

Last Monday our offices were closed for Dr. King's holiday, which allowed our staff to rest up in preparation for the busiest semester start date in our history. Because we partner with all 15 UT System institutions, we wind up helping students navigate as many as 40+ semester start dates a year. This semester all academic institutions except UTD started classes on the same day - Tuesday, January 16, 2007. We anticipated a record amount of activity in Student and Faculty Services as students from multiple campuses called for various support services.

By sunset Monday, Austin had been hit with a severe winter storm bringing with it freezing rain and flash floods. By 9 p.m., System Administration officials announced our closure for Tuesday as increasing ice and snow promised our city's roads.

Tuesday morning students from across Texas woke in much warmer, safer climates than most of us here in Austin, and began to contact UT TeleCampus for help, as they always do the first week of class. No one was in our office to answer their calls or emails. But their questions were not ignored. Unlike so many in Austin nested warmly at home enjoying an extra 'free' day off like happy winter school kids, our Student and Faculty services team had a different morning.

Through a flurry of morning emails and phone calls, Lori McNabb, (Assistant Director, Student and Faculty Services) and her staff readied themselves, their computers and their home phones to help. Lori and Susan Smith initially divided the inbox and voice mail duties for Tuesday's start. Frances Nash had checked the university homepages and found most would be open. She joined in retrieving voice mail and calling students from home. Terry Barksdale and Margie Harris quickly got on their home phones and computers, returning calls and email from students across Texas. Our new SFS staff member, Kathryn Roberts, who had had a car wreck on icy roads the day prior, called in to help handle student inquiries from her house. She was eager to help and disappointed to miss out on two days of team training in the office. Course Development and Technology staff Michael Anderson and Kristin Cockerham helped with tech support issues. Director Rob Robinson worked from home to have our phone system play a closed message so students could go directly to voice mail without holding first. Dogs and kids and kittens watched this activity in their homes with impatient curiosity. Classes opened and students found their way to their virtual seats with a minimum of hassle, getting their semesters off to the critically important good start.

The storm was indeed severe. System Administration offices had to be closed again that Wednesday.

Here's a glimpse of some of the 'behind the scenes' work that went on to serve you and our students during the first days of class:

Lori: "We began answering email that morning. This was the busiest start day in our history with 8 campuses opening classes Tuesday. It's usually spread out over a week or two. Students always need help with remembering usernames and passwords. They're nervous about the first day of class. We send Getting Started postcards, emails and make multiple points of contact to each and every one, but many still need help. My daughters – 3 and 9 – were home from closed school and daycare. My only real problem was getting a three-year-old to understand that Mommy was in the house, typing but couldn't play or pay attention to her. It was hard on them. But our students, who initially had no idea we were closed, were so appreciative of us helping them from home. We doled out the jobs to be done and communicated with each other via email, switching tasks as need be so each of us could have break or work on another pressing issue. Some of the calls and emails took longer than others I had several emails with one student having login problems and found he couldn't have his password emailed to himself because he had six email addresses and none of them were in our records!"

Frances: "The first thing I did was visit each campus homepage and determine who was open and who wasn't so we'd know what we were working with. Tuesday most campuses were open. I had to find a way to access the tool we use to send our student individualized emails that have a better chance of getting past spam filters, so I contacted the System help desk (OTIS) and Chris Smith helped me get off site access to the technology I needed. I finally gained access to the system and sent the students the

getting started email that follows the post card we sent last week. We know it makes a big difference in the students' success that the first week goes well. It was really important these emails went out. It really went off pretty smoothly. You could see the activity in the email box as one message would move to sent folders and two new ones would come in. My only problem was explaining to my husband that while he was stuck inside from the weather he couldn't get near our home computer. I was fighting a winter cold and ultimately had to switch from phones to email because of my throat. We got everything done we needed to for our students. "

Terry: "Tuesday morning I went into the voicemail and found several messages, so I started pulling them out two by two and calling students from home to help Susan. The phone can be really useful in answering the first day questions, and it saves students time if we have that contact option. These students often need the personal touch of specific answers to specific questions. They were great. I have a two and half year old who goes to UT daycare - which was closed. So she was very present in the room. I had to begin each call with "Now if I all of sudden scream into the phone 'put that down!' I'm not talking to you, okay?" The students laughed and understood, a lot of them have toddlers too. At the end of each call I had to let them know my daughter has a fixation right now with getting to say hello/goodbye to who ever I'm on the phone with, so we'd switch to speaker and they'd say hi and bye to her before getting off the line. Ha. I think my daughter added a certain 'something' to our customer service other online universities probably aren't offering."

Margie: "One of my jobs is to follow up with every student that contacts Embanet about an issue where the help desk refers it back to the faculty member. These are usually related to assessment and testing. So we contacted Embanet, explained our situation and asked them to get the phone numbers from the students contacting them. They sent those with my notifications and I started calling everyone from my cell phone. It was a typical first day of class – it takes hours to empty the inbox, messages stack up. I took the faculty calls as well, and we get quite a few of those. By Wednesday the campuses in Austin, San Antonio, Health Science Center San Antonio, Arlington and Permian Basin were closed for the storm, so students who were trying to get help there were contacting us. It was busy, but you know, the students and faculty we helped we're so appreciative it's just never a bad day when you're doing that work. They'd hear my dog Maxine barking in the background and ask if I was home. I'd tell them yes, our office was closed from the storm. They were so thankful.

Susan: "Like the rest of us, I was watching for the closed announcement Monday and when it came at 9 p.m. I called Lori and asked our strategy. We decided she'd take email and I'd take phones so that's what we started with Tuesday morning, but everyone ended up joining in pretty quickly. I'd tell people we were sorry for any delay in answering their call but our offices were closed, and they were so grateful I was calling them back from home. One of my jobs is monitoring the roster feeds from campuses and working with campus staff on any problems with rosters. Roster feeds with student data that doesn't match ours can remove a student from a course which is a little tricky to track down and is upsetting for the student. Sometimes there is a problem with an entire roster and all the students in a class are affected. I was calling and emailing with staff on the campuses and they were great. And, they were concerned about us and the weather. By late Wednesday afternoon I was able to make it into the office and took calls and emails from here. I emailed everyone in the group to let them know that every thing was okay, but lonely, at the office."

Lori: "You know I think it shows that this was about doing the right thing, not just because we had to, but because we want to. We really care about these people."

Hundreds of emails and phone calls later, our classes are open and students are learning online. Thanks to our Student and Faculty Services team – aka The Storm Team! To learn more about SFS see their profiles in this issue of UT4me. <http://www.telecampus.utsystem.edu/index.cfm/4,1560.html>