

Going Virtual with Student Services

One College's Innovative Approach to **Expanding Access** and **Providing 24/7/365 Student Support**



SF SANTA FE COLLEGE

- › **Name:** Santa Fe College
- › **Location:** Gainesville, FL
- › **Enrollment:** 14,000
- › **Founded:** 1965
- › **School Type:** Public College
- › **Degrees Offered:** Associate and Bachelor's

BACKGROUND

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools are quickly seeking ways to provide students with improved virtual support.

Kamia “Mia” Mwango, the Director of Financial Aid at Santa Fe College in Gainesville, FL, has spent the past five years bringing innovation and automation to her school.

From 2015–2020, Mia patiently and prudently assembled the building blocks of technology that would enable the office to go “virtual” and expand access. And in the new normal of COVID-19, her office is now reaping the benefits of the innovations.

Mia has a background in technology, having previously been the Technical Coordinator in the Financial Aid Office. She also has a background in business, having earned an MBA, and is also experienced in traffic engineering.

Mia recently sat down with Ocelot to detail how she built a “virtual” office, and the process improvements and increased student satisfaction that came with it. The roadmap and lessons she shares can dramatically reduce the time it takes schools to implement a “Virtual” Student Service Office.



“Our goal is to meet students where they are. And they have increasing expectations for what can be done online. We provide students with an ‘integrated system.’ There

is not a start or finish. There is not a beginning or an end. We offer many ways for students to reach us—regardless of where they might be in their own life or in the process.

You cannot just bring in technology. You need to build around a process. The office needs to adjust its processes in order for the technology to be successful. The workflow changes. And our team members spend more time on complex questions and situations.”

Kamia “Mia” Mwango

Director, Financial Aid Office
Santa Fe College
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THE MOTIVATION

ONE WORD: ACCESS.

“Being a state college, especially Santa Fe College, we are extremely attentive to all the various populations of students we serve. We have high performing straight-out-of-high school students, transfer students, working students, parents, career and technical students, and all of the above! Different students need to interact with our office in different ways at different times. We want to be there for all of them,” says Mia.

THE BENEFITS

The key benefits of the virtual office are “access, convenience, comfort, a way to ask questions and conduct business that is personal but also somewhat private,” says Mia.

“In addition, students can transact business and even get complicated things done like Professional Judgments and Dependency Overrides now by doing online orientations if they need to. If they are busy at work, in classes, or taking care of family during business hours, they can still do what’s needed to get and keep financial aid.”

THE CHALLENGES

Mia shared the challenges her office encountered along the way. She recounts, “Of course with any new implementation there’s bound to be a few hiccups. There were people who felt like this took away the personal touch from the office and didn’t support students. Of course, we also felt the strain of IT resources when we needed programming and the IT office was already stretched razor thin. In the end, though, we made it all work. People came around, and we found the time with IT between other projects.”

THE 6 COMPONENTS THE VIRTUAL FINANCIAL AID OFFICE CONSISTS OF:



1

ARTIFICIALLY INTELLIGENT CHATBOT “ASK SF”

An AI Chatbot is a self-service tool that enables Santa Fe College to communicate with students 24/7/365. Multiple inquiries can be handled at once. Mia said, “The Chatbot helps with ‘Tier 1.5’ questions, those in both Tier 1 and Tier 2. For scenario-based questions, it can help steer students in the right direction.” The chatbot is also a part of internal staff training.



2

ONLINE FINANCIAL AID PORTAL (MY FA STATUS)

The online self-service portal is where students can access all of their personal details, see—for example—why a flag has been placed on their account, pay bills, etc.



3

EXPLAINER AND HOW-TO VIDEOS

Short online videos that support visual learners, make complex topics easy to understand, and guide students through processes.



4

ELECTRONIC DOCUMENTS THAT INCLUDE ELECTRONIC SIGNATURES

Paper documents and wet signatures require the additional work of keeping copies, scanning, applying wet signatures, etc. Going with electronic documents shortens the time it takes for students to complete paperwork, and reduces the manual record keeping and tracking required of staff.



5

PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CAMPUS BOOKSTORE FOR ONLINE ORDERING / DELIVERY

Online ordering integrated with the student’s schedule in partnership with the campus bookstore facilitates easy use of financial aid funds for students. Automated file transfers to send information for student accounts also allows for student convenience and recording / logging / reconciling of financial aid dollars for books.



6

DIGITAL LOBBY

This virtual tool greets students so they can elect how they best like to communicate with our office (chatbot, Zoom, call, email). By offering students a variety of communication channels, the office signals to students that it is accessible.



THE STUDENT REACTION

What did the students think of the innovations? Mia noted: “I think the students have almost expected it; like, it’s about time higher education got on pace with the rest of the world! Why can I order food, lattes, and literally everything else on my phone and transact any other kind of business on my phone, but can’t conduct business with my college on my computer or my phone? It was puzzling to them, and honestly to me as well. They now feel like we’re on track and not some strange place that’s disconnected from the rest of their world.”

According to Mia, when the virtual office was pulled together and presented to students, a common refrain was: ***“It’s about time!”***



THE IMPACT ON THE FINANCIAL AID STAFF

Change can generate a lot of good; it can also disrupt and cause angst. Mia said, “The team has enjoyed the outcome now that the dust has settled! We did have some implementation hiccups along the way, but we have all understood that on the other side of all of it is innovation and access for students and families. Now, we all benefit. Students have more convenience, and the team has seen less traffic in the lobby, on the phones and in some ways by email. In some ways, we have seen an increase in complexity of questions. We went from ‘Why haven’t I heard back about my FAFSA?’ (rejected FAFSA) to ‘My income changed and I think I need a Special Circumstances form, but I’m not sure which tax year is the most beneficial. Can you help me?’”



STAFF CHALLENGES

What were the biggest challenges? Mia said, “I think rolling out new technology has been challenging. It’s difficult to communicate changes between IT, the project manager (Technical Coordinator), the Financial Aid Leadership, the Financial Aid Team, key stakeholders, key campus partners, students and parents. We do the best we can, but between the changes in financial aid itself and the changes to our technology, it was a wild ride for everyone for a while.”



MAINTENANCE

Technology can create a lot of efficiency. But the staff needs to have the requisite bandwidth to maintain it. Mia sees maintenance as the next challenge. She said, “The more we expand all of these bells and whistles, the more brass there is to polish! We implemented so many forms for this orientation, that orientation and this situation and that one. Each one has to be rolled over to a new year individually...it’s a heavy lift sometimes. Even chatbot. We love that current information gets pushed out to students, and that current information must be groomed from time to time. We have to keep people on it.”

NEXT ROUND OF GOALS

WHERE DOES SANTA FE COLLEGE GO FROM HERE?

Mia said: "We have so many. Working outside of silos, integration with other areas. We are rolling out Ocelot's AI Chatbot across SF, so be on the lookout for that. We are implementing one-stop document submission so students only submit/upload documents to one office and it counts for each one. Things like that where we reach across the hallways and work together for student convenience."

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO OTHER SCHOOLS CONSIDERING CREATING A "VIRTUAL" OFFICE?

Mia said, "Don't give up! It took several years of collaboration to get to this place of investment and agreement to innovate. If you're a dreamer, dream big. If you're an innovator, keep your notes and sketches. One day, you'll be able to pull out your notes. A wise FA Director once told me, plant the seeds, water them every chance you get, and they'll grow when the time is right."

Mia added, "Communication is key. You cannot change processes in a silo. It's important that other student service departments knew what we were doing so that we are all a part of the support system."

And let's not forget that we have a larger purpose. Mia said, "We need to make higher education more accessible. Reduce the barriers to enroll and thrive. We are here to help students realize their dreams."

VIRTUAL STUDENT SERVICES SUMMARY

- ✓ Artificially Intelligent Chatbot
- ✓ Online financial aid portal
- ✓ Explainer and How-To Videos
- ✓ Electronic documents that include electronic signatures
- ✓ Partnership with the campus bookstore for online ordering / delivery
- ✓ Digital lobby



See why 450+ educational institutions are leveraging Ocelot's AI Student Engagement Platform to drive enrollment, retention & student success.

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