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Five "C" Questions for a Healthy Financial Aid Office

While all college financial aid administrators share the goal of effectively administering the assistance programs offered by their institutions, it is fair to say that not all financial aid operations are equally successful at reaching that goal. The answers to these questions may be helpful in considering whether a particular financial aid operation is functioning as effectively as it could.

1) **Is the institution in compliance with all applicable federal, state, and institutional regulations, policies, and procedures?** This is the first and highest obligation of all aid administrators. Federal and state regulations carry the force of law, and compliance is a must if the school wishes to continue participation in the Title IV programs. Many times, federal regulations state that the school must have a policy that addresses a particular federal concern, while allowing the institution the leeway to develop the details of the policy and procedures. For example, schools are required to develop and implement policies for defining and monitoring satisfactory academic progress, but the specifics of these policies are left to the institution. Healthy financial aid offices develop policies and implement procedures that meet both the letter and intent of the law as required by the U.S. Department of Education and state agencies, while meeting the needs of their students.

2) **Are the regulations that govern financial aid programs consistently applied?** Consistency and fairness must be used by financial aid staff when applying the regulations to real world situations. For example, the latitude allowed financial aid administrators by the "professional judgment" regulations should be consistently applied to all similarly-situated students. Students should be able to count on receiving the same treatment under the rules from different staff members in the same office.

3) Is the financial aid staff competent? Is there a staff person who has been assigned the responsibility for staff training? Have staff members received training commensurate with their responsibilities, or have they simply been thrown into the financial aid office because a "warm body" was needed to perform some necessary task? Does the staff cross-train as much as possible? Competent, caring professionals in the financial aid office are invaluable to the smooth operation of the office and to the students they serve. To be considered competent, financial aid staff members should be afforded the opportunity to participate in multiple high-quality professional development opportunities. A healthy financial aid operation will not scrimp on professional development opportunities for its staff.

4) **Is the financial aid program <u>comprehensive</u>?** In other words, do the institution's financial aid programs include aid from grant, loan, work and scholarship programs? Does the institution provide the full complement of veteran's benefits and programs to serve veteran students and their dependents? Obviously, the more comprehensive the program offerings, the more additional staff may be needed to perform the required tasks, and the greater need for staff training.

5) **How effectively does the financial aid office <u>communicate</u> with its stakeholders?** Are the lines of communication among the institutional offices involved in the financial aid process (Financial Aid, Admissions, and the Business Office) wide open, or are there breakdowns in the flow of information? How effective are the school's written, oral, and online communications to students and parents, and do students and parents understand the financial aid process as a result?

Compliance, consistency, competence, comprehensiveness, and communication: an institution that values these characteristics will go a long way towards establishing a healthy financial aid operation that can effectively serve all of its students and their families.