

## Support Services Review 2012: Financial Aid Office

April 16, 2012 - Terry Bazan- Director of Student Assistance

1. What are the primary services or outcomes provided by the support service area and what is the impact of those services and outcomes on students and other key stakeholders?

### **Financial Aid Office Mission Statement**

The Financial Aid Office is committed to helping students achieve their academic goals by providing them with financial resources to gain access to higher education. All staff is dedicated to maintaining fiscal and regulatory integrity, providing timely and accurate information, offering advice about comprehensive financial aid programs, and educating students about financial literacy. Our goal is to provide quality service to our students and staff.

The Financial Aid Office provides grants, loans, and work-study opportunities to students who may otherwise be unable to attend college. The amount and type of aid awarded depends on the availability of funds and the student's established financial need.

Approximately 46% of the ACC student body is receiving some type of assistance. In 2011-12 \$103,496,575 was disbursed to 20,299 students. The Financial Aid Office works closely with the Business Office, Admissions and Information Technology departments to ensure that all our systems and processes are working smoothly for the student. Counseling and Advising Offices are also key offices in ensuring student success and assisting students complete their program of studies.

2. What are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats present that enhance or hinder the unit's ability to provide those services and meet expected outcomes during the next five years?

A SWOT was conducted on February 3, 2012. Key stakeholders in and outside of the Financial Aid Office identified and prioritized the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the office. Participants included staff from financial aid, admissions and business office, counseling, advising, continuing education, scholarship/foundation, information technology, enrollment management and campus manager's office.

In attendance were Terry Bazan, Jason Briseno, Marissa Burill, Terry Cotton, Ann Schubert, Marie Fofi, Theresa Harkins, Mandi Overby, Velda Jackson, Noko Wilson, Rhonda Parsons, Juanita Mendez, Sandy Clevinger, Kelly Grant, Christien Alexander and Mervin Jones.

## SWOT Findings - Financial Aid Review:

### Strengths

- Customer Service- Financial Aid Staff are patient, caring and provide good customer service.
- Training- Financial Aid Office provides informative training and workshops for staff to keep up with regulatory changes and updates. Staff is cross trained, and allowed to attend Dept of Education conferences/workshops to stay current with federal regulations.
- Staff characteristics- Good staff that are innovative and open to ideas/thinking outside the box. Teamwork, knowledgeable, approachable with a can do attitude.
- Leadership- Solid and efficient office system that tries to be proactive. Diversity of ethnicity/gender in supervisors. Good strong leadership.
- Communication- Staff works well with each other and with other departments. Well developed communication between campus locations. Always helpful to other departments and tries to keep other departments informed.

### Weaknesses

- Lack of staff- Campuses not always fully staffed. HBC staff pulled to cover campus staff. Staff spread thin at peak times.
- Work Processes- Too many manual processes. Lack of integrated financial aid application for online submission. Ability to respond to peak processing time due to volume and staffing.
- Inconsistent interpretation of procedures- Multi-campus college wide offices makes it difficult to ensure that all communication/changes are distributed and understood correctly. Need to standardize certain procedures at all campuses. Training new staff too quickly. Interpretation of federal regulations may vary from staff person to staff person.
- Inadequate phone support-Not enough staff to cover help desk phone queue. Phone queue takes time away from attending to students and processing aid applications. Lack of staff during peak periods causes unanswered level II calls to be dropped.
- Workspace environment- Shortage of space at administrative offices and campuses. Lack of student privacy at most campuses especially at RVS FA Office. Cramped work space.

### Opportunities

- Staff allocation- Create an outreach team to assist students with completing FAFSA, FAFSA Saturday, and other College Connection events. Make processing a priority. Better utilize current staff and limit HBC staff from covering campus offices. Create floating positions to assist campuses when needed. Hire additional staff.

- Use of technology- Eliminate manual process. Allow financial aid applications to be submitted online. Use all acceptable methods of communication to inform students. Use social media more to get information out to students. Create a monthly newsletter for students and possibly staff. E-Intake allowing students to sign in at campus offices. Automate scholarship process.
- Phone support- Obtain a well trained phone staff to handle Level 2 calls/allow more time for processing and helping students. Create a financial aid call center.
- Processes/Workflow- Create a mandatory in person orientation for all students to attend before receiving their financial aid. Change priority filing date to an earlier date. Expand FAQ's on website so that students do not come into offices and/or make so many phone calls to ask basic questions.
- Hours of Operation- Extend weekday hours and open Saturdays only during peak periods, otherwise have regular office hours of 8 a.m. -5 p.m. Monday – Friday. Limit office hours for students to come into office and answer questions via email or telephone.
- Training- Customer service training for staff. Provide cross training between campuses.

### Threats

- ACC Upper administration- Budget cuts and hiring freezes affect the additional hiring of staff.
- Legislation- Changes in state and federal regulations. Increase in student loan default rate. Changing political climate making institutions more accountable and deeper funding cuts.
- Lack of student accountability- Students wait until the last minute. Student retention due to satisfactory academic progress requirements not being met. Class attendance- Faculty does not take attendance and financial aid disburses funds to students that never attend a class.
- State funding- Reduction in allocations and limited funding in grant programs.
- IT Support- Lack of sufficient IT support. IT workload causes financial aid requests for support to many times not get done in a timely manner or be put at the bottom of the priority listing. Datatel/Colleague system has limitations that many times require work around processes. Financial Aid needs a dedicated programming staff to assist with constant changes in federal/state regulations.
- Office staff- Staff turnover due to Director and Associate Director retiring and other staff leaving for better advancement possibilities. Staff burnout. Campus Financial Aid staffing is too small that if someone is sick or on vacation it causes inadequate staffing problems. Lack of space for additional staff to be hired.

- Departmental funding- Budget cuts. Funding to hire additional staff. Growth with no increase to support it or additional staff to deal with extra office hours and weekend coverage.
  - Economy- Lack of voter support for education and supporting bonds. Downward spiral economy causes increase in community college enrollments.
3. Using the answers to the first two questions, what improvements to primary services and/or intended outcomes will occur during the next five years?

**Quality Improvement Plan for Financial Aid Office:**

The Financial Aid Office reviewed the SWOT analysis and developed the following plan for quality improvement over the next five years.

- To Address Weaknesses and Opportunities:
  - Continue to address the staffing challenges of both the campus operations and HBC. The Financial Aid Office needs an extra team of staff members that can both serve as “floaters” to cover campuses when staff is sick and/or on vacation. This extra team can then serve as the extra staff needed during peak periods.
  - Continue to work with IT to improve workflow processes. Review the workflow processes in Ellucian (Datatel) to see how they can work in the financial aid office.
  - Continue training workshops to deal with staff having inconsistent interpretation of procedures and guidelines.
  - Continue to work with webmaster to develop a better financial aid website that is easy to navigate and understand.
  - Continue to work/train the Help Line staff so that department can provide better phone support for students needing financial assistance. Consider developing a phone bank that is housed in the financial aid office and reports to the financial aid office instead of IT.
  - Continue to work with campus managers at each campus site to address office space challenges. Incorporate extra space when building new campuses to allow for growth in our area.
  - Review the hours of operation at each campus for both weekdays and weekends for efficiency in regards to the number of students served, staff/costs involved with hours of operation.
  - Work with IT to develop the eIntake system at each campus to assist with student traffic.

- To Address Threats:
  - Continue to work with ACC Administration in regards to staffing challenges and budget priorities.
  - Continue to attend training workshops and conferences to make sure staff are up to date with new legislation for federal/state funding and regulations.
  - Provide workshops to educate students about financial aid programs and stress importance of student accountability in regards to receiving federal aid and paying back student loans.
  - Continue to request additional IT Support to assist with ongoing needs in the financial aid office and scholarship department.

Program Review Question #4:

How will the unit measure the extent to which planned improvements have resulted in better service or intended outcomes for students or other key stakeholders?

- The Financial Aid Office will continue reviewing and analyzing current measurement indicators: Point of service surveys, student walk in traffic data reports, and level II phone queue reports.
- The Financial Aid team will meet once a semester to review progress on recommendations and changes needed.

Program Review Question #5:

How will the planned improvements align with and contribute to the Mission and Intended Outcomes of Austin Community College?

**Function in Support of the College Mission by Financial Aid:**

The Financial Aid Office supports the ACC Student Success initiative to increase access to higher education by providing services to assist students achieve their educational goals. The Financial Aid Office works in partnership with faculty, staff, and administration in upholding the mission, standards, and requirements of the college. We accomplish this function by:

1. Collaborating on student access, retention and success initiatives and programs;
2. Reviewing the mission of the Financial Aid Office periodically, to reflect changes at the college level.