

Update

Quality of Service Through the Strategic Use of Technology

Wayne Myles

If we do not change direction, we may end up where we are going.

Lao-tse

A RECENT REVIEW of NAFSA's INTER-L e-mail distribution list identifies more than 2,600 list members. The popularity of this distribution list will not surprise most international educators since in many ways the technological developments we have incorporated into the day-to-day activities of our offices over the past ten years have been "a marriage made in heaven." We have benefited from the advancements through the management of student applications and study abroad participant address in databases and on mailing lists, the procurement of desktop publishing packages for in-house production of program advertising and reports, and rapid and enhanced communications across campus and around the globe through e-mail and video-teleconferencing.

However, have all these advancements actually improved our office efficiency and quality of service? If we take a closer look at these developments, we might conclude that our role as international educators is becoming essentially that of managers of information or even technical apprentices. We live under the spectre of never quite getting beyond the last upgrade in our array of new electronic tools. We have become unwittingly tied to an ever-increasing set of demands to learn, relearn, and apply the latest addition to our technological inventory. The advent of e-mail has compressed communication patterns, committing us to "immediate" responses. World Wide Web home pages explode information sources, leaving us floundering for the

best hypertext link to follow. Computer databases spin out reports on every imaginable aspect of our work.

How do we feel about our new status as “electronic advisors”? How is our interaction with students faring in all of this? Have we been able to secure more time for students to draw on our experience and knowledge through these labor-saving devices? What has happened to our priorities? Has quality of service to the students kept abreast with the demands of processing ever-increasing amounts of information?

II

As the administrator and education abroad advisor for the International Centre, a small student services unit (4 FTE staff), at Queen’s University, a university of about 13,000 students, I have keenly felt the tensions that focus around the competing interests for my time and energies; on the one hand, by students, and on the other, by the whirlwind changes in electronic and other technologies. I have often struggled with how we could utilize these rapid changes in technology to provide high-quality service for students. At the International

International Centre Mission

The International Centre, as a student service of Queen’s University, supports the academic and personal development of international students and staff, their families and internationally minded Canadians. Through its activities the Centre aims to promote an internationally informed and cross-culturally sensitive university community.

The International Centre will meet this goal by:

- 1. providing services and programs for Queen’s international students and staff as well as their families;*
- 2. providing services and programs for Queen’s students interested in education abroad; and*
- 3. internationalizing the campus by working together with other interested university departments, offices, groups, and individuals to develop strategies, programs and projects aimed at enhancing the international learning environment at Queen’s.*

Centre, we reached a watershed in 1992 when we reviewed our mission, and affirmed our primary purpose as “serving students,” that is, building a community among the students on campus and providing accurate and current information on opportunities for internationalizing student programs. A critical element in this reenvisioning of our Centre is the identification of students as partners in achieving this mission and as active participants involved in a mutual exchange of information among themselves and in the process of researching and developing their international opportunities.

This new mission encompassed not only the role we held for thirty years as a Centre involved in receiving orienting, and supporting incoming international students, but also the broader responsibilities of orienting and supporting outgoing students and working together with other international actors on campus to achieve the international goals of the institution as a whole. This presented a formidable challenge to us, as these increased responsibilities came at a time when we were actually reducing our staff numbers. In the planning sessions that followed, many strategies were considered to meet the challenge of mounting new programs with fewer staff; not least among these strategies was the role that an increased use of computer technology could play in the changes we wished to implement. We spent significant time reviewing and costing each program and linking the programs to our mission. The Centre’s budget submission highlighted program objectives and work targets that were also linked to our mission. One-time projects were identified in order to put in place the support mechanisms and resources to strategically manage our operation. It was no accident that many of these onetime items focus on increasing our computer capability and our use of new technologies. As a rule, all further developments in our computer capacity had to meet the criterion of increasing the quality of service to students. Therefore, each time we reviewed a program or service provided by our Centre in the hope of finding a better way to serve students, we also raised the question “How can technology assist us in meeting this goal, especially in light of the increasing demands of the students and changing priorities of the institution?”

III

For the most part, the outcomes of this process have been positive. Those outcomes that have presented challenges have been engaged as part of the ongoing interplay between quality of service and the use of technology. In times when resources are limited we monitor the costs of maintaining and upgrading our systems. Generally, now that the system is in place, it is treated as a program and the costs are kept in balance with the other programs through efficient planning, careful maintenance and ongoing training for staff.

In reviewing the outcomes of our “marriage” with technology, it must be remembered that the initial efforts resulted from an overall goal to increase the quality of service to students. From the outset we searched for the appropriate mix of staff input, student involvement, and high-tech integration within that mix. As a result, some of our changes were accomplished solely by increasing student involvement in the programs. Computer applications were held in reserve for other areas. The outcomes included the following:

- an increase in involvement of students volunteers in our programs as peer advisors, tutors, and student program coordinators, and with our incoming and outgoing orientation programs
- expanded cooperation between international students and returned exchange and study abroad students to assist students interested in work and study abroad students to assist students interested in work and study abroad with their research and host culture preparation
- the identification, planning, and implementation of new programs that serve the needs of the outgoing students and that utilize a self-directed approach to their research, in large part based on access to information processed on computers or available through the Internet
- a continued commitment to a proactive approach to quality student service, in part through researching and integrating computer applications into various aspects of the administration and services of the Centre
- a commitment to ongoing staff training for managing both the hardware and software in the office

- an awareness that integrating computer technology into the mainstream of our service activities requires ongoing choices around budget and service priorities
- a higher profile on campus through the posting of one of Queen's first home pages and the development of videos that are available for use by departments

IV

In moving toward the strategic use of technology to support the Centre's services and programs, we have employed several computer applications and other technical applications. These include

- employment of electronic mail to communicate with students and colleagues on campus and abroad
- management of electronic mail distribution lists to link students on campus <INTRED-L@qucdn.queensu.ca> and across the country <WUSCnet@qucdn.queensu.ca>, and to facilitate the Work Study Abroad Working Group in Ontario in its work as education abroad professionals
- use of digital graphics for program advertising and a portable display that is mounted at various points on campus to educate students about the services of the Centre
- production of six videos as orientation resources for incoming and outgoing students, including participation in the production of the *World Within Reach* video
- capacity for in-house desktop publishing to produce the Centre's newsletter and program advertising
- development of databases to assist students in searching the records of the Education Abroad Resource Library and to search for on-line work and study abroad opportunities on *Sojourns*, a database package the Centre helped to develop in the 1980s and is now marketed through the Canadian Bureau for International Education¹
- access to Internet and World Wide Web (WWW) by students seeking information on opportunities abroad or links to home pages of universities involved in bilateral exchange agreements with Queen's University

- launching an International Centre home page <<http://quic.queensu.ca>> to make our pre-arrival information and orientation program resources available to prospective students through the WWW, and to serve the students, staff, and faculty at Queen's and other institutions through information posted on the home page
- the installation of a client-server local area network in order to facilitate the ongoing development of the Centre's capability to meet the challenge of technological change

V

Life is what happens to you when you are busy making other plans.

John Lennon

The impact of integrating technology into the Centre's services and programs is most clearly viewed in the process we used to establish an Education Abroad Resource Library. The underlying principles of the Resource Library incorporate a user friendly environment, easy access to resources, and a step-by-step self-directed research process in its organization.

Students—both international students, and returned exchange and study abroad participants—assist in the Education Abroad Resource Library as volunteers and peer advisors for students who are planning a sojourn abroad. These volunteers and the development of a clear and manageable self-directed preparation process give the education abroad advisor some distance from the frontline activities, to focus on the critical situations that require individual support for the student. Very often students have their eyes so fixed on the goal of planning the details of their trip abroad that they fail to attend to the essential steps that prepare them for a successful transition across cultures. A self-directed preparation process aims first to have them identify their key objectives for internationalizing their program. Next they review their own sense of personal and cultural identity through a self-audit exercise. These initial steps, along with students' individual investigations into the potential opportunities for their sojourn abroad, aim to introduce a degree of self-reliance and confidence on their own

judgement as to which programs meet their needs and about the cultural context within which they will soon live.

One of the key resource developments that assist the students in their research is easy access to the myriad of available materials. The use of specialized software for small libraries has allowed for the documentation of all resources regardless of their format—pamphlet, book, file, audio visual, diskette, CD Rom, periodical, and their storage in an accessible layout. Pamphlets are stored in binders in order to keep them visible and readily available for review. The use of specific fields in the database records (country, region, subject, discipline, time frame) allows students to search and review all resources, including program pamphlets and articles printed from the Internet. Volunteers are trained to assist the library users with their searches on the databases and access to the World Wide Web if required. Bookmarks and hypertext links residing on the Centre's home page are also used to facilitate student research.

The Library not only holds information on opportunities abroad and a wide range of reference materials, but also carries key cross-cultural and host cultural resources and a comprehensive collection of host institution calendars and home page links. As a result, as the students pursue their research, they foster an identification with their host culture and the institution to which they will be going. This connectedness is enhanced by interviews, which they can arrange through the library, with returned exchange participants and/or international students from their target culture. The bearing of the responsibility for researching their options and making the final choices fosters an element of ownership in the process, which in turn reduces the dependence of the student on resources and services outside of themselves. This bears fruit especially when they arrive in their host culture setting.

VI

The self-directed process for researching education abroad opportunities is a simple set of steps that guides students through a process not unlike any other research process. Each of these steps has support materials and/or links with electronic assistance on-site in the Resource Library. The education abroad advisor is also available by

appointment during this exercise. The whole process can take as little as two hours or can be extended over a period of several months depending on the student's experience and goals.

The Self-Directed Preparation Process and Its Interface with Technology

Step

1. Identify goal and objectives
2. Document in a journal
3. Initiate a self-audit
4. Choose your option(s)
5. Know your resources
6. Research your opportunities
7. Talk with resource people & academic advisors

Resources

- Education Abroad Self-Directed Preparation Process information sheet on home page
- Goal Setting information sheet on home page
- Begin a Journal information sheet on home page
- Self-Audit information sheet on home page
- Options to Consider information sheet on home page
- Discussion with Resource Centre volunteers
- Interview with education abroad advisor
- Researching the Right Opportunity for You information sheet on home page
- Using the Work/Study Abroad Resource Library information sheet on home page
- Selecting a Work/Study/Travel Abroad Program information sheet on home page
- Access to Sojourns database
- Access to Resource Library database
- Access to Internet
- Interview with education abroad advisor

- Meet with international students and returned exchange/study abroad students
- Access to student distribution lists and news groups on Internet
- 8. Set out a pre-departure plan
 - Pre-departure Checklist information sheet on home page
 - Pre-departure Information: Getting You Ready for Study Abroad and Target Culture Questionnaire information sheets on home page
 - Your Safety While Travelling or Studying Overseas information sheet on home page
 - Fundraising information sheet on home page
 - World Within Reach video
- 9. Pre-departure orientation
 - Re-entry Information: Making the Most of Your Experience information sheet on home page
 - World Within Reach video
- 10. Re-entry

VII

While the International Centre has benefited greatly from the rewards of integrating technology into our services and programs, the tension between focusing on the quality of service or upgrading and maintaining our various computer applications has demanded significant attention and debate on the part of the staff. There were cases when the greatest benefit for the Centre was realized through a reaffirmation of our focus on students with technology on the sidelines; however, with service and program demands increasing, the strategic integration of computer-assisted programs has paid dividends for a small staff with limited resources. To manage these systems effectively, we have stressed strategic planning and flexible time lines for developing any new applications; manageable systems that can be

monitored and upgraded in-house; and ongoing maintenance of our student data and program information through on-line systems.

The most important lesson learned as we traveled through this process of marrying student-centered services with technology has been that students and their needs are our first priority, and in many cases we can meet their needs only through face-to-face interaction and personal service. With this priority in place, our marriage with technology, while not always easy, has been manageable and productive.

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Notes

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