Bridging the Disconnect of Interdepartmental Communication

by

Michael DiBartolomeo

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Brian Nelson, Chair
Stephanie Smith
Christopher Romano

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ABSTRACT

As colleges and universities across the United States continue to grapple with enrollment challenges, many are embracing the concept of customer service as way to improve the student experience and positively impact retention. However, as many institutions of higher education begin to evaluate their own organizational structure, the notion of combining cross-functional departments is one strategy that more intuitions are exploring in an effort to improve communication, collaboration, and efficiencies. This qualitative dissertation study sought to understand the ways in which communication challenges for disconnected, yet cross-functional, departments can impact the ability of individual employees to properly execute the core functions of their individual positions. Utilizing semi-structured interviews, I explored how two previously disconnected departments interacted with each other on a daily basis, including the understanding of communication distribution. Employees were then physically relocated into one physical unified student services department, called Student Financial Services, and provided a structured schedule of professional development and cross-training activities. Participants were then interviewed about their experiences after the transition was completed. The four major themes that emerged through the data analysis were: improved communications equal improved customer service, enhanced professional development identifies and minimizes gaps, cross training leads to innovation, and policies and procedures are best developed by those within the organization.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my son, Matthew, and my daughter, Isabella, who always knew when it was time for “dad to do his homework” and inspired me throughout this journey; to my wife, Chrissy, who has served as the backbone of our family not just these last three years, but every year, and who encouraged me to pursue this program when I wasn’t sure I was capable myself; to my family, who has helped me along the way and always sent feedback and unwavering support.

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INTRODUCTION

In August of 2017, I accepted the position as the Vice President for Enrollment Management at St. Thomas Aquinas College, a small private Catholic college in Rockland County, New York. I was ecstatic to take this position; having worked within higher education - and completely within enrollment management - for the previous 13 years, I felt like this was an important step in my career moving forward. Admittedly, I knew very little about the institution, other than it was small, had struggled with enrollment over the last decade, and that they were looking for somebody who was data-driven to come in and fully revamp the entire enrollment process to grow all facets of enrollment, including first year, transfer, and eventually graduate.

When I arrived, however, what I thought was an issue just within the Division of Enrollment Management turned out to be an issue across the entire campus: poor interdepartmental communication. I immediately noticed that communication regarding various information (policies, procedures, new programs, sunset programs, etc.) would rarely be distributed through the entire campus. When information was presented to the entire campus, it would take weeks, if not months, for it to reach all the relevant departments. In rare instances, only when a situation arose, would the information that had been shared out actually be discussed.

My concerns over this issue, and my interest in addressing it, are at the core of my dissertation. In this dissertation study, I implemented a unified students services department called the Student Financial Services, which encompassed the student service functions of the Business Office (what is typically referred to as the bursar) and the Office of Financial Aid. Through the study, I explored the impact of creating a streamlined office of two traditionally disconnected departments to determine if the improved communication associated with a new office structure resulted in better communication between departments.

Local Context

St. Thomas Aquinas College is divided into 5 divisions - Academic Affairs, Administration and Finance, Enrollment Management, Institutional Advancement, and Student Development - with each division housing between three and eight departments. Interestingly though, many of the employees at this small private college do not necessarily communicate with each other, especially if they did not reside in the same division.

This lack of communication created issues as it pertains to the policies and procedures of the college overall. Firstly, within my first few months at the institution, I identified many instances where policies were set in one department and yet they would not be communicated to other departments that were affected by the policy changes. For instance, when the College admissions office went to a new customer relationship management system, other departments were not aware. These departments may have been able to use this new system to enhance their own services; but without those discussions happening, there was little to no ability for other departments to know how to effectively use these other tools. Secondly, the College very much operated in a top-down communication approach, where the former President oversaw many of the daily decisions that, in my experience at previous institutions, were typically made at a much more local, departmental level. In some cases, very little input from the vice president who oversaw the affected departments was solicited. The task of the leadership was to carry out the directive from the top.

This created many issues. First, there were very few policies and procedures that were formalized across the campus, which created many instances where one student may have been assisted in one way and another student differently. The lack of transparent communication across the campus created confusion and inequity in relation to resolving student issues. As stated by Pongton and Suntrayuth (2019), the improvement of internal communication “leads to the improvement in productivity, reduction of absenteeism, higher quality of products and services and increased levels of innovation” (p. 91). In the absence of communication, unfortunately, the opposite was occurring. Second, a lack of communication to the employees that executed the daily work meant that those that were tasked with actually carrying out policies or procedures may or may not have known what they should have been doing on a daily basis. Understandably, this lack of communication created many gaps between departments and created a large issue when attempting to communicate policies and procedures to students at the institution.

Without proper communication to students, there is an obvious problem of students not fully understanding how to resolve issues that may occur during their enrollment at the College and subsequently, negatively affecting their experience as students at St. Thomas Aquinas College. The impacts of poor communication alone can have lasting effects. For employees to properly execute the core functions of their job, there is a requirement for proper training and information sharing. Communication links people together and creates relationships (Pongton & Suntrayuth et al., 2019) Without both, most employees are forced to either learn by trial and error or simply make up policies as they are approached with the particular situation. Additionally, a lack of policies and procedures combined with the little to no communication across departments, can compound the already confusing terms and lexicons attached to college offices (e.g., registrar, bursar or business office, or the Provost) that are just not in the vocabulary of college students (Johnston, 2019).

Conversely, I was formerly the Dean of Enrollment Services at Bergen Community College, the largest community college in New Jersey, serving more than 14,000 students. Of all the departments that I supervised, the “One Stop” was by far the busiest daily. One Stop was the title given to the department structure through which students could resolve issues pertaining to registration, tuition and billing, and financial aid. Although this department preceded the beginning of my tenure at the institution, its impact was clearly felt during my time with the College. In any given year, the employees of the One Stop served more than 100,000 student issues, ranging from simple solutions to complex issues that required multi-departmental execution. What was most effective aspect of this department, however, was that the One Stop brought together individuals who were previously located in separate financial aid, bursar, and registration offices. From the onset of this new initiative at Bergen Community College, the employees of the new department were not only physically located near each other, but also were brought together to formalize the policies and procedures of the new endeavor, including identifying the communication channels with which to properly help students to successful resolution.

In my dissertation study, I implemented and explored the impact of a similar unified student services structure created at St. Thomas Aquinas College, called “Student Financial Services”, on the communication between departments in an effort to improve interdepartmental communication. For the study, I also provided cross-training to individuals in particular customer-service positions on campus, and explored the impact of the training on the ability of employees to more effectively execute their individual job functions and the overall functions of this newly formed unified student services department. With the creation of Student Financial Services, which brought together individuals from previously separated departments, there was an obvious need to ensure that employees are both aware of the policies and procedures of this newly formed department as well as feel empowered to help create and execute the policies and procedures of this new endeavor.

Larger Context: The Effects of Lost Students

According to Ruffalo Noel Levitz’ 2020 Cost of Recruiting an Undergraduate Student Report, the cost of recruiting a single undergraduate student to a private institution in the United States is $2,114 (p. 4), a five-fold increase over recruiting an undergraduate student to a public institution. Additionally, private institutions enroll 29 new undergraduates for every full-time-equivalent enrollment staff member on average, compared to public institutions which enroll 100 new undergraduate students for each full-time-equivalent enrollment staff member (Levitz, 2020). You may have heard the adage that, “it costs more to recruit a new customer than retain a current one,” and this could not be truer in higher education. Needless to say, a lot of time and money is invested in recruiting, admitting, and enrolling students, some of whom are academically underprepared, meaning that they lack basic skills in at least one of the three basic areas of reading, writing, or mathematics (Tritelli, 2003).

And yet, when they enter college, many students are not prepared to navigate the administrative functions of paying their tuition, registering for classes, and seeking academic advisement. At St Thomas Aquinas College, many of the daily administrative offices that exist to assist students seem to create a very confusing experience for our students, nearly 40% of whom are first-generation college attendees (STAC, 2020). While the institution has many dedicated employees, we have experienced enrollment issues that I believe are directly related to these missteps in communication as a college. While the national average first-time, full-time retention rate in postsecondary institutions in the Mid East region was 77.2% in 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), St. Thomas Aquinas College's first-time, full-time retention rate as of Fall 2020 was about 74%. Additionally, the 6-year graduation rate at the College of the 2012 cohort is 53% (STAC, 2020) compared to nearly 59% nationally (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). These factors clearly outline a disparity between our institution and national averages.

While there is always opportunity for improvement of student achievement metrics, after arriving at the college, I found that there was a clear issue for students from a communication standpoint. According to Rudick et al. (2019), students generally justify their communicative choices in higher education based on their perceptions of appropriate, good, or normal institutional reasoning and behaviors (p. 445). Most students generally follow three general principles:

1. Reciprocity - *“if I show that I’m engaged and interested, I’ll gain the interest of my faculty member”*
2. Taking Responsibility - conforming to their role as a student - and an adult - is an important part of the process of growth while in college
3. Prioritizing effort - conserving your energy in certain aspects of your life as a student, while exerting in others

If we are to believe, as Rudick et al. pointed out, that these principles help students create social capital, which are the “mental frameworks and logics that guide students’ pursuit of relationships” with instructors and administrators, it can be assumed that these principles evolve and change as the student progresses through their academic career. But this begs the question: how can we ensure that students - many of whom are academically underprepared and unaware of the administrative structure of a college or university - clearly understand the non-academic functions of the institution? I believe that this is where a strong interdepartmental communication structure is vital.

However, to frame the conversation around interdepartmental communication as if it is a binary function - either non-communicative or communicative - is like saying students attend or do not attend college; there are varying emotional and political conflicts that can occur within an attempt to create a more internally communicative college campus. As Gearin (2017) states in his research regarding new higher education president integration, “resistance arises from fear of the unknown when change agents offer unsatisfactory explanations of the reasons for change” (p. 562); in other words, when directives are handed down with no explanation or input of employees, the propensity to resist that change increases. However, when a consultative approach between a leader and employees is executed, the most positive results can occur and make employees feel more included in organizational change and less likely to resist.

I suspect that this is what has happened within St. Thomas Aquinas College. For many years, most employees - some of whom have not worked anyplace else in their professional careers - were not included in the decision-making process, but yet were handed directives to execute functions or policies and procedures that they may or may not have agreed with. This lack of collaboration may have contributed to their inability to properly communicate interdepartmentally because of the mistrust across campus. This, in turn, made it difficult for every employee to be fully aware of the daily functions of the College and how to assist students in the best and most equitable manner possible.

Problem of Practice

The problem of practice (PoP) at the heart of my dissertation study focused on the need to improve communication at small private colleges. This problem arises directly from my work over the last eighteen years within enrollment management. College admissions offices across the country utilize every available technology - from email, to virtual chat, to CRM (customer relationship management) systems, to social media - to attract students to their campuses every fall. However, once those students arrive on campus, most colleges force them into one method of communication - email. Furthermore, small colleges - which typically have very small budgets - are hesitant to invest in technologies that may improve communication (like learning management systems, website and social media analytics, and retention tools) for one of two reasons: a.) they are not fully using technologies that they have now and are worried about using something new, or b.) they just do not have the human capital to implement something new.

This idea intrigues me for multiple reasons. I work at a small institution that is severely lacking in human capital with many offices, including crucial offices for students, operated by a small number of employees (for example, the entire academic advisement office at my institution - which typically consists of professional advisors - has only three employees serving nearly 1200 students). College students are consumers, and the more negative experiences that they have at their institution, the less likely they are to continue to enroll at that institution. As is the case with most small institutions of higher education, declining retention of students can significantly negatively impact the ability of the colleges to effectively execute strategies for growth, and can negatively impact budgetary priorities.

Research Questions

To examine the impact that interdepartmental communication has on the ability of employees to properly communicate with and assist students, I used the following research questions to inform my dissertation study:

RQ1: How does implementation of the “Student One Stop Center” affect the ability of employees to properly communicate policies and procedures to students to provide exceptional customer service?

RQ2: How does implementation of the “Student One Stop Center” impact information sharing and policy setting among employees within the shared setting?

RQ3: How can structured professional development help employees who assume new functions assist in their ability to take on new responsibilities?

RQ4: How can cross-training all employees of the “Student One Stop Center” impact the ability of employees to properly execute the functions of this new department?

Action Research

My dissertation study was the culmination of a larger action research project, and builds on earlier research I conducted as part of that overall project. As stated by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, action research is “is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted *by* and *for* those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the ‘actor’ in improving and/or refining his or her actions” (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, n.d.). Additionally, both Koshy et al. (2011) and Meyer (2009) conclude that the strength of action research is its “focus on generating solutions to practical problems and its ability to empower practitioners, by getting them to engage with research and the subsequent development or implementation activities” (Koshy et al., 2011, p. 2). For my problem of practice, action research provides an opportunity to observe, identify, propose solutions, implement, and evaluate while also affording the occasion to collaborate with members of the campus community that I would not otherwise interact with due to the current departmental silos.

Cycle 0 Research - Students

The first step of my larger research project involved surveying students on the St. Thomas Aquinas campus to better understand their perceptions of customer service. Once results were collected, an analysis was conducted to draw conclusions as to the need for the subsequent research. For the purposes of this overview, I will focus on the results of the fifteen-question survey given to student participants and related recommendations.

Demographic Breakdown

Seventy-three respondents completed a survey asking questions about their experiences with customer service at the college that was distributed to 900 undergraduate students at St. Thomas Aquinas College. The demographic breakdown of respondents is as follows: 62 students indicated that their age was between 18-22 years old; 8 were between the ages of 23-25; 4 were 25 or older. Fifty-two (70%) respondents indicated that they were female and 21 (28%) indicated that they were male; one respondent identified as genderqueer/gender-nonconforming. While there was an even distribution in the number of years the students were enrolled at the College, 42 respondents (57%) indicated that they were enrolled at St. Thomas Aquinas College for either two years (23 respondents) or three years (19 respondents).

Key Findings

While all survey responses are included in Appendix A, I focus here on the revealing responses to two specific items. When presented with the survey item, "I feel that the College is helpful to students", more than 33% of the respondents (24 individuals) answered either Slightly Agree, Slightly Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree. While student respondents overall believed that the College is helpful, the fact that one third of respondents did not respond at the two highest levels of answers may indicate that there is still work to be done to improve customer service for students. Additionally, when presented with the item, "I believe that the College has my best interests in mind when enacting policies", more than 40% (32 respondents) responded lower than either Strongly Agree or Agree. This response may indicate that many students are not only displeased with the level of customer service, but even worse, they do not believe that the College has their best interests in mind.

Cycle 0 Research - Employees

Participants

For Cycle 0, I also conducted semi-structured interviews (n = 3) with staff at the College. The staff members were all those that are front-line employees in administrative functions (billing/bursar, financial aid, registration) and interact with students on a daily basis. Employees averaged 9 years of service at the College. Participants were chosen intentionally because of their functional position at the College and their daily interactions with students.

Instrument

The semi-structured interview questions for this cycle of research were written by myself and included questions regarding organizational communication. The goal of the interviews was to learn more about perceptions of interdepartmental communication from the employee perspective and to understand how perception of administrative communication affects students' ability to navigate challenges pertaining to non-academic factors (billing, academic advisement, financial aid, etc.).

Employees were asked eight questions, including:

- Have you ever received conflicting information before from different administrators? How did you decide which to believe?

- Can you talk about an issue that you needed resolved that required interacting with college employees? Was the issue resolved?

A full record of all questions for employees is included in appendix B.

Procedure

I received approval from the Office of Research Integrity and Assurance's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the Cycle 0 study. As described in the study's protocol, I conducted all the interviews and was the co-primary investigator of the study as well as transcribed all data.

All participants were presented with a consent letter and agreed to be audio recorded with my personal iPhone. All interviews occurred individually on campus under strict social distance protocols. Upon collection of the study, participants were invited to review the transcript of their interviews. None of the participants requested to see the transcripts. The collected data from the interview was de-identified and all participants received a participant number for internal identification purposes.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using the open coding method of Strauss and Corbin's (1998) constant comparative method. All audio tapes were reviewed multiple times and initial codes were developed based on the responses of participants that were then organized into similar categories. The following section will provide a description of these findings.

Results

The analysis of this qualitative data from interviews revealed three main themes around the area of interdepartmental communication. Two of these themes can be categorized as employee-centric, and one can be classified as student-centric. The following section will describe each of these themes and provide supporting evidence. A discussion of these findings follows this section.

Departmental Silos

Two of the three staff interviewees discussed the lack of communication that exists across the campus as an organization. There was a sense that much of the important information regarding policies and procedures was not properly communicated to those that would execute the policy/procedure. Maria (a pseudonym) commented,

"I can't tell you how many times that I felt that I was the last person to know when something new was happening on campus in relation to a new policy. For instance, I work in an office that meets with students very often and I didn't know that we were offering current students a discount on winter courses. If I knew that, I would have never advised so many students to go to the local community college for winter courses."

This feeling was common among the other employees interviewed. Cynthia (a pseudonym) stated that "it seems that most decisions are made at the top - from the President and the Cabinet - and then they don't seem to get to the right people. If we were more involved in the decision-making process, we would be able to better understand the reasoning behind decisions and then we could speak to our teams about it." Finally, Stephanie (a pseudonym) spoke to the lack of connection between the faculty and the administration,

"While we all get along, there is definitely a disconnect between the administration and the faculty and although there are some administrators that interact

frequently with faculty, I would say overall that many faculty have no idea what the true policies are of the College outside of our own area of academic affairs."

Willingness to Improve, with Stipulations

Participant responses in the cycle 0 interviews suggested that employees are more than willing to work on improving communication as a college overall. However, there still exists confusion about what each division of the College is responsible for. For instance, Stephanie remarked that the departments within each division do not seem to make sense overall, stating that "Enrollment Management only manages the enrollment of incoming students, but should really oversee all students. That may be why employees don't know where to turn for information or confirmation of a decision, and this is only one example." Additionally, there seems to be a feeling across the campus that as an organization, there are large gaps of human capital due to the previous President - who retired in July 2020 after 25 years as the leader of the College - resisting over the years to grow the overall number of employees. In fact, the number of employees had actually decreased over the last ten years. This had, in turn, created large gaps of information sharing because of employees were more focused on their daily tasks than on strategic initiatives to help move the College forward. Maria remarked, "I'm just trying to get my daily work done because we don't have enough employees to get the daily work done. How could I even think of working on strategic initiatives or ensuring that all the information on the website is correct? I would love to work on a better system of communication across the College, but who has time for that?"

Lack of Communication Affects Students

What may have been most enlightening was the discovery that students know that the College overall has an issue with communication. They see this in many different ways, including receiving different information regarding the same issue from different employees, sometimes in the same department. Additionally, the students surveyed felt that at times, they did not know who to trust when navigating administrative hurdles, so they have begun to rely on one particular person for all issues. One student stated "I've been to see the same employee in financial aid for every issue I've had this year, whether financial aid, or registration, because she's the only person I can trust and I at least know that if she doesn't know the answer, she will try to find it for me." This feeling was echoed by all students, including one student who stated, "If these are the experts of the school and they don't know the answers I'm looking for, then who does? And why am I at a school that doesn't know their own business?"

Discussion

Based on the data collected during these semi-structured interviews with staff, and survey results of students in the Cycle 0 study, there seems to have been a real issue regarding interdepartmental communication. Although there was a real willingness to improve communication at the College, both between employees and between employees and students, there seemed to be a misunderstanding as to how to work towards this improvement, mostly due to the lack of human capital at the faculty and employee level. It was stated many times that people feel overworked and underdeveloped from a professional standpoint. Employees wanted to improve their communication, especially outside of their own division, but there just has not been a method at the College to achieve this.

From the student perspective, there seemed to be real attention to the fact that they do not feel comfortable with the information that they are receiving when handling administrative issues, to the point that they are not sure they are being properly advised on financial and academic matters. There also seemed to be a lack of transparency from students' perspective in respect to where they can locate information, whether in print or online.

There were some limitations to the research in Cycle 0. First, this was a very small sample size of only three professional staff members and 62 students and further data collection was needed to support subsequent cycles of this action research study. In addition, it is important to point out that this College is one that is going through a major transition with a new President who was installed in July of 2020. Further interviews as a new leader extends their tenure will be important to help understand if there was a change in the communication practices post-installation. In conclusion, these findings provide further evidence that the problem of practice originally proposed for my umbrella action research study is valid, and also support my assertion that interdepartmental communication is a real issue at the institution that needs to be addressed to ensure the success of students as they progress towards graduation.

Key Takeaways

Based on the above-mentioned responses, there are two main recommendations that influenced the design of my dissertation study. First, the executive Cabinet of the College must consider to a higher degree how policies and procedures at the College negatively impact students in terms of their ability to navigate the challenges of being a college student. This includes demystifying language that is not part of the lexicon for most18 to 22-year-old students. The second recommendation would be to further work towards a higher level of customer service for student facing departments, such as financial aid, registration, and business office (traditionally known as the Bursar's office). These departments interact with students on a daily basis and at many times, during the most tumultuous situations of their academic tenure. By providing a level of customer service that is welcoming, informative, and responsive, the College can improve the perception of customer service campus wide.

The survey responses obtained from students further validate the intervention that I implemented for the dissertation study, with a new unified Student Financial Services department, combining student-facing departments into one centralized operation, and related cross-training for employees on the new centralized operation

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As discussed in Chapter 1, there was an issue of disconnected communication on my college campus and a need to greatly improve interdepartmental communication. It is my belief that many students on my campus, as outlined by cycle 0 survey results, had a negative perception of customer service. This was due to the lack of formal communication channels interdepartmentally.

To address this issue, for my dissertation study I designed and implemented a “Student One Stop Center” called Student Financial Services and explored its impact on employees from the perspective of both cross-training and shared governance in policy and procedure creation. In addition, I conducted employee cross-communication training through a series of workshops and investigated its impact on overall execution of a new unified student services department. The literature included in this chapter provides an understanding of how a unified student services department can improve interdepartmental communication between employees to better assist students through their educational journey. First, I will discuss how college students identify with their institution as an organization. Second, I will discuss what drives student perceptions of customer service. I have chosen these two specific topics as I feel that they are important to understand the mindset of students from a customer service perspective and can significantly impact the methods with which administrators can use to create a “student first” culture of information sharing and creation of policies and procedures that are transparent and helpful to students. In addition, the studies explored through the literature will also assist in creating not only a new physical space, but a culture of caring for our students, many of whom enter our institution with little knowledge of the administrative hurdles of higher education.

As the Vice President of Enrollment Management at St. Thomas Aquinas College, I have intimate knowledge of the communication channels within my institution. This knowledge has provided me with the foundation for my action research, studying how interdepartmental communication affects the ability for administrators to communicate with each other, and how it affects their ability to communicate properly with students.

Through my Cycle 0 research, I was able to achieve two major milestones. First, I was able to spend a significant amount of time with various members of the College (staff and students) observing interdepartmental interactions between faculty and staff, staff members from disconnected departments, and administrative staff members and students. Each interaction I encountered has reaffirmed the importance of understanding how interdepartmental communication affects our ability to properly communicate with students. Secondly, I was able to interview students and staff about their perceptions of communication on campus. This equally reinforced the need to conduct this dissertation study to better understand how interdepartmental communication is can be positively improved when previously disconnected, yet functionally coupled departments are unified, as well as when a formal cross-training and professional development schedule is created.

Introduction of Intervention

As one of the leaders of my college campus, I am tasked with overseeing the functions of enrollment management: admissions, financial aid, enrollment marketing and campus communications. However, I am also tasked with ensuring that the communication within each division is streamlined at every level. This is where I see the intervention that implemented for this dissertation having the greatest impact.

It is well known on my campus that an area in need of improvement is communication interdepartmentally, especially within our student-facing customer service areas, which include financial aid, registration, bursar / business services, and admissions. With these opportunities in mind, I executed two major interventions to improve communication interdepartmentally and subsequently with students.

First, the College physically moved the employees of the Office of Financial Aid and members of the Business Office (typically known as the Bursar's Office) into one physical space that was rebranded the "Student One Stop Center". Prior to opening the new space, students had to travel to all corners of the campus to resolve financial aid or billing issues; for instance, if a student had a past due balance, they had to first go to the business office and find out what their balance was, then travel across campus to the financial aid office to complete any outstanding requirements, only to then travel back to the business office to have their financial hold lifted. Once that was completed, the students could then register for courses. This created many instances where the student would be confused or would simply give up trying to complete the process. With one physical space that is occupied by the bursar / business office, and financial aid, (with the Office of Admissions now in a renovated adjacent building), we are able to manage all the front-facing student services under one building.

In a previous position as the Dean of Enrollment Services at Bergen Community College - which is New Jersey's largest community college with more than 14,000 enrolled students - we had experienced a similar challenge of disconnected departments.

In my nearly three years there, the College decided to move to a more robust one-stop operation, and the ability to attend to nearly 100,000 student issues - up from fewer than 80,000 the previous year - was clearly magnified by the students' ability to resolve all their issues under one physical location.

The second part of the dissertation study involved scheduled cross-training of individuals in particular customer-service positions on campus through structured, specific cross-training actions executed within the new unified student services department. By far one of the greatest challenges on my campus were the informational silos that offices and individuals within those offices operate in. I have spoken with many students who have commented that they receive conflicting information for similar issues, which confuses and frustrates them. Under this new Student One Stop Center, all employees have been cross trained to handle issues relating to financial aid and bursar/billing functions. All of the front-line employees are now "student financial specialists" and receive clear direction regarding policies and procedures, which will empower them to make clear decisions regarding student issues. Additionally, the official policy of the center is now to strive to bring every student issue to resolution in one interaction. This policy allows for frontline employees to engage in organic problem-solving through enhanced interdepartmental communication. We have, in effect, merged two departments into one, minimizing the opportunity for disinformation to travel from siloed department to siloed department. With both student service offices under one umbrella, there is now one consistent communication plan for students who typically visit this newly formed office when they have issues that need to be resolved.

Supporting Studies

When considering the intervention at the center of this dissertation study - moving student services under one functional department and cross-training all the individuals in this new Student Financial Services - a few areas of research provided context and guidance for the study, including Organizational Identification, student perceptions of service quality, and research on fostering change in organizations.

Organizational Identification

One area of research that informed the study is organizational identification (OID). Myers (2016) was interested in studying students’ organizational identification (OID) through three specific goals: examining the dynamics of organizational identification through the study of college students’ identification with their university; understanding the dynamics of students’ organizational identification with their university in a richer and more rigorous fashion than in previous research; and examining the stability of member’s organizational identification over time, particularly in a context of internal and external environmental turbulence confronted by the organization and its members (p. 211).

Through a mixed methods approach of surveying, a questionnaire used a 7-interval Likert-type scale running from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The researchers assessed organizational identification using Mael and Ashforth’s (1992) six-item scale, which asked questions related to the students’ personal feelings regarding connection to their university (p. 217). They also measured students' perceptions of their university’s external image as well as interorganizational competition between their university and rival similar schools (p. 218). Finally, they measured students’ perceptions of the trustworthiness of their university as well as satisfaction with their university in helping to achieve personal goals (p. 218).

Interestingly, the researchers also included two open-ended questions asking the students about their attachment to the university (p. 218). One question was about identifying events, occasions, or moments that made them feel more attached to their university; the second was related to identifying moments that made them feel less attached to their university.

What the study found that is most relevant to my own research can be seen in the top three responses for moments that made students feel “more attached” to their institution. These included campus sporting events (intercollegiate sports games) - 21% of responses; university sponsored social events (concerts, lectures, performances, commencement) - 20% of responses; and university sponsored social organizations (Greek organizations, campus social organizations, intramural sports) - 14% of responses (p. 222).

Conversely, the following top three responses for moments or events that made students feel “less attached” to their university were the effects or repercussions of budget crises (increased fees, tuition hikes, trouble getting classes) - 24% of responses; the surrounding, primarily student-inhabited, community (parties, robberies, careless people) - 19% of responses; and university life in general (lack of traditional or active student body, poor maintenance, rude or unhelpful staff) - 12% of responses (p. 222).

These identification attributes are directly correlated with the way in which students are communicated to, but most importantly to my dissertation research, the lack of helpful staff as an attribute that creates “less attachment” for students is of great interest. Conversely, I believe that creating this Student One Stop provides at least two opportunities for improvement. First, a new, renovated physical space sends the message to students that the College is making an investment into providing a dedicated space to resolve two issues (financial aid and tuition resolution) that are of high importance to students. Secondly, by providing professional development to the new team working in the Student One Stop, employees who previously were not communicating as much previously can create, execute, and evaluate the policies and procedures of this new department on campus.

Quality Service Perceptions

The second research area that I believe supported my research and intervention is “Quality Service Perceptions”, meaning the components of service that students in a higher education setting identify as important for successful information sharing. This area was studied by Sultan and Wong (2013), who aimed to explore the critical antecedents, dimensions and outcomes of service quality, as perceived by students, in the context of a higher education institute in Australia (p. 15). Essentially, they wanted to see how important the perception of service quality at higher education institutions was to students at both the undergraduate and graduate level. For this study, a focus group was conducted (p. 21). At first, the researchers identified recorded information that was important for developing themes and interrelationships. Transcripts were prepared from the focus group discussions and then coding and categorizing occurred, including assigning keywords to appropriate sections of the transcriptions. The final stage was concept mapping to display concepts and their interrelations to formulate a theory (Babbie, 2007). Each researcher independently reviewed the transcripts and developed their own keywords and interrelationships, then came together to develop a hypothesis (p. 22).

Five specific findings were derived as the results of this research: There is a positive relationship between information received by the students and their evaluation of service quality (p. 23); there is a positive relationship between past experience of the students and perception of service quality (p. 24); performance of service quality positively affects students' satisfaction in a higher education context (p. 27); perception of service quality positively affects trust in the context of higher education (p. 28); perceived satisfaction positively affects trust in the context of higher education (p. 28).

This study is directly related to my dissertation interventions due to the nature of the need for improved service quality as it relates to the student experience. As Sultan and Wong (2013) state in their results, there is a direct correlation between service quality and trust in the minds of students and therefore, there is a need to ensure that through improved communication, service quality for students and as a byproduct their trust in their university. With the creation of not only a new physical space in our Student One Stop, but also a reimagined series of professional development opportunities including cross-training for all individuals under this new unified student services department, there is an enhanced focus on improving service quality.

Employee Communication

At the core of my dissertation study is the area of employee communication and its impact in engagement and overall ability to function. Employees are one of the most critical stakeholders due to their ability to be an organization's largest supporter as well as their largest critic. Kang and Sung (2016) studied the employee-organization relationship (EOR) at a beauty supply company that manufactures and sells personal care products in South Korea. Through their data collection of more than 430 employees who all worked as sales representatives, a series of questions around communication, trust, satisfaction, and dedication were presented to the participants (Kang and Sung, 2016, p. 89). Their analysis revealed that symmetrical internal communication had a significant effect on employee-organization relationships, but also contributed to overall employee engagement (p. 95). These results validate that the methods and success of internal communication processes can have a positive effect on the engagement and overall satisfaction of employees.

Professional Development

Professional development, paired with employee communication, were the two largest areas of research for this study. One area where St. Thomas Aquinas College currently trails other institutions where I have worked is in the area of professional development (PD), including action plans for each employee, proposed training and professional development opportunities, and evaluation of professional development. This is not the fault of anyone at the College; this is very common for small institutions with limited budgets to have little formal professional development, and the institution is actively addressing this with a more proactive approach towards identifying professional opportunities. There have been studies about professional development in many areas, but perhaps not as many as within health care. Samuel, Cervero, Durning, and Maggio (2021) recently conducted a scoping review of continuing professional development to ascertain the level of development literature that is available over the previous decade, resulting in more than 7,000 pieces of literature around the area of healthcare (p. 914).

However, professional development is only successful if those participating are receiving some benefit from the development itself. This is perhaps most evident within education. An example of the positive effects of professional development comes from Higgins and Parsons (2009), who identified an opportunity to study the effects of a professional development model in mathematics as a result of the Third International Mathematics and Science study identifying the achievement of New Zealand students significantly below the internal means in mathematics in 2000 (Higgins & Parsons, 2009, p. 232). In response, more than 25,000 teachers participated in a major government-funded strategy to improve the teaching and learning of mathematics in New Zealand Schools. The professional development model utilized followed three themes first presented by Putnam and Borko (2000): “cognition is (a) situated in particular physical and social context; (b) social in nature; and (c) distributed across the individual, other persons, and tools” (p.4). Through three pedagogical tools, nearly all facilitators of professional development reported that they considered teachers’ content knowledge to have increased as well as nearly three quarters of teachers surveyed reporting an increase in their content knowledge (Higgins & Parsons, 2009, p. 236). This has, in turn, been deemed effective in improving student outcomes, including decreasing disparities in achievements between ethnic groups. However, it does not go without notice from this research that the challenge of maintaining focus and quality of development was a clear challenge according to the researchers (p. 240). This was a core area of focus for the innovation in my dissertation study.

Fostering Change

As I prepared my dissertation study, I was reminded of Weick's (1984) theory on small wins. As Weick stated (p. 40):

> *To recast larger problems into smaller, less arousing problems, people can identify a series of controllable opportunities of modest size that produce visible results and that can be gathered into synoptic solutions. This strategy of small wins addresses social problems by working directly on their construction and indirectly on their resolution.*

If I were to propose that the issue was that employees do not know how to properly assist students who arrive with solvable issues, which are exacerbated by our inability to properly communicate, there is a high likelihood that I would be met with resistance by those I need the most assistance from. However, because I broke down the main issue into smaller issues, such as working together to ensure that all the policies and procedures of each department are clearly documented and distributed to everyone, I was able to slowly build upon each small win to reach the ultimate goal. If we are to believe again as Weick (1984) states that small wins are "controllable opportunities that produce visible results" (p. 43), then intervention in itself may be a small win; however, the totality of these two interventions together may eventually assist in arriving at the ultimate goal, which is to systematically improve the interdepartmental communication of all the customer service departments within my institution. I believe that employing a small wins model lends itself to continued growth as we move forward in our goal of improving student communication. There are many examples of small wins leading to compounded gains. As stated by Lindblom, "a fast-moving sequence of small changes can more speedily accomplish a drastic alteration of the status quo than can an only infrequent policy change" (Lindblom, 1979, p. 520). In this instance, Lindblom introduced the incremental method to policy science, which was based on his analysis of the unrealistic expectations of making rational decisions given the cognitive limitations regarding complex problems and widespread conflicts over values (Teemer & Dewulf, 2019, p. 302). In many ways, the issue on my campus of interdepartmental communication, especially as it relates to executing policies and procedures, is directly related to the complexity of issues that arise and the feeling of lack of ability to resolve issues due to lack of information clarity.

While the totality of this action research project may seem like a large undertaking, in reality this was four small projects in one: first, there is an agreement among all affected individuals to merge two departments together that were previously disconnected; second, there is a physical space that was completely renovated to accommodate the new Student One Stop; third, there was a new process of professional development and information sharing within the department; and finally, the culture of empowerment of evaluating, producing, and executing policies and procedures was encouraged.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

As the Vice President of Enrollment Management at St. Thomas Aquinas College, I have intimate knowledge of the communication channels within my institution. This knowledge has provided me with the foundation for my dissertation study, studying how interdepartmental communication affects the ability of employees to communicate with each other and therefore affecting their ability to communicate properly with students. As stated by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, action research is "is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted *by* and *for* those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the 'actor' in improving and/or refining his or her actions" (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, n.d.). Additionally, both Koshy et al. (2011) and Meyer (2009) conclude that the strength of action research is its "focus on generating solutions to practical problems and its ability to empower practitioners, by getting them to engage with research and the subsequent development or implementation activities" (Koshy et al., 2011). For my problem of practice, action research provides an opportunity to observe, identify, propose solutions, implement, and evaluate while also affording the occasion to collaborate with members of the campus community that I would not otherwise interact with due to the current departmental silos.

Research Questions

As described earlier, my dissertation study centered on the following research questions:

RQ1: How does implementation of the “Student One Stop Center” unified student services structure affect the ability of employees to properly communicate policies and procedures to students to provide exceptional customer service?

RQ2: How does implementation of the “Student One Stop Center” combining student service functions impact information sharing and policy setting among employees within the shared setting?

RQ3: How can structured professional development positively contribute to improved performance as well as communication between employees?

RQ4: How can cross-training all employees of the “Student One Stop Center” unified student one-stop impact the ability of employees to properly execute the functions of this new department?

Measures and Analyses

In support of the research questions, I conducted pre-intervention and post-intervention interviews about perceptions of communication between faculty, staff, and students at St. Thomas Aquinas College. I chose to employ a longitudinal qualitative approach to allow a detailed, rich picture of contexts, mechanisms and outcomes which can be explored as an individual level (Roberts, Appleton, & Calman, 2013). Due to the lack of research about communication related to combining previously siloed departments, I created the interview questions and validated them through a thorough initial pilot launch and review with two administrators and the four Deans at St. Thomas Aquinas College.

Ethnographic Interviews

I conducted ethnographic interviews which, according to Roulston & Choi (2018) are meant “to explore the meanings that people ascribe to actions and events in their cultural worlds, expressed in their own language” (Roulston & Choi, 2018, p. 4). I completed a series of semi-structured interviews with employees, which allowed for a dialogue between myself as the researcher and the participant while also being guided by a flexible interview protocol and supplemented by follow-up questions and comments (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2018). Through a series of interviews, I was able to gain knowledge into the perception of communication through the experiences of faculty and staff. This includes questions for faculty and staff such as:

1. Have you ever received conflicting information before from different administrators? How did you decide which to believe?
2. How confident are you in the ability of your supervisor to fully understand what you do on a daily basis?
3. How confident are you that you are fully apprised of important information such as policies and procedures of the College?

For each employee, I asked a series of 8 questions (interview questions are included in the Appendix B) with the intention of learning more about the perception of how effective or ineffective the College is at communicating administratively as a campus and with students as advocates for their success. After completing all interviews, I employed qualitative thematic coding methods to define and create themes based on the responses of my participants. I found this method to be most effective due to the fact that coding along themes and topics can help to reveal priorities and "provide focus to the process of analyzing qualitative data" (Vaughn & Turner, 2015, pg. 50. These coding methods of the pre-intervention interviews assisted in developing the exact structure and schedule of professional development for all the employees of the Student One Stop.

Setting

All the research was conducted on the campus of St. Thomas Aquinas College in Sparkill, NY. St. Thomas Aquinas College is a small, private, Catholic-affiliated institution of higher education that has a total enrollment of nearly 2,000 students and more than 250 employees, including faculty and staff. The 72-acre campus comprises two residence areas and six academic buildings. The setting of the dissertation study took place in the newly-designed Student Financial Services, which is located in Spellman Hall within our main academic building.

I chose these areas for various reasons. Spellman Hall is squarely situated in the most visited building on campus and already houses other administrative functions. This is the location of all administrative functions of the campus, and this is also an area that many students have to go to when they need to resolve issues with their accounts, whether financial or academic. This is one area that was observed extensively throughout the research. Additionally, the main academic building allowed for more intimate, private interviews with employees and students.

Participants

The participants for the dissertation study were recruited through purposeful sampling and included a combination of professional and support staff from the current

Office of Financial Aid (5 participants) and the Business Office (3 participants) at St. Thomas Aquinas College. All these employees were chosen because of their positions with the new Student One Stop. The staff members are either front-line employees in administrative functions or they interact with students on a daily basis. They averaged 9 years of service at the College and are all highly skilled within their current specific position, which requires broad knowledge of their department and functional knowledge of other departments across the campus. In terms of positions, the participants included one director, two associate/assistant directors, and staff members (do not have a managerial function to their position). Table 1 provides non-identifying information about the participants, including a random interviewee number for future reference.

Interviewee Number	Office of Previous Position	Tenure at St. Thomas Aquinas College
001	Business Office	5-10 years
002	Financial Aid	0-5 years
003	Financial Aid	5-10 years
004	Business Office	0-5 years
005	Financial Aid	10-15 years
006	Financial Aid	0-5 years
007	Business Office	10-15 years
008	Financial Aid	0-5 years

All participating employees took part in both the professional development and the cross training, including those who are assistant/associate directors and the director, due to the new student services structure as well as continuing education as it pertains to state and federal financial aid regulations and requirements. The schedule for cross training and professional development, which began after June 1, 2022, is included in appendix C, but covered topics including:

- Student financial aid eligibility
- Free Application for Federal Student Aid
- Return of Title IV Funds
- Fundamentals of Student Financial aid
- Collaborative policy and procedure creation
- Escalation of student issues from front-line employees to administrators
- Data-driven decision making

Role of the Researcher

My role within the dissertation study was varied. Due to my professional position as the Vice President for Enrollment Management, I oversee the two administrative departments that I observed as part of the study. In this capacity, my position would be as a participant / observer. For offices outside of my portfolio, however, my role was primarily as an observer and interviewer. This included interviewing all participants as well as physically observing interactions exclusively between employees, which included locations around the campus. My position within the study was that of an insider because this research was initiated by me, was conducted on the campus where I work, and the interventions were integrated based on my recommendations.

In terms of the tasks that I conducted, there are four main functions that I performed while conducting this research. First, I conducted the pre-interviews of all employees who participated in my research. Secondly, I made and implemented recommendations based on an analysis of pre-interview data. Third, I worked on implementing the intervention and collaborated with members of the campus community to integrate and evaluate the intervention. Finally, I conducted post-intervention interviews as well as analyzed that data.

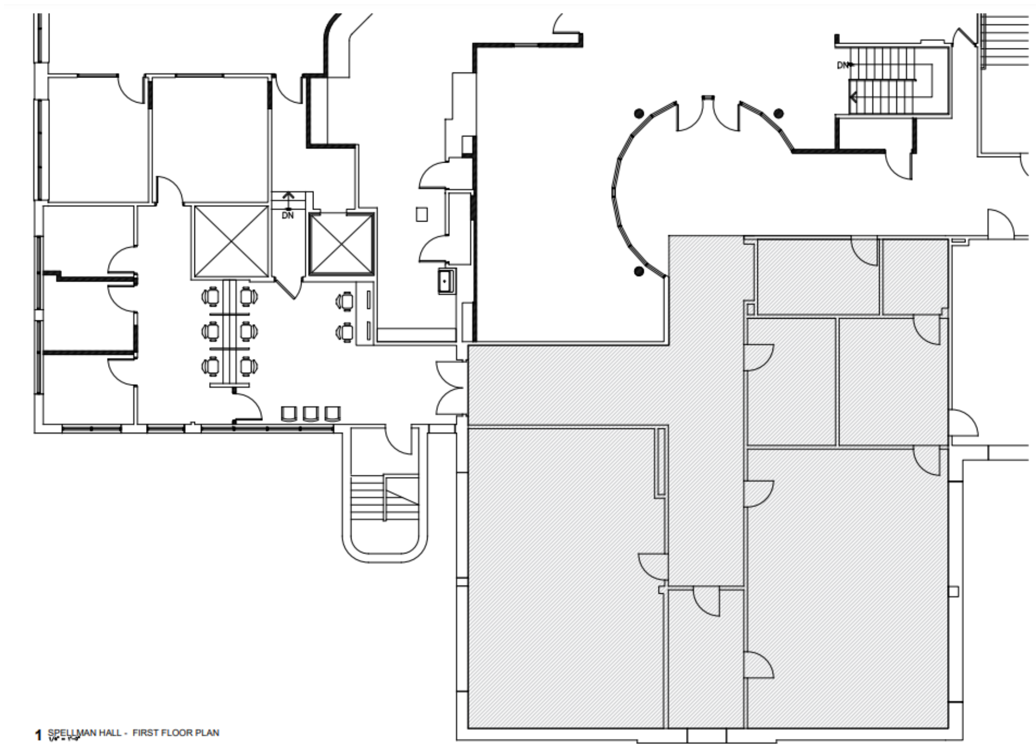
Introduction of Intervention

As a member of the Cabinet at St. Thomas Aquinas College, I am tasked with overseeing the functions of enrollment management: admissions, financial aid, enrollment marketing and campus communications. In addition, I am also tasked with ensuring that the communication within each division is streamlined at every level.

It is well known on my campus that an area in need of improvement is communication interdepartmentally, especially within our student-facing customer service areas, which include financial aid, registration, bursar / business services, and admissions. With these opportunities in mind, I implemented three major interventions to improve communication interdepartmentally and subsequently with students. First, a physical renovation and relocation of employees from both the bursar's office and the financial aid office was executed. Second, a formal professional development schedule was implemented during the summer and fall of 2022. Finally, formal cross training between all individuals within the new unified Student Financial Services was executed throughout the fall of 2022.

Move to a One-Stop Model

We physically moved the Office of Financial Aid and the Business Office (typically known as the Bursar's Office) into one unified space that was rebranded "Student Financial Services" in the early fall of 2022. As I described in chapter 2, the previous structure required students to physically visit different offices to manage issues related to financial and billing functions. With one physical space that was occupied by the bursar / business office and financial aid - in very close proximity to the Office of the Registrar - we are able to manage all the front-facing student services under one building. The space now includes both the Office of Financial Aid and the Business Office (typically named the bursar). Below, is the floor-plan space:



Professional Development and Cross Training

The second intervention that we employed was officially implementing a professional development schedule for all individuals within the newly formed Student Financial Services department. The greatest challenges on my campus are the informational silos in which offices and individuals within those offices operate. I have spoken with many students who have commented that they receive conflicting information for similar issues, which confuses and frustrates them. Under the new

Student Financial Services, all employees were cross-trained to handle issues relating to financial aid and bursar functions. In addition, all employees were provided formal and structured professional development in the areas of billing/bursar functions and financial aid, which created a baseline understanding for each employee of all the core functions of the new unified student services department. Table 2 shows the schedule for professional development sessions implemented for this dissertation study, with an emphasis on both departmental functions through the lens of working towards a model of exceptional customer service:

Table 2

Professional Development Schedule and Topics

Topic	Summary	Dates	Research Question Alignment
Designing a Service Strategy	Focused on recognizing the critical importance of setting, executing, and evaluating service standards.	June 2022 - August 2022 (Approximately 20 hours)	RQ2 RQ3
Delivering Exceptional Service	Designed to increase an understanding of how people, place, and processes intersect while working to deliver exceptional customer service for students	July - September 2022 (Approximately 20 hours)	RQ2 RQ3
Fundamentals of Student Financial Aid	Focusing on the fundamentals of financial aid, including applying, financial aid concepts, and types of financial aid.	August 1, 2022 August 8, 2022 August 15, 2022 August 22, 2022 (Approximately 8	RQ1 RQ4

		hours)	
High Level View of Bursar Functions	Areas of responsibility such as organizational structure, process mapping, and student account systems and invoicing will be addressed.	July 6, 2022 July 13, 2022 July 20, 2022 (Approximately 6 hours)	RQ1 RQ4
Application Processing	Overview of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and the entire online application process.	September 9, 2022 September 15, 2022 September 22, 2022 September 29, 2022 (Approximately 8 hours)	RQ1 RQ4
Return to Title IV Funds	Overview of the return of Title IV funds (R2T4) regulations. Focus will be on what happens to Title IV funds when a student withdraws before completing the period of enrollment.	September 13, 2022 September 27, 2022 October 4, 2022 October 11, 2022 (Approximately 8 hours)	RQ1 RQ4
Student Eligibility	Overview of general Title IV student eligibility criteria and documentation requirements.	October 11, 2022 October 18, 2022 October 25, 2022 (Approximately 6 hours)	RQ1 RQ4

In addition to the professional development implemented both for this dissertation study and moving forward, cross training was formally introduced throughout the fall term once all employees were physically located in the same spade. This allows for frontline employees to engage in organic problem-solving through enhanced interdepartmental communication. We brought two previously disconnected departments into one, minimizing the opportunity for disinformation to travel from siloed department to siloed department. With two student services offices under one umbrella, there is now one consistent communication plan for students who typically visit these offices when they have issues that need to be resolved. A copy of the professional development training schedule can be located in Appendix C.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine how creating a unified students' services department and related professional development could affect interdepartmental communication. Chapter four presents the qualitative analysis of this relationship and develops significant connections between combining departments and improving interdepartmental communication. This study was guided by four research questions:

RQ1: How does implementation of Student Financial Services affect the ability of employees to properly communicate policies and procedures to students to provide exceptional customer service?

RQ2: How does implementation of the new Student Financial Services office impact information sharing and policy setting among employees within the shared setting?

RQ3: How can structured professional development help employees who assume new functions assist in their ability to take on new responsibilities?

RQ4: How can cross training all employees of the new Student Financial Services impact the ability of employees to properly execute the functions of this new department?

Results for Qualitative Data

To better understand and examine how contextual factors regarding the joining of two previously disconnected departments into the new Student Financial Services influenced the outcomes of this study, various types of qualitative data were collected. These data were used to explore themes, perceptions, and modifications that occurred throughout the study. In this section, the qualitative data that were collected are presented along with coding schemes, themes, and conclusions that were developed based on the data collected from this study. Finally, each conclusion is provided along with its associated data, coding scheme, and components.

Description of Qualitative Data Collected

Qualitative data that were collected included pre-intervention (prior to the implementation of the new Student Financial Services office as well as before professional development and cross training) interviews, post-intervention interviews, and observational journaling. Descriptive statistics for the qualitative data sources are provided in Table 4 below.

Table 4

Description of Qualitative Sources

Data Source	Number of Sources	Word Count
Pre-intervention Interviews (conducted before any of three interventions)	8 interviews	15,931
Post-intervention Interviews (conducted after all three interventions)	8 interviews	18,323
Observational Journal (conducted through implementation of both professional development and cross training)	30 hours of observations	22,421

Results from the pre-intervention interviews, post-intervention interviews, and observational journaling (post-intervention) were collected and coded together using the constant comparative method (Boeije, 2002), where raw data are sorted and organized into groups according to attributes, which are then organized into groups in a structured way to formulate a new theory. Initial coding of pre-intervention qualitative data resulted in 41 codes. These codes were identified by reviewing the responses by the eight employees who were each provided eight questions for individual interviews. I then combined these codes into larger categories. From there, the categories were combined into three larger themes which led to conclusions. Table 5 shows the themes, related components and the assertions from the qualitative data analysis of pre-intervention interviews. As presented below, feedback from employees indicated three main themes as it pertains to merging two departments into a unified student services department: (a) campus-wide communication; (b) interdepartmental communication; and (c) formal policies and procedures for each department observed. These themes were important to learn more about the challenges that individuals in departments must face as they navigate the balance between executing the functions of their individual positions while working to deliver a high level of service to students.

Table 5

Themes, Theme-related components and Conclusions of Pre-intervention Interviews

Themes* and Theme-Related Components	Assertions
Campus-wide Communication 1. With the tenure of the new President, communication in general has increased. 2. Employees feel less siloed when it pertains to campus-wide initiatives and announcements than under previous administration. Major	Employees indicated that the method of email, as well as the frequency, to distribute information on behalf of the College is informative, concise, and clearly delivered. Employees also feel that this new increased communication began only as the new President started in July 2020 and many are not used to the new flow of information. Despite improvements, there is still a lack of

announcements are shared with the entire campus community. 3. Less formal channels of communication are still an issue for information distribution.	information sharing between departments.
Interdepartmental Miscommunication 1. Lack of understanding about where and how to access data. 2. At times, employees do not know which departments out of their own manage particular procedures. 3. There is a lack of formal communication between departments that execute cross-departmental functions.	Due to the fact that some departments that are cross-functional do not interact with frequency, there is an increased risk of miscommunication of policies and procedures.
Lack of Formal Policies and Procedures 1. Employees have received conflicting information in terms of approach, with minimal understanding outside of immediate functions of current position. 2. Employees are interested in creating workflows, but with current resource constraints, there leaves little time to work on items outside of daily functions. 3. Lack of understanding of stakeholder relationships exists between departments.	Employees are very interested in creating cross-functional policies and procedures, or at least at a minimum, more formal communication channels to resolve various issues that arise; unfortunately, there seems to be a disconnect between interdepartmental communication due to both the lack of information-sharing and also limited time and resources to formalize policies and procedures.

* Themes are listed in Table 4 in bold text

Pre-intervention Interview Data Analysis

In an attempt to learn more about how communication between two previously disconnected administrative departments that share student service functions impacted the ability of employees from each department to execute the functions of their job, I analyzed pre-intervention data, which were comprised of interviews with all participating staff members for two reasons: (a) to properly understand any issues that previously existed in regards to communication between two departments that share customer service functions, but are not connected to each other physically; and (b) to learn more about the amount of cross training and professional development that currently existed. The responses and subsequent analysis would then inform the dissertation intervention, including the physical configuration of a new unified student services office and future cross training and professional development.

Campus-wide Communication. Assertion 1 - *Employees indicated that the method of email, as well as the frequency, to distribute information on behalf of the College is informative, concise, and clearly delivered. Employees also feel that this new increased communication began only as a new college President started in July 2020 and many employees are not used to the new flow of information. Despite improvements, there is still a lack of information sharing between departments.* The following theme-related components were found which supported the theme leading to this conclusion: (a) with the tenure of the new President, communication in general has increased; (b) employees feel less siloed when it pertains to campus-wide initiatives and announcements than under the previous administration and major announcements are shared with the entire campus community; (c) fewer formal channels of communication are still an issue for information distribution between departments.

According to pre-intervention interview responses, there was a sense of increased communication on behalf of the College. All employees interviewed felt that this was directly correlated with the beginning of the tenure of the new President (who began on July 12, 2020). One employee claimed that "the transparency across the college has definitely increased. I have noticed more frequent emails and not just about large announcements" (Employee 005 interview, September 9). Another employee stated

Under previous leadership, we wouldn't hear about major announcements at the College through any formal channels. It was mostly through word of mouth and you never knew if you could trust the information that was being said. Now, we have formal emails that come out from Campus Communications that look official and also contain a lot of information. Even if it doesn't matter to me or my area, it's good to at least know that the College wants everybody to be on the same page (Employee 007 interview, September 12).

A third employee stated that that "it's nice to always have that information sent to you in a format that can be displayed in front of you, it's always nice to have that reference to go back to because you can only gauge so much information from looking at an email the first time, so to have it transparently and clearly stated is really important" (Employee 004 interview, September 12).

While all employees interviewed felt that the College was improving communication campus-wide, there was still concern about less formal communication as it pertains to departments communicating with each other. One employee stated that the lack of clarity around communication within departments "creates confusion for employees on how to best assist students to find a positive solution to their issues" (Employee 003 interview, September 14). Another stated

> *There have been instances there a co-worker and I have received conflicting information on the same situation, which only leads to confusion… sometimes, we have to make decisions on the fly based on only the information that's presented to us at the time and when that happens, we need to be able to rely on other departments who are affected by the situation. When we don't have an open line of communication that is clear, it can cause more issues down the road* (Employee 001 interview, September 14).

Interdepartmental Miscommunication. Assertion 2 - *Because some departments that are cross-functional do not interact with frequency, there is an increased risk of miscommunication of policies and procedures.* The following theme-related components were found which supported the theme leading to this conclusion: (a) there is a general lack of understanding about where and how to access data; (b) at times, employees do not know which departments out of their own manage particular procedures; (c) there is a lack of formal communication between departments that execute cross-departmental functions.

Employees indicated that one of the largest challenges directly pertains to not only miscommunication, but in general, the lack of communication that occurs outside of the silos of each department. Although the College is divided into five divisions (Academic Affairs, Administration and Finance, Enrollment Management, Institutional Advancement, and Student Development) with the vice presidents meeting at least twice a month to discuss matters and report back to respective departments, feedback from employees indicated that quite often the important information within each department is not cascaded to other departments that would benefit. In an interview, one employee stated,

I felt like the communication may trickle down to me in little bits and pieces, but I think that comes with the territory, so I feel that changes aren't communicated to those of us who have to actually the job and then we are on our own to figure things out (Employee 004 interview, September 12).

Other employees indicated that a lack of knowledge about data access and procedures is very prevalent across the campus. Employees provided feedback on numerous occasions indicating that "we don't know where to get the data from" (Employee 006 interview, September 14) or "even if we have access to the data, I don't think that I would know how to properly guide a student to the correct person within a department to get their issue resolved" (Employee 006 interview, September 14). One interviewee stated that,

Individual tasks like how to use internal systems I learned by shadowing and watching others in my own department, so that worked for me … but when it comes to making sure about certain policies - especially things like registration or billing that aren't technically in our own department - I was never trained on other departments' policies, so I usually just go to the website, which isn't a great tool (Employee 008 interview, September 12).

Employees stated on many occasions that while the campus website is not a great tool, it is a better option than not helping students at all. One employee stated that "I have to at least try to help the student, who is usually sitting in my office at the time, but it's a bit embarrassing to not be able to help despite being an employee of the College" (Employee 006 interview, September 14). Another employee stated,

Collaboration between departments is so important, especially at a small school like ours where we interact with many of the same students so often. We are small enough that we should be able to talk to each other and work together to solve problems and it's happening in pockets, but not overall as a College" (Employee 002 interview, September 13).

Lack of Formal Policies and Procedures. Assertion 3 - *Employees are very interested in creating cross-functional policies and procedures, or at least at a minimum, more formal communication channels to resolve various issues that arise; unfortunately, there seems to be a disconnect between interdepartmental communication due to both the lack of information-sharing and also limited time and resources to formalize policies and procedures.* The following theme-related components were found which supported the theme leading to this conclusion: (a) Employees have received conflicting information in terms of approach, with minimal understanding outside of immediate functions of current position; (b) employees are interested in creating workflows, but with current resource constraints, there leaves little time to work on items outside of daily functions; (c) lack of understanding of stakeholder relationships exists between departments.

Employees indicated that within their own respective departments, they feel somewhat siloed in their own daily functions. Many of the employees felt very comfortable speaking about their specific functions that they execute on a daily basis, but when asked about other functions of their respective departments, they stated that they only knew the policy and not the specific procedure to execute the function. For example, one employee who worked in the Office of Financial Aid was speaking about the financial aid packaging procedure, and stated,

Someone else usually takes care of the packaging and she wasn't there that day, so I didn't know what to do to help the student. This was early in my career at the College and I wasn't yet trained on the system, but even if I was, I wouldn't have known what to do anyways, because this is not something that I would be expected to be able to do in my position (Employee 004 interview, September 12).

Employees also indicated that this lack of knowledge outside of their specific position can at times create issues in terms of resolving issues in a timely manner. Despite the fact that the Office of Financial Aid and the Business Office has seven employees in total, they previously were very fragmented in terms of what each employee executed as the core functions of their daily work, with little overlap of functions. This created confusion as to how to perform functions outside of individual positions, which was exacerbated by a lack of a formal policy and procedures manual. As one employee stated,

If we had one master policy and procedure manual, this would deal with conflicting information about a specific policy or way to handle something technical. That would save tons of time that we honestly waste trying to figure out what the specific policy is and then actually implementing it… it would take the burden of one specific employee and redistribute the work to everyone to accomplish the work faster (Employee 001 interview, September 14).

One employee, who specifically is the sole person responsible for processing commemorative scholarships, stated that "the entire process is dependent on my schedule and me being able to perform more than 200 scholarship swaps. I would think that a second person could cut the time in half" (Employee 006 interview, September 14). This statement is emblematic of the feedback received from most employees, who are eager to help each other to improve overall departmental performance. Employees indicated that they are very willing to learn functions outside of their typical job duties, but they also stressed the need for a more uniform policy and procedures manual. As one employee stated,

There are so many different departments that we interact with on a daily basis, yet we have never taken the time to actually understand the flowchart of decision making when we are talking about specific policies at the College. I honestly don't know if any department has a policy and procedures manual, other than what any one person who has been here forever may know, and that's not good (Employee 002 interview, September 13).

Pre-intervention data revealed three prominent themes: (a) while campus-wide communication has increased since the new president started his tenure in July 2020, there is still a lack of informal communication that is occurring: (b) a lack of formal communication between departments that are not within the same division exists, which creates a lack of opportunities for employees to discuss issues they experience in regards to student services, and (c) a lack of formal policies and procedures that creates issues for not only employees who are new to the department, but also those who want to assist their colleagues on a functional level. Additionally, other than informal training, very few formal professional development opportunities existed.

Based on these observations and feedback from employees, an opportunity existed to reimagine how a unified student services department at St. Thomas Aquinas College could provide a higher level of customer service to students.

Intervention

In April of 2022, an announcement was sent to the entire campus community of St. Thomas Aquinas College that the formerly disconnected Business Office (traditionally known on college campuses as the bursar) and the Office of Financial Aid were to be combined into a new unified students services department to be called Student Financial Services. This combined all financial processing with all billing functions of the College under one unified physical space, but also combined all the policies and procedures into one combined department. This on-campus enhancement involved major physical construction, which involved the demolition and renovation of the former Office of Financial Aid. This period of construction provided a set timeframe for which the combining of the two departments would be officially combined into one department, but this also created a glidepath for which all members of the new Student Financial Services team could spend time learning from each other, completing cross training, and developing policies and procedures for this new unified student services office. Beginning in June 2022, a professional development schedule was established by the Director of Student Financial Services, which would provide training to all employees on customer service and financial aid procedures. Table 6 provides the training schedule through the fall of 2022.

Table 6

Training Schedule for Student Financial Services

Topic	Summary	Dates	Research Question Alignment
Designing a Service Strategy	Focused on recognizing the critical importance of setting, executing, and evaluating service standards.	June 2022 - August 2022 (Approximately 20 hours)	RQ2 RQ3
Delivering Exceptional Service	Designed to increase an understanding of how, people, place, and processes intersect while working to deliver exceptional customer service for students	July - September 2022 (Approximately 20 hours)	RQ2 RQ3
Fundamentals of Student Financial Aid	Focusing on the fundamentals of financial aid, including applying, financial aid concepts, and types of financial aid.	August 1, 2022 August 8, 2022 August 15, 2022 August 22, 2022 (Approximately 8 hours)	RQ1 RQ4
High Level View of Bursar Functions	Areas of responsibility such as organizational structure, process mapping, and student account systems and invoicing will be addressed.	July 6, 2022 July 13, 2022 July 20, 2022 (Approximately 6 hours)	RQ1 RQ4
Application Processing	Overview of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and the entire online	September 9, 2022 September 15, 2022 September 22, 2022 September 29, 2022	RQ1 RQ4

	application process.	(Approximately 8 hours)	
Return to Title IV Funds	Overview of the return of Title IV funds (R2T4) regulations. Focus will be on what happens to Title IV funds when a student withdraws before completing the period of enrollment.	September 13, 2022 September 27, 2022 October 4, 2022 October 11, 2022 (Approximately 8 hours)	RQ1 RQ4
Student Eligibility	Overview of general Title IV student eligibility criteria and documentation requirements.	October 11, 2022 October 18, 2022 October 25, 2022 (Approximately 6 hours)	RQ1 RQ4

On Sept 13, 2022 the newly-formed Student Financial Services officially opened, creating a unified student services space that provided customer service in the areas of financial aid and billing for students.

POST-INTERVENTION DATA ANALYSIS

Over the course of three months (September until December 2022), I conducted nearly 30 hours of observational journaling within the newly formed Student Financial Services office. During this observational journaling, I spent equal time with all employees, from front-line customer service representatives, to employees who worked on more strategic initiatives; I observed daily functions of the new unified student services department, as well as witnessed the initiation, organization, execution, and evaluation of the first policies and procedures manual of this new unified student services department.

Additionally, in early January 2023, when all formal professional development and cross-training was complete, I interviewed all eight employees who comprise the Student Financial Services department again, with the intention of learning more about: (a) the experience of combining two departments that were previously in two different divisions into one unified department; (b) the effect of formal and informal professional development and cross training on the ability to execute the functions of their department; (c) the process of redefining the roles of each individual of this new unified student services department and the communication of those roles; (d) the process in defining the policies and procedures of this new department.

As presented below, feedback from employees in the post-intervention interviews, along with data collected through my observational journaling, indicated three main themes as it pertains to merging two departments into a unified student services department: (a) improved communication; (b) enhanced professional development; (c) formal cross training; and (d) formal creation of policies and procedures for a new unified student services department. These themes were important to learn more about how the intervention of a new unified services department can affect interdepartmental communication, including cross training, professional development, and creation of formal policies and procedures. Table 7 shows the themes, related components, and the assertions from the qualitative data analysis of post-intervention interviews and observational journaling.

Table 7

Themes, Theme-related components and Conclusions of Post-intervention Interviews

Themes* and Theme-Related Components	Assertions
Improved Communication Equals Improved Customer Service 1. Conversations that involve all affected employees allow for equal feedback. 2. Clearly establishing a cadence of work for each employee allows them to explore other areas of interest. 3. Continuous communication helps to eliminate silos of work.	When all employees are involved in development of a newly developed unified student services department, including roles and individual functions as well as scheduled improvements, the entire time has the opportunity to be a high-functioning organization.
Enhanced Professional Development Identifies and Minimizes Gaps 1. Identifying each team member's level of understanding about their individual position within the organization is essential to professional development. 2. Professional development that is individual, rather than uniform across the organization, provides the individual team member the opportunity to focus on personal areas of improvement. 3. Creating direct professional connections between development and daily job functions is beneficial to both the individual and the organization as a whole.	When employees receive professional development that is personalized, rather than uniform across the organization, there is an increased sense of professional accountability to identify and minimize professional weakness as it pertains to daily job functions.
Cross Training Leads to Innovation 1. Organic cross training, which exists when individuals work collaboratively to solve issues,	Employees who performed formal cross training that was led internally by peers were able to understand, execute, and evaluate the training methods immediately, which also allowed for immediate feedback

allows individuals who interact daily to identify, troubleshoot, and evaluate issues on a daily basis. 2. Formal cross training that is peer-lead, rather than supervisor-lead, can positively contribute to enhanced subject knowledge. 3. Creating a schedule of cross-training that is planned in advance allows for teams to thoughtfully plan and prepare for areas of need.	and therefore created additional opportunities for professional growth.
Policies and Procedures are Best Developed by Those Within the Organization 1. Confidence in the ability to executive the core functions of employee daily job tasks increased as their specific functions were better defined. 2. Employees who perform the daily tasks of the department are much better suited to contribute to the policies and procedures of the department due to seeing all the ways in which a policy positively or negatively can affect the student experience. 3. Employees who perform the daily tasks of the department, utilizing all the systems and software available to them, are much better suited to contribute to the procedures of the department.	Employees who are involved in the day to day execution of the functions of the department should be involved in developing the policies and procedures of the department.

Improved Communication Equals Improved Customer Service. Assertion 1 - *When all employees are involved in development of a newly developed unified student* *services department, including roles and individual functions as well as scheduled improvements, the entire team has the opportunity to be a high-functioning organization.* The following theme-related components were found which supported the theme leading to this conclusion: (a) conversations that involve all affected employees allow for equal feedback; (b) clearly establishing a cadence of work for each employee allows them to explore other areas of interest; (c) continuous communication helps to eliminate silos of work.

Every employee spoke about the increased communication that occurred with the creation of the new department, including both formal and informal communication across the department. One employee stated that "we now have, for the first time ever, a regular cadence of meetings internally as a department where we all have an equal opportunity to voice our opinions, raise concerns, and present opportunities to the team" (Employee 002 interview, January 10). The theme of regular staff meetings was something that was raised by all seven employees, regardless of position or individual job function. Another employee stated that

I have worked here for many years, and I truly feel like we all now have an equal say in what we do day in and day out. I don't feel like I'm being told what to do, but rather I'm being asked for my opinion. This is something that is refreshing to me as someone who was not a manager. It makes me feel that my opinions matter, which they should, because I'm on the front lines doing the job" (Employee 001 interview, January 13).

On numerous occasions, I was able to witness the process of interdepartmental communication in person. The employees who were the front-line customer service representatives would regularly bring concerns or issues to the rest of the team and right in the moment when time permitted, they would troubleshoot the issue immediately. Quite frequently, there were opportunities for discussion and solutions between the entire time.

Two particular observations stand out in regards to improved employee communication. First, quite frequently front-line employees required the assistance of other staff members. Rather than having to call another office and then hope that the person who knew the answer to their question was available, employees were now situated within the same local context providing opportunity for more collaboration, but also opportunity for more immediate response to student issues. Second, employees were at all times during normal business hours available with minimal wait for the students to resolve any issues. Previously, employees in one office could at times become overwhelmed due to the small number of employees within separated departments. With the newly formed Student Financial Services department, the number of employees for this unified is now double what the previous departments were individually. This allowed for up to three employees to be available at the front reception area at any time. At no time during the entire observational period was there a line of more than two students.

Additionally, employees indicated that they felt much less siloed based on the clear definition of their positions and responsibilities, but they also felt as if their individual job functions all positively contributed to the newly formed department as a whole. One employee who previously worked on the bursar side before the merger, stated, *It's so awesome to see the end to end process for the students all in one place. We used to print a bill, explain the bill, then send the student to the financial aid people, then they would sit with the student, get them to fill out the right paperwork, then send them back to us. By then, the student has been bounced back and forth and is upset. Now, we can help them from beginning to end and it's all in one place; I don't have to pick up the phone, call someone in financial aid and wonder if they are there and have time to see a student. Now, I turn my chair around and go see one of them and we solve the problem in no time"* (Employee 008 interview, January 13).

Enhanced Professional Development Identifies and Minimizes Gaps.

Assertion 2 - *When employees receive professional development that is personalized, rather than uniform across the organization, there is an increased sense of professional accountability to identify and minimize professional weakness as it pertains to daily job functions.* The following theme-related components were found which supported the theme leading to this conclusion: (a) identifying each team member's level of understanding about their individual position within the organization is essential to professional development; (b) professional development that is individual, rather than uniform across the organization, provides the individual team member the opportunity to focus on personal areas of improvement; (c) creating direct professional connections between development and daily job functions is beneficial to both the individual and the organization as a whole.

Employees indicated that support for professional development greatly enhanced their knowledge about the department's core functions, including financial aid processing (for those that came from the bursar office) and providing a higher level of customer service. On three separate occasions, I observed the team in professional development in September 2022, and then witnessed their development in action as they met with students over the fall 2022 semester; however, as opposed to most traditional professional development that provides the same training to all employees, leadership within Student Financial Services decided to pursue customized training so that each employee would have a baseline understanding of all functions of the department as opposed to the functions of their position within the organization. While observing structured professional development, employees were attentive, participatory, and vocal about how certain functions could be enhanced or customized to their particular positions within the organization. These discussions positively contributed to performance overall as a new unified student services department.

Employees indicated that this method of training greatly increased their willingness to engage with training as well as created a better framework with which to work as a team. As one employee stated,

It could have been so easy to require all of us to do the same training, yet we each identified early on what our individual deficits were as employees of this new department. Some of us have never reviewed financial aid information other than looking at two screens in the system, but to really understand state and federal financial aid, as well as billing, allows us to function as a better team (Employee 006 interview, January 13).

Observational data regarding professional development further indicated that employees valued professional development in two instances in particular: (a) when the topic was such as the employee had little or no knowledge; or (b) where the topic provided an enhancement to their daily job functions. As one employee stated, *I had almost no knowledge about how bills are produced and distributed, so to learn something new that is now in our department just feels like I'm more invested in the team* (Employee 002 interview, January 10).

Cross Training Leads to Innovation. Assertion 3 - *Employees who performed formal cross training that was led internally by peers were able to understand, execute, and evaluate the training methods immediately, which also allowed for immediate feedback and therefore created additional opportunities for professional growth.* The following theme-related components were found which supported the theme leading to this conclusion: (a) organic cross training, which exists when individuals work collaboratively to solve issues, allows individuals who interact daily to identify, troubleshoot, and evaluate issues on a daily basis; (b) formal cross training that is peer-lead, rather than supervisor-lead, can positively contribute to enhanced subject knowledge; (c) creating a schedule of cross-training that is planned in advance allows for teams to thoughtfully plan and prepare for areas of need.

From the very beginning discussions of merging both the bursar office and the financial aid office together, the first conversation observed was grounded in ensuring that cross training occurred with regular frequency. Formal cross training occurred before the physical merger of the department and was identified by the current director as a priority. The merger of two departments necessitated that employees from the bursar's office became acclimated to financial aid issues and policies and that financial aid employees become acclimated with bursar's office functions. One employee formerly from financial aid stated that "I'm learning a lot about billing, and when bills go out and payment plans and options that are helpful to, you know, relate to the students that I work with so I’m pretty confident that the merge was successful for our department” (Employee 003 interview, January 11).

Policies and Procedures are Best Developed by Those Within the Organization. Assertion 4 - *Employees who are involved in the day to day execution of the functions of the department should be involved in developing the policies and procedures of the department.* The following theme-related components were found which supported the theme leading to this conclusion: (a) confidence in the ability to executive the core functions of employee daily job tasks increased as their specific functions were better defined; (b) employees who perform the daily tasks of the department are much better suited to contribute to the policies and procedures of the department due to seeing all the ways in which a policy positively or negatively can affect the student experience; (c) employees who perform the daily tasks of the department, utilizing all the systems and software available to them, are much better suited to contribute to the procedures of the department.

One of the largest projects that was initiated during the observation period (August - December 2022) was the creation of the Student Financial Services policies and procedures manual. This manual was created with the goal of merging the policies and procedures of both the bursar’s office and the financial office, but the intention of this new manual was not to merely combine the two documents into one master document, but rather reimagine the new unified student services department. While one employee led the project, including the actual organization of information and creation of the manual, all employees contributed to the policies, procedures, organization and distribution of the manual. While development of a policies and procedures manual is not typically viewed as a glamorous task, employees were very eager to positively contribute to the exercise, frequently providing feedback and updates as potential amendments to the policies and procedures of the new department were discovered. Interestingly, employees were very engaged throughout the process, right until the final approval of the manual occurred. As one employee stated,

*This was the first time I had ever been consulted about the policies and procedures of the department that I worked in for so many years. It's easy to assume that a policy will benefit everyone, but I see daily how past policies that are created outside the department can negatively affect students. I also see how the ways in which we try to do something just don't work for the department. You can't run a department with an instruction manual that is delivered by a consultant or a company that doesn't know what the workload is, who the students are, and the pressures of the position (*Employee 005 interview, January 10).

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Discussion

This study examined the how creating a unified student services department, now called Student Financial Services, that combined employees from two previously disconnected departments could impact the ability of employees to effectively understand and execute the functions of positions within the new department effectively. Additionally, I studied how professional development and cross training, including the creation of policies and procedures for the new department, can impact the ability of employees to understand all the functions of this new department as well as assist in assuming new responsibilities.

Implementing this action research project on my campus was a very large undertaking for two major reasons. First, proposing a physical reconfiguration of two previously disconnected departments (financial aid and what is typically known as the bursar at most colleges) required considerable physical construction at a cost of more than $250,000. This required approvals at the highest levels of the College, including the President and the Board of Trustees. Thankfully, the forward thinking of these individuals provided a path for approval, demolition, and construction to create a new physical space. Second, this newly formed Student Financial Services department required the participation of all individuals from both departments to be willing, flexible, and participatory to make this endeavor successful. Fortunately, both of these occurrences, along with the willingness to focus on individual learning needs as well as the collective policies and procedures of a newly formed department, have provided what. I believe to be a model for future considerations at St. Thomas Aquinas College and beyond. For the purposes of this dissertation study, I will provide direct responses to each of the research questions with findings to support conclusions.

Implementing a Unified Student Services Center: Improved Communication

RQ1: How does implementation of the "Student One Stop Center" affect the ability of employees to properly communicate policies and procedures to students to provide exceptional customer service?

From the early pursuit of this dissertation study, I was most interested in researching the effects that creating a unified student services office – now called Student Financial Services – could have on the ability of employees to properly communicate policies and procedures to students. As stated in the introduction of this study, I immediately noticed that an issue of ownership of responsibilities existed, but also there was also a lack of clarity about who performed certain functions. I believe that the issue of employee functions was directly connected to the correlation between service quality and trust in the minds of students that Wong (2013) described in his research.

I believe that this new department and organizational structure has improved the ability of employees to properly communicate with students and other stakeholders. Furthermore, the structure of the department with an emphasis on symmetrical communication supports Kang and Sung's (2016) study regarding improving employee communication. Observations indicated that employees within Student Financial Services were now more prepared than before to properly inform on policies and procedures, which in turn provides a higher level of customer service.

Improving Information Sharing and Policy Creation

RQ2: How does implementation of the "Student One Stop Center" impact information sharing and policy setting among employees within the shared setting?

Enhanced Professional Development for Enhanced Service

The physical relocation of two previously disconnected departments provided two important changes that have positively impacted change within the new department. First, the employees of the two departments, who previously had very little interaction, have now become one cohesive team that communicates multiple times a day. This has created a "tiered" structure of employee assistance for students, but it has also provided a space for all employees who have interactions with students to provide a constant feedback loop of observations and questions/concerns from students.

This has, in effect, provided the framework for the second change within the department which is the formal creation of a policies and procedures manual. Neither previous department (financial aid or the bursar office) had a policies and procedures manual that was updated with relevant information. This newly formed student services department provided an opportunity for those that execute the functions of financial aid and the bursar's office to exchange ideas for procedures and collaborate on policies that are mutually beneficial to students and the College. The result of this collaboration is a nearly 40-page manual that outlines all the policies and procedures of Student Financial Services which was created by all members of the newly-formed team.

RQ3: How can structured professional development help employees who assume new functions assist in their ability to take on new responsibilities?

Providing Organic Cross Training Removes Information Silos

As previously stated in chapter 3, structured professional development that was provided for the employees of Student Financial Services in three areas: student financial aid, bursar functions, and providing high level customer service. This was in line with the expectations of all employees to be able to function as both financial aid and bursar professionals; however, one unanticipated response from employees was that even the employees who previously executed the functions of their former department were very willing to attend all sessions that they would have previously attended under their previous position. When asked why, their responses were all the same: (a) they did not want to assume that because they attended training years ago in the same functional area that the information was the same; and (b) the employees saw the training as a way to work towards creating a higher-performing team together.

In support of the research from Higgins and Parsons (2009), the training was both situated in their local physical context and also within the social structure of the newly formed department, which provided opportunity for team members to participate in training together and evaluate how the training could positively contribute to their local setting within Student Financial Services.

RQ4: How can cross training all employees of the “Student One Stop Center” impact the ability of employees to properly execute the functions of this new department?

Throughout both observations and interviews, the most surprising part of the study has been the response and feedback regarding cross training. While there was an explicit gap in knowledge by each employee regarding the functions and procedures of their counterparts in opposite departments, all employees immediately identified that formal cross-training would be required to ensure that all employees had a baseline understanding of both financial aid and bursar functions. Formal cross training was led by peers of the same functional level, providing an environment where employees felt comfortable to voice opinions and provide feedback. Interestingly, quite a few times during observations, employees would be sure to include others that they felt would benefit from witnessing an issue pursued to resolution. This organic cross training allowed individuals to identify, troubleshoot, and evaluate issues on a daily basis. The combination of formal and informal cross training led to more collaboration and more frequent assessment of procedures within the newly formed department.

Implications for Practice

This research can be of benefit in the future for many organizations from varying industries, but for the purposes of this dissertation, I will focus solely on higher education. As more colleges and universities across the United States work to find better efficiencies, the practice of evaluating how to best position employees for success within their departments will become increasingly important. Unfortunately, most institutions rely on employees within individual departments to train each other with little or no action plan for professional development or official employee cross training.

Through this study, I was able to observe the positive effect that combining two cross-functional departments into one unified student services department can have on employees within this newly formed department. As I have stated before, the physical relocation of employees was important, but potentially even more significant was the effect that improved communication within this new department had all employees of Student Financial Services. As Higgins & Parsons (2009) stated, learning that is (a) situated in particular physical and social context and social in nature will lead to successful outcomes. I believe that this statement is true as it pertains to the employees of Student Financial Services and I believe that this same statement could be true across multiple industries.

Limitations to Research

While this study has significantly contributed to answering my research questions, there are some limitations to this research that I would like to consider in another action research cycle. First, the timeframe of this action research project was about six months in total. With that limited timeframe, there are other functions of the new Student Financial Services that I would have preferred to observe. For instance, most functions of Student Financial Services follow a cyclical timeline; in between December and January and from July to early September of each year, the employees of the newly formed student services department are working with students to pay past due bills and have their financial holds released from their accounts to the students can register for the upcoming semester. Due to the timing of this research project, I was not able to observe both cycles in their totality; this is something that I would like to revisit as I continue to research the effectiveness of the new Student Financial Services department.

Second, this department was brought together from two previously disconnected departments that were housed in two different divisions within the College, but I would be interested to see if this can also be accomplished within the same divisional structure. For instance, exploring how Student Financial Services and Admissions would work could be the next evolution of the process. As stated before, institutions of higher education are constantly searching for process improvements and efficiencies to create a higher-functioning organization and I see this as an effective first step. Additionally, I would be interested in exploring the possible affect that this new student services structure had on the overall perception of service quality of students by providing opportunities for qualitative surveying as students exit the new space.

Finally, while the professional development schedule and cross training were a success in both elevating the productivity of Student Financial Services as a unified student services department as well as in the creation of a completely new policy and procedures manual for the department, continued development of employees will be required for two reasons. First, employees enter and exit the organization frequently and as that occurs ensuring that new employees are properly trained and receive communication as effectively as others that are already part of the organization will be important. Second, the organization is constantly evolving and taking on new responsibilities, which means that the employees must be sure that they are able to manage any new tasks that are executed within their department. This includes a feedback loop for communication, which was identified through this study as the greatest deficiency of the previously disconnected departments.

Closing Thoughts

The challenge of ensuring that all employees within a department are communicating and executing the functions of their department at a high level is not an easy task. It requires collaboration, evaluation of skillsets and knowledge base, continuous training and improvements, and a willingness to be more than a participant within the organization, but rather an active contributor and communicator during both successful endeavors and challenges equally. Within St. Thomas Aquinas College, an opportunity was identified where two departments that naturally have cross-functional responsibilities – financial aid and bursar functions – could provide a higher level of service to students if they were both not only physically together, but also in agreement on policies and procedures of this newly formed department.

Although many may think that the most difficult part of combining two merged departments into one department may be the construction or new location of each employee, this study has shown that the greatest challenge, although also the greatest opportunity, is to build a completely new organizational structure which can positively impact communication as well as development of policies and procedures.

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APPENDIX A

CYCLE 0 STUDENT SURVEY

College Student Perceptions of Customer Service at STAC
Please read below before proceeding:

To protect your confidentiality, please create a unique identifier known only to you. To create this unique code, please record the first three letters of your mother's first name and the last four digits of your phone number. Thus, for example, if your mother's name was Sarah and your phone number was (602) 543-6789, your code would be Sar 6789. The unique identifier will allow us to match your post-intervention survey responses and your pre-intervention responses when we analyze the data.

1. My unique identifier is

2. What is your age?
   - o 18 to 22
   - o 23 to 25
   - o 25 or older

3. What is your current gender identity?
   - o Female
   - o Male
   - o Transgender Female
   - o Transgender Male
   - o Genderqueer/Gender-nonconforming
   - o Non-binary
   - o Agender
   - o Other
   - o I prefer not to answer

4. How many years have you been a student at St. Thomas Aquinas College
   - o 1 year
   - o 2 years
   - o 3 years
   - o 4 years
   - o More than 4 years

5. When do you anticipate that you will graduate?
   - o 2021
   - o 2022
   - o 2023
   - o 2024
   - o After 2024

6. I am confident in the College's ability to communicate policies and procedures to students.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Slightly Agree
- Slightly Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

7. I am confident that if I have an issue with registration, I will be able to resolve it in the Office of the Registrar.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Slightly Agree
- Slightly Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

8. I feel that the College is helpful to students.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Slightly Agree
- Slightly Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

9. I am confident that if I have an issue with my financial aid, I will be able to resolve it in the Office of Financial Aid.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Slightly Agree
- Slightly Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

10. I am confident that if I have an issue with my on-campus housing, I will be able to resolve it in the Office of Residence Life.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Slightly agree
- Slightly disagree
- Disagree

- Strongly disagree

11. I am confident that I have been provided adequate academic advisement in my time at the College.
    - Strongly Agree
    - Agree
    - Slightly Agree
    - Slightly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Strongly Disagree

12. I am confident that if I have an issue with my tuition, I will be able to resolve it at the Business Office.
    - Strongly Agree
    - Agree
    - Slightly Agree
    - Slightly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Strongly Disagree

13. I believe that all employees of the College know the policies and procedures of their departments.
    - Strongly Agree
    - Agree
    - Slightly Agree
    - Slightly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Strongly Disagree

14. I believe that the College has my best interests in mind when enacting policies.
    - Strongly Agree
    - Agree
    - Slightly Agree
    - Slightly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Strongly Disagree

15. I believe that the College is honest and truthful when helping students.
    - Strongly Agree
    - Agree
    - Slightly Agree
    - Slightly Disagree

- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

APPENDIX B

CYCLE 0 EMPLOYEE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever received conflicting information before from different administrators? How did you decide which to believe?
2. Can you talk about an issue that you needed resolved that required interacting with college employees? Was the issue resolved?
3. How often would you say that you have to seek assistance for core functions of your department from others who do not work within your department?
4. When you receive information regarding policies that affect your department directly, how included to you feel in the decision-making process for those policies?
5. Do you feel that you have a voice in developing the policies and procedures of your individual department?
6. What is your understanding of your specific position within your department?
7. What is your understanding of your department’s function within the administrative structure of the College?
8. How willing do you believe your department would be to take on additional tasks within the current training and development structure?

APPENDIX C

TIMELINE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR EMPLOYEES

Time Frame	Research Actions	Additional Actions
May 2022	• Contact participants for surveying and interviewing • Conduct online quantitative surveying • Begin construction on One-Stop on campus once semester ends	• Employee participants will be contacted by STAC email and will be invited by me to participate in online quantitative survey
June 2022	• Conduct in-person (or online) qualitative interviews	• Participants are invited by email and phone to participate in interviews • Host 1:1 interviews for staff
July 2022	• Start to integrate all customer service departments geographically and communicatively into the same functional department • Begin field observations of interdepartmental communication practices • Analyze pre-intervention data • Prepare intervention	• Observing the communication practices of Office of Financial Aid and Business Office • Observing professional development topic: designing a service strategy
August 2022	• Begin cycle of professional development • Begin cycle of cross-training • Report pre-intervention data to President for intervention proposal	• Professional development topic: Fundamentals of Student Financial Aid • Professional development topic: Delivering Exceptional Service
September 2022	• Complete construction of Student One Stop Center • Begin marketing of new	• Conduct individual interviews with Student One Stop Center employees

	Student One Stop Center internally to students / faculty / staff	• Professional development topic: Application Processing • Professional development topic: Return to Title IV Funds
November 2022	• Continued professional development • Continued cross-training • Conduct observations	• Professional development topic: Student Eligibility
December 2022	• Complete observations • Complete interviews • Distribute post-intervention survey for analysis	• Conduct final interviews • Analyze data • Code interview data

APPENDIX D

PRE-INTERVENTION INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR EMPLOYEES

1. Can you tell me more about what your specific position is within the College and what departments you interact with on a weekly basis? How long have you been in this position?
2. When major announcements about the College are announced, how would you say that you typically hear about them?
3. How do you feel that the College does in delivering important information?
4. Can you tell me about a time that you were not sure how to perform a task that was inside/outside of your typical job duties? How did you complete that task?
5. Have you ever had a situation where you were not able to help a student who arrived in your department with an issue? What prevented you from resolving the issue?
6. Have you ever received conflicting information before from different administrators? How did you decide which to believe?
7. How confident are you in the ability of your supervisor to fully understand what you do on a daily basis?
8. How confident are you that you are fully apprised of important information such as policies and procedures of the College?

APPENDIX E

POST-INTEVENTION INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR EMPLOYEES

Can you talk about the transition as we merged two departments together into a unified student services office?

1. How do you feel that the information regarding the transition of two separate departments into one department was communicated to employees who were part of the merged areas?
2. How do you feel that this newly merged department has affected the daily work that you perform?
3. Given the fact that two departments were merged, how prepared do you feel that you are to execute all the core functions of the new Student Financial Services office?
4. How confident are you that the cross-training that occurred before and during the actual merge of the two departments has properly prepared you to take on this new role?
5. How confident are you in the ability of this new department to work together to identify and solve issues to the best of your ability?
6. How has the formal professional development provided to you after the announcement of this new department affected your ability to execute the functions of your job?
7. Is there anything that you do not feel confident about in regards to your job functions since the merger of these departments into a new unified student services department?

APPENDIX F

IRB EXEMPTION

EXEMPTION GRANTED

Brian Nelson
Division of Educational Leadership and Innovation - Tempe
480/727-4550
Brian.Nelson@asu.edu

Dear Brian Nelson:

On 8/18/2022 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Bridging the Disconnect of Interdepartmental Communication: A Study of a Unified Student Services Department
Investigator:	Brian Nelson
IRB ID:	STUDY00016193
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• Employee Consent Letter, Category: Consent Form; • IRB Protocol, Category: IRB Protocol; • Post-Intervention Interview Questions, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Pre-Intervention Interview Questions, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • St. Thomas Aquinas College IRB Approval Letter, Category: Off-site authorizations (school permission, other IRB approvals, Tribal permission etc);

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 8/18/2022.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

If any changes are made to the study, the IRB must be notified at research.integrity@asu.edu to determine if additional reviews/approvals are required. Changes may include but not limited to revisions to data collection, survey and/or interview questions, and vulnerable populations, etc.

REMINDER - - Effective January 12, 2022, in-person interactions with human subjects require adherence to all current policies for ASU faculty, staff, students and visitors. Up-to-date information regarding ASU's COVID-19 Management Strategy can be found here. IRB approval is related to the research activity involving human subjects, all other protocols related to COVID-19 management including face coverings, health checks, facility access, etc. are governed by current ASU policy.

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Michael DiBartolomeo