

Top Ten Student-Centered Approaches to Financial Aid Services

Students are most likely to be successful in college when they are able to focus on their studies. Financial aid can make that possible by limiting distractions such as excessive work and students' worries about how they will be able to afford books or rent. Here are some of the ways financial aid offices can be helpful partners to students.

1) *Tell students about the benefits of financial aid before the restrictions.*

All students need to know that Pell grants provide free money for college. Emphasizing the myriad caveats that may not apply to them is discouraging and unnecessary. Basic information about available aid and how to access it should be the main focus of your print and online materials, not regulations and exclusions.

2) *Give students the financial aid information they need, in the language and terms that they understand.*

Financial aid has an esoteric language of its own! Terms like "Title IV," "BOGW," or even "grants" are not typically understood by most students and families, so help them by using student-friendly translations. And remember, non-native English-speaking students and families also need help understanding financial aid terms, concepts, and choices. Make sure your office can serve the students and families present in your community and student body.

3) *Communicate with students in a variety of ways, such as email, fliers, regular mail and text messages.*

The more ways you reach out to students, the more likely you are to reach those who are eligible for financial aid. Take a lesson from advertising: the more times, ways, and places people are exposed to a message, the more likely they are to respond.

4) *Make sure students know their full range of options for financing their education.*

Financial aid officers should help students by explaining how financial aid could help them focus on their studies without working too much. Talk with students about all of their options – including loans – and not just the ones that you think they should choose.

5) *Encourage and support students' completion of the FAFSA.*

Many forms of financial aid can only be accessed through filling out the FAFSA. Encourage students by explaining how they can benefit, and offer to help guide them through what can be an arduous and intimidating process.

6) *Make adjustments to fit students' unique circumstances.*

Students with unique life circumstances may face special challenges in accessing needed aid. Professional judgment can be used to help these students, but only if the administrator is willing to listen to and document the situation. Remember, your choices make a real difference in students' lives!

7) *Give students the benefit of the doubt.*

The vast majority of students applying for aid are looking for help in financing their education – not trying to scam the system. Setting up policies that assume students are dishonest can create unnecessary and damaging barriers to access.

8) *Keep the process as easy and simple as possible.*

Verifying all applicants, requiring extra documentation, or verifying unnecessary data elements all add complexity to the process, hindering students' ability to access aid. Students look to the aid office to help eliminate barriers to college, not construct more of them.

9) *Give eligible students aid when they need it.*

Students need financial aid not only for tuition and fees, but also to help pay for books, rent, groceries, and childcare. Disbursing aid at or before the start of a term – when students are incurring these expenses – helps keep them enrolled and succeeding in college.

10) *Ask students for feedback.*

Encouraging students to provide feedback on the services and policies of the financial aid office can help you identify and mend trouble spots. Surveys, comment boxes, and student advisory panels are all useful ways of soliciting student input.

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