LynxConnect Engages Students with Virtual Front Desk

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If students, professors, and staff didn't know what Zoom was at the beginning of 2020, they certainly know now. The video conferencing platform is everywhere—hosting everything from university classes to book clubs. Genia Herndon, MA, associate vice chancellor of student and community engagement, wanted a better solution to engage students: "Once we knew the virtual approach to our student services was likely going to be happening long term, I sat down with the student and community engagement team and said that how we respond in this moment will inevitably determine how students connect with us in the future; let's seek out the opportunity during this difficult time." After some initial research and encouragement to be innovative and creative, Herndon and her team at LynxConnect instituted the Virtual Front Desk.

Leah Fitzgerald, MBA, worked with Jessica Godo '05 to research, implement, and improve a plan to make LynxConnect work effectively off campus. "We were dedicated to providing access to all of our services while remote," Fitzgerald said. "This included our front desk, as LynxConnect houses four separate offices," she added. The four offices in one location include Career Services, Internships, Undergraduate Research, and Global Education (study abroad). LynxConnect had been trying to meet student needs remotely, but they needed a new tool. "When I first heard of the idea of a virtual desk, I was excited … The prospect of getting a chance to speak with students one-on-one again was a welcome change from the months of trying to meet students' needs efficiently over email," said Meghan Mitchell, a student who works at LynxConnect.

What is Virtual Front Desk?

Not to be flip here, but the Virtual Front Desk is exactly that—a virtual front desk. Instead of walking into LynxConnect and seeing someone behind a desk waiting to help you, you click on the Virtual Front Desk (VFD) on the LynxConnect website page to reach someone immediately. The Virtual Front Desk connects you to a zoom room immediately during its hours of operation, Monday – Friday, 8 a.m. – 5 p.m.

Instead of emailing or calling LynxConnect in order to set up a Zoom meeting and then logging into Zoom to get help at a specific meeting time, students can just go to the Virtual Front Desk and walk right in (virtually). "What would it feel like for a student to be able to walk into an office and have someone immediately there?" Herndon asked. That was the experience LynxConnect was trying to create.

Jessica Godo, senior coordinator for students, community, and events at LynxConnect, had to complete hours of research before Virtual Front Desk could launch. She needed to find a live chat interface that worked for everyone. "However, I found that there are zero companies that are ADA-compliant [Americas with Disabilities Act] for video chatting," she said. "So I worked with what I (the university) had, which is Zoom," she added.

While Zoom doesn't look any different when it's accessed through the Virtual Front Desk, the process is different. "We were able to customize the Waiting Room with the VFD logo and a welcome message," Godo explains. Students and staff who work at the desk also use Jabber, a tool that routes telephone calls through the LynxConnect main office telephone number, as well as email and an Internet browser.

VFD in this New World

Meghan shared what it's like to work at the Virtual Front Desk: "I enjoy working from the VFD, as it gives me a chance to talk with students again." And the process of working at the virtual desk really improved as the LynxConnect team fixed small glitches by creating professional Zoom backgrounds, introducing a waiting room that advised student workers when there was a guest waiting, and greeting students looking for help in the same way they did in person. "I have learned that it is easier for a student to communicate their needs when they know someone is listening and understands exactly what they are asking in that moment. I loved doing that in the office, and I love doing it from home," Meghan said. Herndon expects students will also benefit after they graduate. "Not only is the Virtual Front Desk a way for us to keep our students employed, but it's also a resume builder," she said. Learning this new virtual platform lets student employees "develop some new skills."

LynxConnect pioneered the Virtual Front Desk at CU Denver, and it's been working well. "What we've learned is that this is probably a tool we're going to continue to use for our students, because we're finding that as people get used to this new world, they are likely to continue to expect remote access to our team," Herndon said. Godo reports that at LynxConnect, the Virtual Front Desk is helping "an average of one student every 30 minutes and one or two faculty a day."

The VFD was conceived in March and implemented in May. After the university's Office of Information Technology improved some of the tool's functionality, other offices wanted to use it too. Currently, there are six additional departments using the Virtual Front Desk: Undergraduate Advising, the Center for Undergraduate Exploration & Advising, Peer Advocate Leaders, Learning Resources Center, First Year Experiences, and University Honors and Leadership.

Why is the VFD gaining popularity? "It's immediate gratification for students," Herndon said. "Office hours are set up and somebody is there at the ready."

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