

Shared Service Center Implementations— an Inclusive Approach

By Megan Cluver and Nick Stevens



Shared service centers offer an opportunity to redefine how the common business functions and transactions that support a university's mission are conducted. Decentralized support in areas such as human resources, accounting and budget, information technology, and research administration can be reorganized with a focus on providing an increased level of service by training staff to specialize in specific functions and providing them with systems and processes that are necessary to succeed. Successful implementations result in support functions that are efficient, timely, based on best-practice, and incorporate an accountability structure designed to create an environment of continuous process improvement.

To succeed in a university setting, shared service center implementations must take into account the unique environment of higher education, including elements such as shared governance and multiple funding streams. Implementation and planning should be approached as a collaborative process, integrating input from Principal Investigators (PIs), faculty, and staff to develop an ap-

proach to providing services that fit within the context of university culture.

The implementation is comprised of three key stages, as depicted in the model below. Each of these stages may take months to execute, depending on the scope of services offered and the magnitude of change required.

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Central Mandate: The Framework

It is essential that leadership make the decision to redefine the service model on campus in the context of the unique culture of the institution. Conversations which decision-makers hold with campus leadership to understand stakeholder needs and concerns establish the foundation for the change management effort required to successfully move to a new model. These interactions provide leadership with awareness of both the benefits and the challenges created by this administrative shift. The impact of proposed changes must be considered when constructing the high-level framework.

At their core, shared service centers represent a redefined organizational model, coupled with the opportunity for process transformation and technology enhancement. There are a variety of different models that can be executed based on the needs of customers and the goals of the university. Leadership must consider the services that will be

provided and determine which model best balances the goals of the implementation with the impact of changes on the stakeholders served.

Once the decision has been made to move to a new organizational model, leadership must define—and communicate—the framework for implementation. Stakeholders across campus should be provided with an outline of the high-level vision of what shared services means for their institution. Initial questions which should be addressed in the framework include:

- Will there be one center or many?
- How will service groups be defined (by geography? by affinity?)?
- How will the center(s)' reporting relationships be aligned within the university?
- What services will be provided (at the functional level; e.g., post-award research administration)?
- What level of customization will exist to account for individual customer needs?
- Will unit participation in the model be mandatory or will it be opt-in?
- How will the center(s) be staffed and how will those decisions impact current staff?

The responses to these questions provide a framework for campus stakeholders to develop the detailed design. It is crucial that university leadership provides this high-level vision for the implementation and an unwavering commitment to move forward; without this, stakeholder involvement will not move past a debate of the merits of moving to this model.

Stakeholder Input: The Detailed Roadmap

The second step in the design phase is the most critical: within the context of the vision established by leadership, the university will need to define the desired attributes and activities. Successful shared service centers are *customer focused*—it is only logical to integrate the customer into the implementation approach. Engaging university stakeholders in a meaningful way throughout this stage is essential and will enable the university to create a model that will be successful in both

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achieving the goals of the implementation as well as meeting the needs of its customers.

This stage is focused on fully developing the model by defining: the specific activities to be provided, desk references and process maps for each of these activities, center reporting structure and staffing plan, role definitions and job descriptions, accountability mechanisms, baseline metrics and training plans. A variety of strategies should be used to engage stakeholders in the development of these components, providing opportunities to both gather input as well as to educate future customers and center staff on the benefits of the proposed model.

Gaining Leadership Buy-In The support of influential leaders throughout the university can be cultivated through individual and group meetings to communicate the vision and mission of the model. These meetings should gather feedback and input into how the centers can best serve the customers and will also educate stakeholders about the model benefits. Broad buy-in, based on linking benefits to customer needs, is a must for success in the higher education arena.

Customer and Employee Satisfaction Surveys Ongoing measurement of the impact of changes to the customer and employee experience enables the university to demonstrate the success of the new model and highlights needed corrections. Campus-wide surveys serve as a baseline for measuring satisfaction, provide insight into current pain points and identify potential service areas that offer quick wins. Surveys should ideally be conducted prior to the mandate to move to a new model to establish an unbiased baseline for measuring changes in satisfaction and demonstrating success.

Process Improvement Committees and Focus Groups Process Improvement Committees are charged with developing standardized processes that account for the realities on the ground. These committees bring together key department staff members who currently perform the work with central staff to redesign processes. At the same time, they provide education and disseminate information about the role of the shared service center. Focus groups should also be used to engage faculty, staff, and PIs around a specific topic or issue. These groups provide insight into best practice processes that already exist on campus which can be readily standardized in the new model.

Communication Ambassadors By establishing a broad, inclusive group of campus stakeholders who receive regular communications about implementation progress, the university can manage information sharing and address inevitable rumors as they arise. While this group is broad and open, members are charged with disseminating information to peers at staff meetings and forums. Brown bag forums are also an effective and informal way of discussing the model with faculty and staff.

Implementation Web Site A centrally maintained website can provide regular updates and share accurate information about the implementation and model. This site can also be a venue for gathering feedback and answering questions via “suggestion box” emails and blogs.

Ongoing Feedback Loops: Continuous Improvement

The development of shared service centers is designed to be iterative, with processes being continually reexamined. Focused continuous engagement with customers provides necessary feedback, preventing the development of a gap between customer needs and the services provided.

A service level agreement or service partnership agreement establishes key performance metrics for which the center will be held accountable. To be effective, this document must be used as a guide for ongoing operations. Center staff and customers should be aware of the expectations detailed in the agreement. In addition, detailed

What's on my DESK

process documentation and desk references provide center and departmental staff with a common understanding of the manner in which work is conducted. These materials, initially developed in the design phase, should be living documents with established mechanisms for updating them and plans to regularly communicate changes.

Regular customer engagement, by the center staff and managers, facilitates understanding of the customers' changing needs. Staff meetings offer a key forum to share both customer needs and best practices. Meetings should be held across functional or service lines within individual centers, with customers, and with central staff. Outcomes of these discussions should be captured as process changes by center managers who have ownership of individual processes. To avoid "big bang" process changes that disrupt the flow of work from the departments, an approach of relentless incrementalism allows for continuous process improvement to meet customers' changing expectations.

Establishing governance and oversight—generally through an Advisory Board comprised of customers and stakeholders—provides a formal feedback mechanism for addressing customer concerns and gaining insight into the departments' needs. Membership should include a broad mix of thoughtful leaders, including PIs, faculty, and unit leaders who can help ensure that the center is meeting customer needs.

Shared service centers offer institutional benefits; however, this level of change is difficult to execute and requires thoughtful planning. Without stakeholder involvement throughout the development and implementation process, an institution runs the risk of failing to achieve the benefits of this organizational redesign. Implemented correctly, this model offers an opportunity for improved service, reduced overhead costs for the institution, stronger career paths for staff, and decreased compliance risk to the university. However, realizing these benefits requires customers and staff to come together and approach the implementation as a partnership, solving problems in the spirit of the vision for the unique university model. An inclusive implementation approach offers the benefits of a more sustainable end product that meets the institution's needs, as well as an increased comfort level for the stakeholders involved. ■



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Denise Moody's Desk

At the time of this writing, I'm breathing a sigh of relief that we submitted our Association for Assessment and Accreditation of



Laboratory Animal Care International (AAALAC) Program Description with a few days to spare before the deadline and taking a breather before preparing for our site visit in the first quarter of 2014. On my desk at this moment, I have material to review before a manager's workshop next week, draft the agenda for two upcoming committee meetings and a staff meeting, and perform background research for two possible policy changes. I'm balancing that with our new HR ePerformance goal-setting initiative and helping my staff members draft their (and my!) next year's goals. Finally, I was just asked to prepare training material for our upcoming Responsible Conduct of Research conflict of interest session. This is why I love research administration – the days go by quickly and you never get bored!

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