Improving Student Satisfaction:

A Communications Plan for Simmons College Student Financial Services

Andrea Cunningham

Simmons College
Master’s of Communications Management
Dr. Richard Cravatts

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Abstract

Financing a college education can be extremely stressful for students and their families. Both parties must rely on their college’s financial aid and billing offices for support and guidance. Simmons College Student Financial Services has a goal to increase their students’ satisfaction levels with the services they provide. Additionally, the Office would like to create a more student-centered environment to welcome visitors. An analysis of the Office’s current communication practices would reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the Office. This general assessment, in conjunction with a review of factors that affect student satisfaction and the examination of other academic institutions’ financial aid offices, indicated that Student Financial Services could improve their outreach to key audiences through the use of various communication channels. By tailoring their messages to specific audiences, Student Financial Services will improve their constituents’ perceptions of the Office and form better relationships with their students.
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Background

The financing aspect of a college education is one of the most stressful ordeals a student and his or her family has to endure. Students not only relate to the financial pressures felt by their parents, but are also concerned with their college debt and job prospects upon completion of their degrees. These added pressures to a college course load affect a student’s emotional health and well-being, which, if ignored, could have significant consequences for both the student and the university (Lewin, 2011). Students are not alone in this undertaking, as the Student Financial Service office at any college is prepared to help them through the financial aid process, but only if they are aware of and willing to take advantage of the services the office provides.

Overview of the Student Financial Services Office

Student Financial Services at Simmons College houses both the Financial Aid and Student Accounts staff, as well as a team of Client Services Representatives and a cashier. The financial aid counselors, who are all assigned a caseload of students based on the first letter of the students’ last names, are responsible for awarding students need-based aid, certifying alternative private loans, and counseling students throughout the financial aid process. Student Account Representatives deal with the billing portion of the Office, as well as questions about payment plans, payment methods, and student health insurance. The Client Service Representatives act as a front line to the Office and handle general inquires when students call, email, or walk into the Office. Currently, the majority of inquires the Office receives are handled by the front line staff, with students being referred to other divisions of the office if necessary. In addition to these full-time staff members, the office also employs several work-study students
who assist staff members a few hours a week filing documents, pulling applications, and stuffing envelopes. They also update the Office’s outside scholarship book and design and create the bulletin boards outside the office.

Overview of the Financial Aid Process

Financial aid includes merit-based awards, need-based grants, employment, and loans. At Simmons College merit-based awards are determined by the student’s admissions office. When students apply for admission, they are automatically considered for all merit-based scholarships, and decisions are provided at the same time as admittance. These awards are based on academic achievement, and most are renewable for four years (Simmons College Student Financial Services, 2011). In order to apply for federal funding through the Department of Education, students must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). To fill out the FAFSA, a student and his or her family will need to draw information from their financial records, including their Federal Income Tax Returns, W-2 forms, business, investment, and mortgage information (FAFSA on the Web, 2011). Federal aid includes loans, grants, and work student funds, and is based on financial need rather than academic achievement. The FAFSA is an online tool that is used to calculate a student’s Expected Family Contribution (EFC), which is then used to determine a student’s need. The results of the FAFSA are sent electronically to whichever schools the student has listed on his or her application (Department of Education, 2011). Once Simmons College has received and verified this information, financial aid counselors can then determine a student’s eligibility. Students must be aware and attentive to financial aid deadlines, as packages are awarded on a funds-available basis. These strict deadlines and the seemingly complex application process, along with the financial stress placed
on students and their families, are often sources of contention and dissatisfaction with Student Financial Services.

**Statement of the Problem**

Colleges across the United States face many of the same issues that Simmons College encounters when it comes to student satisfaction with their respective experiences within the financial aid and student accounting offices. These offices must deal with complaints about the process being too complicated, too confusing, too time-consuming, and requiring too many documents. Students and parents may feel as if they were not adequately informed of the requirements and deadlines, or they may even feel as if not enough guidance was provided to them throughout the process. Other times students are just dissatisfied with the aid they were awarded. Students strive to obtain scholarships and grants, but these rarely cover the entire cost of tuition, and for many students taking out loans is sometimes the only way to make their education affordable. This realization can be frightening to those who have never had to worry about or manage their own finances. The financing part of college is complex and overwhelming. However, it is a necessary hurdle students must overcome in order to attend a higher education institution. The tuition bill must be paid, and if students require financial aid, they must follow the mandatory steps laid forth by the college and federal law.

Student Financial Services has the expertise and resources necessary to aid these families, but they must ensure that they are remaining in constant contact with them to ease them through the process, all the while creating fiscally responsible students. The Office must find a way to engage all students, even those who do not necessarily require financial aid, but who could certainly benefit from money management information. This communication plan will provide
solutions to improve the way Simmons College’s Student Financial Services staff responds to and contacts students with the overall goal of creating a student-centered environment that improves satisfaction with the Office.

**Student Satisfaction Inventory**

Simmons College recently received the results of the 2011 Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory. This 116-question tool measures student satisfaction based on their college experience and concerns various departments around campus, as well as the general atmosphere of the institution. Several of the campus expectation statements asked in the survey related directly to the office of Student Financial Services. These statements, in which students rated their level of satisfaction from 1 to 7, were as follows: "Adequate financial aid is available for most students, financial aid awards are announced to students in time to be helpful in college planning, and financial aid counselors are helpful" (Noel-Levitz, 2011). The results of the satisfaction inventory include not only Simmons' responses but also the national averages. The last time Simmons College performed this inventory was in 2006. Although Simmons College Student Financial Services saw an increase in satisfaction from 2006 to 2011, the satisfaction results still lag behind the national average, meaning there is significant room for improvement.

**Discussion of Results**

*Adequate financial aid*

The question of whether “adequate financial aid is available for most students” would be difficult for students to address. Without an understanding of how the financial aid process works, this statement is merely asking for an opinion, and for those who are dissatisfied with the
amount of aid they are receiving (or rather, the amount they will then be required to pay out of pocket/borrow from an outside lender), the statement will elicit a negative response. There seems to be great confusion regarding the financial aid process, as there is a false perception that a financial aid office has an excess of financial resources and that it is merely unwilling to distribute the lot, thus not giving students their fair shares. By helping students to better understand how awards are determined, Student Financial Services could dispel the myths surrounding the financial aid process.

In 2006, Simmons College had a satisfaction rating of 4.26 when it came to the question of whether students thought adequate financial aid was available. By 2011, the rating had increased to 4.41; a number that is still relatively low when compared to the national average of four-year private colleges, which was 4.8 (Noel-Levitz, 2011).

![Figure 1 - Mean Satisfaction Scores of "Adequate Financial Aid" Question on the SSI](image)

**Financial aid award timeliness**

The next relevant question on the inventory, “financial aid awards are announced to students in time to be helpful in college planning,” is a statement that depends not only on
whether the financial aid counselors complete their reviews of a student’s file on time, but also on whether the student completes his or her financial aid applications by certain deadlines. If a student’s application is not complete, it is not possible for financial aid counselors to review and finalize the student’s award. Awarding a student financial aid is a lengthy process, and there cannot be an expectation that a student can turn in his or her required documents a day before the deadline and immediately receive a decision. Students need to be aware of the awarding process’ timeline, and this information needs to be adequately communicated to students. Student Financial Services includes a significant amount of information when communicating with students through the use of mass mailings and emails. Oftentimes students miss important deadlines and requirements that were included in these documents, and this oversight leads to frustrated students and insinuation of poor communication on the Office’s part.

In 2006, Simmons College had a satisfaction rating of 4.56 when it came to the timing of financial aid awards, but in 2011 this number had increased to 4.94, which is actually above the national average of four-year private colleges, which was 4.87 (Noel-Levitz, 2011).

![Figure 2 - Mean Satisfaction Scores for "Timeliness of Awards" Question on the SSI](image-url)
Financial aid counselors are helpful

The statement “Financial aid counselors are helpful” really only pertains to those students who know that they have a financial aid counselor and who have actually met with their financial aid counselors. If students are unaware that they have a financial aid counselor, they certainly cannot find them helpful and are either going to mark the statement as not applicable or indicate a neutral response. Considering that the front line staff currently answers the majority of inquiries, even though the financial aid counselors carry out the awarding process, many students are not forming relationships with their counselors. In order to improve this satisfaction rating, the amount of students entering counselors’ offices will need to be addressed and increased.

In 2006, Simmons College financial aid counselors received an average satisfaction rating of 4.11. By 2011, this rating had increased significantly to 4.75, but still lacked behind the national 4-year private college average of 5.04 (Noel-Levitz, 2011).

Figure 3 - Mean Satisfaction Scores for "Counselors are Helpful" Question on the SSI
Student Financial Services Target Audiences

Student Financial Services caters to two very different audiences: students and their parents. Although these two audiences share the same ultimate goal of financing a Simmons education, they have varying levels of interest, knowledge, and needs that must be addressed. The approach and messaging of an organization’s communication methods must be tailored to their specific audiences (Miller, 2010).

Students

Students are Student Financial Services’ key constituents. The Office’s goal is to help them finance and gain a college education. Students often have very little knowledge of both their personal finances as well as the financial aid process. It is also quite possible, especially in their first couple of years, that some students might have little to no interest in the topic, and do not register how their spending and borrowing habits affect them for the rest of their lives. Other students are very proactive and care a great deal about their finances. Regardless of their level of interest, information about the financial aid process and personal financing needs to be provided to these students in ways that make sense to them and engages them throughout the process. One of the best ways to hold a student’s interest is through technology. Students are rapidly adopting information and communication technologies to complete everyday tasks and to socialize with friends. Large numbers of these students frequent social media websites not only for socializing, but also to gather information related to all aspects of their lives. College administrators should be utilizing these technology mediums in order to improve and increase communication between college professionals and their students (Cotton, 2008). Students, even those who do not
frequently utilize Student Financial Services’ resources, might be more receptive to information and advice from the Office if it is provided through a medium they habitually use.

Parents

Parents of undergraduate students tend to be quite involved in their children’s lives, and many of them have a tendency to want to take control of the financing aspect of college. While parents tend to have more knowledge of financial information, they can still be confused and overwhelmed by the process of applying for financial aid. The application requires that parents provide their income, savings, and tax records. Occasionally, the requests can get a lot more personal, such as requiring information about divorce settlements, job loss, or the death of a family member. Parents typically have more in-depth questions regarding the financial aid process, and how their personal circumstances affect their student’s eligibility, and therefore they tend to want to build personal relationships with their student’s counselors. Counselors need to be aware of the concerns families have and provide professional support along the way (Lange & Stone, 2002). It is also important that Student Financial Services’ staff is conscious of the language they use when speaking to parents. Jargon such as FAFSA, COA (cost of attendance), merit-based aid, need-based aid, Pell, Stafford, subsidized and unsubsidized loans, and verification are common place within the Office, yet this unfamiliar language can easily overwhelm parents (Lange & Stone, 2002). In order to engage parents, it would be beneficial for Student Financial Services to tailor information directly towards them in terms that they can understand and provide reassurance that they will have the opportunity to speak directly to their student’s financial aid counselors.
Communications Analysis

Financial aid and student accounts offices will never be the most popular offices on campus, both at Simmons College or any other college. The types of issues that these colleges deal with are often the cause of great concern and unease for students. At Simmons College, Student Financial Services contacts students when something is required of them, such as a request to file the FAFSA, to submit additional verification documents, to sign a master promissory note, or to pay a bill. The Office is in constant communication with those from whom they require additional information or payment. Through the use of mass emails, billing inserts, missing information letters, and financial aid award guides, students are bombarded with essential, yet overwhelming, amounts of information.

Overview of Current Student Financial Services Communication Methods

Face-to-face interactions

Currently, nothing Student Financial Services does requires students to meet with anyone in the office in person. However, there are a variety of opportunities for students to speak with Student Financial Services staff in person. The student must be the one to initiate any face-to-face interactions. Upon walking into the office, visitors are greeted by front line staff members who are trained and equipped to help with general inquires. These Client Service Representatives (CSRs) assist in any way they can, and only refer students to other members of the staff if there is an inquiry they cannot answer. Should it be crucial for students to speak with a Student Account Representative or financial aid counselor, the CSRs make the necessary arrangements. There is always a financial aid counselor available to meet with students on a walk-in basis during the week. All five financial aid counselors hold walk-in hours at least once a week in
four-hour increments. During these times, students can come into the office without an appointment to meet with the counselor on duty. The schedule for these walk-in hours is available on the website, but should be moved to a more prominent location. Students and their parents can also schedule appointments with their financial aid counselors for any day of the week. Counselors’ contact information, including their email addresses and direct phone lines, is available on the website.

In addition to normal business functions, Student Financial Services reaches out to students and their families during special events. During advising days and orientation the Director or a financial aid counselor will present information regarding the financial aid process to incoming students. The office also holds open hours during the weekends of President’s receptions so that prospective first-year students and their families can sit down with a financial aid counselor to discuss their options. To help prepare students for life after college, a financial aid counselor will hold Exit Counseling sessions—a process that can be completed entirely online as well—that students can attend at the end of each semester if they have questions about their loans.

*Informational handouts/Mailings*

There are several brochures detailing the financial aid process that Simmons College distributes to students and their families. The Undergraduate Admissions office provides booklets explaining the application process and the types of available awards to prospective students. These documents also direct students to Student Financial Services should they have any questions or concerns by including the office’s website address, phone number, and email address. Student Financial Services has also created their own “How to Apply for Financial Aid
Improving Student Satisfaction at Simmons College” handout. This document is available on the website and in the office. The handout includes eligibility rules, application deadlines, tips for filing the FAFSA, and information on the Verification process.

How to Apply for Financial Aid at Simmons College 2011-2012

To be Eligible for Financial Aid you must be:
- Enrolled in a degree or job program.
- Enrolled at least half-time as defined by the Office of the Registrar.
- Not in default on a Federal Stafford or Subsidized Loan or in another Federal Loan program.
- Maintaining satisfactory Academic Progress.

A Complete Application includes:
- 1/2011-0202 Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
- Simmons College Federal School Code: 00344
- 2/2011 Simmons College Student Information Forms
- http://www.simmons.edu/financialaid

APPLICATION DEADLINES
The 2011-2012 FAFSA is used to determine financial eligibility for the following terms:
- Summer 2011
- Fall 2011
- Spring 2012

New applicants are encouraged to file their FAFSA concurrently with their admission application and to begin applying as soon as January 1st, 2011 as possible.

If your fall term of enrollment will be...

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Applications received after these deadlines will be reviewed, however, late filing may result in a delay in the processing of your award and may jeopardize receipt of some funds, regardless of when you file.

Filing the FAFSA for 2011-12
- The FAFSA can be filed electronically or by paper application.
- Online applications are more accurate and processed more quickly than paper.
- An electronic FAFSA must be signed electronically using a PIN.
- A new or electronic PIN can be obtained at www.pin.ed.gov.
- Parents of dependent undergraduate students must also sign if you file an independent FAFSA.
- The FAFSA must be filed within three weeks of receiving your Financial Aid Package.
- Simmons College must have the FAFSA on or before October 1, 2011 to be considered.
- Simmons College must receive the FAFSA on or before October 1, 2011 to be considered for financial aid.
- If the FAFSA is filed using an incorrect PIN, a new FAFSA must be filed.

Selection for Verification
- The U.S. Department of Education may need additional information for verification of the information on the FAFSA. Simmons College may also select your FAFSA for verification. If your application is selected, you will be required to submit the following:
  - A signature Verification Worksheet—you can download it online at http://www.simmons.edu/financialaid/financialaid/howtoapply
  - A copy of the student’s 2010 Federal Tax Return—2-page and schedule.
  - Copies of the student’s 2010 W-2 forms.

Website

Student Financial Services’ website is housed at www.simmons.edu/financialaid. The website is divided into sections by topic and then by viewer. Students must visit the website in order to download any required forms; however, there is a multitude of other resources available on the website, such as loan calculators and links to other useful websites. The website is extremely detailed and contains a wealth of information should students choose to go searching
for it. It may be necessary to inform and remind students of how valuable a resource the website can be.

![Figure 5 - Screenshot of Simmons College Student Financial Services’ Website. Retrieved from www.simmons.edu/financialaid](image)

**Missing information letters**

The FAFSA is not the only documentation required by Simmons College in order to award a student financial aid. If a student’s FAFSA is selected for verification, either by the institution or by the government, the office of Student Financial Services must collect copies of student and parent tax documents as well as the Federal Verification worksheet. Even if a student is not selected for verification the office requires at least one additional form—the
Student Information Form—before a financial aid application will be reviewed. To collect this information, Student Financial Services sends out a missing information letter. The first copy of the letter is sent by mail as soon as the office has received a student’s FAFSA. Subsequent copies are sent by email on a bi-weekly basis until the document is received. Student Financial Services makes multiple attempts to contact students when additional information is required, but many students still fail to meet document deadlines. Other contact methods besides mail and email should be developed to address the issue of missing documents.

Dear Student,

In order to complete your application for financial aid at Simmons College for the 2011-2012 academic year, please submit the following items to the Office of Student Financial Services. All documentation should be submitted early as possible to ensure that your financial aid award can be calculated and mailed to you before the deposit deadline for new applicants and before your next tuition payment is due for returning students.

Estimated award statements may be sent to new undergraduate applicants prior to verification of tax information, but all documents must be received before a final award can be determined. Our priority deadlines for financial aid are posted on our website: http://www.simmons.edu/financialaid.

- A completed and signed copy of the 2011-2012 Student Information Form. This form can be downloaded from the Simmons College website at: http://www.simmons.edu/financialaid/help/forms

If you have any questions regarding the requested documents, please contact the Office of Student Financial Services at (617) 521-2001 or sfs@simmons.edu for more information.

Sincerely,

Student Financial Services

**Figure 6 - Example of a Missing Information Letter**

*Award packets*

Once a student is awarded financial aid he or she receives an award packet in the mail. Included in this packet is an award guide with an assortment of necessary, yet overwhelming, information regarding the financial aid listed on a student’s award letter. The guide also provides
instructions on the necessary steps students must take in order to accept their awards, including the step-by-step directions for completing the Master Promissory Note and Entrance Counseling for their Loans. Also included in the award packet is information about the PLUS loan, a brochure about the College’s tuition payment plan, as well as brochures developed by the Department of Education, which cover topics ranging from Direct Loan Basics for Parents to Entrance Counseling Guides for Direct Loan Borrowers. Although these award guides include the most pertinent information for students regarding their loans and how to ensure that their financial aid disburses to the school, many students still fail to complete the necessary requirements or have questions about the very basic terms of their loans. Either these students are not utilizing these guides or the information is not presented in a way that resonates with them.

Billing inserts

Students’ billing statement include several inserts that cover topics, including payment options, information on the payment plan, instructions for making parents authorized users on a student’s account, and instructions for waiving or enrolling in the state-mandated medical insurance. Although this information is included with all the bills, and is also available on the Student Financial Services website, quite a few students still miss billing, payment plan, and medical insurance waiver/enrollment deadlines.

Student Satisfaction Factors

Students are no longer looking for just a quality college education, but rather for the best college experience. Colleges now have to compete for students with more than just their educational offerings and attractive financial aid packages. Students and their families expect an
extremely high level of service from their colleges. Students are an academic institution’s main
customers, and colleges and universities must consider their student’s satisfaction if they would
like to remain competitive. Students are now applying to a multitude of schools and basing their
decisions on several other factors besides just academic offerings, such as amenities, campus
atmosphere, and satisfaction with the offices with which they routinely come in contact
(Sumaedi, Bakti, & Metasari, 2011). Factors that influence a student’s satisfaction include
developing a sense of belonging, connecting with campus life, and the quality and frequency of
interactions with faculty and staff members (Hoover, 2010).

Quality of Relationships

Students must feel as if their college experience is worth the price, and this assessment
includes the quality of relationships they form with various professionals along the way.
Colleges and universities must utilize a more customer-oriented attitude when dealing with
students and make an effort to form personalized relationships with those they are serving. At
Simmons College the majority of general inquiries directed at Student Financial Services are
handled by the front line staff, and students often never get the opportunity to form connections
with the Office’s financial aid counselors or student account representatives. The building of
these relationships could improve customer satisfaction. In addition to creating the impression
that the financial aid office cares about them as individuals, a counselor could potentially be able
to look further into a student’s situation and determine additional eligibility that was unknown to
a student. Both the student and the Office could benefit from this exchange.
**Perceived Quality**

Perceived quality has a significant effect on student satisfaction, and colleges must work to maintain and improve this image (Sumaedi, et al., 2011). In order to increase satisfaction, organizations need to focus on the quality of services as well as address the issues that lead to misunderstandings on the part of the customer. Oftentimes, perceived poor quality has everything to do with customer expectations not being in line with the service provided, such as when a student neglects to turn in requested documents but still expects his or her award to be completed on time (Pham, Goukens, Lehman, & Stuart, 2010). Additionally, when dealing with financial concerns, students are frustrated and worried about how they are going to pay the bill, and no matter the type of service they are provided there is still a perception that they are not receiving their fair share of financial aid. In some cases, if students are not receiving the answer they desire, they become dissatisfied. On occasion, if they did not file their FAFSA or turn in their documents on time, in their minds it is the fault of Student Financial Services. In these situations the only way to increase satisfaction is to ensure that the proper information is provided to these students in a timely manner, thereby preventing this animosity from growing in the first place.

**Quality of Information**

Another way to increase student and parent satisfaction is to ensure that communication materials are providing them with the information they seek in an easily understandable and relatable manner. Highly customized and personalized messages should be tailored to the particular needs and preferences of various audiences by using multiple communication channels (Lewison & Hawes, 2007). By delivering these customized messages, and by focusing on
audience-specific mediums, Student Financial Services could enhance the effectiveness of their communications with students and their families, as well as increase their overall satisfaction with the Office.

**Student Satisfaction and Retention**

Increasing student satisfaction with Student Financial Services could greatly benefit the office as well as Simmons College as a whole. One of the major reasons students withdraw from a university is due to affordability and cost. Financial hardship can greatly affect a student’s self-esteem and his or her focus, making it difficult to pass courses. However, financial concerns can be overcome when students feel connected to their campus and have built relationships with those they feel they can trust (Scannell, 2011). By encouraging students to develop relationships with Student Financial Services’ staff members, a student’s overall satisfaction with their college experience can be increased. These connections can influence students who are wavering on the decision to withdraw.

**Financial Literacy**

In addition to building relationships with their constituents and making sure their needs are met, Student Financial Services also need to be addressing their personal development. Students will not be satisfied with their college experience if they do not feel as if they have gained knowledge that will help them succeed after graduation. Given the current rough economic times, students have lost their confidence and are searching for knowledge on personal finances from sources they feel they can trust. College students are increasingly looking to their academic institutions for reliable resources for building real-life money management skills.
Improving Student Satisfaction

(Golden, 2011). If Simmons College, together with Student Financial Services, begins expanding its financial education offerings, they will be providing students with the necessary resources and tools to succeed in the future, making them more successful alumni and increasing their overall perception of the institution.

**Importance of financial literacy**

Student Financial Services continuously sees students who are having a difficult time paying their tuition or securing adequate financial aid. However, if the goal of Simmons College is to create responsible students, then a goal of Student Financial Services should be to help create fiscally responsible students. Many college students today lack the experience to make financial decisions on their own. For many of them, parents are highly involved in their day-to-day activities, and college is the first opportunity they have to make financial decisions. When faced with financial pressures, many students reduce their spending habits by not only cutting back on dining and entertainment, but also by avoiding other necessities, such as delaying going to a doctor. In addition, a student’s financial situation in college can greatly affect his or her academic performance and can result in the individual leaving school. Financial literacy is the knowledge that helps students live within their means, plan for the future, and make wise decisions about how to manage their money. By providing this information Student Financial Services will be preparing students for their future.

**Current financial literacy educational offerings**

Simmons College has made several attempts to foster financial literacy in its students. One of the undergraduate academic course offerings includes a personal finance class, which
Improving Student Satisfaction

covers topics such as personal financial statements, taxes, money management, risk management, and wealth distribution (Simmons College Undergraduate College, 2011). However, this course is not required and not every student has the opportunity to take it. A relatively new development by Simmons in regards to financial literacy is the Financial Empowerment Seminar. All Simmons graduates are expected to attend this seminar, which deals with successful senior transitions and focuses on debt reduction, establishing credit, investing, and budgeting. While this event provides seniors with an overview of the importance of personal financial planning, financial literacy information should be provided throughout all four years of a student’s collegiate career.

Real-world applications

Being a higher education institution, Simmons has a responsibility to teach these students about real-world financial lessons. Many students underestimate the impact that their student loan and credit card debt will have on their lives after college. There is a seven percent nationwide loan default rate among recent college graduates (Bahls, 2011). This statistic is something Student Financial Services should be working diligently to improve. An efficient way of relaying this information must be determined to ensure that students understand and retain the severity of this information. In addition to debt reduction and credit information, students need to be prepared for life after graduation. Those students who have lived on campus their entire college career will have little experience creating a budget or renting an apartment, and could greatly benefit from tools and resources on these topics. Parents might also play a key role in their students’ financial awareness. It is absolutely essential that parents not only be educated on the types of aid available to their students, but also on the repayment that will be required should
they or their students take out any loans. Student Financial Services could provide the resources that facilitate the conversations students and their families have about responsible spending and personal finances.

**S.W.O.T. Analysis**

**Strengths**

Student Financial Services employs staff members who are experts in their respective fields and who together possess a great deal of experience when it comes to dealing with financial aid related topics. The staff is friendly and committed to meeting the needs of their students and families. Financial aid counselors rotate the responsibility of being “on-duty” in order to ensure that someone is available should a student walk in without an appointment and a need to speak with a counselor. The front desk staff is sufficiently trained and capable of answering a variety of general questions. In addition to valuable staff members, the office has a variety of other strengths when it comes to communicating with students. Student Financial Services operates an advanced, user-friendly, and informative website that students can access to locate various documents that provide essential information for them to apply, accept, and understand their financial aid and tuition obligations.

**Weaknesses**

Although Student Financial Services does give students the opportunity to meet with financial aid counselors in person, there is a lack of face-to-face communication between students and their families with financial aid staff. Students are not required to ever meet with their financial aid counselors to discuss loan amounts and repayment information, and it even
seems as if there is reluctance on the part of the counselors to offer guidance to students about their loans debt upon graduation. Another weakness would be the lack of notification methods currently being used to reach students. If students do not respond to the emailed missing information letter the first three times it is sent, there is not a back-up method to reach these students. Additionally, Student Financial Services tends to only reach out to students if something is required of them and thus they are typically forced into situations where they have to react to problems as opposed to proactively trying to prevent the problem from occurring in the first place.

**Opportunities**

Student Financial Services sees many repeat customers—students who are appealing their financial aid award decisions, having a difficult time finding the resources to cover their semester’s tuition, or dropping off separate components of their financial aid application. However, there is a whole segment of the Simmons population that never enters the office. Many of these students are not even aware of who their financial aid counselor is, even though they have been applying for and receiving aid every academic year. Other students might not have any financial needs or issues paying their bills on time, yet they could still benefit from contact with Student Financial Services, especially if the office begins providing financial literacy information. There is an opportunity to extend the office’s reach to encompass those students who are not late in applying for financial aid or past due on a bill. The office also has an opportunity to implement and experiment with other methods of communication in an effort to engage those students who are not receptive to the established contact methods.
Threats

Student Financial Services is often in communication with first-year students who are typically not responsive to discussions about the long-term effects of borrowing, budgeting, and other financial implications of living on their own. Students, especially those just beginning their college careers, are significantly more concerned with classes, roommates, and campus life than they are about the financial process which makes these experiences possible. In addition to students’ preoccupation with other interests, another threat would be losing students to other higher education institutions. Colleges and universities compete with financial aid packages, and given the harsh economic times, financial factors have a major effect on whether students choose to attend or even stay at an academic institution.

Industry Examples

Many other academic institutions have successfully implemented unique methods for communicating their financial aid information to students and their families. These methods include added features on their websites, their use of social media platforms, their financial literacy efforts, and their means of building one-on-one relationships with their students.

One of the first resources people tend to seek out when looking for information about a topic is an organization’s website. Therefore, colleges and universities need to ensure that their websites are well organized, user-friendly, and tailored to their audience. Some great examples of college financial aid websites include information not found on most institution’s site. For example, in the undergraduate student section of their financial aid website, the University of California at Davis has a tab devoted entirely to parents. The topics addressed are based on the questions their office frequently receives from parents about the financial aid process. Another
example would be the University of Maryland, which has added a financial literacy section to its website that includes information on financing college, budgeting, credit, and long-term financial planning. The site, which links from the main financial aid site, stresses the importance of financial literacy to the students and warns them of the dangers of not beginning to pay attention to their personal finances.

Furthermore, several financial aid offices at various universities have started experimenting with social media outlets, including both Facebook.com and YouTube.com. Dartmouth College and Brigham Young University have both created Facebook pages that guide students to important components of the financial aid process. There are links to FAFSA, Direct Loans, downloadable forms and scholarship applications, as well as contact information for their offices. Both schools have a considerable number of students who “like” their pages as well as their posts directing them to outside resources, such as a list of the best money management applications for their smart phones. Student are clearly engaging with and utilizing the information provided on these Facebook pages, and it is likely they would not have gone searching for this information on their own.

In terms of video communication, Vanderbilt University, the University of South Carolina, and Arizona State University are just a small sample of higher education institutions that have created a series of informational video clips that are included on their websites and uploaded to YouTube. Some of these videos are housed under their university’s own YouTube page and others are included on their own financial aid office page. Topics include Financial Aid for Unemployed Parents, FAFSA filing Tips, Insider’s Guides, and the Financial Aid process. Each clip is geared towards both students and their families. Some of these videos have quite impressive video statistics, including a high number of total views and favorable ratings. Based
on some of the comments, students and their parents greatly appreciate these resources and have found the videos to be extremely valuable to their understanding of the financial aid process.

Other universities and colleges are using financial aid requirements as a way to compel students to start utilizing and entering their offices. For example, Augustana College in Illinois requires that students come into their financial aid office to complete Entrance Counseling and their Master Promissory Notes in person. When students arrive, they must meet with a representative from this office to complete these loan requirements. This practice benefits both the student and the office, as the student has the opportunity to ask and receive answers to any questions he or she may have, and this introduction provides the foundation for students and their counselors to build a strong relationship. The College has even taken this approach a step further by inviting parents into the process as well. There is also the chance that this effort will not only ease communication with the office, but also initiate financial literacy-related conversations between students and their parents (Bahls, 2011).

**Recommendations**

In order to increase student satisfaction and keep students engaged with Student Financial Services, the Office needs to be more proactive and increase their visibility on campus. By adopting popular technological mediums, which appear more user-friendly, information distributed by Student Financial Services is more likely to be read and followed. Improved communication would result in an increase of satisfied students who are engaged in conversations with the Office rather than confrontations. After a review of Student Financial Services’ current communication methods, as well as research on their target audience and various factors that affect a student’s experience, the following recommendations are being made
to increase student engagement and satisfaction. These recommendations involve using multiple channels to support the same key messages.

**Email Efforts**

Student Financial Services routinely sends out emails to students, whether they are notifications of newly uploaded billing statements, loan disbursements, reminders to complete additional requirements or requests for verification information. The majority of these emails require a formal tone, but some of them, such as the reminders, could be presented in a more aesthetically pleasing manner. In the past these have been plain text emails, occasionally including an attachment with images, but going forward these reminders should be created in an HTML format. Unlike plain text emails, HTML messages are more attractive and compelling to readers. Layout, color and images can greatly affect the consumer’s ability to process and enjoy the content of an email (Email Marketing Best Practices, 2011). If readers find communication from Student Financial Services easier to read, more of them will actually take the time to read the information and click on any links provided. Friendly and seasonal messages could go out to students on a regular basis reminding them to reapply for financial aid, file a FAFSA for the new academic year, complete their Stafford Loan requirements, sign up for a payment plan, or check their online account for a...
new billing statement. Students will be much more receptive to this type of communication than a plain text email.

**Monthly Newsletter**

In addition to these reminder postcards, monthly e-newsletters could improve the way students relate to the Office and could help students feel as if they are more informed and aware of any developments in the financial aid process, such as changes in Stafford Loan regulations. The use of a product such as Constant Contact, which allows for HTML content, as well as tracks and records who opens the emails, could help Student Financial Services tailor the newsletter to their students’ interests (Constant Contact, 2011). This adjustment is a project that everyone in the Office could participate in. Financial aid counselors could rotate writing articles based on their particular areas of expertise, such as financing a study abroad trip. Information about looming scholarship applications deadlines, how to find a work-study position, or where to attend a smart budgeting course could all be included to enhance students’ experiences.
Website Updates

Student Financial Services’ website is an excellent tool. It is well organized and provides detailed and up-to-date information. However, there are a few modifications that the Office could make to increase their level of service to constituents.

Parent section

Parents are one of Student Financial Services’ target audiences. They are expected to be highly involved and responsible throughout the financial aid process, and yet there is no literature directed solely towards them. Adding a parent tab to the department’s homepage could increase visibility to this demographic. Important information to include would be how to apply for the Parent Plus Loans, what to do if they are recently unemployed, divorced, or separated, how to obtain a Personal Identification Number (PIN) to electronically sign their student’s FAFSA, how to understand the bill, and how to speak to their students about credits cards and other personal finance issues.

Financial literacy information

The website also needs to be updated to include a section on financial literacy information. Currently there are very few resources on the site regarding the matter, and research shows that students not only need this information, but are also expecting their academic institutions to provide it for them. Additional links to loan and repayment calculators could be added, as well as links to additional resources concerning budgeting, money management, and other personal finance information.
Social Media

Social media tools “are key to communicating with this generation of students and have opened the lines of communication for both students and institutions” (Hawkins, 2009, para. 2). The use of social media in higher education institutions has grown tremendously, and Simmons College Student Financial Services should be making use of the medium.

Facebook profile

Many offices on the Simmons Campus have their own Facebook profiles, including the School of Management, the College of Arts and Sciences Graduate Admissions, the Study Abroad Office, the Communications Department at Simmons College, and Beatley Library. Facebook now has over 750 million active users with nearly 35% of these being college-age (18-25) adults (Statistics, 2011). Student Financial Services should create and maintain its own Facebook page in order to connect with their students on a platform they are familiar with. In order to be effective, this profile is going to have to be consistently updated with information that Simmons Students find beneficial. Members of the Student Financial Services team, or even the Office’s work-study students, could easily update the profile. General information, deadlines, and contact information for the Office and financial aid counselors will be easily accessible to students. Updates could include information on new scholarship searches, personal money management, and how to access a free credit report. Lastly, any links to Student Financial Services’ social media sites would need to be added to the Office’s website homepage.
Branded YouTube page

A series of short videos explaining various parts of the financial aid process could be produced by Student Financial Services and uploaded to a branded YouTube page. Topics could include how to apply for aid, meet your counselor, how to navigate the website, how to read an online billing statement, and so on. In the description of the video, the Office could include the links to various forms, Student Financial Services websites, other key websites, the counselors’ contact information, and various other helpful resources. The links to the videos could be posted on the website, on the Facebook page, and included in e-newsletters. These videos will give a face and voice to the Office.
Video is an efficient way to grab an audience’s attention. It allows for essential information to be delivered in a shorter period of time, which is more convenient for people and their hectic lifestyles. People tend to be much more excited, and therefore more likely, to watch a short video than they are to read a detailed document.

![Example SFS YouTube Page](image)

**Figure 11 - Example SFS YouTube Page**

**Desired Effects**

All of the above methods of communication serve to help create a more student-centered environment for the Office of Student Financial Services. By being proactive and presenting the Office as welcoming, caring, and helpful, students will be more likely to seek out and utilize
assistance from the Office. More students need to be entering their financial aid counselors’ offices, and one of the ways to achieve this goals is to make it clear to students that the Office is accessible and its staff is willing to form a relationship with them. The counselors’ walk-in hours should be prominently displayed on the Office’s bulletin boards, on the website, mentioned in the newsletter, and advertised on various social media pages. Student Financial Services desires to create relationships with their students that last throughout their four years at the college.

**Indicators of Success**

The ultimate indicator of success would be increased satisfaction scores the next time students complete the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory. The College has plans to conduct this survey every three years moving forward. Another possible indicator of success would be a more in-depth survey of a sample of current undergraduate students to determine their opinions on the Office’s website, materials, accessibly, friendliness, and helpfulness. This survey, which could be conducted on an annual basis, would allow Student Financial Services to determine which methods are working and which need to be tweaked in order to maintain their students’ attention.

Student Financial Services tracks the amount of visitors to the Office and even notes whether they spoke with only the front desk or if they met with a financial aid counselor or student account representative. An increase in the number of visitors to the Office, as well as a significant increase in the amount who meet with those other than the client services representatives, would indicate that efforts to draw more students into the Office are working, and that students are finding their counselors more accessible. If these efforts are successful, counselors should also see an increase in the amount of students making appointment to see them
in person. One final benchmark would be to track the number of visits to the website and newly developed social media pages to gauge their functionality.

**Conclusion**

To improve overall satisfaction with their office, Student Financial Services needs to get creative and start looking for new ways to connect and engage with their students. Traditional methods of communication are no longer sufficient in reaching key constituents. Student Financial Services must look elsewhere to adopt new and innovative communication mediums that will retain these students’ interest. Students and their families are no longer satisfied with the minimal level of service; they want to feel as if they are receiving thoughtful and personalized consideration from the Office. These families are stressed about the financial aspect of college, and they need to believe that Student Financial Services is an advocate, not a hindrance.
References


