Chapter IV

Portals: Your Institution’s Reputation Depends on Them

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ABSTRACT

Whether 18 years old and raised on the Internet or an adult seeking the convenience of online service, today’s student expects personalizable, online self-service, along with high-touch access to help when self-service falters. Personalizable, online self-service is the promise of the campus portal, a promise that can be achieved and afforded if colleges and universities take seriously the challenge to transform and redesign the form and substance of their high-touch interactions with students and other stakeholders.

INTEGRATED, COMPREHENSIVE, PERSONALIZABLE SELF-SERVICE

“Portal” is a word that should be understood first, not so much as a technology, but as a means to unify three aspects of a quality service environment: 1) the horizontal integration of a comprehensive set of services, 2) the personal customization of those services at the discretion of the service receiver and 3) self-service. Portals enable the integration of services in an online self-service environment and can help
improve customer satisfaction through the personal customization of those services. Customer satisfaction derives not only from the flexibility of self-service and the “one-stop shopping” enabled by horizontal integration, but also from the desire for personalized service that takes each individual’s service needs and privacy needs into account. However, self-service and personalized service have heretofore been more in opposition than not. On the one hand, “self-service” has typically described a service environment in which there is little or no human mediation—the supermarket in which you fill your own shopping cart and hope not to need help from store personnel until you arrive at the checkout line. (Even the checkout line is now being disintermediated by bar codes and new technologies that read bar codes to total your choices and charge them to your charge card or bank account.) On the other hand, “personalized service” has typically implied a high degree of human mediation—the clerk who recognizes you when you enter the store, knows your preferences and mediates between those preferences and available retail choices, and is genuinely interested in helping you make a purchase that truly meets your needs.

An “enterprise” portal—or institutional portal in the higher education context—is an Internet-enabled service interface that enables the convergence of self-service and personalized service and permits the comprehensive integration of the organization’s overall service environment—including desirable services that are external to the organization. Harnessing portal technology to serve an organization’s mission most effectively and efficiently requires skipping or moving beyond the mere “bolt-on” stage of technology adoption—a lesson apparently destined to be repeated in the adoption of every major new technology. There is only cosmetic gain in bolting a portal technology onto existing service processes because most of these service processes have been designed in a vertical, departmental paradigm that neglects the customer’s desire for an integrated, one-stop service process. For example, dropping or adding a course typically requires visiting at least two different offices to complete, as does the financial-aid process, and many readers will recall standing in at least five different departmental lines to register for five courses. In a portal implementation, there will be no cost efficiencies unless most service processes are redesigned and streamlined to drive out unnecessary expenses while integrating service islands.

In higher education, portals can integrate and personalize online not only the processes associated with administrative and financial services, but also the academic processes associated with learning services—instructional services, library services, tutoring services, advising services and so on. Of course, this does not happen automatically but requires a concerted effort at the institutional level—and sometimes at the inter-institutional level—to redesign and integrate various academic and administrative processes comprising the overall educational process.
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