

Changing the Delivery of Student Services: The Dynamics of Success

by

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Overview

This learning history describes and analyzes how an urban university campus (the abbreviated pseudonym of "UUC" is used throughout this document) changed its delivery of financial and administrative student services. It traces the process of change chronologically, and offers perspectives from different levels of the organization on how the change occurred and what it meant to those who participated in the process. The change was accomplished by linking long-standing dissatisfaction with the way students were served, a new vision of what an urban university should be, and the requisite commitment and resources.

Within this context of support and vision, one of the keys to UUC's success in translating an opportunity and a plan into true organizational change was the staff's commitment, ingenuity, and ability to self-organize. The Student Services Center (SSC) staff achieved real change by listening carefully to the students (their clients), to the service departments involved in the project, and to each other. This project was also successful because the participants were able to find good solutions to the specific problems they faced while maintaining a holistic, integrative perspective on the relationship between particular problems and the overarching purposes of the project. Finally, attention to the fundamentals of human relationships, such as trust, fear and control, and a commitment to good communication, enabled learning and organizational change. The story told in this learning history is laced with these themes.

The organization of the narrative is structured around another set of themes. It describes the origins of the SSC project. It looks in detail at how organizational learning interacts with issues of identity and participation. It examines how artifacts such as the physical space or the student information system affect and are affected by organizational change.

Several characteristics of learning histories are worth noting. They focus on some of the fundamental intangibles that can make a complex change process succeed or fail; they highlight the complexity of organizational processes by presenting many different, even opposite, voices and points of view; they take respondents at their word, trying to avoid the pitfall of viewing them as less smart, more deluded, less aware, or more self-serving than those of us who are engaged in analyzing organizational change; finally, they are designed to stimulate practical, reflective conversations among practitioners who are engaged with the kinds of issues that are explored in the document. It is worth noting that, in the process of writing this document (our first exploration into the learning history methodology), we have come to believe that a learning history (as a literary form and as a process of inquiry) has unique and significant value, even when available resources are quite limited and the methodology is thus constrained, as described in the methodology box at the end of the document.

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Foreword

by the Executive Director of Student Financial Services at UUC

February 21, 1998

To the reader:

This learning history is a result of small group effort that was intended to reflect on and learn from the successes and failures of UUC in changing the delivery of student services. It reviews the problems, personality strengths and weaknesses and human emotions associated with teamwork and personal control in a complex, highly specialized organization.

The study, like many other learning histories, is intended to be used as a learning tool. It may confirm some ideas you already had about people (staff, supervisors, administrators and faculty), change and the change process. It may also offer some surprises about which level of staff are resistant to change and/or quickest to learn. This study is not about who is right or wrong. It is not about who should be rewarded for successes or reprimanded for failures. It is about learning from the perceptions and interpretations of several levels of concerned team members.

Admittedly, I have my biases, but I consider this project a success. However, having worked closely on the day-to-day details of this project I realize that opportunities to help the change process were missed by many. The ideas and opinions gathered through this learning history have helped me better understand the learning process.

"To become more user friendly" - is one of four themes of the New Urban University platform. "Total Learning Environment" is the theme covering all campuses of the entire University. Learning is one of the core values of UUC. Commitment to and acceptance of change is valued at UUC. Dedication to these platforms and core values presented the opportunity, incentive and support needed to maneuver the obstacles to change. I am aware that the changes implemented at UUC may not work for others. However, your review of the noticeable results, the themes and the lessons learned may help you develop solutions that will work in your setting.

At UUC both the financial commitment and directive of the administration were strong. Fortunately, supervisors of the areas undergoing change worked well together before the changes were implemented. But, to create the vision needed for even higher levels of cooperation new partnerships were created to get buy-in from the staff. Supervisors unwilling to delegate options for success to their staff would not survive a change of this magnitude. Providing an atmosphere that encouraged risk taking led to benefits above and beyond expectations. Realize that some failures will occur - deal with those quickly and move on to new successes.

In my opinion, the real reason for the success of the UUC Service Center belongs to the staff. Whether it was the need for self-preservation or the mandate to become more user-friendly is immaterial. The staff were creative, eager to try new ideas, agreeable to relax controls, willing to take on new duties in cross functional areas without additional pay, listened and reacted to concerns about outdated practices, self organized and eliminated the 'silo mentality' that had been so much a part of higher education for the past decades. Service Center staff developed into a community of caring and sharing - with one another as well as with their customers.

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About this Learning History

This learning history describes a change initiative which took place on an urban campus of a publicly funded university. The story takes place between 1994 and 1997 and focuses on changes in the student services delivery program at UUC. Since much of the material in this document is sensitive information, the identities of the organization and the individuals involved in the project are not provided.

A learning history is a new format for presenting the story of an organizational change project. It is designed to portray the project as participants experienced it, and to invite readers to reflect on that experience and to draw their own conclusions, or "lessons learned" from their reading of the story. To facilitate this kind of reflective reading, we make the "sense-making process" visible -- we report not just what people did, but how they interpreted events around them and what reasoning led to their interpretation. Thus, this document is designed to report on this project and to provide a reporting format rich with insights and perspectives from which other people could learn. The document follows the format that George Roth and Art Kleiner of Reflection Learning Associates, Inc. and the Society of Organizational Learning have developed. More information about other learning histories and learning histories in general is provided under "Further Reading."

The learning history begins with an overview of the delivery of services to students at UUC prior to the change initiative, describes the need for change and summarizes the outcomes of the SSC project. The second section tells the story of the change effort. The story is organized around themes -- key concepts which emerged from an examination of the materials collected in our research. We present each of these themes in the form of a "jointly-told tale," separating the researchers' comments from participants' statements. There are four different types of material in these jointly-told tales:

- The right-hand column of text tells the story in the words of participants.
- The left-hand column of text provides interpretive and synthesizing material: questions, analysis, additional facts, generalizations or implications developed by the learning historians and reflecting their perspectives. This material is designed to help readers to make sense of the story and the narrative in the right-hand column..
- Full-column narratives introduce topics, and provides context and background.
- Boxed text provides background information on methods, tools, or key topics referred to but not fully described in the text.

The story of the SSC involves many different characters with different roles and different points of view. In order to allow participants to tell their story with their own words, anonymity is provided by identifying individuals only by their job title. In addition, participants' actual job titles have been grouped into generic job titles as follows:

- "Executives" are officers with the rank of dean or above
- "Administrators" are supervisors and directors
- "SSC Staff Members" are people who work in the SSC, including some students.

In a few cases, understanding a quote requires a bit more detail on the speaker's role; in those cases exceptions to the usual categorization have been made (i.e., a speaker is identified as "a supervisor" rather than as "an administrator.").

In reading the learning history, you will find yourself having to make choices. Which column do you read first? Do you skip back and forth, between sections? When do you do so? There are no rules for reading a learning history; different people read segments in different orders. As you make your way through the story, however, please pay attention to your own reactions. How credible do you find the story? How would you have dealt with the problems that faced the characters that are portrayed in the story? How could their experience help inform the decisions that you might have to make in the future? How can you assess the learning history itself? The authors believe that reflection, discussion and dialogue with your colleagues about the content of this document can help your learning and your team's learning.

The value of this document depends on the conversation it generates: Can UUC's experience provide useful insights for your team or project? If so, how? If not, why not? Its value also depends on your ability to "suspend" your assumptions and beliefs -- about universities, management teams, bureaucracies, change and many other aspects of the delivery of student services -- so that you can focus on what happened here and how these people experienced and describe this project.

As you read this document we also recommended that you explicitly reflect on its value to you. What is the value (to you or your organization or your community) of your reflection on the issues that the learning history raises? What implications or actions does your reflection suggest? What is the value of hearing the story in the words of the participants? What is discouraging as you read and discuss this story?

The SSC Project's Noticeable Results

Noticeable Results of the SSC Project

"A noticeable result is a significant and measurable event, described in an observable and tangible way, that answers the question : What evidence do we have that something noteworthy happened?" (Wyer and Roth, <http://learning.mit.edu/res/wp/eclh.html>) The project to develop a new Student Service Center ("SSC") at UUC produced the following noticeable results.

- A. The SSC improved the quality of service the UUC provides to students.
1. Services are now provided so that students typically do not need to go to multiple windows or multiple offices.
 2. By increasing the number of steps that can be completed at one location students spend less time on administrative chores.
 3. The service that students receive is more thoroughly integrated, consistent and friendly.
 4. Because students have to go fewer places, students don't "get the run around" from UUC -- the chances of being sent to the wrong places are reduced.
- B. The SSC enriched the effectiveness and the jobs of university staff.
1. Individual jobs have greater scope because of cross-training in several subject areas.
 2. As a result of SSC's practice of self-management, each person is responsible for seeing clearly how their individual contribution affects the service that SSC as a whole provides.
 3. As they train themselves and train each other, and as they deal collectively with new situations, the SSC staff have created an active learning environment that takes better advantage of their abilities as well as the knowledge and experience that they bring to their jobs.
 4. By permitting SSC staff to see how requirements, practices, and policies from several departments jointly impact a specific student, the staff's role has shifted from enforcing rules to a more professional one of serving student needs.
 5. By increasing the interaction between the several student service departments at an operational level, the trust and understanding across departments was increased.
 6. There were also noticeable "costs" associated with these changes, including 1) the increased organizational complexity raised issues of identity and management for SSC staff and their supervisors and 2) the greater difficulty of SSC jobs raised questions of job classification, equity and pay. Turnover in SSC staff is an indicator that these costs were significant.
- C. The SSC improved the environment in which students and staff interact.
1. Physical barriers such as bullet-proof glass have been removed so that students and staff can solve problems collaboratively and so that staff can easily consult with each other.
 2. Because the queue in which students wait for service is further away from the point of service, students have greater privacy when they discuss personal matters with university staff.
 3. The larger, more open space is inviting to students and more comfortable for SSC staff.
 4. Improved technology such as videotaped transactions has improved security and the sense of safety for the cashiers.
- D. The SSC was a visible design and delivery success for UUC in the area of organizational change.
1. People from many different constituencies believed that they had been consulted in the design and development of the SSC, creating a sense of ownership, of pride, and confidence that the New Urban University ("NUU") concept would reflect widely-held values and aspirations.
 2. A more friendly SSC demonstrated that UUC was indeed capable of changing the way it does business.

3. SSC staff found new ways of using the Student Information System, demonstrating that when non-specialists are given access to complex data and software, they are able to achieve an appropriate level of mastery through collaboration.
 4. The SSC's success served as a demonstration that new and effective approaches (e.g., self-management, integration of operations, and new ways of addressing student needs) to university business could be developed and implemented by UUC administration.
 5. By creating and operating the SSC, distinct administrative departments have substantially improved their quality of service without the major upheavals that can accompany large change efforts. The SSC staff and their home departments found a workable balance between a customer-focused front office and back office operations that meet complex legal and technical requirements, without increasing staffing levels.
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Introduction: The SSC Today

The following story illustrates the kind of support that SSC staff provide to UUC students who are faced with a bewildering array of forms, procedures, policies and hurdles that must be mastered before they ever see the inside of a classroom. Note that, since the interviews occurred in a group setting, people being interviewed respond to each other (and laugh) at certain points.

An SSC Staff Member: "[Recently] I had a student sit down in the chair in front of me and he threw his FAFSA documentation, which is financial aid, and his UAP, threw it at me and said, 'I can't do this, do it for me.'"

"And I said, 'wow! Have a seat, let's talk.' And he said, 'I want to go to school, I'm 27 years old, and all I see is this mound of paperwork.'"

"He had picked up an admissions form, financial aid paperwork, and some records forms that he didn't need yet. But he didn't know that. He didn't know what he needed and what he didn't.

"He said, 'I tried to read through this, but it made no sense to me whatsoever.'"

"So, I said, 'OK, let's go through this step by step.' And I said, 'first of all, these are financial aid forms, so let's put all the financial aid forms in a pile.'"

All the forms on the rack look the same to someone who doesn't know what any one of them is for.

Students can and do eventually master university forms and procedures once they learn how to think about them.

"We put all the financial aid forms in a pile, we put all the admissions forms in a pile. He had two admission forms, one for a regular degree admission, and one for non-degree. And then he had a drop-add schedule and a special student form.

This student's action makes perfect sense given his understanding of "the system."

"He had picked up everything. But he had only picked up **one** of everything.

This is a real obstacle to getting an education

"And he said, 'now I really want to go to school, but **this** is beyond me. I don't know what to do.'

"I said, 'OK, have you been admitted?' [SSC staff member shakes her head indicating the student said 'No.']

"At that point I knew how to help this student. I didn't have to send him to Maureen to do the admissions part. I didn't have to send him to Records to do the records part. I said, 'this is an incredibly complex situation if you're just off the street looking at it.'

*From one perspective, the publications that UUC designed to explain all the **possibilities** might seem like obstacles.*

"Oh, and he had a big course catalog, and he had a schedule of classes, and had no idea which one was which and why it needed to be there. And then he'd heard something about extended studies. [The whole group laughs as she continues with the story...]

"Wow!

"And so at that moment I think is when I realized how helpful we could be, number one. How complex the system must look from the outside, and because we have all the forms in a place where they can pick up one of everything, how you can get totally blown away.

And that was the time when I thought,

'I know enough to help this student.'
And I said, 'do you have some time, or do you have a meeting or something you need to go to right away?'

Helping a student understand "what's appropriate" is an essential prerequisite to bringing them into "the academic community."

"He said, 'no, I want to do this.' And I said, 'I can't fill out these forms for you, because that wouldn't be appropriate, but I can sure answer your questions as you fill them out yourself.'

"And so we did the admissions form first, and I explained the difference between the green one and the white one. [Laughter...]

This student is "learning the ropes" of an administrative process. Is the SSC staff member teaching?

"Because that's all they know, is that one's green and one's white, you know. And then the FAFSA form, part of them come back to the university, and part of them get sent someplace else. 'I turn this in here, right?' I said, 'no, this goes in the envelope that's attached.' 'oh, OK.'" [She chuckles again...]

"So that was a good feeling. That I knew the whole spectrum well enough to help this student step-by-step."

This story introduces several important themes that will be explored more fully in this learning history. Access to higher education requires that students cope with the organizational and procedural complexities that have grown up around colleges and universities. Helping students determine where they are in a rather lengthy and difficult-to-visualize process is a significant part of making a college education accessible. Suggesting what behavior or steps are appropriate is an act of inclusiveness and kindness on the part of the SSC staff member. This level of support was not the norm until the SSC was created and it took a great deal of effort to achieve, as is described in the story that follows.

Change: Impetus and Scope

The Impetus for Change

Most universities in the U.S. require students to contact multiple distinct student service offices in order to handle the financial and administrative aspects of getting a college education. UUC recently engaged in a "re-engineering" project which involved the integration of services provided by several different offices (admissions, registration and records, financial aid, and bursar) into a "one-stop" Student Service Center. The project was a response to poor service and poor integration between the different services with which students had to interact.

As the campus grew and departments were distributed around the campus, the services they provided also

An Administrator: "I think as this campus grew, we took departments that

became much more complex.

were traditionally next to each other in one building, and distributed them around the campus to the point that we were running students ragged.

Over time, the number of inappropriate referrals grew and so did the level of student frustration.

"And we didn't communicate very well [between offices]. The students didn't mind being referred to another place, but when they were referred inappropriately, and you had multiple places to go to do what should be a relatively simple task, they got frustrated and I think rightfully so."

In addition to the fact that services to students were provided in multiple scattered locations, the physical set-up where some of the services were provided was inadequate.

The entire process from admissions to financial aid to registration was challenging, and dealing with the cashiers, the final step in the registration process, was especially harsh.

An SSC Staff Member: "Where the cashiers used to be, you had a two-by-two area and you were always talking through this glass that had a little hole to the student.

"And there was always someone right behind them, and the cash registers were going, and you couldn't hear.

The whole scene could be taken as a metaphor for the relationship between students and UUC before the new SSC was established.

"You'd have to say, 'I'm sorry, can you wait a minute until the cash registers stop?' And then you'd try to quickly exchange what you needed to say. And that's how we operated for years."

All of the cashiers and some of the other administrative services were provided from these small cell-like rooms, separated from students by bullet-proof glass.

The microphones got dropped at the last minute from a construction project's budget. How could it take ten years to fix something like this?

An Administrator: "For ten years, the staff couldn't hear the students talking because we never completed the construction with the microphones in the windows."

Although everybody seemed to agree about the poor conditions, there were several different perspectives on what really triggered the change. Some administrators were motivated by concerns about "quality of life" -- staff morale and frustrated students. Others were more focused on the "bottom line" impact of that low morale and frustration.

An Administrator: "I was involved in this project from the beginning because I was appalled at the working conditions of our staff, which affected morale and productivity and translated many times over to frustrations for the students.

"From the beginning I've been very interested and committed to serving the students, and the service center is a big part of that."

An Administrator: "Our students were very clear about what they wanted and what they expected. We were hitting some enrollment challenges, so that always gets attention."

In early 1994, staff from the Bursar's Office at UUC began studying the results of several attempts to change the delivery of student services at other universities and proposed a change. The Admissions, Records, and Financial Aid offices were also reviewing service delivery alternatives at the time and collaborated with the Bursar's office in pursuing the initiative.

Many possible ways of delivering those services more effectively were considered and discussed at length. Committees, regularly scheduled meetings of key players, and other formal and informal mechanisms for capturing and considering ideas were established early in the process. These conversations served to develop focused objectives, to identify a change strategy and to obtain an acceptable level of commitment from the participants and the larger UUC community.

An implementation team was formed and it began to develop its plans, envisioning an ideal Student Service Center. The team proposed a design without regard to cost, physical, or organizational constraints. This "blue sky" approach allowed people to think creatively about entirely new forms of service delivery.

At some point the change process must include consideration of "impossible things."

An Administrator: "My idea was to be revolutionary in our thinking, at least initially. To **not** put on the blinders in the beginning."

Considering "the impossible" had a long term positive effect.

An Administrator: "The initial draft of the service center design was priced out at over \$500,000 for the needed remodeling. When we found out the total budget, we needed to go back and make some changes, but the core values of our design stayed in the final design."

The SSC Renovation

The largest part of the SSC project's budget went for the renovation of space. When the SSC renovation was complete, the SSC's space had the following characteristics:

- Large open space with windows on one side and service counters in a "U" shape facing the windows
- Cashiers on one side of the "U" and customer service representatives from Admissions, Records and Registration, and Financial Aid offices on the other side
- Support offices and related spaces behind the customer service representatives

Why do some "clearly made" decisions flounder when others appear to have some kind of momentum that sweeps obstacles away?

An Executive: "Once the decision was clearly made, people went into action to try to figure out how to make it happen and design the space."

While the physical design was being worked out and began to seem more feasible, the idea of such a change still seemed difficult from some other perspectives.

An Executive: "I think there was some skepticism at some levels about problems with the state personnel system and whether we were going to have people doing the same thing with different job classifications and/or different pay."

Were these problems swept away?

However, resistance to change was also attributed to the workers themselves.

An Administrator: "There were concerns about whether you could change the behavior of the individuals involved, and could you put them in the same location and have them work together."

The biggest risk was changing from a paradigm of "separation of duties" to one of "single point of service."

An Administrator: "I see this as the institution taking the risk of combining some resources and some staff functions."

Nobody could really know whether the idea of an SSC would work, since both opportunities and obstacles could only be seen from a limited and individual perspective in the organization.

An SSC Staff Member: "My perception of the rules and whether they make sense changes according to where I sit at the moment in the organization."

Although the physical renovation was a real accomplishment, it only set the stage for the larger story of organizational change and growth.

The Scope of Change

The story of the SSC project, as it unfolded from the planning stages and into the initial implementation phase two years later, is told in later sections of this history. At the time this learning history was being "generalized" -- improving students overall satisfaction with their UUC experience. written, more than a year after the SSC went into operation, the SSC project is seen as very successful.

As a result of the project, the reputations of UUC's student service units have improved, especially with regard to staff competence, "user-friendliness" of procedures and staff concern for students' welfare. Student complaints are less frequent and students' problems are often addressed before they become time-consuming and stressful to correct or unravel. Students' satisfaction with the SSC has also

An Administrator: "I think that we have really minimized the student who becomes upset with the institution as a whole because of a very specific

problem. It was very common in years past for a student to just come storming in our office **bent out of shape** because of a financial aid issue, or because they couldn't get a form."

The SSC project also resulted in higher levels of job satisfaction among SSC staff. Job satisfaction increased as the physical working environment improved, as the knowledge base of the staff grew, and as staff members experienced greater autonomy and more control over SSC operations.

An SSC Staff member: "I think it depends. Sometimes I waver. I have a lot of internal satisfaction, when I think, 'You know, wow, I helped a student who just said, you know, "I have never had this kind of [good] experience on a campus before!"'"

Finally, UUC administrators believe that the SSC's reputation is bolstering UUC's effort to change its image. It demonstrates a commitment to understanding and meeting the needs of 21st century urban students. The proposal for the SSC project was put forward at a time when UUC executives and administrators perceived a need to change UUC's "identity". Student enrollments had declined recently, precipitating concerns about the institution's ability to retain enough students to support itself. One of the central executive responses to this situation was the adoption of a new organizational philosophy embodying and symbolizing a new commitment to serving a broader range of student and community needs -- both academic and non-academic. The philosophy, under the label "New Urban University," envisioned providing "more" than just access to a high quality education. UUC executives and administrators suggest that the SSC makes a key contribution to crafting the new image -- even a new identity -- for UUC by improving the quality of students' financial and administrative interactions with the UUC.

From this perspective, the SSC is a natural and direct outcome of UUC's new philosophy. It did not involve introducing any "foreign" ideas.

An Executive: "UUC needed to be a more responsive campus academically, student-support wise, in relationships with the community, and so on, and the SSC was very consistent with what the campus wanted to do."

An Administrator: "Over the last ten years we've developed an attitude that retention is an important issue, that student services is an important part of that, and I think that the SSC is a reflection of that change in attitude.

"I've seen attrition go down tremendously and I think it's because of a genuine effort to be more friendly toward students by all the units on the campus. This integrated unit assists in that because if

you're having a problem with financial aid, you're right there. If you're having a problem with your records, you're right there."

The story of the SSC project is divided below into a narrative about the products and the processes of change. The products include a new physical space and a new way of doing business. The processes include the changes in the relationships between people, departments, and decisions that produced the products.

Both the products and the processes of the SSC initiative are perceived by students, SSC staff, university administrators, and faculty as "successful." In the following narrative, participants reflect on the "hows" and "whys" of this successful change initiative.

Products of the Change Initiative

The SSC's new physical space and new ways of doing business succeeded because they offered students more than convenience.

Students are pleased with the convenience of "one-stop-shopping" at a central location staffed with people who are trained to meet multiple student needs. But convenience is only part of this success story. Participants in the SSC project attribute students' satisfaction with the SSC to the open, welcoming characteristics of the SSC's physical space and the competence, professionalism, and friendly attitudes of the SSC staff.

Setting the stage was a significant accomplishment.

An Administrator: "This initiative succeeded because of the priority the administration put on trying to upgrade the physical surroundings, the staffing and the attitude on the part of the staff."

Behind each SSC staff member is a significant investment in technology and there are technological alternatives to a face-to-face conversation. What are the costs and benefits of technology compared to face-to-face interactions?

An Administrator: "Our Service Center is a commitment to personal contact, as well as easy access for students. We still will deal with people via e-mail and faxes and every other way, but at the same time for the human who wants personal contact, it's there."

An SSC Staff Member: "The SSC created an inviting and visibly welcoming space. For instance, on my computer I have a sign, that says, 'you can ask me anything, but I know most about financial aid.'"

"And I do find that most people get a kick out of that, because they feel they can ask me, and, if I can't answer their question, I will try to find an answer for them or someone that can help them. And, I think that's important."

*Is it possible to offer the convenience of telecommunication **and** sufficient human contact or will organizations face the dilemma of having to choose between the two?*

"People should feel welcome and feel excited about a place where they might go to school. That just makes them feel more comfortable and at ease."

From the client's perspective, where does the quality of physical environment end and the quality of the service provided begin?

An SSC Staff Member: "I think the quality of information that the staff gives and the amount of knowledge that they have is important. But I also think that how it's delivered, what the environment feels like, the vibes that the students get, and the feeling that they get from the staff are important."

Why do so many public institutions have a reputation for poor service? Are there any reasons for disbelieving the assessments of a given staff member?

"They could be getting the right answer, but the way that it comes out may be really harsh -- and it may be the truth -- but it's how it's presented."

Signage is an aspect of the SSC that was still being worked out at the time of the interviews.

An SSC Staff Member: "I think now it's definitely a welcoming space, but I also think it's kind of intimidating, at least that's my first impression, when people first started coming in last year."

"It's intimidating because they stand back by that table against the window, and they kinda look around and there's all these people sitting there, you know, smiling at them or whatever, but there are no signs."

Creating a welcoming environment was not even a consideration when staff had to shout at students in order to be heard.

"That's where it's up to us to create the welcoming environment, to be attentive, and to ask them, "Can I help you with something?" And direct them in the right place, rather than kind of staring at them and waiting for them to approach you."

"It's more a friendly, laid-back environment, and comfortable. That's something that the space offers but it's also up to the employees who are there, to offer that to the students."

Many people, including SSC staff, see a relationship between the changes in physical space and improved attitudes of Service Center staff.

An Administrator: "Some offices got windows and the cashiers are able to see and have their view when they sit there. The people in Admissions and Records have their space, and the Financial Aid people have a little more room and more storage, and all those kinds of things."

"The changes in physical surroundings lead to a higher feeling of self-worth and that directly relates to the student and how the student is accepted in terms of their day-to-day activities."

How do characteristics of the physical work environment send messages to workers about their feeling of self-worth? How does a feeling of self-worth affect morale and attitudes toward clients?

The Process of Change

Participants in the SSC project spoke on two different levels about the **process** of change. They spoke about interdepartmental and interpersonal dynamics, about good decisions, and about "good people." They also reflected on the process of change on a deeper level and spoke about the personal and institutional identity issues that influenced project participants and moved specific decisions and the change process as a whole in the right direction.

Keys to a successful change process: "support from the top," "buy in," "teamwork," and "good people."

Participants in the SSC project attribute the success of the change process to enthusiastic public endorsement and financial support from the highest levels of UUC administration, successful efforts to obtain, in advance of the project, widespread support or "buy in" across the university, to teamwork, and to the involvement of "good," committed, and competent people.

An Administrator: "I see several reasons that the SSC project was successful. They got the administration's support and funding for it. And the administration made it be known that they were behind it 100%."

"The fact that the funds were dedicated to the remodeling of the SSC, as opposed to other competing requirements that other people have, demonstrated the Chancellor's commitment to the project."

Is money the ultimate measure of support?

"And then you put together a whole bunch of really good people that worked in the university, and they kind of hashed through several months

of making it work among themselves.

"Nobody was really sure of how this was going to work, or whether or not they even wanted to take part. But they were all good people in their jobs, and they were thrown together, and then they just took over and made it work."

*What makes people decide to "take over and make it work?" What makes people decide **not** to do so?*

An Administrator: "We had people that understood what we were talking about but we also had buy in from the Academic Support Group, which were the major people from Admissions and Registration and Records and from the academic colleges and schools, associate deans and people that were oriented toward student needs and being responsive to students."

Buy in for a project of this size comes at different levels in the organization, at different times during the project, and in varying degrees throughout the project.

An Administrator: "I think you need to get buy in from your leadership, and get them to endorse the concepts and then to delegate the implementation to people that are most knowledgeable about it."

An Administrator: "We did some studies and found that where the service center concept had been tried and was successful was in locations where there was support from the top leadership on down. Failures were reported in cases where there was minimal or no support from the campus leadership for the service center concept."

To minimize the end-runs from people opposed to a project, support from the campus leadership is essential, but their support alone will not create success.

An Executive: "There was good communication about the SSC project. There was pretty widespread knowledge that this was going to happen, and that it was a good thing. And then, I suspect it was the individuals working in the executive offices that got on board. I'm sure that there was a certain amount of skepticism or dragging of the feet from time to time."

Communication was successfully used as the vehicle needed to gain community buy in at all levels.

*If you **have to** buy in to a concept is it really buy in?
What does "get the buy in" really mean?*

"But, eventually they all had to get on board and start thinking about how we could make it work. I think that the leadership all the way up and down the administrative hierarchy was supportive. And then, I think, we had some real good people supervising and staffing the project who captured the idea and made it reality.

Buy in doesn't happen overnight, so if it's important, it needs attention very early in the process.

"The success of this project is more of a reminder that if you're going to make a change, if you want it to be a lasting change, as opposed to just an experiment that dies, you've got to take a lot of time on the front end to get the buy in, and to get support, and not rush it."

Is teamwork more difficult at a university than elsewhere?

An Administrator: "Anything that gets accomplished here is really a team thing. I mean you just can't accomplish anything on your own at the university. You just can't do it."

Why is communication beforehand more powerful than "after the fact"?

An Executive: "My own philosophy is that you have to work it up and down. The chancellor or president can't just announce something. Then you'll get passive/aggressive behavior from people that will keep it from happening, so it has to be worked on from all levels.

"In fact, I would contrast this with [another recent change initiative] where there wasn't a whole lot of planning process, discussion and so forth, before it was implemented. I can also think of probably twenty other projects where we looked for a quick and dirty solution, and then we spent an awful lot of time trying to dress it up and fix it after we made that quick and dirty decision.

Did enough communication happen in this project before the SSC opened for business?

"Doesn't that happen a lot? You can get it up and running, but then, you spend lots of energy pulling it together, you know, fixing this, fixing that, trying to convince other people that it's a good idea.

There is evidence here that advance buy in was important, but how does "real buy in" happen? Why is it so easy and so common to skip the up-front investments in planning, communication, and careful thinking?

"If there's a lesson to be learned there, at least in my mind, it's that it's better to do it right, take a little more time to do it to get a broad range of opinions and feedback, before you march off, rather than to just go marching off and then trying to get everybody to get in line afterwards."

Cooperation among the key managers of the areas contributed to the success of the Service Center.

An Executive: "There's always been a sense of togetherness at the campus. I think that's also permeated at the director's level. There are good people at the director's level that don't tend to wall themselves off, and are problem solvers."

The power of teams suggests that individual administrators might therefore see themselves with less power. What are the implications?

An Administrator: "People's willingness to work together is what made this work."

Managers' contribution to the process was to create alignment between the details and the big picture.

An Executive: "There's a bunch of very pragmatic managers that understand the philosophy and the overall sense of direction but are detail-oriented enough that they can get in there and change the buttons or dot the i's and cross the t's, or whatever, to make it work."

It's hard to get the timing exactly right in "just in time learning."

A Supervisor: "I took a class on Managing Individuals and Teams, but was always about three weeks behind in the learning curve. It seems that what I learned at the class one week really would have been helpful two or three weeks earlier in dealing with a problem."

The SSC project resulted in a better understanding of the need for teamwork.

An SSC Staff Member: "I found it interesting to see how Financial Aid, Bursar's office, Records, and Admissions, all work together. It actually does take all of us to make this thing run. I realized that it takes teamwork and everybody working together."

Deeper aspects of change: personal and institutional identity issues motivated individual decisions to support the SSC project, to "buy in," and to work together.

The participants in this project also spoke about the change process on a deeper level -- in terms of how their thinking changed. In particular, executives, administrators, and staff discussed ways in which identity issues impacted key decisions which in turn led to the success of the SSC project.

The role of institutional identity in executive-level decisions to support the SSC project

The idea that institutions have "identities" is reflected in the importance many of them place on mission statements, advertising, and other mechanisms which convey, internally and externally, the central philosophy, beliefs, values, and goals that shape them. Explicit and symbolic expression of an institution's identity impacts the development of an "organizational culture" and the organization's ability to attract a particular clientele or type of customer. Thus, a change in institutional identity can drive a change in clientele or a change in company culture. Such a change in culture involves changes in beliefs and values which, in turn, require individuals in the organization to wrestle with their own understandings or ways of thinking about the goals, philosophies, relationships, and systems that prevail in an organization.

Adopting the New Urban University ("NUU") philosophy was an initial move toward establishing a new institutional identity for UUC. While this move had already been made at the time the SSC project was proposed, this new philosophy was vague and required substantial redefinition of the role of the university in the community and in students' lives. Thus, upper-level executives perceived a need to "advertise" the emergent NUU identity, to act on it and to provide both university employees and the public with opportunities to explore its meaning and implications.

The development of the SSC was perceived as a venue for addressing this need. The project was perceived as an opportunity to begin to define and publicize UUC's new identity in concrete terms. The Chancellor's decision to support and fund the SSC was largely motivated by this perception that UUC needed an opportunity to give substance, meaning, and definition to the NUU vision and that the SSC represented such an opportunity.

UUC had taken more than a year to re-examine its goals and beliefs. That process laid the foundation for the SSC project.

An Executive: "The New Urban University process -- all the conversations, all the forums, all the discussions created a general awareness of the need to be more responsive to our community. It helped us to focus on what the major things were that we needed to do.

"The SSC was consistent with our overall vision and philosophy of the new urban university, and of just being more customer- and student-friendly.

Thinking about the vision in a more concrete way made the vision more powerful.

"It was also, I think, a milestone, something that was do-able, and it was visible, and something that we could point to and say OK, we talked about user-friendly. Here! Here's something

concrete that you can touch and feel and see ...

"It went from skepticism to somewhat of, probably some euphoria. It was like, 'we're really going to do this, isn't this going to be fun?' Like people were very proud of walking visitors through the space when it was being planned and saying, 'see what we're doing, doesn't this feel good?'"

What could have made this project so exciting?

At some point the ownership of the NUU vision passed from executives to administrators who had to defend and explain the idea.

An Administrator: "This campus is very proud of their urban campus / urban university concept.

In a way, the NUU created some real organizational anxiety because there was lots of publicity but, until the SSC, little in the way of results or action. The SSC was an opportunity to make NUU concrete.

"But if you ask the executives to be specific about what that is, they say, 'well, look at our Service Center. Those people are working there late at night, and take care of all the students. Look how much more responsive to students we are.'"

The role of institutional identity in middle management "buy in" to the SSC concept

For middle level managers, supporting the SSC project created an opportunity to explore and "touch" the NUU identity. These managers first questioned the utility of the NUU philosophy and the value of establishing a new institutional identity.

NUU is seen either as "pie-in-the-sky" or as "nothing new."

An Administrator: "I think the New Urban University is an amorphous blob without structure. I just think that this is part of an increased retention / student service awareness.

Middle managers had been talking about a service center idea before the NUU concept was articulated.

"I can't get anybody to tell me what the New Urban University is. I don't know what the New Urban University is, and I think in some ways I would like to see UUC just try to improve its image and its retention and its recruitment and improve the quality of its programs, and not get on this marketing bandwagon.

The SSC project was endorsed by upper administration advocates of the NUU philosophy, **and** it was a project that operationalized and resonated with middle managers' long-standing visions of what the UUC "stood for." Thus, supporting the SSC project provided managers with a way to connect their own established, concrete, and clearly

articulated visions of UUC's goals and values with the new identity they were being asked to embrace. Their decisions to "buy in" to the project grew out of a recognition of the SSC as a **vehicle** for defining the NUU identity in a way that was consistent with their own practical, previously formulated and closely held goals and beliefs. Reconciling the NUU vision with their own beliefs and ways of thinking about UUC's identity relieved middle managers of some of the anxiety which was emerging around what upper level administration was asking them to do with the NUU concept.

Managers preferred to talk about the concrete particulars of "reality".

An Administrator: "I think we stand on what we are, by what we do, not what we call ourselves. And I think the SSC is really a move in the right direction.

"One night we had a meeting where a marketing professor had been talking about the New Urban University, and telling us about identity and symbols and that same night I was sitting, waiting for my son to pick me up, right out in front of this building.

"And I just looked at the campus map. I had never had an opportunity to look at the map before, and I looked at the map. And I noticed the UUC logo. There's nothing that distinguishes this campus from any other campus in the system with respect to its logo.

"We don't have an identity. All of a sudden what this business marketing professor was telling us was sinking in to me. We don't have an identity. We don't know what to call ourselves. We actually use several different names.

"And so I understand what he's saying, and I think it's fine to try and get that identity and market yourself a little bit better. But for some of us old timers, it's not going to be easy....

"I sometimes wish that we could get to the media, when they start talking about the ever increasing cost of a college education for people's kids, and to tell them, 'wait a minute. Here we are.' We're here in the middle of the city, and we've got a wonderful situation.

Middle managers define the University in terms of concrete particulars and in terms of what it offers to students. The SSC meshes with that definition.

"You can come here and not mortgage your life in order to send your kid to school. You can get a good education with the very best faculty that the university can provide. Here we are. But nobody says that.

"I think this place stands for the best value that you can receive in an education. Our students are able to take classes with full professors, and relatively small student/teacher ratios, and yet they're charged tuition that isn't exorbitant.

"You hear all the time in the media telling you that it's going to take six figures by the year two thousand and something to provide a college education for your kids. But you can get a pretty damn good college education here for \$5,000.

"The SSC sends the message that in going with a less expensive, publicly funded education, you don't have to sacrifice your physical surroundings. You don't have to go to a place that looks like it's a hole in the wall.

Other middle-managers agreed with this.

"In other words you can come to a place like the SSC that has a very nice and friendly staff, has a very nice and friendly atmosphere when you walk in the door.

*In the end, how does good service relate to the student's **learning** experience?*

"It looks professional, it has state of the art systems for tracking your bill, for tracking your classes, for signing up for courses, and for faculty and for advisors and for people in finance and whatever the area that you happen to have to deal with at the time.

Supporting SSC enabled middle level managers to accept NUU as more than an empty marketing campaign.

"The SSC staff have a professional way of dealing with students and when the students leave they always have in their mind that they visited a place that looks nice, that has friendly people that has knowledgeable people

who can handle whatever problems they have."

The role of personal identity in staff "buy in" processes.

Staff decisions to "buy in" and "get on board" were crucial to the success of the SSC project. For staff, these decisions to commit themselves to the success of the project meant taking ownership of and responsibility for the students' well-being. Taking on new personal and professional identities, which transformed staff members' views of themselves and of their clients, played a central role in those decisions.

SSC staff described ways in which they personally needed to embrace a "team" identity in order to provide better service to students at the SSC. They also described a process of developing more mature and professional identities as they took on more responsibility for meeting students' needs and protecting the best interests of the students more comprehensively than they had before.

Development of SSC "team identity"

Administrators and supervisors implicitly endorsed the importance of developing a "team identity" among SSC staff by designating the staff assigned to the SSC as the "core team," by naming the staff "service center partners," and by leaving the staff relatively unsupervised as they ventured into the SSC enterprise. However, the SSC team identity actually evolved as staff members decided individually to connect with and rely on one another -- since they found themselves with very little supervisory guidance or support at the SSC, separated from home department support, faced with the stresses of customer service contact and needing to learn each others' jobs.

An SSC Staff Member: "I was the first person hired to work in the service center. So on my first day on the job here at UUC my office was moving across the street. It was pretty traumatic."

It wasn't just the first day that was traumatic.

An SSC Staff Member: "I think we sort of clicked at the beginning... We all felt alienated from our departments. We were frustrated, so we just sort of bonded. That's what started it."

What are the consequences of this kind of bonding between workers? Can organizations promote bonding? Should they?

"We started just asking each other questions about what our departments do, and figuring out what we can and we can't give out, you know, as far as information. We trained each other, basically. And so that's how it came about."

What leads a work group to focus their attention on solving the problems at hand? They could have become involved in blaming the organization for letting them down....

"We were put in a situation without support, like anybody saying 'if you need anything you come to us,' or 'this is who you go to if you have problems.' And we sort of figured it out ourselves."

Covering for each other when dealing with distress is an important but purposely invisible part of team

An SSC Staff Member: "The team dynamics between all of us are

functioning.

important. When I see someone yelling at one staff member and she's going to walk away, then I cover for her -- I'll say to the student, 'she's gone, she'll be right back.' You help out as much as you can.

"Even though there's a little bit of difference between what each of us can actually do for a student, there's the support within us, so that we're supporting the person that just got chewed out and needed to go take a break."

Embracing the SSC team identity had several implications. This process required staff members to compromise strong departmental loyalties and identities which shaped their initial interactions and work at the SSC. This compromise created both interpersonal and intrapersonal tension and conflict.

An SSC Staff Member: "We don't take breaks. Because of the coverage issue, again.

Interdepartmental tensions are internalized as interpersonal and intrapersonal tensions as staff members struggle with the evolution of an SSC team identity.

"Even though there's cross-training, even though we're trying to be able to cover each other, there's still an underlying feeling of, well, they're gonna be thinking, 'oh Admissions always leaves their post,' or, 'Records always leaves theirs.'

Is accountability or mistrust the issue here?

"I think that causes problems, saying, well, 'I wanna go do something for fifteen minutes,' but is someone going to think, you know, 'Admissions isn't doing their job, they're not covering'?"

Does signage serve the needs of the client more than those of the organization's needs to communicate its structure?

An SSC Staff Member: "The whole signage battle goes back to the departments and territories and the problems that we have with that.

What could different outcomes of this battle imply?

"There's this battle between departments as to whether we want to identify ourselves as Admissions, Records, Financial Aid, and Bursar's, or do we want to just say we're completely cross-trained?"

Signage is one of the places where the identity tensions and conflicts are played out explicitly.

"There's battles 'cause I think there's just real strong feelings both

ways of what some departments want and what others don't want, and what some people want."

"But, I'm not sure how that's gonna resolve itself, 'cause I think there's a lot of power struggle in that. And that goes beyond -- certainly beyond where I am, way up into the rafters. I don't know if that's something that will be able to work itself out.

"There's nobody telling us we have to or we shouldn't and there's no one putting a sign above our head, and if they did that it would change the dynamics of the way that the Service Center works.

"Minimizing signage is supported by some, and not by others. So there's this constant battle around who's gonna put it up. Right now, there are some signs on some people's computers saying, 'I know most about records,' and I just don't want to do that.

"But it's still something that is there. It trickles down onto us because it's pressure within our departments and then between each other.

"We have feelings about our work environment and how we experience it, but there are forces from our supervisors and their supervisors about how they perceive it."

The phrase "I know most about X subject area" is sometimes used by SSC staff as evidence of user-friendliness and sometimes as evidence of divisions between departments.

Tensions such as these are in no sense unique to the SSC.

Signage is one of several areas of conflict that the SSC faced in its first year. A number of battles have already been forgotten because they had a creative and positive outcome.

Staff members chose to accept and manage this tension and conflict in order to honor and strengthen their connections with their SSC colleagues. Pride and confidence in their growing understanding of and commitment to the SSC concept, and the belief that the success of the SSC was in their hands, contributed strongly to these decisions.

Development of professional identities

As they struggled with the challenge of defining their roles as SSC "front-line staff," and committed themselves to the success of the SSC, SSC staff told us that they became heavily invested in being able to meet students' needs as fully and professionally as possible. Their experiences in the SSC, where supervisors were less available than they had been in their respective home departments, required staff to deal with a wide range of students' frustrations and challenges without the help of their supervisors. As they struggled to face these challenges, their knowledge of the policies they enforced, of students' real needs, and of the relationship between the two became broader and more sophisticated -- perhaps, in some ways, more sophisticated than their supervisors' knowledge. As they began to recognize that they were developing specialized knowledge and skills, they began to take a more professional

ownership of their jobs and responsibilities. The staff attributes much of the success of the SSC project to their personal decisions to make this identity shift from "employees doing their jobs" to "professionals taking responsibility for the well-being of their clients."

Staff members are committed to the University goal of increasing retention and have specialized knowledge around retention issues.

An SSC Staff Member: "What I try to do, with new students, what I think has really been a benefit and what I get a lot of response about, is, I answer their admissions questions, I get them their application, and I give them all the information they need.

"And then they say, 'thanks. Can you tell me where the Financial Aid office is?' And I'll say, 'well, have a seat. What do you need?'

"I get them all their forms, give them all their financial aid information. 'oh wow! OK. Wow, great, thanks!' You know? OK, so now where do I pay my bill?'

"Across the way" means on the other side of the room, where the cashiers are stationed.

"OK. You know, 'just right across the way,' or, 'let me give you your bill,' or 'let me print out your schedule for you, take this over,' and I can almost complete their whole process just sitting at my desk.

"And, they're like, 'wow!' You know? 'thank you!' I mean, this is very odd for them because they have been to other campuses where they have to run all the way across campus trying to get all that information.

"And so I think they acknowledge the breadth of what we do here. By the students, and by the parents of students, which is even more important in keeping them here.

Staff are getting positive feedback from the students about their knowledge and abilities to meet students' needs.

"I think the students can come over and see that we can find out information that they can't get from any other department.

"I have some students now that don't want to go to the Financial Aid office when before they would always

want to go there.

"Now they are like, 'well but, you guys always are finding more out for me,' you know? and 'you guys always do more for me and I like staying here.'

"I had one girl who just insisted that I take her FAFSA form, which is not a problem, 'cause I'll just walk across and put it in the box.

An SSC Staff Member: "Financial Aid is a huge part of the students' life here on campus. Most students, without financial aid, wouldn't be here. And much of Financial Aid is, policy, procedure, legislative acts, and laws.

Professionalism involves taking ownership and thinking about both the success of the SSC and the best interests of students.

The Financial Aid department's policy of using work/study students in this role was controversial.

"So, to ask [work-study] students to first of all learn all of that, is, I think, a huge expectation of a student.

Students in these jobs turn over quickly, but SSC staff themselves do too.

"Putting a work-study student out there alone to answer financial aid questions and to have constant turnover of people in that position is unfair to students [clients] and unfair to the other SSC staff.

Embracing a "professional" identity involves taking on the responsibility of authoritatively critiquing the staffing and the impact of that staffing on the achievement of the organization's goals.

"When staff have to constantly be training new work-studies, especially in peak times when we don't have the time to do that, we start feeling stressed out. And if you're feeling stressed out, that's going to reflect on how you react with the students.

Does it upset a conventional power difference to have SSC staff advising the Financial Aid department on staffing policy like this?

"Students need to see somebody who has the authority to say, 'I can get your paperwork in.' Fortunately Financial Aid is just down the way, and we can send them there, but we shouldn't have to send them there.

"They should be able to get the answer here. Students should be able to say, 'OK, I got my answer.'"

Presently, many staff members are experiencing growing distress over the need for levels of recognition, authority, status, and compensation which are consistent with the professional quality of their knowledge and skills, commitment, and level of responsibility. Issues include willingness of supervisors to support staff in their "front-line" decisions or interpretations of policy, job titles and salaries, availability of name plates and business cards, and the desire to have one's name associated with one's actions.

Support

Staff feel that by taking responsibility for learning about and understanding policy, they have earned the right to have their interpretations of policy supported more consistently by their supervisors. They struggle to gain students' respect for their knowledge and expertise. Respect from their clients is important to them; they believe that they need that respect to do their jobs the way they want to do them, that is, "professionally".

From where does the authority of SSC staff derive?

An SSC Staff Member: "I will show the policy to the student, where it's written down so that they don't question me. That usually helps because I think students respect that more than if you just tell them."

Why do SSC staff try to learn about UUC policies on a deeper level when so many other front line staff are not motivated to do so?

An SSC Staff Member: "I think that if you know why the policies are there you can explain it to the students. That's why I try to learn **why** we have certain policies."

"Usually they make sense and if you know why they're there, you can explain it to the student. Usually, if it's reasonable, they will understand."

"I mean, students will come in and argue (or not) anyway, but if you know why the policies are there it helps to explain it to the students."

Does the administrator understand that granting an exception may reduce the SSC staff's sense of being truly responsible for interpreting and enforcing the rules?

"And even if we've gone to the effort to find out about the policy and we explain it to the student, sometimes the student gets irate, goes to an administrator, and the policy all of a sudden doesn't exist--there's an exception made!"

Who is seeing more of 'the whole system', this staff member, the administrator, or the student?

"I have a really hard time with that. It's an exception for those students that get angry. It teaches them to work the system that way. The supervisors' point is, 'but that's the customer, you know? We're taking care of them!'"

What is likely to happen if this staff member had the

"But my point is: 11,999 students took

authority to make the exception that the administrator is making?

this step correctly, did this right, and that's unfair to 11,999 students, and he's not up there handling the 11,999 students!"

Status and compensation

Status and role and compensation are intertwined in most work settings and SSC staff reflect on the fact that, while their role has changed, their status (in some regards) and compensation have not.

SSC job descriptions, titles, and pay are increasingly perceived to be inadequate, as SSC staff take on more professional responsibility and gain a broad and specialized knowledge base.

An SSC Staff Member: "There's a lot of information and a lot of responsibility that we have. I think that it is an issue, especially with the fact that there's not a lot of supervision, and that we're responsible for training. I think that raises our responsibility and job description to a higher level.

Creating the SSC meant taking risks at all levels. The risk that the SSC staff took was of not being acknowledged or compensated in proportion to their professional growth.

"It's a job description / promotional kind of thing. It's still an issue with money, but it's also with title and the respect that comes from the students. It's just bringing the level of job description and pay to what we're actually doing. Because I don't think that they're the same.

"It's one thing to have some idea of other departments' policies, but the amount of information that we're expected to know, that is involved in this job! I'm an Administrative Assistant, and I don't think that describes what I do at all!

In the personnel system, authority flows from the hierarchy of bosses. In the SSC, it flows from the needs of students.

"I'm more like a customer service representative. It's the level of expectation, because it's not written anywhere that I have to know information about the Student Advocacy Center, or that I have to know about [the college of] Liberal Arts and Sciences rules and policies.

Can innovation and "thinking outside of the box" happen without some tension in the work-group?

"My job description doesn't say that, you know? There's nothing that tells me that I have to do that, but that's part of what I think makes the Service Center successful: being able to give that information."

Recognition

The availability of name plates and business cards emerged as a status issue which affected staff members' abilities to perform their jobs with professional demeanor and authority.

Should administrators and supervisors have dealt with these questions beforehand?

An SSC Staff Member: "I think that there are tools [such as business cards and name plates] that you can use to allow people to present themselves as professionals."

An SSC Staff Member: "I was one of the people who was really for the signage in the beginning. That's because I came from an area where it was separate, and that was the only way I could see things working, was separate."

There are also frustrations around the need for "professional tools" such as name plates and business cards which communicate professionalism and accountability to students.

"Now I don't see that happening. I don't like the signs now. I think that it would be very professional looking to have signs on our desks that said, 'customer service rep, cashier,' 'customer service rep, admissions.'"

What is the difference and connection between appearing professional and feeling professional?

"I think that signs would be a tool that would not only make our area appear professional, but would make you feel professional."

Staff members' changing views of their role at the SSC and of the importance of acknowledgment of that role are reflected in these comments about business cards and their significance.

"I hate giving students my post-it note. It's as if I'm saying 'here's my name on a post-it note, and here's my phone number, and you can call me here. **Trust me!**'"

"I think that those kinds of tools make people appear professional, and allow people to feel professional. They're things that are professional tools in the workforce today. And I think that is something that would raise our authority and professionalism."

"Sometimes students will come in and they'll say, 'are you a student?' 'no, I'm a full-time employee.' Then they'll say, 'OK. Then I'll ask you this question.'"

"And, you know, there has to be some

of that, you know, I **do** know what I'm talking about. And we **are** professional in how we present the information as well.

"I have a name tag from a previous job that I put up 'cause I am not afraid to say, 'yes, my name is Kate Carlson. If you have a problem with me, this is my name.' You know, if you need to come back and talk to me, this is my name. I will take responsibility for what I do.

Accountability is a key aspect of professionalism.

"Plus your name is on the front line. It's there, for people to see, so you're gonna live up to it. You're gonna live up to the fact that your name is there, that people can see your name and know who you are. And you're gonna live up to that.

"You know, 'this is who I am and now you know who I am'. That's just one of the things that I think is really important, is to be able to place your name out there so students can say, this is the person that helped me."

Despite the frustrations and growing pains staff members are experiencing as they take on more professional identities and a commitment to the success of the SSC, their increasing breadth of knowledge, depth of expertise and sense of agency appear to be sources of deep satisfaction as they strive to anticipate, understand, and satisfy UUC students' needs and demands.

Artifacts that Shaped, and Were Shaped by, Change

The artifacts that SSC staff spoke about most included: the physical environment, the new interface with students made available by the new physical space, external policies and requirements (at the campus, university, state and federal levels) as they are interpreted by the SSC staff's home departments, budget and personnel constraints, and the university's information systems. Each of these artifacts shaped the way SSC staff worked and each of them was either directly affected by the new way of working or it was perceived differently because of the change.

"Artifacts"

By "artifacts" we refer to systems or tools that people and organizations use as implements intended to have some organizational effect or to shape an organizational process. Business cards and signage, for example, are artifacts that have already been discussed that could facilitate students' access and orientation. Artifacts like business cards and signage also have emotional and political significance. Change efforts often focus on changing a specific artifact, such as the physical arrangement of an office or an information system, in order to accomplish an organizational goal. Conversely, they often collide with artifacts that suddenly seem to have a life of their own as obstacles or as barriers.

The renovation of the physical space changed how SSC staff communicated with students. It also changed how the staff could listen to each other communicate with students. The more public nature of communicating with

students permitted SSC staff to learn from students in a new way. This in turn affected how the SSC staff saw their "home departments."

When SSC staff began working in new ways, important artifacts such as their job classifications and the personnel system itself did not change in response to those new ways of working. This inconsistency eventually created obstacles to the change effort. The student information system (SIS) was another important artifact; which did not itself change. However, the way SIS was used changed significantly as a result of the SSC project.

Physical environment

The most easily observable change in the creation of the SSC was the physical renovation. As discussed previously, the small, noisy cubicles with bullet-proof glass windows separating staff from students shaped communication in a very negative way. That physical arrangement was replaced by a large, open space that allowed students to sit down in a comfortable chair to talk with a UUC representative across a counter that is the height of a normal desk. A snippet of conversation that was quoted earlier shows the more open feeling of the new physical arrangement:

An SSC Staff member: "And I said, 'wow! Have a seat, let's talk.'

The open physical configuration not only creates a better atmosphere for communication with students, but, as discussed below, it played an essential role in enabling SSC staff to listen to each other and ask each other questions, creating an opportunity to learn from each other as they carried out their daily tasks. It allowed SSC staff to understand student perspectives more deeply, to learning about the procedures in other "home departments," and to acquire the skills to navigate unknown parts of SIS.

An SSC Staff Member: "If we have a question, or if we know that someone can help us over there, and if there's not a whole bunch of people, we'll just holler across, "Janet," you know, "Can you look at this screen for me?"

Training became integrated with work because the physical space permitted SSC staff to see what other staff members were doing.

An SSC Staff Member: "Hands-on training is the best. It is important to actually have the question asked [by the student], get the person who knows, have them come to my computer, punch it in, look at the screen, show me exactly what I'm needing.

Competence in using SIS is fundamental to the contribution of SSC staff. Ready access to each others' knowledge and perspective was enhanced by the new physical space.

"I mean that's the biggest thing with SIS: 'what am I seeing here?' Especially with financial aid screens."

Looking at an SIS screen in the context of a specific student's situation is much more meaningful than looking at the screen without context.

As the SSC began to mature, staff members began to reflect on how the physical environment at the SSC affected a student's perception of service and of the university. As a result, they took it upon themselves, drawing upon their experience in prior jobs at banks and other service organizations, to add to the environment and shape it themselves.

An SSC Staff Member: "Last year we put candy out there during the beginning of school. That helps with children that come in with their parents. A

It's the thought that counts.

piece of candy will keep them happy and makes the SSC more inviting."

SSC staff came to see the new physical environment as part of the service they were providing and thus something to be shaped as their understanding of the service goals evolved.

The fact that SSC staff would think about decorating the space reflects a sense of comfort and ownership.

An SSC Staff Member: "We may all sit there and think, 'wow, you know, that would be really fun to do, to decorate the Service Center for "themes". You know, like "back to school". Let's go get some stuff! Let's do it!'"

Is this true? Why?

SSC staff member #1: "It's important for students to feel like [SSC staff] are having a good time in the center."

Could the management team have planned or anticipated the relationships that SSC staff built with students?

SSC staff member #2: "Yeah. And I think an example of that was last Halloween. Some of us dressed up. I dressed up as an angel. And I still have people who come up to me and say, 'oh, you're the angel.' And like I stop and I say, 'gosh, did I really help that student that day?'"

A new relationship with students

The administrators who planned the SSC had thought a lot about the SSC's goal: to provide a single point of service for student transactions such as registering for a course or paying a bill. They expressed this purpose well in the open physical design of the SSC. However, no one really knew exactly how the SSC would function or what it would be like to work there. The details had to be worked out after the SSC was in full operation. As a result, the job of sorting out those details, that is, developing a new relationship with students, fell, largely, to the SSC staff. The staff shaped many aspects of SSC's relationship with students, using student requests to guide them in the process.

Once SSC staff had the opportunity to listen to them, students stated their desires clearly -- they didn't want to get "the run around." That phrase came to have both a physical and a functional significance. SSC staff interpreted students complaints as encouragement to change their own behavior by exploring functional integration and cross-training.

One reason that students' questions were powerful is that the SSC's new open space allowed SSC staff to discuss them and learn from them.

An SSC Staff Member: "I think that the SSC has absolutely been shaped by the students and the questions that we get asked, and the situations that we're in, as we experience the Service Center -- more than anything else.

Listening carefully to the customer more than to a boss is a somewhat different organizational paradigm than the traditional bureaucratic one.

"It was the students more than anybody. I mean, definitely more than my boss ever saying, 'this is what we expect of you.'"

An SSC Staff Member: "You know, we're all expected to know each other's jobs. Not necessarily perform them accurately and one hundred percent, but we're all expected to **know**."

Where did students get this idea? To what extent did SSC staff help in shaping students' expectations?

"Maybe it's not a written expectation, but it's definitely an expectation of students. Students will say, 'why do you have to send me across this way here? That's very redundant, you know?' And we **should** be expected to have those skills."

An Administrator: "Cause students will just show up at the Service Center and say, for example, 'I can't register.' It could be a financial stop, it could be an academic stop, it could be that they've been gone for three semesters, it could be a whole bunch of different things..."

All: "And it probably **is** a whole bunch of things!"

Presently, this response to students' needs has evolved to the point where SSC staff try to respond not just to what a student asks for, but to what a student needs.

An Administrator: "Now [the SSC staff] really does dig through and find way more than what the student asks for."

The SSC staff came to see their role differently and also came to see students differently as conversations in the SSC, without the negative effects of the bullet-proof glass, had their cumulative effect.

An SSC Staff Member: "After Spring semester had started one administrator says to me, 'I want you to pay attention to the things that you have to say "no" to when a student comes to the Service Center. What do you have to say "no" to the most?' And I really thought about that, because as things have evolved, we say 'no' less and less."

Was thinking about "no's" differently the cause or the effect of the SSC change?

A Supervisor: "But we did try to provide the team with time to reflect."

Not only did the new physical environment permit better conversations between students and UUC representatives, the whole situation permitted SSC staff to listen directly to students, to respond to student needs, and to listen to their conversations in a new and more reflective fashion.

"Home Departments"

To provide the service they heard students requesting, SSC staff had to respond both to student needs for a single point of service and to the policy and procedural requirements of their "home departments." The "home departments" set expectations for how transactions were to be processed as well as how information should be handled and interpreted. The "home departments" expectations, in turn, were a response to, and interpretation of, requirements set at the campus, university, state, or federal levels. The "home departments" response had evolved over a long period of time. For example, although many policies about information access are specified in federal law (e.g., the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act), actual practice had evolved as the "home departments" dealt with a myriad of interacting details and considerations (including the student information system) over more than 10 years.

A result of the creation of the SSC was that the SSC staff were uniquely positioned to see how all of these rules and procedures fit together. The breadth of their jobs became a source of satisfaction to SSC staff. (Meeting job requirements as seen by their "home departments" and the need for customer service as demanded by students, created a dilemma for SSC staff that is discussed in more detail in the section titled "Development of SSC 'team identity'.")

It's a big challenge to provide good customer service and adhere to policy requirements.

The "home departments" are the repository of a great deal of tacit "know-how" that may be invisible to the casual observer, is difficult to make explicit for cross-training, and may actually need to be screened from the student.

An SSC Staff Member: "So much of Financial Aid is policy, procedure, legislative acts, and laws. I mean, it's not something that we just make up or just **decide**. It's not even something that's **customer service**. A lot of things are dictated to us by government."

An SSC Staff Member: "We needed to know what that [SIS] screen meant, what we need to look at, and what information on that screen to give to students. There's a lot of information on that screen, but not all of it has to be told to the student."

"We now know Records, Registration, Financial Aid, and Admissions. And you can look at all these SIS screens and give out information."

Who else gets to (or should) see how the "whole system" works together? Do SSC staff really get to see the whole system? "It's neat to be able to get to know other departments and what they do and how the whole system works together."

The consequences of this project were felt throughout UUC's student service offices. The way SSC staff were able to listen to "other departments" answer questions and were able to teach each other how to do tasks that had previously been handled separately, in a more isolated environment, raised questions about consistency that eventually were heard back at the "home departments."

An Administrator: "This [SSC project] has **not** been easy. This has been very challenging. It has caused a whole lot of rethinking of how we run our ["home department"] office, how we staff our office."

Budget and personnel constraints

Although the vision provided by executives and upper level administrators set the overall direction, actually implementing the SSC concept was a matter of working out a host of details between the "home departments," finding the dollars for the renovation, finding specific staff for the new office and making it all work together. All of this had to happen within the real-world constraints of budget, existing personnel and the existing personnel system. The budget and the personnel system had enough play in them to permit the SSC change to begin, but problems emerged once the SSC was functioning and the need for additional change in job classifications and pay became evident.

An Administrator: "Now the staffing compromise is, we wouldn't have been able to create the SSC if we had waited for that ideal situation to take place."

The SSC project leaders found unexpected opportunities as well as unforeseen obstacles.

An Administrator: "We did not have new budget positions. We reorganized internally, and happened to have a vacancy at a timely moment, at a time that was advantageous to being able to hire for staffing the SSC."

A Supervisor: "I think they (SSC Staff) need structure. We have taken employees who were very comfortable in structured jobs and put them in an environment that maybe isn't so structured anymore."

Both supervisors and SSC staff had to tolerate ambiguity and change.

An SSC Staff Member: "I've been around for a lot of changes and you just sort of roll with change. Some conflict is expected."

As the SSC staff's role has taken shape, it has become clear that the job classifications that staff had when they came on board may not be appropriate for the long run. This issue surfaced in the earlier section on professional

identity. The view that job classifications are not really appropriate is shared by both the SSC staff and the administrators of their home departments.

Could "eventually" take 10 years? How different is this problem from the budget shortfall that left the microphones out of the bullet-proof glass windows?

An Administrator: "We've talked about how eventually we need to look at the [job classification] levels of the people and their responsibilities in the Service Center.

"Their responsibilities are pretty complex and pretty broad, and that may not be recognized in the position levels that they currently hold, because SSC staff are at the position levels they had when they came into the Service Center."

The change process has stretched the classified personnel system's basic principle of "equal pay for equal work."

An Administrator: "Should everybody be at the same level or should they not be at the same level? Because some people take cash, some people don't take cash, and is that worth more or not? and the people who are not taking cash are doing a lot more service and how should that be taken care of?"

No current job description really fits what SSC staff members do.

An SSC Staff Member: "Even though they're starting 'pay for performance' [which would increase UUC's flexibility in setting compensation levels], the pay issues and performance issues will still cause some problems in the Service Center. What we do doesn't fit into one job description."

The development of the SSC changed the way UUC views customer service but it is more difficult to change the value judgments embedded in the personnel system.

An SSC Staff Member: "The extent and amount of knowledge I need to know as an Administrative Assistant is much less than the amount I need to be a customer service representative. Yet a customer service representative classification is much lower."

High staff turnover would be one consequence of a mismatch between knowledge expectations and pay.

An SSC Staff Member: "It's nicer now because we have more knowledge of what everybody [in the SSC] does. And we can help the students more. More pay would be nice..."

About a year and a half after the SSC opened, several members of its staff move on, some going back to school while others went on to other, higher-paying jobs. This raises interesting questions about the causes of staff turnover and of whether the SSC's level of staff performance is sustainable. Are the artifacts that shaped the SSC

staff's behavior early in the process capable of shaping another generation of enthusiastic staff members without also resulting in chronic turn-over and short term tours of duty in the SSC?

The importance of SIS in shaping the SSC and how SIS changed as a result

Sometimes SSC staff spoke about their jobs as if their role was mainly to look up information in SIS, the computer system that stores and manages student records. At other times their focus was entirely on helping students solve problems, and they seemed to assume that SIS was in the background as a passive tool, completely taking it for granted.

Although SIS played a fundamental role in shaping the SSC, somehow it was also a very ambiguous one. Most student transactions (such as admission and graduation) are recorded in SIS while many transactions (such as registering or opening a class to more students) are actually accomplished through SIS. SIS is sometimes the "point of contact" between a student and UUC; for example when a student registers by phone, the keystrokes that the student enters are recorded directly in SIS. Sometimes SIS appears to be "behind the scenes" because it's only visible as one of several complex subsystems. The system that a student sees is the result of the interaction between university policy, service providers such as faculty, intermediaries such as staff (including those working in the SSC) and the computer system itself.

Because the interactions between all the elements of this larger system are so complex, and because one part of this complex system may add or subtract to the perceived contribution of the other parts, it is difficult to assess the individual effect of any one of the parts on the performance of the whole. For example, it is sometimes hard to tell when the computer system is a constraint on the staff or when the staff are the limiting factor in the computer system's performance. The actions that SSC staff took in order to use SIS effectively are a more telling assessment of the system than anything they might have said directly.

Technological advances allow more and more SIS transactions to be handled directly by students over the phone or via the world-wide-web. Thus the role of SSC staff evolves from doing complex transactions and bureaucratic tasks on behalf of students to that of helping students adjust to the use of the new "easy-to-use" interfaces.

Students have a wide range of experience with computer systems, ranging from computer phobia to completely taking phone registration for granted.

An SSC Staff Member: "When I was in college, standing in line and getting that computer card was part of going to school, you know. And now you'll say to a student, "Would you like to step down the hall and register by phone?"

"And they just look at you like you've flipped. Because they're afraid of doing it by phone."

The interface to SIS that SSC staff themselves use is quite a bit more difficult to use than the interface that students use over the phone. In fact, as discussed below, it requires a lot of experience to learn where things are located and understand how they are represented in SIS.

An Executive: "We can walk people down the hall [around the SSC] and say

'look at how wonderful this is,' and then, you know, they don't really realize the problems that we have behind the scenes [with our information systems]."

The problems that are "behind the scenes" are found both in SIS and the "home departments" that play such a large role in shaping it: enormous complexity, functional silos driven by legal and technical requirements, the high cost of change, and the crucial role of the tacit (but relatively invisible) interpretation skills that are needed to make sense of the system and to keep it functioning.

The situation where both the computer system and the jobs change all at once may not be the ideal vantage point to understand the relationship between the system and the people who use it. Failures may be more useful, as when the computer system changes, but the jobs do not; the organizational change literature is full of examples showing how people see the system in the "old" way and eventually defeat it. The case that is discussed here (where jobs changed, but the computer system did not) was a very interesting success.

The SSC project leaders believed that SIS could not be changed

The SSC project provided new computers on the desktops of SSC staff, which provided more convenient e-mail as well as new opportunities to coordinate schedules and to use the world wide web. But the SSC project leadership believed that, although it might be desirable to do so, changing SIS and the Billing and Receivables System (BRS) was outside project scope. There were several reasons for this. The cost of replacing the two systems would be several orders of magnitude greater than the total cost of the SSC project. The SSC's rate of change would make it a very difficult target for any complex system to keep up with (both of these systems are expensive to change, in part because they were designed fifteen to twenty years ago). Given technology and resource constraints, these systems were already being changed at or near their maximum rate of change. And finally, financial resources were limited by the fact that at the university had already begun to work on a large project to replace the financial and human resources information systems.

An Executive: "The things that have not been accomplished [in this project] that could have been accomplished, are more on the infrastructure level in terms of the SIS system and the billing and receivables system.

Do we blame our information systems for discreteness and unfriendliness that we ourselves have collectively and incrementally built into our administrative processes?

"Because these systems were all so discrete, and so unfriendly from a staff point of view, somebody that worked in the Bursar's office might not be able to learn enough about the SIS system, and vice versa."

It was left to SSC staff to find ways to bridge the functional barriers embedded in the information systems and make work flow more smoothly despite those barriers. The skills they needed to bridge those barriers could only be acquired by getting more training.

Training took on extra significance because SSC staff could only change how they used SIS

When the SSC opened, most of SSC staff knew how to use a **part** of SIS. To reduce the amount of "run around" for students they suddenly needed to understand and use a greater proportion of the whole system.

How do we recognize "fully trained" and how could the **A supervisor:** "I'm not sure I want

risks of training gaps be assessed?

access to all those [SIS] screens, 'cause I could be misinterpreting the information, unless I were fully trained."

Within the "home departments," UUC staff learn to use SIS during a slow apprenticeship period under the supervision of other people who are experts in that part of SIS. The apprenticeship process is not too visible because it is an integral part of daily work. As they perform their daily tasks, new staff gradually adopt a jointly held departmental perspective on, and acquire jointly held knowledge about, how to interpret a transaction or bit of text in an SIS screen. This apprenticeship process is the most common way to learn to use each of the university's information systems (or part of a system, such as the financial aid part of SIS).

Just before the Student Service Center opened, the administrators from the "home departments" organized a series of training sessions about SIS. Either because SSC staff did not yet realize that they would be expected to use and understand so much more of SIS or because the training was abstract and descriptive rather than concrete and situated (e.g., "here's how you use SIS to help a student in this situation"), SSC staff did not feel they got adequate information from those training sessions.

As discussed previously, the home departments are the repositories of a great deal of knowledge about how to interpret SIS, how transactions should be performed through SIS, and why those rules about interpretation and transactions are necessary. To some extent, SIS makes sense in the context of the home departments work processes. Since the introductory instruction was offered in a classroom format and the staff needed "hands-on" training, the SSC staff members took training into their own hands soon after they returned to their new work setting.

What's the relationship between "screens as screens" and "screens as tools for working"? How could it be difficult to connect the two?

An SSC Staff Member: "There were some kind of training sessions before the Service Center opened, but they were like pfffft, you know, half an hour or an hour of 'here's some screens, and here are some more,' and... and that's not the same as working."

"I think the training at the beginning was awkward until we ended up doing our own training sessions."

An SSC Staff Member: "[In the SSC] you do more problem solving than just give out general information, because each student comes up with a different problem. That's how you learn, how you learn about all the information that's out there."

This on-the-job training about using new parts of SIS was enabled by the physical space which allowed SSC staff to ask each other questions as different situations arose with students and with SIS. Since the SSC staff were trying to provide a single point of service that had not existed before, and the information system itself could not change, the only thing that could change was how the information systems was used. To use SIS better, SSC staff insisted on more training. Spending time with another SSC staff member for an afternoon's internship in a "home department" was a short but very useful apprenticeship.

An SSC Staff Member: "I just went over there [to one of the 'home departments'] and said, 'somebody's gotta teach me this stuff, 'cause, you know, *I'm getting these questions!*'"

Why would these "back office" details be important to someone who is providing "front office" customer service? How does "they let me" differ from "they trained me?"

"So, they let me answer the phone, they let me work on the SIS screens, they let me deal with the problems, and they also let me see how their office functions over there, and see little things like where they keep their files and how long they keep their files, and when they get rid of their files. Little things like that. That was the best [training] experience that I had."

Since the performance of the larger system is the joint product of so many factors, training SIS users might be seen as a substitute for changing the computer system. Greater and greater user competence could make SIS seem to be more and more "behind the scenes." What the SSC's external clients (students and administrators) are able to see is the result of the software system and the SSC staff member expertise combined. At what point does more training for staff become a poor investment that hides a real problem?

Passing SIS lore along in conversation does not seem to be enough.

Because SSC staff felt that the best way to learn about SIS was to learn incrementally, on a problem-by-problem basis, each staff member developed his or her own individual reference manuals. SSC staff members became involved in the never-ending process of getting things written down.

An SSC Staff Member: "It's almost like there does need to be a [special] Service Center training manual that has this information in it. If somebody would be responsible for keeping it current... It's gotta be at everybody's station too, to try to help the next generation of Service Center employees."

Just as there are risks in learning to use an information system by apprenticeship (e.g., learning in one group differs significantly from other groups in invisible ways that might be problematic), there may be risks in developing local documentation that is not normally seen by people in other groups.

An unintended benefit of the SSC is that its staff have an understanding of SIS that is embedded in work processes while simultaneously embracing more of the whole system than is possible in any one "home department." This has resulted in a new understanding for home departments (of their own policies or of those originating in other departments). And it has caused some specific improvements in university policy.

An Administrator: "The whole effort of cross-training is something that made us all think about what we do and it made us put it in writing so that we can try to explain what our area does to the other divisions. Sometimes it

would make you look at your own area and think, 'oh, that's kinda dumb, why do we do that?'"

An Administrator: "So we've revised some of our current policies and procedures based on the fact that they didn't always make sense."

Developing trust and access to more of SIS shape the SSC

Their proximity to each other and the training they gave each other enabled SSC staff to understand more and more of the whole system. It also gradually brought out the fact that the need-to-know, screen-by-screen security system in SIS still prevented them from providing the single-point-of-service that they were trying to provide. People sitting next to each other could not retrieve the same information from SIS because they reported to different "home departments" and thus had different access rights. Changing SIS access rules amounted to re-negotiating departmental boundaries.

An SSC Staff Member: "I think it's been an evolution. I don't think it's all the way there yet. But it's been an evolution where we've come to trust each other. We've come to realize that we can help. The more all of us know, the more we can help each other."

"During the busy time of the fall semester and spring semester, there were a lot of things that I couldn't do, so I had to direct traffic up to these other people, 'cause I didn't have access."

Personal Identification Numbers (PIN) are regarded as confidential because they work as a password for phone registration and other transactions where the student interacts directly with SIS.

"That was frustrating, because it was simple stuff, like looking up a student's PIN number, you know. All I needed was access to those screens."

*Separation of duties has been one of the most common mechanisms for assuring process integrity. What strategies are available for assuring integrity when the emphasis is so much on service **integration**? Was it SIS itself or **the way people think** that seemed to resist change?*

"And I felt that the ["home departments"] were being overly protective of their thing, their control over these screens. And I didn't even want **write** access, I just wanted view access so that I could help process the students. Well, after two or maybe three months, that access came through."

Once the process of opening up SIS had begun, it gained momentum because SSC staff asked each other to "do their share of the work." This put some pressure on the "home departments," who had traditionally reserved access to certain screens to themselves, granting access to other departments on an "as needed" basis.

An SSC Staff Member: "Eventually I just got the nerve up to ask [an SSC

work study who was not contributing much]. I said, 'you know, you can do this,' and she replied, 'well, we don't have access to that screen!'

"And then, it became clear to me. I'm like, 'oh, this is happening because **they just don't have access!**'

"And that was one of the reasons that I just didn't trust them and felt they were just not doing their jobs. But once they got access, they've made an effort to learn the information. It's a lot of information, so it's going to take them a while."

Even when access was granted, it wasn't necessarily a smooth process.

An SSC Staff Member: "We found out Friday we **have** access! No one ever, ever told us we had the access, and we **stumbled** upon it Friday."

As the interaction between the SSC and the artifacts that shape it is seen in this learning history to be dynamic, we may assume that the two will continue to influence each other in the future: the SSC will continue to evolve in response to its environment (the physical space, the conversations with students, the information systems, etc.) and the SSC itself will have a continuing effect on those artifacts.

Back to Business as Usual

As the SSC changed from being an experiment to simply being one more service unit demanding the attention of busy administrators, it became more clear that what had evolved still required ongoing management. Again, a significant part of that management was provided by SSC staff members themselves. It also became clear that support and guidance from outside the SSC was still necessary.

The SSC becomes a "regular" management problem.

A Supervisor: "In reality the service center represents only a small portion of what I do each day. It **should** get a lot more of my attention -- as should many other things. I need to spend more time with employees and the change process."

A Supervisor: "There's a perception that someone's in charge [of the SSC], but in fact no one's in charge. There is no direct supervisor of the service center. It lives as a unit."

Supervision and the staff meetings that tie the SSC staff together have continued to evolve over time. The sense of team identity among SSC staff permits them to provide a level of integration that would not be easy to match for the staff in the "home departments," who technically supervise the SSC staff.

Rotation of this function reflects the fact that no single "home department" has control over the SSC.

A Supervisor: "We were trying to run those [SSC Staff] meetings. And they

don't want us to do it anymore. So now the meetings are run by a staff member who is one of a four-person committee that's been set up. And one of these four people runs the meeting each time."

Because it's an ongoing process, there is really no end to designing the SSC.

A supervisor: "Service center staff meet as a team on a monthly basis to identify issues and bring proposals and problem solutions to the SSC management team.

The level of performance and rate of progress that SSC staff saw themselves making did not come without cost or significant ongoing effort.

An SSC Staff Member: "I think it's hard to give up control. It's hard to build an area where decisions are made by consensus instead of one department making their own decision and letting it stand. Because a lot of the stuff that we have to do [in the SSC], we have to figure out a way to agree on it."

But are each of the SSC staff members doing the same thing? Where do the "home departments" fit in?

A Supervisor: "I've always thought that the service center staff needs to report to the same person, to make it easier on everybody -- staff and supervisors -- and then the employees would feel like they are one: a group of people doing the same thing."

An SSC Staff Member: "We don't need a supervisor -- what we do need is a service center coordinator that will help with training needs, community outreach, and support the employees when needed. This person should not report to the supervisor of any of the areas represented in the service center."

An SSC Staff Member: "It seems that every semester goes smoother than the previous semester. I think we're making progress."

Real Life is Not So Rosy

Although the SSC is largely seen as a success, it has imperfections and the staff members must deal with the difficult problems that students bring. The SSC is not perfectly cohesive and there are always ideas for improvement. Some problems that SSC staff members must deal with have causes completely beyond their control.

An SSC Staff Member: "Sometimes you've

got a student in front of you who just failed his doctoral dissertation."

Can too much success be a problem?

An SSC Staff Member: "Maybe one of the downfalls of the service center is that it's so convenient, and students get used to the idea of having everything done there. So when you actually do have to tell them to cross the street or to go somewhere specific, you know, they're like, 'horror! horror!'"

An SSC Staff Member: "Yesterday I got yelled at [by a student]. It was frightening to have this angry person there."

The "user-friendly" environment without bullet-proof glass may come at a cost.

An Administrator: "I do have my concerns about security [at the SSC]."

Students experience the convenience of the SSC only after experiencing the hassle of finding a parking space.

An Administrator: "I think there's one minor, very minor flaw in the SSC and that is that there really isn't any parking where somebody can run in and take care of their business and then go about their way."

Integration between the two sides of the SSC is not perfect.

SSC staff member #1 (from the Cashier's side): "It's still the Bursar's Office and the Service Center."

SSC staff member #2 (from the "other side"): "Yeah."

SSC staff member #1: "I mean, I feel a little bit of resentment from that side, too, that maybe we don't do as much for them as they do for us sometimes. That may be a wrong perception, I don't know."

SSC staff are sophisticated communicators, able to raise issues in non-confrontational ways.

SSC staff member #2: "No, I think that's a correct perception."

Can the Success be Replicated?

Nevertheless the SSC is seen as a model for growth and change and the campus faces the question as to whether the SSC's success can be replicated in other settings. It is a matter of debate whether the success of the SSC was based

on unique and local conditions or not. Thus questions remain regarding whether and how it would be possible to take the SSC idea and extend it to other areas at UUC. Many ideas have been suggested about how the success of the SSC could be leveraged in one way or another for further progress.

An Administrator: "I would like to see the student service center coordinate, on a once-a-semester or once-a-year basis, with each of the academic units at the undergraduate level.

Everyone who deals with students on "administrative" issues should talk.

"It seems to me that a meeting to increase communication, not that there's issues that have to be resolved, but let's just get together and talk about what we need to do so that we understand each other's function a little bit.

"Then when minor problems come up, you can put a name with a face. You can put issues with policies and we can try and do a better job of working with students."

An Administrator: "I like the [SSC] concept a lot. I think we could do a lot along those lines. The barrier here is that the deans at this institution are put in a position of stabbing each other in the back as part of doing their job.

There seems to be disagreement about common goals. Do they exist or not?

"I don't see that this institution has what I call a vision towards common goals. It's everybody out there fighting over nonexistent space and nonexistent dollars.

But did the SSC seem "possible" beforehand? To what extent is seeing what's possible an individual or a group characteristic?

"And so I don't see any cooperation to do some of these things. And it takes a fair amount of fortitude to make that big a change."

What if all administrators could choose to look at student issues from a "front counter" perspective?

An Administrator: "When you run that front counter you get a whole different perspective of what student issues are, what their concerns are, how they approach it."

A Closing Snapshot: The Heart of SSC

An SSC Staff Member: "I had a woman stop by who was 82 years old, who was just wandering, bless her heart. She had made lots of phone calls, but had not ever actually been to the university.

"She wanted to study music and she knew that she could be in this Golden Age program where their tuition is paid for, but she hadn't been on a university campus for a long time.

"And she just stopped to rest in my chair, really. And we started to talk, and she was terrified. She was really terrified.

"The whole thing was too big for her, the campus was too big, she didn't understand what she was supposed to do. She had called different places and gotten different stories. I reassured her that she was OK.

"She came back several times. She started three weeks before the semester started, and then each week she'd come to get a little more familiar, and as she came by she'd stop and say hello to me.

"And after the semester started she came back and said, 'I just love this... This is just the most fun!' She said, 'those people at the home wonder what I'm doing.'"

"She said, 'but they can just sit in their rocking chairs and rock.' She said, '***I'm learning how to write music!***'"

Chronology and Project Milestones

UUC and SSC	Date	Learning History Project
1994		
The service center idea is proposed to UUC administration.	October	
1995		
The New Urban University "NUU" initiative is announced. It includes "a user friendly campus" as one of 4 UUC goals.	January	
A physical planning study demonstrates that additional square footage is needed to meet "minimum requirements."	March	
Administration identifies initial funding for SSC renovation.	April	
Service delivery issues are discussed by administrators.	July	
First physical move makes way for SSC renovation.	August	
Final funding for the redesign is identified.	December	
1996		
Architect is selected and supervisors work on planning issues.	February-March	
Communication efforts to obtain buy in and support .	January - August	
Physical renovation.	April -August	
Staff are involved in planning SSC and training begins, raising information system access issues.	June - August	
The new Student Service Center opens, ready or not.	August	
SSC shake-down begins.	September	Learning history project first proposed.
1997		
	July	Learning history team is formed.
	August	Interviews are completed.
SSC services and procedures continue to evolve.	August to November	
	September to following March	Learning history is written.
1998		

SSC supervision issues are discussed within UUC administration.	January	Quotes are verified and draft is circulated for review.
Large turnover in service center staff.	February	
	March	First learning history dissemination.

Methodology

The basics

The document was written by a small team of SSC "insiders" and "outsiders" -- a UUC student services administrator, an administrator from the University system office, and an outside consultant. The team interviewed 22 individuals. The interviewees included full- and part-time staff, work-study students, supervisors, administrators, executives and faculty. The interviews were two to three hours in length. Meeting notes, interdepartmental memos, construction drawings and other documents served as additional sources of information.

Reflective Conversations

The group interviews on which this learning history is based began with a series of broad questions about the change process and a preliminary list of "noticeable results" derived from preliminary conversations with the student services administrator. However, the ultimate direction and content of these interviews, or conversations, revolved around particular topics brought up by the participants. The learning historians made efforts to set a tone of reflection and inquiry in order to draw out the deepest insights possible.

Costs and Benefits: Working Within Time and Financial Constraints

This document was produced as an exploration into the potential uses of the learning history concept and methodology in the context of time and financial constraints which precluded the extensive individual interview process and the exhaustive analysis of interview transcripts which serve to make many learning histories so authoritative.

In pursuit of this goal, we adopted a group interview strategy. In addition to reducing the time investment in the interview process, this strategy produced a mix of other substantive costs and benefits--we sacrificed deeper insight into individual perspectives, while we gained elaboration and development of those perspectives in a group context in which participants were stimulated to consider the views and perspectives of others, as well as a sense of some collaborative, collective perspectives on the SSC experience.

We also limited the total number of participants to be interviewed and the number of times we interviewed each participant. We interviewed 22 participants; we would have liked to interview many more. We interviewed each participant, or group of participants, once; we would have liked to return for follow-up interviews with some of the participants as we proceeded with analysis of the interview transcripts. Despite these constraints, we were able to interview participants with a wide and representative range of perspectives, involvements and stake in the project and we were able to delve deeply enough into their thinking to produce some satisfying insights into their experiences.

Finally, we limited the number of story lines, or themes, developed in our analysis and the extent to which we developed those themes. Our data would support further development of the themes we did explore, as well as identification and development of additional themes. Some of the additional themes we noticed as we worked through the interview transcripts are noted in the introduction.

Thus, we offer here an abbreviated learning history, or perhaps a case study 'cousin' of the learning history approach, which serves two purposes. It stands on its own as a tool for understanding and learning about organizational change. It also introduces UUC to the concept of learning histories by providing a real UUC example of, or glimpse into, their potential utility and power.

Further Reading

- Kleiner, Art and Roth, George: "The Learning Initiative at the AutoCo Epsilon Program," was an inspiration and example. Parts of it exist on the Web (at: <http://www.sol-ne.org/prapro/aut/index.html>) but the full-length version is highly recommended (it can be ordered at <http://learning.mit.edu/res/wp/ordering.html>).
- The "Field Manual for the Learning Historian," published by the MIT Center for Organizational Learning and Reflection Learning Associates (1996) has provided much guidance and food for thought. Again, the first chapter is available on the Web (at <http://ccs.mit.edu/lh/intro.html>), but the full-length version is highly recommended (it also can be ordered at <http://learning.mit.edu/res/wp/ordering.html>).
- Kleiner, Art and Roth, George: "How to Make Experience Your Company's Best Teacher," *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 75, No. 5, September-October 1997. An accessible and thorough introduction that focuses on the significance of learning histories. A summary and ordering information is available on the Web at: <http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu/noframes/groups/hbr/sepoct97/97506.html>.
- Reflection Learning Associates, Inc. provides an excellent bibliography (at <http://www.fieldbook.com/rla-bibl.htm>) that includes papers about the subject of learning histories, published learning histories, antecedent models, theory, tools and methods. Related materials are at <http://www.fieldbook.com/rlearning.htm>.
- Pascale, Richard, Millemann, Mark , and Gioja, Linda : "Changing the Way We Change" *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 75, No. 6, November-December 1997, influenced our thinking as we wrote this learning history. A summary and ordering information is available on the Web at: <http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu/bin/showbook/frames?97609>.