2014-2015
EFFICIENCY & EFFECTIVENESS
PROGRAM OFFICE

Final Report: Office of Financial Aid, Florida A&M University

Submitted by Dr. Carl Starling
February 16, 2015
Report Objectives and Scope

The objective of this project was to conduct and in-depth evaluation of the Office of Financial Aid at Florida A&M University, in an attempt to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the processes and procedures. This will be accomplished through administrative streamlining, while positively impacting customer service and overall student satisfaction. Techniques of the Bacharach Leadership Group (BLG) Grounded Change Model were used during this exercise. See exhibit #1. The primary focus was on the processes and procedures, which directly affected the disbursement of student financial aid, from beginning to end. (Note: Elements outside the scope such as determining whether the University timely and accurately completes reconciliations related to the Title IV Programs were not considered.)

Process Beginning:

The process began by contacting Lisa Stewart, Director of the Financial Aid Department to provide a brief background of the Efficiency & Effectiveness Program Office. A meeting was requested to discuss plans to evaluate the financial aid department. The meeting was held in Mrs. Stewart’s office and was attended by attorney Linda Barge Miles, Ivy Wilcox the associate director of financial aid and myself.

Project Goals

Goal 1

- Map the Financial Aid disbursement process from the time the student completes the free application for federal student aid (FASFA) to the time they receive all eligible financial aid, including any eligible refunds. To identify the core opportunities for improvements and determine inefficiencies that can be eliminated which would enhance the process. See exhibit #4, the mapping process steps and exhibit #5 a flowchart of the mapping process

Goal 2
Interview all employees of the financial aid department, including leadership, to assess the workforce to determine the following:

a. If there is a sufficient number of employees to carry out the mission.
b. If existing personnel are being utilized based on their experience and education.
c. The level of employee satisfaction.
d. Themes or patterns that occur from questions presented to each employee. See exhibit #3.

Goal 3

Evaluate the processes and provide recommendations that can be implemented immediately, short term and long term. Provide recommendations that improve efficiency, increase student satisfaction, and increase enrollment.

Actions Taken Outside of the Financial Aid Department

- On site meeting with the Director of Financial Aid at Tallahassee Community College, Bill Spiers.
- On site meeting with key staff of the Financial Aid Department at Florida State University.
- Attended the Federal Student Aid FSA Training conference held Dec. 2 – Dec. 5, 2014 Georgia World Congress Center Atlanta, Georgia.
- Attended meetings with other departments at FAMU that impact the financial aid process, such as the Enterprise Information Technology department, Student Accounts, Registrar’s Office, and Admissions.
- Interviewed Barry Wells of EIT, Gerald Adams EIT consultant whom worked directly with the Financial Aid department, and Carl Threatt of the Audit and Compliance department whom discussed the current audit of the Financial Aid Department. Consulted with Michael James, Interim Associate Vice President of Information Technology/CIO.
- Several telephone conversations with Mr. Lee Melvin, Vice Provost for Enrollment Management at the University of Buffalo.
- Although a FAMU customer service survey existed on the Financial Aid department’s website the results were not being monitored and the survey was not easily accessible. A new survey was developed that provided easier access. The
survey utilized the use of the QR code which allowed students the ability to use their cellular phone to scan the QR code and take the survey. A flyer was created for marketing purposes. The survey flyer was placed on the FAMU face book page and distributed in strategic locations around campus. See exhibit #2.

**Summary of Key Findings**

- The financial aid disbursement process is an automated system that begins when the student submits the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASFA). This information is converted into a record called Institutional Student Information Record (ISIR) and made available to FAMU from ED Connect (Department of Education). ISIR is moved from ED Connect to Core File Transfer Protocol (FTP) server at FAMU. ISIRs are moved from Core FTP server to PeopleSoft staging table. A daily process is run to load the ISIRs from the staging table. This process is done by one person, if the person is unavailable or absent, data is not extracted and the process is halted.

- The awarding process is done almost completely within the PeopleSoft system. This is a complex process that covers many steps depending on whether the student is selected for Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP), being selected for Verification, the types of financial aid being offered such as grants, loans, or scholarships.

- Employees stated their current computers are old and outdated, which makes performing their duties more difficult.

- The most glaring observation and negative consequence discovered in this process was the component involving the relationship between the Enterprise Information Technology department and the Financial Aid department. Out of approximately twenty individuals interviewed 80% of those individuals stated the major problem that causes delays within the disbursement process was because of IT related issues involving the PeopleSoft system.

  - Each year updates and changes occur within the hosting system PeopleSoft called bundles that must be programmed into the system by EIT. The financial aid department has stated that the bundles are sometimes updated late, which causes the process to be delayed from the beginning.
  - Not having a qualified IT person that works within the financial aid department that can resolve the complex IT related issues.
    - Issues such as trouble shooting errors
    - Programming PeopleSoft bundle updates
    - Writing new programs for batch processing
    - Creating reports and dynamic Structured Query Language (SQL)
• An IT position has been developed and advertised specifically for the financial aid department to address these concerns

**Personnel Concerns:**

• Although all but two financial aid positions are filled, it appears that additional employees are needed.
  o The assistant director of financial aid, Carita Evans is in charge of scholarships, however the area appears to be understaffed.
  o Many key functions in the disbursement process are only done by one individual, which causes problems in keeping the process moving.
  o Management stated additional financial aid counselors are needed to assist students, because currently they have to stop what they are doing to work at the customer service window.

• Many employees feel their full potential is not being utilized and desire to be cross-trained to better serve the students. Because of the lack of cross-training, the process is slowed or delayed. Areas are inadequately staffed with insufficient backup when individuals are out of the office. This also delays or stops the process until the individual returns.
  o The financial aid department has stressed the need for an in house IT person; however, it appears there is a person currently working within the financial aid department that possess the education, skills and abilities, and the desire to become that needed IT person. Ennis Brinson a Coordinator within the FA department has been working with the FAMU IT department on PeopleSoft related issues. Mr. Brinson has a vast knowledge of the PeopleSoft system and the Financial Aid module. He also has experience in troubleshooting issues in the production environment, a key area of concern for the Financial Aid department.

• The majority of the financial aid department displayed a true passion and the willingness to timely award all students.

**Challenges during the project:**

• Although management has been very receptive of the project in terms of access to their department and staff, requested information has been delayed or not provided.
• The primary task of the Efficiency & Effectiveness office was to map the existing financial disbursement process from beginning to end; however, no written documentation of the existing process was provide by management.
• When asked for written policies and procedure of the existing disbursement process, it was stated that policies and procedures do exist; however, none were provided.

Recommendations:

1. The financial aid processes should be redesigned. Functions with one person performing should have built redundancy. If a person is unavailable the system should automatically route to another individual. Employees should be cross-trained.

2. All processes that can be automated should be changed within PeopleSoft, including, the awarding process for the summer semester, processing of scholarships and the current student work study process.

3. A meeting with Lisa Stewart, William Hudson, Michael James, Gerald Adams, Linda Barge Miles, and myself to agree, on the processes that needs to be automated, priorities those selections, and agree on the funding source to implement the changes.

4. A monitoring system of the process needs to be developed that provides weekly statistics. How many students have been awarded, how many students are pending verification, how many students have been selected for Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP), how many scholarships have been awarded, how many student’s financial aid have been disbursed? Etc.

5. When students return requested verification documents it should be processed immediately. It was stated that sometimes information is not processed for days. Employees should be provided measurable goals such as quotas to determine the efficiency of work that’s being performed.

6. Students selected for verification should be contacted several times reminding them of what is needed. New methods of contacting students other than email must be developed to obtain a greater response. Although a To Do List is provided, the financial aid office must be proactive in contacting students that have been selected for verification and provide all necessary assistance in helping students obtain information in a timely manner.

7. The financial aid office should hire an IT candidate that has experience working in a financial aid environment that has the appropriate PeopleSoft experience.

8. Financial aid employees must be provided regular training in regards to changes in federal regulations.

9. Instructors must be held accountable for failing to provide accurate and timely attendance reporting.
10. The financial aid department should develop an electronic version of a Financial Aid Policy and Procedure Manual. The financial aid department should also develop for each position description, a desk manual of the day to day procedures of each position.

11. The financial aid survey should be placed within iRattler and accessible when the financial aid portal is opened.
The diagram below is an overview of the process and the implementation timeline of the streamlining process, using the Bacharach Grounded Change Model. With this model, the projects are based on input received from surveys of faculty, staff, and students. This model also focuses on the importance of using those same constituent groups to recommend and implement needed change.

**Exhibit #1**
Exhibit #2

Florida A&M University
Efficiency and Effectiveness Program Office

How Are We Doing?

Use the QR Code
Take the Financial Aid Survey

Questions?
Please contact the Efficiency and Effectiveness Program Office @ 850/599.8210

Powered by the Office of University Assessment
Exhibit #3


Exhibit #4 Written Mapping Process

Florida A&M University’s Financial Aid Process and procedure duties:

1. Free application for federal student aid (FASFA) completed via web and Institutional student information record (ISIR) created (student task)

2. ISIR & Common Origination disbursement files (COD) is transmitted from FAFSA to ED Connect (Dept. of Ed task)

3. ISIRs & Common Origination disbursement files (COD) are moved from ED Connect to Core File Transfer Protocol (FTP) server at FAMU (D. Conner task)

4. ISIRs are moved from Core FTP server to PeopleSoft staging table (D. Conner task)

5. _____ job runs daily to load ISIRs from staging table (D. Conner, process in PeopleSoft)
   a. *Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) needs to be processed at this point “sap display run”* (Lisa or Ivy task)

6. Financial Aid Status page is created systematically

7. Financial Aid (FA) Term built systematically (I. Wilcox)

8. Budget built systematically (I. Wilcox)

9. Checklists are built manually on a daily basis (E. Brinson task)
   a. (Student aid report comment) SARC
   b. Verification

10. NOT SELECTED FOR VERIFICATION:

11. Status on financial aid status page updated to “ready for packaging” (I. Wilcox task)

12. Mass packaging will award manually on a weekly basis (I. Wilcox task)

13. Based on offer, student may need to complete:
   a. Master promissory note (MPN)
   b. Loan entrance counseling form (LECF)
   c. Parent loan for undergraduate students (PLUS)/Grad PLUS
14. Award notification sent via communication generation manually on a weekly basis (E. Brinson task)

15. SELECTED FOR VERIFICATION:

16. Submit required documents (student task)
   a. Dependent verification worksheet (DVWS)
   b. Independent verification worksheet (IVWS)
   c. IRS tax transcript
   d. Citizenship, Social security, national student loan database (Citz/ss/nslds)

17. Verification documents are processed in date order (E. Agboola, R. Edwards, E. Brinson task)

18. Correct ISIR records page is updated (E. Agboola, R. Edwards, E. Brinson task)

19. Verification completed (E. Agboola, R. Edwards, E. Brinson task)

20. Status on Correct ISIR records page is updated to “send” (E. Agboola, R. Edwards, E. Brinson task)

21. ISIR correction outbound process occurs (D. Conner task)

22. Status on financial aid status page changes to “sent” (systematic)

23. ISIR correction files are moved from Core FTP to ED Connect to Common origination and disbursement (COD) (D. Conner task)

24. COD sends correction files to ED Connect mailbox

25. Financial Aid status page updated to “accepted” (systematic)

26. Mass packaging occurs manually on a weekly basis (I. Wilcox task)

27. Student review/accept/decline awards
   a. Federal Direct Stafford Loan (FDSL) – MPN, LECF, - studentloans.gov
   b. PLUS – approved – MPN
      i. Denied – credit override/endorser
      ii. Alternative loan
      iii. Additional unsubsidized loan – FAMU Loan request form (LNRF)
c. GradPLUS – approved – MPN
   i. Denied – credit override/endorser
   ii. Alternative loan

28. PLUS report generated (B. Colson task)
29. Ability to benefit (ATB) processed (M. Smith task)
30. Loan origination batch process (M. Smith task)
31. Loan outbound process moved files to Core FTP (M. Smith task)
32. Files are transmitted to COD (D. Conner task)
33. Loan files received from COD via Ed Connect mailbox (D. Conner task)
34. Files moved from ED Connect to Core FTP (D. Conner task)
35. Files are inbound from Core FTP to PeopleSoft (D. Conner task)
36. Manage Direct Loan page updated (D. Conner task)
37. Authorization processed (I. Wilcox task)
38. Authorization failure report (I. Wilcox task)
39. Authorization errors corrected (staff task) (processing team)
40. Disburse financial aid to Student financial services (SFS) (I. Wilcox task)
41. Outbound process for PELL disbursements (D. Conner task)
42. Inbound process for PELL disbursements (D. Conner task)
Exhibit #5 Flowchart of Mapping Process