In Translation: Fitting Square Pegs into Round Holes: A Career Services Model for Incorporating Technology into Advising with Limited Resources

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ABSTRACT

The Division of Student Affairs at the University of North Texas Health Science Center continuously seeks to expand creative technology solutions for optimizing complex advising issues. The institution is in a period of rapid growth and diversifying student needs, and the Office of Career Services was developed to meet the increased demand and accreditation requirements for all academic programs and disciplines. To help address this immediately, we developed an in-house solution using our student information system platform to manage the intricate medical residency application process. This allows us to use existing technology and other resources to make the most of what we already have available.

As a Student Affairs unit, we have the unique opportunity to be the drivers of the advising process as well as the document management clearinghouse for the culmination of our students’ medical education: the residency application process. Conventionally, this is a function that is assigned to the dean’s office at many medical schools. For example, the official nomenclature for this process is referred to by the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC) as the “Dean’s Workstation,” specifying that this is carried out on the academic side of the house. This is the centralized application service for medical students, known as Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS). Consequently, unlike most traditional two- and four-year institutions, our Career Services function expands beyond the more familiar “planning and placement” activities and ventures into an esoteric world of medical education acronyms such as GME (Graduate Medical Education), MSPE (Medical School Performance Evaluation), and the aforementioned ERAS – all integral components of the medical student career search.
Along the way, this alphabet soup of technical concepts presents some unique and challenging advising implications in trying to meet students at the crossroads of peak stress, intensive study, spiking personal expenses, and a host of other life-changing circumstances that loom ahead. Our goal is to balance the convenience of available technologies while retaining the calming effect of personalized advising throughout each step. Our number of graduating medical students is growing dramatically, as is the diversifying array of residency programs and specialties from which they choose.

To address all these factors, we turned to our in-house technology solutions as a tool for optimizing these complex advising issues and developed a system that provides access points for all stakeholders while integrating student academic and personal data already available. We partnered with our Information Technology department to create this platform, which utilizes data from different systems connected throughout the institution. These include academic and personal data, clinical clerkship experiences and evaluations, curricular descriptions and graduation requirements, comprehensive endorsement input by an academic dean, along with student-provided academic and extracurricular background information. In addition, we consolidated external processes into this system to: allow students and deans to independently schedule interview appointments, generate graphical representations of pre-clinical academic performance, and input summative evaluation comments by clinical rotation preceptors.

In essence, this system operates as a “spokes on a wheel” data sharing and processing interface, available to all parties through the respective campus portal logins, and maintained via a dashboard of user tools. More specifically, these components perform the following:

Dean’s Interview/Residency Counseling Scheduling (Managed by Dean’s Office/Facilitated by Career Services)

As the first aspect of the system to originally go live, this process allows all authorized personnel to set appointment times and locations for each designated interviewer. Students sign up for an interview by logging into their campus portal. Once scheduled, students receive an automated confirmation, as well as reminder e-mails, prior to the designated meeting time. A separate Residency Counseling appointment component is also available and is configured so that sessions can be arranged mutually exclusive of each other. Only designated system administrators may change appointments, thereby keeping all offices aware of schedule updates. Going forward, this system allows us to manage additional layers of interviewers and calendars.

Student Personal Profile (Entered by Student/Viewed by All Parties)

In addition to providing key biographical components of the Dean’s Letter, this feature largely mimics the same fields required for input in the ERAS application, and extracts personal and transcript data already available in the campus portal (allowing students, in effect, to pre-write their ERAS applications). At this point in the process, the student electronically consents to release academic information for the purpose of including with her residency application, thus covering the institution for FERPA protection.
Clinical Comments (Provided through Clinical Education Department/Managed by Career Services)

Individual third-year clinical rotation schedules are imported automatically from existing campus portal data and comments from each student’s clinical evaluations can be input for inclusion in the Dean’s Letter. Written Clinical Evaluation comments may now be entered by clinical preceptors directly into New Innovations (a web-based system managed by the Clinical Education Department) and transferred into the student information system.

Editing, Output, and Review (Available to All Parties)

Once the required data is entered and the Dean’s Interview is completed, a draft of the MSPE can be generated and viewed concurrently into the student information system by students and authorized personnel. Edits to the draft can be made by all parties, as well as the addition of the Dean’s Letter “Summary” section, as provided by the respective Dean. A PDF version of the final document and student “CV” can also be generated through the student information system, among other reports.

Graphs (Generated by Career Services)

Graphs depicting comparative preclinical academic performance for each of the first four semesters as well as quartile rank are generated for each student as specified by AAMC/MSPE guidelines.

Ultimately, we believe we are “meeting students where they are” with this system, while not breaking the bank—and producing a high-quality product that accomplishes the end-goal of the institution. It is available to students 24 hours a day and can be accessed from any point where there is internet capability. For some, this may mean accessing the system at 2:00 a.m. while on call. In addition, it saves our office some of the minutiae. The system also allows us to leverage expected growth, both in number of students as well as advisers and interviewers who will use the system in the foreseeable future. From the student side, feedback has been generally positive for the use of both the scheduling and profile components. Although some students do express frustration, it nonetheless allows us more direct control over the scheduling process, which results in fewer missed or surprise appointments. All told, the majority of students report that using the components of the system is relatively intuitive. Although entering data into the profile section can be somewhat time-consuming, it is not unreasonably so. Once they enter into the ERAS application season, they report that this process helped them to organize a significant portion of their application, saving them several steps during this period of heightened stress and limited time.

Overall, we believe this system contributes to the overall mission of the Division of Student Affairs, which is “Fostering Student Success!”

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