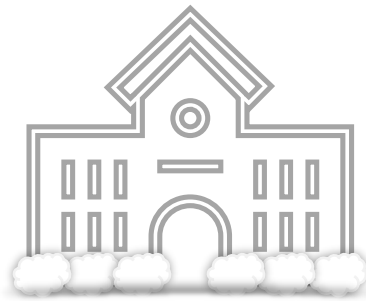# Secret Shopper Analysis

Conducted for:

Institute of Higher Education

School of Professional, Continuing, and Online Education

Conducted by:

Center for Research and Strategy

January 2023

Between January 4, 2023, and January 21, 2023, UPCEA's Center for Research and Strategy conducted a secret shopper analysis of Institute of Higher Education's School of Professional, Continuing and Online Studies (IHE-SPCO). During that time, 30 unique requests for information on programs found on the SPCO website were made. Requests were made either through the request for information form (RFI), or an email was sent to the designated contact for a given program. Response time was measured only during traditional business hours, defined as 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM EST Monday through Friday. Designated federal holidays were removed from response time calculations. Responses were only counted if they were not automated. To protect the identity of secret shoppers and institutional staff, names are not included in this report. Key findings include:

- The average email response time to inquiries was 12 hours and 10 minutes, while the median was 3 hours and 6 minutes. The average response time is similar to UPCEA benchmarking results (11 hours and 47 minutes), while IHE-SPCO's median response time is faster than the benchmarking average (4 hours and 42 minutes).

- Among the inquiries placed, 73% received a non-automated response from IHE-SPCO. Nearly a quarter of responses (23%) were made the same day the inquiry was placed. **The school has a higher-than-expected number of inquiries that did not receive a response,** which suggests room for improvement. Additionally, there was inconsistency in the response processes.

- IHE-SPCO appears to have a robust automated system that routinely contacts individuals who have inquired about a program. This is an area of strength for the School. However, the School possesses a number of different avenues of inquiry, which result in inconsistent inquirer experiences and presents challenges for maintained communication. Some of this may be a result of form navigation and where inquiries are housed. **The inquiry process brought UPCEA shoppers to a number of different forms, owned by different stakeholders, which may make follow-up and reporting more challenging.**

Table 1 highlights the email response time for all information requests made by UPCEA shoppers through a digital format. Inquiries that were placed via emails had a faster average response time than those that were placed by the RFI form.

Table 1: Secret Shopper Results

Inquiry Type	# of Inquiries	Average Response Time	Median Response Time	Best Response Time	Worst Response Time	# of Same Day Responses	Inquiries without Response
Overall	30	12:10	3:06	0:11	61:16:00	7	8
RFI Form	18	14:24	3:44	2:00	61:16:00	2	3
Emails	12	7:23	1:53	0:11	28:50:00	5	5

Areas of Improvement

While the School of Professional, Continuing, and Online Education has much of the infrastructure in place to ensure all inquiries receive a response in a prompt and complete manner, the current system has flaws that could cause some prospective students to slip through the cracks or pursue options other than SPCO. While the established intake systems have been successful for institution in the past, IHE-SPCO will need to update its processes and procedures to provide a smoother and more user-friendly inquirer experience for the next generation of learners. The following suggestions provide potential solutions to the School's current inefficiencies.

Improve RFI Form by Eliminating Unnecessary Questions and Providing a Comment Box

One area for improvement is the structure of the request for information form. While the RFI form was not present for all programs, it is a main artery for connecting with the School about many programs. Figure 1 on the following page highlights the current structure of the form for a BA in Recreation and Sports Management. While it is not excessively long, it has required fields that may not be necessary, specifically the "entry term" and "student type" fields. Though entry term may be a valuable piece of information for the institution, a potential student may not know the exact term in which they would enroll. Requiring this field encourages a potential student to provide inaccurate information or seek out a similar program at another institution. If IHE-SPCO truly values this field, it should consider making it optional so those who are unsure can still request more information. Student type is another field that should not be required to complete the RFI form. Recent research by UPCEA indicates that younger generations are less willing to provide this type of information than previous generations.

Additionally, the School should consider providing a box for an individual to ask a specific question, rather than waiting for a response from IHE-SPCO and then engaging. Positioning the RFI form for future generations will be critical for the long-term success of the School and institution. Failure to update the School's RFI form could present long-term challenges.

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Figure 1: Current RFI Form

Complete the form below to receive more information about this degree program.

Review Existing Inquiry Response Structure

The School should review the current existing inquiry response structure to ensure all inquiries receive a response in a reasonable time. While the automated responses from the institution are helpful, inquirers often want to engage with an individual, particularly if they have a question about a specific program. Additionally, SPCO houses a number of programs on its Continuing Education (CE) page that appear to reside at other schools at IHE-SPCO.[1] This leads to a variety of different methods to contact the institution about programs of interest, alters inquirer experience by program, and likely stretches staff capacity.

Some programs, such as the financial services certificate, list a specific staff member email address, or the general SPCO email, while others, such as the Bachelor of Science in Applied Behavioral Science, include a request for information form on the program page. Additionally, the School hosts many programs on its CE page that are not housed within the School, such as the Post-Bachelor's Certificate in Analytics. While this diverse approach can allow for program-specific inquiries, it also opens the institution to a number of inefficiencies. For example, one individual staff member only replied to one of the four inquiries that were placed directly to

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[1] removed

them, while another responded to all four inquiries, each of which was under three hours. Additionally, while the inquiries placed through RFI forms received responses more frequently, response time was nearly double that of the response time for emailed inquiries. Furthermore, the disjointed avenues for entry likely create internal challenges for tracking and maintaining contact with inquirers. While it may not be feasible for the School to create a uniform system for inquiries, it should examine the existing structure for improvements.

Explore Possibilities to Remain Engaged with Inquirers

After submitting the request for information form, inquirers were redirected to the page highlighted in Figure 2. While this page in itself may not pose a direct issue to inquirers, it is a missed opportunity for the institution to highlight other offerings, direct inquirers to social SPCO media activity, or otherwise remain engaged with the inquirer after the RFI form has been completed.

Figure 2: Inquiry Form Redirection

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Improve Request for Information Form and Link Mazes for Select Programs

While some programs have a request for information form embedded on the program page, others produced a maze to connect to a laborious RFI form. Figures 3 through 5 illustrate the path that an individual inquiring about the MS in Applied Technology program might take. If an inquirer clicks on the "request info" button on the program page (Figure 3), they are transported to another page that offers a number of different links for information (Figure 4). If an individual is trying to inquire about the MS in Applied Technology, they would click the "graduate degrees" link, which would transport them to the graduate information request form (Figure 5). Not only does the form take too many clicks to get to, the form itself is littered with a number of unnecessary fields. Recent research by UPCEA and ThinkingCap indicates that only 39% of potential students are willing to share their address with an institution, a required field on the graduate RFI form. User-experience, not the customer relationship management (CRM) system, should dictate the fields of an RFI form. The University as a whole can improve the intake process to better meet the needs of future learners.

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Figure 3: MS in Applied Technology – Program Page
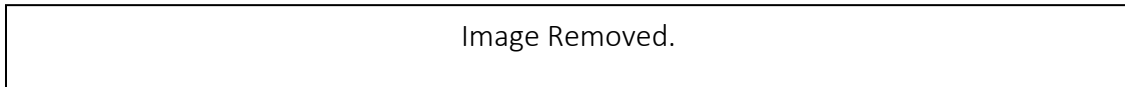
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Figure 4: Overall Request Information Page

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Figure 5: Request Graduate Information Form

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