

DESIGNING A STUDENT SERVICES ECOSYSTEM* FOR GILLINGS' STUDENTS (9/21/2018)

*Consider ecosystem in its broadest usage, e.g. a system formed by the interaction of a community of organisms with their physical **environment** system, scheme - a group of independent but interrelated elements comprising a unified whole;
<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/Ecosystem>

PURPOSE OF THIS COMMUNICATION

Purpose: provide background on why we must create a student services ecosystem and a process for doing so. Given the sensitivity of this communication, it should not be shared until we have developed a communications plan.

Imperative to create ecosystem. While the Gillings MPH was the catalyst for our most recent discussions about what student services should comprise at Gillings, we have examined student services intermittently for the last ten years. It is time to create the Gillings' student services ecosystem for all our students. An ecosystem includes a full range of services rather than focusing on a single person or service. An ecosystem is a set of inter-relationships, and a designed ecosystem would start by asking questions about what the services should be at various points during a student's academic journey and then building a delivery system that includes the right people doing the right work at the right time and at the right cost. All Gillings students should be provided a package of student services to facilitate their successful degree completion and positive experience throughout.

In attempting to create positions that will support new MPH students and developing cost models, we have been trying to accommodate the current structure, the "old system," and future needs. It is not working, because we are inserting the past into the future rather than inventing the future. The exercise discussed here will add time, but with external facilitation and participants committed to specified timelines, it could be done in eight weeks or less. If the process advances the work of developing a 21st century ecosystem at reasonable cost and unsticks our processes, it will be time well-spent.

Multiple factors driving imperative. The imperative for creating the student services ecosystem is driven by multiple factors. These include rising expectations of today's students about services that should be provided to them by colleges and universities along their academic journeys, our accreditor's feedback that we should provide consistent, high quality services to students regardless of academic unit and degree, our own recognition that we are not providing optimal services in today's world, the competitive landscape and the professionalization of student services.

We have obtained consistent feedback from a variety of sources over recent years about students experiences at Gillings. There have been many positive comments but several important concerns, including, speed of response to inquiries during the pre-application and application processes for some individuals and parts of the School, frustrations about advising, perceptions by some students that career advising is excellent and by other students that it is problematic, timeliness of students being paid for work as a TA or GA, lack of or incorrect information about degree and other requirements,

persistent lack of clear information about awards and financial aid and desire of students to connect more across departments. Several years ago, over 1.5 years, we developed a Gillings School organizational development plan; student services were one of four service areas on which we focused. The final report identified three critical issues for student services:

1. Student services managers (SSMs) are performing multiple roles and managing competing tasks and responsibilities. Definitions of roles and responsibilities vary by department. Some departments have enough staff, and others do not. SSMs are not always offered specific training and professional development for their positions. For these reasons, SSMs are unable to provide optimal service to students in all the ways that they are currently being asked.
2. Data about students are inconsistent. Departments collect the same data differently and in different systems. There is no process for determining who should have access to data, and a lack of trust that data are accurate. There are problems collecting data for CEPH. Data issues make it much harder to tell stories to stakeholders such as media, legislators, university leadership, and donors.
3. Advising is inconsistent across and within units (including individual faculty members, program directors and student services). In the student satisfaction survey done as part of the organization development process, 27 of 263 respondents reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with academic support and advising—not large numbers but disturbing nonetheless. The qualitative comments included both positive, grateful statements and disturbing ones, e.g., the stress of students not knowing whether they would be funded, sometimes, even as terms began, feeling they did not have access to critical information, and repeatedly unresponsive advisors. Students are unclear about advising roles and expectations. Reading the comments from students shows a disconnect between who we believe we are and want to be, and how we are perceived by at least some students. There are no schoolwide performance standards for advisors as there are for some peer schools, and we do not offer any formal or official training for faculty and staff in these roles.

In three successive CEPH site visit reports, we received feedback that our decentralized approach does not allow for adequate monitoring and does not deliver consistent, high quality services. We do not have schoolwide, coordinated student services or minimum requirements and quality standards.

A review of some competitors' websites (<https://www.jhsph.edu/offices-and-services/student-affairs/>; <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/student-affairs/>; <https://www.bu.edu/sph/students/getting-started-at-busph/>; <https://www.mailman.columbia.edu/office-student-affairs>; <https://sph.umich.edu/student-life/contact.html>) shows that they are paying increased attention to student services and view student services as part of their competitive advantage. The titles of their positions reflect the increasing specialization of student services, e.g., with roles for recruitment, enrollment management, admissions processing, student life, and financial aid.

Student services profession. Student services is a profession. While some within the school recognize this, and our OSA is built on a professional student services model, there is significant variability across the school in preparation for student services positions, what they are expected to do and how they do it. At Gillings, there is not a student services career ladder or a clear path to career advancement.

Being competitive means preparing employees for evolving jobs and change. AT&T, a very large ship to turn, saw that to be competitive, they had to transform the way they operated; many positions changed. The CEO told Tom Friedman who reported in his book: "You can be a lifelong employee if you are ready to be a lifelong learner." (Friedman, 2016). As Friedman discussed elsewhere, the needed skills for good jobs are going up. We have a responsibility to help our employees who serve students to enhance their skills and advance. Neither they nor we should accept under-performance. We can no longer assume that the best student services professionals will come to Gillings and stay for their careers. They, too, have choices, and each time one leaves, there is a crisis. The world is changing, and if we fail to change, we will be left behind. This is not change for the sake of change. It is intended to address the goal of consistent, high quality service and demonstrated gaps in and needs for services. The past was not designed for accelerating change cycles and the need for resilience (Thomas Friedman. *Thank you for being late*, 2016). As we consider student services, we should recognize that, like any industry dependent on customers (our students), we must be prepared to change faster.

To serve our students well, we need a new ecosystem of student services delivery that works across concentrations, departments and degrees. It should be an ecosystem with multiple services of different kinds, delivered by the right people at the right time in the right way, with quality standards for which people are accountable. In some cases, online support systems increasingly could augment but not supplant people. In a period of rapidly expanding capacity of AI and machine learning to deliver highly individualized advice, we should begin to examine how human and digitally-delivered services can be combined to provide optimal delivery for all our students at the right cost. We should innovate in tailoring messages and customizing information. As in medicine and nursing fields, we want our most highly trained student services professionals to work at the top of their training, delivering the services that require their expertise.

THE WORLD IS BECOMING MORE CUSTOMER-CENTERED

Customers' end-to-end experiences. According to Ram Charan, a prolific writer about organizations and counselor to corporate leaders, [organizations](#) that have not yet changed to focus on the customer experience must do so to thrive. Because we believe fundamentally that students are at the center of our school, we could lead in and even own the user experience domain. In speaking of digital companies, from which we can learn a lot, Charan said that successful digital companies are focused on consumers and treat each one as an individual. We are not yet using all potential best practices and technologies to do that.

We *must* change how we organize services for students. As discussed earlier, we've received a lot of feedback that what we now offer is not optimal. By the next accreditation site visit, we will be expected to deliver with more consistency and quality than in the past. Increasingly, we are likely to find ourselves at odds with students who have grown up digital. They are smart, focused, driven, and they are pragmatic about the cost and value of education.

ACT ON OUR VALUES IN A CHANGING WORLD

Actualize our values. In our statement of values for the Gillings School, we say that we are student-centered, and that is one of the principles underlying curricular changes for the MPH. To date, we have

not articulated fully what that means. We pride ourselves on being high-touch. Where in the process is this feature essential and provides value, and where may it be less important? For what will we be accountable? We should be willing to make a Gillings Pledge to applicants and students that communicates what we commit to provide each student who matriculates, including services that will help them achieve their goals. In other words, back up our words with actions. If we deliver, we could enhance our brand, increase enrollment and facilitate students' satisfaction and success while at Gillings. And it will be just-in-time, given that today's students have grown up expecting to be treated as savvy customers who have choices. We want them to choose Gillings.

CONDUCT EMPTY ROOM EXERCISE AND DESIGN AN ECOSYSTEM

What it is. An empty room exercise is one in which participants are asked to leave the past and present behind and create the best possible vision for the situation, not limited by the present and assumptions about what we can do. Often, as is the case at Gillings, the present is the result of happenstance, serendipity, needs of students many years ago and some planning. We used an empty room approach to design *Framing the Future*, the ASPPH educational plan, and it was highly effective <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4032212/>. Freeing ourselves of priors could enable us to envision and create a future ecosystem without being constrained by the past or by job titles and people in them.

Before the empty room exercise, participants will be given data, reports and other background material. This is not an exercise removed from reality. It is an exercise removed from constraints. We should envision student services as a delivery ecosystem and not as a single job description, identify what services should comprise the delivery system and redesign student services from students' perspectives and with them at the center. If we use this frame, it will be more successful than if we try to protect the present and project a future vision into it. The most expensive system is likely to be one that holds onto the present and builds the new on top of it. That's not efficient, effective or sustainable.

Understand what students want. At a recent retreat, Charletta Sims Evans, her team and student services staff identified the key tasks they perform, and we learned a lot about student services from our organizational development process. We have not mapped the student's journey in relation to student services, from the student's perspective, e.g., at the start when they are first considering Gillings, to application, acceptance, enrollment, across the degree process through to graduation and beyond. If we begin with what students perceive they want and need rather than our assumptions about what they need, we could design an ecosystem without being burdened by the past. Today's students differ in many ways from those of us in academic leadership who grew up in pre-digital eras. *The past is not the future. The past was not designed for a tailored, consumer-driven world in which there is immense competition among schools, and applicants have vast quantities of information at their command.*

Our digital partner, 2U, could be very helpful in this process. They are a digital company, have thought a lot about student services, must consider cost as a primary consideration, designed student-centered services and use analytics in a way we have not to date.

PROCESS FOR EMPTY ROOM EXERCISES

Critical Tasks. The various tasks and exercises will be specified in more detail by Kathy Anderson., with input from key people, including Kramer Leadership. She also will attach ranges of dates to different activities. We have committed to an ambitious timeline, but success is dependent, in part, on the willingness of people to participate when asked and to accommodate a rapid completion timeline. The specific activities will be subject to refinement during the planning process. Also, while we have listed activities numerically, some activities will occur simultaneously.

1. **Kathy Anderson, associate dean, has agreed to serve as project manager.**
2. **Identify and work with an external facilitator.** We are in discussions with Kramer Leadership which has worked with us previously, and it is likely that they be the contractor.
3. Begin process of **outreach communication** with key stakeholder groups and continue throughout process.
4. **Identify and assemble materials that will be provided to different participants.**
5. **With key Gillings staff and faculty, develop a map of students' academic journeys** with variations for different kinds of students, if appropriate.
6. **Solicit students to participate in prototype design process.** (In advance, identify location, logistics and materials and incentives for participation.)
7. **Appoint Rapid Design Team** of 8-10 people performing key academic roles across the School and someone expert in student services external to the School. (Identify information to be provided, location and other logistics.) Hold orientation session to explain purpose for activity, provide an overview of student services and best practices. and discuss background materials and asked to review them in advance, e.g., students' ideal services package from 8 (potentially, after initial work), admitted students' survey data (qualitative and quantitative), exit surveys, reports and background materials from the organizational development process in which student services were one of several school functions we examined. While none of the inputs and data are perfect, they will provide useful starting points.
8. **Appoint Implementation Team** to begin work as Rapid Design Team finishes.
9. **A. Conduct facilitated design prototype exercise with students.** Engage 3-4 sessions of current students and recent graduates in a design exercise to specify what they would want and need to succeed at each step along the academic public health journey. Each session would be three hours or less and generally include different student levels and degree types. A BSPH group likely will be done separately. Completion time: 2 days. **Outcome:** recommended set of student services from students' perspectives, a prototype.
B. A parallel facilitated activity yet to be determined will be conducted to obtain additional information from student services professionals. **Outcome:** TBD
10. **Facilitated exercise to design optimal student services package prototype and ecosystem.** Participants will be asked to imagine the future and design the optimal package of student services, including what would be offered at each step in the academic public health journey, which would become the recommended student services ecosystem. Cost will not be considered at this stage but will be a consideration during the implementation process that follows. Completion time: 2 half-day sessions about one week apart. **Outcome:** recommended design prototype for student services ecosystem arrayed along the academic journey, specifying differences among different types of students

11. **Report findings and recommended prototype** to the Dean's Council and Chairs' Committee; get feedback and make necessary adjustments.
12. **Implementation Team** costs proposed services and determines how package would be implemented, including associated HR issues.
13. **Additional discussions with key groups to receive input and feedback.**
14. **Final decision about ecosystem by dean** of the Gillings School

Principles that will be used to focus participants at all stages. We will communicate and reinforce these guiding principles for design consideration. They are aligned with the principles that guide curricular development.

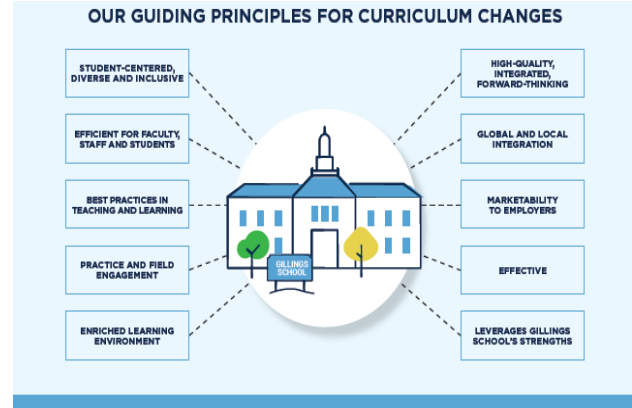
- 🌐 Student services should be high quality, sustainable, responsive and proactive,
- 🌐 They should be aimed at helping students succeed in their academic journeys.
- 🌐 Services should be high quality, accurate, consistent, individualized and high touch, where appropriate.
- 🌐 Students should be provided the right help at the right time by the right people and in the right ways.
- 🌐 Services should be delivered efficiently with the fewest number of employees needed to achieve goals.
- 🌐 Staff should perform at the top of their credentials.
- 🌐 Quality metrics will be used for continuous quality improvement.

Draft examples for guiding questions that will be asked of participants. We'd use a detailed map of the academic journey to differentiate the types of services needed by students at different points.

- 🌐 Where do we need highly expert, human, high touch, high knowledge skills delivered by a student services professional with advanced training?
- 🌐 Are there points where services can be high touch but low complexity in terms of decision making (e.g., might be done following a scripted set of responses)?
- 🌐 What aspects of student services are transactional and require people who can perform them accurately and in a timely manner (e.g. putting students on payroll) but do not require a student services professional?
- 🌐 While this is not how we work today, are there points where information could be curated and made available digitally in a tailored manner?
- 🌐 What services are most important for a high functioning student services ecosystem?
- 🌐 Is there anything we should no longer do?
- 🌐 What do we do well? What can we do better? Where are we at legal and other risks because of what we are doing/not doing?
- 🌐 What's missing from the student service experience today? (from perspective of students and those who deliver services)
- 🌐 How can we assure efficiency, consistency, quality, timeliness, relevance and accuracy of information provided by those in student services, including all delivery channels?
- 🌐 Where should services be located and administered?
- 🌐 What could we do that our competitors cannot?
- 🌐 What would it take to create the best student services ecosystem?

THE GILLINGS PLEDGE

If we can create and promote a student services ecosystem, it is very likely that we will attract even more qualified job applicants than in the past (as has happened for HR), and that more students will choose Gillings even if we can't give them all the financial support they would prefer. We could make the Gillings Pledge—what every student should expect if they come to Gillings. As far as we can tell, no other SPH has done that. [UNC School for the Arts'](#) home page says... *We promise you this. You'll do what you love.* That's the closest we've seen.



Consider this a hypothetical straw person example and by no means a proposed set of services. But imagine a combination of the following. I don't know what the ultimate service package would be. These are just some premature thoughts.

The Gillings Pledge

Preamble: Gillings education involves a partnership between students, faculty members and staff in the School. Each has a part to play. (This would say more about some of the general assumptions, e.g. effective pedagogy, diverse, inclusive and other aspects of the school that will benefit all students.)

Every Gillings student will... (Note: the specifics would be refined as we create the student services ecosystem and an essential services package. *These are draft ideas.* They don't include pre-enrollment, but there also would be someone identified and known to students during the recruitment/application phase.)

1. Get individualized advice in a tailored, online portfolio regarding what is required to complete the degree in which they are enrolled, including required and elective courses, deliverables needed to complete degree, graduate on-time and be career ready.
2. Receive a clear, written statement regarding what their education will cost, and how we will contribute, if at all, including services they receive for which they are not charged separate fees and those that carry fees. For students who must complete practica, a statement regarding those costs will be included. It also will indicate what they are expected to do in return for support they receive.
 - a. Someone is responsible for processing payments in a timely manner to assure on-time payments to students.
3. Be given the name, contact information and introduced to a person they can reach anytime (certain restrictions apply to human response) about their academic programs, e.g., the person who helps them sort out what class they need next, can be called upon if they encounter problems registering and similar issues or finding a needed online form and knows what is required as students approach graduation. This is the person who can help students get unstuck when they hit barriers and on whom they can call if they are dissatisfied at any point in their academic journey. Specific title for this person is TBD.

4. Have a faculty advisor. It is communicated how often this person will be available, at a minimum, how to reach them and what is expected of them and the student. (There are quality standards for work.)
5. Have access to a knowledgeable career advisor with necessary credentials to serve students optimally. That person understands what career path student seeks and how to help them achieve career goals.
6. Have access to alumni on whom they can call at whatever stage in the journey they wish.
7. Opportunity to join an online support community, if they wish, by degree, interest or other characteristics, e.g. global.
8. Access to a curated digital repository of questions, answers, tips and comments from Gillings students and others.
9. Current, accurate, comprehensive student handbook. See examples from [Hopkins](#) and [Harvard](#).
10. A high-quality educational experience at every step to degree, with excellence in pedagogy, access to appropriate classes, a diverse and inclusive environment etc. (To be completed after discussions and additional input.)

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