The Business of Enrollment Management
Focus on Managing Student Records for Superior Service

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INTRODUCTION

In a registrar's office or student records center, nothing gets in the way of operational efficiency and superior student service more than a poorly managed student file. When responding to student inquiries, processing students' requests or advising students during course registration, having rapid and easy access to a complete student file – an accurate and up-to-date one – is key to timeliness and effectiveness. Unfortunately, because they remain mired in cumbersome, paper-based approaches to storing and retrieving student information, many student-supporting offices struggle to maximize their efficiency and optimize their service.

With the variety of information that comprises a student record, the staff and faculty who need access to it and the many different processes those materials drive, managing student records is about much more than simply handling volume. It's about making student information readily accessible while providing secure and affordable storage of protected student data.

In an earlier 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, specifically in the admissions, financial aid and registrar's offices. As is true in the business world, schools must be able to deliver ever-increasing levels of responsiveness and convenience to customers – in this case, their students and prospective students. With the competition among higher education institutions rising, fast decision-making and superior student service have become, more so than ever, true differentiators in attracting and retaining students.

Without a system that makes information easy to access, processes move slowly, interfering with an institution's ability to serve students well. And, as funding becomes increasingly tied to student retention and graduation rates, the ability to leverage a well-managed student record impacts the institution's fiscal stability by helping to keep more students on track for degree or program completion.

GETTING OUT OF YOUR OWN WAY

Where businesses apply a number of approaches, such as Lean, Six Sigma, continuous improvement and others, to operate at top efficiency, institutions of higher education traditionally have been less focused on operational change in any kind of formalized, monitored way. 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.

One common way to transform operations in a registrar's office or student records center is to leverage electronic systems and the automation tools and audit controls they provide. By taking a page from the for-profit playbook, institutions of higher education can enjoy the reduced costs, reclaimed office space and higher levels of customer satisfaction that stem from managing records electronically.

Paper-based filing and other manual processes present a number of concerns, including access and security. Paper also is the most costly way to manage student records, typically requiring physical storage space both on and off-campus.

Implementing an electronic document management and process automation solution addresses these accessibility, security and storage issues. Commonly referred to as enterprise content management (ECM), such solutions provide the ability to create and securely store an entire student record in one centralized, electronic repository. Contained in the record can be everything from admissions applications, letters of recommendation, test scores and transcripts to academic records, athletic eligibility reports, financial aid verification documents, etc.

For security purposes, particular documents within the file or particular pieces of information on a document can be blocked from view by unauthorized users. And, when integrated with the institution's core line-of-business applications – e.g., the student information system (SIS) – the ECM solution can allow authorized users to access files and perform actions on them directly from the familiar SIS screens they're used to working in.

Consistent, complete student records – easily and quickly accessed – facilitate collaboration among student advisors, faculty and staff as everyone (based on permissions) has access to the same record – a single version of the truth. And, with business process automation tools, the ECM solution can route files and other information for review electronically so staff members spend less time locating and routing physical documents and more time on higher value tasks, such as providing superior service.

DRIVING ADDITIONAL SERVICE BENEFITS

With satisfied students more likely to complete their degrees at your institution – impacting the retention and graduation rates that continue to play larger roles in funding decisions – the more service-forward initiatives your institution undertakes, the better. Today's students are accustomed to convenience and immediacy. As is the case when they do online searches for information or make purchases online, they expect their questions to be answered quickly and their requests to be processed without delay. The move to an electronic and automated approach to student information processing and records management helps immensely in this regard.

For real convenience to students, colleges and universities can post electronic forms online for students to fill out on self-service portals. Once submitted, those student forms can be automatically routed electronically to various reviewers and approvers. At the end of the approval chain, the completed form can join other student documents in the single, complete student record. Now if students need to submit forms to drop or add courses, change demographic information, change their majors, request academic reinstatement, petition to graduate, and so on, they can submit these – and many other types of forms – online to trigger fast, efficient, electronic routing downstream through the review and approval chain.

RUN LIKE A WELL-OILED MACHINE

And, there are additional benefits in terms of both cost and compliance. By improving the way student records are managed, schools also reclaim hard costs – through the improved use of physical space and by reducing, if not eliminating, paper-based storage expenses. With less need for paper, toner, file folders and fire-proof filing cabinets, there is less need for onsite vaults or offsite storage. As such, schools have more space for offices or even a dedicated student service area.

Moreover, the secure, electronic repository for student records helps the institution mitigate the risk of information mismanagement. As mentioned above, the ECM system can provide different levels of access to ensure that only authorized users view the information, and audit trails provide visibility into what information was accessed and by whom. With ECM, data is backed up automatically, in multiple server locations, if so desired, which offers IT a solid disaster recovery plan. ECM also makes staying in compliance easy with business rules that automate retention schedules, ensuring that records are kept as long as they're required to be and not a minute longer.

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS

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, including in the Registrar's Office. Examining the work environments at Bottleneck Technical University and Streamlined State University clearly shows that effective process tools and access to information offer Streamlined State a clear 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 and superior service to students.

By thinking like a business and addressing the process inefficiencies that bring additional cost and impact productivity, enrollment management professionals will be well prepared to provide their institutions with a noticeable advantage in an increasingly competitive market for students. To help support those efforts, registrars and other managers of student records must embrace the technology enhancements that streamline student file management. At a time when competition for students is at an all-time high while operating budgets continue to slide, taking measures to gain efficiencies, bolster service, reduce costs and mitigate risk gives every institution an improved chance of sustaining its long-term fiscal stability and viability. ∎

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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