

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

Paper 4: « So, what does this mean? » Data informed decision making at the University of Ottawa... and elsewhere?

Part of the strength of the peer mentoring project in 2011-2012 was the bringing together of a cross-sectorial research team, composed of researchers (professors and research assistants), senior administrators and management, to discuss and analyse the findings. This multiple perspective allowed for the emergence of a so called 'unplanned finding' – the various data sources available but unexploited on campus that could inform decision making and strategic planning the University with regards to the way the institution delivers various services to students across an academic cycle or cohort, from admission (May) until the beginning of the next cycle (September). Beyond data readily available from departments of Institutional Research and Planning such as large scale survey on student satisfaction, many institutions may be unaware of what can be gleaned and learned from existing data bases. The challenge, however, is accessing the data and aggregating it so that the analysis may inform policy (Allen, Bacow & Trombley, 2011). It could also help inform strategic planning in PSE institutions so that they can truly prosper (Rowley, Lujan & Dolence, 1997) by anticipating and meeting their students' needs.

Transforming higher education institutions from within requires leadership (Eckel & Kezar, 2011), even shared leadership (Luc, 2004), to ensure intra-organisational collaboration. This has been one of the strengths of the Cohort project. This paper will look at how we're transforming our services by transforming the way we collaborate institutionally.

As a decentralised institution, the approach to student services at the University of Ottawa is sectorial. The assessment of service quality is done through the lens of individual administrative units. In addition to providing all sectors with an institutional perspective of students' needs and challenges, the 'Cohort project' aims to provide a common ground for discussion on the issues faced by students during a particular period of time. This is helping us in forging a collaborative approach to the definition of institutional policies.

The dissemination of observations through periodic reports is key to engaging partners and stakeholders in the project. This was especially true in the first months of the project when we distributed a report of students' needs and issues during the summer period preceding their arrival to university. Indeed, the summer transition is a critical period in the establishment of a relation between the student and the institution. The spectrum of students' needs is wide and many administrative units are involved to make that transition a success. There were certain areas of services that represented more important challenges to students than others. Having the data and testimonies to support those observations made it easier to get all partners to work collaboratively on finding solutions for specific student needs. Although these needs might have been the

responsibility of a single sector or a few of them, all the partners were committed to enhancing the overall quality of students' experiences during the transition period. The dissemination of a summer report of these findings helped us promote the project and establish a base of discussion for a future working group.

Once the report was distributed, we presented the results to a large number of senior administrators and proposed the creation of a working group that would join forces to find solutions to issues documented. This joining together of sectors has been a great experiment as this has not been a typical configuration for a working group in the past at the University. While collaboration did not naturally occur between certain sectors, for others, this teamwork has been quite easy and very productive. The solutions defined by the working group could not have been the same had those sectors worked in isolation. Of the 19 issues that were presented to the working group, only one remained unresolved and 4 were partially resolved. With those solutions now in place, we will be closely monitoring their effectiveness during the summer period of our second cohort (2013-2014) and will be building on those observations to further improve the implemented solutions.

The university's Student Academic Success Service which is an active partner to the project, has been helping us orient our analysis and will also have a key role in making use of the data generated by the platform to assess the impact of our initiatives on student's success. In the past, student's profile and previous academic results have been the main sources of data to assess whether a student is at risk or not. Having now access to their interactions throughout the year, we can start measuring how behaviours are impacting their chances of success. With this information in hand, we'll be able to measure the impact of institutional policies on student's success.

In addition to having a direct influence on institutional policies, we're also starting to see the Cohort project's potential in transforming the way we're communicating with our students. By having access to a temporal view of students' needs, we can create a content strategy that will push specific information to our targeted audience based on observations for particular time periods in past years. For example, we're looking into transforming our web portal for registered students to a dynamically changing content offering based on the main needs we've observed with previous cohorts.

In 2012-2013, this project was only in its first year of existence and already we have seen how it can have a profound impact on how we're transforming the services offered to our students. There are great benefits to adopting a data-informed approach to institutional policy where students' needs are at the heart of multi-sectorial collaboration. Building on these early successes, we're expanding our platform to better integrate the multiple dimensions of students needs throughout their first year of study. We first want to integrate the rest of our faculties and certain services, such as the university's library, sports services, computing services, etc. We're also looking into eventually expanding the scope of our analysis to follow cohorts throughout the rest of their undergraduate studies.

References

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