STRATEGIC PLAN FOR
STUDENT FINANCIAL SERVICES
2002-07

I. Context for Planning

Institutional:
The mission of the office is to provide students with financial assistance options to attend the University. We support the goal of access to higher education through need-based federal, state, and institutional financial aid programs, and the goal of choice through academic merit, scholarship, and part-time employment programs. We promote and support the goals of the University in the recruitment and retention of students to achieve their personal and career objectives.

Mission-specific;

Current national and state trends:

- Increases in traditional college-age, full-time enrollment.
- Increases in enrollment from Southern Nevada.
- Continuing increases in college costs, the burden of which falls disproportionately on low-income families.
- Increases in state aid are targeted to non-need aid programs for specific academic programs and academic merit rather than need-based aid.
- Creation by states of 529 savings, pre-paid tuition plans, and other financing options.
- Increase in the use of credit cards and other consumer financing options to pay for college.
- Continuing support at the federal level for easing the burden of college cost for middle-income families (choice) rather than access for needy, low-income families.
- Federal initiatives to provide higher education benefits through the Internal Revenue code rather than allocating additional aid directly to campuses for needy students.
- Continuing emphasis and availability of federal aid through borrowing; half of all aid is loans, and their annual limits do not provide enough funds to meet the total cost of education.
- Delivery of aid information, applicant data and reporting to and from the U.S. Dept of Education solely through electronic communication.

Trends in service demands and quality:

- On-demand service expectations, according to the student’s schedule and need to know.
- Attitude of "entitlement" and unwillingness of students to accept individual responsibility and accountability for their action/inaction.
- Impatience and lack of regard for policies, regulations and deadlines.
- Reluctance by students to read materials designed to provide self-service assistance.
- Lack of planning for college on the part of students and parents and unfamiliarity with the college experience and processes
- Increasing demand and use of electronic communications and web services.
- Single point of contact for students for processing financial aid; reduction is the number of participants in the processes- lenders, guarantors, servicers of loans, the federal processor, our office, national student loan data system and the related federal systems that "match" applicant data. Availability of the FAFSA PIN is a major step in this direction.
- With the creation of more non-need programs, such as the Millennium Scholarship and pre-paid tuition, more affluent parents contact the office and demand our time and attention.
- More aid programs with no commensurate increases in office resources to meet the operational and reporting requirements.
Performance Indicators for Overall Effectiveness:

- Total dollars administered annually
- Number of students served and the percentage they represent of the total student population and of total undergraduate and total graduate students
- Number of students and dollars that were available to students at the opening of the school year
- Student default rate on federal loans
- Number of students accessing the office web page.
- Number of students who were "purged" for non-payment who were waiting for financial aid processing.
- Number of students who receive aid and graduate
- Reduction in the number of in-person visits required by a student to complete their aid processing
- The number of processing days in our office for Stafford loans
- Student satisfaction surveys and the results of other assessment tools
- Annual compliance audits of federal and state aid funds are without financial liability to the University.

II. Evaluation of Current Services:

Present Demand and Requirements for Services

- We are accountable for over 30 different federal and institutional aid programs and 13 state aid programs.
- Over 800 active accounts are expended, monitored, and reported on annually, each with its associated set of regulations and requirements.
- Annually, the office receives approximately 12,000 applications for federal aid, 3000 scholarship applications, and process paperwork for 3100 students employed on campus.
- Between Jan 1- April 1, 2002, 94% of our aid applicants filed their application electronically with the U.S. Department of Education, and we received 26% more applications from the previous year.
- During 2001-02, the office managed and disbursed $6.8 million in grants, $13 million in scholarships (including the Millennium scholarship), $25.6 million in loans, and $8 million in on-campus employment.
- 2001-02, 7337 undergraduate students (70% of total undergraduates) received one or more types financial assistance- an 14% increase over 2000-01.
- 2000-01, 1475 graduate students (46% of total graduates) received one or more types of financial assistance- an increase of 4% from 2000-01.
- The Millennium Scholarship Program has grown from 1474 recipients in the fall 2000, to 2878 in fall 2001, and 3892 in fall 2002. Dollars disbursed in fall 2000 were just over $3 million. This fall, we have disbursed over $4.6 million so far and expect to reach total disbursements of about $10 million for the year.
- Applications for aid are not static documents processed once and stored. Upwards of 500,000 transactions may occur annually as students change data, enrollment, class standing, financial information or eligibility determinants.
- The federal requirements mandate a complex set of steps and procedures that necessitate numerous communications with students. We are using email, postcards, and web services to reduce paper correspondence and save in postage costs.
- Over 5300 loans were disbursed in 2001-02. The number of "players" involved in the student loan delivery system (the university, the lender, the guarantee agency, the servicer, the student and the parent) and the processing time is complex; therefore we receive a large volume of daily "traffic" seeking reassurance and information on their status in that process.
In the weeks just prior to and just after the opening of the school year, we can have as many as 150 student visits a day and twice the number of phone calls. Over a semester, we average 500 student visits a month, even with the web-based services we offer. The State continues to add new, non-need programs without resources to administer them. Programs like the Regents Award Program, the Millennium Scholarship, the new Nevada Nursing Loan Program, and beginning this fall the Nevada Prepaid Tuition Program, all require administrative support and create a demand on our office for services from the community, students, parents, the system office, and the university community.

Effectiveness of Current Organizational Structure/Policies and Procedures:
- Office policies and procedures are in large part dictated by federal and state regulations.
- As a part of our assessment plan, the office has joined the Quality Assurance Program sanctioned by the U.S. Dept of Education, one of 150 colleges and universities nationally. The program provides the authority to modify federal requirements involving verification of the application data by designing our own. As a result, we have been able to streamline the processes for students and parents, and no longer “bother” families whose eligibility for aid would not change. Annually, we analyze our effectiveness in targeting and modify procedures for the next processing cycle.
- The office’s organizational structure is flat; not hierarchical enough to permit effective decision-making to occur at more points of authority.
- Reception functions are handled by automated phone system that directs calls to an advisor or another appropriate person. Although this may seem impersonal, it is more important that the caller immediately reach someone who can appropriately and completely their answer questions than to be routed to several person for pieces of an answer. The level of specific information all programs, procedures, and policies prohibits the assignment of one person as an office receptionist. We are in the process of upgrading our system to provide quicker response to callers. However, with the implementation of many on-line services, the phone traffic has been reduced significantly.
- On-going customer service dilemma- essential processing time and attention, particularly in peak periods such as the opening of the school year vs. phone and personal visits to the office for routine information available in printed materials and on the Internet. Responding to general queries takes time away from those essential tasks that get funds to students in timeframes they demand. What is the priority?

Strengths of Existing Programs:
- Our strengths are reflected in the annual report data to the UCCSN system office summarizing our activity for that year. In 2001-02, the office managed close to $55 million in financial aid sources for students.
- Annual audits for the U.S. Department of Education never find inadequacies in funds management, program compliance, or regulatory enforcement. Findings can translate into limitations, suspension, financial repayments, or termination of the University from the federal student aid programs.
- The default rate for our Stafford loan borrowers of is 3.3% for 2000, well below the national average of 4.8% for 4-year publics. The average for all Nevada schools is 7.0%, compared to the national average 5.9%.
- The default rate for federal Perkins loan borrowers is 2.1%
- For 2001-02, 70% of undergraduate students and 46% of graduate students received financial aid.
- We successfully implement new state programs without additional resources.
Current Challenges and Constraints:

Staffing and Training:
- Current office organization provides no career ladder for professional staff. Entry level professionals leave for higher level positions at other colleges, so we are in a constant hiring and training mode. The training time for a new employee is at least one full cycle of the delivery system (minimum of one year depending on where in the cycle they begin employment).
- Employment search and hiring processes are overly cumbersome, take too long, and require too many levels of review.
- Salary placements and position ranges make it difficult to recruit and retain qualified technical and computer systems personnel to manage the required electronic capabilities of the U.S. Department of Education.
- Redundancy is limited; positions are task and program specific because of the level of expertise required.
- Accommodate the increasing need in the University's Southern Nevada office for a financial aid advisor.
- Additional staff to share the increasing workload, so that stress level and premature burnout are reduced.
- The UCCSN master plan proposes a new need-based grant program of $7 million each year, up to a total of $21 million. Without staff and other financial resources to implement and manage this and any other new state programs, timeliness may suffer and checks delayed to students.
- Lack of technical expertise within the classified staff to manage the electronic systems and the appropriate compensation once they learn on the job.

Computer Systems:
- Current SIS system is inflexible, out-of-date, and user-unfriendly. Procedures and processes that would improve service are impossible to implement.
- Training is non-existent for new employees to learn how to use the SIS system and FOCUS reporting.
- Retain techno-literate staff to manage all the electronic data systems for our applicant database, loan processing, and reporting to the U.S. Department of Education.
- Lack of priority for financial aid enhancements with SCS.

24/7 Service:
- Lack of technology support, computer, and enhanced retrieval systems hinder the implementation of self-service options for students in accessing their financial aid information.
- Seek out partners in the delivery of student loans to make it more efficient and timely.
- Restructure the financial aid advisor assignments to provide more time for in-person advising for complex problems that necessitate intervention.

Outreach:
- Educate parents on the college experience and essential steps to be successful in securing the aid they need.
- Streamline routine office tasks to provide time for staff to partner with other offices in outreach to middle school students.
III. Analysis and Future Goals:

*Major Challenges and Goals for the Next Five Years:*

- Reauthorization of the federal financial aid programs occurs in 2003 with new regulations to implement that will be in effect through 2008.
- Implementation of an enhanced computer system.
- Implementation of self-service options through the Internet and more sophisticated phone system to allow students to get aid information when they need it, such as a virtual counselor, on-line help, financial planning tools, electronic forms, signatures and submission, and a college planning system for early awareness.
- Resources to upgrade computer hardware, software, and middleware in advance of the U.S. Department of Education's electronic requirements for aid processing and web interfaces.
- Manage the telephone traffic more efficiently.
- Create a paperless aid delivery system that culminates with the deposit of aid funds electronically into the student's bank account using web technology, interfaces with the U.S. Department of Education and lenders.
- Restructure the office and maintain a trained, experienced staff adequate to meet the increasing demands for service caused by increased enrollment, new programs, changing regulations for existing programs, and enhanced technologies.
- Support recruitment and retention of students through multi-year scholarship commitments.
- Increase efforts in outreach to Southern Nevada and to middle and high school students.
- Create ways to work more effectively in recruiting students of color by teaming with staff who has entrée with organizations representing those students and their families.
- Create training workshops for campus staff on the fundamentals of financial aid - Financial Aid 101 - to improve the communication of basic information by recruiting staff and academic representatives of colleges.

*Strategies for the Future and Changes Needed:*

- Partner with our student loan organizations to create a seamless loan delivery system, incorporating the use of "smart card" technology for students to access funds deposited automatically into their bank account.
- Investigate the feasibility for a voice response system to manage telephone traffic.
- Create a service pyramid by type: automatic service: triggered without student intervention (electronic funds transfer and loan processing); self-service: student requests information and process transactions on-line (on-line aid applications, award status); general service: student requests common information/transactions from staff generalists (deadlines, processing, exit interviews); and special service: student receives advise from aid advisors/specialists.
- Restructure staff to address types of service created by new programs and impacted by volume. Consider resources to address the increased need for aid expertise in Southern Nevada.
- Restructure the general scholarship program, folding in grants-in-aid, to commit 4-year scholarships to incoming undergraduate students. Consultants hired by the University to review our marketing plans have all suggested that our current practices are not competitive with other colleges for capturing new students nor do they support retention.
- Create a paperless scholarship selection system for departments/colleges to use data existing in the student information system (GPA, major/college, and class standing); thus eliminating the need for the student to take action.
- Work collaboratively with Development to enhance the current scholarship program.
- Create cross-functional teams within the Enrollment Services division.
Resource Allocation and Priorities:

- The office has for several of the last 5 years provided salary savings for our division with to position vacancies. Since the hiring process takes many months, it has had the effect of a reduction in our budget and staffing. This affects the amount of work that each staff remaining must do. We cannot afford to lose any of our current budget and continue to meet the expectations students and parents have for timely aid delivery without reducing services or programs.
- Fixed resources may require a reduction in phone and reception hours to accomplish the processing of student applications and/or the elimination of programs.
- Restructure staff into a hierarchy that provides a career ladder, allows more authority and responsibility for decision-making, and addresses service demands caused by new programs and students. This would create assistant director positions, each with professional and classified staff assistance.
- With 10% more resources, hire a financial aid advisor for the Southern Nevada office.
- A budget reduction would require that we reevaluate the cost benefit of the Regents Award Program that is a workload burden with limited dollars and a small number of student participants. The funds could be reallocated to the other UCCSN institutions.

IV. Summary:

1. Demand for financial aid and scholarships increases each year while resources, both human and financial, remain static or are decreasing.
2. Merit and non-need aid programs are on the increase. Additional state need-based aid is required to provide access for needy, low-income students.
3. Students expect instant service and prefer to use electronic information channels and communication options to printed media.
4. The University's current computer system and lack of priority with SCS for financial aid enhancements restricts our capability to streamline and enhance our services to students.
5. Office staffing structure requires substantial changes to address changing needs and demands of students, increasing numbers of programs and applicants, the rate of staff turnover in the technical support areas.
6. Salary structure for student services professionals requires modification in order to attract and retain experienced staff.
7. Scholarship program requires additional funding and modification to be competitive and support enrollment and retention. Multi-year awards must be offered.
8. The resource demand for technology enhancements and value-added technologies will continue, along with the requirement for trained, technical staff.
9. A pyramid of different types of service would better utilize staff resources and support 24/7 service.
IMAGINE THIS…. 4 YEARS OR LESS:

Jane is a high school freshman, from Las Vegas who wants to attend the University in Reno. Through on-line college planning tools, she is already familiar with the admission requirements and knows that she will meet them with the college courses she has planned to take. She and her family have started to investigate financing options, and know what she cannot attend without financial assistance. She expects to be a Millennium Scholar, but knows that it does not cover all the costs of living on campus in the residence hall. She decides to visit UNR’s financial aid advisor in the Southern Nevada office. S/he pulls up the UNR homepage and shows her how to use all the various links to on-line financial planning. Amazed at how easy it is, Jane runs through different financing options at home with her family. They continue to monitor her academic progress using the college planner tool through high school.

Jane applies on-line for admission early in her senior year and receives an email acceptance through her customized web site. It also informs Jane that she qualified for a 4-year scholarship based on her admission credentials. Her major department has also awarded her a scholarship. Jane and her parents already applied for and received their SFA PINs to access the federal aid systems, so she and her parents complete and "sign" her federal financial aid application on-line. After receiving the FAFSA data electronically, UNR posts her financial aid offer on her private web site and emails her that it is time to review the aid offer and pick a lender for her loan. Jane visits the web sites of the "recommended" lenders, picks one, clicks on the promissory note, "signs" it electronically, and completes the first-time borrowers entrance interview session. She informs UNR that she will be attending in the fall and has arranged for the transfer of funds, after tuition and housing is paid, into her newly set up bank account when she arrives in the fall. She checks WEB-REG for disbursement information, tracks her borrowing through the National Student Loan Data System, and uses the on-line tools for debt management. She also can track on-line her Millennium Scholarship balance once she accesses the funds.

Jane has just finished first semester and her grades are high enough to maintain her current scholarships. Her department can access the information through SIS and automatically consider her for additional awards for her sophomore year. She has already completed the renewal FAFSA on-line, using the SFA PIN she received prior to enrollment. She visits the UNR home page and links to Student Financial Services to search for other scholarship opportunities. She clicks to check her aid status-making sure the file is complete and awarded. Then completes the loan process on-line for the next year. Jane is going to be the first in her family to attend and graduate from college.