

WEDN, NOVEMBER 12, 2014

Making Business Process Improvement Work in Higher Ed

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The following interview is with Bill Dracos and Jamie Smith of the Business Practice Improvement office at Emory University. During October's Special Feature on Operational Efficiency in Higher Education, Dracos and Smith discussed the importance of business process improvements in the context of streamlining processes and improving institutional capacity. In this conclusion to that interview, Dracos and Smith discuss some of the specific cases their office has dealt with and share some of the strategies they implemented to improve efficiency at Emory University.

1. Can you share a case study of one of the strategies the BPI team has put into place to foster greater efficiency at Emory?

Jamie Smith (JS): A good example of a more focused project we did within a department is our work within a unit inside of our university library. This particular unit asked if we would come in and provide some support because, amongst some other things, they had some difficulty getting their payments made on time. What we found when we arrived was that there was about \$1 million of late payments and there



By finding ways to streamline business processes in individual units, the entire institution can benefit from new ways of seeing old problems.

was no plan in place. The results of that for that unit were that they were dealing with some reputational damage with their vendor, which was their lifeblood given the nature of how that unit functions.

We were invited to come in and solve the problem and what we found was that everything was paper-based, roles and responsibilities were really unclear and that there was no process of getting payments through their system, which involved a lot of different people. We leveraged our process to try to bring some structure to their chaos. We worked with their staff very closely to document what the current state was and we identified

some opportunities. We structured the roles and responsibilities but then we realized we needed to innovate a bit to make things work. We leveraged an enterprise-wide hosted document storage system called Box.com. We had just designed an enterprise-level agreement with Box.com and that was really important for us because that meant that everybody had access to the system, including the staff within any unit. It allowed me to construct an automated workflow process in the cloud for this unit.

The result of that was that the director of that unit could approve things electronically and the director no

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longer had to wonder where payments were in the system. It also increased accountability because every single step in the process was time stamped and attributed to an individual. If there was a breakdown in the process you could very quickly identify where the breakdown was and what you needed to do to get it resolved.

We were able to quantify the results; it amounted to about \$100,000 a year saved in terms of productivity gained.

The process we were able to create can be replicated around the university. We could take the same workflow process that is at no cost to the departments and schools and units and we could replicate this in other similar departments, bigger or smaller.

Bill Dracos (BD): Our solutions are not cookie cutter. We're working in an environment that is highly flexible. A lot of batch processes or custom processes go on here, like research, like teaching where there's great difference and there's a need for flexibility. When you approach problems in the university, process realignment may get you nowhere. There may or may not be obvious defects in process flow in the business environment inside the university. Typically I found there aren't that many. You're not going to find massive replication and massive inefficiency. What you're going to find are complex problems that require creative solutions, thoughtful solutions, engagement of constituents to understand the problem and solutions, and a way to approach it from a problem-solving consultant's mindset.

2. Overall, what is the impact of these kinds of efficiency-boosting projects on the institution?

BD: One of the biggest challenges we have is psychological and one of the biggest changes we've seen is psychological. By showing that you can thoughtfully work through these projects, identify the problems, vet the problems with experts, and develop solutions collaboratively with experts and large working groups, people start to understand this kind of positive change is a very good thing. They start identifying how they can do it inside of their own units.

For example, the School of Medicine is undergoing great change right now in a very positive way. They're doing shared service models and shared service centers themselves for some of their own centralized functions and business functions. We're guiding them and helping them but really they've absorbed it and are taking it on as something they want to do. We also see some of the people in other departments and units who look at problems now with a different eye. Part of the success and impact we've had on the university is changing how people think, changing how they look at problems not as insurmountable obstacles, not as something to be ignored but as something to be thought through and something to be addressed and maybe something to be changed depending on what the right answer is.

JS: With the corporate card project [discussed in the [first installment of this interview](#)], at a high level our goal is to increase adoption of the corporate card because we had a really low adoption rate. With the travelling and expense system we wanted to make enhancements to the process because there are a lot of redundancies and unnecessary steps in the way that the process and the system was designed for dealing with business expenses. After we went

through a long process with a lot of stakeholders, we have great outcomes from their ideas for this project. We were able to eliminate some of the redundancies and unnecessary steps in our travel and expense system, and we provided a series of incentives for people to adopt the corporate card as their method of business expenses for the university. We were able to track that if people are using a corporate card versus a personal card for their expenses. When they are reimbursed, it takes on average about 38.6 minutes less per expense reports if you're expensing corporate card charges versus charges put on your personal card, and that's because of some of the efficiencies we're able to build in because of our system.

We project that we're going to save hundreds of thousands if not millions of dollars over time just by getting people off of personal card reimbursements and onto the corporate card. Not to mention that we have greater visibility over the expenses that are on our corporate card. It gives us better fraud prevention and controls and we have better reporting overall. We understand how our users of the corporate card are spending university money. It gives us good data so that we can make changes in other areas of the university.

This interview has been edited for length.

Key Takeaways

- Efficiency is not just measured by money saved, but also time saved; which has an inherent cost associated.
- Finding business process improvements for individual units can have major impacts on the rest of the institution.

The EvoLLLution is an online newspaper dedicated to non-traditional higher education. It is the brainchild of [Destiny Solutions](#), a company that creates software for universities and colleges to help them successfully attract, manage and maintain their non-traditional students.