



Student Services Revitalization/Transformation

By Brenda Pipitone and Wayne Poirer

Introduction

Over a two year period, a multidisciplinary team developed and implemented a plan to transform the delivery of student services at George Brown College in Toronto. It was a plan that called upon the College to fundamentally overhaul student services, but more importantly, to transform the service culture at the College through the students' 'lens'.

They accomplished this by developing:

1. A student-centric culture
2. Appropriate systems, tools and training
3. Accurate integrated and accessible information
4. Empowered people delivering exceptional service
5. An attractive environment filled with energy, fun and creativity.

The resulting Student Life Cycle Initiative (SLC) addressed the continuum of service from the first point of contact throughout the student's College experience—or *life cycle*—to graduation, and involved a revitalization of all systems and services that affect all students.

The implementation was co-led by a senior faculty member and an experienced student services administrator, reflecting a key element of the project from the outset. Their appointment and the team composition signaled a departure from traditional 'change efforts' at the College because it brought a wide variety of faculty, staff and administration perspectives together to address the issue, and the members did not come only from the service areas.

This approach was unique in the College's history. Previously, leaders in service areas would be given the task to improve their own areas without a broader mandate to examine how the various areas intersected. The College's matrix management system and decentralized structure with each academic division set up as a separate business unit with the Dean as the CEO made broad, cross-cutting institutional change difficult to accomplish. A unionized environment with strong tradition of advocacy internally and at the provincial level also posed challenges to some change efforts.

To support the ongoing development and implementation of the SLC model and continued investment by the College's senior management, the co-leaders emphasized attention to measuring outcomes throughout the process, using a mix of quantitative and qualitative research to chart progress and gauge the perception of change.

The following is a narrative description of the process planning and execution of a comprehensive systemic change project delivered

successfully with in a large urban college environment.

Context/Background

Between 1995 and 2001, George Brown College experienced serious systemic challenges associated with drastic government funding cuts. In 1995 GBC faced a confluence of challenges that posed a major threat to its future viability including:

- cuts in provincial and federal funding representing 15% of its annual revenues
- an annual operating deficit of \$1M
- declining enrolment
- low staff morale
- a vacancy in the presidency of the College

In 1995 a newly-appointed President, moved quickly and decisively to reduce the staff complement from 1200 to 800 and the number of faculties from nine to four and a number of college programs eliminated. Urban 'land lock,' older facilities and delayed maintenance issues exacerbated the challenges. There were few 'purpose built' buildings and no traditional campus and there was little investment in technology and infrastructure during the period of fiscal restraint.

In 1998 the Ontario government introduced a mandatory *Key Performance Indicator (KPI) Student Satisfaction Survey* in all Ontario's colleges. In the inaugural year of KPI, Student Satisfaction at George Brown College was amongst the lowest in the system with only 49% of students satisfied – 17% below the provincial average.

The Change Challenge

By 2000, the context in the College had changed significantly. Enrollment was rising, the budget was balanced, the debt had been retired and there were funds available for strategic investment, The President appointed a new VP Academic and Student Success with a mandate to give higher priority to academic planning and to the student experience. In 2002, following a series of attempts to fix individual processes, systems and challenges, the College President and the senior management team decided to take a substantially different approach.

The Student Life Cycle (SLC) Initiative was established and eight staff members were appointed to a multidisciplinary team with the mandate to articulate the vision and 'blue print' of an ideal student service system and propose a comprehensive solution.

The announcement of this College-wide effort stated:

"Currently, many of our systems and processes are not integrated. In many instances, we waste time and money because our delivery systems do not work properly. Too often, we frustrate our students with processes that don't meet their needs. 50% of our students say they wouldn't recommend us. In turn, staffs are frustrated and demoralized. This situation affects all of us negatively—students, support staff, faculty, administrators. This cannot continue.

Quick fixes or piecemeal solutions won't solve this problem. We need a fundamental and integrated redesign of all the services from recruitment through graduation—the whole student service cycle.” (Excerpt from SLC announcement, 2002)

The team's task was to “*determine the current state of student service, examine other service models, design the ideal George Brown student service environment and then draft a high-level plan for implementation, all the while maintaining a student perspective.*” (SLC, 2002)

The team concluded the 14 week exercise and delivered a comprehensive report that called upon the College to fundamentally overhaul student services.

Findings confirmed that both students and staff were dissatisfied with the experience. Systems were broken, processes were not integrated and staff did not have the right tools to do their jobs. College staff expressed an overwhelming desire to improve the situation and everyone wanted to contribute.

In its report, the SLC team identified eight themes to guide revitalizing/transforming George Brown's student services:

1. Communications
2. Project Management and Implementation
3. Information Management
4. Customer Relationship Management, Process and Technology
5. Customer Service
6. Environment and Facilities
7. Governance
8. Human Resources

The Vision: “Success at every opportunity, and satisfaction in every interaction for both our staff and our students.”

Jobs, systems and environments all needed to be transformed. Central to the redesign was that the processes of the College needed to be viewed through a student lens. *We must continue to use the student expectation as the primary driver of determining initiatives and their satisfaction as the standard by which we measure our success.* (SLC Report, 2002)

Student Life Cycle

Choosing the Right Leadership

The final report of the SLC Team received strong endorsement from the College's President and the Senior Management Committee. Following the conclusion of the final report, the President contacted 2 College community members to ask them to leave their respective positions to co-lead the implementation phase of this transformation initiative. Two project sponsors were appointed from the senior management team to oversee the

project. Vice-President Academic and the Chief Information Officer were chosen to champion the initiative, guide its implementation and lead the effort with Senior Management Committee.

The President committed to implementing the recommendations over a three-year period and to providing up to \$2M annually to finance the implementation.

Implementation

At the time that the Student Life Cycle Initiative was announced, the effects of the financial losses and lay-offs of the recent past were still keenly felt by many College staff and there was a high degree of skepticism about the possibility of bringing real change to unwieldy, outdated systems and processes.

As SLC's co-leaders began to develop the approach and the implementation strategies for the eight components of the plan, they quickly realized that no-one would be willing to accept that change was possible unless they were able to create buy-in and momentum. The changes had to be actionable and visible—things people could see, and touch that would stand as a symbol of the changes. In addition to the actual changes, the leaders recognized the need for a communication strategy to let people know what was happening.

Quick Wins to Demonstrate the Difference

The SLC team needed to demonstrate that this experience was going to be different. Solutions could be found. The College could get the right people to solve the right problems and collectively, they could transform student services and in turn, restore staff confidence in the College.

With these objectives in mind, the co-leaders proposed a series of *Quick Wins* to launch the project in the spirit in which it would continue and 'buy' the time needed to do the more substantial changes.

The *Quick Wins* included improvements to student spaces in high profile areas, improved navigational signage, washroom renewal, line management enhancements (integration of multiple lines into one contact where the majority of inquiries could be answered) and a robust communication and engagement plan.

When the leaders presented their proposed list it was received with reservations about how the five elements were central to transforming student services. They made the case that had been shared with them: "If we can't fix the very basic things like finding our way around and fixing our washrooms: how are we going to fix broken processes and discouraged people?" ***Getting the Right People to Get it Right***

The leaders set a six month period of implementation for the five *Quick Wins* and recruited cross functional working groups for each of the projects. As they'd done with the core team to oversee the whole initiative, the leaders selected individuals from every department—managers, faculty and support staff—and asked people who traditionally would not be on committees to participate. Once the *Quick Win* groups were launched and a course set for target delivery, the core team began the work on the more

complex issues of process re-mapping, conceptual design of two new service centres, staff job redesign, staff redeployment, systems upgrading and functional space design.

Multidisciplinary Teams—A New Approach

The co-leaders mobilized multidisciplinary teams for every initiative that would be undertaken. In total they involved 83 staff on implementation teams and engaged over 500 staff in every aspect of the SLC project. The co-leaders asked all team members to leave their corporate identities at the door and become champions for better service to students while they worked on a team. This approach was deliberately different from previous change initiatives at the College. Individuals who had a vested interest in a particular service would participate and would have authority and decision-making power, irrespective of the positions they held in the organization. The leaders aimed for a sense of inclusion, energy for the work and novelty on each of the teams. The outcomes were serious but the process was engaging and fun.

The co-leaders decided that each victory needed to be acknowledged and celebrated. For example, when the new campus directory was installed, complete with new college maps, the team assembled to watch the 10 foot structure being put into place. It was a strong symbol that things were changing. The co-leaders bought champagne to toast the work of the faculty team that designed the new navigational signage system, the staff who contributed to the information and the team that worked on the installation. This was one of many celebrations throughout the two years of implementation that recognized the contribution and work of many and celebrated the steps to transformation.

For example when the *Washroom Renewal* project was launched, cleaners, facilities staff, and users were interviewed and involved. Staff got to see materials, tour local washrooms in Toronto and contribute to the problem-solving. Cleaners told the team to hang the stalls from the ceilings so that cleaning under them would not encounter barriers. Barrier-free access and hands-free components were among the many solutions offered up.

This process was replicated for each of the project activities. People were asked for their opinions, ideas were shared, designs circulated and feedback sought before a solution could be reached. In the end, the *Quick Wins* approach was a winner, with improved washrooms, student spaces, and navigational signage as well as shorter line-ups, all within 6 months.

A' Right Fit' Project Manager

As the Initiative's first projects got underway, the decision was made to hire a project manager to work alongside the co-leaders. Finding someone who would share their perspective on the primacy of the multi-team contribution to successful implementation and who would understand the 'flat hierarchy' of the initiative was a big challenge. The leaders were very clear about the qualities they were looking for and when the right candidate appeared, they recognized the 'good' fit for the team allowing the co-leaders to lead and guided the project outcomes by applying rigorous methodology.

The SLC 'journey' to this point had been guided by a corporate consulting firm which provided advice and assistance during the research and development phases of the work, but the application of a corporate consulting model to an academic environment did not always translate. With the implementation team solidly established, it was time to proceed without their continued support.

Building Momentum

With all five *Quick Wins* delivered on time, the team used the momentum to build buy-in for the extensive process re-engineering that needed to be undertaken. An example of one such process was wait times. Line-ups were up to three hours for each of the key services that students needed to begin their studies, including registration and financial assistance. It had become an unstated expectation that it would take a student a whole day to get their service needs met at the beginning of a semester, with most of that time spent in line ups.

Clearly a new way to provide students with essential services was a priority.

Creating the Conceptual Model

Using feedback from the original report, process mapping, site visits, and research, the team began to hone in on a student service delivery model for the College.

The end-result was a 'one-stop shop' model largely based on best practice research but which brought in elements that were unique to the culture at the College adapted by the people who would live in this future experience. In the end, the vision the model embodied was a powerful one that spoke to stakeholders and got them excited. It was the "generalist" and "specialist" model, with elements of comfort and a celebration of the College. The team blended best of the hospital triage model, which focused on identifying and addressing students with the most critical issues first with the banking model which encourages efficient transactions and having the necessary tools at hand. The model was grounded within a welcoming environment. All of it would be underpinned by a technology platform and service culture.

To identify who might be suitable candidates for the positions in the new model staff were encouraged to self-identify as "people" people or "process" people. In the existing system, staff who were great at detailed problem-solving were spending large parts of their day on the front line providing direct services, and staff who were found paper work exhausting weren't spending enough time with students.

Managing Staff Redeployment

To realize the new model, eleven existing staff members would need to move from their current positions to new positions. The co-leaders decided to engage the union local and had Human Resources consultant seconded to the team. The team and union then collaboratively designed the process and the parameters for this redeployment to occur:

- redesigned jobs to fit with the strategy: the increasing availability of one-stop service solutions and increasing levels of student

self-service

- defined the role of the information specialist team to deliver improved services and identified the type of work that this person would be responsible for.
- collectively designed the job descriptions, developed the process
- met with each individual and as a group to present the options and the future plans and allow for questions to be answered.

Staffs felt the commitment of both their union and management and were able to make well-informed decisions that were good for them and the new delivery model. The upfront work with the union allowed for the smooth grievance-free movement of all eleven staff members to new roles.

Training Model Emphasizes Shared Service Values

To prepare them for the new positions and to develop this group as a team, the new Information Specialists who were the front line generalist assisting students with 70% of all transactions were given a month of upfront training for their new roles. The training was developed by the leaders. Emphasis was placed on service values and skills and the training included the creation of a service mandate that ensured that new staff shared service values and demonstrated superior skills.

There was an increased focus on informal sensitivity and communication preparation as well as problem-solving and conflict resolution training. Implementation of service standards and scripted exchanges for front-line staff were developed. Initial operational management and coaching was provided for each of the core front counter staff.

One of the outcomes was that customer service values and skills ingrained in hiring practices for all 'student-facing' staff and supervisors as well as any action to fill vacancies, remains built into the formal hiring processes. The co-leaders implemented a new employee orientation and front-line-service "on-boarding" program that clearly established service vision, values and expectations.

New College Leadership = Valuable New Support

Mid way through Year 2, the incumbent President who had been the strongest champion of the SLC initiative announced his retirement. This was unanticipated and produced anxiety about the project continuing. The college community was again concerned SLC could get derailed by the different agenda of a new President.

While a new President was sought, the SLC progress slowed, but once she took over and was up to speed, the new President embraced what was being delivered and became a new champion and mentor. The new President also introduced a valuable concept of "piloting" critical aspects of the model prior to full implementation. While the co-leaders had to rethink the deadlines for the full implementation, the pilots allowed more room to test components of the new design and readjust them according to the experience.

Building of Two Prototype Service Centres to Test the Model

In order to begin the full integration of numerous student services into a *one-stop-shop* model, a physical centre in which to deliver them was needed, and one of the most complicated projects of the Student Life Cycle initiative involved creating physical spaces on two campuses to house the newly-formed staff team.

The new College President introduced the idea of piloting key elements of the conceptual design before committing substantial college resources to the full centres on both campuses. This reinforced the co-leaders' *Quick Wins* approach of start small, get something on the ground and build momentum to last through the longer design and building phases. The design of two prototype centres allowed many of the process pieces to be tested prior to full implementation and integration.

The Service Centre Design team—named *Build It and They Will Come* was established. Multi-disciplinary, like all the SLC teams, this group included people from the areas who would work in the new service centres as well as key members of the College who had a vested interest in the new area, for example the student success staff. The co leaders worked with a design team of 14 college members and the Facilities Management department to design a new model for effective and efficient delivery of the newly integrated services. Representatives from the group met the architects, vetted all plans, collectively designed the new service map, while others met with suppliers and even chose the furniture and paint colours from a set of options provided to the group.

The integration in the prototype environment focused on a new approach to 'triage' and line management, the new generalist model for front line staff and the new specialist model for both registration and financial assistance. The new counter enabled the front line generalists to resolve a large volume of transactions and inquiries while more complex transactions were handed off to area specialists who sat behind the main counter. A triage desk was placed in front of the counter as the first point of contact and to ensure that students were not getting in line unless they needed to. The new design also incorporated message boards for communicating information, a line management system, seating and a drop box to encourage students to avoid line ups.

The new counter environment had most students stand during their visit as it was typically short in nature. The Information Specialists sat on high stools so that they were be at the same eye level as the student. A lower counter was provided for wheelchair users, for students with low mobility or students with children. Transfers could easily be made for more complex inquiries or transactions. From the student lens, the service delivery was seamless and integrated although the two teams reported to different departments.

Metrics Measure Progress

Measuring progress and effectiveness was a key component of SLC from the outset. Three major tools were used to assist in the compilation of data and assessment activities:

- The Q-matic line management software system was used extensively to gather information about transaction times, volume, wait times and transaction types. Students are able to

take a ticket to monitor their own wait times from start to finish and staff is able to code each transaction as a way of capturing extensive data.

- Surveys were developed and administered to determine student satisfaction with the new service and wait times.
- Focus groups were conducted to provide qualitative information about students' experiences with the new service model.

The team looked to other best practice sites to establish targets. For example, the team established 70% as the target for first contact resolution and set targets for wait times based on the initial student satisfaction surveys. Wait time targets were set for all students to be served within one hour and 80% of students to be served in less than 30 minutes. This was down from the more than six hours that students had previously waited for two main service components. The initial surveying was designed and administered by an independent consultant and after the first round; surveys were administered by a team of students to gather trend data.

Further metrics have been introduced including average handling time, student satisfaction, staff satisfaction and contact quality. The team has clear goals to work towards and clear metrics to measure success.

Early Results Demonstrate Effectiveness

The first results were very promising. Wait times targets were achieved with 99% of students served within one hour at the busiest peak periods, more than 80% served within 30 minutes and the average wait time reduced to about 14 minutes. More than 80% of students were served by the generalist—exceeding the 70% best practice target that had been set. Less than 5% of all students were referred to other departments.

Since 2002, student satisfaction has grown consistently from 49% to 63%. All of these targets have been achieved while experiencing 54% growth in student volume, but with staffing levels remaining constant. This means that the staffing efficiency has increased dramatically and the team has been able to serve the growing student body with the same staffing resources. The College has been collecting trend data since 2004 and these trends have been consistent.

Credibility

The co-leaders put the effort forward and got results and people slowly responded. Suddenly, staff were willing to entertain new ideas, sharing became easier and during the hard task of mapping out every process, coming up with a conceptual design and conducting detailed planning for facility renewal and job redesign.

The project gained credibility because it had

1. support at the highest level
2. resources
3. inspired/inspiring leadership
4. process involved people
5. effort and the visibility were sustained

People began to be cautiously optimistic and some became the early adopters. Even resistors were engaged as some of the biggest skeptics were purposely invited onto the implementation teams. The co-leaders took the time to find out what made someone a resistor. In some cases, staff disclosed that they had simply not been asked before or that they really missed some of their colleagues that they used to work with.

Many reflected on days when things worked better. Everyone shared something that could be used to help with the transformation. One of the most common questions that kept arising was: “*don't you get overwhelmed with the task in front of you?*” The co-leaders would routinely answer that they looked at one task at a time and followed the vision to control the sense of overload. The two co-leaders relied on each other completely utilized each other's strengths and were motivated by each other's resolute determination that this change was possible.

Formalizing Service Standards

Following the first few years of operation, the current student services operational team has developed a service agreement between the three major service providers (student affairs, student services and the registrar's office).

This agreement:

- outlines the role of transfer and referral, data collection, team communications, team meetings and joint meetings, training as well as operational procedures such as cash handling and security
- clearly defines roles and responsibilities as well as escalation processes.

Developing the agreement also allowed the team to fine tune the service standards into 10 key service indicators that are measured and reported on a monthly and annual basis. Some of the service levels have been improved because the team was routinely meeting or exceeding the standards.

The Current Picture

Following the successful implementation of the prototype Student Service Centres, the Casa Loma campus built an integrated Student Service Centre (completed in 2008) that has more than 29 services representing 13 different physical locations in the new *one-stop-shop*. At the St. James campus, 24 services were integrated in the new Student Service Centre that is being completed in 2010.

Additionally, the integrated service model was adopted by the College's Educational Resources department and major redesign was undertaken to integrate the former open access labs, library and assessment centre into an integrated Library Learning Commons.

The College's Student Service Centres have been visited by more than 20 official delegations from as far away as Nova Scotia. Six Ontario colleges have adopted part, or all, of the service delivery model. Other specialist areas have been able to focus more time on process re-engineering; for example, the Registrar's Office has made significant

enhancements to automated processes, testing, quality assurance and audit processes. The new model has supported a college-wide enrolment growth of 57% over a six year period without additional staffing.

Many of the Student Service Centre teams have been recognized by their peers as service leaders. Many of the original team members have been promoted into other areas of the College and the Student Service Centre has served as a major training ground for new staff. Finally, parts of the model are being carried forward to the College's new Waterfront campus now under development for 2012.

Lessons learned

As the changes were carried out and improvements realized, the urgency of whole service transformation became less apparent. Satisfaction scores came more in line with other colleges in the system.

Academic quality replaced service transformation as the top priority and the *Academic Strategy* was launched in 2005 with the mandate to ensure excellence in teaching and learning.

A renewed effort is underway to better understand what students believe should be the focus of new investment in student services going forward. In 2010, the Student Service Centre projects were concluded and other service priorities are emerging.

Discussions about new services and how to deliver them will be informed and enhanced by the lessons of the successful SLC Project;

1. Strong sustained leadership is essential to ensure any change process and to achieve the outcomes
2. Seek to understand the context quickly and move to implementation to build momentum
3. Early engagement and personal outreach is key to ensure staff connect develop a sense of their potential and know the opportunities available to them in this change experience
4. Quick wins buy time, build momentum and provide opportunity to celebrate early successes
5. Working in partnership with others creates synergies, builds college capacity and strengthens networks to drive the agenda
6. Relationships are key to helping people develop trust in the information and change process
7. Clear communication and regular opportunities to meet with staff allows for informal information sharing and critical update.

The Student Life Cycle project called upon the College to carry out culture change throughout the College. The Initiative succeeded, in fact, exceeded expectations, despite considerable initial skepticism and doubt that it could. Over time SLC gained the widespread credibility that was critical to its success. That credibility developed because the Initiative had support at the highest level and inspired, inspiring leaders. It had resources. The process involved people, and the effort and the visibility were sustained.

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◀ Contents

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