

Bringing Students and Parents Together through Online Student Record Information

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Abstract

How much financial aid did you award my daughter? Did you send that refund check to my son last week? Can you tell me how much I owe on my daughter's student account... and by the way what were her grades last semester?

These parent questions were all too familiar for the University of Minnesota's busy One Stop Student Services staff who handles all incoming phone calls, e-mails, and in-person contacts from over 50,000 students enrolled at the University. Making things more complex for One Stop Counselors was that more often than not the information parents or other third parties were requesting was restricted by Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) data privacy laws.

Now, thanks to a new online web tool, students can authorize their parents and other guests to view six different areas of their online student record (including student financial transactions, financial aid awards and status, enrollment information, holds, and grades). In addition to the online information, access is automatically granted to these same parents/guests to information via phone, e-mail, or walk-in service.

This new web tool called Parent/Guest Access has reduced the number of parent questions, reduced the need to process paper release forms, increased the understanding of the student account and financial aid processes, as well as furthered our goal of promoting student and parent relationships.

Introduction of the Organization:

The University of Minnesota is a four-year, public research institution located in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area. It is the state land-grant university and consists of seventeen colleges offering baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral degrees. As of fall 2007, there were 50,883 students enrolled in undergraduate, graduate, professional, and non-degree. The institution is ranked ninth among the top public research universities in the nation (The Center for Measuring University Performance, 2006).

The Parent/Guest Access web application designed for both students and parents was an enterprise-wide endeavor including all five of the University of Minnesota's campuses. This new tool for students has been seen as a cutting-edge technology development for higher education and many institutions from across the nation have inquired about how to implement such a tool for their students.

This "best practice" web tool is not only a benefit to the University of Minnesota through the reduction of paper forms and time-consuming staff resources, but more importantly has become a widely accepted web self-service benefiting students, parents, spouses, and other third parties. Students and parents have commented how beneficial and user-friendly the system is and has eliminated unnecessary contacts to the student services office.

Statement of the Problem/Initiative

One of the main problems that the One Stop Student Services Office was confronted with (and which many institutions of higher education are confronted with) is that many of the questions received were from parents and other third parties, but with FERPA privacy laws protecting student record information, One Stop Counselors were unable to release information. Most of the information parents desired was to help the student with financial aid questions or with academic issues. An paper information release form was developed years prior to this initiative, but the paper form was labor intensive and only allowed parents and other third parties to access information through a conversation with a counselor through the phone, e-mail, or in-person and only during open office hours. The University of Minnesota wanted to develop a process by which students could easily and seamlessly grant access to a third party on the web, thereby eliminating the paper form, but the University wanted to take the process a step further by actually allowing parents and others to virtually access real-time student record information via the internet.

The problem was complex because the process was not as simple as transforming a paper process into an online process, but involved an intricate and complex system to be developed that would actually “connect” students to their parents in the University of Minnesota’s PeopleSoft student database. The system had to be real-time and quick. It had to be user-friendly and it had to be completely compliant with FERPA privacy laws. We had to develop an intricate algorithm to “search and match” against hundreds of thousands of student records in the database in order to ensure we were “connecting” the right student to the right parent and

to be sure we weren't creating duplicate records in our database. In addition, we had to develop a way for students to retract access "invitations" in real-time and revoke access in real-time to ensure that student private data was secure.

Design

Many weeks of planning were necessary to ensure a proper design of the system. We had no road maps to follow and we knew of no other institution developing such a process so there were no “best practices” to call upon. We needed to ensure all the right experts were at the table. We needed to carefully decide what types of student records information we want to release: what information would be beneficial to students/parents and what types of information would reduce the number of contacts to student services and help answer questions that parents had? We need to think carefully about the reactions from students and their parents and we needed to design the system in a manner so they would use it, it would be easy to understand, and it would answer the questions that parents had.

We did not hire additional personnel for this initiative; however, we invested a total of 2095 hours in both functional and technical staff expertise in this project. This time includes overall project management, analysis and identifying design specifications, development, testing, usability testing with current students, and some post-implementation support. We built the entire system in-house without any outside vendor products and we interface our system in real-time with our PeopleSoft student database.

Implementation

We started the design phase in January 2005 and went live in July 2005; a relatively short-time when you think about the complexity of this project. We made sure to develop a communication strategy to inform students, parents, and the campus community about this initiative. Most of the targeted communications were through student and parent orientation that occurs in July. We created flyers for orientation packets and described the value of the process through in-person orientation presentations. Since the implementation, we had a few common questions that helped us identify ways to tweak the text within the online web product to reduce any confusion. Overall, there has been a high level of students satisfaction and a large percentage of the student population that has signed up for this service.

Benefits

Since the implementation in July 2005, we have had over 17,000 students grant student record access to their parents or other third parties. We have heard much positive feedback that the new process has not only been easier for students to grant access, but that it has allowed for students and parents to have more dialogue about student records issues than in the past.

Parents can now have access to grades and class information and they can discuss concerns with their students. Parents now have access to financial transactions allowing them to more easily understand their student's tuition bill. Parents now have access to financial aid award details and financial aid application status information allowing them to be more involved in the financial aid process. It has truly promoted a greater understanding of the complexities of student record information.

In addition to having a process that helps students and their parents, this new initiative has helped staff by reducing the labor intensive process of doing paperwork and data entry and now frees them up from being a "paper-pusher" to be able to focus more on the rewarding work of solving complex problems in the student services arena.

We feel that this new initiative we have developed has reduced contacts to our student services staff by providing access to information that was previously not shared. It has created a self-service environment by which students and parents can get access to important information which is critical to students' success on-campus. The process we have developed will benefit any institution of higher education and we encourage colleges and universities to contact us on

any questions they have about our product or to consider alternative ways to provide this same type of information to students and their parents.