

# Ventura County Community College Financial Aid Program

## REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

After receiving a citizen's complaint #96-34 regarding delays in students' financial aid disbursement checks the 1995/96 Ventura County Grand Jury conducted an investigation into the Financial Aid Program procedures at Ventura County Community Colleges.

## BACKGROUND

Student financial aid is available through a variety of programs funded at the state and federal levels. Students can receive funds for vocational training and academic programs at colleges and universities if they qualify under guidelines that determine their financial aid eligibility. Students who have financial needs may apply for assistance with expenses related to continuing education.

The financial assistance ranges from simple book vouchers and fee waivers to aid packages which may amount to \$6800.00 per annum, excluding loans.

## PROCEDURES FOLLOWED

- Met with complainant to discuss allegations.
- Interviewed Financial Aid officers at Oxnard, Ventura and Moorpark Colleges.
- Interviewed Extended Opportunity Program & Services (EOPS) Coordinators from all three colleges.
- Met with the chairman of the "Governing Board Financial Aid Task Force".
- Interviewed students who had received their financial aid in a timely manner as well as students who had problems receiving their aid on time.
- Met with a member of the Ventura County Community College Board of Trustees.
- Met with the chancellor of the Ventura County Community College system.

## FINDINGS

- Financial Aid officers, EOPS Coordinators, Financial Aid Task Force, VCC Board of Trustees and the Chancellor were all aware that problems exist regarding the distribution of financial aid awards to students.
- There is no administrative position at the district wide level or at individual colleges with the authority and responsibility for developing and overseeing uniform guidelines for all offices involved in financial aid services.
- There is no apparent cooperative effort to find solutions among the offices involved in providing these student services. Each office is attempting to solve these problems without communicating with each other.
- Frustration was voiced in all offices involved over the lack of meaningful communication

regarding these problems. The EOPS and Financial Aid offices are situated in the same building in close proximity.

- Problems related to cooperation and delayed payouts appear to have begun when the student services administrator position was eliminated in 1993.
- Distribution of financial aid funds to students is governed by strict federal and state regulations. These include eligibility requirements based on: need, U.S. citizenship or legal non citizen, satisfactory academic progress, enrollment in a program leading to a degree or certificate, and completing the program in the prescribed length of time and with the proper amount of accrued credits.
- County Financial Aid Officers (FAO) meet regularly with the statewide Financial Aid Administrators Association to deal with the complex federal and state issues/regulations.
- Disagreement exists among the student services offices regarding how strict the interpretation of the state/federal regulations must be.
- Students can be denied financial aid disbursements if they fail to provide necessary documents/information, fail to fulfill their obligations to maintain a 2.0 grade point average, fail to complete the required number of courses in the prescribed time frame.
- One of the most prevalent reasons for delays in pay outs is the lack of required documents and other necessary information students must provide.
- Applications for financial aid that are filed at the last minute do not give students time to collect missing documents/information in time to avoid delays in pay outs.
- Formal meetings for all students approved for financial aid packages, designed to underscore requirements for maintaining their eligibility, were discontinued during budget cuts.
- If a student loses financial aid eligibility for any reason, an appeals process is in place, however, disbursement checks will probably be delayed while decisions are made.

**Concerns from EOPS Coordinators regarding student disbursement delays included:**

- Students are placed on "Suspension" status instead of "Probation" which results in loss of financial aid until the following semester or until an appeal is filed and approved.
- Delays in receiving financial aid checks have resulted in some students having to drop out of school.
- There is a lack of clear, advance notice from the Financial Aid Office to students regarding their status and the probable consequences if they are not meeting eligibility standards.
- The language of the "Satisfactory Academic Progress Standards" information sheet developed to assist financial aid students is too technical, not "user friendly", was written without involvement of offices/personnel affected by provisions.

**Concerns of students included:**

- Major difficulties if financial aid checks are delayed.
- Small temporary loans of \$100 from EOPS were not enough to pay for books so students

could start classes.

- In some cases students felt they had not been treated with respect by employees who worked at the counters in Financial Aid offices.
- One student could not get all the information needed. The student stated that the various offices blamed each other and no one came up with all the information needed to straighten out the problem.
- Students who met all requirements did not have problems with disbursements.
- Once a problem arose, it was difficult to get back on track even with constant efforts to determine what course of action the student needed to take.

**Concerns from Financial Aid officers regarding student disbursement delays included:**

- Other student services offices do not understand how rigid financial aid regulations have become. Since 1992 the 600 pages of government regulations have risen to 1300 pages.
- Financial Aid Offices are responsible to federal and state agencies for the proper distribution of funds and are subject to audit and possible pay back of funds if found in non-compliance.
- The number of students applying for financial aid more than doubled since 1992, even as district wide enrollment fell.
- The work in Financial Aid Offices is cyclical. The greatest need for more staff is from July to November when applications are being processed and pay outs are being made.
- Some offices do not encourage student accountability in the matter of maintaining financial aid assistance.
- A new software program called "Power Faids" is now in place which will expedite delivery of financial aid to eligible students.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The 1995/96 Ventura County Grand Jury recommends:

1. The Board of Trustees should create an Administrative position or positions with the authority level to develop and implement operational procedures that would call for full cooperation among Financial Aid offices, EOPS offices and student Counseling offices in order to deliver financial aid assistance to students in a timely manner.
2. Funds should be allocated in this year's budget to hire temporary part-time help in Financial Aid offices to process financial aid applications during the crucial months before the fall semester begins.
3. Formal meetings should be reinstated for all students who have been awarded financial aid packages. These meetings should be designed to disseminate crucial information on maintaining eligibility.
4. All offices including Financial Aid, EOPS, Disabled Students and Counselors, who are involved in providing services to students should operate in a coordinated manner and should be knowledgeable about necessary information regarding financial aid

requirements.

5. Procedures regarding financial aid should also be uniform among all three colleges so that transferring students are not confused regarding requirements.
6. Forms to disseminate federal/state requirements and student responsibilities for achieving and maintaining financial aid eligibility should be cooperatively developed by student services offices who use them.
7. Lines of communication among student services offices must be established and used to solve problems.
8. Student accountability must be encouraged and expected as a factor in continuing receipt of financial aid.
9. Inservice training should be presented to all staff involved in the financial aid process so that all employees can disseminate correct/consistent information to students.
10. Supervisors must train staff members who serve at the counters to be courteous to all students.
11. Administration must promote mutual respect for the skills and expertise of employees in student services offices.

#### RESPONSES REQUIRED

Chancellor of Ventura County Community College District

Ventura County Community College Board of Trustees