

Ask! Solution Finder Project Final Report
Creativity and Innovation for Effectiveness (CAIFE)
California State University, Fresno

Executive Summary

Universities such as Fresno State are complex organizations, with a host of rules and regulations that govern each student's learning environment. For many students – and especially for those who are the first in their family to experience college life – those rules and regulations create barriers to their success. Students are challenged by where to go for help to solve problems and to obtain accurate information. Students who go to campus offices for help may experience the “run-around”, which can leave them frustrated, exhausted, and with their problem unresolved.

The CAIFE Solution Finder Team was charged with creating a “solution finder” which would be a tool to help get students to the people who can solve their specific problem. The bold idea as originally conceived was to have a one-stop shop staffed with a university representative that will help direct students to the proper office to solve any issue that they are having. The *Ask!* Solution Finder would be a place for students to get support and avoid the Fresno State “run-around”.

To identify the problem, the team consulted with members of the campus community who regularly interact with students, conducted an online survey of several defined student groups, and held both formal and informal discussions with students. Areas that students frequently indicated as problems included: financial aid, finding classes, parking, registration, academic advising, time management, and issues related to grades.

The team sought to build a system where students could get help, no matter what their specific issue involved. We concluded that the most efficient and effective system would include both technology-based and face-to-face solutions. Underlying all of the solutions will be a common set of information about the campus and our policies and procedures. The *Ask!* Solution Finder is not designed to answer every single question, but to get the student to the person or office who can answer it. It will enable student empowerment and engagement, facilitate a greater sense of belonging, enhance student satisfaction, and ultimately lead to greater student persistence and degree completion.

Recommendations

- 1) *Ask! Mobile Booth*: Purchase or design a mobile, in-person service booth that can be located in key locations across the campus during designated times.
- 2) *Ask! Virtual Assistant*: Create an internet-based application that students could use to get anytime anywhere answers to common questions.
- 3) *Ask! Service Sites*: Establish designated locations throughout the campus, identified with the *Ask!* Logo, to indicate that friendly and accurate help is available.



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Introduction

Universities such as Fresno State are complex organizations, with a host of rules and regulations that govern each student's learning environment. For many students – and especially for those who are the first in their family to experience college life – those rules and regulations create barriers to their success. Students are challenged with a variety of issues and do not know where to go for help to solve problems and to obtain accurate information. Students who go to campus offices for help often experience the “run-around”, which can leave them frustrated, exhausted, and with their problem unresolved.

The Solution Finder CAIFE Team was charge to create a “solution finder” (also described as a Lucy .05 cent advice stand), which would be a tool or service that would help students who don't know where to turn for help. The bold idea was to have a one-stop shop staffed with a university representative that would help direct students to the proper offices for support, avoid frustration, and eliminate the Fresno State “run-around”.

Team members were very familiar with the “run-around” experienced by students and the frustration that usually resulted from trying to navigate the campus maze. It was clearly apparent that a solution was needed. We consulted with campus members, talked with students to find out the type of questions and challenges they face and to whom and where they go for solutions and explored various options for providing accurate and accessible information to students upon demand. This brought us to creating a system which would provide students with answers to questions by using a face-to-face method and on line tools.

Methodology

The team consulted with various members of the campus community, including University Communications (Margarita Adona), Facilities Management (Tom Gaffery), DISCOVERe (Mike Pronovost), Technology Services (Robert Guinn), and the original Bold Idea submission author (Sharon Ramirez). In addition, the Team held informal discussions with students and conducted an anonymous student survey of a variety of defined student groups. This was followed up with a student focus group to discover problems they encountered as new students.

Students were asked to identify the types of problems they encountered, as well as their primary sources of information they used when they had questions. After consulting with these various groups, the team identified major problem areas that would need to be included in the *Ask!* Solution Finder, which are listed in ranked order below:

- Financial Aid
- Finding Classes
- Parking
- Registration
- Academic Advising
- Time Management
- Grade-related Concerns

There were also a wide variety of other issues that students mentioned less frequently that also would need to be included in *Ask!* Solution Finder. It was apparent to the team that to be successful, the *Ask!* Solution Finder would be an ever-growing and evolving tool.

Consultations

The CAIFE Solution Finder Team conducted a needs assessment to determine whether students have problems getting accurate information and whether they ever experienced the "runaround" in seeking support from campus services. The team crafted an assessment plan that included quantitative (campus survey) and qualitative (focus group) components. The data collected from student groups (non-scientific research) was aggregated to protect individual responses. The details of each assessment component are given below.

1. The team created a campus survey that consisted of nine (9) survey items that utilized step-logic questions ("if-then") in the primary university-sponsored survey software (Qualtrics). The team identified a number of defined student groups to send the survey to, including selected course sections of University 1 (freshman orientation class), students residing in the Residence Halls (all student levels), and student employees (Henry Madden Library). The total survey population was 1,400 potential respondents. The survey was available for two (2) weeks in March 2015. The team collected 158 student responses for an 11.3% response rate. Dmitri Rogulkin, Assistant Director of the Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) reviewed the survey items and conducted data analysis for the Team.
2. The team used questions from the campus survey to generate open-ended questions for a student focus group. The team partnered with Erin Boele, Director of the University Courtyard, to recruit Residence Hall Advisors (Residence Advisers - RAs) to participate in the focus groups. These students were selected because they could discuss problems that they had personally encountered as well as problems that they hear about from the

students who live in their residence halls. The team facilitated an hour long focus group with more than 20 RAs on April 2015. The focus group was insightful as the team took extensive notes about student problems and opinions. The information from the focus group supported many of the themes identified in the survey, but also identified some new areas that create student frustration.

The campus survey and the focus group provided insightful student information and general opinions in regard to personal experiences while seeking general support and information related to campus services. According to the assessment plan, 62% of respondents said they have experienced the "runaround" or have been sent to multiple office when trying to seek assistance. Seventy-three percent (73%) of students indicated that they are likely to use a website tool or mobile application to address commonly asked questions. Finally, students indicated the best method of communication to inform them about these tools is email correspondence (95%). Overall, the common themes identified from the survey and focus group included:

- Financial aid and academic advising
- Physical location of classes and parking
- Registration and grades
- Understanding how to use Blackboard and the Student Portal (training)
- Adjusting to the university environment
- Time management and other academic skills
- Wi-Fi connectivity challenges across campus (specifically in the Residence Halls)

Recommendations

Since the academic community tends to work at various hours during a 24-hour cycle – and especially since students often work on their problems during hours when campus staff are not in their offices – answers need to be accessible and available around the clock. *Ask!* Solution Finder has developed a three-prong solution to helping students. These include: designated offices around campus will be identified as starting points for students needing assistance; mobile information stations that can be placed at strategic locations around campus during high traffic times to assist students; and a virtual assistant that can be consulted 24/7 from any web-enabled device. A unique and easily-identifiable logo will be developed to let individuals with questions know that where they can get help. Underlying the success of both solutions is the need for a designated person to assess and coordinate all aspects of the *Ask!* Solution Finder.

***Ask!* Service Locations.** Participating offices will be identified with a distinctive logo to indicate that they are a location where help is available for students. The team anticipates that these offices will be located in advising centers, Deans' offices, the Library, and other strategic

locations across the campus. *Ask!* service locations will partner with advising and other offices or programs that already handle many of these issues.

Ask! Mobile Booths: Mobile in-person service booths will be located in key areas across the campus during designated times. Each booth will be staffed with a knowledgeable person who can interact one-on-one with students. The booth could be used at events such as DOG DAYS: New Student Orientation at Fresno State, registration, graduation, athletics events, and other key activities that bring a large number of people to campus. The booths are designed to be mobile and to include the technology infrastructure necessary to provide immediate information. They will be identified with the same logo as the permanent information centers. Because they are mobile and can be set up at different locations around campus, they will attract and support students who might not go to the permanent help centers.

Ask! On Line Virtual Assistant: An online Virtual Assistant will allow students to access help on a 24/7 basis, using either a standard knowledge base that is accessed by the software or a real person who can communicate with the student (or both). The Virtual Assistant allows students to interact with the campus online in a personal and anonymous mode. It can either provide students with answers to specific questions or direct them to the staff and offices who can help them. The Virtual Assistant needs to be integrated with the Fresno State website so it can take advantage of the wealth of information available that is often difficult to find.

The team learned students rarely go to the Fresno State home page for assistance. More often than not, when there is a question about deadlines, policies, or events, their response is that they, “Google it!” Unfortunately, this does not often yield correct or current information. The team found companies in the private sector often have Virtual Assistant technology embedded within their websites that will pop-up whenever someone is visiting a web page for an extended period of time (presumably looking for information). The Virtual Assistant will provide assistance by answering questions with responses from a centralized database. For example, businesses such as Alaskan Airlines, Amtrak, and the City of Clovis use Virtual Assistant technology on their websites. It is much like Apple’s Siri or Microsoft’s Cortana. Although many are familiar with this type of customer service technology, it does not appear to be used extensively in higher education.

Various offices across campus would need to be responsible for updating and maintaining the information within the centralized knowledge base. The team recommends this information also be tied in to existing support systems on campus such as the PeopleSoft Student Center, Blackboard, and Fresno State’s existing mobile application so the data is consistent regardless of the platform used to find the information. Putting the Virtual Assistant on the mobile application will also make it easy for students to find when they need it.

It is important the employees at all *Ask!* locations receive customer service training and periodic training updates in order to provide accurate and up-to-date information about campus policies and procedures. Fresno State serves a large, diverse population and it is critical the training incorporate procedures on handling difficult and delicate situations. The employees at the *Ask!* locations, both in the offices and the mobile booths, may be the first person that individuals encounter on the campus and must also receive cultural competence training and referral procedures appropriate to their role. The University's *Learning for Excellence and Development* (LEAD) program may have the capacity to assist in the development and ongoing support of customer service training.

Implementation Timeline

Semester	Activities
Fall 2015	Identify and hire <i>Ask!</i> Solution Finder Coordinator
	Collaborate with LEAD/HR for customer service training schedule and certification process
	Partner with University Communications to devise a communication plan
	Work with faculty and students from Mass Communication & Journalism/Public Relations, or Marketing courses to devise a communications plan targeting students (class projects)
	Identify and assign <i>ASK!</i> Locations and develop a schedule for mobile units Create <i>Ask!</i> Solution Finder logo
	Adopt recommendation for Virtual Assistant from DISCOVERe
Spring 2016	<i>Soft Launch</i> Purchase marketing/signage materials, mobile units, and mobile devices/technology
	Procure Virtual Assistant and build FAQs database
	Hire and train student assistants from graduate programs
	Commence LEAD customer service trainings
Summer 2016	<i>Official Launch at DOG DAYS</i> Launch <i>ASK!</i> Solution Finder program Launch Virtual Assistant on Fresno State webpage

Budget

The successful implementation of the *Ask!* Solution Finder project is dependent on hiring a project coordinator, who will implement the ideas presented in this report. The total budget projects an allocation of \$110,000 first year investment costs and \$77,000 on-going costs. The CAIFE Solution Finder Team has developed a thoughtful budget with staff, technology tools, and supplies. The following items and their respective costs are explained.

1. ***Ask!* Solution Finder Coordinator** (estimated at \$60,000 per year for one full-time position). The coordinator is responsible for the implementation and coordination of *Ask!* Solution Finder activities. Duties include developing the knowledge base, collaborating with participating campus units, implementation of project activities, training and updating participants, including the student assistants, and conducting assessment of the CAIFE *Ask!* Solution Finder project. The coordinator will be a full-time staff (Student Services Professional - SSPII) with healthcare and staff benefits included.
2. **Student Assistants** (estimated at \$10,000 per academic year). The student assistants will be hired and trained to support the operation of the mobile units during designated periods during the fall/spring semesters. The student assistants will also support the coordinator and participate in campus marketing outreach opportunities.
3. **Mobile Units** (\$5,000 per unit/one-time costs). The mobile units will be purchased to serve as locations to provide assistance to students. They will be used in a variety of highly visible locations during designated campus events and in designated high traffic campus areas determined by the coordinator.
4. **Mobile Devices/Technology Equipment/Supplies** (\$10,000 one-time costs/\$2,000 on-going costs). Mobile technology – including tablets, laptops, wireless printers – will be used to support the staff and student assistants providing assistance in the mobile units.
5. **Virtual Assistant** (estimated \$3,000 annual cost). The Virtual Assistant is the third-party vendor product that will be used to deliver information on the Fresno State website. DISCOVERe is investigating software products and will make a recommendation to the campus. *Ask!* Solution Finder may be able to collaborate in the purchase of software they are considering, which could reduce or eliminate this cost item.
6. **Promotional Items/Signage** (\$7,000 one-time costs/\$2,000 ongoing costs). Promotional signs, items, and promotional videos will be purchased and/or produced to promote the service and maintain the visibility of the CAIFE *Ask!* Solution Finder project.

Ask! Solution Finder Budget Estimates

Item	Description	Unit Cost	First Year Cost	Ongoing Cost
Ask! Solution Finder Coordinator (SSPII)	One (1) SSP II + benefits (estimate 40%)	\$ 60,000 annual	\$60,000	\$ 60,000
Student Assistants	Student assistants	\$ 10,000 academic year	\$10,000	\$ 10,000
Mobile Units for peak periods during academic year	4 mobile units in high traffic areas	\$ 5,000	\$20,000	
Mobile Devices/ Technology/Equipment	Tablets/laptops, wireless/bluetooth printers	\$10,000	\$10,000	\$2,000
Virtual Assistant for Common Challenges and FAQs on Fresno State website	Yearly Vendor Subscription <i>based on Campus License thru DISCOVERe</i>	\$3,000 Est.	\$3,000 Est.	\$3,000 Est.
Promotional Items and Campus Signage (Ask! buttons, stickers)	Promotion and Information for on-campus departments, events, and activities		\$ 7,000	\$ 2,000
Total			\$ 110,000	\$ 77,000

Assessment Plan

Success of the *Ask!* Solution Finder will be somewhat difficult to measure. True success occurs when students find the information they need and the staff or office who can help them at the time they need help. We will measure usage of the Virtual Assistant and keep statistics on the number of people asking for help at the *Ask!* Service locations and at the mobile units. The *Ask!* Solution Finder coordinator will consult with the Office of Institutional Effectiveness to develop a comprehensive assessment plan to measure the desired outcomes.

Conclusion

A system such as the *Ask!* Solution Finder will help students solve their specific problems. It will provide students with information and assistance they need to solve their specific issue. The in-person assistance will allow students to get help face-to-face, whereas the Virtual Assistant will offer 24/7 anonymous information. *Ask!* Solution Finder will give students a greater sense of empowerment and engagement with the campus, and will help reduce the Fresno State “runaround”. These recommendations will foster a greater sense of belonging, enhance student satisfaction, and ultimately lead to greater student persistence and degree completion. The team strongly recommends the campus fund the *Ask!* Solution Finder project.