Tennessee's Community Colleges
Quest for a Common Application

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Project Background:

Section 8 of the Complete College Tennessee Act of 2010 calls for a "consolidation of services among institutions and standardization of processes between institutions" (CCTA, 2010). This law serves as a driving force for many of the efforts underway at the Tennessee Board of Regents and is a major force behind the Business Process Model (BPM) initiative. The Tennessee Board of Regents and its member institutions are seeking ways to continue to enhance customer service while being more efficient with the available resources. One of the initiatives being considered is the creation of a common application for the community colleges. When polled in a 2011 survey, students from across the country indicated that differences found in applications serve as a moderate source of stress during the college application process (College Board, 2011). One recommendation from the College Board as a means to assist students from lower incomes in finding colleges that are a good fit is to "use common applications as an effective tool to broaden a student's set of postsecondary choices." (College Board, 2011)

The creation of a common application is viewed as one step in improving customer service as completing one common application would save time for students who apply to more than one community college in the state. Furthermore, the cost for processing the application could be reduced, and having one application would help ensure that a standard set of data is collected at the thirteen community colleges. Efforts would be made to allow for some variations at the institution level for items such as distinct programs and concentrations.

Initially Dr. Warren Nichols, Vice Chancellor for Community Colleges expressed a desire to have this project result in the creation of a common community application for the system. My role in this project was to review existing applications to determine whether there are commonalities and make recommendations regarding potential common wording for a common application. After working with Mr. Kenyatta Lovett, Executive Director of Community College Initiatives, it was ultimately determined that it might not be feasible to employ the technical resources to have one common application, but rather it would be more feasible to create fields that are required by all institutions, so that the community colleges in the system are collecting and sharing the same set of data. The technical issues stem from the fact that the thirteen colleges have no common platform to allow exchanges between their primary information system, which is Banner. Presently the system office is not in position to invest in a platform to serve as the exchange system. Without this platform there is no warehouse for the application information to be accepted and stored and no means of transferring the information to the applicable institution(s). There are also some legal challenges that stand in the way of a central application being created at this time. These legal challenges stem from challenges in creating a vehicle for Banner to "talk to" potential software to handle the common application. There is also a fiscal challenge in terms of the cost associated with the level of programming needed to create the middleware software to transfer the information from a common application as the current budget does not provide for this project.

Review of Existing Applications:

In order to identify the common elements of the online application and to better understand the online application process that prospective students undergo when applying at the thirteen community colleges, I completed the online application process at each of the community colleges. I used my personal information to undergo the process as an entering first time student. I prepared a spreadsheet to document the fields that each college application contained. This spreadsheet was used to identify the application fields that the colleges had in common, as well as those that were distinct.

Each of the colleges require that a login and pin be established. Twelve of the thirteen have the following requirements for the login and the pin: "Your Login ID can be up to nine alphanumeric characters. Your PIN must be six numbers." Walters State Community College was the only college that had different requirements for the login and pin. The following is the requirement for WSCC: "You will need these every time you wish to access or modify any of your information. Please choose something you can easily remember. Your username and password can be 5-12 letters long and cannot contain any spaces. Enter the same password in both password boxes to make sure you typed it correctly." Walters State's application also had a different look and feel as they use ZAPP instead of Banner to generate the application. The use of this application poses some issues for WSCC as they have the manually transfer the data into Banner.

Once the user established a login, a screen with the options for application type appeared. The available options varied by institution and ranged from certificate, dual enrollment, first time freshmen, first time transfer, non-degree, readmit, and transient. Once this selection was entered, the applicant is then asked to enter an admission term. Some of the colleges provided options (i.e. summer 2013, fall 2013, spring 2014, summer 2014) while others only make available the next term (i.e. fall 2013). Applicants are also required to enter their first and last names on this screen, middle name was optional and for a first name (required field), middle name, and last name (required field) was displayed. Once this information is entered the applicant is then given the option to continue with his/her application or to exit and return later.

Generally the online applications have the following categories:
- Personal Information (previous last name, suffix, prefix, previously attended, previously applied)
- Permanent Address (street, city, state, county, phone number, Tennessee residency questions)
- High School (HS Code, HS address, date of graduation, home schooled, GED)
- Previous College (College Code, Address, date of graduation, degree or hours earned)
- Planned Course of Study (typically a list is provided for a major and a concentration)
- Citizenship and Ethnicity (Ethnicity and Race Codes provided, Birth Country or Nation, Native Language, Visa Status, Veteran Status, Selective Service Registration)
- Additional Information (Educational Attainment of Parents, Employment Status, Marital Status, In case of an emergency contacts, Legacy Status)

Once the applicant enters the required information for the categories provided by the institution, they can click "the application is complete" button to complete the application process. At this point the students are provided with an agreement statement. Most of the statements require the applicant to agree that the information they provided in the application is factual. Some also use this statement to remind the applicant that they must provide the college with transcripts from their high school and if applicable colleges/universities previously attended. Some also include on the agreement page a reminder of other documents such as copies of drivers licenses, immunization records, etc. that must be submitted prior to the application being processed. Some campuses require that the applicant print and submit a copy of the agreement along with their application fee payment if the applicant is not paying electronically. Students applying to colleges who are able to accept electronic payment of the application fee are directed to the page with the online payment options after they agree to the application terms.

The review of the online applications revealed that there are 163 different fields used by the thirteen community colleges. Some of the differences in fields are wording, whereas some of the differences are

in terms of the information being requested by the different institutions. Southwest Tennessee Community College had the fewest number of fields with thirty-three and Dyersburg State Community College had the most with seventy-five fields. Eighteen of the items were common among all thirteen of the community colleges. Twenty-two of the fields were the same on 10 or more of the applications. There were 62 items that were unique to only one institution. Some of these questions ranged from legacy status to employment status. Conversation with the institutions needs to be held to determine the appropriate time to secure information and to better understand how the institutions are using the data that is being collected. The application fee ranges from $10.00 to $25.00.

Plan:

The current plan is for the Executive Director of Community College Initiatives to present the data to the Enrollment Services and Registrar group and to gain consensus for adopting the set of fields that ten to thirteen of the institutions had in common. From there he will work to gain consensus regarding the remaining fields in order to determine which fields are necessary and which can be eliminated. The goal is to reduce the number of fields in effort to minimize fatigue and confusion by the applicant. During the spring 2014 meetings will be held with Enrollment Management and Registrars to establish standard core fields for all community college applications. By the fall 2014 the goal is to have all community college applications reflect the agreed upon standard core application fields. All standard data should be captured in a system-wide common repository by the fall 2015.

It is hoped that in the future research will be conducted to review the impact of the various means of communicating with applicants who complete the application and who begin but failed to complete the process. During this research it was noted that each school provided some contact, but the type and duration of the contact varied by institution. Most institutions provided a form letter, some communicated via email, one provided a professional postcard and several provided automated calls to encourage completion of the process and to remind of missing items. It is possible with further research to establish baseline system expectations that should have a positive impact on the yield and capture rate of the applicant.

Recommendations:

Personal Information: this section should contain the following fields: first name, middle name, last name, preferred name, prefix, suffix, previous last name, date of birth, gender, cell phone number, and email address

Permanent Address: this section should contain the following fields: street 1, street 2, street 3, city, state, zip code, county, phone number

High School: this section should contain the following fields: HS Code, HS address, date of graduation, home schooled, GED, add another high school

Previous College: This section should contain the following fields: College Code, Address, date of graduation, date of attendance, degree or hours earned, add another college

Planned Course of Study: If possible this list should only contain the list of majors and concentrations available at the institution applying and should contain definitions of the various degree/certificate options

Citizenship and Ethnicity: This section should contain the following fields, Ethnicity and Race Codes, Birth Country or Nation, Native Language, Visa Status, Veteran Status, Selective Service Registration, and Tennessee Residency

Additional Information: This section should contain the following fields: first generation status, in case of emergency contact information)

Recommendations for wording:
Category Header: Personal Information
Field Names: First Name, Middle Name, Last Name, Preferred Name, Prefix, Suffix, Previous Last Name, Date of Birth, Gender, Cell Phone Number and E-mail Address and E-mail Address Verification.

Category Header: Permanent Address
Field Names: Street 1, Street 2, Street 3, City, State, Zip Code, County, Phone Number

Category Header: High School
Field Names: Did you receive a GED or a High School Diploma? If HS Diploma checked, the following fields: High School Code, High School Address, Date or Anticipated Date of Graduation, Home Schooled, Option to enter another High School, If GED checked, the following fields: GED location code, GED Address, Date or Anticipated Date of GED

Category Header: Previous College
Field Names: College Code, College Address, Period of Attendance (from this date – to this date), date of graduation, was a degree earned? If yes, list the degree, if not, list the number of credit hours earned, Option to enter another college)

Category Header: Planned Course of Study
Field Name: Major or concentration (drop down box that if possible will only contain the list of majors and concentrations available at the institution applying, above the list of options there should be a list of definitions for the various degree/certificate options

Category Header: Citizenship and Ethnicity
Field Name: Ethnicity, Race, Birth Country or Nation, Native Language, Visa Status, Visa Type, Visa Issue Date, Visa Expiration Date, Are you a Veteran or are you currently in the military? If so, do you have honorable characterization of service?, Every male who is between the ages of 18 and 26 and is a U.S. citizen or a resident of the U.S. must register with the selective service, Indicate whether you have registered with Selective Service, If no, please explain why you are not registered with Selective Service, Have you resided in TN since birth?, If no, please provide the dates and reasons that you lived elsewhere and the dates and reasons that you lived in TN.

Category Header: Additional Information:
Fields: Have either of your parents enrolled in education past HS? If yes, then have either of your parents attended some college, but did not obtain a degree?, Please enter the name, phone number and address of the person you would like us to contact in case of an emergency. Also, please tell us their relationship to you.

Works Cited:

21st Century Task Force Implementation Committee. Complexity in College Admissions: The Barriers Between Aspiration and Enrollment for Lower –Income Students. The College Board, 2011.

Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 49, Chapter 8 Complete College Tennessee Act of 2010, 2010.