

Peer Team Report On
Financial Aid Office
Spring 2008

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Area 1. Curriculum

N/A

Area 2. Student Support and Development

Findings:

The Financial Aid Office (FAO) offers multiple methods of disseminating information to students, both personal and general. The FAO also maintains a timely communications plan to keep students informed regarding their financial aid status. However, the staff has identified problems with having accurate mailing address information for our mobile student population. They have suggested exploring the possibility of using email as a primary means for further communication.

The peer team found that there is ample evidence of multiple means of disseminating information to students. The team also confirmed the concern about the office having accurate mailing information for students receiving financial aid. The use of email as the primary means of communicating with students as a way to address this problem raises confidentiality questions to be addressed with Instructional Technology Services (ITS).

The staff has also seen a steady increase in the number of applicants in recent years, apparently as a result of effective outreach programs and the increase in enrollment at AVC and with the expansion of educational programs at our Palmdale site. New state and federal programs contribute to this increase as well. Because AVC has an ethnically and linguistically diverse population, this office provides information in various languages and has staff to accommodate to Spanish-speaking students. The staff also regularly reviews feedback from its various programs to enhance its services.

The peer team reviewed data from the self-study to confirm the increase in student applications for aid. The team also confirmed the availability of information in multiple languages and the availability of Spanish-speakers on the staff. We also verified the regular review, during weekly staff meetings, of student feedback and its use in modifying programs to better serve financial aid students.

Two areas of concern identified by the staff were that none of their services are available in Palmdale and difficulty securing student records in a confidential manner at the front counter. While most records are secured in other areas, this lack of security at the front counter remains a concern. The peer team verified that these are concerns but some improvement has occurred since the self-study report. The office is in the process of developing a procedure wherein all paper documents are digitized with scanners and then returned to the student to enhance security. This process is currently being developed

with the addition of three scanners to the area of the front counter. The lack of staff for the Palmdale site remains a concern.

Recommendations:

1. Continue to develop the process of digitizing documents to enhance security of these personal documents.
2. The peer team supports the recommendation of modifying the college's policy on the use of email to communicate personal information to financial aid recipients. However, ITS must be actively involved in this process to develop an encryption method to protect the confidence of students.

Area 3. Program and Student Learning Outcomes

Findings:

Since establishing SLOs in 2004 the office has used them to evaluate the effectiveness of its services. The peer team confirmed that FAO routinely evaluates its SLOs through assessments of its various programs. We confirmed that as a result the office has implemented new resources such as Financial Aid TV on its web site and more widely available electronic and paper formats for disseminating information. We also confirmed the identified need students expressed for direct, individual contact with the office staff.

Recommendations:

1. The peer team affirms the recommendation that FAO continue using its SLOs to assess the effectiveness of its programs and services.

Area 4. Personnel and Support Services

Findings:

The FAO self-study indicated that additional staff is required to reduce the student-staff ratio and to provide more direct, personal contact with students. The study also suggested that more bilingual staff members are needed to serve a growing Spanish-speaking population. The peer team interviews confirmed the need for a larger staff and for more Spanish-speakers. Since the self-study, the office has hired an additional Spanish-speaking staff member.

The self-study also indicated the need for an Assistant Director, an Academic Counselor and a dedicated IT staff member. The team verified that these positions continue to be seen as priorities for the office, especially the Assistant Director and the Academic Counselor. While the Assistant Director's position was in the budgeting process at the time of the self-study, the position is now on hold pending final state budget allocations.

Recommendations:

1. Pursue funding for the Assistant Director position. While the recommendations of the self-study were not prioritized, all of the FAO staff identified filling the Assistant Director position as their highest priority. The need for this position is based on the frequent absence of the Director fulfilling other on-campus duties and off-campus responsibilities. The peer team ascertained that the staff sees the Assistant Director position as providing leadership for revising and developing policies and procedures.
2. The Director should consult with the Dean of Counseling and Matriculation in seeking an Academic Counselor for the office. The Director cannot supervise faculty and there is concern in Counseling regarding the decentralization of counseling services.
3. Hire staff for the Palmdale site.

Area 5. Facilities, Equipment, and Technology

Findings:

The self-study report indicated that the lack of adequate front counter space hinders processing paperwork and especially creates issues with confidentiality, while being hazardous to staff. The self-study also reported the need for improved infrastructure to accommodate increased equipment, such as scanners, copiers and a fax machine. The peer team verified that there is consensus among the staff members of FAO that its current office space, technology and equipment are inadequate to its needs. The peer team also confirmed the concern regarding confidentiality since the front counter is located in a high traffic area and shares space with another Student Service area. The peer team confirmed that FAO does not have its own fax machine. However, since the self-study was completed the office was able to acquire three new scanners for the front counter.

Recommendations:

1. Develop a plan to increase the amount of space at the front counter and to increase privacy for students. This, along with offices for the technical staff, was very high priority for the FAO staff.
2. Develop office space for increased staff members, especially an Assistant Director.
3. In this plan, include improved electrical outlets and Internet connections to accommodate increased electrical and electronic equipment.

Area 6. Fiscal Support

Findings:

According to the FAO self-study, the district funds only 50 percent of the office salaries and benefits and 25 percent of the office supply needs each year. The remainder of FAO expenses are funded through federal sources. The federal funding is partially contingent upon the number of grant awards made by the office. This makes the funding of the office unpredictable, being dependent on federal budgets and state financial aid funding.

The peer team determined that insufficient funding and unstable funding were contributory to a high staff to student ratio and directly affected the efficiency of the office. The peer team also confirmed that lack of funding contributed to the office's unmet need for equipment. The peer team verified the funding mechanism for the office.

Recommendations:

1. Increase district funding of the Financial Aid Office to stabilize its income.

Area 7. Community Outreach and Program Awareness

Findings:

The peer team confirmed the self-study report concerning outreach efforts by FAO. The office coordinates several outreach activities in Lancaster throughout the year to inform the community regarding assistance opportunities for those considering pursuing education at AVC. The team also confirmed that a lack of staff and facilities in Palmdale prevented outreach to that city. Again, the team confirmed that funding was a major contributor to limiting outreach efforts.

Recommendations:

1. Increase district funding to FAO to stabilize its income and to allow for the expansion of its staff.
2. Develop community resources in Palmdale to support outreach programs there.

Area 8. State and Federal Compliance

Findings:

The peer team confirmed that FAO is in compliance with all state and federal regulations and adheres to all College policies and procedures related to financial aid.

Recommendations:

1. Continue to comply with all state, federal and College regulations, policies and procedures.