

## **University Student Financial Services and Cashier Operations (USFSCO)**

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University Student Financial Services and Cashier Operations (USFSCO)

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## Abstract

In 2005, the University of Illinois' University Student Financial Services and Cashier Operations (USFSCO) was given the charge to become one, system-wide unit serving three campuses. At that time, staff morale and trust throughout the organization were very low. Communication was one of USFSCO's greatest challenges. Due to these obstacles, USFSCO decided to implement concepts developed by Franklin Covey to create a specific mission and vision statement for the newly consolidated unit.

The decision to implement the comprehensive organizational methodology of the Franklin Covey processes has allowed USFSCO to "speak the same language." Regardless of unit or location, the Covey methodology has armed staff with skills to "walk the walk and talk the talk." Effective communication across campuses has fostered excellent working relationships. Staff members are now engaged and challenged in their daily activities. Teamwork has improved dramatically.

By utilizing Franklin Covey's execution methodology, USFSCO has progressed from an average organization to one that verges on being elite in its ability to achieve its most important goals. Essentially this means that when USFSCO sets a goal, it achieves that goal *with excellence*. As of December 2009, USFSCO units have completed over 50 WIGs (Wildly Important Goals).

It is unlikely that USFSCO would have accomplished so many goals without the clear focus of the Franklin Covey execution process. Using the same goal achievement processes and tools throughout the organization has given USFSCO a sense of commonality. One staff member summed up the value of the WIG process by stating, "Together we achieved what we couldn't accomplish individually in the past."

## Introducing USFSCO

The University of Illinois is the state's largest and most comprehensive public university. It has three campuses—Chicago, Springfield, and Urbana-Champaign—that serve the people of Illinois. There is a shared commitment of excellence in teaching, research, public service, and economic development. The University attracts the nation's most talented students with hundreds of undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs, many of which are ranked among the best in the United States. Over 70,000 students are currently enrolled at our campuses, and thousands take classes off campus and online.

University of Illinois faculty, staff, and students share their knowledge and expertise, as well as the resources of the University, with citizens in every corner of the state, by offering over 700 public service and outreach programs. The University has an impressive impact on the state's economy. Its operation provides employment for more than 23,000 people and generates billions of dollars in direct spending.

- USFSCO (University Student Financial Services and Cashier Operations) is the billing and collections arm of the university. USFSCO invoices all charges – from academic tuition and fees to parking tickets and telecommunications – for all three campuses. In 2005, USFSCO was formed from three traditional campus-based student financial services offices. Each office was performing essentially the same functions, but business was being conducted in an independent and distinct manner. These separate practices were causing inefficiencies in USFSCO.
- USFSCO was reorganized to consist of seven interdependent units: Accounts Receivable Operations, Business Operations, Cashier Operations, Loans and Collections, Customer

Service, Projects and Operations, and Systems Management. This new organization reflects a blended structure, with a mix of centralized and decentralized functional units. Depending on each unit's role in USFSCO, some are more centralized than others. However, none of these units are composed entirely of staff from a single campus; each one involves multi-campus interaction. Reporting lines for the seven units are defined not only by function, but also by the amount of up-front customer contact experienced within the unit:

- Customer Service and Cashier Operations are the true “face” of USFSCO.
- Accounts Receivable Operations and Loans and Collections are both integral to the day-to-day business of USFSCO, but do not receive much customer-initiated contact.
- Business Operations is not a traditional “functional” unit. It is responsible for the reconciliation of the many USFSCO general ledger accounts, serves as a liaison with internal and external auditors, and holds principal responsibility for preparing USFSCO responses to audit reports.
- Both Systems Management and Projects and Operations are small, internal administrative units that report directly to the executive director of USFSCO.

Structuring the organization by function rather than location has allowed USFSCO to maximize the effectiveness of its staff.

Sharing process ownership across campuses has allowed USFSCO to tap into the talents of its entire workforce. In so doing, USFSCO has managed to reduce full-time staff by approximately 20% through attrition and retirement. In addition, the nature of this functionally-arranged organization fosters an environment of daily collaboration and interdependence among staff members separated by geographic location.

## Statement of the Problem/Initiative

USFSCO came into existence as a consolidated unit in February 2005. Prior to this consolidation, each University of Illinois campus had a distinct Student Accounts/Student Financial Services/Bursar's Office. Some of the challenges to be addressed or overcome by this consolidation included:

- Approximately 80 staff members working in different locations
- Poor communication
- Duplication of work
- Specific campus focus
- Lack of shared mission, vision and goals
- Low morale and little cooperation

USFSCO's charge was to become one unit serving three campuses. One of the biggest obstacles to consolidation was communication: how could USFSCO communicate pertinent information to staff and build a sense of community in such a disparate group?

## Design

### **Franklin Covey Methodology:**

To address its problems head-on, USFSCO partnered with Franklin Covey. USFSCO's goal was to become an organization capable of consistently delivering superior results.

#### *Core Curriculum for All Staff*

USFSCO chose four Franklin Covey courses as a requirement for all staff: "The Core Four."

- ***FOCUS: Achieving Your Highest Priorities***

This one-day workshop provides participants with a system to ensure that their time is spent in the most effective manner possible. This workshop integrates concepts such as: daily, weekly and monthly planning; identifying values, goals and roles; planning and preparation. Participants also learn the Franklin Covey planning system. These skills enable individuals to translate their highest goals and ambitions into specific tasks.

- ***The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People***

This intensive three-day workshop provides participant with an implementation plan to integrate the 7 Habits into their lives. The first three habits focus on "private victories."

Individuals learn self-mastery and self-discipline:

Habit 1: Be Proactive

Habit 2: Begin with the End in Mind

Habit 3: Put First Things First

The next three habits focus on "public victories." Individuals build lasting relationships with others and learn about interdependence:

Habit 4: Think Win-Win

Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood

Habit 6: Synergize

The 7<sup>th</sup> Habit focuses on “renewal.” Individuals learn the importance of rejuvenating their mind, body, heart and soul.

- ***The 4 Disciplines of Execution***

This two-day workshop helps managers and teams separate the merely important from the wildly important, allowing organizations to stay aligned to their highest priorities. The central theme of this execution process is the idea that an organization can only achieve three goals at a time with excellence. Measured progress toward those goals must be publicly scored to create accountability within the organization.

This workshop is integral to USFSCO team building because it teaches units how to:

- Communicate and manage expectations around project timing and expected results.
- Design high-performing work teams that:
  - Conduct productive meetings
  - Display team coherence
  - Resolve conflicts/issues
  - Leverage team dynamics/diversity
  - Practice work planning
  - Are driven by goals
- Provide a model for successful team development.

- Deliver results that, at a minimum, meet, but have the potential to exceed expectations.
- ***Writing Advantage (Note: This class was added in late 2008.)***

This one-day hands-on workshop reduces time spent crafting documents. Writing Advantage is highly beneficial to USFSCO; units improve their written communications dramatically as a result of this training.

### **Additional Covey Tools:**

#### *Execution Quotient (xQ) Survey*

Prior to beginning the Franklin Covey workshops, USFSCO implemented Franklin Covey's structured goal-setting process. Franklin Covey provides an objective method of measuring progress within an organization. This tool is called the Execution Quotient (xQ) Survey. The xQ score is a number on a scale of 0 – 100; a score of 100 indicating flawless execution. The xQ score is based on points awarded to responses collected from employees via the xQ Survey. Simply stated, the xQ provides an overall picture of an organization's ability to execute its most important goals.

All USFSCO staff members participate in the annual xQ survey. The first survey was conducted in January 2006 (at the beginning of the goal-setting process). This established a benchmark for future xQ surveys.

#### *Individual Benchmarking*

In addition to the xQ Survey process, USFSCO utilizes Franklin Covey's individual benchmarking tools for front-line managers and supervisors. These benchmarks are based on the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People and how closely the individual is modeling the behavior of the 7 Habits.

Benchmark surveys are completed annually for the USFSCO Management. The benchmark results provide the individual with a clear assessment of his or her strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for growth; team members use the benchmark results to create individual action plans. As a supplement to the individual benchmark surveys, USFSCO has implemented a peer-coaching program for team members to meet and discuss their action plans. These monthly meetings promote encouragement and support.

**Administrative Considerations:**

Training 80 individuals is a time-consuming task. This commitment to professional development continues to require carefully-orchestrated planning and logistics. In order to train and implement “The Core Four” Franklin Covey courses, USFSCO does the following:

- Executes a contract with Franklin Covey.
- Organizes dozens of training events to accommodate small groups of USFSCO staff (while still providing adequate coverage in the offices).
- Coordinates meeting space in a centralized location.
- Manages the ordering of all Franklin Covey materials (e.g., participant guides, planners, online tools, etc.).
- Assembles the materials necessary to conduct the training (e.g., projectors, laptops, table-top flip charts, markers, etc.).
- Installs Video conference equipment at each of the USFSCO locations to facilitate communication between campuses and units.

### *Budget Considerations*

Costs for implementing the Franklin Covey methodology were a significant consideration for USFSCO. USFSCO staff usually travels to an off-site location for workshops. A neutral location incurs additional cost, but it underscores USFSCO's commitment to the process. The rationale for off-site training is two-fold:

- Allows staff the time to focus completely on the training itself without the distractions of the office.
- Brings staff together from multiple locations and gives them the opportunity to meet each other and interact personally. This interaction has helped improve morale dramatically.

Historically, USFSCO has spent approximately \$750 per staff member, per year on the Franklin Covey process. Now that all staff has completed training in The Core Four, USFSCO only offers these workshops once a year for any new staff members.

## **Implementation**

USFSCO began implementing the Franklin Covey methodology in 2005. The following timeline highlights the activities USFSCO has completed through December 31, 2009.

### **2005**

- The USFSCO LT (Leadership Team) started working with Franklin Covey consultant Suzanne Hays to identify key issues and areas of strengths and weaknesses. Most importantly, Suzanne has helped the LT work through conflicts and obstacles that existed within the group as a result of the consolidation.
- USFSCO began practicing The 4 Disciplines of Execution concepts at a unit level. Each unit chose a WIG and held weekly WIG meetings to review their progress. In these meetings, each unit member shared his or her behaviors for that week and then discussed the impact on the goal. A visual tracking component (“scoreboard”) allowed each unit to view weekly progress.

### **2006**

- The Execution Quotient (xQ) Survey was administered to all of USFSCO in January to establish a baseline set of numbers. The Leadership Team met with Suzanne Hays to review the results in detail and plan action items for improving the numbers. USFSCO conducted the xQ Survey again in November to determine progress. USFSCO’s overall xQ1 score was 52; by xQ2, the overall score improved to 64.

- The first USFSCO All-Staff Retreat was held in November at an off-campus location. The xQ Survey results were discussed.. After the overall debrief, each unit met individually to discuss unit scores and devise action plans to address areas with lower scores.
- USFSCO began training all staff in Focus: Achieving Your Highest Priorities, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective and The 4 Disciplines of Execution. Eleven 4 Disciplines workshops were facilitated by the Franklin Covey consultant in 2006. Several LT members went through the Franklin Covey certification process in order to facilitate the classes internally (this was a cost-reduction strategy).
- The Leadership Team started using the 7 Habits Benchmark tool to assess their individual and team effectiveness. Each LT member met personally with the Franklin Covey consultant to discuss their benchmark and receive individual coaching, including setting goals and identifying action items.
- USFSCO implemented a policy for each unit to hold an off-site unit retreat annually to work on WIGs and team building activities (this was later increased to semi-annual unit retreats).
- Weekly unit WIG meetings continued in 2006.
- The Franklin Covey consultant met with each unit for a Covey-facilitated WIG meeting. The facilitator critiqued the WIG meetings, reviewed the unit scoreboards and offered guidance and support.

## **2007**

- The xQ Surveys were conducted in April and November 2007. The overall score fluctuated from 64 in xQ2 (November 2006), to 61 in xQ3 (April 2007), to 71 in xQ4 (November 2007).

- USFSCO offered a total of 13 workshops for Focus: Achieving Your Highest Priorities, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People and The 4 Disciplines of Execution. These sessions were offered at various locations throughout the year. All USFSCO staff members completed the three classes by the end of the year. Upon completion of these three classes, each staff member received a framed certificate from Franklin Covey, along with a coupon with two options: upgrade their “starter” Covey planner (they could choose any style) or order an additional USFSCO shirt.
- USFSCO held All-Staff Retreats in May and November 2007. A significant portion of the retreats were devoted to reviewing the overall xQ Survey results, followed by unit break-out sessions to review their unit results in detail.
- LT Benchmarking and coaching continued bi-annually.
- Manager/Supervisor Benchmarking and coaching began.
- Weekly WIG meetings continued.
- Semi-annually, the Franklin Covey Consultant met with each unit for WIG review meetings.

## **2008**

- Writing Advantage was added to the list of core curriculum for USFSCO.
- The xQ Survey was conducted in November and discussed at the All-Staff Retreat. USFSCO’s overall score improved from 71 in xQ4 to 75 in xQ5.
- Leadership Team and Managers/Supervisors continued Benchmarking and coaching annually.
- All-Staff Retreats were held in May and November 2008.
- Weekly WIG meetings continued.

- Semi-annually, the Franklin Covey consultant met with each unit for WIG review meetings.

## **2009**

- Two additional Writing Advantage workshops were offered for all staff.
- The xQ Survey was administered in November 2009. USFSCO's overall score improved from 75 in xQ5 to 79 in xQ6. Moving this score upward becomes increasingly difficult as an organization gets closer to the top percentile.
- Leadership Team and Manager/Supervisor Benchmarking and coaching continued annually.
- Semi-annual unit retreats were held.
- All Staff Retreats were held in May and November 2009.
- Weekly WIG meetings continued.
- Semi-annually, the Franklin Covey consultant met with each unit for WIG review meetings.

USFSCO has chosen to use the same Covey facilitators throughout the years. Continuity with facilitators is beneficial for the entire organization. The facilitators know our group and understand the inner-workings of our business.

### **Pitfalls/Issues:**

- *Lack of Buy-In*

Initially, the Leadership Team experienced a lack of buy-in from some members. This divided the group and made it difficult to move forward as a team. Additionally, some staff members were opposed to the Covey methodology. They viewed this as the *training du jour* and were reluctant to invest time and effort in the methodology. Several staff members who struggled with the changes ultimately chose to leave the organization.

- *Scheduling*

Scheduling requires careful consideration. It takes considerable coordination to offer classes at central locations. Scheduling also requires strategic planning to accommodate for seasonal fluctuations in office activities, as well as adequate office coverage.

- *Expense*

Expenses to hold off-site training classes and provide participant kits are costly. To off-set these costs, USFSCO sent several staff members through Franklin Covey certification in order to facilitate sessions internally and at campus locations. By using internal USFSCO facilitators, USFSCO eliminated the facilitator fee and travel expenses. For internally-facilitated workshops, the only Franklin Covey-related expense is for the participant materials.

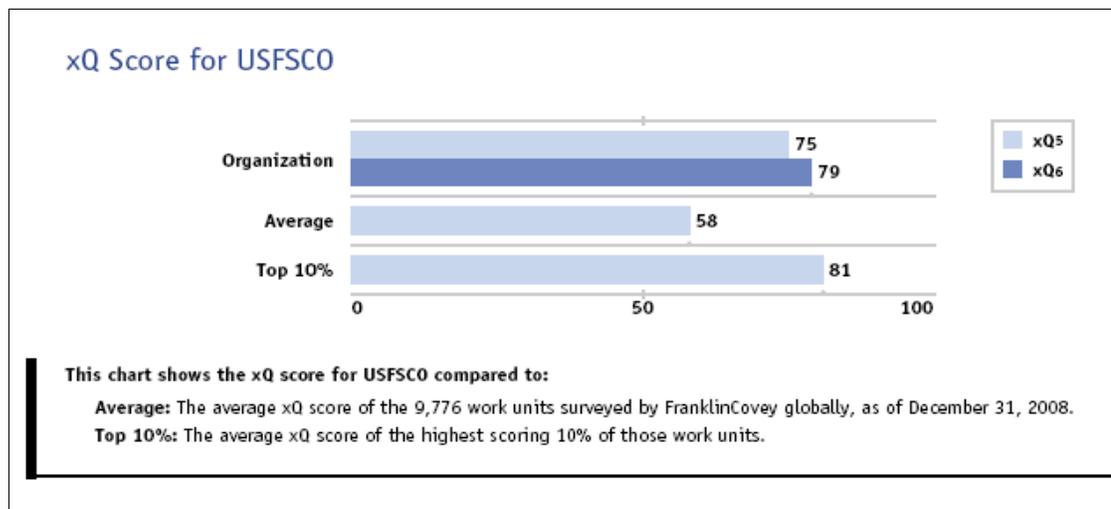
- *Timing*

USFSCO originally initiated The Four Disciplines of Execution, including the weekly WIG meetings, before providing training for staff. This approach caused confusion, push back and an initial lack of motivation. Once staff became trained, the execution was much smoother and staff began to understand how their day-to-day activities and commitments moved the WIGs forward.

## Benefits

### Sustained Superior Performance (Consistent Execution):

A close look at these survey numbers reveals USFSCO's progress in relation to both the global average and the top 10% of the 8,998 organizations taking similar xQ surveys:



The xQ survey further breaks down USFSCO's performance according to the following Six Key Principles of Execution:

**Clarity:** *Do we know the goals?*

**Commitment:** *Do we buy in to the goals?*

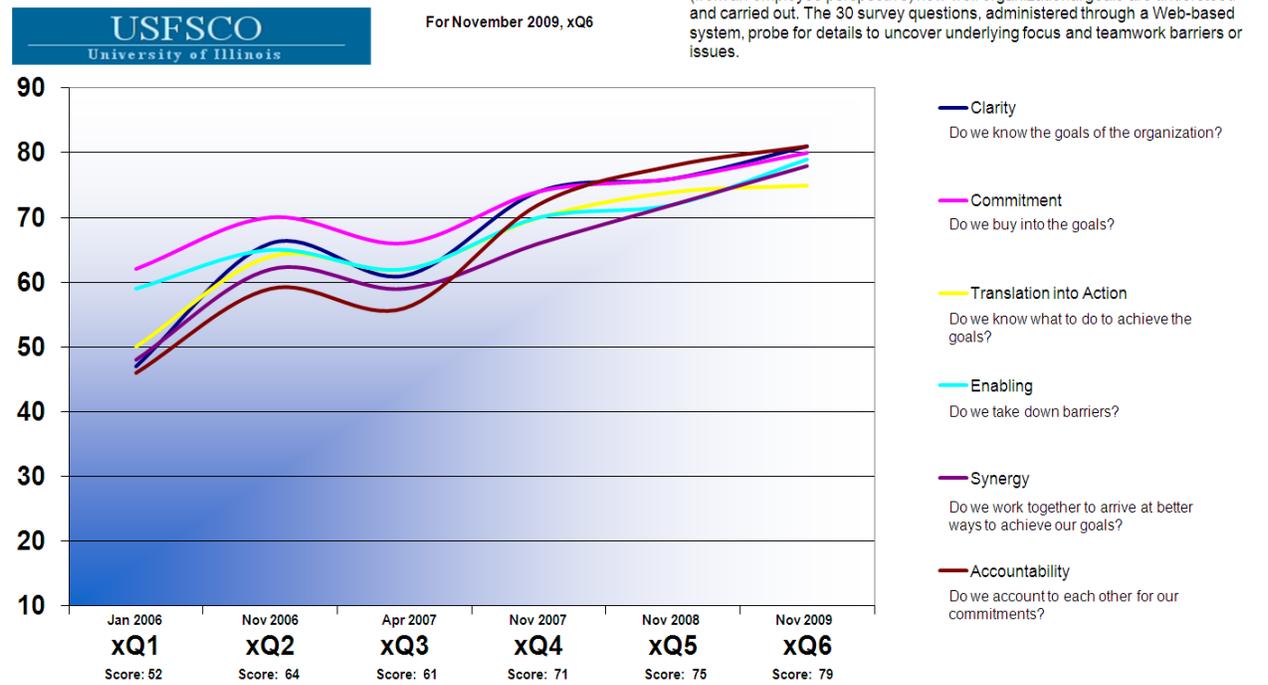
**Translation into Action:** *Do we know what to do to achieve the goals?*

**Enabling:** *Do we take down barriers?*

**Synergy:** *Do we work together to arrive at better ways to achieve our goals?*

**Accountability:** *Do we hold each other accountable for our commitments?*

## USFSCO Overall xQ Score



These results are significant in that the xQ score is a leading indicator of the likelihood of executing current and future goals. USFSCO’s baseline score in January 2006 was a 52; by November 2009, USFSCO’s score has reached a high of 79. USFSCO is only 2 points away from that elite top 10% of organizations that are executing at the highest level of performance.

### **Staff Morale**

The Franklin Covey workshops, coupled with Covey tools and processes, have dramatically improved USFSCO staff morale. All USFSCO staff members have had the opportunity to attend a minimum of four Franklin Covey workshops.

Using the same goal achievement processes and tools across the organization has given USFSCO a sense of commonality. Everyone speaks the same language and is working toward the same overarching goals. Additionally, many units have shared the sentiment “we accomplished together what

we couldn't accomplish individually" at the completion of their WIGS (Wildly Important Goals). This has strengthened the teams and given them a strong sense of accomplishment.

### **Management Development**

The Leadership Team (LT) and the group of managers and supervisors, called the Matchstick Team, have had several unique opportunities to use, develop and hone their management and leadership skills. First, the LT and Matchstick groups have participated in additional Franklin Covey courses, such as *7 Habits for Managers, Leadership, and Project Management*; these courses have provided direct application to leadership roles and provided numerous tools to bring back to the office. However, some of the best management development has taken place in the individual functional units as the LT and Matchstick groups implement the *4 Disciplines of Execution* at the unit level. Managers learn how to lead their team to execute goals with excellence by implementing a "cadence of accountability."

### **Staff Commitment**

One component measured on the xQ survey is Commitment (*do we buy in to the goals?*). Commitment is ranked on two levels: direction of the unit and engagement within the unit. The xQ results for Commitment have increased from 62 points in xQ1 to 80 points in xQ6. This 18-point increase indicates that staff members are much more aligned with the direction of the unit and are actively engaged within the unit.

As USFSCO is completing its latest generation of Wildly Important Goals, one thing is clear: staff commitment to and enthusiasm for USFSCO and the Franklin Covey process are very high. That alone makes the future very exciting. One staff member commented:

*“I have never worked for a company that strives to improve their employees as much as this department has and does. I am honored to be an employee of USFSCO. Thank you for making my work place environment a pleasure to be a part of. I know that many of the employees here feel the same as I.”*

## **Teamwork**

USFSCO has witnessed a significant impact on teamwork from the Franklin Covey professional development, both in the organization as a whole and in the functional units. The Franklin Covey workshops have given USFSCO a common point of emphasis – a shared experience. Prior to the onset of USFSCO’s participation in this program, the differences among staff members seemed to outshine the commonalities. As suggested in the following quotes from USFSCO staff members, working through this process has brought individual team members closer together and contributed significantly to the cohesiveness of the organization.

*“I just wanted to drop a line and thank you again for the opportunity you have given me and all of USFSCO Staff to participate in the Franklin-Covey courses. I really appreciate (and enjoy) getting to know our USFSCO coworkers on a personal level through these experiences! We are becoming a team-not just a name or contact as a 'go-to'-but someone we actually know on a personal basis.”*

*“The group we had was fantastic and I have rarely experienced such high levels of camaraderie in a work related setting. In the lead up to co-founding a writer’s group in Champaign I had been part of multiple unsuccessful writers groups. This workshop reminded me of one of many typical nights my current group has had in the past year and half. I’m*

*glad because the workshop we had last week could have missed that unique spark many groups never create. And we did it. Very cool.”*

Specifically with the WIGs (Wildly Important Goals), USFSCO has fostered teamwork within the seven functional units. In general, USFSCO works on over-arching WIGs at all times during the year. Each functional unit works together to select their specific WIG for the upcoming time period. For example, the UIC Cashiers unit completed a WIG to “develop policy and implement procedures to retain, retrieve and destroy daily cashier receipt information in compliance with University and Audit guidelines at UIC by November 24, 2008.” To achieve this goal, UIC Cashiers hold a weekly WIG meeting. During this meeting, the team members share the activities accomplished in the past week and activities that they hope to accomplish in the upcoming week. The team also identifies areas where they need another team member to “clear the path.” This process fosters accountability, collaboration, and synergy between team members.

Additionally, one of the first WIGs selected by USFSCO focused on internal communication: “USFSCO will complete and implement an internal communications plan by June 30, 2006.” Objectives of this WIG were the implementation of the UFSFSCO Intranet; implementation of regular functional unit, Leadership Team, and cross-functional meetings; and the start of semi-annual USFSCO retreats. All of these new structures for promoting internal communication have had the additional benefit of building bridges and allowing opportunities for staff to work together.

As of January 2010, USFSCO units have completed over 50 WIGs. As USFSCO has become more accomplished at crafting unit-level goals that tie directly to the overarching USFSCO WIG, the true potential of the Covey execution process has begun to reveal itself. Staff members are now able to see a direct line of sight between their daily work and the strategic direction of USFSCO.

## **Less Staff**

The consolidated University Student Financial Services and Cashier Operations of today is accomplishing more, and working more effectively than the three campus-based student financial services offices from which it was formed. A closer look at the student financial services organization charts before and after the consolidation of USFSCO reveals a reduction of 16 full-time staff members, roughly equating to a 20% reduction in full-time staff. The pre-consolidation organizations had approximately 80 full-time employees, and the current organization has approximately 60 full-time employees. This reduction in staff was accomplished through a combination of implementing more efficient processes, staff development, technology, retirement and attrition.

The lessons learned in the Franklin Covey curriculum certainly contributed greatly to USFSCO's ability to achieve these efficiencies. Workshops such as FOCUS: Achieving Your Highest Priorities and The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People have enabled individual USFSCO staff members to make more efficient and effective use of their time. Likewise, Covey's process of setting Wildly Important Goals has brought about a similar effect on the USFSCO organization as a whole.

## Retrospect

Of course, USFSCO's emergence as a successful organization has not been without roadblocks. Meeting the needs of three unique campuses is not always easy, and it is especially difficult since most of USFSCO's true "peer" units are not consolidated. For example, USFSCO must find ways to collaborate effectively with three financial aid offices and three registrar's offices, not to mention the hundreds of individual university departments on the three campuses. Seemingly commonplace problems can present impediments for a multi-campus organization such as USFSCO. In fact, USFSCO has yet to achieve its goal of fully consolidating back-office operations onto a single campus because none of the three campus offices is physically large enough to accommodate such an operation. In spite of these space limitations, USFSCO has managed to utilize its allocated space better by relocating and renovating Customer Service offices on each campus.

In the early stages of the consolidation, USFSCO was often cited as a dysfunctional organization. Morale was low, distrust was high. By adopting the Franklin Covey methodology, USFSCO has successfully implemented systems and processes that will ensure long beyond the current leadership. They have also improved communications within and between units. This once-dysfunctional unit is now recognized as one of the strongest and most productive units within University Administration at the University of Illinois.