



An ATAC Client Success Story



AUBURN

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

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Enlisting the continuous improvement expertise of the Auburn Technical Assistance Center (ATAC) at AU’s College of Business, Auburn’s libraries are going Lean.



*AU library personnel, from left, Paula Sullenger, Shade Aladebumoye, Yolanda Callaway, and Helen Goldman tackle a problem during their recent process improvement event.*

## AU Libraries ‘going Lean’ to improve program efficiency

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Library Dean Bonnie MacEwan first became interested in exploring the benefits of Lean in improving library processes after talking with her sister, who is responsible for strategic planning for a major HMO. Upon learning of an open enrollment opportunity last summer through which ATAC would be teaching a course in Lean Office as part of AU’s Human Resources professional development offerings, she signed up.

“I didn’t know much about Lean, but I wanted to find out more because I could see similarities between the challenges



*ATAC Lean Specialists Rick Battye and Terri Lawrence prepare for the Process Improvement Team’s kaizen report given to library administration at the end of the five-day process improvement initiative. Lawrence and Battye facilitated the event.*

of the Libraries and the HMO,” Dean MacEwan said.

Unable to attend the Lean Office class herself because of a conflict, she sent Paula Sullenger, head of the Acquisitions Department.

“After participating in the Lean Office training, I saw quickly how we might

apply the concepts in the library,” Sullenger said.

Lean is a continuous improvement system that has roots in the automotive manufacturing industry. Lean is centered around removing waste and non-value-added activities from a process, which once removed or reduced, greatly leads to improved efficiency in all ways -- from better quality, to increased productivity, greater customer satisfaction, reduced costs, to higher employee satisfaction, and more efficient utilization of space, skills and other resources.

ATAC’s instructors have facilitated Lean improvement training and implementation events for hundreds of manufacturing firms throughout Alabama and the Southeast. They also have taken the Lean system into the service industry, having trained at Aflac’s corporate headquarters in Columbus, Ga., and into the medical field where they have trained personnel from East

Alabama Medical Center (EAMC) in Opelika, Ala.

After several meetings with the AU Libraries, including conducting an in-depth assessment of the process proposed for improvement, a training plan emerged.

The initial improvement undertaking would be on the library's Electronic Journals Process. Some 4,000 electronic journals comprise this process which accounts for about \$2.5 million of the library's approximately \$5 million annual collections budget, according to Dean MacEwan.

Transactions in the process contain a tremendous backlog of documentation and processing tasks. They may take anywhere from a few days to several weeks to complete, according to Sullenger.

"ATAC recommended that we select a core group of our employees who have direct, but different responsibilities in the process," said Sullenger. "Those employees would be our unit Lean leaders."

A team of 16 library employees from among the areas of cataloging, acquisitions, public service, reference, and document delivery underwent 16 hours of Lean Office training over two days, and then immersed themselves into an intense three-day kaizen (improvement project) of the Electronic Journal Process. Additionally, Sullenger underwent ATAC's five-day "boot camp" Lean Certificate Series course to prepare her to be the library Lean "go-to" person.

At the formal kaizen out-briefing held Oct. 30, the project team deemed the undertaking a success.

"We turned a mostly reactive process into a pro-active one," Sullenger said. "We overcame a basic problem of the work being too dependent on central key people into one in which there now are additional knowledgeable and capable people involved."

ATAC facilitators described the training and approach.

"They achieved workload balancing," explained ATAC's Terri

## Impact Summary

Evaluations conducted at the end of the library kaizen reported such impact comments as:

- "Just going through this process is as valuable as any other outcome."
- "It allows us to think more creatively about the positions that we have and how to most effectively use those employees."
- "It revealed new ideas regarding work flow and feedback."
- "It leads to better organization."
- "It led me to actions I otherwise would not have taken in the area of standardized work."
- "We learned ways to distribute the work load more efficiently and to develop a 'thinking' system."
- "It provided a new way to look at our jobs."

Lawrence, who with ATAC Lean Specialist Rick Batty, facilitated the training and kaizen event. "Additionally, we implemented such key Lean components as standardized work, made the process more visual, and established accountability mechanisms that will enable better management and help prevent things from being omitted – essentially, to keep things from being dropped through the crack – if you will."

Sullenger says the outcome, though still a work in progress, is a more user friendly system, with reduced interruptions and better metrics.

"We have made huge strides in reducing email overload, we improved information gathering so that we have better data and management capabilities, and we now have a process that is very empowering," Sullenger said.

Dean MacEwan speaks to the value and practicality of the initiative.

"This is one of the most important things we've done in a long while," she said. "It is making us think differently about what we do and how we do it. It will make us better stewards of these resources, better managers and better employees."

The library continuous improvement team is going to stay in tact, and Dean MacEwan said the initiative will not only continue in the Electronic Journals Process, but will be carried over into other processes throughout the AU Libraries.

"We have a number of action and accountability items from this initial event," Sullenger adds. "Our team will continue to meet bi-weekly to report on progress in those areas, to follow-up and to add new action items, and we will continue to train internally."

Sullenger also has plans to write and present a paper about the AU Libraries Lean Initiatives to the leading university library conferences. Other library employees hope to use the Lean project as tenure-gaining accomplishments.

*Auburn Technical Assistance Center was established in 1976 and is an affiliate of the Alabama Technology Network and an Economic Development Administration University Center. As an Outreach arm of the Auburn University College of Business, ATAC provides business and technical assistance, customized training, and consultation in implementing value-added strategies to manufacturers and other businesses, not-for-profit organizations and government agencies in Alabama and the Southeast. SOAR is an ATAC publication. Direct inquiries and questions to Mitch Emmons, Sr. Outreach Assoc., 334.844.3881, emmonmb@auburn.edu.*

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