2015 Non-Academic Department Review
Department of Financial Aid

Objectives
The Department of Financial Aid (FA) supports the college’s mission, goals and objectives by providing students and their families with access to financial aid resources to fund their education. FA administers federal, state, veterans, institutional and private aid programs for the college. FA supports the institution’s eligibility to participate in federal and state financial aid programs by maintaining compliance with program regulations and collaborating with other areas in the college to ensure institutional compliance.

Short-Term Goals for Prior Year (2014-2015):
• Purchase and implement scholarship application and awarding tool
• Create and implement an in-person student loan counseling/personal finance program
• First-stop student center pilot
• Establishment of a schedule to convert paper communication to electronic as appropriate and implementation of the schedule

Long-Term Goals for Prior Year (2014-2015):
• Monitor student service levels and make changes as needed to improve the student experience
• Maintain compliance with federal and state financial aid program regulations
• Leverage technology to increase efficiency of office operations
• Maintain relationships between internal and external stakeholders

Progress
Short-Term Goals:
FA received feedback from students, staff and the CLC Foundation about the limitations of the current scholarship awarding process: 1) students were restricted to choosing only 5 scholarships to which they could apply, 2) awards were not made in a timely manner, 3) scholarships were left unawarded due to lack of qualified applicants, and 4) the application, selection and awarding process was manual and inefficient. To address these issues, FA evaluated three scholarship software providers and selected AcademicWorks. The benefits of this tool are that it: 1) allows students to apply online, 2) automatically matches students to an unlimited number of awards, 3) provides customizable options for additional selection criteria per donor request, and 4) replaces manual evaluation and notification procedures with online methods. AcademicWorks will satisfactorily address all of the limitations of the prior process and allow FA to award scholarships in a timely, cost-effective manner. The software was purchased in the fall of 2014 and implementation began in winter 2015. AcademicWorks is anticipated to go live in May 2015 for the 2015-2016 scholarship season.

In response to the national outcry against student loan debt and irresponsible borrowing, FA created the “Responsible Borrower” program for students requesting loans to attend the College of Lake County. As part of this program, students need to complete a Responsible Borrower workbook, which includes sections on personal budgeting for school, researching the estimated income of their job after
graduation, and calculating future loan payments based on current debt levels. Students then meet one-on-one with Financial Aid Specialists for a 30 minute appointment to discuss the workbook, as well as the terms of the loan, student borrower responsibilities and consequences of default. So far during the 2014-2015 aid year, 702 students have participated in the program.

In the summer of 2014, FA participated in a “First Stop” student center pilot with Enrollment Services and Career and Placement Services. A location was created for students visiting CLC for the first-time where they could receive answers to questions about admissions, registration, financial and program of study/career options all in one place. During the pilot, Enrollment Services (ES) staff served as the primary point of contact for incoming students. In few occasions was it necessary to consult the FA staff member present, since student questions about financial aid were general in nature and had been answered by ES. As a result of this initiative, it was clear that the “well-trained generalist” staffing model would be a good option for the future enrollment center.

FA sends significant amounts of paper correspondence to students. In the interest of utilizing electronic methods of communication where possible, increasing the timeliness of communication, and reducing the cost of mailing paper correspondence, the FA office evaluated its use of paper communication. The costliest paper communication was the “missing information letter”, which included custom enclosures for each student. Most students would not bring in the forms FA had mailed them and would instead come to the office for assistance. For 2014-2015, a one-page letter was created to advise students that missing information needed to be provided, where to identify these items in myStudentCenter, where forms could be found online, and that future communication would come via CLC student email. {insert count here} Additional paper communications are scheduled for conversion for 2015-2016.

Long-Term Goals:
FA routinely monitor student service levels through a variety of methods and makes changes as needed to improve the student experience. During 2014-2015, FA improved the appeal process for students subject to Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) restriction for timeframe limitation (the number of attempted hours to complete a program). The procedure was modified so that students who are below the 150% restriction do a check-in with the Counseling Office to see if they can complete their program within regulatory timeframes and bypass the SAP appeal process altogether. This eliminated student frustration at having to complete multiple unnecessary steps to regain financial aid eligibility.

Additionally, FA looks to improve the student experience through technological enhancements. Each year, we expand the use of PeopleSoft within the department. Through checklist and communication functions of the software, FA can manage a student’s application and easily see where a student is at in the financial aid life cycle. Any FA staff member can access this information and provide consistent answers to student inquiries. Many pieces of information are also available for student view in myStudentCenter, which allows for immediate and clear communication of the additional information needed to complete a student’s file, resulting in lower frustration levels with the financial aid process.

Compliance with federal and state financial aid regulations is integral to the success of any financial aid office. FA leadership evaluates regulatory guidance and trends and implements the necessary changes in FA policies and procedures. During 2014-2015, the following initiatives were implemented in this area:
• A Senior Program Coordinator position was created to focus on Return of Title IV (R2T4) adjustments, State of Illinois MAP grant processing, and other tasks related to student monitoring and aid adjustment. The responsibility for these items had fallen onto Financial Aid Specialists. When working on the program-specific tasks, Specialists are not able to serve students, their primary job responsibility. Further, R2T4 issues are consistently among the top 10 audit findings for institutions who participate in the federal financial aid program. Moving these duties to a dedicated person allows for the development of expertise and a focus on compliance. With these tasks removed from the responsibility of the FA Specialist, time has been freed up for student appointments, outreach events and department initiatives such as student borrowing education. FA is better positioned to partner in the college’s retention and completion initiatives.

• Beginning in the fall 2014 semester, FA leveraged the degree audit function in PeopleSoft to verify course eligibility for financial aid. Students can only receive aid for classes required to complete their declared program of study. By running students through degree audit review in batch, thousands of students are checked for eligibility each term. Students are not awarded their financial aid until the review is completed. Controls are in place to prevent disbursement if an updated course review is required. Emails are generated to students listing ineligible courses. As a result, FA is compliant with Department of Education requirements for course eligibility. Additionally, students are guided toward only taking courses needed for completing their programs of study, which will result in improvements in institutional completion measures.

• The Department of Education requires institutions to have methods in place to identify and resolve student FAFSA applications with conflicting information. FA used PeopleSoft checklists and processes to identify students for additional review before their application should be completed, such as students with reported income below designated thresholds and students with questionable independent status. The changes ensure that the institution is properly administering the financial aid program and that students are truly eligible for the aid they are receiving.

• FA was able to adapt to ever-changing federal regulatory requirements. In 2014-2015, FA made the procedural and information system changes necessary to comply with requirements for high school and identity verification reporting and enrollment status reporting for subsidized loan limit requirements.

• Overall, federal, state and institutional programs were administered successfully. FA successfully completed the college’s re-application for federal student aid participation, which was approved for continuation through 2020. Deadlines for FISAP, ECAR, disbursement, gainful employment and other reports were met. Programs were reconciled and closed out as appropriate. FA participated in the annual audit which resulted in no findings for the office. The Department of Veteran’s Affairs audited the federal veteran’s benefits program with satisfactory results.

Based on feedback from various college stakeholders and the results of SEM strategic planning sessions, FA has taken steps to advance the administration of the scholarship program. To date, qualifications and rules for recipients have been clarified with the CLC Foundation and documented. By partnering with Foundation staff, the scholarship program billing and reconciliation process is more timely and accurate. Additionally, the application processing cycle has been moved up by 3 months to notify students of awards sooner. FA also participated in multiple meetings with donors interested in funding scholarships at CLC, providing necessary financial aid information as requested.
Planning

As part of this review, FA studied student survey data provided by IEPR from the CCSSE and ACT student opinion surveys. Over the past 6 years, student satisfaction with financial aid advising, financial aid services and access to financial aid information has declined and has scored below national and peer levels.

Additionally, FA participated in a feedback session with the CLC Student Experience Team (SET). During this session, the following items were discussed:

- The financial aid process is confusing and frustrating for students.
- Students are frustrated with the process to access financial aid to charge books in the bookstore at the beginning of the term.
- Financial Aid staff should be more involved in New Student Orientation.
- The scholarship application process is slow and can be confusing.

Based on this feedback, plus conversations with FA staff and Student Development leadership, the following goals have been established for 2015-2016.

**Short-Term Goals for 2015-2016:**

**New Student Orientation (NSO) financial aid appointments:** Receipt of financial aid is a critical factor in student success and completion. FA is moving from a reactionary approach to student financial aid service and desires to provide proactive, timely service to students when they need it most. One of these initiatives is partnering with NSO. This year, students who participate in NSO will be given a financial aid snapshot that outlines their current aid status and award eligibility. Students will then have an opportunity to meet one-on-one with an FA Specialist to get guidance on the aid process and to answer any questions they may have. Access to this information early in the orientation process will facilitate the decision to enroll at CLC.

In 2014, 2,999 students participated in NSOs. Of these, 1,620 (54%) were financial aid applicants. To provide these 30 minute financial aid advising appointments, 810 hours of Specialist time will be needed. To accomplish this goal, these appointments cannot be tacked on to the current Specialists’ workload. An additional position will provide the necessary hours to:

- Meet with students (and their families) one-on-one to explain the financial aid process and the student’s current status
- Provide explanation for additional forms and documentation needed to complete the student file
- Explain the student’s financial aid award package
- Explain the student’s responsibility for maintaining eligibility for aid and steps for subsequent terms
- Advise about scholarship and student employment opportunities
- Conduct follow up after the appointment

Desired outcomes for this initiative are:

- Clear communication of financial aid award eligibility early in the decision-making process to attend CLC
- Reduction of student return visits to the Financial Aid office with questions
- More accurate documentation submitted by students to complete their aid applications
- Faster turnaround in award decisions
Increased connection to individual financial aid staff members make the student feel more supported by the institution

Increase in student satisfaction with the service of the financial aid office

Scholarship program redesign: During 2014-15, the College of Lake County began a review of its model for awarding institutional (CLC Foundation) scholarships. After working with staff from across the institution, input from a strategic enrollment management consultant, reviewing student feedback and researching published scholarship studies and best practices, a new model was developed. The scholarship program will have two components. The first is a recruitment scholarship designed to attract academically ready students to make an early decision to attend CLC. The second is a renewable scholarship program covering tuition and fees (up to 30 credit hours per year), awarded to students in four areas:

- Transition: For students who started their academic work at CLC in the ESL or GED programs and are now pursuing college-level programs
- Diversity and International Engagement: For students from diverse backgrounds/populations and students studying abroad or studying new cultural experiences
- Connect to Your Career: For students in career programs who plan to gain meaningful employment after graduation
- Connect to Your Bachelor’s Degree: For students who start their academic work at CLC and intend to transfer and complete their degree at a four-year institution

Students will be selected for the renewable scholarships based on a rubric assessing the student’s academic level and financial need. Additionally, at the time of acceptance, students must commit to visits with their academic advisors and coaches, attend tutoring as needed, limit work hours if attending full-time, and take their developmental math classes in their first term. In order to be eligible for renewal, students need to maintain a 2.5 GPA, satisfactory course completion rates, be continuously enrolled, meet with advisors and coaches as required, and attend special workshops during the term. This model will be implemented during 2015-2016, reviewed at the end of the year, and modified as needed.

Desired outcomes for this initiative are:
- By paying full tuition and fees, fewer students will be awarded but the awards are larger and more impactful. Awards are life-changing!
- Students can count on future awards and plan their education accordingly.
- Award recipients are academically ready and committed to their education.
- Students leave CLC debt-free.

Integrate financial literacy programming with financial aid: Student Development staff have identified the “Cash Course” program, offered free of charge by the National Endowment for Financial Education, as the preferred financial literacy tool for the institution and plans to implement the program during the 2015-2016 year. To build upon the success of its “Responsible Borrower” program, FA will be adding components of the “Cash Course” program to the student financial aid experience. For example, students taking out student loans for a subsequent year will be offered learning experiences in
budgeting, being credit savvy, and saving and investing. Students who withdraw or graduate from CLC with student loans will be offered a course in paying back those loans. Other areas within Student Development will also be utilizing aspects of the financial literacy program in their work with students.

Desired outcomes for this initiative are:
- Improved financial literacy levels of CLC students
- Reduction of number of students defaulting on student loans
- Students are better prepared to handle unexpected financial crises that often impact ability to be successful in school

**Participate in the transition to the One-Stop Enrollment Center model:** In 2015-2016, FA will be housed in Building E as the college undergoes building improvements as part of the Master Plan. Over the year, FA will create procedure guides, training sessions and collaborate with other Student Development areas on the creation of the enrollment center and its new staffing model. The goal is to have the necessary staff and procedures in place by the opening of the new enrollment center in the summer 2016.

Desired outcomes for this initiative are:
- Improved student experience with student development offices. Consistent, accurate information provided in a single location.
- Improved efficiency of the financial aid operation. With generalist staff serving the students on the front line, FA Specialists can focus on student appointments, outreach events and department initiatives such as student borrowing education

**Leverage technology to increase efficiency of office operations and improve the student experience:** In the next year, FA will be converting paper award letters (which are generated every time a student’s financial aid package changes) to email communication. Enhancements will be made to the bookstore extract, which automatically sends student eligibility for bookstore charging to the bookstore. Pending support from ITS, FA will expand its use of the ImageNow document imaging software to route student forms and documents to designated staff members in the office. Options for the collection of documents electronically will also be explored.

Desired outcomes for these initiatives are:
- An increase in the number of students included in the automatic bookstore process and an increase in the timeliness of eligibility change notifications.
- Reduced cost of mailing paper award letters.
- More timely notification of student award notifications.
- Increased efficiency of financial aid application processing.
- Increased student satisfaction with financial aid services.

**Maintain compliance with federal and state financial aid program regulations:** FA is aware of two major regulatory changes with which it needs to comply during the 2015-2016. The first is the Gainful Employment Report, due July 31, 2015. This report contains enrollment, graduation and program cost information for all students enrollment in gainful employment programs who received federal financial
aid. Since this is the first year of the report, institutions are asked to report data from 2008-2009 through 2013-2014. In subsequent years, the report is due October 1st following the close of the aid year. FA is collaborating with the Registrar, Educational Affairs, and ITS on completing this report.

The second compliance project is continued monitoring of requirements related to the subsidized loan limitation for students. FA is monitoring guidance from the Department of Education and working with the Registrar and ITS to ensure systems and procedures continue to comply with processing and reporting rules.

**Long-Term Goals for Prior Year (2015-2016):**

Long-term goals remain unchanged for the upcoming year.

- Monitor student service levels and make changes as needed to improve the student experience
- Maintain compliance with federal and state financial aid program regulations
- Leverage technology to increase efficiency of office operations
- Maintain relationships between internal and external stakeholders

**Summary**