

# Quality Endeavors

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## Social Security Number Conversion Provides An Opportunity for Process Improvement

Your Penn State id+ card, as well as many forms, documents, and computer systems around the University, will soon have a new look. Effective January 1, 2005, Penn State will implement a new main identifier for all faculty, staff, and students in place of the current identifier—a person's Social Security number (SSN). University President Graham B. Spanier has said, "An individual's social security number is now considered confidential information. The University's use of it as a main identifier is no longer practical and may be considered by some to compromise its confidential nature." Although the University will still be required to collect SSNs for reporting and taxation purposes, their use will be strictly limited and will be outlined in official University policy.

### Feeling the Impact

The British theologian Richard Hooker is quoted as having said, "Change is not made without inconvenience, even from worse to better." And so it is with the SSN conversion project. In order to affect the conversion to the new identifier, many systems and processes throughout the University will need to be modified. "Each department, college and campus is responsible for converting their own unique academic and administrative procedures, processes and data. So, it's important for them to closely examine how widespread their use of SSNs is," said Kathy Plavko, manager of the SSN Project. Everything from the University's central systems to the cash registers in the dining halls to instructors' grade books will need to be reviewed for usage of the SSN. Any online data containing SSNs will need to be converted, refreshed, or deleted.

### An Opportunity for Improvement?

One approach to handling the change resulting from the SSN conversion is to view it as an opportunity to implement other improvements to the system. Some common reasons for improving a process include: inefficiency—requiring excessive material, time, or movement; difficult access to information or personnel; unnecessary complexity; and customer dissatisfaction. Asking questions such as "How well is this process performing?" "How well is it meeting the needs of our customers?" or "What would we change about the process if we were starting from scratch?" can be helpful in identifying potential improvements.

### Grasp the "Low-Hanging Fruit"

In process improvement jargon we use the phrase "low-hanging fruit" to refer to any easily implemented improvements. Typically, these are improvements for which there is a consensus about what should be done and that do not require a significant investment in resources—time or money—in order to implement. By taking time to review the system as a whole, not just how to convert the SSN to the PSU ID, it is likely that you will be able to find some "low-hanging fruit" in your systems. Perhaps there are improvements that you would like to make to a system, but they are not significant enough to warrant taking the system offline in order to implement. If the system will need to be taken offline for the SSN conversion, this would be an opportunity to implement those improvements. Examples might include bug fixes in a computer program or redesigning paper forms or reports before re-printing.

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## Steps to Improve a Process

What if your improvements are not so readily identifiable or implemented? How would you go about making improvements to your process? The answer is by taking a structured approach to your improvement efforts. The Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment has several models that we use when working with an improvement initiative. Depending on the data you have in advance of the team's work, and the outcomes you are looking for, you can work with the IMPROVE model, the Fast Track approach, or Reengineering. Each model has its strengths, but all have been developed to facilitate problem solving, decision-making, and process improvement teamwork. Information about the models and about starting an improvement initiative is available on the Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment's Web site at <http://www.psu.edu/president/pia/initiatives/>.

## "Think Outside the Box"

The goal of the SSN project is to convert from the University's use of the SSN as the primary identifier to the new PSU ID as the primary identifier. However, the conversion is not simply a matter of replacing SSN with the PSU ID. Some federal or state governmental agencies and outside third

parties require SSNs in reporting processes. Since SSN use will be restricted, departments at Penn State who provide this information will need prior approval for obtaining SSNs from central systems after January 1, 2005. In reviewing their systems and processes, units and departments have to ask the question, "Is the Social Security Number required for this process?"

For example, the Commonwealth College is using the SSN conversion as an opportunity to re-design their academic approval process. The academic approval process is the current procedure used by Commonwealth College and other units of the University for approving potential new faculty and identifying them on the Schedule of Courses, prior to their completing the hiring process with W-4 and I-9 forms. In the current process, SSNs are collected from applicants and used to identify individuals throughout the approval process. According to Frank Miller, campus registrar at Penn State York, "As a principle, we don't want to use your SSN until you come in for the I-9 and W-4." The re-designed process will assign all potential faculty members a PSU ID upon their application. The new PSU ID will then be used to identify individuals in the system—

eliminating the need to collect the SSN. States Miller, "By improving our practices like this, we are being a little more careful."

## For more information

For more information about the University's Social Security Number Conversion Project, visit the official project Web site at <http://ais.its.psu.edu/SSN>. Updated regularly, the site includes Top Ten Things You Should Know About the SSN Project, news stories, decisions that have been made as a result of the initiative, FAQs and more.

The Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment is available to consult with units or departments who would like assistance in reviewing their systems and processes. Contact the Office at 814-863-8721 or [psupia@psu.edu](mailto:psupia@psu.edu) for more information. Services of the Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment are provided free of charge to The Pennsylvania State University and are adapted to the specific needs of departments or individuals.