



Providing Excellent Student Services on a Shoe String

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Setting the Scene

Three phones are ringing; several people are waiting in line at the counter; one of the staff left for lunch ten minutes ago; and, you and a student worker are the only ones to help all these people – what are you to do?

Many of us have experienced a situation similar to the one above or one very like it in our daily work lives and become frustrated by our inability to deliver the excellent student service we want to provide. Whether the institution is large or small and with budgets ranging from non-existent to flush, good service is dependent on the people providing the service. The question is how to provide our great teams of staff with the resources they need to provide that excellent service under trying circumstances.

Step One

Creating a culture of helpfulness is the first step to achieving excellent student service. In our very harried and busy lives, we are much more likely to encounter rude, abrupt and discourteous people in service positions. Are we those people? If we are, the culture of the office is probably not one of helpfulness and likely too focused on process or task.

While we look to our leaders, the office manager, the Registrar, the Dean, the President for cues on tone and substance in our work environments, each one of us can take the responsibility to set the tone of our own work. Peer pressure is a wonderful thing and helpful in converting people into staff who are committed to providing excellent service. We have all heard of the type of service that Nordstrom's is famous for and may be familiar with Nordstrom's commitment to providing the very best possible service to its customers. We can adopt that

same level of commitment in the delivery of service to our students and colleagues.

Step Two

In nearly 20 years of working with student services professionals, I have observed that there has been a steady move toward specializing on one or two primary tasks. As tasks become more complex, technology more focused, and responsibilities larger, there seems to be this tendency toward specialization. By that, I am talking about not only the titles that we attach to our positions but also the way we specialize in one or maybe two components of our jobs. It is only natural that we want to be very good at our jobs and try to do that by becoming expert in those areas of our work.

Rather than specializing, there may be a benefit of branching out and adding more to our toolbox of competencies. While at first glance this solution does not appear to address the situation described in the introductory paragraph, it could very well be the answer if more people in surrounding offices were equipped with the knowledge and skill to assist those waiting in line for the next staff member.

There are many terms that are applicable – cross training, dual role, empowering, or authorizing staff to gain new skills and knowledge. Whatever term we use for the process, the staff member benefits by having a broad knowledge base to draw on and our customers benefit because others can assist them with their questions and needs.

Step Three

Putting it altogether is not as daunting as one might imagine but there does need to be a will to make it happen.

We found that the busy time for staff in one office often coincides with a slow time for staff in another office. As staff members become knowledgeable of the tasks and processes in both offices, staff from the office experiencing a slow time can augment and support their colleagues in the office experiencing a busy time.

Unless institutional, local, state or federal laws prohibit information sharing, which rarely applies to our daily work tasks, employees can share with each other information, processes and procedures necessary to complete a task or to answer questions. There are many ways to share information. Creating easy-to-follow loose-leaf binder user's guides of common tasks not only assist new employees to learn a particular job but also can be the basis of a cross-training effort with colleagues from other offices. An on-line reference guide linked to inter-office web pages are handy, quick means of posting and sharing procedures and processes needed to complete a task. A rolodex with a card

describing the steps for each task can be located at workstations for those filling-in for the staff member to access when providing service. This is also a great method to refresh our understanding of tasks completed infrequently.

Once the documentation is created detailing the information, processes and procedures for particular tasks, it is important to create an environment that allows colleagues to share this information. Point-of-service training can provide the opportunity to allow cross training and sharing the information. Workshop-type training is a good method with larger groups of staff or when the amount of information to be shared is significant. Workshops give the participants good opportunities to discuss processes and perhaps to brainstorm on more efficient methods of accomplishing our work.

Cross-trained staff should be given the opportunity to practice their new skills in a safe environment that is when coaching with the primary staff member is possible. Supervisors and managers must be supportive of these efforts and recognize that yes, mistakes may occur but in the end all will benefit.



Recasting the Scene

Three phone lines are ringing, several people are waiting at the counter, one staff member left for lunch ten minutes ago and you and a student worker are the only ones in the office. You pick up the phone, make a quick call to your cross-training partner in the next office, and ask for help. In a moment, your partner appears and begins taking the phone calls while you and your student employee help the people at the counter. In a short time, the situation is calmer and you thank your partner for the help.

A Real Life Example and Summary

On our little campus, for years the distribution of financial aid residual checks to students was done the old-fashioned way – paper checks were handed one at a time to fidgety, frustrated and angry students who had been made to stand in a long line waiting for the financial aid coordinator. Upon arriving at my new post as director of the campus four years ago and observing this process during my first academic term, I decided there had to be a better way to match students with their financial aid checks.

While we could not avoid dealing with paper checks, we could get more help for the hapless financial aid coordinator. Two interested staff members volunteered for training and after several conversations and training sessions with the financial aid coordinator, they were ready to help disburse financial aid checks. During the following quarter, these three individuals distributed nearly a million dollars in financial aid in less than two hours with no student having to wait more than five minutes for their check. No more lines; no more fidgety students; no more anxious staff!

There are no easy solutions to being short of staff, short of budget, and having too much to do. However, with some thought and planning, empowering staff to help each other can happen. Creating an environment that encourages people to help each other is the first step. Identifying people interested and willing to invest time in cross training is the next step and perhaps the most critical. Once staff are confident in their skills and knowledge, there is usually an eagerness to help each other. While these suggestions, at first glance, may seem simplistic and superficial using cross training and dual roles can provide staff with new opportunities to grow in their positions and contribute to a climate of helpfulness.

About the Author



Janet Danley, a long-time PACRAO member, is currently employed by Walla Walla Community College as the director of its Clarkston Campus. In this role, Janet is responsible for operations and instruction including student recruitment and retention. Janet is also the chair of the PACRAO Writers Team, a position she has held for two and a half years.

During Janet's 20-plus years in higher education, she has been a PACRAO member for nearly 15 of those years and has served the association as presenter, facilitator, treasurer, member and chair of the Writers Team, LAC member (Couer d'Alene) and as Program Committee chair (Hawaii). She began her PACRAO membership as a new registrar at what was then Northern Montana College, in Havre, MT (now Montana State University-Northern).

Among her interests and passions, Janet is a firm believer in open access to higher education. Janet is a strong advocate for the adult learner and has written articles, made presentations, and chaired workshops on topics related to adult learners.

Janet holds a doctorate in higher education leadership and administration; a master's in public administration, and a bachelor's in business and communications.

Janet resides in Lewiston, Idaho – just across the river from Clarkston, WA, with her niece and cat. Janet has two adult children; son Bryan and wife Theresa live

in Havre, MT, and daughter Sarah lives in Lewiston. Janet is also the delighted owner of a red convertible Nissan 350Z!

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