Financial Aid Program Review

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Financial Aid Program Review

Executive Summary

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Major Conclusions:

Campus Recommendations:

1) In the financial aid area technology must remain a high priority for the campus. With the combination of federal mandates and an increased equipment budget the campus has begun to address the office’s needs in this area. New computers for staff and students use, are on order and will greatly improve the delivery of services. However, the campus must be aware that additional computers will be needed in the future. All signs point to the Department of Education heading towards a paperless environment, which will require more computers for filing financial aid applications.

2) This committee recommends that additional funds be made available for professional development. Financial Aid Staff need to participate in more external forms of technical training and conferences. This is a critical component for success. Both professional and clerical staff must stay current with new state and federal policies and procedures.

3) With the campus moving toward an enrollment management model more cross-training needs to occur for both professional and clerical staff.

4) Student confidentiality has remained an issue on the Eastern Campus. Although it has improved since moving to a new location, students are still discussing very personal matters in an open space.

5) Technical support for computers dedicated for students to file their financial aid application electronically, should come from the campus Educational Technical Unit. It is part of their responsibility to service student computers. They are on campus and can respond quicker when needed.

6) After reviewing the results from the Faculty Awareness Survey, the committee feels that faculty need to be better informed about the Financial Aid process and the services that are performed by the office. To accomplish this the Financial Aid Office needs do more outreach to faculty, and increase awareness of the office’s services.
College-Wide Recommendations:

1) Central Financial Aid should investigate an early delivery system. Financial aid packages should be reaching students in a more timely manner.

2) More financial resources need to be allocated for technical training and professional development. Financial Aid is not like other areas of higher education. Policies, procedures and technology change on a regular basis and staff need to stay current with these changes.

3) Central Financial Aid needs to continue producing a comprehensive Policies and Procedure manual to ensure consistency among campuses. However, each campus needs to maintain a certain amount of autonomy and allow delivery of services to be consistent with its population.

4) Central Financial Aid needs to continue to offer the excellent in-service technical and professional development for professional and clerical staff. Included in the training, needs to be a segment on FERPA. The committee is concerned with personal and institutional liabilities, as well as confidentiality when dealing with directory information.

5) The College needs to continue to investigate an integrated computer system. The current system is inefficient and needs to be upgraded. The Financial Aid Office needs to have closer ties to the Business Office, and better tools to handle student accounts.

6) The committee recommends better communication between college scholarships and financial aid. Whereby, financial aid packages and scholarship awards can aid in the recruitment of new students.

7) Central Financial Aid should create a report which demonstrates the impact that Financial Aid has on enrollment (i.e. 59% of the students surveyed at the Eastern Campus said they could not have attended the College if it were not for financial aid).
Mission

The College’s Financial Aid Mission Statement is congruent with the Mission Statements of both the Eastern Campus and the Division of Student Affairs. However, the committee feels that the Mission Statement needs to be more visible and should appear in financial aid literature and other promotional materials.

Program

The financial aid program provides students with the means to achieve their educational goals.

The program complies with all federal and state laws and regulations, as evidenced by excellent audit reports.

The College’s awarding policy is designed to provide equal access to all students. The policy maximizes grant funding, without any loan funding, to the lowest income students. The College’s awarding policy seeks to meet each student's need through grants, and to minimize reliance on loans for academic funding. The College’s grant-to-loan ratio is far higher than that of other colleges, including community colleges, throughout the country. (See Appendix). The College has achieved a very low default rate of 5.5% for the 1999-2000 year (the latest year for which there is data available) as compared to 11.9% for the 1997-1998 year.

Timely awarding of financial aid is important for students who are deciding whether to attend college, and which college to attend. Early delivery of financial aid is necessary for many students who depend upon financial aid funds to help cover transportation and other expenses while in school. Currently, the College cannot begin processing for the next academic year until April, which is later than the ideal start date. The College is currently revising the computerized system to better meet the needs of the students and the College.

The Eastern campus Enrollment Services staff tries to hasten the awarding and delivery process in several ways. The importance of applying for financial aid early is stressed at all high school visits and other outreach activities. Students are advised of the services provided by the Financial Aid Office and are given a name and telephone number to call for assistance. Outreach activities provided to the continuing students include a “financial aid table,” set up in the cafeteria periodically, where a professional answers questions, assists in the completion of forms, and provides general information to all students. Additionally, posters are displayed around campus to inform students about various state and federal grants and loan programs, and notices are sent to students' homes, advising them to apply for financial aid for the next year. (See Appendix).
Leadership

The East Campus Financial Aid Office continues to be a leader in providing comprehensive service and information to students. It continues to assist with the enrollment process by providing innovative ways of delivering the necessary funds that enable students to continue their education. The College recently conducted a Student Satisfaction Survey, in which 59% of Eastern Campus students responded that “they would not have been able to attend if it were not for financial aid.”

To continue with this successful track record the Office needs to maintain strong leadership. Financial Aid is noted as a field of continual change. To be an effective leader, the supervisor needs to stay current with new regulations, policy, procedures, and technology. To accomplish this, one must attend Financial Aid seminars and conferences, which are designed to enhance professional development.

It is the recommendation of this committee that the Director and Assistant Director be more proactive in attending Financial Aid related conferences to remain up to date with state and federal regulations and technological changes.

Organization and Management

The College Financial Aid Office provides updated policies and procedures for each professional and clerical financial aid staff member each year. They also provide updates and training activities for all financial aid staff throughout the year. Director’s meetings are held monthly with all professional staff.

The Eastern campus provides performance expectations and assessment for all staff. Each staff member is provided with an organizational chart. Campus financial aid staff meetings are held throughout the year.

During the past year, the Financial Aid Office and the Admissions Office were combined into one office. This combination seems to provide the most comprehensive service to students. Most questions concerning admissions, financial aid and enrollment can be answered in one office. The staff works well together and all staff can answer general questions. To become more proficient in each area, additional cross training is needed for Admissions and Financial Aid staff.

Human Resources

The East Campus Office of Financial Aid consists of 1 ½ professionals and two clerical staff members. Although this is a relatively low number of workers, each person is cross-trained in most aspects of the office’s functions. This model provides comprehensive service and allows each staff member to handle a wide array of situations, so that office coverage is less of an issue.
Regarding service, the Financial Aid Student Satisfaction Survey demonstrated that 77% of the students received the information they were looking for, 89% felt knowledgeable about the financial aid process and understood their role after visiting the office, and only 1% received no information at all.

While good service is crucial to a successful operation, updating and keeping staff current plays just as important a role. Attendance and participation at conferences and workshops are vital to the continuation of sound office policy. Because of limited funds, the Director and Assistant Director are limited to the number of financial aid conferences they are able to attend. Neither individual receives the technical training needed, or attends the necessary amount of professional functions. This problem stems from a lack of an adequate budget. When requests are submitted, personnel are informed that the funds for this are not available.

Financial Resources

Funding to the Financial Aid Program is neither adequate, nor commensurate with revenue produced for the College.

The College provides $850 for professional staff development every two years. However, funds should also be available for technical training throughout the year. Technical training is necessary to remain current with the changing federal and state regulations and revisions to the state and federal computerized systems. The College should budget funding for financial aid training.

Funding has also not been adequate to fund the computerized systems of the Financial Aid Office. During the past year, the computer available for students to apply online for financial aid did not meet the minimum necessary requirements to support this function; therefore students could not apply online from the Financial Aid Office. Currently, only one computer in the Financial Aid Office meets the minimum requirements for Financial Aid staff to transfer information to the federal government, as is required by federal statute.

The Campus has been able to secure funding for new computers for the office; upon their arrival, the technological requirements will be met and all staff members will be able to transmit data. One new computer will be secured for the exclusive use of "FAFSA on the Web" filing, and two other computers will be available for this purpose during peak times. More computers will be needed as more students apply online. The campus will need to be able to use the computers in the computer lab as additional computers. Thus, the campus will need the funds to continuously update computers to meet the minimum technological requirements needed to complete this process.
Facilities, Technology, and Equipment

Issues that arose at the committee meetings concerning these areas involved: physical facility, student confidentiality, adequate technological support, and equipment.

The campus has begun to address many of these concerns. The financial aid operation recently moved to a new location. During the planning and carrying out of the relocation, issues of service and confidentiality were always a primary concern. Prior to relocating, the Financial Aid Office used a counter to discuss personal financial matters. This created an environment that forced students to often discuss their financial situation in the presence of other students. Since moving, the office is located in a private suite providing more seclusion to discuss personal matters.

Technological needs are also being addressed. The College recently received a mandate by the federal government stating that all PC’s affiliated with Financial Aid need to meet minimum specifications in order to remain in compliance. The campus responded by ordering new “high end” computers for all Financial Aid personnel, and one new computer dedicated to filing applications online. In addition, the campus is adding two computers for document imaging, which students will have access to during peak periods.

However, an area of concern is mainframe capability. Packaging cannot take place for the next academic year until the end of April. From a recruiting perspective, financial aid should help drive enrollment. Financial aid packages for incoming freshmen should be made available as early as possible, so that families can make educated decisions about their financial obligations.

The field of Financial Aid has made significant strides toward automatic packaging, whereby student information is electronically sent from the Department of Education to our mainframe computer. Students can then be automatically packaged based on information submitted on the FAFSA. This increases the speed by which the students receive the information, and it cuts down on the amount of time the staff needs to spend manually packaging students. The committee understands that the College is moving in this direction, but it feels this needs to be a high priority for Central Financial Aid and the Computer Center.

Legal Responsibilities

It was the feeling of the Committee that the current practices of the College’s Financial Aid Office are legally sound. Most importantly, staff members were found to possess adequate knowledge of, and respect for, laws and regulations relevant to the operations of the office and its various programs and services. However, improved access to legal advice for staff members, along with increased dissemination of legal information to staff members by the college, is desirable.

Constructive concerns raised by the committee principally dealt with the issue of confidentiality – both in the actual office and on the phone. With respect to the facility
itself, one cannot ignore the fact that the office functions in “close quarters”. That being the case, students ought to be better apprised of the option of a private meeting with a counselor. It is our thinking that increased signage within the office is a workable solution. Telephone communications between staff members and students raise confidentiality concerns as well: Staff members do not have a uniform tool to guard against imposter callers. Consequently, (and quite understandably) the information available to students via the telephone is somewhat limited.

**Equal Opportunity Access and Affirmative Action**

The operation of the Financial Aid Office at the Eastern Campus is consistent with both the letter and intent of equal opportunity laws. Staff members are well aware of relevant state and federal law and work hard to insure the proper implementation of the same. College financial aid publications were found to be compliant as well.

To ensure continued success in this area, staff are encouraged to develop and conduct periodic surveys of students with respect to fundamental issues of equal opportunity, access and affirmative action.

**Campus and Community Relations**

The Campus Financial Aid Office has established and promotes effective working relationships with all campus offices and external agencies. Financial aid documents are accurate and confidentiality is maintained.

Outreach activities are held at high schools, community agencies and college fairs.

Linking the Admissions and Financial Aid Office has enhanced the working relationship between the offices.

The College should hold a seminar for all support staff to review all the issues regarding confidentiality.

**Diversity**

The Campus Financial Aid Office tries to provide services to a diverse student population and to meet the special needs of the campus’s various constituencies. The Financial Aid staff works with the Child Care Center in an effort to provide funds for child care for the adult student population, many of whom are single parents and could not attend college without day care services. The office provides individual assistance in filing applications; this service is most helpful for students who are the first generation in their family to attend college. Many
of these students would find filing the applications and completing the financial aid process an obstacle to attending college. Personal and confidential financial aid counseling is available and encouraged for students with extenuating circumstances. The Financial Aid professionals work with high school counselors and social workers in helping students who may be eligible for an “independence override” due to family circumstances. Additional funding is secured if applicable and emergency loan funds are available to students until available financial aid funds are received, helping students with emergencies in their daily lives. The Admissions staff is very aware that many students cannot even consider college without financial aid. They talk about financial aid at each high school visit and give students the name and telephone number of a person to call to make an appointment. Students, particularly low-income students, seem to feel less fearful by establishing a more personal relationship with the financial aid office.

The College has both federal student guides and applications available in Spanish. The Eastern campus requested a supply and has found them useful, particularly for parents of students.

**Ethics**

Review of the ethical practices of the financial aid office proved unremarkable. In short, Financial Aid staff members were found to have a great respect for student confidentiality, as well as the need to insure that their decisions were the product of fair, independent and timely decision making.

The chief shortfall in this area is that the college does not have a code of ethics for the Financial Aid Office. The development and dissemination of a Financial Aid Office “Mission Statement” as well as a “Code of Ethics” are important to the continued success of the Office.

**Assessment and Evaluation**

The College has made great strides in the assessment and evaluation of Financial Aid. To help measure the Office’s effectiveness, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the institution recently implemented two surveys: a Student Satisfaction Survey, and a Faculty Awareness Survey. These instruments provide valuable feedback from both students and professionals who interact with the office.

In addition, Central Administration conducts monthly meetings to review and introduce new policies for professional staff, and the campus meets periodically to update and discuss the daily operation with clerical staff.
Financial Aid Program Review

Committee Review of Financial Aid Student Survey

Questions:

#2 Result 59% of our students say they would not be able to attend if it were not for FA

#3 The committee wanted to know what percentage of students (nationally) who take out a student loan to help pay for college — the answer is 59%.

#4 High % of students 83% say yes to receiving information about financial aid programs

#5 Why are students calling
   - Requesting application
   - Check their status
   When they call they are not getting a busy signal, nor put on hold they report that they always get an answer.

#8 79% walk-in to the office with no appointment

#9 Do you feel comfortable when discussing personal/financial information? 31% said no

#10 Minutes waiting with appointments, to be seen only 6% was more than 15 minutes
   - without appointments 9% more than 15 minutes

#11 47% visit to have their forms completed — a substantial #
   42% visit to question about billing
   27% visit for special circumstance

#12 77% received information or help they wanted
   1% received no help of information

#13 89% feel knowledgeable about financial aid process and understand their role after visiting the office

#14 After reviewing the application process 81% feel satisfied or very satisfied

#15 75% are either very satisfied or satisfied with the FA package they received

see student comments

Committee Concerns: East Campus FA Budget, Facilities, Staffing, Technology, Website