

A 2-Year-College System Streamlines Student Aid So Campuses Can Focus on Counseling

By BECKIE SUPIANO

Financial aid can go a long way toward meeting the cost of attending community colleges, but it is notoriously difficult to get students to apply. The Connecticut Community Colleges system has hit on a process that helps.



Marc Herzog (*right*), chancellor of the Connecticut Community Colleges system, created a central bureau, run by Tom Bradham (*left*), that freed up individual colleges' aid offices to concentrate on counseling and outreach. (Photograph by Stan Godlewski)

About a decade ago, the system created a centralized student-aid office to cut down on bureaucratic tasks at its 12 campuses and free up their staffs to work more with students. Since that change in the 2000-1 academic year, the system has seen the number of students applying for aid more than double, at a time when enrollment has grown about 25 percent. And at least one other state system is considering the model.

Marc S. Herzog, the Connecticut system's chancellor, saw an opportunity to create the central aid office when the system moved its data onto SunGard Higher Education's Banner software. At the time, each college's financial-aid staff was responsible not only for packaging and distributing student aid, but also for keeping up with regulations and policy changes, verifying student financial information, and handling audits. A typical office at one of the system's colleges had a financial-aid director, two other aid professionals, and work-study employees. And in an increasingly technology-dependent field, some of them were still pushing paper. "You are asking these offices to do an incredible amount of work," Mr. Herzog says.

So Mr. Herzog, himself a former student-aid director, created a bureau in the system office that took many of those routine tasks out of the individual aid offices. He could do that because the system decided to run the software centrally, rather than on each campus. The decision saved the system in licensing fees, but more importantly, prevented it from having to hire 12 associate directors in charge of technology on the campuses, says Tom Bradham, director of financial-aid services for the system.

The bureau, staffed by three student-aid and two information-technology workers, provides support to the colleges' aid offices. Mr. Herzog estimates that the staff members' salaries run about half-a-million dollars a year. If the system hadn't created a central aid office, Mr. Herzog says, it would have had to add, conservatively, two or three staff members per campus to handle student aid under the new data system. He estimates that those salaries would have cost about \$2.4-million a year.

The service bureau handles all the upgrades and technical issues for the student-aid aspects of the data system. It ensures compliance with federal and state regulations and handles government audits. The bureau automatically uploads student-aid applications into the software each night and sends the aid offices the files they need in the morning. And its staff provides an easy-to-reach resource for policy and technical questions.

The new data system allowed the colleges to automate some routine tasks, says David J. Welsh, director of financial-aid services at Tunxis Community College. This, he says, "leaves us more time to deal with real problems" like helping students understand and take advantage of financial aid.

At a community college, many students are "a bit overwhelmed by the whole college process," Mr. Welsh says. In many cases, his staff meets with students in person to help them apply for aid. All of the college's entrance counseling is done in person. And the staff also does outreach at area high schools. These tasks are important but time-consuming, and making other parts of the job more efficient has freed up more time for them.

The increase in staff time devoted to counseling, Mr. Welsh says, is one reason the system has seen so many more students applying for aid. Since 2000-1, the system has had a 111-percent increase in the number of students applying for aid, and a 102-percent increase in students receiving it. In the 2008-9 academic year, 63 percent of the system's students applied for aid. By comparison, 42.5 percent of all community-college students applied for aid in 2007-8, according to an analysis by the Institute for College Access & Success of the most recent data available from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey.

Before 2000, "we were very bad in getting students financial aid," says Mr. Bradham. He was the financial-aid director at one of the system's campuses, Asnuntuck Community College, from 1977 to 1998, until Mr. Herzog brought him in to lead the software implementation and then run the service bureau. Back when he was a financial-aid director, Mr. Bradham says, staff members in some of the colleges' financial-aid offices still had to type a student's name and Social Security number on a piece of paper and walk it to another office. And the workload was tremendous: "At my office, I was director of cooperative education, career services, and financial aid all at the same time."

The service bureau exists to support student-aid directors, he says. "We've taken the mundane financial-aid tasks away from them," he says, but "what we haven't taken away is the judgment. From the system, we have not given \$1 of financial aid to any student." That key task is still done at the campus level.

But the system's board did set some guidelines for packaging aid, changes that coincided with the creation of the service bureau.

The first priority is covering all students' direct costs: tuition and fees, books and supplies. Those costs now total \$4,200, and the board's policy is to cover any need a student has up to that amount in grants.

The colleges are also instructed to treat everyone as a full-time student. Generally, more aid is available to students who attend full time, and the college wants to make clear the maximum amount each student qualifies for. Doing so, they think, encourages more students to attend full time — which makes students

more likely to stay in college, make good grades, and complete a degree. Students are also given an explanation of full-time status. And the colleges don't list loans as part of a student's award, although they do award federally backed loans.

A Possible Model

For Connecticut, the new infrastructure has proved beneficial. "There's no way we could handle our volume today if we didn't do what we did with our system office," Mr. Bradham says.

And the service bureau has at least one fan outside of the state. "It's a very impressive system in a number of ways," says Glenn DuBois, chancellor of Virginia's community-college system, who went to Connecticut last summer to see how the colleges' center operates firsthand. "I would say it's liberated them, really, to do the counseling piece and the recruitment piece."

Mr. DuBois plans to do something similar in his own system. He just finished a big software project for the system's finances, is currently working on human resources, and will deal next with financial aid. Virginia uses PeopleSoft much the way Connecticut uses Banner, so the system should be able to design a similar center.

Community colleges operate differently in various states, but Mr. Herzog thinks even those without a state system should find ways to work together to centralize some of their student-aid functions. In addition to all its other benefits, it should save some money. And who isn't looking to do that these days?