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Improving Student Support on a Decentralized Campus

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Improving Student Support on a Decentralized Campus

Project Management Ensures Campus Stakeholder Buy-in, Cross-Collaboration, and Thorough Communication

by Delaney Ybarra, MA, Andrea Garrity, MS, and Erica L. Wagner, PhD

Portland State University's Office of Student Success adopted a project management framework to improve student outcomes, starting with a pilot program to administer hardship funds.

Introduction

Portland State University (PSU) is nationally recognized for promoting social mobility among its graduates and is committed to equitable student success. The student body is non-traditional, with an average age of 26, 90 percent living off campus, and one-quarter being parents. Additionally, approximately 50 percent of our incoming students now identify as non-white and 80 percent are state residents. We are a designated minority-serving

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4 TAKEAWAYS . . .

. . . for Planning and Accomplishing Multiple Campus-Wide Initiatives

1. **Use a predictive waterfall project management approach,** which employs sequential planning to divide tasks into phases, for linear high-stake projects.

2. **Ensure cross-collaboration and thorough communication with campus stakeholders** throughout every project phase.

3. When executing projects surrounding student success, **receive direct input from students throughout the discovery phase.**

4. Conduct a thorough analysis of measurable metrics to **determine the success of project outcomes.**

> Adopting a structured project management approach . . . was instrumental in creating integrated and collaborative campus-wide efforts to improve student success outcomes.

institution: an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving Institution and an Emerging Hispanic-serving Institution. Located in the heart of downtown Portland, the economic engine of Oregon, PSU educates 21,000 individuals who directly contribute to the region's vitality. Most PSU graduates remain in the region, aiming to enter careers that enable them to support their families and serve their communities.

Since 2008, PSU has prioritized student success as a guiding theme, evolving through initiatives and structural changes. In 2019, the Students First infrastructure centralized university efforts to improve student completion outcomes. The Office of Student Success (OSS) developed this strategic framework, with support from executive leadership, to outline a clear and equitable path forward. Adopting a structured project management approach by OSS in 2013 was instrumental in creating integrated and collaborative campus-wide efforts to improve student success outcomes. The priority projects were to make significant strides in removing barriers for students, reducing their costs, and helping them to complete their degrees.

This article highlights a high-stakes project involving multiple campus partners designed to create a centralized, equitable, and low-stress process for students seeking just-in-time hardship funding. We describe how OSS's project management approach drove implementation and ultimately led to successful outcomes. Also, we share recommendations for practitioners interested in adopting a structured project management approach at their institution.

Over the last several decades, students have had to assume higher amounts of debt to afford college (Goldrick-Rab and Anderson 2016). State governments across the country have cut state funding to higher education, resulting in institutions increasing the cost of student tuition to offset necessary operational costs (Goldrick-Rab). Student federal aid in the form of grants has yet to match the pace and demand of the rising cost of higher education. The cost of a college degree, coupled with increased expenses for housing, books, supplies, transportation, and more, results in many students facing significant financial burdens and challenges (Goldrick-Rab). These loads can place anxiety and stress on students and hinder positive outcomes. At PSU, multiple campus-wide surveys, such as the annual Student Experience Survey sent to all undergraduate students during the spring term, illuminated the reality that many students face financial hardships. Our students have repeatedly expressed having little or no financial safety net when emergencies or unexpected expenses arise.

Figure 1 **Portland State University**

Photography by NaschCO, University Communications

These negative implications were deeply troubling, such as students having to leave college or suffering academically. We needed to view this phenomenon through an equity lens to make the significance of financial hardship on student success outcomes more visible. When analyzing family income brackets, for example, it was evident that students had better outcomes when they came from wealthier families. Tough (2019) found it more likely that a student would graduate from college if they came from a family in the top income quartile, with 90 percent of those students earning a college degree. Whether higher education professionals acknowledged it, money mattered: It affected student success outcomes. PSU had committed to addressing emergency aid and financial stress. Still, the process remained decentralized, and many of our students remained unaware of available resources across the units to support this work.

> This issue highlighted the urgent need for a streamlined, unified process for students to request hardship funds. Silos, redundancies, and gaps in communications had to be addressed.

This issue highlighted the urgent need for a streamlined, unified process for students to request hardship funds. Silos, redundancies, and gaps in communications had to be addressed. Financial support processes at the time varied across campus, based on many elements, and the awarding of funds was inconsistent. For example, sometimes a hardship request would be fully processed before we discovered the student's financial aid award made them ineligible. Meanwhile, multiple homegrown systems prone to human error (spreadsheets, paper forms, email, and databases) were used to move each request forward. Most striking was that, unlike many other public universities, PSU did not have a Hardship Funding policy, and there was no visible centralized way for students to initiate a request. Students were left going from one office/academic department to another, talking with different university representatives, and filling out multiple requests.

Project Management and the Project Team

As part of the Students First initiative, a team of staff and faculty was assembled to support affordability efforts by reviewing PSU's Hardship Funding process, identifying ways to improve the student experience, and developing an online application system. This would speed up funding, streamline administration, and maximize limited resources. The team turned to a structured project management approach, mainly due to the OSS's Senior Project Manager's success in using the method while implementing previous projects to address questions and create an innovative technology-led plan of action, consisting of several phases. It began with a discovery phase in partnership with PSU's Information Technology team and was followed by planning, execution, monitoring, and closing phases.

Although project management remains underutilized in higher education compared to other industries (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2023), the team turned to it as a planning approach because of its effectiveness in different fields. The benefits other sectors have experienced with project management, such as increased efficiencies, minimization of redundancies, and enhanced communication, were quickly experienced by our team.

Throughout the discovery process, project management allowed the team to identify and confirm what was already believed to be occurring among students experiencing financial hardships. For example, project management practices let the project team and stakeholders understand the project's scope, mitigate "creep," and ensure time and resources were used efficiently to solve this student-centered problem.

Figure 2 **List of OSS Projects**
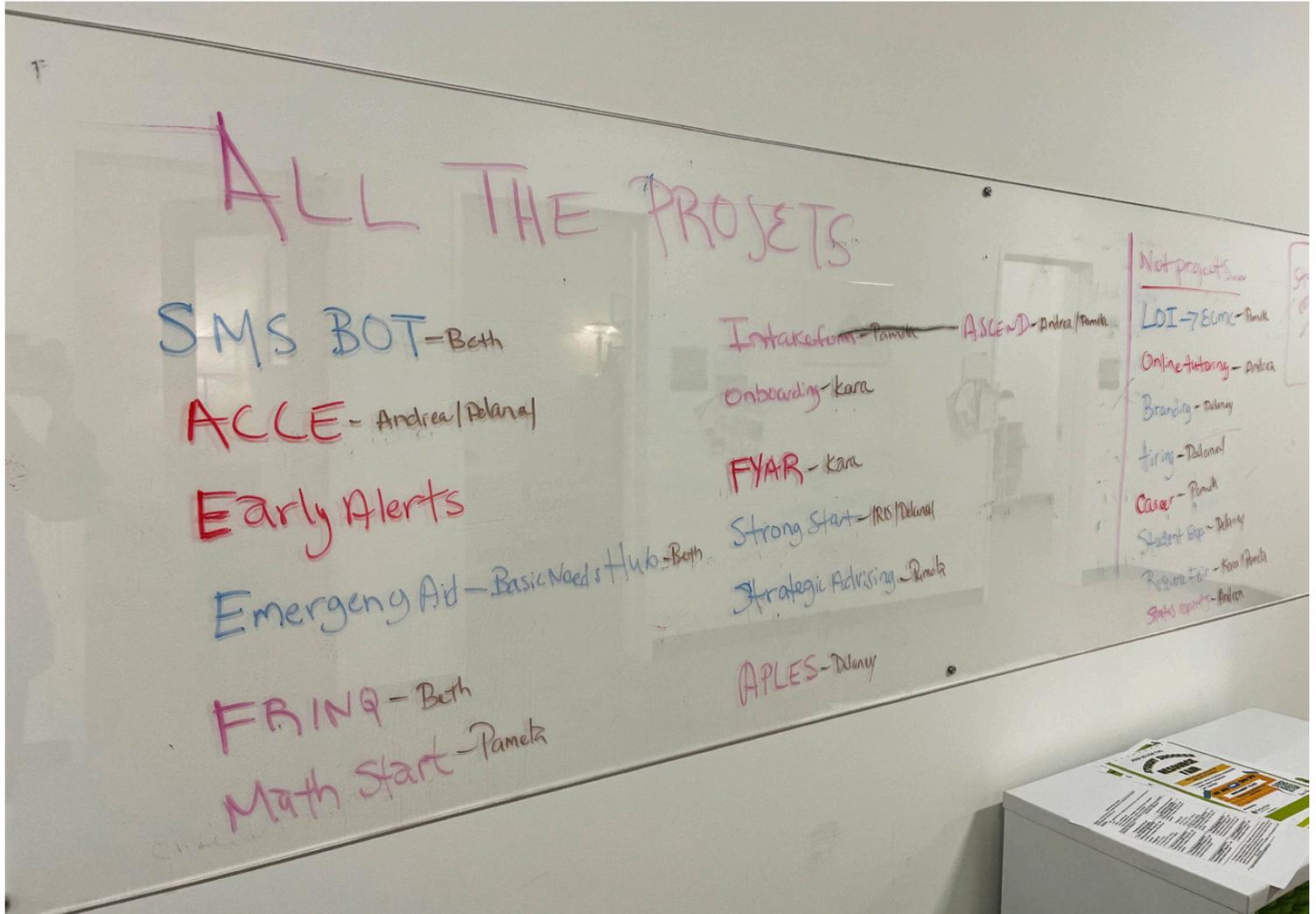
Photography by Delaney Ybarra

A structured project management approach provided organized methods, such as using the discovery phase to gather student feedback, to prioritize student success. The process helped the team identify key ways PSU could enhance its support for students in need of emergency aid services. Some actual student examples were discovered, including:

- Developing an accessible process for students to access emergency aid that did not depend

on "performing" their poverty—and frequently having to do so repeatedly as they applied for funding at different offices/departments

- Receiving emergency aid quickly to remain in school

- Supporting students experiencing financial stress to access academic and mental health resources

To move this work forward, the project team leveraged the existing Students First structure, organized around four pillars, each focusing on different issues important for student success. These pillars were persistence, academic success, affordability, and student experience. Subject matter experts from across the university led each pillar. Strategically using data was central to the work. Given how closely these emergency aid services aligned with the affordability pillar, multiple pillar members were tasked by the Vice Provost of Student Success with creating a project team of 10 members to execute a pilot program. They used existing technology to create a digital application for students, reduce the time to review, and quickly ensure aid received would not negatively impact financial aid packages. These features would maintain the current relationship and personal connection to PSU and student success. Simultaneously, they would create process efficiency, access equity, and measure effectiveness tied to retention.

Iterating Toward an Equitable Solution

The project team followed a traditional project management framework by creating a charter, which was typical for predictive waterfall approaches. It would serve as the foundation for the work, establishing clear roles and responsibilities for everyone involved, and clearly defining the objective: *"This project aims to create a proof concept to centralize emergency funds and make the process more accessible for students. Currently, funds are spread across over a dozen areas and are frequently difficult to find, apply for, and receive. Further, this project aims to destigmatize*

asking for financial support and ensure equitable funds disbursement."

The team planned the work as a pilot to gain administrative buy-in from administrative leaders across various departments, including the Office of the Vice Provost. The pilot could expedite implementation, allow flexibility for iteration, and offer the ability to assess outcomes.

The team carried out the work using a predictive waterfall approach, as suggested by the Senior Project Manager in OSS. This included creating timelines, workbacks,[1] and a stakeholder plan, all established and reputable tools in the project management framework. Further, the team worked directly with students throughout the process to amplify their perspectives and ensure the effort was co-designed with and for students.

During the discovery process, PSU identified Scholarship Universe, an existing scholarship platform, as the best tool to address hardship fund challenges. Originally used only for scholarships, it could be adapted for emergency aid and was already integrated with the student information system. That meant that student information would be pulled into the application automatically and allow an automated check of a student's financial aid status and disbursement of funds, reducing redundancies. For instance, if a student had already set up direct deposit as part of their financial aid process, the emergency funds could be administered to the student via this route.

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1 A workback is a reverse timeline that works backward from a critical date.

. . . project management practices let the project team and stakeholders understand the project's scope, mitigate "creep," and ensure time and resources were used efficiently to solve this student-centered problem.

Between 2021–2023, the project team initiated the pilot to digitize and centralize access to emergency funding. As part of the centralization process, the team defined emergency funding as direct student aid for financial emergencies that may prevent a student from being able to stay in school. The pilot was socialized to higher administrative leaders as a proof of concept for how emergency aid might be administered to reduce stigma, barriers, and the time it takes to access funds. Given the complexity of financial aid and other student aid programs, it was critical that we integrated the process with existing systems and worked in close collaboration, not in opposition, with Financial Aid and Student Financial Services. The project management framework allowed for more precise avenues of communication, project status updates, standardized emails, and regular meetings, that ensured everyone involved—across different departments on campus—was on the same page. This project management approach helped colleagues with primary fiduciary responsibilities, such as managing resources and ensuring policies, to prioritize compliance and contain risk. This was, at times, in conflict with highlighting the student experience. Without skillful project management in balancing competing priorities,

monitoring efforts versus resources, etc., the project would have repeatedly stalled.

Project Outcomes

Assessment is a core part of the project management framework for determining whether outcomes were successful and if deliverables established by the team were met. We also intended the assessment to serve as a mechanism for continuous improvement. It was an unbiased and straightforward way to know how effectively this pilot served students and what could be improved. The guiding principle for this work was a commitment to equity and embracing student-centeredness. To that end, we disaggregated data to specifically focus on understanding if there were differences for historically underserved students.

The first assessment was conducted at the end of the pilot's first year. In summary, students who received funding through this process felt strongly that PSU cared about their success, had a higher sense of belonging at the university than our general student body, and shared that the funds helped them stay enrolled. Persistence outcomes for students who received funds were higher than for the general student population. In terms of improvements, we needed to build better awareness of the program among our BIPOC and low-income students. While we serve more BIPOC and low-income students than the general student population, PSU must do the work to ensure that *all* students are aware of the program and have access to it.

The project team also intentionally engaged internal cross-campus stakeholders because a critical part of this work was that other departments and units across PSU that administer emergency aid adopt this technology and use a digital application process to reduce the complexities and risks of manual administration. The team also collaborated with internal cross-campus stakeholders to adjust questions, eligibility, and timing to ensure the application met the needs of all stakeholders. This was largely possible because a project coordinator was assigned to support this pilot and tasked with ensuring that milestones and deliverables were met.

The pilot lasted two years, 2021 through 2023. In the program's second year, the team led the implementation to a more permanent solution by working closely with PSU's Basic Needs Hub, an existing office designed to connect students with resources. This close collaboration was founded on the prevalence of basic needs-related challenges, such as food and housing insecurity. Students struggling to meet basic needs indicated they were more likely to leave PSU. Basic needs-related challenges were frequently seen in students who did not identify as white, based on duplicate race (cases where a student may be counted in more than one racial or ethnic category). Those instances highlighted the need for equity-minded student support. Subsequently, the review, awarding, and communication with students will be completed through the Basic Needs Hub, beginning in the program's third year in 2024. This will provide students with a direct connection to the support system that can help beyond what Emergency Aid or Hardship funds offer. The Basic Needs Hub will also be transitioning the General Student Emergency Fund to Scholarship Universe, based on a mutual decision of administrative leaders, bringing PSU closer to centralizing all emergency and hardship support.

How to Implement Project Management in Higher Education

Given OSS's success in using project management to help plan and implement the complex university-wide Hardship Funding process, we are proponents of encouraging other universities to explore whether a similar approach might benefit them. Our top five recommendations, in order of importance, are:

1. **Gain high-level university leader buy-in.** Leader support is essential for universities considering implementing campus-wide project management. Leaders from all areas across campus should research and understand the value of a project management approach. Breaking misconceptions, such as project management being too corporate or rigid, is vital for successful implementation. The PSU team developed support by focusing on how project management would add capacity and offer more value than mere administrative support. As stakeholders worked directly with the team, information about the project's importance was shared more widely across campus.

2. **Determine the campus office that would benefit most from project management support.** Select one that engages with multiple campus-wide stakeholders. Offices directly affecting students, such as Student Affairs; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; and Student Success, are great places to start.

3. **Secure a budget to hire FTE project management.** Employ a dedicated and experienced project manager who can guide the subject matter experts through each task. Doing so will allow for more seamless communication, reduced task duplication, and clarity in navigating the institution's decentralized nature. Once a project manager is onboarded, invest in professional development for new professionals who will become project coordinators. If there are no funds to support this work, consider piloting it with grant funds and later secure more sustainable funding.

4. **Identify the type of project management framework to adopt.** Once the team and project manager have been named, determine which framework to select, and ensure consistent use across all projects. The predictive waterfall model has been helpful for our high-stakes linear projects.

5. **Evaluate the effectiveness of the approach.** Consider an objective and thorough measurement system, using pre-set metrics, to gauge whether the implementation of the additional project management support has been successful. A status report, surveys, focus groups with stakeholders, and evaluation of expected project deliverables can be used.

Conclusion

Although project management may remain underutilized in universities, OSS at PSU is an example of an office that has successfully used it to plan and accomplish multiple campus-wide initiatives. Today, OSS manages approximately 20 projects across the university annually with its team of 11 full-time staff (including a dedicated project manager and project coordinator), each aiming to assist students in retaining, persisting, and completing their degrees (Portland State University n.d.). The diverse portfolio of projects includes using a virtual chatbot that texts all PSU students with essential announcements, creating a task force to research and address course scheduling barriers, implementing a Summer Scholars program to support students with GPAs lower than 3.0, and more. Each project has multiple levels of scope, impact, resources, members from various departments across campus, and risks, which can be overwhelming for project members to manage in a silo. Therefore, it has been valuable for each project to be assigned a formal project manager from OSS. They utilize similar predictive waterfall approaches to lead the subject matter experts through each project phase.

Based on our ethos of supporting students to succeed, we recommend universities gain a deeper understanding of project management benefits and consider how adopting it could positively impact their campus.

WHAT WORKED

- Using predictive project management approaches
- Maintaining consistent messaging and goal aspirations among key stakeholders
- Conducting the project as a pilot to move the work forward
- Using pre-set metrics to measure the pilot's effectiveness

WHAT DIDN'T

- Not anticipating that multiple check-ins with stakeholders would be required to ensure future-forward technology was sufficiently designed and implemented

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Engage with the Authors

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