Campus Using Six Sigma to Improve Business Operations

University Communications
February 2009

Officials at The University of Arizona are turning to a widely used business tool to help guide the current Transformation process.

Several campus teams are using "Lean Six Sigma," originally developed to streamline manufacturing companies, to help identify ways to make both the academic and the business sides of the University function more efficiently.

Lean Six Sigma [1] also is a component of the Mosaic Project [2], the UA program that has begun to replace outdated campus technology infrastructure over the next three years.

The first changes could come as soon as this fall with the replacement of the Personnel Services and Operations System, or PSOS, with PeopleSoft Human Capital Resources. PeopleSoft is currently the most widely used system in higher education.

Leslie Porter, director of recruitment and employee advising in Human Resources, was a member of one of three teams commissioned by the provost's office to analyze the UA's hiring process and identify ways to improve it. The other two teams are working on the University's P-Card purchasing process and on managing department mergers.

Lean Six Sigma, which is a fusion of two strategies that evolved from the automotive industry, is geared primarily for the service sector. It is designed to identify and change processes to make businesses more productive. The hiring process review team, which included representatives from Human Resources, Systems Control and departmental business representatives, spent a week with Six Sigma facilitators documenting processes and identifying opportunities for improvement.

"Primarily we used tools like process mapping and flow chart tools to look at existing processes, explore ways to do things more efficiently," Porter said. The team was looking for ways to make the hiring process run faster and enhance the hiring experience for new employees.

"We determined, for instance, that the way we managed the assignment of the employee's EID (employment identification number) needs to happen earlier in the process to facilitate access to e-mail and other resources.

Streamlining the hiring process also will make it easier to meet a number of new compliance requirements that have emerged on background checks, the federal E-Verify program and others, Porter said.

Porter said this and other current projects could form the methodological framework that could be applied to other units on campus.

Michele Norin, the UA's chief information officer, is one of the administrators overseeing Mosaic. Norin said the Lean Six Sigma project was launched primarily to help find ways to improve productivity, which also is a goal of the Mosaic project.

An example will be "developing a complete electronic document work flow process using electronic signatures," Norin said. "We know that when we roll out the HR system, it will include electronic hiring forms with automated routing, signatures and approval capture points."

Norin said the size of the University would necessitate some coordination between all of the teams in the Six Sigma effort.

"We knew going in that we would have the Six Sigma path and the Mosaic system replacement path, and we would at some point want those paths to cross. And so we literally had steps in the Six Sigma review process where Mosaic folks would come in and listen to what a team uncovered, the goals they were establishing and get some reaction. So, they were able to compare notes and shift accordingly in their respective processes," she said.

As part of the Mosaic project, in addition to replacing PSOS, other systems will be replaced as well. A new student recruitment module is scheduled to be in place beginning in May. The FRS financial system should be replaced with Kuali Financials by January 2010. A just-launched effort will replace the SIC/Matrix student systems with PeopleSoft by December 2010. Also in development is a project to replace the research administration system with Kuali Coeus, tentatively by December 2010.

"Parallel to these new applications is business intelligence, the reporting and data-gathering layer that is common across all the systems. That will ultimately be completed when we work through the implementation of all the systems," Norin said.

"The new systems will ultimately touch everyone on campus."