

Chapter V. Office Systems and Coordination

An essential part of performing a thorough program review is to evaluate an institution's systems and procedures for administering Title IV funds. The primary focus of the program review is to identify systemic problems at an institution. Discussions should be held with the appropriate managers to identify how the systems work, and whether there are any obvious weaknesses. Review of the school's records will demonstrate whether the systems work as they are designed.

The following is a basic overview of the responsibilities of offices involved in the Title IV process at an institution:

The Admissions Office usually makes the initial determination of who is eligible to enroll, based on institutional, accrediting, or licensing requirements.

The Academic Advising/Student Counseling Office usually decides what program of study students are accepted into, based on information provided in the admissions process. This office may require adjustments to students' programs (e.g., requiring remedial coursework).

The Registrar/Records Office usually confirms enrollment criteria (e.g., confirms high school graduation), records and tracks students' status throughout their enrollment at the school.

The Financial Aid Office determines eligibility, awards financial aid, and authorizes the disbursement of funds;

The Bursar/Business Office/Student Account Office/Fiscal Office/Comptroller's Office usually bills students, disburses funds to students and/or their accounts, draws federal funds, maintains fiscal records, and reports on the use of federal funds;

A very small school may have two people coordinating all these processes, whereas a larger school will have a more complex and segmented organization. For example, a large school may have a Bursar's Office to handle student charges, disbursements, payments and refunds. However, a separate Comptroller's Office may be responsible for taking student disbursement information from the Bursar's Office in order to draw federal funds, and for completion of reports. The school may even have a separate payroll office which maintains the records of payments made to students under FWS.

It is suggested that the reviewer determine as quickly as possible the structure of the organization in order to plan staff interviews. It is important to discuss with different managers how information passes between the various offices, and which office is responsible for what tasks (e.g., Which office determines satisfactory academic progress? Is it the Financial Aid Office, the Registrar, or perhaps the Bursar?)

An institution must have systems which allow for the coordination of information between different offices. For example, if the school's admission application collects information about prior schooling, this information must be shared with the Financial Aid Office (FAO). Many students report different schools on their admission application than they report to the FAO, and the institution cannot assume that information will always be reported consistently when the same question is asked on different forms. Similarly, students sometimes apply to the Registrar to transfer credits from prior schools not reported to either Admissions or the FAO. The FAO may be responsible for collecting financial aid transcripts, but failure to coordinate information received in other offices may cause a breakdown in this process.

If a school maintains a computer system, determine if the system allows sharing of one office's data with another. For example, does the financial aid staff have access to the admissions data, and do they review it?

Coordination of information within offices is also important. For example, many schools have students complete statements authorizing the retention of funds in excess of direct charges for budgeting assistance. How does the school track which students *don't* complete the retention authorization? The school may assume most students will sign the statement, and not worry about the few that don't. If there is no adequate system of tracking, and many students withhold authorization, the school may have a significant problem with credit balances not paid to students.

Understanding the institution's procedures may also help determine the cause of a problem when the responsibility for performing the task resides with more than one office. For example, untimely refunds may be the result either of 1) the Records Office's delayed determination that a student dropped out; 2) the FAO's delay in calculating the refund; 3) the Business Office's delay in issuing the refund check; or 4) possibly all of the above!

The complexity of the Title IV regulations and statutes requires continuous coordination of information offices. The discussions of the focus review items in this guide provide some insight into specific systemic problems commonly encountered.