

Symposium: 'Getting to know you': Understanding students' interface with university services to improve the student experience

Paper 2 – A data-driven institutional approach to service transformation

The regional peer mentoring program initiative implemented in 2011-2012 led to many interesting findings around access to postsecondary education (PSE) and how students experience the transition to PSE (Lamoureux et al., in press). However, two findings, unrelated to the stated goal of the research project, came to have significant importance during the analysis of the research data and decision-making based on the results. The first finding was the importance of a cross-sectorial research team for all parts of the study, to ensure that analysis identified clear action areas where the university could implement changes based on evidence. The second finding was that there was a wealth of information gathered for this project but also elsewhere at the university, which could allow the university to develop a better understanding of how students interfaced so to speak with university services.

It isn't only a question of improving access and the student experience for underrepresented youth (Kanno & Harklau, 2012; Lamoureux, 2007), but also locating within different university databases traces of student voice (Jones, 2008) that could help inform the university in its desire to transform itself (Thomas and Light, 2011) to better meet the needs of all students, thus leading to more engaged students. How can an institution focus on international cooperation (Chan, 2004), if the different administrative sectors of one institution do not cooperate in shared vision and in sharing data to inform decision making? This critical reflexive posture that led to the success of the regional peer mentoring program allowed this cross-sectorial team to design the 'cohort' project.

The peer mentoring program allowed for a diversified group to think collectively in terms of student needs for specific periods of time, most notably during their transition to university and their first months of integration. During these periods, students are not familiar with university's administrative structure, all in the while experiencing needs ranging across a wide spectrum. The mentoring program allowed for students to have a single point of contact through which they could be referred to the right services.

But what happened then? Were the students indeed referred to the right services? Did they obtain the answers they were looking for? Did that lead to further questioning necessitating additional interactions with other points of services? Although data was being collected in regards to students needs via their interactions with their peer mentors, the research team came to realize the importance of expanding the project to integrate student's interactions with other university services. Indeed, once the students familiarized themselves with the university, they started interacting directly with other points of services instead of turning to their mentor. Thus, we were losing our overarching view of student's needs.

In order to overcome these limitations, the 'cohort' project structured itself around 3 objectives: (i) building an integrated platform able to map out first-year students' needs during their transition, integration and the critical months of persistence; (ii) keeping track of the evolution of student needs through multiple points of services; (iii) uncovering issues and opportunities, to inform the transformation of various university services.

A multi-sectorial and multi-disciplinary team was formed to give direction to this project. To achieve our goals, efforts needed to be invested in the development of our technical platform, recruitment and integration of partners from other points of services, and regular analysis and reporting of observations drawn from the platform. What we were proposing was novel to the university and the evolution of the project has been one informed by trials and errors, feedback gained by multiple discussions with multiple stakeholders, and lessons learned along the way.

Building on the mentoring program that uses Facebook as a preferred medium through which mentors were interacting with students, we defined a process where questions and answers could be transferred to a proprietary database. This then gave us leverage to link this data to other data sources, like faculty mentoring programs and centrally administered points of services. In addition, based on the students' needs observed within university services integrated into the platform, we developed an abstraction layer that defines approximately 30 needs which cross sectors and their services, thus giving institutional meaning to interactions recorded using terminology adapted to the administrative unit serving the student.

That became our first effort of integration and also the basic structure of our platform. Once the first iteration of integration was completed, we approached other points of services to act as partners to this project. This has been an ongoing activity throughout the first year of this project, and remains a major focus of our efforts. Sharing our project's objectives, modifying our new partners' internal process for integration and keeping them actively engaged are keys to the success of this project. As the platform is evolving, so has the reporting of observations. There are 4 main purposes to our reporting strategy: promoting the project and its objectives to potential partners and stakeholders; actively engaging partners with questions that arises from observations; identifying issues and zones of opportunities for service transformation; exploring potential variables for further student success research. Reporting has become central to the development of this project and the attainment of its objectives.

During the first year of the Cohort project, 6 services and faculties were been integrated into the platform. In addition, the research team is aiming to integrate 5 other faculties in 2013-2014, providing us with an almost complete view of first-year students' academic needs. Of the 1800 students that constituted the 2012-2013 cohort, more than 8000 needs have been captured.

This paper will retrace how to Cohort project came to be, its objectives and the road map taken to achieve these objectives. Challenges faced by the cross-sectorial research team will also be discussed. Finally, we will demonstrate how this project has informed university policy and

services at the University of Ottawa, and highlight the future opportunities associated with the project. (975)

References

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