

12-1-1979

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### Recommended Citation

Johnson, Ronald W. and Frambs, Geraldyn (1979) "Financial Aid Office: Counseling and Outreach," *Journal of Student Financial Aid*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 3 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/jsfa/vol9/iss3/5>

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# FINANCIAL AID OFFICE: COUNSELING AND OUTREACH

by Ronald W. Johnson and Geraldine Frambs

One stock-in-trade of *The Journal of Student Financial Aid* is to share, among student aid practitioners, ideas that work for improving the state of the art. This article describes financial aid counseling and outreach programs at the University of California, Davis. Time-proven additions to its Financial Aid Office, such as student interns, drop-in counseling, and the hotline, are offered to aid administrators who are interested in shopping for innovative "software." These and other ancillary programs are included in the UC Davis Financial Aid Office's total student support effort.

At UC Davis, eight full-time financial aid counselors advise about 6,500 single and married undergraduate, graduate, and professional students. The counseling program recognizes financial need as inevitably bound to educational and vocational plans, and often to health or adjustment concerns. It also recognizes that scant information, or worse, misinformation, is a formidable obstruction to higher education.

For this reason, the Financial Aid Office established an intensive outreach program with two objectives. The first objective was to provide information regarding financial aid to the largest possible audience within the student community. The second goal was to provide financial aid information to prospective college-bound students. This proved to be an important thrust because, historically, a large percentage of secondary schools lacked not only finances but the knowledge required to obtain educational funds. This barrier to higher education is being eroded now due to intensified efforts to disseminate current and detailed financial aid information.



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Ronald Johnson is the Assistant Director of Financial Aid at the University of California, Davis, with responsibility for all counseling and outreach services. In addition, he currently is serving as an instructor for the National Student Financial Aid Training Project and is a current recipient of a University of California Management Fellowship for 1979.

Other factors have further defined the University's Outreach Program goals. Student affirmative action has evolved during the last several years to direct information not only to low-income students but to other under-represented students, such as the physically disabled. Also, student consumer information legislation requires institutions to distribute information regarding financial aid admissions, placement, income of graduates, faculty and facilities in much more detail than before.

#### *Organization and Administration*

The Financial Aid Office's programs of information access and outreach are divided into two components which are headed by the Assistant Director for Counseling. The first component is geared to the needs of currently enrolled students. Some of the services which will be discussed in greater detail include intake interviewing, student interns, drop-in counseling, counseling by appointment, telephone reception and back-up.

The second component is a mixture of information dissemination, aimed at both currently enrolled and potential students, and of outreach activities. These services include, financial aid application workshops, a *weekly Cal Aggie* financial aid column, a financial aid newsletter (quarterly), workshops for University special interest groups (i.e., Admissions, Peer Advising, Counseling Center, Ethnic Student Communities), Summer Advising and Registration Conferences, and financial aid classes for University employees. Efforts within this component also include workshops for high schools and college counselors, a special transitional enrichment program, summer residential programs, visitations to high schools and community colleges, admission recruitment trips, and "Preview Day" which is sponsored by Advising Services.

#### *Counseling Services*

Counseling Services designed for enrolled students are termed "in-house services", and strive to provide immediate attention to problems and questions students have regarding financial aid and the processes involved. There was a time when students experienced a great deal of frustration because their concerns were not responded to in a timely fashion. The advent of an intake interviewer process, a student intern program, and a drop-in counseling program, in addition to our traditional counseling services, has made the Financial Aid Office more responsive to students.

*Intake Interviewer:* The major responsibilities of the Intake Interviewer are the operation of a reception area, the selection, training, and supervision of student interns, and the counseling of students and parents regarding financial aid. This interviewer has the responsibility, on occasion, for the first personal contact with students, parents, and staff who come to the Financial Aid Office, and for referring individuals to other offices on campus. The Intake Interviewer also answers general questions so that counselors' time is reserved for more complex student problems. The efficiency of counseling and information dissemination has increased remarkably through the use of this process.

*Student Interns:* The current student intern program is composed of three distinct groups: student intake interviewers, student peer-counselors, and

student hot-line personnel. All interns are selected, trained, and employed under the supervision of the Intake Interviewer. Forty hours of financial aid training is scheduled, which includes fifteen hours of selected reading and twenty-five hours with staff in all the Financial Aid Office units. These units include Counseling, Need Analysis, Student Records, Computer Information Systems, and the Student Aid Business Office.

Periodically, a one to two-hour meeting is scheduled with each student intern so that the Intake Interviewer can review information which has been learned by the intern. When the intern has demonstrated satisfactory understanding of financial aid office procedures, s/he begins advising students in the reception area under the observation of the Intake Interviewer. The intern is evaluated for articulation of information, response to inquiries, and ease with students. Helpful information and guidance goes along with this evaluation. Once the Intake Interviewer and student intern mutually agree that a level of confidence has been reached, the intern assumes advising duties at the Reception Desk. Subsequent to the training period, weekly meetings are conducted with the Student Interns to update information and review progress.

The student intake interviewer position was developed four years ago and has now expanded to five students who work between six to eighteen hours a week each. Four of the five student interns are liaisons with the ethnic centers and maintain regular contact with their respective ethnic centers. The balance of their time is spent at the Reception Desk. The Student Interns also assist other processing units during peak work-load periods.

The Hot-Line Program was initiated and promoted four years ago to offer additional service to students each working day between 8 a.m. and 10 p.m. Students may call and be assured of an answer to their questions within 48 hours. The Hot-line student intern is often able to answer questions immediately due to his/her access to student files. Students who are frequently unavailable during the day (due to classes, etc.), are contacted by the student intern during the evening to relay messages. The hot-line telephone, which is located in the file room, also makes the hot-line personnel available for special projects which require pulling folders and filing documents. The hot-line service is staffed essentially with student interns. The one problem that arises is absences due to exams and illnesses, etc. It is necessary, therefore, to provide auxiliary interns within an hour's notice.

The latest expansion of the student intern program was the development of peer counseling in the four major dorm areas on campus. Five students were selected — one coordinator and four peer-counselors — each residing in his/her own dormitory facility. Schedules are devised that provide nine hours of peer counseling a week for each peer counselor. The student coordinator passes messages, disperses materials, and acts as a back-up for the other student interns as necessary.

All peer counselors, along with the student interns, spend an hour a week with the Intake Interviewer in the Financial Aid Office. Questions are resolved, problems aired, changes made, and assignments given during this time. Flexibility is the key during developmental stages of a dormitory

peer-counseling program. The student peer counselors are encouraged to assess the needs of their dorm mates and to make suggestions regarding their own responsibilities. The students are given the latitude to develop their position under guidance of the Intake Interviewer.

The goals and objectives for all interns are identical. They must have a thorough understanding of procedures ranging from completing applications to receiving financial aid disbursements. Interns have access to student files for interpretation of need analyses. They are expected to know the processing timeline and to advise students of documentation and appeal processes. All interns are cross-trained so they can act as a substitute for other interns in the event of absences due to illness or academic conflicts.

*Drop-In-Counseling:* The purposes of this program are to provide an alternative for students in immediate need of counseling, to provide an auxiliary counseling service for those students encumbered with heavy course schedules and family responsibilities, to serve as a back-up to the Intake Interviewer, and to quicken responsiveness to student needs.

This segment of our counseling program differs from regular counseling in that on Tuesdays and Fridays students need not schedule an appointment to see a counselor. A student may come into the reception area and "sign-up." This results in an average waiting time of ten to fifteen minutes. The arrangement is extremely helpful to students whose classroom or work schedule prevents them from making a regular appointment. Because of direct access to counselors, many situations have been resolved before becoming problems.

In order to reduce stress encountered by students at the opening of a quarter, all counselors are seen on a drop-in basis. It is during this two-week period that students undergo various levels of trauma due to registration, new classes, and academic assignments. The ability to answer questions pertaining to financial aid immediately removes an excessively large burden from the students' shoulders. Thus, they are more capable of focusing on academic concerns.

*Counseling by Appointment:* Counseling by appointment is a confirmed meeting between student and counselor. In the majority of cases, students can schedule an appointment and see the counselor within the same week, sometimes the next day.

The counseling staff, as well as the Financial Aid Office, considers their primary function to be providing guidance and assistance to students in resolving their financial problems so that they can accomplish their educational goals. Counselors recognize that financial aid issues are not simply fiscal in character. They involve students in deeply personal ways, touching questions of value, reality, and purpose. Such concerns as these imply that the institution's financial responsibility to the student is also of a personal nature. Operating within the Student Services framework, the Financial Aid Office has assisted in shaping the quality of student life. All financial aid counseling staff are knowledgeable about student life, housing, commuting, health, academic problems, and general morale. The counseling staff is fully aware of other counseling and supportive resources for students

within the University. In addition, we have developed the kind of staff relationship that facilitates referral to such services.

Counseling must be flexible and must consider the individual differences of students. Students from the poorest economic circumstances may have great resistance to borrowing substantial sums for future gains. The concept of "investing" for later benefits is something one learns and one needs to be taught. For example, our office uses the packaging concept for students which consists of partial repayable aid and partial gift aid. A desire to earn one's way may be unrealistic or even self-defeating in the case of students who need remedial help in basic educational skills. In addition, a student's field of study and career aspirations may require an abstract or unique approach to the financing of his or her education.

*Telephone Receptionist:* Both on-going and prospective students usually make their first contact with the Financial Aid Office by telephone. It is during this initial exchange that students' and parents' perceptions are formed about the Financial Aid Office and the University. Hence, the individual in this capacity must be courteous, patient and must have adequate knowledge of the financial aid operation and its support services should referral be necessary.

#### *Outreach Services*

The Financial Aid Outreach Services seek to motivate students to apply for assistance and educate them to the financial aid and scholarship opportunities available.

*Financial Aid Application Workshops:* Financial Aid workshops to explain application procedures are held by counselors in such locations as the Memorial Union, residence halls, ethnic centers, and in the graduate and professional schools. These sessions provide information and assistance in completing applications and offer opportunities to announce deadlines. Criteria used to determine financial need, and current information about new changes in aid programs are also reviewed during these workshops.

*Cal Aggie Financial Aid Column:* A weekly column which answers commonly asked questions by students was established during the academic year 1976/77. This has resulted in a useful tool for students, reducing the number of visits and/or telephone calls to the Financial Aid Office. This information column appears every Wednesday and is also used by other University staff who interface with student.

*Financial Aid Quarterly Newsletter:* This newsletter is distributed with students' financial aid checks at the beginning of each quarter. It contains information on unit enrollment requirements and other pertinent data on students' rights, responsibilities and obligations. This is a very effective document which allows our office to communicate, in writing, important subject matters to students once each quarter.

*Workshops for University Special Interests Groups:* These workshops provide up-to-date information concerning financial aid operations and procedures to Admissions, the Counseling Center, ethnic communities, etc. In addition to providing accurate information, the workshops promote interaction between the above support services and students. The advantage of these workshops is the expansion of our communication to students.

*Summer Advising and Registration Conference (SARC):* The Financial Aid Office participates in ten SARC's during the months of July and August. Both students and parents receive an intensive three-day orientation to the Davis campus, including the opportunity to register in advance (these are incoming students in September). During this conference, counselors speak to parents about the financial aid process, payment of fees, and disbursement of financial aid. This is one of the few times parents have the opportunity to confer with financial aid staff on this subject; hence, all of these sessions are well attended.

*Workshops for High School and Community College Counselors:* The purpose of these conferences is for the High School and Community College counselors to interact and identify University support staff for potential applicants among their students. During these workshops, current information is presented on financial aid policy and procedures. The counselors appreciate the opportunity to clarify procedures and requirements.

*Special Transitional Enrichment Program (STEP):* This program provides academic and counseling support for incoming special action EOP students. Many of these students are from low-income and minority backgrounds and have academic skill problems. During a four-week summer program structured to strengthen their academic skills, they also receive orientation on financial aid and the management of those resources during the academic year. Students in this program receive a small financial stipend and housing in the dormitories. STEP students also participate in the Summer Advising and Registration Conference during this four-week period.

*Summer Residential Programs:* The goal of the summer residential programs is to motivate low-income and/or minority students to attend the University. Information concerning admissions requirements, financial aid, academic opportunities, and general college life is provided within the context of a residential week on campus. Summer residential programs are sponsored by the Colleges of Agriculture, Letters and Science, and Engineering. The activities scheduled during each residential week are similar for all three programs. Discussions concerning admissions requirements and financial aid continue throughout the week, both in informal settings with college student advisors and group workshops.

*University Outreach:* The general format for recruiting is the school visitation program, which is coordinated with the Office of Relations with Schools. The purpose of the Financial Aid Office's participation is to provide firsthand information on the Financial Aid Application process. This involvement is highly beneficial to the recruiting staff because their audience receives answers to technical questions on the spot.

*On-Campus High School Visits by Prospective Students:* During campus visitation to UC Davis, students are provided with a comprehensive orientation of admissions requirements, financial aid application procedures, and sources of funds. These seminars are important because they stimulate planning and preparation on the part of prospective students.

*Financial Aid Class:* This is a class developed by the Financial Aid Office in conjunction with the University Employee Development Program admini-

stered by the University Personnel Office. The objective of this class is to acquaint interested University personnel with Financial Aid Office policies and procedures. This nine-hour class is conducted by financial aid personnel.

In addition to all of the above avenues utilized to disseminate financial aid information, UC Davis has a wide range of student aid publications developed for continuing and prospective students and their parents. The UC Davis Financial Aid Office received the first place award in the 1977 Communications Awards Program, which was sponsored nationally by the College Entrance Examination Board and Aetna Life and Casualty Insurance Company. Through the development of attractive and readable publications, a broader audience has been educated regarding alternatives in financing their education at UC Davis. Much energy has been directed to these programs, resulting in students having a better understanding of a very complex process and a heightened awareness of financial aid and their responsibilities as recipients.