Process Standardization In Higher Education & Silo-Based IT Cultures
Executive Summary

Every organization is challenged to cut costs and ‘do more with less,’ and the higher education environment is no different. However, many institutions have operated historically as a collection of separate departments and offices in loose affiliation with a common ‘brand’ at the highest level.

What seems to defy all logic in the business world is commonplace for higher education; history, politics, or complacency provides sufficient gravity to prevent organizations from breaking these bad habits.

Massive reorganization may not be possible, and for many is not even the right choice. But even in distributed environments, value can be realized by increasing collaboration between disparate IT groups on campus, through the sharing of common IT Service Management (ITSM) Processes and supporting technology. Recognizing that there are many different levels of process standardization, and choosing the right standardization model (along with an inclusive governance model), will enable success while preserving a level of local control and autonomy where needed.

This collaboration reduces waste created by duplicate processes (along with the management, upkeep, and related technology) and better mitigates risks that exist wherever separate but highly interdependent IT systems support a common customer base.

The purpose of this white paper is to offer an approach for increasing efficiency and effectiveness of IT within College and University settings that have traditionally operated in a distributed environment, without upsetting organizational reporting lines or compromising the individuality of each area.

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1) THE SAME BUT DIFFERENT

“We’re different” is a statement often made by IT within higher education institutions. Historically, many organizations have been able to sell that as a reason to distance themselves from industry best practice and other efficiency-increasing actions, or in an effort to preserve flexibility, uniqueness, responsiveness and ‘close-to-home’ control over IT resources. This culture has been diminishing recently with the increased need to clearly demonstrate value, operate in an efficient and fiscally responsible way, and deliver consistent and reliable services. With so many College or University activities dependent on Information-based services, IT is under pressure to operate with the assumed availability of any other utility; availability, reliability, and predictability have never been more important. Clearly, ‘running IT like a business’ means more to higher education now than it did 10 years ago.

In this sense, IT in higher education faces many of the same challenges organizations in any sector are up against. Beyond the issues of waste caused by duplication of work, re-work, variability and so on, separate IT divisions that do not effectively collaborate produce a disconnected and frustrating experience for the users, along with increased risk for the greater organization. This is especially challenging in higher education where many of the customers are served by different IT shops. To them, it is all ‘Just IT’, but this quickly leads to frustration and disappointment when they are given the run-around and bounced back and forth while trying to find the right people to help solve their problems.

IT consolidation is not always the answer (either functionally or politically), so the real challenge becomes how to work together to give the appearance of one IT, and interoperate at a level which is able to provide the consistent, reliable service to the customer. This is even more important when one IT group provides services which another IT group depends on for their own services (such as network connectivity).
One of the largest challenges within a higher education setting (but a clear opportunity at the same time) is process standardization. Lean IT would suggest that duplication is waste – something of no value to the customer and something they would rather not pay for. Multiple redundant processes and tools are a clear example of this waste. So, how can this waste be eliminated? The easy answer is to establish one and get rid of the rest.

Easy to type, not so easy to do – especially in higher education. Many Colleges and Universities are comprised of a set of individual colleges, schools, and departments. Furthermore, these areas may have very different missions such as academics, administration, healthcare, research, hospitality, and even retail. But unique needs (and even unique IT areas) between these groups is not a valid argument to manage the waste and overhead of multiple IT processes. For this to work, however, the anatomy of a process must first be understood.
THE ANATOMY OF A PROCESS

For many, the first thing that comes to mind when they hear ‘process’ is some type of graphical flow chart, or maybe even a set of ‘Standard Operating Procedures’ (SOPs). While these are key parts of a process, there is much more that must exist. Looking at the best practice described in ITIL®, a Process is made up of many different parts, including:

**Process Controls**

A Process Owner: A single point of accountability for the given Process. This role ensures the process is designed appropriate to the needs of the organization, is being followed, and is producing the expected results.

Process Policies: The non-negotiable aspects of the Process. Stronger than guidelines, these select aspects are non-optional and must be followed without exception.

Process Objectives: Define what the Process is seeking to accomplish. If not formally stated and agreed, the rest of the Process becomes more challenging to design and difficult to measure with any level of efficiency. Different stakeholders may have different expectations or understanding of what the Process exists for.

Process Documentation: The only way to ensure consistency in the Process. If not written down (and kept up to date), the Process will always vary depending on who you ask. Documentation of the Process provides a consistent means of reference, training, and change control.

Process Feedback: The quantifiable outputs that signal proper flow through the Process. For example, closed Records, escalated Incidents, or authorized Changes.
**Process Itself**

**Process Activities**: Describe ‘What’ to do. Luckily, a framework like ITIL can be referenced for best practice guidance on Process activities.

**Process Procedures**: Describe ‘How’ to do the activities. While not necessarily available from best practice guidelines, procedures represent the specific step-by-step actions to perform for each activity.

**Process Work Instructions**: Describe an even more detailed level of ‘How’ to perform certain tasks. For example, exactly what values should be filled in for a given situation, screen shots of where to click, etc.

**Process Measurements**: Process Measurements measure how the Process is performing. It is important to distinguish between ‘Reports’, which is a more general term, and ‘Management Information’, which may be specific to a sub-set of data or functional groups. Process Measurements indicate how the Process as a whole is making good on the defined objectives for that Process.

**Process Roles**: Describe the ‘Who’ of the Process. While not necessarily tied directly to position titles and reporting lines, roles are groupings of responsibilities and authorities which can be granted to a person or team. Anyone can fill any role, regardless of position, title, or structure as defined within the organization.

**Process Improvements**: Represents the list of opportunities to make the Process better. Every Process should be continually improved though suggestions driven by metrics and stakeholder input at all levels.

**Process Enablers**

Process Enablers include any of the **Capabilities** and **Resources** needed to operate and manage the Process. This may include the tools used to enable the Process, training, and communication.
THE ANATOMY OF A PROCESS IN THE ITIL PROCESS MODEL

Process Control

Process

Triggers

Process Inputs

Process Enablers

Process Outputs

Including process reports & reviews

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3) PROCESS STANDARDIZATION

In looking at the Process Model, it becomes clear that many aspects can be fairly ‘universal’, especially if considering the ‘What’ and the ‘How’ of any process separately. Most of the Process controls, and even some of the Process itself, are described at a high level in best practice to illustrate ‘What’ to do. These include:

- Objectives
- Policies
- Measurements
- Activities
- Roles

The ‘How’ items may include procedures, work instructions, and even enablers like tools. These items may be slightly different for certain areas to meet specific needs.

With this in mind, the main goal in Process standardization is to agree on and adopt the greatest number of ‘What’ items as standards, while accommodating individual areas within the enterprise with ‘How’ items as required. Keep in mind, some Processes may require a higher level of standardization than others.

Ideally, each Process can be defined once without duplicating any aspects of the process model. This can work even while maintaining separate organizations and reporting structures, as Processes should be independent of reporting structure. In general, the less duplication the better, but if it is not possible to completely standardize, some duplication may be unavoidable.

Beyond waste reduction is the added benefit of fostering a more collaborative relationship between disparate IT groups. Even if groups maintain separate tools and procedures, the high level consistency will facilitate the integration and hand-off between groups with common Record data fields, prioritization, etc.
As an example, the following describes what the Incident Management process might look like in an enterprise model:

- One Process Owner, named and agreed on to be accountable for the overall Process and core aspects of the Process
- One set of Process Policies that applies to everyone in every area (like ‘All Incidents shall be Logged in an approved tracking system’, ‘The definition of an Incident shall be…’)
- One set of Process Activities (Incident Logging, Incident Categorization, Incident Prioritization)
- A Common Prioritization Model
- A Common Categorization Model
- One Set of Process Roles (Incident Manager, Incident Analyst)
- One Set of Process Measures (which apply across any and all areas)
- At least one (but maybe more) sets of Procedures (‘How’ to do the activities)
- Work Instructions as needed (One or more detailed descriptions of how to perform the procedures)
- One or more tool sets, training, communication plans, etc.
4) TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT FOR ITSM PROCESS (i.e. Tools)

Once a Process is standardized across all groups, it often makes sense to standardize the technology that supports the Process. This promotes a collaborative environment and reduces the need to maintain costly integration points. There is also the waste reduction realized by removing redundant technologies. When economies of scale are leveraged to lower the total cost across the board, these savings can be seen at both an enterprise and local level.

This may seem like common sense, but where technology and tools are concerned, there will always be apprehension. The decision to standardize a tool across areas in different reporting structures brings many challenges that must be addressed.

Cost

Who’s going to pay for it? Ideally, it is a shared cost across all the areas, but asking departments to pay extra for something they think they already have may be difficult. Just as difficult is reducing individual department budgets by what they are currently spending on tools locally. In the departmental world of the ‘have and have not’, establishing a fair and equitable cost model to fund the ITSM technology is critical.

If the institution is not in the lucky position to have it funded centrally for the entire enterprise, it is likely that a ‘per-user’ chargeback of some type will have to be established. If this is the case, it is important that the cost model account not only for licensing but any associated hardware, development, support, and maintenance for a true ‘total cost’.
Governance

How to handle all the different opinions, wants, and needs. In a model where departments each have their own technology set up exactly the way they like, the movement to a more consistent and universal configuration may leave some ready to head back to their silo. While maintaining numerous different 'screens', forms, and layouts will negate much of the savings consistency brings, there may be a need to have some configurations specific to certain areas.

The level and costs of individual configuration must be defined early so clear expectations may be set. This includes decisions around distributed administrative rights, the process for reviewing suggestions, Changes, etc. Whatever decision is made, the key is to ensure an inclusive approach which provides a consistent way for all users, from any IT area, to provide input, make a request and have it considered.

Security

Security is another common area of concern. For the most part, the data in the ITSM tool is likely ‘enterprise’ data. In other words, it is ‘the University's’ data, and any employee or IT staff member has a legitimate reason for accessing it to do their job and support the operation of the institution. There may be some data, however, that is not for wide consumption by the broader IT organization, and it will need to be restricted to a specific group or role. This often includes information security data (details of security incident investigations, firewall rule Requests and Changes, etc.), HR Data, and some Configuration Management data (specific IP addresses, server locations).

Wherever this is an issue, proper security at the field, row, or table level may be needed. Beyond the security concerns, there may be interest in simply removing the ‘noise’ of a bunch of data that may not apply to some areas. These concerns can often be addressed with filters, views, or personalized lists, and many of the current ITSM suites available offer options to support multiple ‘IT Service Providers’ in one enterprise. If these or other challenges are insurmountable, it is possible to leverage multiple technologies to support a common Process, as long as they are configured the same way.
5) COLLABORATION: A DRIVER & ENABLER FOR CHANGE

As the value chains that make up IT services increase in complexity, collaboration among IT providers and suppliers becomes even more important. When different IT Service Providers within one institution share a common customer base, but insist on different Processes and tools, client frustration will flourish. These Service Providers must work together to produce a consistent customer experience and enable the over-arching missions of their institution.

Standardized Processes and technology promote a single IT front door, allowing the customer to engage ‘IT’ without knowing exactly which IT group serves their needs. There may be a Request or Incident which requires something from more than one group, or an issue where responsibility is less well-known to the day-to-day business user. This standardization may provide a comprehensive Service Catalog based on their role (and not based on which IT catalog they are viewing).

In this approach, customers would see all the IT services they are entitled to from any number of different IT Service Providers, based on their role, department, affiliation, etc. For instance, imagine the professor who is entitled to the basic services provided from central IT, the additional services from his/her department, and the additional services provided from the research IT group. A ‘superset’ of all these services are presented in one place and Requests are automatically routed to the right IT group for fulfillment.

All Processes have the potential for collaboration within the enterprise; however, the following tend to be the most critical for the customer and user experience:

- Incident Management
- Request Fulfillment
- Change Management
- Service Asset & Configuration Management
- Event Management
- Service Catalog Management
At the more strategic level, these Processes tend to facilitate a more fiscally responsible IT investment for the institution:

- Service Portfolio Management
- Financial Management For IT

The complexity and interdependency of IT systems, coupled with the customer’s expectations from ‘IT’, make a convincing case for greater collaboration among IT providers on campus. On the other hand, collaboration is a key component to making consistent Processes work. The benefits are only fully realized when all areas are able to work in a truly trusting partnership toward a common goal. After all, everyone is on the same team – right?

To provide the capstone on this thought, it should be noted that any successful collaboration initiative must have dedicated attention to organizational culture. This is especially true for organizations with large groups of ‘legacy’ stakeholders: those that have ‘been around a while’ and may be hesitant to let go of the old way. It may be clear to some that the old way, which worked with a different mix of technology, no longer provides the required levels of value, return and risk mitigation. Still, the personal feelings and reluctance to let go must be recognized. Formal culture shaping initiatives that go beyond IT may be the best way to drive success (when this is possible).
6) PROCESS GOVERNANCE

ITSM Process Governance will build upon and formalize the necessary collaboration among IT Service Providers. A solid governance model will enable feedback, Process integration, decision authority, continual improvement and accountability. Some key entities typically make up the governance model, including an enterprise or executive group, Process Owners group and process teams.

**Process Executive Council** – Provides the high-level leadership support, vision and commitment. This council should be made up of executive leadership representing all IT provider groups.

**Process Owners Council** – Made up of all Process Owners, this group ensures that required Process integrations exist. Typically, they will review Process Metrics to feed continual improvement and serve as a change authority for larger or interdependent Process changes.

**Process Councils** – Exist for each Process. These teams are chaired by the Process Owner and should be made up with representation from all key stakeholder groups that use or rely on the Process. They will provide a two-way communication mechanism for Process performance, management and feedback for improvements.

Process Governance cannot be understated. In an environment of disparate IT groups, it is the ‘glue’ that holds everything together and which fosters the required transparency, trust and inclusion. With that in mind, selecting the membership of the governance groups becomes even more important. The most successful models have widespread involvement, with membership made up of influential and respected staff from all key IT areas.
7) TIPS FROM THE ‘REAL WORLD’

Standardizing on Process, supporting shared technology, and working more collaboratively are never easy changes for organizations, especially those that have traditionally been able to operate on their own islands. So, here are seven tips to increase the success of this effort from the ‘front lines’:

- Establish governance early and get buy-in from all. Since governance provides the decision making structure and authority tree for Process and technology decisions, it is important to define and gain agreement on how it will happen and who will be involved before decisions are made. This prevents having to ‘undo’ or change course later, and ensures that the decisions made are done so with input from all stakeholders.

- Spread ownership around. Not all Process Owners have to come from the central, or even largest, IT area on campus. This promotes collaborative and trusting relationships, but also spreads the resource requirements to prevent any one area from taking the brunt of it.

- Use a best practice framework like ITIL. ITIL provides best practices with input from many different sectors. This becomes a starting point for all the main components of ITSM Processes. Starting with a framework provides a common, neutral ground for Processes as well as a common vocabulary, and prevents any area from feeling like they are being forced to conform to ‘the way that group does it’. The Processes used must be seen as ‘Our’ Processes by all involved. In fact, delivering basic ITIL training classes to attendees from a mix of IT provider areas is a great way to kick-off the effort.
• Ensure a ‘feedback and improvement suggestion’ mechanism is in place, such as a common email address, blog, or social media solution that is known and publicized. Input is important to consider, especially in a College or University setting where individuals have been encouraged to think outside-the-box, innovate, and find creative solutions to problems. The governance model is one way to bring feedback to the decision makers, so everyone should know who the ‘feedback representatives’ are. Even more, establishing a mechanism to facilitate getting this feedback to the governance teams will promote the feeling that everyone has a voice and all feedback is welcome. Expectations should be set that not everything will be acted on, but all will be reviewed. Top it off by ensuring anyone who provides feedback receives a response of some type!

• Don’t stop at tactical/operational Processes. At the surface, clear wins can be gained from standardizing operational processes like Incident Management, but the higher order levels of value will be realized when strategic processes like Service Portfolio Management, Financial Management For IT, and Strategy Management are considered. Start where it makes sense, but ensure Continual Service Improvement is, in fact, continual

• Capture your ‘starting point’ in a baseline of some type. It is always fascinating how quickly the old ways are forgotten after an improvement is made. This is compounded by changing leadership and an ever-changing customer base. Capture a starting point in terms of a formal baseline assessment, current metrics, or simply satisfaction survey data. This can be used later to gauge progress, demonstrate value, and drive the continual improvement effort

• Meeting frequency is important for governance teams. Too infrequent and the value is lost, but too often and it can be seen as overly time consuming. Generally, there will be more time required when the governance groups are first established and improvement activities are ramping up. For this initial time span, try having the executive council meet once every 1-3 months, Process Owners meet once per month, and Process councils meet once or twice per month (until the Process is in ‘regular operation’ mode). From there, the frequency and duration may be adjusted to accommodate the required agendas
8) CONCLUSION:

The decision to team up and work together is never an easy one, but this is especially true for IT groups that have operated within the traditionally autonomous higher education environment. It carries many of the same challenges as an organization faced with a merger or acquisition, but the campus setting seems to have a special flavor. There are many levels of consolidation and collaboration that can exist, but all of them are arguably better than complete disassociation from both the customer viewpoint and the enterprise administration. The level to which ITSM standardization can be made consistent across the enterprise depends largely on the current, politics, and unique scenarios within the specific institution.

Whatever the drivers and extent adopted, it is important to remember that Process standardization can be a reality in a College/University without giving up local reporting lines and the individuality of separate IT provider groups.
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Brian applies his extensive experience and knowledge of ITSM frameworks to assist clients’ development of consistent, efficient IT processes rooted in industry best practice to deliver high customer value services.
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