Organizational Excellence
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Graduate School Application Process

The Graduate School has embarked on a major initiative to transform and optimize the graduate admissions process. The "Strengthening Admissions Initiative" is USC's first comprehensive review of graduate admissions in 15 years. The aim is to create an agile, responsive admissions process that meets today's needs and positions the university to anticipate and adapt to the changing demands of future students.

Background

The university eliminated its application fee in admissions cycle 2024-25. The change reduced barriers to entry in graduate education, broadened the applicant pool, and contributed to the increased flow of applications. USC has seen a significant increase in the number of graduate applications – from 5,000 in Fall 2023 to nearly 15,000 in Fall 2024. This has put pressure on existing processes and systems that were designed for a lighter load.

CollegeNET has long served as the primary system for managing graduate education admissions at USC. The system has improved in functionality and efficiency over time, however, it is limited in its ability to exchange data with other systems.

The lack of real-time integrations results in a significant amount of time-consuming manual work, complex workarounds, greater costs, and reduced data accuracy. Longer processing times result in slow responsivity to applicants, students, and campus partners.

All of this has affected the highest priority: quick and effective service to the people who count on the graduate admissions system.

Developing a deeper understanding of the current situation

In the first phase of the project, the Graduate School used a twofold approach to (1) look internally at the current-state process and (2) hear from clients, stakeholders and partners.

The internal review included mapping the current application process in detail to visualize the data flow from submission of application to decision letter dissemination (see Appendix A). Graduate School staff used the map to assess the current situation, highlight strengths, and uncover opportunities for improvement.

Next came an external review to collect input from applicants, graduate students, and partners (including graduate directors, deans and assistant deans, and others). A survey drew responses from 700 people. The feedback was used to identify inefficiencies and positives as experienced by stakeholders.

Determining improvements to achieve project goals

The team then used the insights to discuss and develop potential improvement actions. Many of these proposed actions related to mechanical and technical/IT aspects of the process. Other actions were more qualitative, relating to communication, service, and support.

Dean Ann Vail and Graduate School staff worked together in reviewing the current state and developing potential actions.

The actions with the greatest potential impact related to systems – specifically CollegeNET (used to process submitted applications, submit admission recommendations to the Graduate School, run reports, etc.), and the opportunity for real-time integration with Banner, PeopleSoft, and other systems.

Given that systems and system integration are central to nearly every aspect of the application process, a critical question arose: Is it more effective to address and overcome the limitations of the current CollegeNET system, or to transition to a new system that can fully meet the needs of all stakeholders, both now and in the future?

The former is an incremental approach that would likely maintain or slightly improve the status quo. The latter is a transformational approach. It involves more effort and investment, but it has the potential to streamline and simplify processes, significantly reduce manual labor and processing time, and provide a higher-quality experience overall for stakeholders and clients alike.

Improvement Actions

To drive meaningful and sustainable improvements, the Graduate School has taken strategic steps to address both immediate and long-term needs.

- A Graduate Admissions Systems Optimization Task Force was convened. Its threefold purpose was to review in detail the current admissions system's capabilities, strengths, and inefficiencies; research potential new systems to improve functionality; and develop

recommendations. Beginning in September 2024, the task force conducted stakeholder interviews, peer consultations, vendor evaluations, system demonstrations, community feedback forums (explained further in the next bullet point), and community surveys to identify challenges and system needs. Its final report (December 2024) provided detailed comparative information on three potential systems and recommended two of these systems. As noted in the report, "Both systems align with USC's goals of streamlining operations, reducing redundancies, and improving user experience." As of the date of this report, the recommendations are currently under review by university leadership.

Graduate Admissions Systems Optimization Task Force

Sam Beals, Graduate Student Services Manager, College of Information & Communications
Bob Brookshire, Ph.D., Graduate Director, Molinaroli College of Engineering and Computing
Lisa Carter, CRM Manager & Systems Development Analyst, College of Nursing
Julia Hodge, Ph.D., Director of Recruitment and Engagement, College of Education
Danny Jenkins, Ph.D., Associate Dean and Director of Graduate Studies, School of Music
Elizabeth Orehovec, Ph.D., Assistant Vice President and Executive Director of Undergraduate Admissions, Enrollment Management

Co-leads:
Angelina C. Sylvain, Ph.D., Vice Dean for Graduate Education, the Graduate School
Tom Vrana, Ph.D., Executive Director of Enterprise Applications, Division of IT

- Four sessions were held with stakeholders (e.g., graduate directors, associate and assistant deans for graduate education) to review research on graduate admissions and to get deeper input (beyond the survey feedback) regarding opportunities for simplification and standardization. This input was brought into the work of the task force. Key recurring themes included the challenge of balancing standardization and departmental autonomy, the need to clarify requirements and address exceptions, and the debate over the role of test scores in admissions. Participants emphasized the importance of transparency, holistic evaluation, and flexibility in decision-making, while also addressing concerns about AI-generated documents and the need for alternative evaluation methods.

While the work toward systems optimization has the biggest scope and the greatest potential for long-term improvement, the Graduate School has taken smaller steps to bring about near-term enhancements:

- Standardized and compiled detailed process guidance in a comprehensive Graduate School Coordinator Manual. This all-in-one resource, with screen shots and step-by-step instructions, covers key processes that Graduate School coordinators routinely perform.

- Enhanced the focus on applicant feedback through a survey available to all admitted graduate applicants. Their input is being used to strengthen communication and refine processes.

- Institutionalized a weekly update admissions report that is sent to a variety of stakeholders, including central administration, deans, recruiters, graduate directors, and Graduate School staff. The report keeps people up to date on key service-related metrics such as the number of graduate applicants accepted in the previous time period, the number of applications pending, and more.

- Additional reports are being provided this spring, including: Incoming GPA Analysis, Admissions Survey, Admitted Student Survey. Results will inform the admissions process as well as other important initiatives.

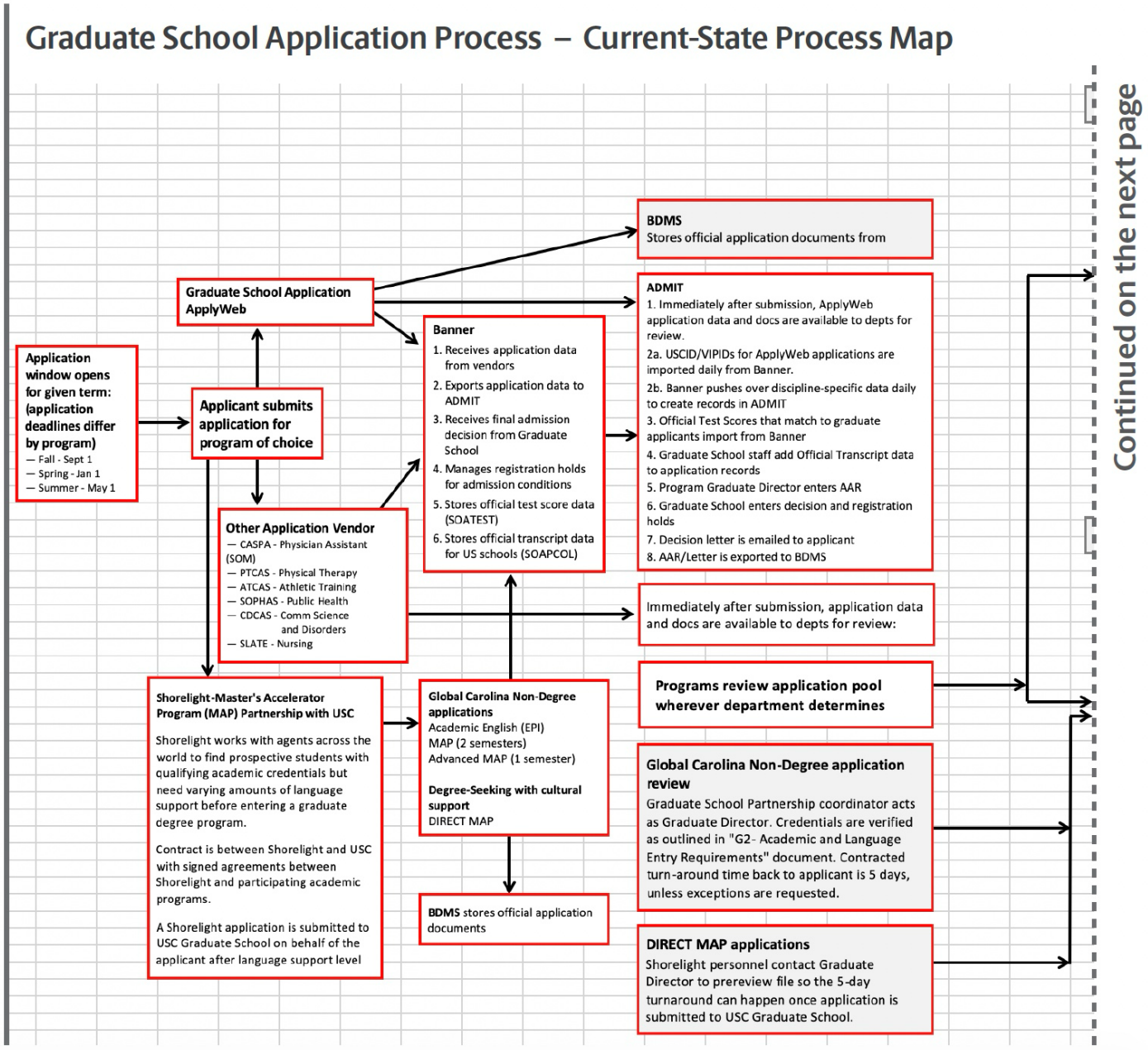
- The Graduate School continues to expand its emphasis on data-driven decision making.

Conclusion

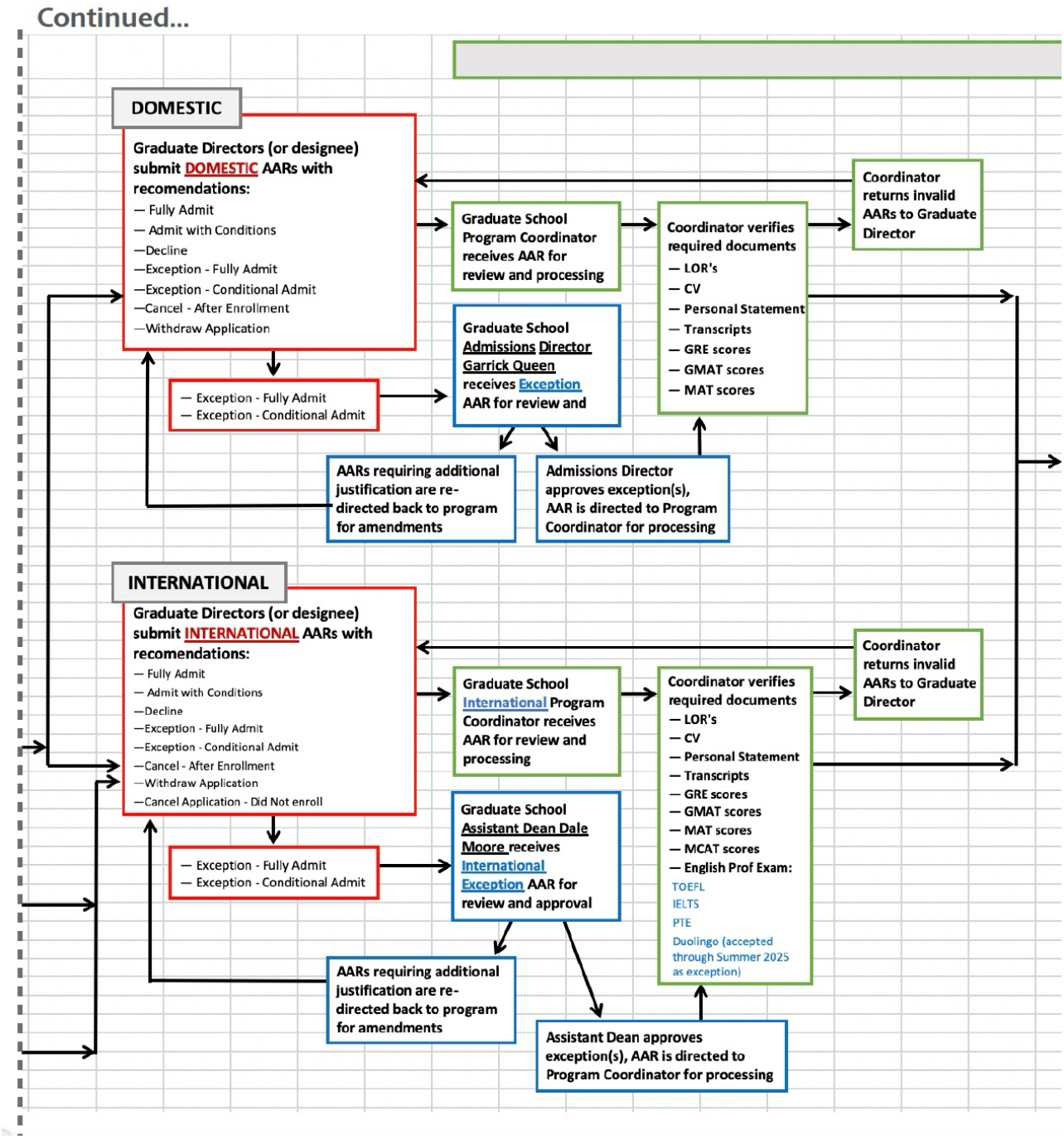
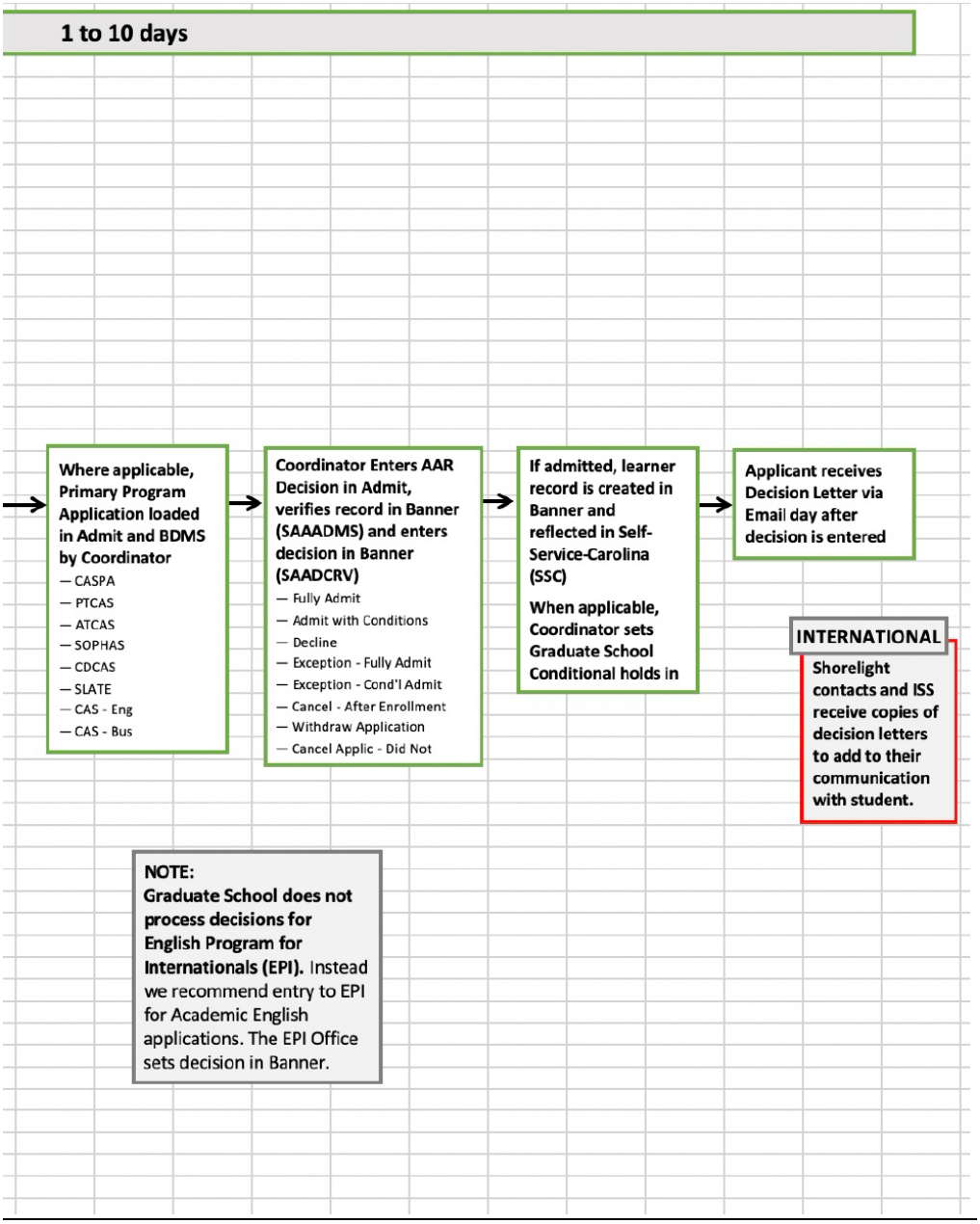
The Graduate School's ongoing efforts to strengthen and optimize the admissions process represent a critical step toward creating a more efficient, responsive, and sustainable system. The "Strengthening Admissions Initiative" has provided valuable insights into the current challenges and opportunities for improvement, underscoring the importance of modernizing systems and enhancing communication. By conducting a comprehensive review of existing practices and engaging stakeholders at every level, the Graduate School has made substantial progress in identifying inefficiencies, streamlining processes, and considering both incremental and transformational changes.

The recommendations put forth by the Graduate Admissions Systems Optimization Task Force, combined with smaller near-term enhancements, reflect a balanced approach to achieving both immediate and long-term goals. The next steps will focus on implementing the most effective solutions to improve user experience, reduce manual labor, and ensure the graduate admissions system is agile enough to meet the evolving needs of current and future applicants. The commitment to ongoing improvement and collaboration across departments and stakeholders will be essential in ensuring the continued success of these initiatives and the overall enhancement of graduate education at USC.

Appendix A: Current-State Process Map — 1 of 3



Appendix A: Current-State Process Map — 2 of 3



Appendix A: Current-State Process Map — 3 of 3