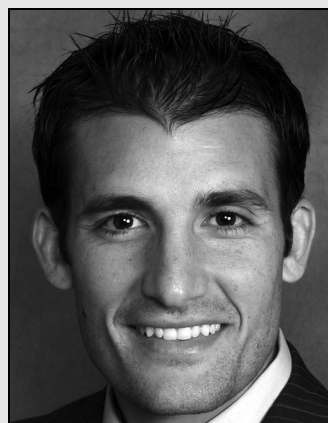


The Major Role of Financial Aid Guidance During the Enrollment Process

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Among the many responsibilities that a university's financial aid department might have is educating students about their options for paying tuition. In a study conducted by the researcher that aimed to learn more about why an admitted student decides not to enroll, five of the six participants expressed issues with some aspect of the university's financial aid process, and four of the six participants cited some level of financial aid dissatisfaction during their experience within the university's admission process.



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One of the three major themes revealed during the researchers study was the important role of financial aid guidance during the enrollment process. Three current trends that potentially indicate the number of prospective students relying on a university's financial aid guidance with their academic tuition and costs will rise in the future include the following (a) the increasing cost of a college education within the United States, (b) the rise in postsecondary enrollment rates, and (c) the increasing demand for financial aid by postsecondary undergraduates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015a), the cost of a college education rose 25% at private, nonprofit institutions between 2003–2004 and 2013–2014. Furthermore, student enrollment at degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased 20% between these years as well (2015b). Not only did both of these indicators rise, but also the percentage of first-time degree/certificate seeking undergraduates at 4-year institutions requesting financial aid. The National Center for Education Statistics (2015c) noted this figure increased 5% between the academic years of 2008–8 and 2012–2013.

Two of the primary sources of a prospective student's financial aid information should be from the office of Federal Student Aid and the financial aid department at the university they are interested in attending. Both of these financial aid

resources, one directly managed by the federal government and the other by university personnel, can have a significant impact on a prospective student's enrollment experience. Both entities are the two most trusted and reliable sources for a student's financial aid services. The role of a university's financial aid services will not only increase due to the trends reflecting possible increases in the needs of prospective students, but it will also expand its already significant role in helping educate and provide prospective students with accurate and timely financial aid assistance.

Regardless of whether or not prospective students believe they qualify for financial aid, they should still consider completing a Free Application for Student Financial Aid (FASFA) because it may be an existing eligibility requirement for certain scholarships at various schools (FASFA, 2016). Moreover, the reason why prospective students decide not to complete their FASFA can simply be irrelevant or inaccurate. The FASFA (2016) website highlights several of the most common misconceptions by prospective students about its eligibility requirements, which include the following: (a) the applicant's age (b) the applicant's family income, and (c) the applicant's prior academic success or grade point average. It is essential for prospective students to rely on factual information regarding their financial aid eligibility because it can alter their academic path tremendously. For example, if prospective students believe they are ineligible for financial aid assistance, it can likely influence important decisions such as (a) what college they decide to apply to or attend, (b) how many classes they enroll in, (c) which semester they begin enrollment, and (d) what certificate or degree they can afford to pursue. Therefore, it can be extremely valuable for prospective students to be aware of legitimate FASFA eligibility requirements in order to reduce the likelihood of making a poor decision that

alters their academic path and is based on false information.

The FASFA website not only provides prospective students with accurate eligibility requirements and the ability to submit their application online, it also offers the opportunity to learn a great deal more about the college search process, key financial definitions, college cost comparison guides, and much more college-related preparatory information. Available advice that can be found on the FASFA website ranges from how an elementary student can begin preparing for college to a university's scorecard, which compares current information about a college's graduation rates, annual estimated tuition, and average earnings of its graduates. The FASFA website should be among a prospective student's most reliable and trustworthy sources because it is an office of the U.S. Department of Education and the provider of over \$150 billion in federal aid to students.

Although the FASFA website should be among a prospective student's primary sources of financial aid information, it encourages its website visitors to learn more about the financial aid process by contacting the financial aid office at the schools they are interested in attending. Moreover, there are many prospective students who begin the process of financially planning to attend college by either reviewing literature provided to them by a college or through some other form of communication with a college's financial aid office. Therefore, prospective students are not only encouraged to trust, but also to rely on a university's financial aid office for financial aid guidance and pertinent FASFA-related information such as key application deadline dates.

Universities that are interested in exploring why an admitted student fails to enroll might likely want to consider measuring a prospective student's level of satisfaction within key enrollment stages, such as a student's experience with its finan-

cial aid office. In a recent study conducted by the writer exploring why an admitted student failed to enroll, several of the participants did in fact discuss their experience within a university's financial aid office and, for some of the study's participants, their experiences did influence their decision not to enroll.

Five of the six participants in the researcher's study expressed issues with some aspect of the university's financial aid process. Specifically, two of the participants attributed their failure to enroll to a financial aid "roadblock" they experienced or the "lack of financial aid information" (Hudnett, 2015). When Participant 1 was asked to describe what led her to never enroll at the university, she stated that the "financial part was the main reason." Although the first participant also found the university's tuition to be "too expensive," she also stated that "financial aid could have helped me create a better road map to pay for the degree," and "I would have liked to have gotten assigned to a financial aid person to help me with this." The second participant stated during her interview that she "was a bit confused about how to figure out the financial aid process." The third participant referenced several issues addressing the topic of financial aid with the university that included a few of the following statements: (a) the "financial aid side was confusing"; (b) "financial aid was a roadblock"; (c) it was a "headache trying to figure out how to pay for classes"; and (d) "I got fed up with trying to figure the financial aid process." The fourth participant had no issue with the financial aid process; however, it was never successfully communicated to her that she was admitted to the university. The fifth participant stated that she encountered a "halt in her financial aid process and many questions never got answered." Moreover, when the fifth participant was asked what were some of her unanswered enrollment questions before or after she submitted her application, she

stated that, "I needed to know more about my financial aid hold." The final participant, Participant 6, did in fact enroll, but quickly dropped her course and was billed for the class, which she did not complete. She is still disputing the charges. Furthermore, when asked to describe her reason for not enrolling, in her case re-enrolling for her first class that she did not complete, she stated that it's due to the lack of financial aid "available funds" (Hudnett, 2015).

Four of the participants cited some level of financial aid dissatisfaction during their experience in the university's admission process in addition to further describing this as one of the primary reasons why they never enrolled. A university's financial aid department can have many responsibilities; however, among the most important is providing current and prospective students with accurate financial aid information. One of the emerging themes that resulted from a recent study by Ziskin, Fischer, Torres, Pellicciotti, and Player-Sanders (2014), which focused on the perception college students have on how they will pay for their college tuition, was that the majority of its participants felt anxious and uncertain about their entire financial aid process. Moreover, the students' negative feelings were primarily due to lack of clarity and information about the university's financial aid processes. Similar to Ziskin et al.'s findings, many of the participants in this study expressed the need for more complete and accurate financial aid information and guidance (Hudnett, 2015).

The second participant, who eventually enrolled at the university, attributes doing so to eventually getting the answers to her outstanding questions, several on the topic of her financial aid. The fourth participant, one of the two participants who enrolled at a different university, never knew she was admitted and, therefore, did not have any difficulty with the financial aid process. The importance for financial aid is a combination of the first interpretation that a

need exists for a personalized experience, relevant to a student's financial aid. The second interpretation is that a breakdown in communication occurred at some point between the participant and the university's financial aid process, which led to a failure to enroll (Hudnett, 2015).

Prospective students, along with many other students, who are anticipating the use of federal loans to pay for their college tuition expenses will very likely receive information or establish some level of communication with a university's financial aid office. The success of a university's communication with its prospective admitted students relative to each of their personal financial aid needs can likely determine if they in fact enroll. The research findings revealed in this study indicated that the majority of the study's participants who failed to enroll expressed issues with some aspect of the university's financial aid process and cited some level of financial aid dissatisfaction during the process.

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