

## **Combining Campus Mail Services to Deliver Better Results**

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## **Abstract**

*With over 37,000 students attending The University of Alabama and approximately 7,211 of those students being freshman living on campus, it has become increasingly important to provide students with a reliable, customer-centered mail service that is as consumer driven as any that could be found off-campus. The University of Alabama continues to grow both in student population as well as brick and mortar, and students are looking for proximity, simplicity, convenience, choices and community. With more students than ever living on-campus and participating in the idea of community, we as an institution realized that a decentralized method of distributing mail and packages was no longer working at UA. Prior to the inception and creation of a centralized mail service on the University's campus, students were bothered by dealing with multiple ways to receive mail and personal packages on campus. Students who desired postal mail service on campus had to rent a mailbox from a United States post office that leased space from the University and was located inside the University's Ferguson Center student union building. Students who desired to receive inbound UPS/FedEx items utilized services of a student-ran package delivery center provided by UA's Housing and Residential Communities. Students who lived in Greek housing couldn't receive mail delivery at their sorority/fraternity house, but could receive UPS/FedEx items that were commonly left at the front door by the carrier. In essence, students could potentially have up to three different addresses to receive mail and packages. The address to use was all situational and determined by how an item might be sent to the student. Likewise, the address used would also determine where a student would have to go to pick-up their mail or package. As you can imagine, this decentralized, multi-faceted system was very confusing to the students, the campus community, and even those directly involved in the processes. Additionally, the units handling these individual processes did not have adequate resources to improve their systems and provide a level of service desired by the students and the rest of the campus community.*

*In 2013, the Department of Logistics & Support Services at The University of Alabama established several goals to create a centralized and improve the business processes of mail and package handling at the Capstone; it was to be called the UA Ferguson Mail Center. The idea was to use one principal location to better serve the University community, preserve accuracy for the organization and to be a positive, dynamic and vital resource for the University. Within the first year of operation, UA's Ferguson Mail Center has centralized operations, streamlined processes, and increased productivity. As a result, mail and packages for students are now handled more efficiently with an increase in the number of packages received and delivered, an increase in the number of satisfied students utilizing the service, and a significant decrease in package pick-up wait time.*

## **Introduction of the Organization**

The University of Alabama is a major, comprehensive, student-centered research university founded in 1831 as Alabama's first public college. Dedicated to excellence in teaching, research and service, we provide a creative, nurturing campus environment where our

students can become the best individuals possible, learn from the best and brightest faculty, and make a positive difference in the community, the state, and the world. The University of Alabama is a senior comprehensive doctoral-level institution. Its mission is to advance the intellectual and social condition of the people of the state through quality programs of teaching, research, and service.

Enrollment at The University of Alabama reached a record high of 37,100 students in the fall of 2015, and it includes some of the nation's most academically talented students. Numbers can help demonstrate the growth we see annually on our campus: total enrolment is up 2.6 percent, an increase of 945 students over the fall 2014 and the freshman class includes 7,211 students, a 5.8 percent increase over last fall. This class comes to UA with an average ACT score of 26.6 and an average high school GPA of 3.66. The class includes 174 National Merit and 20 National Achievement Finalists. More than one-third (36 percent) of the class reports an ACT of 30 or higher, and 2,261 freshman are enrolled in Honors College. These students, and the growth of the UA community, are supported by more than 5,300 faculty and staff on over 1,000 acres of campus located within the city limits of Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

The University of Alabama is part of the UA system with other major campuses in Birmingham, Huntsville, and outreach locations throughout Alabama. The UA System is governed by the Board of Trustees. Dr. Stuart R. Bell was appointed president of The University of Alabama in June 2015.

The Campus Mail Service department is within the Division of Financial Affairs.

## **Statement of the Problem / Initiative**

The Department of Financial Affairs desired to create a standard for campus mail service by streamlining and automating the mail services process, establishing a centralized location for all mail services on campus, and providing a more customer friendly experience for students. For a number of years, The University of Alabama student mail services were handled by a United States Postal Service (USPS) operation located at the University's Ferguson Center, within the University grounds. There was a lack of satisfaction in the student mail service due to packages not being tracked by any formal system, business hours that were not student-friendly and long customer lines during operating times. These inconveniences caused students to miss classes and waste valuable learning time.

Our analysis indicated the negative experiences with the student mail services on campus were caused mainly by insufficient staffing by the US Postal Service and the use of older technology that decreased their efficiency. At times, the number of students standing in line would exceed 80; while only one USPS employee would be working the counter. During peak times, the wait would be over an hour, but at 4:00 p.m. the USPS employee would lock the door and serve no more customers, regardless of the number of students in line still waiting to be helped.

Because the US Postal Service would not accept packages from UPS and FedEx or deliver packages to any residential community, The University of Alabama Housing and Residential Communities operated the Paty Package Center ,a student package center located inside a vacant space that once was a small hamburger restaurant. The Paty Package Center proved to be too small and understaffed to handle the daily volume of packages received. Often times, the package center had to close its pick-up window to allow the staff time to receive

inbound packages from UPS and FedEx. This resulted in students visiting the center to pick-up a package only to find it temporarily closed. The package center was operated by student labor. The package center staff did not have a package tracking software application, so staff used an Excel spreadsheet to help track packages. The staff sorted packages alphabetically and had to communicate to the students when packages were ready for pick-up. The staff used an online campus directory to obtain each student's email address. As a result of substandard resources and processes, students suffered long lines and wait times when trying to pick-up a package that may or may not have been at the package center.

After careful consideration, it was determined that UA students deserved better service in the area of receiving incoming mail/packages and the dispatch of outgoing mail/packages from all mail and package carriers. By creating a centralized mail center, operated by the University, the Department of Financial Affairs could ensure a timely delivery of items from all mail and package carriers.

## **Design**

The mission of The University of Alabama Campus Mail Service was to provide efficient, safe handling of the mail and excellent customer service to our students, faculty and staff in regard to their incoming and outgoing mailing needs.

The University of Alabama already managed the delivery of incoming and outgoing mail to all campus departments at the Campus Mail Service department. It seemed like a seamless fit to have Campus Mail Service, which is operated by the University, manage a new campus mail service for students since there was already an infrastructure in place, knowledgeable employees on staff, and a determination to please and to serve customers to their satisfaction.

In November 2011, the Campus Mail Service at The University of Alabama did an extensive search of the available package tracking systems, POS systems, and various mailbox styles. The director gathered information from other universities within similar parameters of The University of Alabama for comparison.

The University selected two vendors, PostalMate and SCLogic, to meet the specific needs for a POS system and a tracking/mailbox management system that including a website for mailbox rental, storing of mailbox rental and contact information, email notification for packages, white mail and automatic updates of the recipient list. PostalMate was the vendor chosen to handle the POS system for outgoing mail, while SCLogic was selected to accommodate all of the requirements presented by The University of Alabama in the area of tracking/mailbox management.

An issue that arose was the space needed for the new business venture was not readily available in the building where Campus Mail Service resided. The criteria for the space needed for the new business venture was multi-faceted; room for 4,360 mailboxes was necessary and space to house upward of 5,000 packages at a time was also needed. Add the space to run a window operation to house four clerks to sell postal products and packaging material along with another two-station package pick-up window, plus the four stations needed to process packages – and the square footage necessary was substantial. Also, the projected customer base is largely expected to be students living on-campus, and the location of the campus mail services operation is not centrally located to our housing residences. The postal service's lease with the University was close to expiring and their service to the campus community was substandard, the decision was made to open the new campus mail services for students in the previous USPS location in

UA's Ferguson Center. This space has about 8,500 square feet between the public and back-of-house space.

In order to manage incoming mail and packages efficiently, the decision was made to implement an addressing format that was flexible enough to allow every student the capability to receive packages free of charge, while students who also needed to receive traditional white mail could rent a mailbox for a nominal fee. This decision was based on researched data that was directly linked to the mix of incoming mail and packages to the campus. Research suggested that the majority of the incoming volume was in the form of packages, most of which were trackable items. The new address format included a phantom street address in conjunction with a 6-digit mailstop code and unique ZIP Code specifically for the University.

To position itself against any future address changes should it decide to move its operations to a different location in the future, the University established a phantom street address as opposed to an actual physical street address. The University already possessed a unique ZIP Code from the US Postal Service. This ensured that all incoming items sent via the postal service with the ZIP Code of 35487 would arrive to the University's mail center regardless of any other address information. To ensure all items sent via UPS, FedEx, DHL, etc. would be delivered to one centralized location, a phantom street address of 1831 UNIVERSITY STATION was implemented.

Once mail and packages arrive at 1831 UNIVERSITY STATION, TUSCALOOSA, AL 35487, mail center staff can quickly sort to a department, Greek house, or individual student based on the specifics of a 6-digit mailstop code (MSC#). Every student who becomes actively enrolled in classes at The University of Alabama is automatically assigned a 6-digit "non-

boxholder” mailstop code. This number, which is permanently-assigned to the student and tied directly to the student’s campus-wide I.D., allows each student the capability to receive packages free of charge. For consistency purposes, these mailstop codes begin with the last two digits of the year that the student becomes actively enrolled. For example, the mailstop code (MSC#) for students who were enrolled in 2013 all begins with 13XXXX. For students who were enrolled in 2014, their permanently assigned MSC# would begin with 14XXXX.

Campus departments and Greek houses at the University each have their own 6-digit mailstop code. All of these mailstop codes begin with “870”, with the “87” being the last two digits of the University’s unique ZIP Code and the “0” denoting that it belongs to a campus department or Greek house. Incoming mail and packages can be sorted quickly by route by following this simple sorting scheme:

870100 – 870199 = Route 1

870200 – 870299 = Route 2

870300 – 870399 = Route 3

870400 – 870499 = Sororities

870500 – 870599 = Fraternities

By following the same logic in this sort scheme, the University was able to establish mailstop codes (MSC#) for its student mailboxes. The mailstop codes for student mailboxes all start with 871, 872, 873, 874, or 875.

The new mailbox utility function included the following capabilities:



- Assignment of a six-digit mailstop code to each of our “non-departmental” customers. These customers could include students, faculty, staff, student organizations, sororities and fraternities. The application will also be used to maintain the inventory of mailboxes and to assign mailboxes on a first-come, first-served basis.
- A feature allowing University students, faculty and staff to sign up to purchase a mailbox rental online or at the POS. Having the ability to rent a mailbox online was a way to make the process more convenient and user friendly.
- Identifying which mailboxes are assigned, to whom they are assigned, the box holder’s contact information, the date the mailbox was assigned and the renewal date.
- Creating mailbox renewal notices for box holders.
- Storing of mailbox combination information. The combination information should be accessible by the box holder through a secured interface process. The concept is for a box holder to be able to look-up the combination to their mailbox at will through a secure web portal.
- The ability to set a flag in the database indicating when a recipient has requested that their incoming mail is forwarded from their University address to their permanent (home) mailing address. Forwarding addresses will be either entered directly into the application database or may be imported from an external data file. The application must be able to store a box holder’s non-University permanent address.

- Mailboxes have a barcode unique to each renter. Once all letter mail has been placed in each mailbox, each mailbox would be scanned with a SCLogic barcode scanner to inform the box holder via e-mail that they have mail in their mailbox.

Route accountability was another challenge for The University of Alabama. Barcoded labels are at each mailstop location. The barcode is the actual mailstop # (i.e. 870100, 870101, 870102, etc.). Delivery clerks scan these barcodes with a handheld scanner each time they make a delivery/pick-up. A “status” is also noted with the scan (i.e. Delivered, Attempted, etc.). This current process would need to be adapted into the selected package tracking software system.

The system would also need to run reports to show the following:

- The status of mail delivery to a specific mailstop (Delivered, Delivery Attempted, etc.)  
We wanted to be able to look in the system to see if a delivery clerk had made a delivery to a specific mailstop location and when the delivery was made.
- A listing of stops the delivery clerk made on a specific date, the order he/she delivered, the status, and the time he delivered.
- The expected time of delivery vs. the actual time of delivery for each mailstop.

The system will need to account for adjustments made due to circumstances such as employee absences, road closures or mailstops that may sometimes be added to a route for a specific day.

The keying of trackable packages into an internal package tracking system and notifying the students of a package arrival was another necessary process.

Based off the feedback received across campus, and the complaints about the customer service of the existing operation along with the mishandling of packages, it was vital to have a

solution for improving those processes. The package tracking software met these needs.

Internally, we assign multiple statuses to maintain a clear and concise chain of custody for each package. As soon as a package receives a status of 'Ready for Pickup,' which occurs when the package is placed in an assigned bin/shelf location, the recipient is notified via email. Seeing that most students receive email on a smartphone, students instantly receive their notification while they may be out and about on campus. Each student can also retrieve the same information behind their login to the University's web portal. The customer also receives an automated reminder notification at 5 days and 10 days after receipt until the package is deemed unclaimed and returned to the sender.

- Each package barcode had to be recognizable by carrier and service-type by scanning. SCLogic was able to identify both by loading sample ID numbers by carrier (i.e. USPS Delivery Confirmation, Certified Mail, Registered Mail, UPS Ground, FedEx 2-Day, etc.)
- A location for each package had to be available on the system so that when an item was entered into the system, it could be located immediately. We considered having wire racks approximately 16-inches high to store all packages, but we quickly realized that smaller packages, such as padded mailers and Tyvek envelopes, would need another method of storage.
- An alternative storage for smaller and flat packages was as simple as numbering mail tubs and arranging them numerically on both sides of the large wire racks used for the larger, more conventionally-shaped parcels.
- Other types of mail needing alternative storage were round tubes and accountable letters (Certified Mail, etc.). The tubes would roll on the wire racks and get in the way. Letters

were small enough for possible misplacement. Another mail tub was placed in the vault that was specifically for tubes and letters.

- A final consideration for package storage was for items requiring “special handling,” including medications, such as insulin, or perishable items needing refrigeration. A small refrigerator was purchased for the storage of such items.
- When setting up the bin/shelf locations for these areas on the SCLogic system, we decided to assign each package rack a number and each shelf on that rack a letter. . We purchased 40 wire racks for storage and are using 34 for that purpose. The remaining racks were modified to accommodate extra-large packages. We also use the same type of rack to stage outgoing mail items, to display retail packaging items, and USPS branded items (Priority/Express Mail boxes and envelopes.) The bin/shelf location for items placed in the refrigerator was noted as “REFRIGERATOR” in the location listing, and the vault was labeled “VAULT”. Each mail tub was labeled with the tub number (i.e. “TUB 35,” “TUB 18”.)

## **Implementation**

The implementation of the new campus mail services took a joint effort from departments across campus to ensure the new automated services were streamlined and efficient before launching services to students. During the spring and summer of 2013, the Department worked with PostalMate and SCLogic to load data into a test database on their system, to which we had online access. The Information Technology Application Support group extracted and converted student, faculty and staff data from the University’s Banner Finance system and formatted it per the SCLogic software specifications. SCLogic then loaded the data into their test system. We

worked with the vendor to resolve conversion issues that arose during the validation and load processes. We validated the converted test data against our production system, including campus-wide identification numbers, names, email addresses, phone numbers and mail addresses.

An implementation date of July 25, 2013 was selected. The production data was extracted, converted and validated in the new system.

We also worked in conjunction with our Action Card office (University ID card), and our Student Receivables (credit card processing), our residential communities, Student Affairs, logistics staff, and our new student onboarding team. The integration of processes played a significant piece in the success of the operation. Today, students, or their parents, can rent or renew a mailbox online, and receive a mailbox combination and email notification when a package or mail piece arrives in their mailboxes. They can also retrieve this information from the online portal. These steps and processes are combined with a drive and passion from the employees that work in Campus Mail Service who strive to exceed student expectations.

Since opening, a great majority of out-of-state students now opt to ship everything needed for their residential hall to the Ferguson Mail Center. Some students received pallets of more than 20 packages. When students arrived to pick-up their packages, the mail center has logistical staff on hand offering to deliver the packages to their residence hall free of charge.

In the fall of 2015, there was a second, satellite location added on campus for the convince of students living on the south of campus in Tutwiler Hall. Tutwiler Hall houses 980 women on the University campus. The additional satellite location at Tutwiler Hall offers an alternative solution to receiving packages at UA. The Tutwiler Package Center is no exclusive to students who live in Tutwiler Hall or in nearby residence halls, any student (both on-campus and

off-campus) can receive packages there. With a campus of over 1,000 acres, the Tutwiler Package Center is a convenient package pick-up location for students who live on the south side of campus. Packages that are routed to the Tutwiler Package Center also frees-up space at the Ferguson Mail Center.

The processes and staff at The University of Alabama Campus Mail Service are combining to create both best practice and excellent service. From sorting through the packages that have not been entered into the tracking system to find a textbook a student ordered too late, or when an employee helps locate the dress that was shipped for the night's formal party, UA Campus Mail Service employees are making the mailing experience much more consumer friendly for our students.

## **Benefits**

Combining student mail/packages and departmental mail/packages processes dramatically improved the business process of Campus Mail Service. In the first year of business, students picked up over 73,000 trackable packages from the Ferguson Mail Center. This year alone, from July to September, there have been over 51,942 trackable packages picked-up by students from the Ferguson Mail Center.



*Image from the campus mail services Ferguson Center location.*

Other benefits of combining the student mail/packages and departmental mail/packages processes include the following:

- Students now have the convenience of shipping items for move-in and having them delivered to their dorm or campus housing during move in. In 2014, 63 percent of freshmen were from out of state. We found that having students ship items to the Ferguson Mail Center and then delivering those items to other residences on campus decreases both stress and time while giving new students a sense of trust in University staff and its services. This also creates a positive first-time college experience for each incoming freshman.
- The redesign of the workspace for the Ferguson Mail Center made a major difference in business proficiency. The space was redesigned to accommodate more square footage for packages. The size of mailboxes was changed from small square mailboxes to larger, horizontal mailboxes to store more mail and keep magazines and newspapers pristine..

Additionally, more work surfaces and additional customer service windows were created to better serve customers during peak times.



*New mailboxes accommodate more mail. Mobile racks for staging packages that are ready for pick-up.*

- Trackable packages are keyed into the internal tracking system, placed in unique bin/shelf locations, and students are notified via e-mail immediately of its arrival. It takes less than 45 seconds to key in a trackable mail piece, place it in a unique bin/shelf location, and to send an e-mail notifying the student that their trackable mail piece is available for pick-up.
- Mailboxes are now easier for students to purchase; they are sold online through the UA student portal. Anyone with access to a computer or smartphone can purchase a mailbox in minutes. We are one of the only universities where mailboxes can be purchased online with a credit card, any time of day. Previously, when the postal service handled the mail, students had to fill-out a four-page application, provide two forms of identification, and



pay a key deposit to rent a mailbox. As a result, long lines ensued as students waited to rent a mailbox.

- The mail center has extended customer service window hours. Students can pick-up packages any time between 8:00a.m. – 7:00 p.m. Monday – Thursday, 8:00a.m.– 5:00 p.m. on Fridays, and 10:00a.m.– 2:00 p.m. on Saturdays.
- Students are satisfied. They are not standing in lines, they can get to classes on time, and they are receiving their mail and packages in timely manner. The average time it takes to swipe a student’s ID, locate their package, and have the student sign for it is less than 30 seconds.



*Campus Mail Services employee, Megan Stewart, delivers package that was shipped to a University of Alabama Student.*

- Each student has a permanently-assigned 6-digit mailstop code. This allows each student to receive any trackable package free of charge. If a student chooses to purchase a mailbox rental, the student’s mailstop code temporarily changes to reflect the number of the mailbox they have rented. If the student does not renew their mailbox rental, the

student's mailstop code reverts back to their permanently-assigned number so that the student can still receive trackable packages.

- A final benefit lies outside The University of Alabama. The mail and package carriers (US Postal Service, UPS, FedEx, DHL, etc.) are pleased with the centralizing of operations. It streamlines their operations by only having to deliver to one location. We also have the added benefit of having each carrier driver available to us daily if we have any questions or concerns about the packages they deliver. It helps reduce our carbon footprint by not having these carriers make multiple trips to multiple locations on our campus.

## **Retrospect**

The Ferguson Mail Center is still a new concept to many students on campus; especially those who had used the postal service and the Paty Package Center in the past. Overall, students are happy with the new service. The operation has seen an increase in the number of students using the Ferguson Mail Center because it's easy, convenient and efficient. Now that the mail center is staffed by UA employees, students appear more confident in the process. They trust our service and have the peace-of-mind that they will receive their items in a safe, timely and efficient manner.

(The above seems redundant to what has previously been stated). When a parent, grandparent, or friend sends something through the mail stream, they want their student to receive it in a timely manner. They take the time to send those mail pieces with love, and we want to extend that love and care by the way we handle each student's mail and package. The

UA mail center staff takes great pride in their work and constantly strives to provide great customer service to all of our students.