



# **Best Practices** **in Handling Student Requests**

## **NOTE: Best Practices for Handling Student Requests**

The information in this Best Practices document was developed following a workshop at a CLC conference. The workshop was divided into 2 parts: how to deal with some common challenges in handling student inquiries and a discussion of best practices. For the first part, the group made a list of their most common challenges and together, came up with different ways of overcoming them. In the second part, the group discussed a list of comments, which were based on observations.

### **PART ONE: Challenges and Strategies**

#### **□ How can we more successfully deal with the volume of inquiries?**

- Hire some help! Answering inquiries effectively is the most cost efficient method of recruitment. If your unit can afford to advertise or participate in fairs, then it can afford to hire someone. Employing students can be wonderful and very inexpensive. Check your career services office to research this option. It's best to have students on a long-term basis, so consider extending their part-time position during the school year to full-time over the summer. Increase responsibility, encourage initiative and come up with interesting long-term projects – you'll attract the right kind of students and keep them longer.
- Delegate responsibility for certain types of questions to particular individuals or departments. Some individuals will naturally have more knowledge in certain areas. Set up a system where you can forward on certain inquiries to those individuals. It will probably be easier and faster for them to respond than for others.
- Use form letters or form paragraphs for general inquiries or common questions. This will save you time writing and ensure your responses to questions are consistent. Include direct links to pages that deal in detail with students' specific questions.
- Use the vacation response on your general email and include links to pages that would answer common questions.
- Create a Frequently Asked Questions page. Directing students to this at the outset is an easy way to reduce the time spent answering common questions.

#### **□ How can we deal with students' expectations of getting an instant response?**

- Acknowledge emails immediately with a quick note or form letter directing students to pages that might answer their questions. Students are less likely to pester for an answer if they've received some acknowledgement and know you'll get back to them as soon as possible.
- Enable your email vacation response with an acknowledgement of the student's inquiry and include a timeframe for answering it (e.g. we will respond to your inquiry within 3 business days).

#### **□ How can we avoid inquiries being misdirected *to* or *away from* our unit?**

- If the inquiry is in writing, answer it and copy the appropriate person. In seeing your response, that individual or department should realize (hopefully) the types of inquiries you handle.
- If misdirected inquiries are coming via your web page, you may want to reconsider how students get to you from the main institutional site or the titles of your pages. It may help if

you have links on your own page that send students in the direction they really want to go (e.g. graduate admissions for international students).

- ❑ Pick up the phone and contact the individual who misdirected the inquiry. Set them straight on what you or your unit deals with. Suggest where they might direct that type of inquiry in future.
- ❑ Educate other departments about your unit's function. Create an inexpensive brochure/flyer that highlights the services you provide and distribute it via campus mail. A better campus-wide understanding of your unit's function may help prevent inquiries from being mistakenly sent to you or elsewhere!
- ❑ Try creating a working committee of all those dealing with international student issues. This would be a great way to educate each another and foster collaboration.

## **PART TWO: Best Practices**

1) Strive to answer inquiries (email, fax, phone) within 1-3 business days and requests for mailed packages within 5 business days.

2) Respond to email requests via email first (e.g. don't insist the prospect receive information by post). For faxes and mailed packages where the student provides an email, a first effort to use email to pass on information is reasonable. If it's clear that the prospective student prefers to receive information by fax or post, then that should be the method used.

3) Convert any documents that will be attached to an email into RTF (rich text format). This conversion will ensure that prospective students can open your attachment regardless of their software package. To save in RTF format, open your existing document and click "save as". Under the "Save as type" drop-down box, select "rich text format".

4) Take care with third party requests. Be careful with the "Reply To" email function. It is preferable to send a fresh, new email message so as to avoid copying the trail of information preceding the request. It looks clearer and more professional.

5) Consider using identifiers to track the sources of the request. For example, email can have a unique subject line automatically inserted to identify the page from your website that the request came from. This can assist in redirecting messages efficiently (e.g. an email from your housing page entitled "Inquiry about Housing" could be quickly forwarded on to a certain individual who deals with this). In order to achieve this, just insert additional coding into the mail (email) tag on the specific web page. ( `<ahref="mailto:(insert full email address here – no brackets) ?subject = (insert subject line here – no brackets)">`  
Example: `<ahref="mailto:info@languagescanada.ca?subject=housing-question">info@languagescanada.ca</a>`

6) Ensure that all information of interest and necessity to your students is available on your website in an easy-to-read and easy-to-find manner.

7) When you get a specific request for clarification via your web site, do not create a loop for the student by sending them back to the same address in your site. Specify the location of the information or provide a direct link to the appropriate section.