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MicroChange Project
Element 8
Study

The following is a list of my lessons learned for my implementation stage for each element of my Microchange Project.

Write a mission statement, format it in a way that it can be included in introductory curricular materials, and post it on my website.

I found writing a mission statement to be a fulfilling and easy way to help me begin to focus my project. It was a good reminder of what I want Fit Education Consulting to be, and therefore, a good indication of why this project was so important. In my line of work, there can be an emphasis placed on the prestige of results, and I realized I, too, have been sucked into this trap. I want to realign to work towards helping my clients find the best institution for their abilities, interests, and social needs. As I am beginning to work with future employees, I want to emphasize that our goal is students who are challenged and engaged at their institutions of enrollment, not all students headed towards the Ivy League.

Also, by writing out my mission, I felt compelled to include a line about equity in educational access. While this has always been a passion of mine, and the reason that I originally went into public school teaching, I feel that this part of my mission has become somewhat nonperformative as in the Ahmed definition (2012). I will take *pro bono* clients when they are referred to me through families, my network of standardized test tutors, and civic organizations with which I am involved, but I don't do enough to actively seek out these students. Specifically, I usually have 1-3 non-paying or highly discounted students per year, because I argue that I cannot afford more than that. I realize that my mission statement doesn't work to its fullest potential without seeking out more of these students.

Write a statement of institutional values, format it in a way that can be included in introductory curricular materials, and post it on my website.

Writing a statement of institutional values was really helpful in that I felt that it further clarified who Fit is and more important, what sets us apart from our competition. When I set out to write this statement, I thought it was going to be really challenging, but it actually flowed quite naturally. I realized that I had very clearly established institutional values that I communicated to every family in our initial contact point before the family officially hires me. Having these in writing actually helped structure those initial conversations I had with moms (it's almost always mothers who make the first phone call) of new clients this spring. My yield rate has been particularly high this year, and I believe that having such a clear statement of institutional values guide the conversation that I can then share in writing has contributed to that increase in yield.

Interestingly, there are a lot of things that I believe about the college application process that I chose not to include in this list because I felt that they didn't apply to all applicants. For example, I regularly discourage students looking for merit money from applying to out-of-state tier 1 through tier 2 state universities because invariably going to a home institution in their state will ultimately be less expensive and the search for merit money is best won at smaller private

institutions. However, this doesn't feel like a value, it feels like something I have learned in professional practice. I also believe that the vast majority of my students grow more when they travel at least 2 hours away from home for college, but I don't want to put off students who might not be yet open to considering some more distant options. So, I think there are parts of my institutional values statement that are not quite working to perfection yet.

Ultimately, I think that the statement of institutional values serves to inform my perspective clients, their families, and perspective employees of what kind of practice Fit is. Specifically, we are intentionally called "Fit" not "IvyNext" or "CrimsonBound" or other similar names which are trendy in my profession for a reason. Further, I clearly signaled that we believe in a student-directed process that is sensitive to financial need.

Write a statement of expectations for student-clients, format it in a way that it can be included in introductory curricular materials.

This was actually really challenging to do. Parents hire me to ease the college process, but I need to make it clear to them that I am a facilitator of the application, I am not completing the application. This has been a problem on a number of occasions, and it would have been helpful if I clarified this from the very beginning. I also wanted to state in no uncertain terms that I find ghostwriting for your child abhorrent and grounds for terminating our work relationship. I eventually was able to create expectations for students, their parents, and for Fit staff (me included) that I can share with parents and students in the first meeting.

I toyed with making this statement of expectations public, but I decided that it is better communicated in the first meeting in person. I worked hard to make sure that it did not sound accusatory or demanding, but I think I can soften it even more in person. I am going to say that this worked, but that I may do things differently in the expanded implementation and send this to students and their parents privately before the first meeting.

Create a standardized service plan that has customizable options.

This was challenging but it has been hugely helpful to my perspective families that I am ashamed that I did not do this years ago. Prior to making this, I usually said to parents that I work hourly and that the typical students works with me between 8 and 13 hours. Now, I can show them in an easily digestible handout what services I offer, how long each one takes, and they can figure out the cost based on their price point and discount structure. That is, even though I do not offer packages, a parent can identify all of the services that his or her child will need and estimate the investment while knowing that the student can always have more or fewer meetings if their needs change.

One thing that did not work is that while I estimated my most common services and some of my uncommon, but not-unheard-of services, I always have at least one surprise per year. Last year, I had a student in a wilderness training boarding school which involved some special communication arrangements and therefore I had to bill differently. I have had students for whom I had to call addiction services at all of their prospective colleges to learn about programming, which was different. Part of me thinks that as a consultant, I will never be able to predict every single variable, but I will do my best, in those cases, to give a time/cost estimate.

Create a standardized student electronic folder with an electronic student information sheet, curricular materials, college lists, service plans, and an update and reporting system.

While this is complete, as I am just starting full service with my rising seniors, it is too soon to tell how it is working. I like that I have all data easily accessible to me and to any future consultant who works with this student. I also like that we can put the identified service plan for the student with due dates in each folder, which can help parents. I think it further professionalizes my practice, too.

However, I am having a hard time working with a student and typing their information when I am used to handwriting it and storing it in a binder. One of the challenges was that I shrank the student so small in video conference so that I could see my full sheet that it felt impersonal. I just started experimenting with the student on an iPad suspended behind the computer so that I can look them in the eye, while still making notes. This might be my solution, but I am still working on it. Ultimately, I have worked very hard to learn how to have relationships over videoconferencing, and I worry that seeming distracted will harm those rapports.

Update curricular materials related to the college essay, college visits, and college interviews and make these electronically available and editable for each student.

I made some of my curricular material ten years ago, and while the information is still good, I was horrified at how text-dense it was. I had lengthy paragraphs that were unwieldy to read and kind of boring. I transitioned these into shared documents that had bullet points, could be printed by the student and his or her parents if they wanted them, and easier to digest. I have just started to use the College Visit Guide and it works so much better than it did before. I realize actually, how good some of my curricular materials are, and I am not motived to make more for the use of my students, their families, and future employees and to maintain this format.

Develop a job advertisement for the writing coach, interview coach, and scholarship search coordinator positions.

I tried my best to channel Iris Bohnet when drafting my open position advertisements. I actually had the most difficult time with the format that I want to send people and institutions in order to attract applicants. I read a lot of job postings before settling on a format that seemed professional and in line with the kind of work I do. Further, my original text had a lot of words that seemed to cue feminine including "nurturing" and "empathetic." I decided that I should rephrase these characteristics and focus on relevant job experiences that might attract a wider number of applicants.

Additionally, I originally did not mention anything about compensation on my job posting, but after reviewing job posts for more traditionally-masculine fields like engineering and business, I realized that they all made some mention of compensation, so I decided to include it. I will be sending these job posts out through social network groups, to friends who work in the industry to pass on, and will be cold emailing teachers, higher education management graduate programs, and institutions to see if I get any applicants.

Create a reporting system for future employees in order to facilitate billing, student action steps, and institutional feedback.

I would say that this is my biggest failure in this process. I kept trying to come up with a form that would stay confidential between the employee and me in order to raise issues about the

client, to report for billing, and to offer institutional feedback. Everything that I created felt totally unwieldly. Instead, I worked through my email server and billing platform and realized that I could set up each employee with a Fit email that they could just email me feedback and private notes to request payment for a meeting, and it could be automatically billed to the parents and paid to the consultant through my current systems. I think I got hung up on the idea that professionalization and organization meant forms, when in reality it was just paperwork without actually clarifying communication, and I worry that any form I create would stifle necessary information or feedback, not encourage it.

References

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