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Powered by Publics Learning Memo: the Western Coalition

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Each cluster in [APLU's Powered by Publics initiative](#) is working to refine, implement, and scale innovative practices that address shared challenges among the participating institutions. This memo highlights universities in the Western Coalition (a list of institutions in this cluster at the end of this memo).

The Western Coalition cluster represents universities and state systems in the Western United States. The group has taken on two strands of work: 1) faculty development to support student success in the classroom, and 2) using “process mapping” to reform administrative processes that present barriers to student progression and completion. The following learning memo is a summary of the process mapping work to date (a separate summary of faculty development work is forthcoming). The Western Coalition is building a guide for helping institutions conduct process mapping. It includes examples from each institution's experiences mapping common processes.

What is process mapping in higher education, and why use it?

Process mapping is a collaborative exercise that engages stakeholders across campus that “touch” a common administrative process to understand how that process is currently executed and why. The goal is improving and transforming that process to achieve student-centered results. The mapping exercise itself can be formal or informal, use established methodologies such as Lean Management, or be conducted in a more ad hoc manner. Regardless of the method used, the goal is to help universities deliver “the right thing, at the right time, at the right quality and in the right amount” to meet student needs.

The primary reason for undertaking process mapping is to improve student outcomes, including retention, completion, and equity, as well as enhance the student experience and satisfaction. Process mapping guides staff who work on a process regularly to see it from the student's perspective and understand where students are facing barriers or gaps in support. In addition to the impact on students, process mapping results in: 1) broader culture change, encouraging staff to continuously seek new ideas and improve how work is done day-to-day, 2) greater effectiveness to meet student needs, including use of advanced technology where appropriate, and 3) improved efficiency to maximize resources and value, including reducing paperwork, re-allocating staff time to higher-value activities, use of automation, and cost savings (to the university and students).

How did the Western Coalition universities apply process mapping?

Step 1: Identify processes that are problematic for students. For example, Washington State University

conducted a review of registration holds and found that a top hold is connected to mandatory student writing portfolios. Approximately 1,000 students, mostly juniors, were required to submit these portfolios, and the collection process has been logistically challenging, especially given the variation across campuses in the Washington State System. WSU plans to tackle other top holds that prevent students from registering, including financial holds and required alcohol, sex and violence training. Another cluster institution, Boise State University, has identified the admissions and onboarding process as a potential barrier to new students. Boise State has struggled with coordinating communications to students and parents, including over-communication and conflicting messages. Communication mishaps can be costly. For example, if a student chooses not to enroll and doesn't inform housing, they may still be charged for housing.

Step 2: Identify a desired goal or outcome. For example, Washington State University wanted to brainstorm small changes to reduce the burden of the writing portfolio requirement without restructuring entire programs. The goal was to increase the number of students registering in spring 2020 for the following fall semester. For Boise State University, the goal was to deliver a smoother onboarding experience for students by mapping the current process, piloting new messages to target groups of students, and making structural changes to get systems to talk to each other – rather than relying on the student to convey critical messages.

Step 3: Convene the right individuals who are knowledgeable about the process from start to finish and empowered to make changes. Washington State convened the administrators of the writing program, the registrar, global campus, transfer student services, advising, and the faculty senate. Two student representatives (one transfer student, one first-time student) were also included. The provost was briefed on the redesign effort and provided high-level support. Since Boise State University has decided to focus on the admissions process, they are engaging enrollment services, new student programs, and the registrar, but also financial aid and student housing since communications from these units are critical during the admissions process.

Step 4: Map the current process – without a complete understanding of how things are being done now, changes cannot be made. Some schools held formal redesign events to develop a process map (Washington State), others like University of South Dakota simply held monthly meetings with a committee to make gradual progress toward understanding the current state and identifying necessary change actions.

What best practices emerged from the process mapping work?

- Engage leaders from the very beginning. This will confer legitimacy and improve buy-in from staff across campus who are involved in the process being mapped.
- Give participants a vision of the future that will be appealing to them. Even mundane aspects of the new vision, such as less paper to push around, will help.
- Consistency and regularity are key. University of South Dakota found that to move from talk to action, they had to give each participant formal “homework” assignments and require them to report back to the group each month on their progress. The bottom line is: don't leave the meeting without clear action steps that are assigned to the individuals present.
- Finally, there needs to be high-level “gatekeeping” to tie all components of the process together and ensure comprehensive reform. As the team from Boise State University put it, “partial implementation is a failure.” Conduct regular review and follow-up to ensure implementation and address problems that arise.

Overall lessons learned

Changing the process is only the first step; the broader culture change required to socialize the new process can take much longer and is more challenging. There will always be staff who are invested in the status quo. The use of technology in administrative processes can be tricky if the institution doesn't fully invest in integration. For example, the University of South Dakota learned it needed to train a much broader group of staff on campus to use EAB Navigate and ensure coordination with other technology solutions on campus (Salesforce for recruitment, Banner for student information). The University of Montana is similarly moving to EAB Navigate to allow for greater data analysis and utilization across campus.

What's next?

The Western Coalition will continue learning together as they finish mapping key processes on campus or begin mapping new ones. Several larger themes for future discussion emerged: 1) managing communications with students and ensuring consistent messaging, 2) integrating technology systems on campus, and 3) socializing reformed processes to ensure culture change and consistent implementation.

Other Resources

- Keys-Mathews, L. and Fadden, J.B. (2019). [Cultural Change through Rapid Improvement Events: Five Successful Project Case Studies](#). Case studies showing how Rapid Improvement Events can help reform processes including recruitment, undergraduate admissions, and curriculum changes.
- [Becoming Lean Pocket Guide](#), developed by St. Andrew's University in 2015 as a step-by-step guide to conducting process mapping in a university setting using Lean principles.

Schools in the cluster:

- Boise State University
- The University of Montana
- University of Alaska System
- University of Hawai'i System
- University of South Dakota
- Washington State University