Making the Case for CSDCAS

“Applications were increasing, making our offline process unmanageable,” shared Lisa Lucks Mendel, Ph.D. in a recent conversation about the University of Memphis School of Communication Sciences and Disorders’ (CSD) choice to streamline their cumbersome, paper-driven graduate admissions process. “Our field is moving towards widespread adoption of CSDCAS, the Communication Sciences and Disorders Centralized Application Service (CAS™), so there was no question that this would be the best solution to enhance our process.”

Many departments of Communication Sciences and Disorders across the U.S. find themselves in a similar place — they are ready for a new process and see the value in transitioning to CSDCAS, which is provided by the Council of Academic Programs in Communication Sciences and Disorders (CAPCSD). Then comes what may be the hardest part of transitioning an admissions process: making the case for CSDCAS to other stakeholders.

“At the University of Memphis, we had a functioning system in place. Several of those involved in admissions didn’t see the value in changing, while others did,” recalled Dr. Lucks Mendel. In the end, the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies and Frances Breland, the School’s administrative assistant, found three approaches that worked best for overcoming objections in the early stages of the decision process: (1) offering a safety net, (2) emphasizing consistencies and (3) highlighting the possibilities introduced by CSDCAS.

Offer a safety net to increase comfort

“Approaching CSDCAS as an option to try rather than as the only way forward helps those who are slow to change become more comfortable with the idea of it. When they can see the processes side by side, it makes it much easier to recognize the value of CSDCAS,” Breland shared. “Actually, we are still benefiting from this even after two full years with the centralized service. Our Ph.D. programs currently use our former admissions process. When we compare the Ph.D. application process to the MA and AuD application process, the value of CSDCAS is reemphasized each time.”

“I must admit that we made it a bit harder than it needed to be by using two systems during our first year with CSDCAS. The stakeholder buy-in that it drove made it worth it,” added Dr. Lucks Mendel.

If it’s not possible to leverage two separate solutions at the same time — understandably, as many offices are suffering from a lack of support to run just one! — then focus on how the change is communicated. Transitioning to CSDCAS doesn’t have to mean there’s no looking back. “In fact, now that we’re on our third year, we’re looking back even more because we’re figuring out how the new technology can make our process even better!” explained Breland.

Explore what will stay the same...

For the University of Memphis, the attention to detail that the admissions committee always gave applications stayed the same. Faculty members still see every application so that they can weigh in on each prospective student’s fit for the program before the admissions committee makes decisions.
“The difference is that faculty don’t have to spend twelve hours in a room going through paper files. They can access all the information that informed their previous decisions, but digitally, where and when they need it,” shared Breland.

“It was key to emphasize that CSDCAS didn’t remove the human element of admissions decisions. We can still communicate with prospective students, something that we see as integral to the admissions process, but we spend less answering the easy questions which allows us time to engage with those who we may end up teaching next year,” added Dr. Lucks Mendel.

Often, fear of the unknown can create an insurmountable barrier to change. CSDCAS makes it possible to overcome this challenge because it was developed for CSD programs, taking into account decision makers’ workflows and introducing efficiencies where possible.

And highlight what more is possible with CSDCAS

Not only does transitioning to CSDCAS allow a school to continue the processes that work, but it also creates opportunities to reallocate limited resources and make data-driven admissions decisions more efficiently.

“CSDCAS frees us from files. We can share information before we sit down to consider candidates. We can pull up transcripts or individual components of the application if we need them, but CSDCAS packages all of the pieces into a secure, comprehensive PDF,” shared Dr. Lucks Mendel.

“I remember the surprise from faculty members during our first cycle with CSDCAS. I managed to complete other tasks that were not related to admissions during what had previously been the busiest time of the year. Many faculty members approached me, stunned that I had time for anything other than application processing tasks. Previously, they had known not to approach the administrative staff during admissions season since our plates were completely full,” added Breland.

In the end, making the case for CSDCAS is similar to making the case for implementing any new technology. The difference is that with CSDCAS, the value will be clear from the very beginning, when your office has more time for the work that they are uniquely qualified to do: building the best Communication Sciences and Disorders classes, and ultimately, the best workforce.
You Made the Case for CSDCAS. Now What?

You’ve heard the common objections. You’ve overcome them. Those who were cautious about transitioning to a new admissions process are now ready for CSDCAS, the Communication Sciences and Disorders Centralized Application Service (CAS™). So now what?

“I advocated for CSDCAS for years. Once my school decided to move forward, my first thought was, ‘What was I thinking?’” reminisced Dr. Lisa Lucks Mendel, associate professor at the University of Memphis School of Communication Sciences and Disorders. “As far as implementation of the service and outcomes from it are concerned, in the end it was way better than I expected, but there is a learning curve. I remember being stressed out, wondering what I should be doing, what was I missing, what did I need to know as my time wasn’t taken up with the manual, administrative tasks that I’d previously had to manage.”

There’s good news for those who are new to CSDCAS and feeling similarly overwhelmed: The Council of Academic Programs in Communication Sciences and Disorders (CAPCSD), the organization that partnered with leading admissions solution provider Liaison International to power CSDCAS, is pushing for widespread adoption across graduate Communication Sciences and Disorders programs. Because of this, your support network is expanding as peers are willing to share what they’ve learned firsthand. Dr. Lucks Mendel and Frances Breland, the administrative assistant for the University of Memphis School of Communication Sciences and Disorders, are two such colleagues. Their advice: prepare for a learning curve, be willing to bend your process and prioritize transparency for all stakeholders.

Prepare for a learning curve

“The more I learn about CSDCAS, the more impressed I am with it, but you can’t learn it all at the beginning,” shared Dr. Lucks Mendel. “Now, we’re leveraging complex list building techniques and other features to refine our processes. If you would have introduced me to these techniques when I first signed on, I wouldn’t have understood their value. As with many tech solutions, it’s important to start with the basics, gaining a foundational knowledge before you expand your focus to more advanced concepts.”

Breland suggests not only pacing yourself, but keeping — or getting — other stakeholders involved at this early point as well. “Take advantage of WebADMIT [the administrative backend for CSDCAS] training for administrative staff as well as for faculty members. This is a great opportunity to continue to build buy-in as you compare the current system with CSDCAS, highlighting what will remain the same about your process and what new efficiencies CSDCAS will introduce.”

The available training is increasing as more programs join the CSDCAS community. The training catalog now includes asynchronous materials such as videos and manuals as well as synchronous workshops with both online and in-person options. “I attended an in-person CSDCAS workshop earlier this year. Afterwards, I texted Frances, ‘I just learned something that will change your world,” added Dr. Lucks Mendel.
Be willing to bend your process

Many schools transitioning away from paper-driven admissions cling to the specifics of their former process even as they implement a more powerful technology solution. “You’re going to be tempted to try to translate what you’ve done before directly to the new service,” shared Dr. Lucks Mendel. “The problem is that the technology that you now have in your hands can do so much more. You might be hurting yourself if you stick to exactly what you did previously.”

Breland expanded on this: “We tried — and sometimes still try — to replicate our paper processes within WebAdMIT. As one example, we use a specific formula to give prospective students a ranking that communicates their fit for our program. We couldn’t figure out how to get the formula into WebAdMIT so we’re using two different systems concurrently. Now, we are re-evaluating our ranking process to determine if it is as efficient or effective as it once was, and we are exploring the additional capabilities that CSDCAS makes possible.”

Prioritize transparency for all stakeholders

Making the case for CSDCAS, and then working through the transition, requires concentrated effort, but it doesn’t stop there. “Once you’re live, you add another stakeholder: applicants,” added Breland. “Be clear on your website and in all of your application materials about how to apply to your program. Share details about what materials they’ll need at each stage of the CSDCAS application and be open about what problems they may encounter in order to reduce frustration along the way.”

Before you know it, you’ll start to recognize opportunities to do more with CSDCAS. The key is starting slow, being open minded and communicating openly as you work towards a streamlined admissions process.