



MAPPING OUT BUSINESS PROCESSES

Everything we do involves a process, even tasks as routine as making coffee: Measure and place coffee grounds in the filter, add water to the machine, place the pot on the burner and push the start button. Similarly, there are processes for tasks handled by study abroad offices, although admittedly more complex. To ensure these tasks are done efficiently, some study abroad professionals have adopted a practice called process mapping.

The term may sound as though it were plucked from a computer science lexicon, but at its heart process mapping is simply creating a workflow diagram to obtain a clear understanding of the steps in any business process. “For me, process mapping means writing down what you do. It’s really that simple,” says Stacey Hansen, Senior Education Abroad Advisor and Operations Coordinator at the University of Virginia. Typically, the list of tasks also identifies the person responsible for each one and a timeline indicating when tasks need to be done.

Hansen began process mapping in 2010, when she took on new responsibilities in the department and tried to get a firm understanding of them. Now she’s an advocate for process mapping. She and two other study abroad professionals led a session on the topic entitled “Finding Efficiencies in Education Abroad” at NAFSA’s 2016 Annual Conference.

Documenting all the tasks involved in important activities or programs can:

1. streamline operations

and

2. create efficiencies.



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"As we move farther away from just offering traditional study abroad programs, our work is getting a little more frenetic and difficult to manage," says Brook Blahnik, Associate Director of the Learning Abroad Center at the

University of Minnesota and a co-presenter at the NAFSA session. "Now it's not just semester-long programs, but winter breaks, summer sessions, research abroad, internships and service learning. The models and

program types are more diverse, and we're doing them more often, which makes everything more complex to manage." This makes process mapping an imperative for Blahnik's team.



WHY DOES PROCESS MAPPING MATTER?

Making lists or diagrams of all the tasks handled by your office may seem daunting and unnecessarily time-consuming. But Hansen and Blahnik cite several scenarios, adapted from the book "The Power of Business Process Improvement" by Susan Page, that indicate it may be time to map your processes:

- Students or faculty complain about your processes.
- Study abroad staff are making errors—often the same ones over and over again.
- You don't have enough time to complete your tasks and would like more time to focus on valuable work.
- You've been asked to increase the number of study abroad participants, but without an increase in resources or staff.
- Your department has been doing things the same way for years.

"The use of process mapping to document how work gets done in a study abroad office helps achieve the goal of identifying inefficiencies in processes, making those processes transparent to others, and effectively training new staff," says Blahnik. He started using process mapping about two years ago, beginning with the university's faculty-led programs. Blahnik realized they needed close examination when "no single person in our 40-person office could actually explain to me the whole process for faculty-led programs end to end." Staff members only understood the role they played.

"I didn't find any glaring problems, but a lot of areas could be more efficient," says Blahnik. The Learning Abroad Center created a process map for faculty-led programs, tweaked areas that needed improvement and shared the map with everyone involved with the programs. "The hallmark of a decent finished process map is that you don't need special knowledge to look at it," says Blahnik. "It's pretty intuitive when you see the steps laid out."



WHERE SHOULD YOU BEGIN?

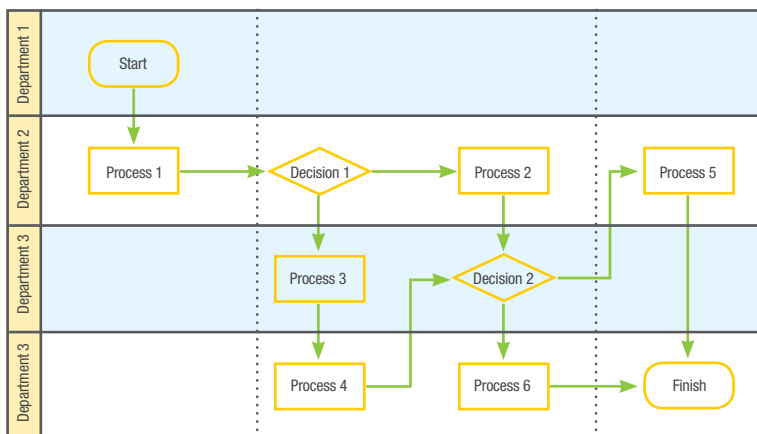


In her book, Page mentions three primary considerations when examining business processes: efficiency, effectiveness and adaptability. An ideal process is one that is easily understood and accomplished by staff (efficient), that delivers the results needed to stakeholders (effective) and that can be modified if and when necessary (adaptable). Ask yourself the following when examining business processes:

- **Efficiency**—Who is doing what, and how quickly or easily can it be done?
- **Effectiveness**—Does the process deliver what it should and to the right people (students, staff, faculty, affiliates, etc.)?
- **Adaptability**—Can the process be easily modified to fit changing circumstances?

There are many different types of process mapping. For instance, if you're looking at work done across many departments in your university, you might consider a relationship map. This tracks relationships that exist between everyone involved in the process: Who are the stakeholders, and what role do they play? Or you can map specific jobs within a process using a flowchart to note each task performed in the order they occur.

One of the most common mapping techniques used by the University of Minnesota is cross-functional mapping, also known as a “swim lane diagram.” Think of a swimming pool with several lanes. Each lane represents a department or staff member. Starting with the first step in a process, each activity and decision is placed in a box and displayed in the appropriate lane. Arrows connect each activity, showing the progression of the process across the pool until its conclusion, as shown here:



There are lots of good resources to help universities get started with process mapping. In addition to “The Power of Business Process Improvement,” Blahnik also recommends “The Basics of Process Mapping” by Robert Damelio. You can begin with a simple process to get your feet wet, select a cumbersome process you would like to streamline or choose one that would have the most impact on your organization.

One of the processes mapped out by the University of Virginia was its application data and requirements. Previously, the application process for study abroad programs was quite lengthy. “We wanted to know everything about students so we could advise them in the best way and determine if they were the best fit for each program,” says Hansen. “It really was a ‘pie-in-the-sky’ approach. But we didn’t actually need all of the things we were asking for, and not all of them were useful.”

When Hansen and her team mapped out the application process, they realized that requiring students applying for scholarships to submit letters of recommendation was unwarranted. All the letters they received were positive, and most didn’t include truly meaningful information. “The requirement created more stress for the students and people asked to write the letters, but it wasn’t contributing to our evaluation of students for a scholarship,” says Hansen. The university has stopped asking for letters of recommendation.



“You need to be intentional and thoughtful about your decisions and make sure you make them based on good data,” says Hansen. “Process making helps you do that.” Blahnik agrees, and adds that while the task of process mapping is time-consuming, the end results are worth the effort.

“Once you’ve got a really robust process documentation library, you will actually save time,” he says. “Rather than putting all your energy and time into dealing with the fallout when problems occur, the hope is those issues won’t come up in the first place. And if they do, you can anticipate them much better.”



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