U.S. Department of Education

Customer Service Plan

October 24, 2011

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Executive Summary

The U.S. Department of Education seeks to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access. To support accomplishment of its mission, the Department provides funding for education via grants and loans, dissemination of information about educational performance and effective teaching methods, and compliance monitoring of education-related civil rights law.

The Secretary of Education has articulated a cradle-to-career education strategy that reflects the importance of teaching and learning at all levels of the education system and is designed to achieve the following goals over the next two years.

- College Attainment: Nation improving the percent of 25- to 34-year-olds who have completed an associate's or higher degree.

- College: Nation improving overall and disaggregated college completion rates.

- K-12: All states improving overall and disaggregated high school graduation rates.

- Early Learning: All states improving overall and disaggregated outcomes at kindergarten entry across a broad range of domains.

The Department's Customer Service Plan is designed to improve the delivery of services to our customers by redesigning the business processes and systems that impact key customer interactions. This includes placing more services online, making our online services easy to use and implementing customer service best practices across the agency. The Department's Customer Service Plan describes our signature initiative "Integrated Student View (ISV)," which encompasses the web experience of the student aid lifecycle and focuses on our loans line of business. Student borrowers and their parents represent the largest group of customers with which the Department directly interacts. ISV was chosen as our signature initiative because it provides a simplified process for shopping for higher education financing options that benefit millions of customers daily.

The other service area our Customer Service Plan focuses on is in our grants line of business; the "Grant Award Notification, E-Signature" initiative will reduce paper and eliminate the lag time between grant funding and recipient notification.

Loans and grants are the primary mechanisms for delivering service to our customers; therefore these areas are the primary focus of this plan.

Integrated Student View

Federal Student Aid (FSA) plays a central role in the nation's postsecondary education. FSA's core mission is to ensure that all eligible individuals benefit from federal financial assistance – grants, work-study, and loans – for education beyond high school. The programs administered by FSA comprise the nation's largest source of student aid. Every year, the agency provides more than $150 billion in aid to nearly 14 million postsecondary students and their families. The staff is based in 10 cities in addition to the Washington, D.C., headquarters. FSA is responsible for the Department's loans line of business.

The Customer Experience Office was established in November 2010 for the purpose of understanding customer needs and meeting or exceeding their expectations during the student/borrower lifecycle, providing information to students and borrowers who could be recipients of federal student aid, and identifying, measuring and reporting customer expectations and satisfaction with federal financial services and products.

Grant Award Notification, E-Signature

The Department's Grant Management System (G5) is managed by the Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO), Financial Systems Services organization. The system provides an end-to-end solution for processing the thousands of grants that are awarded by the Department of Education. G5 supports the full lifecycle of grants, including pre-award, award, payments and post-award functions, and it is used by the Department's eight principal grant making offices to award and monitor discretionary, formula, and fellowship grants. As part of the award process, three copies of a Grant Award Notification (GAN) are printed and signed, two of which are mailed to grantees for each newly awarded, supplemented or modified grant. The third signed copy is

retained in the official grant file folder. Each printed GAN for new awards averages 42 pages at a combined cost of approximately $.96 per page. The estimated cost of the supplies and services to handle and mail over 30,000 GAN documents is $1.2 million per year.

G5 will be enhanced to make use of the digital certificate capability of the HSPD-12 implementation to digitally sign electronic GANs and email them to grantees saving the Department time and money. This initiative will improve customer service by increasing the timeliness and accuracy of the GAN process by ensuring instant delivery of GANs via email to the appropriate grant recipients. The electronically signed GAN will no longer need to be stored in a paper file folder because it will be stored in an electronic grant file, accessible by grant recipients and Education staff at any time throughout the grant lifecycle.

Signature Initiative Integrated Student View

Department of Education Federal Student Aid

Overview

FSA currently disseminates financial aid information to students through more than 14 websites and faces a number of challenges including: content inconsistency and redundancy across websites, multiple authentication requirements for a comprehensive view of financial aid portfolios, and duplicative administrative and resource requirements for the management and support of multiple websites. The ISV initiative will provide students and parents with an enhanced customer experience across the student aid lifecycle, with the goal of increasing financial aid awareness and college attendance, while simplifying the application and servicing process.

FSA's vision is to be the most trusted and reliable source of student financial aid information and services in the nation. The Integrated Student View initiative supports this vision by providing students and parents with an enhanced customer experience across the student aid lifecycle, eventually increasing financial aid awareness and attendance while simplifying the application and servicing process.

Key Customer Groups

Prospective students and their parents seeking opportunities to obtain postsecondary education along with students and parents who are borrowers are the primary customers served by ISV.

Challenges

Some of the challenges that ISV addresses are: Awareness is low among key customer groups on where to find information. Reaching key audiences with a disjointed web presence can be costly and difficult to maintain. Relying on public service outreach does not provide consistent opportunities for customers to receive our communications. Continuing to improve the customer experience requires ongoing negotiations with third party providers and internal stakeholders. Promotion and outreach can be costly and difficult to sustain as budget levels are reduced.

Featured Actions

In a two-phased approach, ISV will initially provide a "one-stop-shop" for students and parents for information related to financial aid, applying for federal aid and navigating through the college decision-making process.

Phase One: ISV will overhaul student-facing content by transforming FSA's flagship informational site into a plain language and user friendly website.

Phase Two: ISV will supplement this information with transactional tools, such as status on loans, or other processes needed throughout the financial aid lifecycle, in a single view.

Impact and Benefits

The ISV initiative will improve the customer experience by leveraging technology more effectively to better meet the demands of its customers and to find efficiency improvements, expand access to higher education, improve financial literacy and support customer decision-making. Providing information in a "one stop shop" experience where customers can look for information and find updates to their own personal information should reduce call volumes into the call centers particularly during peak timeframes. In addition, FSA expects the following benefits from this Signature Initiative: Students can access and easily digest FSA static content and information,

and make greater use of newly available self-service tools; customers gain improved financial literacy and decision making skills; and the reduction of 14 websites creates cost efficiencies.

Key Milestones and Timelines

Phase I: Update FSA's informational websites using in-house resources and retiring websites

- July 2011: Project definition complete

- December 2011: Current content assessed and streamlined

- January 2012: Website content rewritten in plain language

- March 2012: Expected launch of plain language FSA flagship informational site

- April 2012: Websites that are currently maintained separately are consolidated. By eliminating unnecessary websites, the agency can consolidate internal and external resource time dedicated to operations.

- April 2012: At least two FSA websites retired

Phase II: Build upon Phase I functionality and enhancements, and add transactional capability

- September 2011: Detailed planning begins

- December 2011 and March 2012: Hold focus groups and usability studies with ISV key audiences to ensure designs and site functionality properly serve students.

- March 2012: Build a persistent feedback box available on each page of ISV to continuously collect users' feedback and make improvements.

- March 2012: Update all student-facing materials (ISV, publications) to plain language.

- March 2012: Allow customers to more easily complete their tasks by segmenting users by top tasks in their web experience.

- March 2012: ISV will increase accessibility of service contact information by publicizing and streamlining contact information.

- March 2012: FSA is streamlining internal processes by enhancing the student-facing content update and approval process. Through the implementation of a Content Management System, subject matter experts will update website, publication, or other content through automatic workflows instead of the email process used now.

- June 2012: Build an interactive question section on ISV to allow customers to submit questions and suggest pre-populated answers based on top questions.

- More details will be provided as scope and requirements work continues.

Increase Feedback from Customers

- Hold focus groups and usability studies with ISV key audiences to ensure designs and site functionality properly serve students. (December 2011 and March 2012)

- Build a persistent feedback box available on each page of ISV to continuously collect users' feedback and make improvements. (March 2012)

Adopt Best Practices for Improving Customer Experience

- Update all student-facing materials (ISV, publications) to plain language. (March 2012)

- Allow customers to more easily complete their tasks by segmenting users by top tasks in their web experience. (March 2012)

- Conduct weekly meetings between the Customer Experience Office and FSA project teams to allow for the integration of FSA's communication, new media, and website strategies

Set, Communicate, and Use Customer Service Metrics and Standards

- ISV will increase accessibility of service contact information by publicizing and streamlining contact information. (March 2012)

- FSA's Customer Experience Office tracks key service metrics in a monthly dashboard to easily communicate successes across and beyond the organization, beginning in September 2012.

Streamline Agency Processes to Reduce Costs and Accelerate Delivery

- Build an interactive question section on ISV to allow customers to submit questions and suggest pre-populated answers based on top questions. (June 2012)

- FSA is streamlining internal processes by enhancing the student-facing content update and approval process. Through the implementation of a Content Management System subject matter experts will update website, publication, or other content through automatic workflows instead of the email process used now. (March 2012)

- Through the ISV project, FSA is working to consolidate websites that are currently maintained separately. By eliminating unnecessary websites, the agency can consolidate internal and external resource time dedicated to operations. (June 2012)

GAN Electronic Signature

Department of Education, Office of the Chief Information Officer/Financial Systems Services

Overview

The Department's G5 grants management system provides an end-to-end solution for processing the Department's thousands of grants. The GAN process provides the Department's grantees with official documentation of their Federal grant award and instructions for grants management. This process is currently paper-based, requiring a traditional signature from the Department's representative and the signed GAN being mailed to the grantee. The G5 grants management system will be enhanced to make use of the digital certificate capability of the HSPD-12 implementation and PIV card to digitally sign electronic GANs. The G5 system will also provide the capability to electronically email the GAN to grantees. The electronically signed GAN will also be stored in an electronic grant file.

Key Customer Groups

The grantee community, program office and grant officers are affected by the change.

Challenges

The current challenge the Department faces in servicing these customer groups is the lag time between grant funding and recipient notification. The GAN process is paper-based and slow. Delays are attributed to the manual process of printing and signing large GAN documents averaging 42 pages, in triplicate. Additional delays are attributed to the stuffing, mailing and delivery of two copies to recipient offices throughout the United States and U.S. territories. Currently GANs are mailed via the U.S. Postal Service to the grantee days after the GANs are signed, and it takes approximately five days for a recipient to receive a GAN after it is mailed. Finally, there is no way to track the grantee's receipt of the GAN documents once mailed, and signed copies are stored in paper file folders.

Featured Actions

The G5 grants management system will be enhanced to make use of the digital certificate capability of the HSPD-12 implementation and PIV card to digitally sign electronic GANs. The G5 system will also provide the capability to electronically email the GAN to grantees. The electronically signed GAN will also be stored in an electronic grant file.

Impact and Benefits

Each printed GAN for new awards averages 42 pages at a combined cost of approximately $.96 per page. The estimated cost of the supplies and services to handle and mail over 30,000 GAN documents annually is $1.2 million per year. This initiative reduces costs associated with printing, paper and postage. Implementation of the electronic GAN will also improve customer service as follows:

- Reduces GAN delivery from five or more days to minutes.

- Reduces the amount of time required to notify grantees of awards received.

- Allows grantees to view a cataloged history of GAN documentation at any time.

- Creates a completely paperless grant funding process.

Key Milestones and Timeline

- November 2011: Design Completed

- March 2012: Construction Completed

- May 2012: Integration Testing Completed

- June 2012: Training Delivered

- July 2012: User Acceptance Testing and Go-Live

Increase Feedback from Customers

- When reaching out to the grantee community, provide feedback contact information. Periodically, collect feedback and discuss with the functional and technical teams for potential issues. Provide a mechanism to react and respond to potential issues.

- Provide survey to grantees to measure customer reaction prior to proposed enhancement.

- Provide survey to grantees to measure post-deployment customer satisfaction.

Adopt Best Practices for Improving Customer Experience

- Ensure e-signature best practices are followed to ascertain the legality, accuracy and non-repudiation of the GAN document.

Set, Communicate, and Use Customer Service Metrics and Standards

- Provide a survey to grantees to measure customer reaction prior to proposed e-signature enhancement.

- Provide a survey to grantees to measure post-deployment customer satisfaction.

Streamline Agency Processes to Reduce Costs and Accelerate Delivery

- The implementation of the electronic GAN will reduce costs by approximately $1.2 million/year.

- Electronic GANs are delivered instantly via email to the grantee. Currently GANs are prepared and mailed to the grantee.