

international center

university of michigan

Final Report

University of Michigan International Center

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I. PROJECT SUMMARY

This is the final report for the SI501 I-Center Group research project on the University of Michigan's International Center conducted during the Fall 2002 semester. Our goal was to go through a contextual design (Contextual Design: A Customer-Centered Approach to Systems Designs, 1997) on this organization and help to solve the client's problems of interest. We focused on investigating communication and workflows in the International Center and evaluated the impact of these on services provided to International Center clients. We began with an initial meeting with Tara Kram, (Immigration Assistant) our project coordinator, and followed by conducting interviews and observations, collecting artifacts from and about the organization and conducting outside research on the field of international education.

Based on contextual design methodologies, we have identified problems with the internal and external communication flows and change management, attributed to various constraints of the International Center. To date, under its dedicated and professional service culture, the I-Center is successful because of its committed, hardworking, and service oriented staff. The International Center is highly appreciated and well known among its clients. However the problems posed by limited space, limited technology support, increasing workload, and lack of documented processes will affect its success and effectiveness in the long run.

This report contains recommendations that have resulted from the contextual design process. We offer suggestions that we believe will provide the International Center with additional methods that fit within the confines of its current constraints and culture and that will further enhance its ability to serve the University of Michigan community.

II. INTERNATIONAL CENTER OVERVIEW

The International Center is a service organization that is dedicated to the promotion and facilitation of international education and intercultural learning at the University of Michigan by providing expertise, service, advocacy, and information. (Mission statement, International Center Brochure)

The International Center, hereby referred to as the I-Center, accomplishes this mission by providing services to the University of Michigan community of international and U.S. students, as well as University administration, faculty and staff. In the course of this project, we have learned important aspects of the I-Center's culture, capabilities and constraints through the methodology explained in Section III below. These aspects are:

Culture

- *Existence of a relaxed work environment and work ethic:* Staff members are comfortable talking about their positions and duties in the I-Center and are direct about their opinions on I-Center processes and possible changes.
- *Range of staff experience/tenure:* Staff member experience and time at the I-Center and University range from as little as six months to almost 40 years. This diversity of experience leads to a range of staff adaptability to environmental and process changes.
- *Organizational knowledge embedded in staff members:* This varies depending on the length of time at the I-Center as indicated above.

- *Predominant cultural values of staff:* The general values we discovered can be summarized by the following summarized statements (modified statements are also indicated in our cultural chart, (see Figure 1):

- “It’s a job for people who love diversity and working with people from other cultures. There’s a lot of cross-cultural interaction.”
- We’re underpaid, overworked and under-appreciated (summarization).

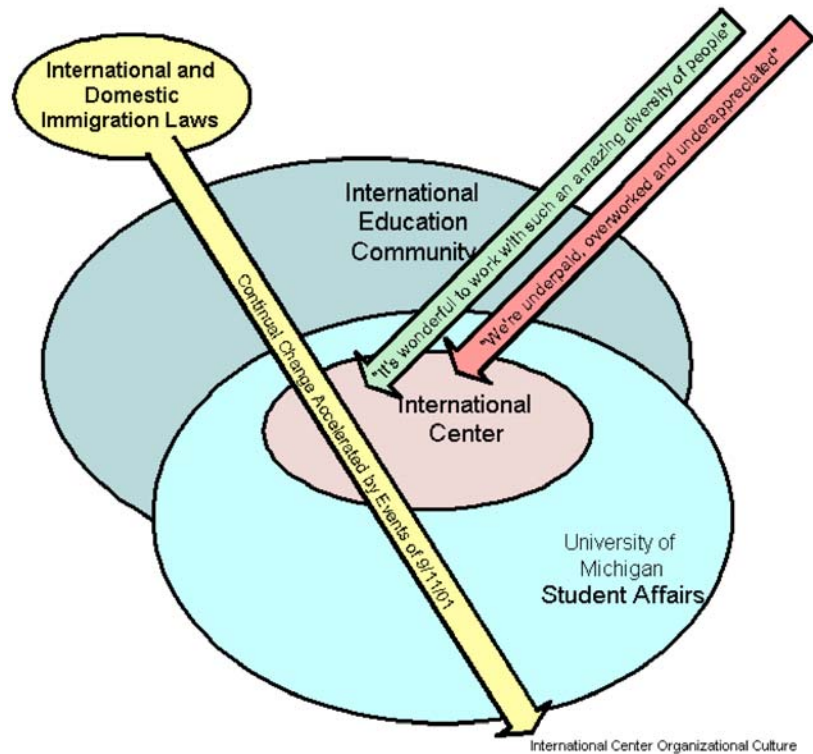


Figure 1: International Center Organizational Culture

Capabilities

- Act as conduit and advocate for International Students
- Specialists in Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) regulations and changes for the University community
- Experts in processing international visas and documents for the University community
- Act as resource for students seeking to work, study or live abroad

Constraints

- *Regulatory:* Federal immigration rules, regulations and policies
- *University:* Student Affairs budget limitations and University policies, regulations and politics
- *Technology:* Limited technology budget affects equipment maintenance and general support
- *Physical Space:* Confines of space layout, lighting and space affect overall communication and work flow efficiency

III. METHODOLOGY

The initial focus of our project research on the I-Center was on client-based internal process standardization and documentation. To impact as many departments as possible we limited our investigative scope to Administrative Services. In particular, we were interested in how administrative processes affect:

- Coordination of departments knowledge and behavior – particularly scheduling
- Internal and external communication strategies
- How clients find resources.

Through the course of our research, we discovered that a large part of the I-Center's work is client-focused and that internal review of client-oriented processes is thoughtful and ongoing. We also began identifying alternate solutions to challenges the I-Center faces.

To gather information relevant to our research interests we used a variety of strategies:

- We reviewed the I-Center's documentation for clients
- Researched similar organizations' client-oriented strategies
- Reviewed literature specific to serving the International community
- In pairs, interviewed 6 staff members
- Interviewed 1 student client and informally spoke to several others
- Interviewed 1 Peer Advisor
- Observed 3 department meetings
- Observed 1 I-Center sponsored student event
- Conducted 4 interviews during work to observe contextual work processes
- Passively observed I-Center public spaces on 3 occasions
- Solicited feedback on preliminary recommendations through 4 interviews and email

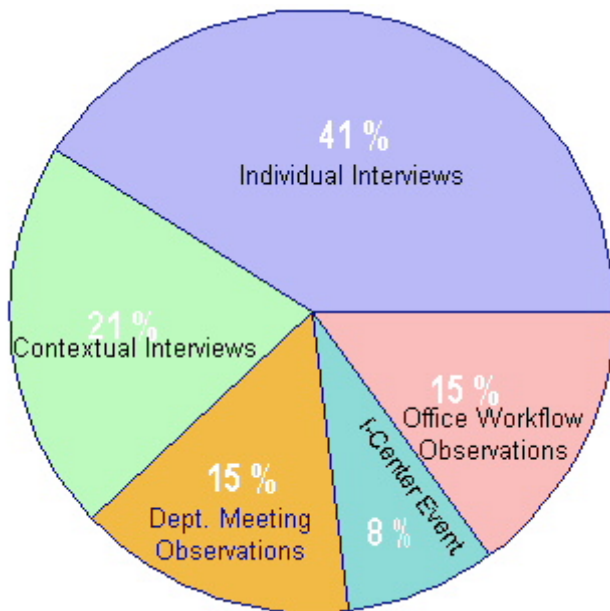


Figure 2: Interview Time Allocation

To the left, Figure 2 shows how time was allocated between a variety of interview and observation strategies. Individual interviews were clearly the greatest single source of information on the I-Center.

The results from the information we gathered were compiled into fourteen preliminary recommendations. Based on feedback from I-Center staff, six recommendations were selected for further research and presentation in the final report.

IV. INTERNATIONAL CENTER GOALS, TASKS & WORK PROCESSES

Goals

Based on the stated I-Center mission (Mission statement, International Center Brochure) the goals of the I-Center can be summarized as follows:

1. Promote and facilitate “international education and intercultural learning”
2. Provide “expertise, service, advocacy and information”

Tasks

The I-Center accomplishes these goals through various tasks allocated to and performed by six specific departments, as seen below in Figure 3. These departments are:

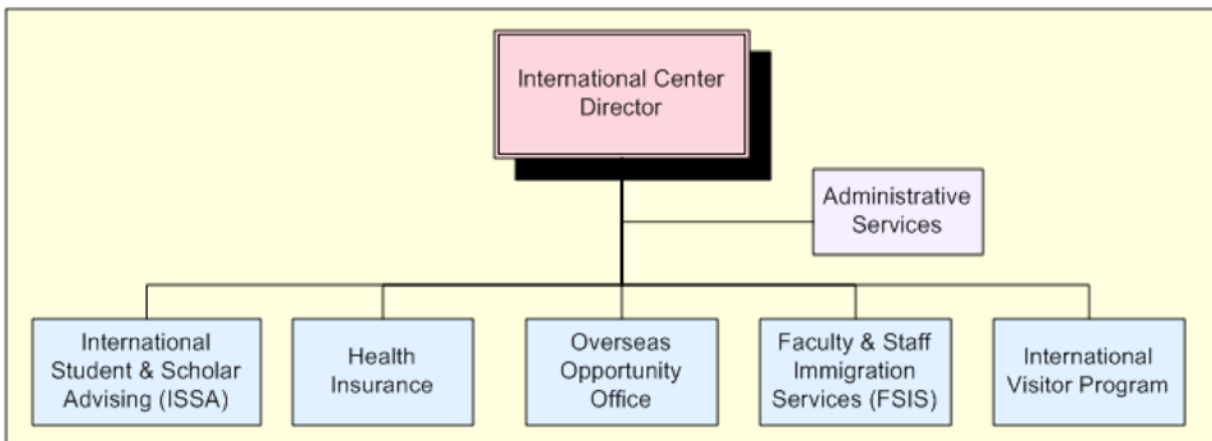


Figure 3: International Center Departments

1. *Administrative Services*: Our project focus. Responsible for greeting and directing clients, providing overall support for other I-Center departments including the proper completion and distribution of government documents and I-Center compliance with University requirements.

2. *International Student/Scholar Advising (ISSA)*: Provides expertise on immigration regulations and procedures for student/scholars including the impending federally required implementation of the SEVIS electronic reporting system for international students.

3. *Health Insurance*: Provides information and support for international student/scholars and their dependents on health insurance coverage and other issues.

4. *Overseas Opportunities Office*: Provides information, resources and advising for University students on work, study, travel and living abroad opportunities.

5. *Faculty and Staff Immigration Services (FSIS)*: Acts as a key resource for University departments hiring international faculty and staff. This department is responsible for ensuring the University’s compliance with government immigration hiring regulations.

6. *International Visitor Program*: Plans and coordinates the visits of international leaders through the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

Work Processes

The above department tasks are accomplished in large part with the help of departmental meetings, meetings with Directors and full staff meetings. I-Center meetings are a primary source of communication and information for employees individually and for departments as a whole. They are generally informal with an emphasis on collaboration. They serve as a mechanism for staff members to voice opinions, concerns and complaints as well as to collaboratively outline departmental problem solving and implementation and changes to department work processes.

V. PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED

In limiting our investigative scope to Administrative Services, we identified two areas of problems: internal and external communications flow and change management. Through observations and interviews, we discovered that workload and technology constrain Administrative Services' ability to effectively communicate with the rest of the office. One example we researched is the process clients navigate in order to schedule appointments with ISSAs. This workflow is detailed in Diagram 1 (Advising Workflow) located in the Appendix. We discovered communication difficulties around this process, represented in Diagram 2 (International Center Communication Flow) located in the Appendix. Further challenges with internal and external communication were identified in relation to the I-Center's branding and sign policies and the ambiguity this causes. Finally, we found that a lack of up-to-date documentation for certain processes resulted in problems from the absence of key employees. We also felt that challenges associated managing ever-changing immigration regulations would be mitigated by better process documentation as well. The difficulties we discovered are a result of some of the specific cultural characteristics of and constraints faced by the I-Center. We detail the evidence for specific problems in the discussion of each of our final recommendations below.

VI. FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Recommendations regarding Internal & External Communication Flows

1. Meeting Maker

Problem Identified: Advisors do not have convenient access to up-to-date appointment schedules without leaving their offices. As a result, they must visit the front desk to review a current copy of their appointment schedules and potentially synchronize that schedule with any copy they made earlier. This adds time to the process of appointment management and causes confusing or conflicting schedules.

Evidence: Advising appointments are manually recorded on paper and are kept in a binder at the front desk. When an advisor needs to check their appointment schedule they stop by the front desk to view or copy their appointment sheet for the desired day. As appointments are added to schedules, the advisor is typically unaware of the added appointments until they retrieve a more current copy from the front desk.

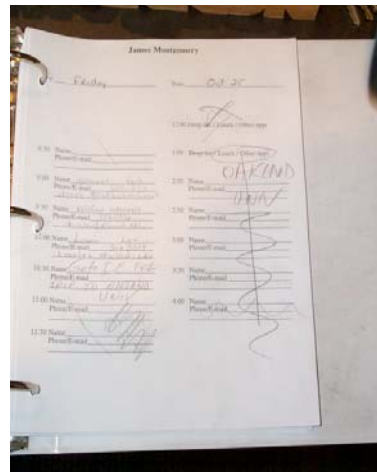


Figure 4: Scheduling Binder

Recommendation: Enable more widespread use of Meeting Maker within the I-Center, most specifically for the ISSAs. Using Meeting Maker for all advising appointments would allow staff to check not only their own availability, but also that of their colleagues without having to check the schedule binder at the front desk. The use of Meeting Maker also allows for real-time and simultaneous appointment and event scheduling. Meeting Maker is currently being used by a small number of I-Center staff already.

Feasibility Analysis:

Budget: The University's Information Technology Computing Services (ITCS) provides a central Meeting Maker service for University departments. Individual accounts cost \$30 per account per year and non-user resource accounts (e.g. conference rooms) are provided at no additional charge. Additional information regarding the ITCS Meeting Maker service can be found at:

<http://www.itd.umich.edu/~lannos/mtgmaker/index.html>

Given budget constraints, utilizing ITCS Meeting Maker service is extremely cost effective since the I-Center does not need to provide a server or support infrastructure in order to utilize this service.

Workload: Developing internal protocols related to the use of Meeting Maker can minimize the long-term impact on workload. For example, Macintosh users could use Meeting Maker in conjunction with the "stickies" or "text clipping" features (both internal components included as part of the MacOS) to quickly cut and paste standard information such as type of appointment into the calendar as events are scheduled. This streamlines data entry and reduces barriers to its use.

Resistance: By providing training and information on Meeting Maker and its potential use and benefit, staff resistance to a wider implementation can be reduced. ITCS offers customized group training on how to use and implement Meeting Maker through their Education Services department. Additional information regarding ITCS Education Services can be found at:

<http://www.itd.umich.edu/education>

I-Center staff already familiar with the Meeting Maker product can also train their colleagues thus reducing costs associated with contracting ITCS Education Services.

Summary: In the long run, the budget impact is minimal compared to benefit received from a more widespread implementation of Meeting Maker. The workload among I-Center members

will be well balanced, and advisors will be better connected to one another, which increases their social capital.

2. Instant Messaging

Problem Identified: The physical layout of the office impedes inter-office communication and real-time awareness of staff availability particularly for drop-in appointments.

Evidence: The receptionist must repeatedly leave the front desk to ascertain the availability of colleagues. Calls are lost when they are routed to a staff member who is not available. This requires clients to call back to the front desk, potentially decreasing client satisfaction. Additionally, we observed specific problems with the process of directing clients to available advisors for walk-in consultations. One advisor returned referred clients to the reception. There is currently no synchronous, real-time coordination of schedules between advisors and the front desk.

Recommendation: Leverage a tool like instant messaging (IM) to improve inter-office communication. For example, rather than requiring the receptionist leave the front desk to ascertain appointment availability, a tool like IM could be used to remotely confirm availability. Staff could alert the front desk as they are available for appointments or to indicate they are unavailable. Flag features could be used so the receptionist is alerted when an advisor is available, in a meeting, or not taking calls. For example, Yahoo, MSN, ICQ and AOL are supported on both MacOS and Windows platforms. These IM tools are readily available through on-line links as follows:

Yahoo: <http://messenger.yahoo.com>
MSN: <http://messenger.msn.com>
ICQ: <http://www.icq.com/products>
AOL: <http://www.aim.com/>

Feasibility Analysis:

Resistance: There are no explicit costs and limited technical requirements in implementing an IM tool. Several staff members have experience working with an IM tool. Therefore, they could provide training to staff members who are unfamiliar with these tools.

Protocol: As is shown in the article, “*What is Chat Doing in the Workplace?*” by Mark Handel and James B. Herbsleb, IM is very flexible and can be customized to accommodate the office culture. It can provide the staff with a non-intrusive way to discern availability and allow them to maintain synchronous scheduling while staying focused on their work. The I-Center will need to research and experiment with the tools in order to choose the one that most adequately meets their needs. The I-Center must establish guidelines for the effective use of IM such as the protocol that staff members use the proper IM status settings to indicate when they are away from their desk, on an uninterruptible telephone call, etc.

Workload: If proper protocols are established and followed, there will be no significant, additional workload. A workload burden will occur in the beginning stages of implementation as

staff members receive training, especially if current staff members are used to train those unfamiliar with IM tools. Additionally, work will be required to develop protocols and guidelines for use of IM tools and the relation this will have to appointment scheduling processes.

Summary: Implementing an IM client will allow all of the staff to be better connected to one another, and makes the receptionist more aware of staff availability for various impromptu interactions throughout the day without having to leave the front desk.

3. Document Templates

Problem Identified: There is currently no standardization of I-Center forms and documents. This prevents instant recognition and creates added work for employees who must repeatedly create similar documents.

Evidence: In observations of meetings we discovered that staff members negotiate the process of standardizing responses to clients. For example, in the ISSA department and their process of creating FAQs, these decisions include routing responses to particular staff members to ensure uniformity prior to client distribution. This process is also being attempted in the FSIS department. Also, In our attendance at an event co-sponsored with the Office of Career Planning and Placement, there was no way to immediately tell which documents were from the I-Center.

Recommendation: Improve I-Center branding for internal and external communication. Create document templates with clear International Center branding for use by all departments. Information specific to each department (for example, a FAQ) could be tailored, but would maintain the look and feel of the template. Create templates for documents that are routinely distributed to clients.

Many staff members realize the need for using document templates and have begun revising forms individually. This demonstrates that this recommendation is already informally occurring at the I-Center. It also shows the willingness of certain staff to adapt and take responsibility in overseeing the implementation. There was also recognition by staff of a need for more consistent branding to give their postings and information more authority as well as bring cohesiveness to I-Center documents.

Feasibility Analysis:

Workload: The I-Center will need to dedicate time, perhaps on a weekly basis, to enable progress in creating the necessary templates. There are several programs available to create document templates. The I-Center has access to Microsoft Word including style sheets that can be used to create a consistent format for internal procedural documentation and creating consistent postings.

Summary: In the long run, by using document templates, staff will see a time savings in being able to quickly generate standard information without having to recreate formatting and layouts. Clients will be better able to synthesize needed information by being able to more

quickly identify it upon seeing a document fitting a specific format. For example, changes to I-Center hours could be easily identified by the color and format of the sign.

4. Posting Policy

Problem Identified: We have observed that the I-Center currently has four posting processes based on purpose and department. These are:

- 1) The posting of external information for the purpose of client-to-client communication, for example the “For Sale” bulletin board.
- 2) The posting of department specific communications to clients.
- 3) The posting of I-Center-wide communication of information such as operating hours.
- 4) The posting of information to the I-Center website.



Figure 5: Main Entrance

are not posted at the main entrance to the I-Center building. Consequently these signs neither communicate essential information nor lend a sense of reliability. The digital posting strategy reflects similar dynamics. For example, the I-Center website’s calendar of events can only be accessed through three hypertext links and is updated only occasionally.

The informality of processes one and two limit the workload involved in posting and do not negatively impact client service. However, for processes three and four, this informal implementation may not produce the best client perception of the I-Center.

Evidence:

There is no explicit hierarchy of signs. Inside the I-Center, vividly colored signs are sometimes of less significance than those on white paper. For example, a sign indicating the I-Center would be closed the following day was less prominently displayed than an advertisement for a department open house six days later.

Another example is that there is no I-Center template for permanent signs such as for the posting of the I-Center’s hours. As can be seen in Figure 5, the hours are printed on white paper without letterhead or other I-Center branding. Also, the hours of operation

Recommendation: Improve communication of events, programs and schedules to both clients and staff. Consistent with our previous recommendation to improve I-Center branding, create a posting policy for I-Center wide communication and digital posting. Establish a posting policy for the website that improves client access to current information, such as office hours and

a calendar of events organized by date. This could take the form of a direct link from the home page to a schedule of events.

Feasibility Analysis:

Workload: Limited time and effort are necessary to establish a consistent design for permanent signs and their placement. The I-Center will need to consult with their webmaster to have a link established from the home page to the schedule of events for international students. Once established, the updating of the postings in the office and on the website will take minimal effort.

Summary: In the long run, clients will be able to more easily locate the information they need by having it posted in a consistent fashion. In addition the front desk should experience a reduction in questions as clients become more familiar with locating information posted in a consistent manner.

5. Directional Signs

Problem Identified: Unclear posting of traffic flow directions. This results in clients facing an initial uneasiness about entering the I-Center, even though this is quickly overcome upon contact with staff.

Evidence: There are no signs near the main entrance or the back, West Quad entrance, directing foot traffic to the receptionist area. During our team's initial visit to the I-Center we entered through the West Quad door and we were uncertain of where we needed to meet our contact. Looking around, there was no clear signage or directional aids indicating where to go, so we proceeded down the hall until we found the receptionist desk. This kind of experience can make visitors and clients apprehensive about how they will receive assistance. It can also add unnecessary confusion to their visit.

Recommendation: With the recommendations regarding posting policy and document templates, we recommend providing consistency of signs inside and especially near the entryways of the I-Center. Providing visual cues will help to better direct traffic flow and allow clients to find where they need to go. These aids can be further improved by using material such as foam core or plastic for permanent signs. This would also draw more attention to the posted information.

Feasibility Analysis: We reiterate our own initial experience of confusion as we entered the office and our belief that clients can be confused about how to navigate through the I-Center. It should also be noted that the I-Center staff acknowledges that if their clients do have a problem, a solution is needed and that our group's outside perspective may illuminate issues that internal staff overlook.

Summary: Given the strong service ethic that exists within the I-Center, providing additional directional cues will further enhance the I-Center's capital as a friendly and helpful organization.

B. Recommendations regarding Change Management

1. Procedural Documentation

Problem Identified: In general, standard workflow processes and routines of the I-Center are not well documented. Within certain staff positions such as the front desk receptionist, unexpected illness and even planned vacations can generate challenges for staff providing coverage during these times. Conversations with I-Center staff illuminated concerns about the lack of documented practices and procedures. This concern is heightened by the impending requirement of implementing the SEVIS tracking system. Staff members are apprehensive about how the implementation of SEVIS is going to change processes, staff duties and workload. In order to effectively and efficiently integrate this new tool into the normal workflow, a deeper understanding of current processes is needed.

Evidence: Staff noted their hope that the organization can make a “fresh start” with the new processes that would result from the SEVIS implementation and document them at that time. However, this is problematic for areas such as the front desk, where an outdated procedures document exists. As a result, work processes for this area are highly dependent on routines stored primarily in individuals. Therefore, when the receptionist is absent, providing the same level of coverage can be challenging. It is additionally difficult for the receptionist to find time to document this embedded knowledge given the constant flow of people and phone calls we observed.

Recommendation: With the implementation of SEVIS less than 2 months away, documenting current, critical practices and workflow of the ISSA would make the implementation and integration much smoother. The benefits of documenting the current process, to ensure the coherent migration of all the essential features, are underestimated. Documenting the current procedures as they now stand will provide a clearer picture of where changes will be most dramatic.

Feasibility Analysis: Staff acknowledged that documenting key tasks and processes was the right thing to do. As noted by staff,

“Permanent and radical changes occur” and “[we] need to concentrate on nailing down new things”

Workload: In order to effectively document critical routines, the I-Center staff will have to dedicate time on an ongoing basis to produce and revise content. For example, the I-Center could provide coverage for the receptionist for a dedicated 2-4 hours on a weekly basis giving the receptionist uninterrupted time to revise the existing front desk procedures manual.

“Temporary” Processes: Most work routines evolve over time rather than being replaced outright because the routine is no longer relevant. While the perception may exist that it is unnecessary to document a routine or task that is considered temporary, the I-Center needs to define what constitutes temporary and make a determination as to which processes and routines are the most critical to document.

Example of Implementation: There are a number of other University departments that have documented routines in this imperfect ever-changing environment. For example, Campus Computing Sites documented their internal routine for the making of computer classroom reservations even though there are changes and adjustments made to this routine every semester. The core practice and information concerning making classroom reservations is recorded and as components of this process change every 3-4 months, the documentation is tweaked to reflect these changes. Given the turnover of their receptionist, at least 7 times in the past 6 years, this critical process was documented so that a record of the process existed for new staff as they were brought on board.

Summary: In the long run, the I-Center will benefit from having key critical processes and work flows documented in a dynamic and easily updated fashion. Should further changes to governmental regulations force significant process modifications, the I-Center will be better prepared to handle these modifications and integrate them into their documented workflow. In addition, the I-Center will be better prepared for staff absences and turnover.

VI. CONCLUSION

In our study of the International Center and their internal and external communication and workflow, we discovered a cohesive group of people with a strong culture of service to the international community. Additionally, they have a commitment to accomplishing their stated mission to promote “international education and intercultural learning” (International Center brochure) for the greater University community. Our recommendations are based on a series of observations and interviews in which we developed a deeper understanding of the I-Center’s departments and how they perform their various tasks.

Implementing these recommendations will have a positive impact on internal and external communication flows and change management and will address the communication breakdowns we observed. These solutions are meant to provide the I-Center with concrete ways to continue and improve customer service efforts, internal process management and recognition of the I-Center’s efforts throughout the University community.

REFERENCES

1. *Mission statement, International Center, University of Michigan* brochure - Yellow general information brochure on the center and offered services including location and hours, mission statement and departments of the International Center, 12 pages. (Copy picked up by the group.)
2. Handel, Mark & Herbsleb, James D., *What is Chat Doing in the Workplace?* Received from Mark Handel via email prior to the paper's presentation at the 2002 Computer-Supported Cooperative Work meeting in New Orleans.
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APPENDIX

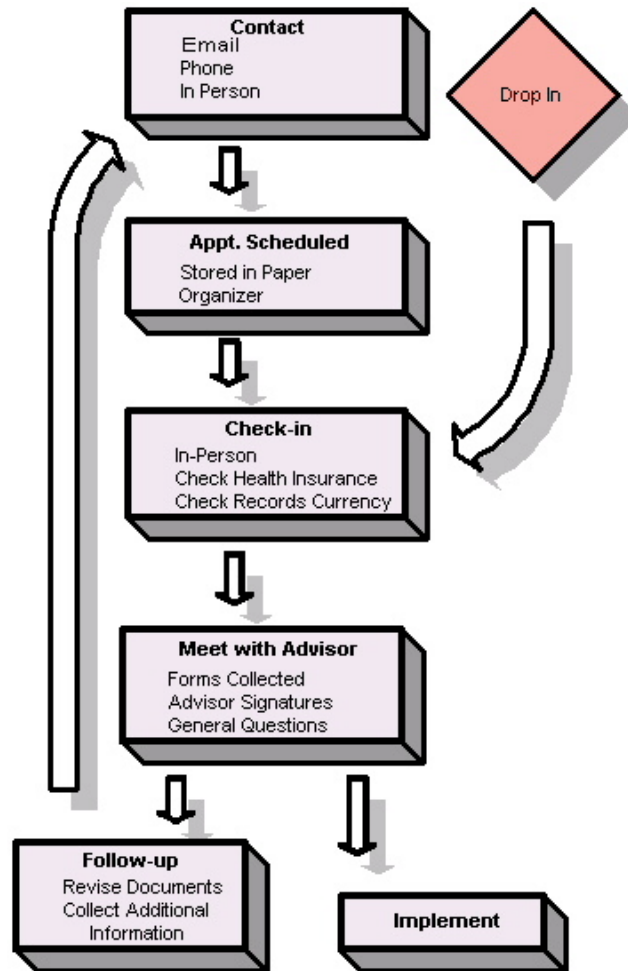


Diagram 1: Advising Workflow

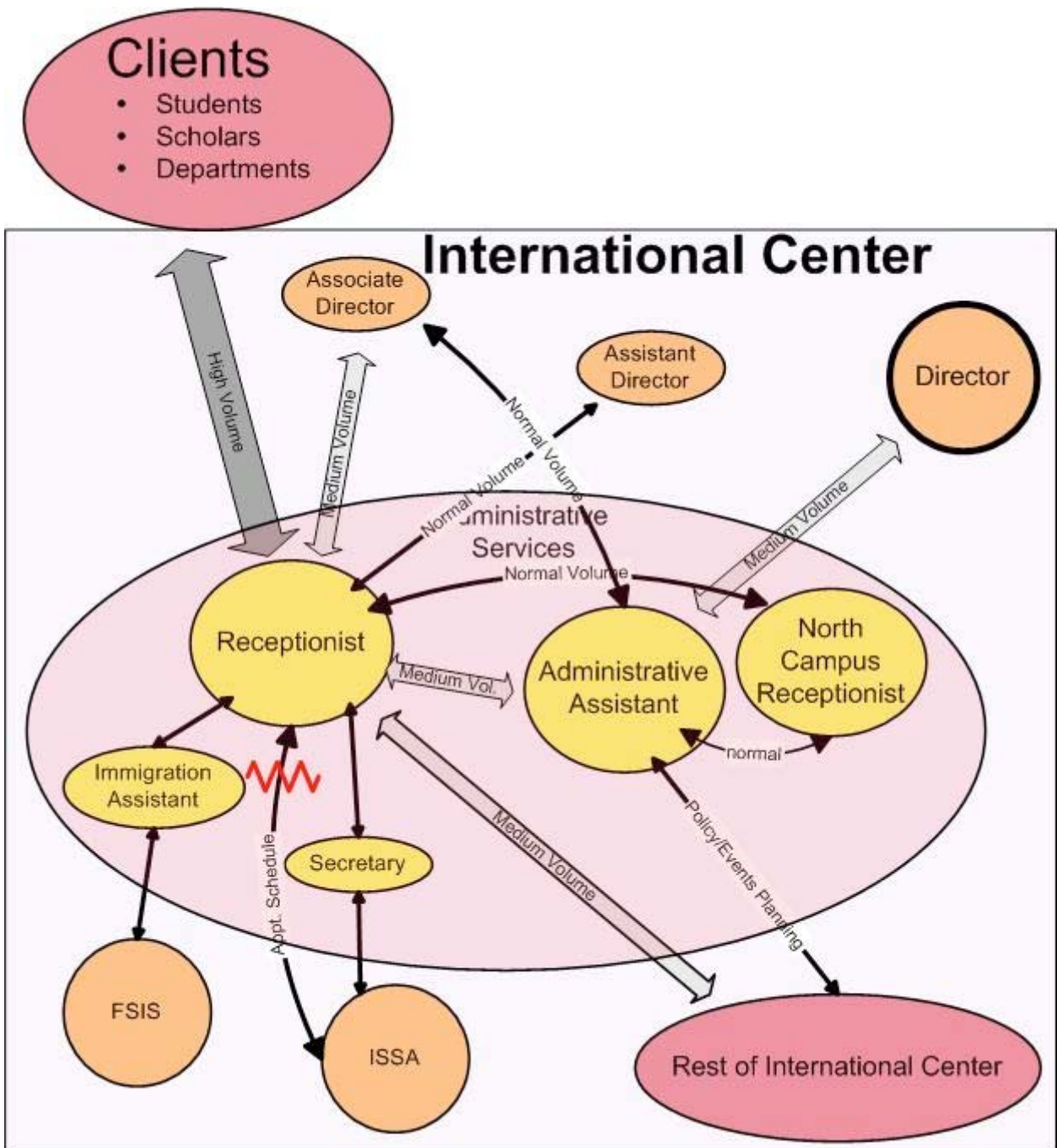


Diagram 2: International Center Communication Flow