

7-1-1973

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Recommended Citation

O'Hearne, John (1973) "Financial Aid Office Management," *Journal of Student Financial Aid*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/jsfa/vol3/iss2/2>

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FINANCIAL AID OFFICE MANAGEMENT

John J. O'Hearne

Financial aid office management is compelling, vital, and energetic; it involves the exercise of responsibility to control and direct persons and things to accomplish the judicious use of other people's money for those students who need it.

This may seem to be a fairly long and complex thesis, but running a financial aid office today is a complex and challenging business, and describing its management is similarly difficult.

Definition of Terms

Probably the best place to start is first to review definitions. What is financial aid? Everyone knows the answer: it is money.

Clearly, financial aid is money. But it is not all money. One definition (Van Dusen and O'Hearne, *A Design for a Model College Financial Aid Office*, p. 5) defines financial aid for college students as "only those expense reducing means (money, goods, or services) awarded directly to or for the student himself and used to defray educational expenses". I now would add that the definition applies only when the student can show a "need" to receive ". . . those expense reducing means". When the student cannot demonstrate the "need" for those means commonly called financial aid, they are not aids but rewards.



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Continuing with definitions, let me make perfectly clear some of the things that will not be included: ways to arrange desks, file cabinets, and work areas; methods of dividing responsibilities; charting paper flow; whether or not to have a coffee pot; what style of clothes the staff should be allowed to wear; what to do if your staff comes to work late and goes home early. Neither will I consider "office" to be simply the place to which you report when you come on campus each day. The dictionary also defines "office" as:

The staff or body of persons carrying on work in a business or other office. A position of duty, trust or authority, especially in the public service. The duty, function, or part of a particular person or agency.

These definitions which speak to responsibility and to people are far more telling than descriptions concerned only with enclosed space.

What now of the definition of management? What do Noah Webster and his successors say of this last word?

Management: The *act* or *art* of managing: Control, Direction, Judicious use of means to accomplish an end. Capacity for managing: *executive skill*. The collective body of those who manage or direct an enterprise.

So much then for a brief amalgam of definitions. There is still considerable room for the application of individual personality and styles of operations, and possibly even for the element of experience. Do not, incidentally, become too enamored by the passage of time and the recycling of events. Do not have one experience and repeat it many times. Remember Herman Wouk's warning in *Marjorie Morningstar* when he said, "Nine times out of ten, experience is nothing more than stupidity hardened by habit."

How To Get A Raise

"How to Get a Raise?" This seemingly frivolous question becomes, in fact, crucial to the fundamental understandings of how to manage a financial aid office. The ways of getting a raise are vitally dependent on perceptions. Part of the vagary of the present scene is rooted in the fact that there is no standard formal method of entering the professional group called financial aid administrators. Other factors, too, militate against a formalized basis of evaluation which is the most common means of determining a scale for equitable degrees of compensation. Yet some of these same vagaries that have limited salary levels also provide for the development of management techniques which can lead to the standards of evaluation.

The routine of definitions was not self-indulgence nor an attempt to impress the reader. Rather it was designed to suggest that if a financial aid administrator and his superior do not share, mutually and simultaneously, the identical (not similar) definitions of duties and responsibilities, then prospects are indeed gloomy for any kind of effective working relationship — or for increasing the aid administrator's remuneration. Uncertainties will multiply about roles in the institutional hierarchy, and the possibilities will increase for arbitrary, if not capricious or whimsical, compensation scales. What I am stressing here is a need for congruity in perceptions on the part of everyone involved.

Don't be afraid to ask questions of yourself, and be prepared to settle for incomplete — but not “wrong” — answers sometimes. It is both interesting and useful to reverse roles and perspectives. If you were one of those to whom you report, what would you expect of your financial aid officer? And the answer to this question — seen from every side — holds the key to successful financial aid office management.

Financial aid officers, like most managers, find themselves on the horns of a familiar dilemma — to do what is urgent or to do what is desirable? How to spread too little money among too many people, and do so while encumbered by external forms, formal routines, and arcane rituals; or alternatively, how to achieve that level of professional performance recognized as one which clearly makes major and frequent contributions to the viability of your institution?

My advice? Hang up your red suspenders and put away the fireman's hose for a minute. Take time, even if you have to steal it from firefighting and invest it in fire prevention. Often, of course, it is frustratingly easier to talk about change than it is to affect it. But that is the way it is with management — it is easier to talk about it than to do it with recognized success.

While you are wondering about what is expected of you, you can start to act on your own expectations of yourself. You don't expect to be manipulated continually and serially do you? If not, you can begin by examining what occupies your time. In a simplistic way — if you do not know how you spend your typical day, chart it for yourself. You may be surprised to find the most time consuming activity contributes little to your objective. You and I frequently fail to recognize the opportunities to routinize our work even when routine becomes most of our work. A word of caution — I am not suggesting that you are not working as hard or as diligently as you can. I am asking you to ask yourself if you can do things differently in order to make the time to do other things. In your role as a supervisor, or if you were a supervisor, would you be willing to pay more each year for the same level and quality of performance simply in recognition of calendar progression?

Many may conclude that the principal expectation held for you is “problem-free distribution of financial aid”. No one wants more problems, least of all senior administrators in colleges and universities. Others of you may be held to the expectation of reducing outstanding loan repayment amounts — the newest form of college level juvenile delinquency. Yet others may be charged with filling classrooms or, even less nobly, with filling dormitories. Still others may come under more random and less well defined expectations.

Take another look at your job description; if you don't have one, write one. As you reconsider the statement of duties, spend more time on what is expected as the result of your work than on the technical aspects of your assignment. The needed element in this review process is the description of the value of your actions to the students and the institution you serve.

Once the revision has been accomplished, the next step calls for approval and endorsement. Before moving along the administrative ladder, check the reactions to your ideas of those whose work impinges on yours. If there are disagreements or ambiguities, try to get them resolved. If there can't be a

satisfactory resolution, indicate that discrepancies exist on your level of administration, and do so without prejudice. For example, if you and the Business Officer do not agree completely about the functions of your job, just indicate that congruity is missing. Someone else will be needed to smooth out the rough spots but at least you tried. While a position description should not be unchangeable, neither should it be unofficially or unilaterally revised.

Components of Good Office Management

The first three steps in good aid office management are:

- (1) be aware of the time being spent on individual functions.
- (2) determine the relative importance and the financial impact of the student aid program.
- (3) examine the expectations you hold for yourself, and seek approval for a full and thoughtfully developed statement of your responsibility and authority.

While each of us may wish for the opportunity to be the first student financial aid administrator on a new campus, most of us will be required to enter an already functioning operation. Look to statements of institutional policy, the principles for student aid, and then note the practices which characterize the actual work. Because there are similarities between policies, principles and practices, it is not uncommon to mistake codified or ritualized practices with broader, more encompassing policies and principles. The distinction between the three P's is important for policies and principles define the area within which you work, and the practices express for the world to see how you try to achieve those goals. Your role will permit you to attempt to influence policy and principles, but it remains your function to set the actual practices which should lead to those ends.

When you described your job, you reflected some of your own goals and aspirations for the office. Deliberately, now set out, in any order initially, the objectives you see for the financial aid office. Make a list of what you want to accomplish in the mature exercise of your professional responsibility.

The next step is to produce in rank order, a priority list and schedule of completion dates of the first three or four items or areas on which you will work to produce the desired changes. Be reasonable and fair to yourself, avoid selecting the three most awesome areas. Select only one or possibly two major areas and pick the others from relatively minor targets. This simply is the technique for positive reinforcement and let's apply the maxim "nothing succeeds like success". Accomplishing goals, even if minor goals, will give you the courage to accept more compelling challenges and to do so with a positive attitude.

Repeat this pattern until you have confronted and coped with each of the targets you have set. Don't worry about running out of work or achieving perfection. As you go through the process you will extend targets and you will find the need to adjust or to amend expectations. Your conscious commitment to the activity is essential because if you are not making progress you are losing ground.

Take another look at your activities. Who, besides yourself, knows of your successes and your frustrations. Because you have an influence on the lives of people, you have an obligation to transmit information beyond entering numbers in well defined boxes on somebody's form. Your reports must include numerical data, but they also should include illustrations and examples of those who are affected by student aid; both those whom you help and those for whom you can not provide assistance.

An annual summary, at least, should go to the administrator to whom you report. You may wish to provide this type of comprehensive review on a semi-annual basis or even more frequently. If you are not required to report on a fixed schedule, you should select times that are related to other institutional events such as trustee meetings, and supply information to your seniors in the administrative chain of command about three weeks before those dates. College presidents and other senior administrators in addition to formal reviews are often asked to make speeches or to provide "ad hoc" statements. Your reports can provide them with the data they can use. Numbers are essential, but people are interested in other people so include the human element.

Your summaries should go to others on whose work your activities impinge, and your reports should reflect the assistance or support you receive from those others. Among these people clearly are: admissions directors, academic deans, registrars, counseling center directors, business officers, alumni office directors, and those who are the sources of your funds. Your reports may form the basis for changes in student recruiting, school-college relations, curriculum plans, class scheduling, office procedures, fund drives, and the like. Take the time to let others know what is happening, so that they may be better informed and your competency made more visible.

In the recent past, the sensitivity of financial aid to the shifts in politics has been made very apparent. Your institution has been invited, if not urged, to communicate with state and federal officials and legislators in the attempt to help determine policy and to influence legislation. If your college has participated in these activities, have you ever communicated the result of legislative action on your students? You should.

Information is a two-way process. To whom do you listen? I am not talking about hidden meanings or divination of the subtleties of language. I am referring to the frank, open, honest exchange of ideas and viewpoints. How much do you know about the way your work and that of your staff is regarded on your campus, particularly by those who are affected by what you do? What is it like to be a student on financial aid on your campus?

To whom do you talk most often and the longest? Pause to picture in your mind those you see and to whom to talk during the day. These will not be the same every day, but there will be a discernible pattern of individuals representing particular functions on the campus. You may wish to keep some sort of a record over a week or so of those faculty and staff you seek out and who seek you out. There is the possibility that you are isolating yourself by limiting your associations on campus.

As an emerging group within education, financial aid administrators, like counselors in schools and colleges in many cases, are victims of others and of themselves. There is a danger in all of us taking ourselves too seriously. Don't feel shattered if you conclude that you are not the most important person on campus. That designation is awesome, and frequently, is a self-awarded accolade for an ulcer on the way to becoming a coronary.

There is the ripple effect in vigorous management activity which compels the recognition of the consequences of our actions, and those sometimes exist long after the fact. Moves that are prompted by a sense of expediency should only be those that occur within a controlled and a well defined locus. Perhaps it is the influence of English common-law, but there is the always attraction of the precedent. The egregious errors of last year or this year may become the rock on which you will be put next year. Your actions will produce results beyond the target of their applications. It is necessary to be aware that today's action, particularly if provoked by expediency or impetuosity, will produce responses, some unexpected, in the future. The consequence of our actions is relentless, so that insofar as possible you should project the extended impact of your deeds. This is not an observation in support of inaction to avoid errors, but it is an exhortation to be aware of the ever expanding ripple your actions produce in the pond of management.

To the statements of some psychologists who maintain that "*anxiety*", in its positive influence, is what makes us get up in the morning, I would add that it is "*hope*" that keeps us from going back to bed early in the day. This hope for success should prompt us to review periodically that which we are doing and to do so with the intent of revising our plans and actions or reaffirming them in the conviction that "it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness".

SUMMARY

Remembering the early definition, I have dwelt on the *act* of management in such terms as to tempt you always to consider the *art* of management. Just as I have eschewed a procedural description of the techniques of administration, I have avoided the directions for "painting by the numbers" in the art of management. A creative individual uses parameters as guides, and makes the rules work for him rather than him working for the rules. You are the artist of the action in financial aid management on your campus. Your work is limited by extra-mural proscriptions and by the situations on-campus, but the techniques of the medium and the selection of hues from the colors in spectrum are yours.

Hidden with the prose were ten admonitions for financial aid office management, and in case you missed them, here they are in summary:

- (1) know the definition of terms and appreciate their limitations.
- (2) understand the distinctions between procedural routines and management functions.
- (3) seek and obtain congruity and mutuality of expectations, both vertically and laterally in the administrative hierarchy.

- (4) planning is preliminary to, and not a substitute for, action.
- (5) delineate and apply the differences between principles, policies, and practices.
- (6) develop priorities and establish a calendar of activities.
- (7) be sensitive to the need both to transmit and to receive information.
- (8) be attuned to stimulus and response patterns, both immediate and delayed.
- (9) review actions and plans and be prepared to revise or reaffirm.
- (10) even within restraints, be aware of the opportunity for creative management through conscious actions.

In the words of another, I end with hope that:

The road rise up in front of you
The wind be always at your back
That God hold you in the palm of His hand and
That your soul be in heaven 30 minutes before the
Devil knows you're dead.

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