CHALLENGES

- Improve student intake experience from application through awarding financial aid for students, faculty, and staff
- Identify retention strategies to support students in achieving educational goals
- Expedite employee hiring to attract and employ the best and brightest job candidates to the institution
- Maximize Piedmont Technical College's (PTC) ERP and related technology investment to provide functionality that exceeds stakeholder expectations

SOLUTIONS

- Facilitate dialogue among administrators, faculty, and staff for consensus on strategies to enhance PTC environment
- Redesign work practices and processes to achieve efficiencies and deliver improved services to students
- Analyze current employee recruitment and hiring practices to identify opportunities for improvement
- Integrate PTC technology functionality to support ideal processes and approaches

RESULTS

- Adhere to Lean principles, reducing inefficient and ineffective processes without cutting services to students, faculty, and staff
- Increase student enrollment and improve student retention rates, delivering on student expectations
- Reduce employee hiring time and improve onboarding programs,
- Estimated 25% of enrollment growth due to better service to transfers
- Significantly greater effectiveness and efficiency in enrollment management

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Improving student intake, student retention, and employee hiring at Piedmont Technical College

Providing educational opportunities to seven counties in the Lakelands region of South Carolina, Piedmont Technical College (PTC) serves the largest geographic area of any institution in the South Carolina Technical College System.

Profile

PTC has been an innovative leader in comprehensive 2-year community colleges within the state since its founding in 1961. Enrollment has increased continuously, with PTC responding to the needs of its students through diverse programs including health science, engineering, technology, general education, and veterinary technology. PTC also offers transfer programs to 4-year colleges and universities.

PTC offers academic degrees, diplomas, and certificates, as well as non-credit courses and training programs that serve individuals, businesses, and organizations through the College's Continuing Education Division. PTC has also received regional and state recognition for its distance-learning programs.

In 2008, the economic downturn that affected the entire nation caused PTC to redefine how to maintain its level of quality services in a time of declining revenue. The answer for PTC was to adopt Lean principles that are based in problem-solving, empowerment of faculty and staff, and data-driven decisions.

Challenges

Three areas were identified as being of high importance to maintaining the continuing quality of the College's services and operations:

- Student intake, from application to awarding financial aid
- Student retention
- Employee hiring and onboarding

Stakeholders realized that using Lean principles could improve conditions in these areas and bring about an innovative approach to accomplish PTC goals.

Student Intake

The process for students to be admitted to PTC and apply for financial aid was time- and paper-intensive for staff and students alike. Staff frustration surrounded communication with students and their ability to respond to admissions instructions. A strong desire to meet student needs prompted the Admissions and Financial Aid teams to rework and combine efforts to admit students and award aid successfully.

Student Retention

PTC realized that there was confusion in policies and policy interpretations for attendance, canceling classes, overrides, and midterm grades that were making the identification of students who needed help difficult. Interventions were inconsistent, and communication with students was sometimes inadequate. Although there were academic areas that had met student retention challenges, many others had not. Members of the student retention team desired to make significant strides in keeping students in classes so that the educational objectives of students could be realized.

Employee Hiring and Onboarding

Multiple forms for accomplishing similar tasks, manual processes, and delayed management approvals permeated the hiring practices at PTC. ERP and related technology functionality did not appear to be as effective at streamlining processes as it could be. A lack of time to problem-solve coupled with demands of the current workload prohibited PTC from moving forward to find new ways to hire and onboard top candidates.

Where to Start?

PTC Vice President Leadership team members realized that to significantly improve services, PTC needed an objective third party that could identify institutional needs. PTC sought a consulting firm that understood and had experience with the following:

- The role of community colleges in higher education learning
- The processes associated with admitting students and providing financial aid assistance
- The hiring and onboarding of employees including work study students
- PTC's adherence to Lean objectives

Strata Information Group (SIG) was selected because of its experience and expertise in the above requirements for this project. After discussions with PTC leadership to understand the culture and technology environment of the College, SIG recommended a structured approach for achieving significant improvements in the identified areas while moving the institution toward a positive shift in a culture that embraced the Lean philosophy.

SIG assembled three teams of highly seasoned Student and Human Resources consultants to work with PTC stakeholders to examine the student intake process, student retention, and employee hiring and onboarding work practices. For each area, a Business Process Analysis and Redesign workshop was held.

In preparation for designing new processes, SIG helped PTC discover opportunities to simplify and streamline services and thereby enhance the PTC experience for constituencies. These included institutional policy, procedure, and technology enhancements. As discussions progressed, each SIG consultant team provided guidance about how ERP and related technology functionality could support the new and improved ways of providing services.

Solutions

The Student Intake team and the Employee Hiring/Onboarding team, which included SIG consultants, determined that the flow of their tasks and activities could support construction of redesigned work routines. Subsequently, PTC constructed new ways of performing these processes. PTC's refined and enhanced ERP functionality, imaging management software, and workflow applications were layered over the new processes to support automation of approval and communication tasks.

In the case of student retention, a somewhat unique approach was employed. Unlike processing admissions applications or managing employee onboarding, retention depends on a combination of behaviors, activities, and techniques that together can be used to support students in and out of classes. The Student Retention team identified process improvements, technology enhancements, and interventions in five categories:

- New and returning students
- Faculty
- Communications and Connections
- Outside the Classroom
- Reporting

PTC project sponsors took on the responsibility of championing the projects. They each advocated for resources as needed and communicated the importance of implementing significant changes in these areas to PTC constituencies. To help PTC implement the new processes and realize the efforts of the workshop participants, high-level project plans for each area were developed that included:

- Realistic implementation timelines
- Major tasks including ERP refinements and workflow routines development
- Roles and responsibilities
- Committees/persons responsible
- Project communication strategies
- Key performance indicators to measure project progress and success
- For student retention, a focus on automating notifications and communications as part of identified interventions

Results

In keeping with Lean principles, participant teams focused on measuring their success. Quantifying results was important to the College and is considered a best practice in project management. Today, PTC is proud of the progress that the work teams have made. Nearly every indicator of success has not only achieved but exceeded expectations. In addition, PTC has experienced a model that can be adapted and used in the future to improve all facets of the PTC experience.