

Individual Paper: Southwestern College

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MGMT520 – Managing Organizational Change and Conflict

March 31, 2013

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Abstract

Southwestern College, a private not-for-profit college affiliated with the United Methodist Church was founded in 1885 and has continue to change in order to stay current and offer what learners are looking for in meeting their educational goals. In 1994, Southwestern College launched Southwestern College Online and Southwestern College Professional Studies, later becoming Southwestern College Professional Studies in order to stay ahead of the trends in education by offering programs targeted toward adults that needed to complete a degree and offering courses online so that the working professional could find time to fit course work into their already busy schedules. Over the years, Southwestern College has changed multiple times and it is a sign of good leadership that changes, for the most part, are often welcomed and embraced.

Individual Paper: Southwestern College

I currently work for Southwestern College. There are several variations of “Southwestern” based schools across the United States, as I have come to learn through way of my current job. The school I work for is boasts its main campus in Winfield, Kansas. Southwestern College is a small to medium size school founded in 1885 with ties to the United Methodist Church with 6 locations in Kansas and 1 in Oklahoma. The office I work out of, the majority of the time, is located in Wichita, Kansas at one of two locations inside the Wichita city limits. Outside of the main campus in Winfield, Kansas, the other satellite locations are a part of a group known as Southwestern College Professional Studies. While I work at a satellite location, part of Southwestern College Professional Studies, I do not actually work for nor am I a part of the Professional Studies group. Rather, I am a main campus employee who reports directly to the business office located in Winfield, Kansas. While this makes perfect sense to me, as this is “how things were” when I started working there, things had not always been this way and it took some adjusting for other employees who were/are a part of the Professional Studies Group.

Change is always something that the business office group is working through. While not all change is by choice, especially in regards to new payroll taxes, laws, and the like that seem to change on a consistent basis, some change is by choice for the sole purpose of improving processes, customer service and overall success of the organization. One specific change example that comes to mind is a situation regarding the U.S. Military temporarily ceasing its tuition assistance program, which provides aid for soldiers so that they can pursue an education. With this change, Southwestern College had to act fast to figure out how to remain competitive while still helping its learners reach their own unique educational goals. From a business office

perspective, this change, while shaky and unclear initially, became a streamlined success with little effort, much attributed to the success of Southwestern College's overall leadership.

Organization and Background

Southwestern College was founded in 1885 by the United Methodist Church, and began offering classes to students in the Fall semester of 1886. In 1994, Southwestern College decided to offer programs specifically targeted toward working adults that needed to finish or complete their degree. As a result, Southwestern College Professional Studies was formed as a part of Southwestern College. With its initial office in Winfield, Kansas, Southwestern College Professional Studies strived to provide working adults with an opportunity to work their existing jobs while attending classes during the evenings and weekends. In 2001, Southwestern College Professional Studies began offering online courses geared toward the working professional. Today, Southwestern College Professional Studies has two offices in Wichita, Kansas, one office on McConnell Air Force Base, one office on Fort Riley Army Base, one office in Midwest City, Oklahoma and one office in Overland Park, Kansas. With the launch of online programs, the majority of Southwestern College Professional Studies' students attend courses online around the world.

With a presence on two military installations, and one of the few participants in the eArmyU program, an online program that only a select number of schools were allowed to participate in (as the program has since been retired), Southwestern College Professional Studies has a large number of military affiliated learners, from active duty military personnel, spouses of military personnel, or Department of Defense civilian employees. While this large number of

military affiliated learners, Southwestern College Professional Studies has many students that utilize federal tuition assistance through the military branch in which they are affiliated.

Introduction of Problem/Change/Conflict

With a large number of students utilizing federal tuition assistance through the military, Southwestern College Professional Studies had become dependent on tuition assistance funding through the military. Over the past several years, the United States government has had trouble reaching agreements, specifically in regard to budgeting and national debt. As a result, the U.S. Congress enacted into law, a policy referred to as sequestration so that in the event that the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives do not reach a mutual agreement on these issues, the United States government will in essence “shut down” and immediately being to cease funding until such a time that an agreement can be reached.

In early 2013, the Department of Defense was told that they must reduce billions of dollars from their budget. In response, different military branches began suspending their tuition assistance programs. The U.S. Army was the first branch to suspend the program, informing current students that were already enrolled in courses that their current enrollments would be paid, but they would not be allowed to register for additional course to be paid for by the military until such a time that the sequester was resolved and additional money was placed back in the Department of Defense’s budget. The U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Air Force also followed the Army and suspended their tuition assistance programs as well. While this may have temporarily “fixed” the Department of Defense’s problem of needing to reduce their budget, it did not fix how thousands of soldiers for the U.S. Military now felt. Many of whom felt betrayed that they were losing a benefit offered to them for the service that they perform for their country.

While many people do not join the military specifically for one benefit or another, but rather for the opportunity to serve their country and to be rewarded in the process. Many soldiers enjoy the tuition assistance program as it allows them to obtain a degree that they can use when they eventually retire from the military and begin working back in the civilian world again. While the skills and information that soldiers learn in their day-to-day operations are important and vital to what they do, the majority of that information is not applicable in the civilian world. This is why the military offers the tuition assistance program: so that soldiers can be productive in the civilian world after they are no longer affiliated with the military.

Southwestern College Professional Studies immediately recognized this as a problem and a major area of concern. While Southwestern College Professional Studies does have its own budget and its own revenues generated, it is still part of Southwestern College as a whole and as such everything is funneled together. Within days of the announcement that the U.S. Army would be immediately suspending its tuition assistance program, followed by the U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Air Force, Southwestern College's president, Dick Merriman, sent out an email to all employees affiliated with Southwestern College. In his email, Merriam discussed the immediate impact that the sequestration caused regarding the suspension of military tuition assistance on Southwestern College and its budget. Southwestern College operates its fiscal year from July 1 through June 30. For fiscal year 2013 (July 1, 2012 through June 30, 2013) the project impact of the suspension of military tuition assistance was devastating. Assuming the government does not end the sequestration and tuition assistance is not reinstated, Southwestern College is looking at a loss of revenues between \$600,000 and \$1,000,000. This is an enormous reduction in revenues that had been counted on for purposes of budgeting. As a result, president Merriman immediately suspended all spending and discussed how Southwestern College

Professional Studies is looking for ways to reduce its dependence on military tuition assistance and hopes to be less dependent on the military in the future.

Comparison of Strategies

Jick and Peiperl (2011) suggest that organizations often change in response to a problem, even if the problem is not life threatening. Southwestern College Professional Studies knew it must act and must act quickly in order to maintain enrollments in the third session of Spring 2013 that begins on April 1. While this scenario for this particular enrollment period was not “life threatening” for the college, it was definitely a cause for concern as the potential for loss of revenues for this enrollment period combined with the next one was a cause for immediate concern and the situation required action. From the date the U.S. Army announced it would be suspending its tuition assistance program, Southwestern College Professional Studies had three weeks to devise a strategy and implement it into action. Much thought and consideration was utilized during this time in addition to constant communication. Jick and Peiperl (2011) suggest that having honest communication can be a vital tool for overcoming the challenge of change and allowing the internal organization to be more personally invested. Communication also allows members of the organization to feel at ease with change.

After days of deliberation, Southwestern College Professional Studies determined that offering a grant to existing learners that would have normally utilized military tuition assistance would be the most beneficial method to not only retain existing students but also to show existing students that Southwestern College Professional Studies is dedicated to helping them with their educational goals. While most decisions at Southwestern College Professional Studies that require change to existing policies and procedures take much longer to be decided upon, this decision came rather quickly because of the specific time constraints in place. From the time the

U.S. Army announced it would be suspending its tuition assistance program on March 8, 2013 until Southwestern College announced it would be offering a grant to existing students was only ten days, March 18, 2013.

Implementation of Plan

The new grant, called the Southwestern College Military Tuition Assistance Grant, or MTAG for short, was being offered to learners that used military tuition assistance at Southwestern College between Fall 2012 session 1 (August 2012) and Spring 2013 session 2 (February 2013). The grant would cover up to a 3 credit-hour course at a rate of \$250 per credit-hour and had the same restrictions as military tuition assistance in that the learner was subject to a \$4500 per year cap, following the military fiscal year from October 1 through September 30. This means that anyone who used military tuition assistance for Fall 2012 session 3 through Spring 2013 session 2 and had already used \$4500 of tuition assistance would be ineligible for the Military Tuition Assistance Grant.

These restrictions were placed on the program because of several laws and rules that govern schools that utilize federal funding by means of military tuition assistance and new students. Additionally, schools are prohibited from offering a “gift” or other incentive to attract new students as part of these restrictions. Offering this grant to new students would be in clear violation of these laws. Southwestern College Professional Studies also decided to use the same \$4500 cap that the military tuition assistance program uses because current learners using the military tuition assistance program were already subject to these limitations and could only take a certain number of courses during the fiscal year. The new grant was not intended to offer more funding to students, but rather to supplement funding that had normally been available that was no longer being offered.

After these criterion had been established regarding eligibility, it was determined that a group would need to be in charge of reviewing eligibility and applying the grant to the students' accounts. It was decided that the billing office would be the best group to determine eligibility and devise a method of applying the grant to accounts. The billing office already had access to students' accounts and would be able to determine if the student had used military tuition assistance between Fall 2012 session 1 and Spring 2013 session 2. They would also be able to determine the amount of tuition assistance that had been utilized from Fall 2013 session 2 through Spring 2013 session 2. Additionally, military students were already accustomed to sending their approved tuition assistance forms to the billing office's general email, accounts@sckans.edu, and it would make sense for these students to send their military tuition assistance grant applications to this email address as well.

The leadership team of Southwestern College Professional Studies had already been working to increase communication between current learners and their academic success coach. In an effort to help increase this communication, the leadership team decided that the academic success coaches would be the group to notify learners as to whether or not their grant application was approved or denied. The leadership team requested that after the billing office reviews the applications, that the "approval" or "denial" would be sent to our data management specialist so that she would be able to not only track the number of approved versus denied application, but also so that she could send the approval or denial to the student's individual academic success coach. The academic success coach would then be responsible for notifying the student that their application was either approved or denied.

On March 18, 2013, Southwestern College Professional Studies sent out a mass email to all military learners that had been enrolled in the college from August 2012 to current notifying

them of the new grant that was available. The marketing department created a PDF form so that information could be collected including name, address, branch of military service and whether or not the student had used federal financial aid during the Spring 2013 term and a link to the form was inserted into the mass email.

The billing office members decided to meet the same day in order to devise a method and strategy for reviewing applications and applying the grant to the students' accounts. The billing office already had tools that allowed different charges or payments to be imported from lists into the college's academic software. The billing office members decided that keeping a spreadsheet of all applications that had been either approved or denied would be easier to track and would help prevent duplication in the event that a student attempted to apply for the grant more than once. The goal was to have the grant applied to students' accounts the day after they received an approval. This meant that the spreadsheet would need a separate worksheet for each day's approvals. The following day, one person would import all of the approved grants for learners that were enrolled in courses from the previous day. Additionally, because the applications were being sent to one inbox, it was determined that one person would log in to this mailbox and divide out the applications among all the members of the billing office so that the workload was evenly distributed. In order to accomplish this, one person would stay signed in to the accounts@sckans.edu mail account and forward the applications that came in between the three members of the billing office.

To no one's surprise, forms began filling the billing office's inbox the same day. After the assigned person distributing the applications among the three members of the billing office it was determined that we had encountered a problem that must be resolved. Many of the students that were submitting applications for the grant were not enrolled in any course for the third

session of Spring 2013. This meant that the billing office would not be able to apply the grant to the student's account. To overcome this issue, the members of the billing office conferenced via phone and determined that it would be necessary to create another worksheet within the spreadsheet that had been created. This new worksheet would be for "approved not enrolled". This meant that now there would be a separate worksheet for each day's approved applications of enrolled learners, denied applications and approved applications for learners that were not yet enrolled. Creating a separate worksheet for the learners that were not enrolled was easy. The challenging part was determining how to go back and figure out if these students had enrolled after receiving an approval. After some further research, it was determined that it would be fairly easy to run a report from the academic software of all enrollments for the third session of Spring 2013. It would then be possible to compare this report with the report of learners approved for the grant but not enrolled and then move the learners that had enrolled from this worksheet to the worksheet of approved and enrolled for that particular day.

Anticipated Results and Measurements for Success

When the Military Tuition Assistance Grant was created by Southwestern College Professional Studies no one knew exactly how many applications would be received because this was a new incentive being offered with little time for students to act. While the goal was for a large number of applications so that Southwestern College Professional Studies could maintain or even increase their enrollment numbers for the third session of Spring 2013, at the same time certain members of Southwestern College leadership teams were hoping for smaller numbers of applications as the grant being offered was not backed by any funding but was merely writing off revenue from the college's reports. Obviously the goal of any higher educational institution is to provide their students with the opportunity to pursue their educational goals. Southwestern

College Professional Studies, because it has a large number of military students, also wanted to impress on the military community that they fully support our nation's military servicemen and women and continually strive to help them meet their educational goals.

Success with the Military Tuition Assistance Grant program goes beyond enrollment numbers for Southwestern College. The long-term goal of this grant was to allow individuals to see that Southwestern College Professional Studies cares about their learners and in a time of crisis, will help out in whatever way possible. Now that the final numbers have been tallied, over 140 students were able to benefit from this program. Not only are these 140 students grateful to Southwestern College Professional Studies for offering them the ability to continue their education, some of whom had no other means financially to do so, but many are now motivated to continue their education with Southwestern College Professional Studies and tell their friends about their positive experience as well.

Conclusion

Organizations often spend large amounts of money on advertising and marketing themselves so that they can attract people to their organization and promote their image. Southwestern College Professional Studies was able to do this without spending a large amount of money by simply offering to help out its students in a time of need. Offering a grant to students who had just lost their ability to pay for their education meant for some that they now desired to continue taking classes with Southwestern College Professional Studies where they previously had been searching for an alternate school. Change happens every day and being able to react in a positive way and with great communication will often prevent discomfort typically associated with change.

References

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