

Tracking the Student Experience at North Florida College

background

How Five Secret Shopper Projects Helped NFC Drive Continuous Service Improvement

Starting in Fall 2023, **North Florida College** partnered with GradComm to launch a series of secret shopper evaluations designed not as one-off audits, but as a longitudinal study of student service quality. Over five consecutive semesters, researchers posed as prospective students and assessed NFC's performance at key touchpoints from online inquiries to enrollment.

By repeating the same core evaluation across time, NFC sought not just to identify weak spots, but to track its own progress: Were student questions being answered faster? Was communication clearer? Was the enrollment journey getting smoother? By comparing the experiences semester over semester, NFC was able to identify themes and barriers in the prospective student experience.

Why NFC invested in five projects

Rather than relying on anecdotal feedback or internal assumptions, NFC committed to a multi-term secret shopper series to create an objective, student-centered performance baseline. Each report delivered quantifiable insights into:

- **Staff response times** (form fill, email, phone)
- **Clarity of next steps in the application and enrollment process**
- **Helpfulness and tone of staff interactions**
- **Barriers encountered and how easily they were resolved**

approach

Each term, a GradComm researcher enrolled in a different student persona. They initiated contact via web forms, emails, and phone calls, and followed through to application, and advising with the ultimate goal of enrolling in a course. Each experience was documented with timestamps, screenshots, and detailed narratives.



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Why It *worked*

By committing to five consecutive secret shopper projects, NFC moved beyond snapshot assessments into true service benchmarking. They used the data to validate what was improving and flag where more attention was needed, especially in areas affecting enrollment outcomes.

“This wasn’t about catching people doing something wrong. It was about seeing if we were getting better and where we still had work to do.”

—NFC College Leader (Summarized Insight)

impact

This approach enabled NFC to:

- Establish semester-by-semester baselines for staff response time and communication quality
- Test whether process changes (like appointment links or web updates) were making a difference
- Identify which departments consistently delivered student-first service and which needed support
- Build accountability into its student services, using real-world student personas to evaluate progress

conclusion

North Florida College’s five-term investment in secret shopper assessments reflects a rare but powerful strategy: using real-time, recurring student experiences to drive continuous service improvement. By viewing each student touchpoint as a measurable opportunity, NFC is setting a high bar, not just for responsiveness, but for institutional self-awareness.

