Brad Honious gets it right with a one-stop shop

BY JUSTIN DRAEGER

The “one-stop shop” model is now commonplace in higher education. Providing several campus services at one location can make it easier for students to accomplish a number of chores in one office visit. It’s a proven business model that’s been around for several years. It’s surprising that so many schools get it so wrong.

Getting it wrong was not an option for Brad Honious. Several years ago, as financial aid director at GateWay Community College in Phoenix, he learned that students at private for-profit schools were more satisfied with their enrollment processes than students at community colleges. The reason was clear to Honious: for-profit career schools understood the one-stop shop.

Honious wanted to emulate some of the hand-holding that students attending career schools received. Getting it right at a community college took study, work, and transformations, and it has yielded dramatic and unexpected benefits.

One stop or one location?

“Many one-stop models merely put their services in one building,” explains Honious. “That’s not enough to insure one stop, especially if students are still waiting in multiple lines to talk to multiple people to resolve interrelated issues.”

Some schools try to remedy this by placing a one-stop desk in a lobby or reception area. But Honious noticed that in many cases, students were simply directed to different offices from that desk. A centralized desk must do something—anything—to help a student resolve issues. Otherwise, it’s just another stop.

“During peak times, students move from line to line to line,” says Honious. “Sure they’re in the same building, but our goal was one line, one person, and out the door.”

Blank checks

While the financial aid office could be a catalyst for change, Honious knew that he would need involvement and cooperation of people in multiple offices. After getting a buy-in from management, Honious began working with 60 people from various administrative departments, including IT, cashier, registrar and financial aid staff. The work groups included administrators working on frontlines, those behind the scenes, and even students.

They brainstormed as if they had a blank check from the president. Every idea was aired, no matter how extravagant or costly. They pared the idea list down to choices with a realistic chance of successful near-term implementation. Some good ideas had to be sacrificed—like installing a drive-up window due to cost of implementation time.

“Community colleges are commuter schools,” says Honious, who is still disappointed about shelving the drive-through idea. A drive-through would be a real help for the many students who complain about endlessly circling parking lots for a space simply to stop in the office and turn in a form.

The workgroups studied the enrollment practices of other schools to see what they themselves were doing right and wrong. Core participants who made up the steering committee created a “war room” where they met weekly. The school’s vice president provided funds to hire a planning consultant.
They also hired additional staff to fill in for individuals who were involved in the implementation.

After nearly two years of study and preparation, “GateWay Central” emerged. It goes even further than the one-stop shop model. The one-stop study launched a larger ambition: to build better relationships with students and retain them so they successfully finish school.

GateWay Central would establish one counter where students are admitted, register for classes, complete financial aid forms, and pick up ID cards and parking permits. Along with that, the steering committee revamped several management and financial aid policies.

The steering committee tapped a local professor and consultant to learn about “kaizen,” a management style used by companies like Toyota that focuses on an entire process, not just the present view. GateWay’s goal was to use kaizen to help students succeed.

Teams and more teams
Staff were cross-trained. Managers who formerly supervised one function needed skills to oversee multiple administrative areas. The management structure became lighter and more agile. The steering committee formed additional workgroups to restructure the organization chart. “We had a steering team. We had a one-stop team to review front counter operations. We had a training team, and a technology team and a construction team,” says Honious.

During the rollout it became evident that they had to remove other student logjams. Like many community colleges, Gateway had an undesirable student loan default rate—as high as 19 percent in recent years. The financial aid office had been wary of packaging students with federal loans upfront, but this didn’t fit their new philosophy. Without having student loans packaged upfront, GateWay students often used credit cards to pay for living expenses and tuition. In a bold move, Honious began offering financial aid awards with student loans.

“Some of my colleagues thought I was nuts!” he exclaims. “But I believed that we had to give students these options to help them work fewer hours, enroll for more credit hours and complete their schooling quicker.”

They implemented money management and financial aid courses that qualified for college credit. They implemented a money management webpage. These moves were some of their “in-reach” efforts. While outreach attempts to bring students into the school, in-reach tries to retain the students you have and help them complete their program. GateWay began offering counseling, financial literacy courses, life skills courses, and they communicated more often with them. The core competencies of the credit courses were approved by the Maricopa Community Colleges’ Curriculum Committee and were built around USA Funds Life Skills, a financial-literacy curriculum that gives schools tools to teach students money and time management skills.

The results
After two years of planning and two years of implementation, GateWay Central became a fully functioning one-stop shop for students.

“You should see the faces on students when they realize they can get all the service they need from one person,” says Honious. In cases where they need to meet with someone behind the scenes, a frontline staffer uses an in-house queue system that uses Microsoft Office SharePoint. Before long, an administrator joins the student for additional help.

The results have been dramatic. Over five years, the number of students who completed their associate degrees nearly doubled from 800 to 1,500. The total number of students enrolled remained the same, but full-time enrollment increased, along with students’ likelihood of graduation.

Offering federal student loans upfront also had positive effects. While annual federal loan volume increased from $700,000 to $8 million within three years, the cohort default rate decreased from 9 percent to 5.4 percent. The number of students using credit cards to pay tuition decreased dramatically from 2,300 to about 200. The increased financial aid also helped students dedicate more time to school, and their average increased from 8.2 credit hours per semester to 9.5 credit hours.

Honious has since left GateWay to a job as system-wide director of financial aid with Valencia Community College in Orlando, Florida. Valencia was one of the schools GateWay used as a model for its one-stop shop. Honious looks back at his achievements at GateWay with great pride. “We increased access and success,” he says, two small words that sum up the gold standard of all higher education professionals.