Study on the feasibility of maintaining an online ordering system at the PRC and improving operational efficiencies

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4. **INTRODUCTION**
   1. **An overview of UBC Residence Life**

UBC Student Housing and Community Services (SHCS) operates 15 student residences at the Point Grey (Vancouver) campus, including Pacific Residence which is currently under construction. Together, these residences house over 13,000 members of the university community, and 440 staff directly work to operate these facilities. In addition to the operations of residences, SHCS also oversees other campus divisions such as the Bookstore, Campus Mail, childcare, conferences, food services and parking (UBC SHCS, “About Us”).

Within each residence area, a number of Residence Advisors (RAs) work under the supervision of the area’s Residence Life Manager (RLM) to support wellness, safety, security, community building and personal development for students living in residence. RAs are part-time professional staff, who must live in the residence area they work in and be a UBC student enrolled in classes as well. As part of their roles, RAs are contractually obligated to propose and implement a minimum number of programs and events which “support the Residence Life mission statement and the Residence Life community-building model” (UBC SHCS, “Residence Advisor 2021–2022 Job Description”).

* 1. **History of the Programme Resource Centre (PRC)**

The PRC is located in the Commonsblock of the Walter Gage Residence, near the entrance to South Tower. The PRC has been operating in this location for about two decades, with little changes to the facility other than upgraded equipment, new furniture and minor renovations.

A number of staff work within the PRC to operate the facility and its day-to-day operations. Typically, three PRCAs (Programme Resource Centre Assistants) are hired by SHCS to work a 12-month contract. The contract which starts May in conjunction with residence move-in and the start of summer session. Hiring usually takes places several months prior, in January and February. Unlike some other residence staff roles such as RAs, PRCAs are not obligated to live in residence. PRCAs directly report to and are under the supervision of Mike Cheung, Manager, Residence Life Projects (UBC SHCS, “Programme Resource Centre (PRC) Advisor 2021–2022 Job Description”).

In past years, Residence Coordinators (RCs) also may have worked in the PRC throughout the year on a rotating basis, in conjunction with PRCAs. However, after the elimination of the RC role starting in the 2019-2020 academic year, the PRC is solely staffed by PRCAs.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the PRC has officially been ‘closed’. However, a limited range of services were still offered in accordance with heatlh guidelines. During this time, services were offered by existing SHCS staff, such as Residence Life Managers (RLMs) and Residence Life Office Assistants (RLOAs). In September 2021, the PRC will officially open again (staffed by PRCAs) and offer a full range of in-person services.

* 1. **Description of services offered by the PRC**

The PRC exists to support Residence Advisors, members of residence council and other individuals affiliated with Residence Life in the fulfilment of their programming duties. The PRC offers a range of services, such as printers, laminators, die-cut machines, art and craft supplies and borrowable materials. These services are used by PRC clients when promoting and/or running events and other initiatives in residence (UBC PRC).

* 1. **Purpose of this report**

Due to the onset of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in March 2020 and the associated health measures, numerous changes have been made to PRC operations to adapt. As UBC reopens and in-person classes resume, the PRC plans to resume normal (i.e. pre-COVID-19) operations in September 2021. PRCAs will return again and clients will be able to visit the PRC in-person to utilize a full range of services.

The main purpose of this report is to determine whether the online ordering system implemented as a result of the pandemic should be kept even when regular in-person services resume at the PRC.

* 1. **Brief description of interview and data sources**

Most data in this report is formulated from data available online (e.g. UBC Housing and PRC websites), interviews with PRC management, surveys of current PRC users, and the author’s own experiences of both working in the PRC and utilizing its services while previously working as a Residence Advisor.

* 1. **Scope of this report**

This report will examine several areas. Namely, the current state of the online ordering system and the feasibility of maintain such system once normal operations resume will be examined. Additionally, feedback from Residence Advisors and PRC management will be used to critically examine the state of services at the centre. Lastly, alternative measures such as hiring additional staff, extending opening hours, or relocating the PRC will also be briefly explored.

1. **DATA SECTION**
   1. **Interviews of senior-level staff members at UBC SHCS**

Mike Cheung is currently the staff member directly responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operations of the PRC. Mike started working for UBC SHCS in 2013 as a Residence Life Manager (RLM). Mike then started working in a role directly related to the PRC briefly in 2015, and on a permanent basis since 2018.

In relation to the online ordering system, Mike identified the role which the PRC plays in connecting members of the residence community from differing areas with professionals (PRCAs) who are able to help them create the best and highest-quality resources.

* 1. **Surveys gathered from Residence Advisors**

A total of four Residence Advisors completed a comprehensive and anonymous survey about their experiences with the PRC. All surveyed RAs have been working in residence for at least two years, and have utilized the services of the PRC prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

* + 1. **Overall satisfaction with the PRC**

There are three main points in the mission statement (UBC PRC):

* "Foster an inclusive residence leader community."
* "Provide resources and coaching for skill development and community support."
* "Inspire actions that build connections and enhance the residence experience."

The majority (75%) of surveyed RAs identified “Provide resources and coaching…” as the statement which best describes the “role which the PRC plays in UBC Residence Life. 25% of those surveyed best identified with “Inspire actions…”, while none of the individuals surveyed identified with the statement “Foster an inclusive residence leader community.”

* + 1. **Ease of accessibility**

75% of respondents stated they would visit the PRC more often if it was located closer to their residence. All respondents stated the PRC is located at least a 15-minute walk away from their residence. However, this survey sample is small and therefore likely not representative of the entire residence community (as several residences such as Walter Gage, Brock Commons and Exchange are in the immediate vicinity of the PRC).

* + 1. **Commonly used services**

The most frequently used services at the PRC are poster printing, banner printing, lamination and diecuts. All survey respondents stated they have used these services at the PRC before. Except for diecuts, the three other services can be ordered online and picked up at the PRC. Other services, such as borrowing supplies, have not been utilized by all respondents (Figure 1).

Chart, bar chart

Description automatically generated

**FIGURE 1** Survey responses indicating which PRC services respondents have utilized so far.

* 1. **Analysis of online ordering system**
     1. **Current set-up of Qualtrics system**

The current online ordering system in place for prints involves clients visiting a Qualtrics webform and inputting their personal information (name, email, phone, residence area) and information about their order, such as the file size, number of copies, etc. Clients can attach a single file (PDF, PNG, JPEG, etc.) to the order form.

* + 1. **Issues with online ordering**

There are two major issues inherent in the operation of the current online system. First, clients are unable to submit more than one file at a single time when placing an order. This is frustrating for both PRC staff and clients, as clients have to fill out multiple order forms and staff has to sift through multiple redundant orders. This can be ameliorated by changing the setup of the Qualtrics form to allow the submission of multiple files in a single order.

Another issue is the processing time involved in managing the influx of online orders. Although clients receive assistance from PRCAs while at the centre, most work is completed independently. This eases the workload for PRCAs, allowing them to attend to other tasks and assist a greater number of people. As shown in **Figure 2**, under the typical scheme, most labour is completed by the clients (i.e. RAs) themselves. Under the online ordering scheme, this process is further complicated by the addition of several steps to the process which did not exist before. The labour burden of these additional steps (indicated in blue) is borne by the staff of the PRC. Maintaining online ordering has the unintended consequences of potentially overwhelming PRCAs and decreasing the efficiency of the centre.

**Figure 2** Flowcharts showing the ‘normal’ ordering process (top), and the online ordering process (bottom) implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly half of the residences at UBC were closed due to the cancellation of in-person classes and reduced number of students on campus. This in turn meant that less RAs were hired during the 2020-2021 academic term, and therefore less programs and events were hosted in residence. Additionally, public health guidelines have significantly restricted the number of in-person programs which can be orchestrated. Therefore, during the past year the PRC has experienced significantly reduced order volume and workload. The current online system has been suitable for this volume. However, the full resumption of regular residence activities is likely to result in a return to pre-pandemic use of the PRC’s services. Maintenance of the current online ordering system might not be feasible under such volumes.

* 1. **Potential for expansion of range of services**
     1. **Extended operating hours**

During normal times the PRC operates from 11 am – 7 pm on weekdays and from 12 pm – 5 pm on weekends (UBC PRC). This is a total of 50 hours per week of operations, divided between three staff members who each typically work parttime for 15-20 hours per week. Taking this into consideration, extended hours would require at least one additional staff member (discussed in the following section). Since the PRC is already open for most of the day 7 days a week, extension of operating hours is likely to yield little or no benefits. According to interviews and feedback from RAs, the usual operating hours of the PRC are sufficient to meet community needs.

* + 1. **Additional staff and personnel**

An extension of PRC operating hours would not be feasible unless additional staff are hired. In 2021-2022, the renumeration for a single PRCA is $13,680 for a full 12-month term (UBC SHCS, “Programme Resource Centre (PRC) Advisor 2021–2022 Job Description”). Hiring more staff would also incur additional costs involved in processes such as training and onboarding. Unless the PRC’s operating budget is significantly increased, the hiring of additional staff is not realistically feasible or desirable.

* + 1. **Relocation of the PRC**

In the past, senior residence management have entertained the idea of relocating the PRC from its current location. A new PRC location could offer the benefits of being located in a more centralized and easily accessible area, offer more modernized facilities and be larger. One major obstacle towards such relocation would be the limited number of options available. If the PRC were to be located to a purpose-built facility in a newly constructed residence building, planning for such a move would have to begin several years in advance, during the budgeting and planning stage of construction. Relocating the PRC to a pre-existing facility would also presupposed on the availability of adequate vacant space and still require capital costs to update such a space for the PRCs needs.

Most residences in UBC are either clustered in the northeast part of campus (Walter Gage, Exchange, Brock Commons and Pacific) or the western part of campus near or along West Mall (Marine Drive, Place Vanier, Totem Park, Rits, Orchard, Ponderosa and Thunderbird). Moving the PRC to a location in the western part would improve accessibility for clients in that region, but at the same time worsen it for those in the northeast. Additionally, clients from more ‘remote’ residence such as Fairview, Fraser and Acadia would experience no improvement.

The ideal candidate for potential relocation would be somewhere in the Ponderosa Commons complex. This location serves the western part of campus well, while also maintaining relative proximity to the northeast sector. Ponderosa is also located close to the academic core of campus, making it easy for PRC users to visit before, between or after their classes. However, relocation of the PRC to Ponderosa Commons would be contingent on the availability of space and the necessary funds to retrofitting of a proper facility.

1. **CONCLUSION**
   1. **Summary and overall interpretation of findings**

Within the limited sample of surveyed RAs, there is widespread support for an online ordering system as the ‘ideal’ mode of operation for the PRC. However, maintaining an online ordering system greatly increases the workload for PRCAs, which could have the unintended effect of making PRC operations less efficient. In-person services at the PRC are also essential for fulfilling certain elements of the centre’s mandate, such as building connections and fostering an inclusive community. Considering these facts, the implementation of online ordering alongside normal PRC operations should be approached with caution.

* 1. **Recommendations**

Since it is evident that it is likely not possible to efficiently operate the Qualtrics online ordering system once regular campus activities resume, the PRC should resume normal operations in September 2021. However, the online ordering system can be maintained (alongside in-person services) for a brief period of time as a pilot project in order to gauge broader interest from the community in such a service when a choice is offered between both online and in-person services. If PRC management determines it is feasible and efficient to maintain online ordering, then it can be permanently implemented. If not, the pilot project can be wrapped up, and the PRC would then exclusively offer in-person services, as it has done so in the past. One important change which should be made to the online ordering system prior to its potential use in September is adding the ability to submit multiple files in a single order.

Other areas which have been studied, such as relocating the PRC, extending hours, or hiring additional staff, have been deemed to be financially and logistically improbable under current circumstances. Even if these changes were implemented, it is unlikely that they would noticeably improve the PRC experience.

* 1. **Potential areas for future research**

As technology further evolves and develops, it may be possible to implement an online ordering system at the PRC which is less labour-intensive. For example, a platform might be created which could automatically notify clients when their order is printed and ready. PRC staff and management should be on the lookout for new technologies and software which might emerge in the near future.

While the relocation of the PRC is currently unfeasible due to the absence of a significantly better and ideal location, PRC and SHCS management should continually consider whether a purpose-built facility can be created in any newly constructed residence. In the long-term, it is possible that a new residence at UBC might be constructed in a geographically central location which is favourable for most PRC clients.

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