WORKFORCE OPTIMIZATION AND ALIGNMENT: ONE SCHOOL'S APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN

ERIN FINN

Introduction

The Center City campus of Thomas Jefferson University (Jefferson) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is an academic medical center that enrolls 3,700 students all seeking degrees in a health science–related discipline; the Center City campus includes six colleges and an Institute for Emerging Health Professions. The Office of Admissions is tasked with enrolling approximately 1,300 new undergraduate, graduate, and professional degree students each year. In March 2015, the Office of Admissions embarked on an "Organizational Design" project with the following stated objective:

> We will assess and redesign our organization to ensure that we are ***optimally organized to support our mission and meet our strategic goals***. We will transition into the new organizational structure beginning August 1, 2015, with full implementation by October 1, 2015.

This article outlines the various steps of our organizational design project with the goal of sharing our experiences in support of other institutions considering a similar project. Note that this particular project focused not on the development of a comprehensive institutional strategic enrollment management model, but on optimizing the workforce within one office in the enrollment management apparatus and aligning it to the broad strategic goals of the university.

Impetus for Change

Jim Black (2001) cautioned in *The Strategic Enrollment Management Revolution,* "void of strategic thinking, your enrollment management operations—at best—will be proficient at reacting. Perpetual crisis management will be the order of the day, every day." Prior to the launch of this project, more time and energy was given to the management of the operating budget than was given to the strategic deployment of our largest resource: our people. Considering that the large majority (75%) of our budget allocation was dedicated to staff salaries and benefits, we knew that we had to be more strategic and less reactionary.

Prior to the project launch—and to confirm its necessity—we conducted informational interviews with all admissions staff and key partners throughout the university. The interview questions varied by audience but were informed by Campeau, Gurganus, and Hoover's (2008) chapter, "So You Want to Be a Director of Admissions?" in *The College Admissions Officer's Guide*:

- What do you see as the role of the admissions office?

View this article online at wileyonlinelibrary.com • DOI:10.1002/sem3.20116

- How would you define your role in this admissions office?
- What do you see as the major strengths/weaknesses of the admissions office?
- If you could change three things about the admissions office, what would they be?
- What are your professional goals?

The result of this information-gathering phase provided clear confirmation that a full examination and realignment of our staffing resources was in order. Specifically, we identified the following 11 "pain points":

1. **Reporting structure.** Historically, all 14 staff members reported to the director, but this was impractical, and informal supervision relationships emerged; as a result, reporting lines were confusing and ineffective.
2. **Job descriptions.** Job descriptions were significantly out of date and work assignments had become muddled; additionally, several key functions were not properly accounted for in job descriptions/formal work assignments.
3. **Accountability.** Staff accountability was inconsistent across positions/employees; the organization was not well positioned to create and enforce accountability measures; additionally, there were several key functions for which no one held formal accountability.
4. **Training/Performance management.** There needed to be an increased commitment to best practice in employee selection, onboarding, training, and performance management.
5. **Cross-training/Skill redundancy.** There were several positions that were "single points of failure" due to the lack of cross-training or skill redundancy.
6. **Understaffing.** There were several key functional areas that were significantly underresourced, leading to both excessive work hours for salaried employees and important work not being done.
7. **Turnover.** There were frequent and prolonged vacancies, which led to service disruption and chronic onboarding and training; we determined that turnover could be reduced at every level by creating meaningful work assignments, clear accountability measures, motivating career paths, and advancement opportunities.
8. **Performance standards.** Due to organizational deficiencies, we were unable to implement response time, turnaround time, and quality assurance standards.
9. **Salaried versus hourly employees.** We determined that we could benefit from a review of exempt versus nonexempt job classification as well as issues related the classifications (e.g., some employees worked 40-hour weeks, others 35-hour weeks).
10. **Data and technology culture.** Historically, the university-at-large had not been oriented toward or resourced for a culture that promoted the use of technology and data to advance the work of the unit.
11. **Process engineering and documentation.** There was no bandwidth or structure that supported the review and improvement of processes or the creation and maintenance of policy and process documentation; this led to poor applicant experiences as well as internal inconsistencies, inefficiencies, and quality control issues.

The Organizational Design Process

Knowing that we had 11 pain points to overcome, we began our organizational design project with a simple concept: We have 28,080 annual labor hours resourced to our office—how should we "spend" them? To address this and other questions, we deployed the three-phase organizational design process outlined below. Embedded into each phase was a communication plan that provided written and oral updates to our admissions staff and other key constituents.

PHASE I: PROJECT ORIENTATION

In the first phase of our organizational redesign, we committed to assembling the process, people, and documents that would contribute to the success of the project.

- **Process.** First, we created a project plan that included the following elements: project overview/objective, project team, project deliverables, project rationale, and project timeline. This was a fluid document that evolved as our work progressed. For example, at the beginning of the project, we identified major milestone dates for the timeline, but task-specific deadlines were added as the project evolved.

- **People.** Next, we assembled advisers and working groups, who would provide guidance, insights, and time in support of the project. Our primary adviser was our human resources business partner. In addition to our HR partner, we also convened a "university advisory board" composed of leadership from all colleges and key administrative offices. Finally, we assembled two groups within the admissions office: a design team composed of senior members of the staff and an admissions "org design" discussion group that the design team consulted with throughout the process.
- **Documents.** Finally, we compiled documents that would create context and direction for our work; these included the Jefferson Blueprint for Strategic Action, mission/vision/value statements for the university and individual colleges/programs, specific enrollment goals along with historic enrollment funnels, and other documents that defined future strategic ambitions.

PHASE II: ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT (SCOPE OF WORK)

The second phase of the organizational design project was to create an exhaustive list of all work required of our office to achieve our current and future goals; before we could start "spending" our 28,080 annual labor hours, we needed to understand all of our "expenses."

Our design team worked together to compile the list of tasks; to begin this process, we created broad categories:

- Strategic Planning
- Application Generation
- Communications and Events
- Application Pool Management
- Operations, Technology, & Data
- Resource Acquisition & Management
- Internal University Collaborations

Under each category, design team members began filling in tasks, and as a team, we organized, curated, and refined the list until it was clear and comprehensive. We then took the list to our two main advisory groups: the admissions "org design" discussion group and the university advisory board. We reviewed the list and offered a period of open comment; upon receipt of feedback, we incorporated additional tasks to ensure that all expectations of our office were on the scope of work.

After our scope of work was defined, we worked to assign "labor hours" to each task, as our ultimate objective was to see how our scope of work aligned with the assigned annual labor hours. Unfortunately, for various reasons, this exercise was not as precise as we would have liked: many of our staff were new and did not have a handle on the timing of their tasks, some staff were resistant to creating tracking logs to assist with this exercise, and many tasks were undergoing review and were likely to become more streamlined. In the end, we did our best by creating estimates (i.e., we interview *X* candidates at 30 minutes per interview; we run *Y* information sessions at 60 minutes each). It was clear that our scope of work, if executed properly, would require additional labor hours rather than just a reassignment of the current hours.

This phase of the project was extremely labor intensive but the nine-page "scope of work" document created an excellent foundation on which to build the new organization.

PHASE III: ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN

The third phase of the project was to actually design our new organization. To begin this phase, the design team met to review the documents collected in Phase I and the scope of work developed in Phase II. We then took a linear approach that included the development of the following deliverables:

- **Mission overview.** As Bontrager (2004) articulated, "Any enrollment effort must begin with an understanding of what an institution is trying to achieve, based on the niche it fills in the higher education marketplace." With this in mind, we derived our mission from the greater institutional mission and defined our own objectives by describing how we serve our primary constituents:

Thomas Jefferson University, our colleges, our applicants (Figure 1).

- **Functional organizational chart.** Next, we created a "functional organizational" chart that would provide a quick, high-level visual summary of our scope of work. To develop this chart, we had extensive discussions about how to "bucket" our work—should we use the categories from the scope of work, or does it translate differently now that it is time to design the organization? After considerable discussion, we arrived at six main functions performed by our office in support of our mission (Figure 2):

1. Enrollment Partnerships & Strategic Initiatives
2. Strategic Communications & Visit Experience
3. Enrollment Operations & Technology
4. Enrollment Reporting & Analytics
5. Application Pool Management (Admissions)
6. Team Management

- **Function charters.** For each of the "functions" listed above, we created a charter that described the focus and purpose of the functional area. Following is an example of the charter for Enrollment Reporting & Analytics:

> Enrollment Reporting & Analytics is responsible for all activity related to the strategic use of data in the Office of Admissions; this includes defining the scope of data and the data capture policies that

Figure 1. Thomas Jefferson University Office of Admissions Mission Overview

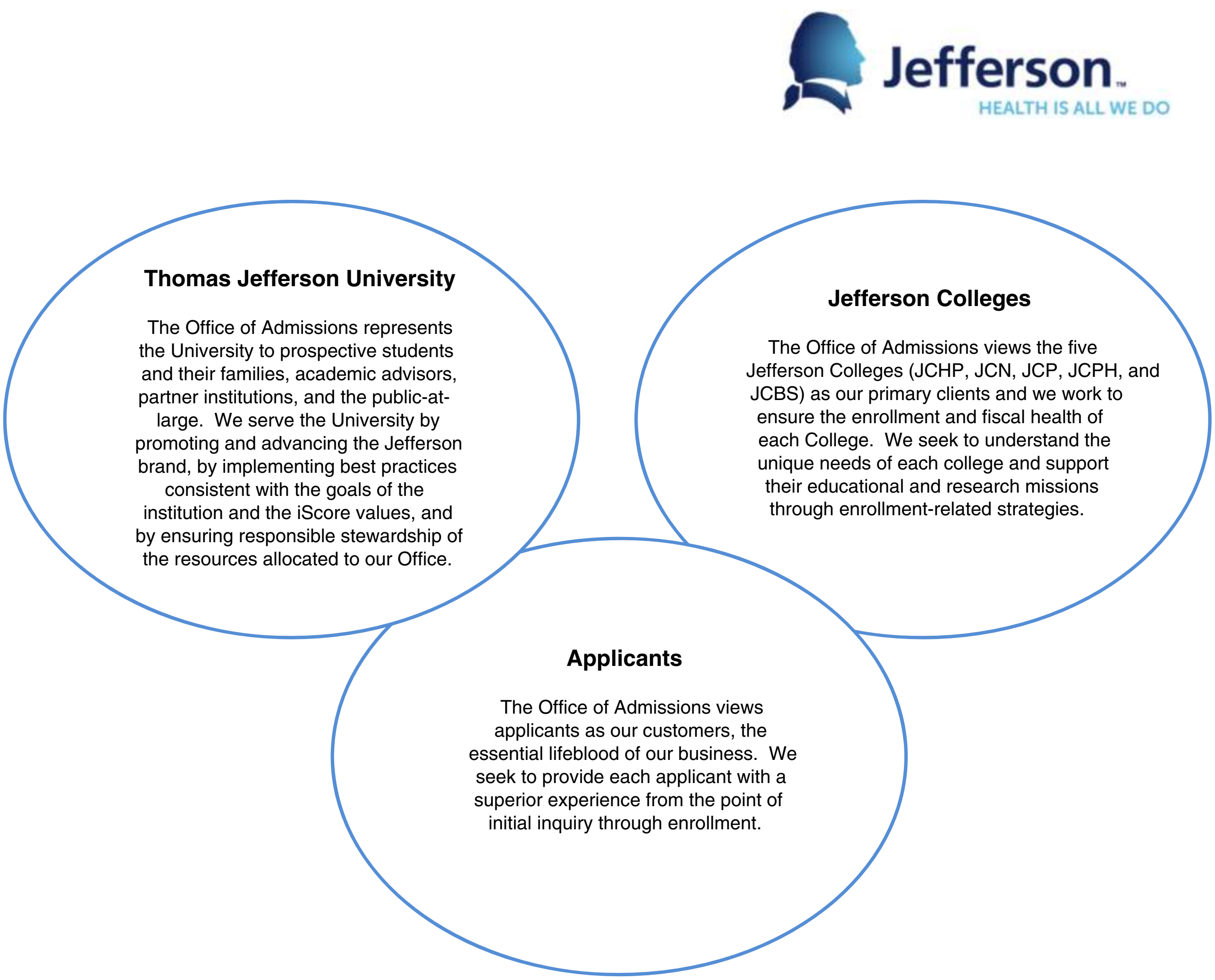
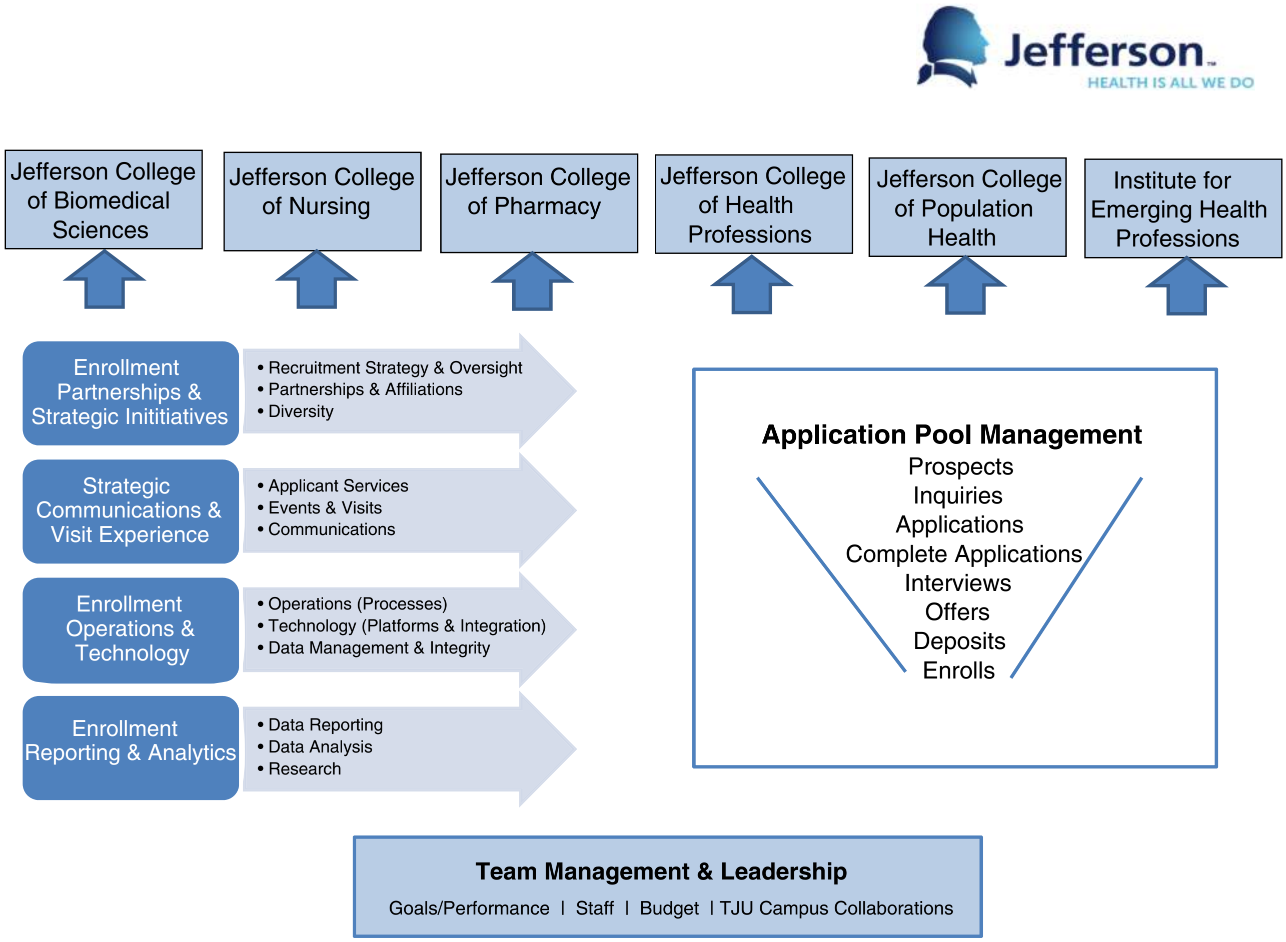


Figure 2. TJU Office of Admissions Functional Organizational Chart

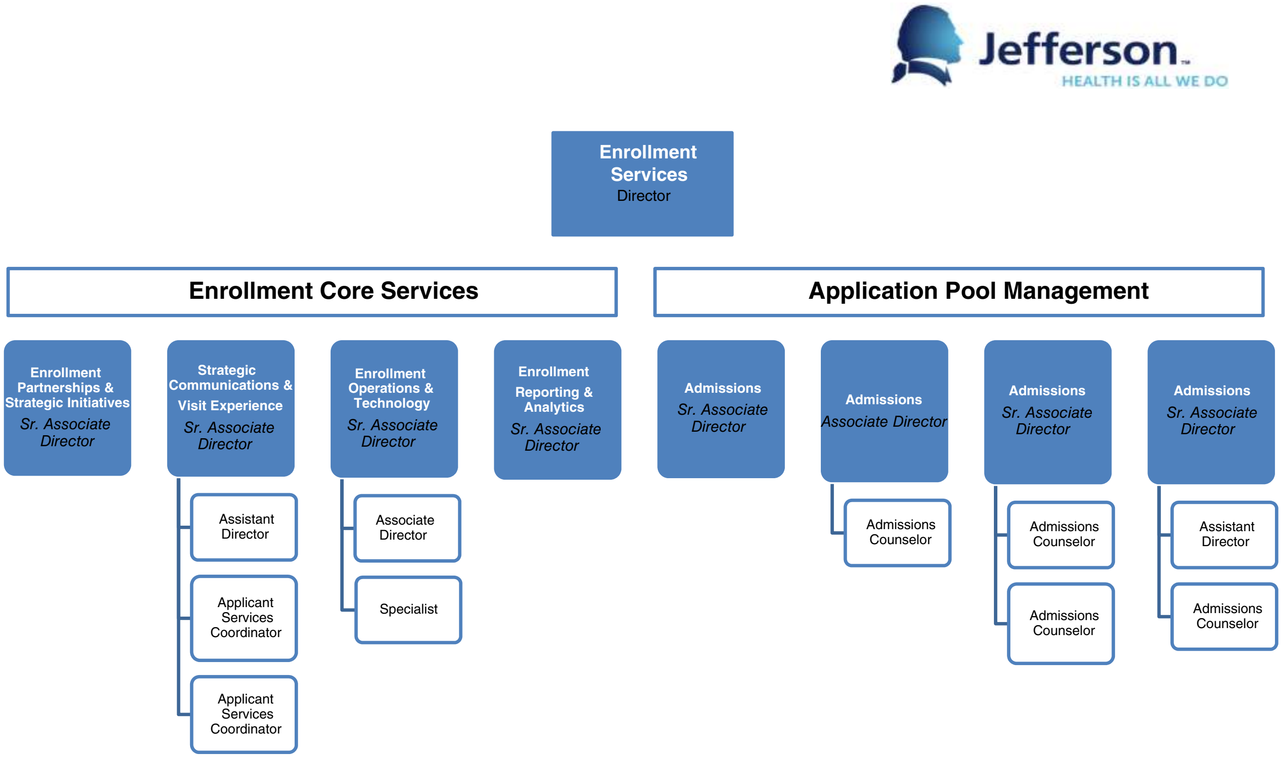


will support a comprehensive analytical approach to decision-making. Additionally, the Enrollment Reporting & Analytics function will design, produce, and distribute reports and analyses that inform daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly operations of the Office of Admissions.

- **Staffing organizational chart.** With a clear understanding of the scope of work and how we wanted to define the functional areas in our organization, we designed a staffing organizational chart. This was a highly iterative process whereby each member of the design team proposed and presented his/her version of a staffing plan, and we shaped the organizational structure based on ideas generated from this exercise. The "best case" organizational chart (Figure 3) ccounted for estimated labor hours in each functional area and represented an increase in staffing for which we would have to negotiate with our university leadership. Note that this chart included positons only and did not assign staff members to any of the positions.

- **Job descriptions.** With a staffing plan outlined, we began the work of creating a job description for each position on the staffing organizational chart. We had two primary objectives: Ensure that all tasks on the scope of work were accounted for, and identify core competencies that reflect the type of professional skills needed to support a best practices admissions office. For direction on core competencies, we referenced the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers' (AACRAO, n.d.) *Professional Competencies and Proficiencies* and worked to represent core competencies, admissions core proficiencies,

Figure 3. Thomas Jefferson University Office of Admissions Staffing Organizational Chart



and enrollment management core proficiencies across our organization. These were especially useful, as they not only informed our job descriptions but served as a foundation for our organizational culture and provided guidance in selecting new members of the team.

This step of the project yielded 15 new job descriptions that included the following sections: overview, essential functions, core competencies, qualifications, reporting lines, position requirements (i.e., travel, weekend work).

- **Staffing budget.** Utilizing our "best case" organizational chart, the current salary budget, and the salary grades from human resources, the director developed and proposed a staffing budget to university leadership along with the rationale for additional positions. With a stated interest in investing in the Office of Admissions after a long period of "status-quo" budgeting, we were fortunate to receive additional funding in support of the new organization. While we did not receive funding for all new positions, the additional funding would significantly advance our plans for our new organizational design. The design team met and made adjustments to the staffing organizational chart that reflected our funding allocation. The net result of this project is that we would increase our staff head count from 15 to 18 under the new organizational design.

Implementing Our New Organizational Design

With support from the university advisory board and funding in place from University leadership, the design team proceeded with a plan to transition into our new organizational structure. As one might imagine, this was an especially "high stakes" time for the Office of Admissions, as both individual roles and the collective culture of our team were undergoing dramatic change. To support our team and manage this change, we created a formal "transition plan"; the stated objectives for the transition plan were as follows:

> We will transition into the new organizational structure utilizing a responsible and measured approach that ensures the following:

1. all team members remain focused on achieving enrollment goals;
2. all applicants and academic departments receive superior customer service;
3. all team members maintain quality work standards.

With these objectives in mind, the director (and design team when appropriate) embarked on a process that included the steps outlined below:

STEP 1: COMPILE AND PRESENT THE ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN PORTFOLIO

Although Office of Admissions staff members were kept informed of the organizational design project as it progressed, we felt it was important to present and discuss the full scope of the project along with the outcome—our "future state" organizational design. At this time, we reviewed and provided copies of all materials in the portfolio: mission overview, scope of work, functional organizational chart, team charters, staffing organizational chart, and job descriptions. We also discussed the transition plan and "next steps."

STEP 2: INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS (PART 1)

The director met individually with all staff members to discuss the new organization, the staff members' professional goals, and any preference they had for a specific role moving forward. Ideally, both the needs of the organization and each staff member would be met in the staffing assignments and all parties were encouraged to view these individual meetings as an opportunity to direct their career path.

STEP 3: STAFF ASSIGNMENTS

Utilizing information gathered during the individual meetings and a "big picture" view of what needed to happen, the director, in consultation with human resources and a key member of university leadership, made specific staff assignments that would support the long-term success of the organization. This exercise resulted in employees/positions falling into one of three categories:

- **Exiting employees.** There were three employees who did not have the qualifications for any of the positions in the new organizational design; these employees would be released under the university's policy governing this type of situation and would receive severance and/or support in securing a new position.
- **Transitioning employees.** There were 10 employees who would transition into "new" roles; in some cases, these positions represented a new set of responsibilities or simply an updated, more current job description.
- **Open positions.** With the plan for the current staff determined, the Office of Admissions would need to fill eight open positions.

STEP 4: INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS (PART 2) AND STAFF TRANSITIONS

After receiving sign-off from human resources on the staff assignments, the director met with each employee to discuss his/her future role with the organization.

In the case of the employees who were not being offered a position in the new organization, they were given this news along with information about severance and job search support from human resources. Also determined was a "last day" that supported both the employee's transition needs as well as those of the organization.

In the case of the employees who were being offered a position in the new organization, the director reviewed the job description and discussed an approach to getting that employee settled into his/her new or updated responsibilities: identify current duties that would need to be reassigned, identify training or resource needs, create a transition checklist/game plan, and schedule a 30-day check-in meeting. Current employees were asked to "drive" their transition and alert the director or supervisor of challenges and roadblocks to fully assuming new duties.

STEP 5: FILL OPEN POSITIONS AND ONBOARD/TRAIN NEW EMPLOYEES

To support the values and goals of our new organization, we developed a behavior-based employee selection approach that included presentations and writing samples for certain positions. The employee selection process also included a more streamlined search committee than was previously utilized.

Upon successful selection and recruitment of new employees, we onboarded and trained them using a newly developed 90-day plan that would better support the long-term success of the employee.

STEP 6: COMMUNICATION TO THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

We communicated immediately with all colleagues directly impacted by specific changes. Additionally, when we had a full organization and were settled in a bit, we held a forum open to all university partners where we explained our organizational design project, reviewed the portfolio, and introduced all staff members in their new position.

Evaluating and Modifying Our Organizational Design

As a commitment to the short-term and long-term success of the organization, we all agreed on one key assumption: *We did not get it 100% right*. Philosophically, we felt it would be easier to deal with issues if we had this mind-set from the beginning; practically, we ensured that the "reorg" was a standing agenda item on all meeting agendas (full staff, senior team, one-on-one meetings). We tracked issues and worked to determine if they were the result of a design flaw or simply an issue related to the transition that would "smooth out" over time. A few examples:

- One issue that bubbled up concerned the data entry aspect of tracking our incoming students' prematriculation requirements. Ultimately, we determined that the task was not properly accounted for in the scope of work and job descriptions, and we corrected this.
- A second issue that arose concerned the timing of file review; in two key application pools, we were tracking later on decisions. It was clear that this was a training/transition issue, and we simply rallied to support the staff members in the short term. As anticipated, this issue did not reoccur in "year 2."
- Our most significant issue concerned the design of the "Operations & Technology" role. Around the six-month mark, it became clear that we underestimated the amount of work involved in both maintaining daily operations and working to strategically advance our organization through technology optimization. If we wanted to advance the best practices of our organization, we would need to adjust this and did so at the beginning of the next admissions cycle by doubling the "labor hours" in this function by reassigning a staff member to the operations role. This required distributing her duties across multiple other team members, but we agreed collectively that this was the best option.

In addition to the ongoing check-ins, we conducted a formal survey at the 1-year mark; this survey asked a broad set of questions ranging from "Do you have a clear understanding of your job duties?" to "What types of training would benefit you at this time?" to "What functional areas do you think are over/underresourced and why?" The survey results informed choices we made for "year 2" of the organizational design.

Finally, it is worth noting our most reassuring, if not incredibly formal type of evaluation—in the heat of the transition and concurrent admissions cycle, we would often ask each other: *Are we better off than we were a year ago?* Regardless of how hectic things were, the answer was always positive.

Lessons Learned

By most measures, our new organizational design has been successful: We overcame all of the 11 pain points; we increased applications by 22% and enrollments by 20% between 2014 and 2016; and our new student satisfaction survey results are improved. That said, there were many lessons learned over the past two years that may inform another institution's organizational design project:

1. **Pre- and post surveys.** In addition to the informational interviews used to identify pain points and confirm the necessity of the project, we wish that we had conducted a "baseline" survey with our staff and key constituents at the beginning of the project. Similarly, while we surveyed our staff after a year in the new organizational design, we regret that we did not also survey other key constituents.

2. **Scope of work development.** We relied exclusively on each team member ensuring that his/her job duties were represented on the scope of work; this method was not entirely successful, as several tasks did not make the list. If we could do this again, we would layer this process with a "side-by-side" shadowing exercise where one employee spends time with a colleague to observe and document tasks.
3. **Labor hour calculations.** It was really helpful to frame our work in terms of how many labor hours we have allocated to various functions and tasks; as a result of this exercise, we eliminated certain processes and tasks as we simply did not want to "spend" our hours on activity that did not support our goals. The only caveat with this approach is that, while some staff members understood and were comfortable with the idea of labor hour estimates, several employees became hyperfocused on getting "exact" counts and we almost became paralyzed by the need to make precise a concept that is still effective with some level of imprecision.
4. **Resource acquisition.** As part of this process, we received an increase in our budget to support new positions in our organization. We understand how lucky we were to have leadership ready and willing to invest in our office; beyond luck, we found that our ability to quantify our work and tie it to revenue generation was a big factor in receiving the increase. In retrospect, we would also work to account for appropriate salary adjustments for current staff in addition to the funding of new positions. We ultimately accounted for this, but we had to reduce our "new" head count from four to three full-time equivalents (FTEs) and reduce one new position from an "associate" level to an "assistant" level.

Conclusion

It has been over two years since we embarked on our organizational design project, and we are through two full admission cycles under the new structure. Based on continued evaluation and a recent merger with Philadelphia University, we made additional modifications for "year 3" to further increase our ability to adapt and scale our organization. We have benefited from a stable and increasingly productive staff of talented professionals, and we continue to aspire to a description of a successful admissions officer that we referenced throughout our organizational design project. Cited by Henderson (1998), this description derived from the Committee for Professional Development of the AACRAO, as reported in a work edited by Ellen Deering in 1954; its relevancy today is remarkable:

> [The successful admissions officer …] should be able to speak and to write well, to organize work and supervise employees, to cooperate with faculty and administrative officers. Coupled with these abilities should be certain qualities of character—emotional stability, perseverance, decisiveness, poise, good balance, charity under criticism, patience and objectivity with people—and in adverse situations, fearlessness under pressure.

References

AACRAO. (n.d.). *Professional competencies and proficiencies*. Retrieved from www.aacrao.org/competencies

Black, J. (Ed.) (2001). *Strategic enrollment management revolution*. Washington, DC: American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

Bontrager, B. (2004). Enrollment management: An introduction to concepts and structures. *College and University Journal, 79*(3), 12.

Campeau, T., Gurganus, L., & Hoover, R. (2008). *So you want to be a director of admissions?* In B. Lauren (Ed.), *The college admissions officer's guide* (p. 558). Washington, DC: American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

Henderson, S. E. (1998). Competencies and training. In C. Swann (Sr. Ed,) & S. Henderson (Ed.), *Handbook for the college admissions profession* (p. 40). Washington, DC: American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

Erin Finn *currently serves as the Senior Associate Provost for Enrollment Management at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Formerly, Finn held the positions of assistant vice president at Drexel University in Philadelphia and dean of*

enrollment management at Harcum College in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. In addition to work in enrollment management, Finn has taught undergraduate and graduate presentation skills courses at La Salle University in Philadelphia and a graduate-level enrollment management and marketing course at Drexel University. In the course of 23 years in enrollment management, Finn has participated in and conducted organizational design projects of varying scope and complexity within a diversity of organizations. Finn earned a bachelor of arts in English from King's College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and a master of arts in Professional Communication from La Salle University in Philadelphia; she also earned a certificate in Leadership in Enrollment Management from the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education.