



BY JUDITH WITHERSPOON

# *The* CENTER *of* PERFORMANCE

Centralizing campus operations can make the best of resources  
and improve student satisfaction.

## CENTRALIZED PROCESSING OPERATIONS IMPROVE CONSISTENCY. WHEN FUNCTIONS ARE DECENTRALIZED, POLICIES AND PROCEDURES MAY VARY.

COLLEGE LEADERS STRUGGLE WITH ISSUES OF RESOURCE allocation almost daily. With fluctuations in state support for community colleges and changes in funding formulas, administrators are looking for ways to operate more efficiently while improving service to students. The answer for many community college districts and systems may be the strategic centralization of certain student service and business office operations.

At first glance, the concept of improving operating efficiency while simultaneously improving service to students may seem like an impossibility; however, that is not the case. Colleges with multi-campus operations have the ability to reconfigure the day-to-day operations of select administrative units. Back office functions such as admissions processing, transcript evaluation, and federal aid processing, among others, are administrative functions that do not require face-to-face interaction with students and can easily be performed in a single, centralized location.

Centralized processing operations improve consistency. When functions are decentralized, policies and procedures may vary. These differences may confuse students as they migrate from campus to campus or negatively impact an audit. For example, a campus financial aid office may be following U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) regulations but not college policies, which could be stricter. When audits occur, aid offices are reviewed based on institutional policies as well as USDOE regulations.

Higher education is heavily regulated, requiring administrators to spend considerable efforts in gathering, processing, and reporting data to the USDOE, Federal Student Aid, state agencies, etc. Regulations change, processes are modified, and administrators must react accordingly. Institutional control is paramount, and functions that are centralized are much easier to change and control. In a centralized environment, it is easier to modify or remove processes, identify and correct data errors, and monitor reporting compliance. For example, training materials can be standardized along with the training function itself. In a decentralized environment, there are no guarantees that procedures are trained as intended. Centralization gives the college administration a mechanism for better institutional control.

### First Steps

Before any move is made to centralize functions, college districts or systems should move to standardize policies and procedures for the departments or divisions that are targeted for centralization. Building consensus for a single set of policies or procedures can be challenging, but it can also be a very positive exercise, allowing for true examination of

the “why” behind the policy and the value of continuing that policy. Is the policy or procedure in place because of tradition? Does it serve to help or hinder the student?

The biggest challenge to centralization is often getting buy-in from staff members and campus-level administrators whose day-to-day duties may be affected by the change. Winning the hearts and minds of staff members can be accomplished by examining the core competencies of each employee and aligning duties to better fit the skill set and attributes of each. For example, it can be difficult to find employees that have all of the skill sets to be great at customer service while being technical enough to keep up with all of the changes that happen in the administration of federal student aid. Centralization allows the campuses to hire or retain the employees who excel at customer service while directing the technical experts who prefer processing and data-related duties to the central operations center. In the end, employees are able to focus on more of what they enjoy doing.

Centralization also serves to enhance productivity and decrease application turnaround times. When the technical employees are allowed to focus only on processing financial aid without having to stop for customer service, they improve both speed and accuracy. This increases productivity, reduces overtime, and heightens employee satisfaction.

Best of all, colleges see a marked improvement in student satisfaction. Students benefit from improved service levels and more qualitative interaction with staff. Students work with employees who enjoy face-to-face interaction. Common policies and standard deadlines reduce confusion and allow for improved student communication at the system or district level. Students know what to expect, regardless of which campus they attend. With improved processing models, administrators are able to devote more time and attention to at-risk students, improving student outcomes.

With so much national attention on innovative ways to deliver course content, it may also be time for colleges to reimagine how student services divisions operate. District- and system-level centralization can have a very positive impact on efficiencies, institutional control and compliance, staff morale, student satisfaction and completion, as seen in the profile of Hillsborough Community College that follows.



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# CENTRALIZATION *as a* CATALYST *for* CHANGE AT HCC

BY KENNETH RAY JR.

IN 2012, HILLSBOROUGH COMMUNITY College (HCC) commissioned a study focusing on the quality of students' experience at the college's five campuses.

At the time of the study, each college campus operated its own processing centers for financial aid, Admission, Records & Registration (AR&R), and veteran affairs. The study revealed a need for improvement in the areas of communication and responsiveness, as well as the redesign of enrollment services units. This thorough review of the college's processes highlighted a need for centralization and served as a catalyst for change. The HCC leadership team focused on:

- Identifying specific college functions to centralize
- Reviewing and modifying staff positions and job descriptions
- Identifying a central location for all centralized student services functions
- Identifying technology and equipment needs
- Creating better relationships between enrollment services, financial aid, institutional technology, and finance
- Identifying channels of communications
- Determining staffing patterns needed for centralization and campus functions
- Identifying staff training/development needs
- Developing a process to reassign staff to the centralized enrollment processing center

The overall goal was to improve the student experience through efficient and timely processing and enhanced customer service.

## Phase 1: Financial Aid and Call Center

Centralization began in 2011-12, initially focusing on financial aid and call center operations. The college established a single Student Services Central Processing Center, initially housing financial aid operations with capacity for additional staff in later phases.

Call center operations were centralized by using third-party vendors to handle most student inquiries. Higher level inquiries received at the call center were addressed by staff within the Student Services Central Processing Center. This change enhanced student experience and improved customer service.

Although the overall plan to improve the student experience is still ongoing, centralization of the financial aid, AR&R, and veteran affairs departments have generated extremely positive results. Since 2013, the college has experienced a 47 percent increase in the number of students awarded financial aid by the first day of the fall semester. The college has also made tremendous gains in the number of students awarded financial aid throughout the summer.

## Phase 2: Admission, Records & Registrar and Veterans Affairs

Centralization of the AR&R processing began in September 2014. Recent data indicates a significant increase in the number of processed applications. A comparison of mid-July data indicates that more than 1,000 additional students have been admitted to the college in 2015, an 8 percent increase.

The centralization of the veteran affairs department was significantly helpful in removing barriers that negatively affected the college's compliance with Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) regulations. The centralized VA certification process aided the improvement of veteran students' experience with the department.

## Exceptions to Every Rule

While centralization streamlined back office processing, established standardization, and improved students' experiences, it is important to emphasize that not every service of a multi-campus organization benefits from centralization. Student

### Hillsborough Community College

- Located in Tampa, Florida
- President Ken Atwater
- 47,000 students
- Five campuses and three centers
- Seventh largest institution in Florida College System
- \$220 million annual budget
- 2,500 employees
- \$1.1 billion economic impact to Hillsborough County

development services such as advising, career counseling, counseling, recruitment, and student activities relate and respond well to local community needs. Some campuses may have greater need for flexibility to enhance student development or educational support services, while others face different opportunities to support their community. It is essential to recognize the uniqueness of each campus community. The socio-economic, demographic, geographic, and cultural challenges and opportunities of each campus service area are important factors to consider when determining what functions and services will benefit the college most through centralization.

In creating a harmonic balance between decentralized and centralized services, academic and student development needs, operating efficiencies, and federal and state compliance issues should be taken into account. At Hillsborough Community College, we are making systemic and meaningful change reflective of student needs to improve institutional effectiveness and to serve our community.



*Kenneth Ray Jr. is vice president for student services and student enrollment at Hillsborough Community College.*