
The Business of Enrollment Management

Focus on Admissions Application Processing

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INTRODUCTION

With the volume of student applications on the rise, admissions offices without an efficient processing operation often find the race to secure coveted, best-fit applicants is over almost before the starting gate has opened. After all, until an application is processed, counselors make little progress moving a prospective student to a matriculated student. For that reason, processing admissions applications so that decisions can be made quickly is a crucial first step toward meeting enrollment goals. For a school to remain competitive, efficiently managing admissions application volumes must be a priority.

In a previous article in this series, [The Business of Enrollment Management, Part One: 3 Keys to Surviving and Thriving](#), I present a case for higher education institutions to adopt more overtly businesslike approaches to competing for and securing students. That's because activities in the admissions, financial aid and registrar's offices directly impact an institution's fiscal stability. The enrollment management tasks of attracting and retaining students parallel the for-profit activities of securing new business and managing current accounts. Both generate new and ongoing revenue. As the number of applications an institution receives continues to climb each year, admissions offices can learn an important – and timely – lesson about driving business by managing volumes with increased operational efficiency.

GETTING OUT OF YOUR OWN WAY

Where businesses often have a constant dedication to operational improvement, institutions of higher education traditionally have been less focused on change in any kind of formalized, monitored way. Businesses apply a number of approaches, such as Lean, Six Sigma, continuous improvement, and others, to operate at top efficiency. While mostly associated with the manufacturing world, these methodologies can be universally applied to any operational process to identify areas that can be made more efficient. By adopting a “continuous improvement” approach to their operations, admissions offices have an opportunity to examine where their application processing operations slow down – and then improve them.

In its [2012 State of College Admission](#) report, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) states that for each of the past 15 years, three key application metrics have exceeded those from the previous year, including the:

- Number of applications received
- Percentage of students submitting three or more applications, and
- Percentage of students applying to seven or more schools.

Each year, these trends produce a “seasonal tsunami” in admissions offices. Businesses deal with surges in volume in the manner that enrollment management offices must: by keeping a constant focus on process and resource efficiency. Businesses make it a priority to effectively use every resource to its fullest potential in order to keep up with demand. And now, schools must do the same.

OPTIMIZING PROCESSES TO MAXIMIZE RESOURCES

All too often, one of the greatest resources any enrollment office has – its staff – is stifled by low-value, time-intensive tasks. Many of these stem from paper-based filing and other manual processes. Not only is staff time being consumed by the wrong kind of work, there’s more overall work for each staff member to do. According to the NACAC study, the average number of applications assigned to each counselor has risen by 73 percent since 2005.

Inundated by time-consuming, tedious administrative tasks, staff spend too much time:

- Manually updating checklists in the student information system (SIS) with received documents
- Sifting through folders of miscellaneous, pre-app documents to see if any can be matched with newly created student records
- Searching through filing cabinets to locate documents in order to answer student inquiries
- Physically routing paper files for review and managing file completion (which usually involves the aforementioned filing cabinets, as well as color-coded labels, photocopying, campus mail, etc.)

In the past, many institutions have improved processing speed primarily through increasing head count. However, budgetary constraints prevent nearly every school from hiring additional full-time staff. While temporary staff may help at peak processing times, the practice doesn’t offer a viable, long-term solution. Instead, like many businesses, schools must find ways to improve process efficiency so they can handle increased volume with the same number of staff – and in less time.

TURN PAPER PILES INTO ELECTRONIC FILES

Moving from paper-based application processing to automated, electronic processing positions an institution well to absorb the annual wave of incoming applications. By scanning supporting documents as they arrive, adding them to an electronic file, and managing the review and decision process in an electronic, automated fashion, institutions speed the process. Integrating a document and process management solution with the SIS brings even greater speed and accuracy by allowing updates to the document checklist in the SIS to occur automatically and in real time.

By improving the way applications are processed, admissions staff can focus on higher-value responsibilities, such as student recruiting and advising, while their less prepared counterparts continue struggling with the volume of applications. Streamlined schools issue decision letters long before the slowest know who is actually in the review pool.

In another article in this series, [The Business of Enrollment Management, Part Two: A Case Study in Contrasts](#), I compare the enrollment management operations of two fictitious, rival institutions to underscore the benefits a more businesslike approach brings to enrollment management. Examining the work environments at Bottleneck Technical University and Streamlined State University shows that effective process tools and access to information offer Streamlined State a clear competitive advantage.

The biggest difference between the two is that Streamlined State has optimized processes with technology. Like many businesses, it maximized its existing technology investments so that they are optimally tuned to support operational efficiency.

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS

By thinking like a business – addressing the process inefficiencies that impede rapid and accurate decision making – enrollment management professionals will be well prepared to provide their institutions with a noticeable advantage in an increasingly competitive market for students. To do so, admissions offices must embrace the technology enhancements that support process automation. At a time when competition for best-fit students is at an all-time high, managing application volumes well gives an institution a significant jumpstart on the competition. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom von Gunden's deep understanding of best practices in deploying Enterprise Content Management (ECM) capabilities in colleges and universities comes from his direct involvement in numerous successful implementations. Tom spent more than a dozen years in higher education, serving as a tenured university professor, program director and accreditation specialist. A long-time observer of the emergence of ECM as a business-critical platform, Tom also served for several years as chief editor of Web and print publications focused on ECM and related technologies.

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