

# Increasing Student Access, Success and Equity: California Community College Student Focused Financial Aid Policies

Financial Aid Office Operations Taskforce  
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COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
LEAGUE OF CALIFORNIA



# OVERVIEW

Low-income California Community College students are facing a crisis. For over thirty-years, California's community colleges have had the largest free tuition program in the country, and even students who do not qualify for a waiver pay the lowest tuition fees in the nation<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, our students live in some of the most expensive markets in the country, and tuition waivers are just not enough. As a result, they struggle to pay high living costs which include housing, transit to and from school, books, and other expenses. It is clear that much more than just tuition and fees present obstacles to college access and affordability.

Additionally, the state's system of financial aid for California's community college students is systematically broken for our students. Despite comprising two-thirds of the students in this state, California's community college students receive only six percent of the funding distributed by the Cal Grant system.<sup>2</sup>

Once the total amount of financial aid a student is eligible to receive is subtracted from the total cost of attendance – living costs in addition to tuition – it is more expensive for a low-income student to attend a community college than either the University of California or the California State University.<sup>3</sup> This inequity hinders our students' ability to take more classes, focus on academics and graduate on time.

Thus, it is imperative that our colleges work to maximize the amount of financial aid our students receive for which they are eligible. A taskforce composed of trustees, CEOs, and financial aid administrators has held a series of meetings over the past year to discuss various policies, practices, and procedures a college can implement to help their students maximize their financial awards and receive them in a timely manner.

## PURPOSE

This paper is crafted to assist colleges with accomplishing two priority goals:

- 1. Reduce institutional and procedural barriers that prevent students from receiving the maximum financial aid for which they are eligible to assist them in completing their educational goals, and**
- 2. Improve the disbursement of financial aid in a timely manner using data-driven decisions to mitigate institutional risk.**

This document is intended as a framework of recommended best practices for college financial aid operations to identify a clear and transparent process to outreach and assist students in qualifying for financial aid and to help colleges increase their delivery of financial aid awards to students. Through a review of existing processes, increased opportunities to serve students may become more apparent. The framework is also intended to provide suggested metrics and board updates so that trustees and CEOs might better understand how their financial aid office is operating and better understand the intent of the policies and procedures presented to the district for possible implementation.

It is important to note that reducing institutional and procedural barriers while maximizing financial aid awards must be a district-wide commitment. It will require a campus culture shift, with departments ranging from academic instruction and information technology to business services working together to maximize student financial aid awards. To be successful, financial aid departments will need to be supported by faculty, staff, campus administration, and boards of trustees.

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1 Ma, J., Baum, S., & Libassi, C. J. (2018). *Trends in College Pricing*. New York, CA: College Board.

2 Cochrane, D. (2016). *How and Why to Improve Cal Grants: Key Facts and Recommendations* (Rep.). Berkeley, CA: The Institute for College Access & Success.

3 *What Does College Really Cost for Low-Income Students across California?* (Rep.). (2016). Berkeley, CA: The Institute for College Access & Success.

# FRAMEWORK RECOMMENDATIONS

To reach the outlined goals, this framework utilizes the following approaches to guide operational improvements and recommends best practices for Financial Aid Offices, including:

- An annual review of financial aid data with an emphasis on using data that is contained in MIS reports.
- Questions that trustees and CEOs can ask regarding current financial aid policies or procedures.
- Suggested ways of setting goals for both the college and the financial aid department.
- A series of appendices intended to provide best practices to help trustees, CEOs, and financial aid offices maximize the amount of resources that go towards their students.

## Annually Review Financial Aid Data

To get a better understanding of how a financial aid office is functioning, a board could ask for and receive an annual report of various metrics on the process in which students obtain their financial aid. An annual report would give the board information needed to analyze if the current practices of the financial aid offices and other departments are maximizing awards and services. It also could form a baseline for goal setting by campus leadership.

It is important to note that in order to have effective reports, collaboration with the campus research or information technology departments will be essential. Many of the data elements below may not be readily available in the financial aid office and therefore a college will need to be intentional about who is involved in crafting these reports.

### Colleges could track and report various metrics, including the following items:

- Application Processing
- Award Disbursement
- Maximization and Utilization of Awards
- Student Satisfaction

## Application Processing

Financial aid offices receive a large number of financial aid applications with technical information that can be hard to process. It is important to have an understanding of the number of applications a financial aid office receives and how the office processes these applications.

### A report to a board of trustees could show:

- How many financial aid applications were received for prospective and enrolled students over the past year?
- How many were successfully processed (resulted in a financial aid award disbursed)?
- What is the staff time needed to process the average CADAA application?
- What is the average length of time to process a financial aid application that was not flagged for verification?
- What is the average length of time to process a financial aid application that was flagged verification?
- What type of support is provided to help students in the application process?
- What are the communication strategies that help support students in the application completion process?

## ***Award Disbursement***

After students submit their applications for an award, they must then wait for the Department of Education and the college to process their applications. This could result in delays in the disbursement of their awards.

### **A report could show...**

- What percentage of eligible students received aid in the first disbursement that were eligible to do so?
- How often does your college disburse financial aid and refunds during the term?
- During the academic year, what is the average length of time a student waits between file completion and payment?

## ***Maximization and Utilization of Awards***

Depending on a number of factors including income and number of units taken, a student may be eligible for multiple awards. Additionally, since many of the most substantial financial aid programs are based on full-time enrollment status, students might be one or two units away from significantly increasing their award amounts.

### **A report could show...**

- How many students were eligible for awards but did not receive them?
- How many students were eligible for a Pell Grant but did not utilize it?
- What percentage of students with a Pell eligible Expected Family Contribution (EFC) received a Pell Grant?
- How many students were eligible for a Cal Grant B Access Award but reported a Leave of Absence with the California Student Aid Commission?
- What percentage of those eligible for the Student Success Completion Grant received it?
- What percent of those eligible for the California College Promise Grant received it?
- What percent of those eligible for the California Promise program (AB 19) participated in it?
- How many students were one or two units away from qualifying for the Student Success Completion Grant?
- How many students were one or two units away from qualifying for the California Promise Grant program?

## ***Student Satisfaction***

It is important that your college has an understanding of how students feel about your institution's customer service policies and how students are being served.

### **A report could show...**

- Is the financial aid office conducting annual reviews, surveys, or focus groups to determine student satisfaction?
- What are the results of the research?
- How many students are being consulted?
- Is the survey sample size representative of the campus community?

## **Questions Trustees Can Ask Regarding Current Financial Aid Practices**

Financial aid offices have some discretion around how they process applications, what documents they require, and how to verify information. Financial aid directors must balance the competing priorities of remaining compliant with federal and state financial aid regulations and ensuring all eligible students receive financial aid awards in a timely manner.

If financial aid office policies swing too far in one direction, eligible students may not receive awards or may face delays in receiving those awards. On the other hand, a college could increase its vulnerability for a federal program review or audit, which may result in financial penalties for the college. Each college must locally determine the appropriate balance between procedures that mitigate institutional risk and meeting student needs.

Below are some questions that boards of trustees can ask to gain a better understanding of the policies and procedures their college has put into place to achieve the balance.

### ***Cal Grant and Pell Grant Lifetime Eligibility Limits***

Currently, students are eligible for up to the equivalent of four full-time years of Cal Grants and six full-time years for Pell Grants. Students who attend less than full-time will have awards prorated. Utilizing financial aid awards is important to academic success at a community college. However, the academic careers of many part-time students may last longer than the equivalent of four or six years of full-time enrollment and as a result, may exhaust their eligibility for Cal or Pell.

In these cases, students are occasionally informed not to utilize their Cal or Pell Grants while at a community college. While this advice preserves a student's ability to utilize their financial aid awards at a four-year institution, it may come at the cost of increasing the difficulty to succeed academically at a community college.

#### **Important questions to ask...**

- What are the guidelines that financial aid administrators or campus staff use to inform students to not utilize their Cal or Pell Grant during their time at a community college?
- How many eligible students are electing not to utilize their Cal or Pell Grants?
- How much money do students not receive due to electing to defer their Cal or Pell Grants?

### ***Communications and Outreach***

Reaching out to prospective college students is a significant part of getting students to fill out the FASFA/CADAA and obtaining much needed financial aid. This requires financial aid departments to work with local high schools and other applicable entities.

#### **Important questions to ask...**

- What are the current outreach and communications efforts targeting prospective students who are not coming directly out of high school?
- What is the current outreach and communications efforts regarding prospective students who are coming directly out of high school?
- Does the financial aid office have dedicated staff for individual high schools?
- Does the campus have dedicated lab space available for incoming students to complete the FASFA/CADAA?
- Does your college conduct workshops for incoming students to help them complete the FASFA/CADAA?

### ***Disbursement and Refunds***

Colleges can determine certain aspects regarding when financial aid awards are disbursed. The Department of Education requires funds be available for books and supplies before the eighth day of the term for students who are:

- Eligible to have their financial aid disbursed ten days before the beginning of the payment period, the school could have disbursed FSA funds to the student; and of those funds would have created an FSA credit balance.

Some schools make limited funds available via a Pell book voucher at the campus bookstore and then make remaining disbursements after the census date. Other schools disburse aid to students ten days in advance of the term (the earliest allowed by federal regulations), so students can choose where to buy books and supplies or use funds for other expenses (i.e. rent, parking permits, etc.).



### **Important questions to ask...**

- What is the college's disbursement policy?
- Has the college determined the impact of holding disbursements until after census date?
- How often does the college disburse funds (generally on a monthly, weekly or daily basis)?
- Are the students receiving enough aid early enough to be able to obtain the books and supplies needed to successfully complete reading and other assignments during the first 4 weeks of class?

### **Loans**

Student loans can be a vital part of a student's financial aid options. Without access to Federal Direct Loans, a student may have to decide to either work more or take out high-interest loans on the private market. While student borrowing should be done responsibly, it may be reasonable for a student to take on debt if it increases their chance of academic success and completion.

### **Important questions to ask...**

- Does the college participate in the Federal Direct Loan program? If not, why?
- Does the college pre-package loans? If not, what is the loan application process?
- What percent of students borrow?
- What is the college's three-year cohort default rate?
- Does your college take advantage of the Chancellor's Office default prevention and financial literacy tool?
- Does the college use a third-party service to manage default rates?

### **Required Documents**

Federal and state laws require certain documents when students apply for financial aid. To resolve conflicting information, perform EFC recalculations and process dependency overrides, colleges are federally required to request additional documentation. However, the Department of Education specifically prohibits schools from holding disbursements for requests beyond federally required documentation.

### **Important questions to ask...**

- Is the college requiring documents beyond what is required by federal and state law?
- If so, in what instances?
- Can staff quantify how many eligible students were denied funding due to not turning all federally required documents but could have received financial aid?
- Can staff quantify how many eligible students were denied funding due to not turning all institutionally beyond federal law required documents but could have received financial aid?
- Is your college utilizing effective technology to communicate with students regarding missing documentation?

### **Professional Judgement**

Many low-income students, particularly disadvantaged students such as those who are homeless, have incomplete information regarding their parents' income which prevents them from completing the financial aid application. Financial aid administrators can utilize their professional judgement by interviewing students and collecting documents to substantiate changes to the student's dependency status.

Other examples of Professional Judgement include recalculating Expected Family Contribution (EFC) due to loss of income and increasing Cost of Attendance (COA) for certain allowable expenses. Well-thought-out institutional policies should permit professional financial aid administrators to make these determinations while also mitigating the college's risk of sanctions by the Department of Education.

### **Important questions to ask...**

- What are the college's policies for utilizing professional judgment?
- Are policies student-focused while at the same time mitigating the risk of Department of Education sanctions for the college?
- Who has the authority to determine a dependency status override?
- Who has the authority to process EFC and COA adjustments?
- How many students did not receive their financial aid awards due to their FAFSA/CADAA missing a parent signature?

### ***Satisfactory Academic Progress***

Students who do not make Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) are in danger of losing their financial aid awards and are at heightened risk of dropping out of school. It is crucial that your college be proactive in reaching out to these students and connecting them to services that might help them maintain an acceptable GPA and pace of completion to continue qualifying for financial aid.

### **Important questions to ask...**

- How does the college communicate when a student is in danger of losing financial aid due to not meeting SAP?
- Does your college have an "early alert" type of system in place to proactively connect these students to tutors and other academic supports?
- What are the academic support structures that are provided to students who are in danger of losing their SAP?
- What is our SAP appeal process?
- Is our SAP appeal process both student-focused and orientated towards mitigating institutional risk?
- How often is a SAP run? By term? Annually?

### ***Verification***

Verification is the process in which colleges are required to collect specific documents to validate information certain data fields on the FAFSA/CADAA. Required verification can range from something as simple as confirming household size or as complicated as providing complete copies of tax transcripts. Colleges are only required to verify applications that are flagged for verification by the federal government, but they do have the discretion to verify more applications to resolve conflicting information.

### **Important questions to ask...**

- What are the college's verification policies and procedures?
- What is the average financial aid application processing time after a student has provided accurate verification documents?
- Are there certain types of verification requests that take longer to review?
- How many enrolled students that were selected for verification and did not supply the requested documents?
- Does the college verify more applications or data elements than are required by the federal government? If so, why?
- If the college requires verification beyond what is required by the federal government, what are the most common elements?
- Does your financial aid office utilize approved alternative methods of receiving tax documents? If not, why?
- If the college requires verification beyond what is required by the federal government, what are the average processing times for those applications?
- If your college requires verification beyond what is required by the federal government, how many students did your institution flag for verification and were not able to supply the requested documents ?
- How many enrolled students that were selected for verification and did not supply the requested documents?

### ***Collaboration with Other Departments***

Financial aid offices do not exist in a vacuum. Maximizing financial aid awards depends on various departments within the college working together. Trustees should be asking questions about how the goal of maximizing financial aid awards is being advanced by inter-departmental cooperation.

## Goal Setting for Your College and Financial Aid Department

Once a college has an understanding of both how well it is currently providing financial aid to its students and its current policies and procedures, colleges should set measurable goals for maximizing the financial aid awards that students receive. They could include increasing the number of eligible students receiving financial aid, increasing their award levels or increasing the retention of those students. Effective goal setting should follow the following principles:

### ***Aspirational but Attainable***

Specific goals should be set with the intention that one of the tracked metrics be improved, but goals should be realistic and relevant. Colleges should consider what policies and procedures might need to be changed or how increased resources are needed to achieve that goal. They also should have a specific implementation timeline so that the college can track its progress.

### ***Crafted by Practitioners***

Financial aid directors and their staff, with input from other various campus entities, should be central to setting these goals. They have the experience and understanding of the challenges our students face obtaining financial aid and will have most of the responsibility in implementing the goals. Goals imposed on the financial aid office without input from them and other stakeholders may not be achievable.

### ***Legal and Ethical***

Care must be taken to ensure that goals tied to the delivery of financial aid dollars do not create an environment in which financial aid officers are incentivized to violate federal regulations or ethical principles. These rules and principles have been put into place to protect students as consumers of higher education and to reduce wasteful spending of taxpayer dollars. Thus colleges and financial aid offices need to be cognizant of such rules when setting goals.



# Appendix A: Four Things Trustees Need to Know About Financial Aid Offices

## 1. Compliance Focus vs. Student Service Focus:

Financial aid offices have various amounts of discretion, relating to the documents they require, how often they verify applications, overriding the need of required documentation and how appeals are handled for students who are in danger of losing their financial aid awards due to lack of satisfactory academic progress. In general, financial aid offices have the discretion to increase the level of scrutiny or request more documentation than necessary to ensure taxpayer dollars are not fraudulently spent. Consequently, this could reduce the number of low-income students who receive awards or increase the length of time it takes them to receive those awards.

It is important for trustee boards to establish policies and procedures that strike a balance: reducing artificial barriers that prevent low-income students from receipt of their awards, while ensuring that the college remains compliant with federal and state law. A financial aid office should feel empowered to make decisions in the student's best interest wherever possible.

## 2. Financial Aid for all Students, Including Non-Traditional Students:

It is relatively simple for financial aid offices to reach out and serve students who are coming to our institutions directly out of high school. Coordination with high school counselors, financial aid workshops, and a natural audience of students at school make outreach programs to this population relatively effective. It is more difficult to serve students who are returning to school or coming to our institutions directly out of the workforce. Thus, it is essential that financial aid offices develop outreach plans and procedures that effectively serve both traditional and non-traditional students. Financial aid offices should be funded appropriately to be able to provide outreach support.

## 3. Access to Federally Subsidized Loans:

While it is important to minimize student debt, it is critical that our students be given the choice to determine what debt level is appropriate for them. Without borrowing, our low-income students will either need to work more rather than take additional classes or take out expensive private loans. Thus, the subsidized loan borrowing rate can have direct implications on the success of him or her at your college. Prospective students should be given all of the information they need to make an informed choice on whether or not borrowing is right for them.

While colleges can be sanctioned for having a too high cohort default rate, existing law provides protections for institutions with very low loan participation rates. In general, your college will likely be protected from sanctions due to these protections, but it is important that your financial aid office takes proactive steps to keep the risk at manageable levels. However, high cohort default rates can result in the requirement of the financial aid office to develop, implement and submit an administrative burdensome plan to reduce the cohort default rates.

## 4. Annual Reports:

It is difficult to make meaningful reforms without tracking how you are currently serving your low-income students. Annual reports tracking how many eligible students do not obtain their awards, common reasons why students were denied their awards or how long it takes students to obtain those awards and other elements would be helpful in guiding the discussion at the CEO and board level.

# Appendix B: The CEO Role in Leading Financial Aid Offices, What a CEO Needs to KNOW and DO.

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR WHAT A CEO NEEDS TO KNOW:

### 1. Financial Aid for Non-Traditional Students:

It is relatively easy for financial aid offices to reach out and serve students who are coming to our institutions directly out of high school. Coordination with high school counselors, financial aid workshops and a naturally captive audience of students at school makes outreach programs to this population relatively effective. It is harder to serve students who are returning to school or coming to our institutions directly out of the workforce. Thus, it is essential that financial aid offices develop outreach plans and procedures that effectively serve both traditional and non-traditional students. Financial aid offices should be funded appropriately to be able to provide outreach support.

### 2. To Loan or Not to Loan?

While it is important to minimize student debt, it is critical that our students be given the choice to determine what debt level is appropriate for them. Without borrowing, our low-income students will either need to work more rather than take additional classes or take out expensive private loans. Thus, a student's utilization of the subsidized loan program can have a direct implications on the success of him or her at your college. Prospective student should be given all of the information they need to make an informed choice on whether or not borrowing is right for them. In general, your college will be protected from sanctions related to cohort default rate due to the low numbers of students who borrow, but it is important that your financial aid office takes proactive steps to keep it at manageable levels.

### 3. Compliance vs. Student Service Focus: A Sliding Scale:

Financial aid offices have various amounts of discretion in several areas relating to the documents they require, how often they verify applications, overriding the need of required documentation and how appeals are handled for students who are in danger of losing their financial aid awards due to lack of satisfactory academic progress. In general, financial aid offices have the discretion to increase the level of scrutiny or documentation more than necessary to ensure taxpayer dollar are not fraudulently spent, but these reduce the number of low-income students who receive those awards. As a CEO it is important to set policies and procedures in place that reduce artificial barriers that prevent low-income students from receiving those awards while ensuring your college is compliant with federal law. It is important for CEOs to establish policies and procedures that strike a balance: reducing artificial barriers that prevent low-income students from receipt of their awards, while ensuring that the college remains compliant with federal and state law. A financial aid office should feel empowered to make decisions in the student's best interest wherever possible.

### 4. Professional Judgment:

Applications for financial aid now rely on may utilize income data that is up to two years old. Financial aid administrators have the ability to use professional judgment to replace the prior-prior year data with current year estimated income data, so that student eligibility is determined by their actual income while they are going to college. Aid administrators also have the ability to provide a "Dependency Status Override" for students under the age of 24 with special circumstances that prevent them from supplying parental income and asset information. Aid offices also have great flexibility in designing Satisfactory Academic Progress policies, and related appeal policies. CEOs should encourage financial aid administrators to design student-friendly processes and policies if this is the case at your college.

## **5. Return to Title IV (R2T4) Institutional and Student Obligations to Return Unused Financial Aid:**

If a student receives a financial aid award but does not complete his or her term, your institution may be required to return a small percentage of those funds back to the federal government. The student also has an obligation to repay the federal government, known as return to Title IV. At some colleges, financial aid disbursement policies are designed to reduce the financial obligation to the college – most commonly this is done by delaying disbursements until after census. The result is that some students who need their financial aid funds at the beginning of the term drop out because they have not received their disbursements. It's important to collect data on these students to see if there is any commonality that new policies or procedures can address.

## **6. Potential Instability of Key Financial Aid Programs:**

Existing categorical funding financial aid programs such as the California Promise Program or the Student Success Completion Grants are contingent on an appropriation by the state legislature in the Budget Act. While both programs are funded out of ongoing revenues, they may be reduced or cut back during budget cuts forced in the next recession. Thus, it is always important to consider what can occur to your students and promises you have made to your community when building programs based on these funds.

## **7. Disbursements:**

Timing of financial aid disbursements can impact the continued enrollment of many of our students. Financial Aid Directors should work in conjunction with Business Services to develop an annual disbursement schedule that ensures students are receiving financial aid disbursements timely. Disbursement rules allow institutions to issue a first disbursement to students 10 days in advance of the start of the semester for standard and non-standard term programs, the only exception is programs awarded in clock hour. Disbursement calendars should reflect disbursement frequency needed to ensure timely aid to the student once they have completed the financial aid process. If your college does not provide early disbursements to students, it may be necessary to create a book advance voucher program to ensure that students have access to purchase required course materials at the start of the semester. Institutions that use a third-party refund partner such as; BankMobile or NelNet, should have a process in place to communicate and assist students in setting up their refund preference with the third-party partner. Students who do not establish a refund preference will have delayed access to their aid as a result.

## **IMPLEMENTATION BASICS OR WHAT A CEO NEEDS TO DO:**

### **1. Ensure trustees have a basic understanding of how financial aid works on your campus.**

Your trustees cannot set appropriate board policies and procedures without a basic understanding of how your financial aid office operates, the concept of being compliance or student service focused and the various financial aid awards that are offered. Periodically you should review the previously mentioned items with your elected trustees, so they are up to date on how your institution is serving low-income students.

### **2. Empower financial aid staff to become navigators.**

To help students through the confusion and jargon, work with your financial aid leadership to create and support a culture where financial aid staff help students to navigate the ins-and-outs of a complex system. While this is not an easy shift due to time and staffing limits, we lose too many students who are not able to complete these processes.

### **3. Develop metrics meaningful to your college or district to measure trends.**

It's difficult to make meaningful reforms without tracking how you are currently serving your low-income students. Annual reports tracking how many eligible students do not obtain their awards, common reasons why students were denied their awards, the length of time it takes students to obtain their awards, and other elements would be helpful in guiding the discussion at the CEO and board level.

### **4. Participate in CEO-level discussions about financial aid.**

With the emphasis on financial aid metrics contained within the Student Focused Funding Formula your colleagues are talking about their college's financial aid more than ever before. To keep up to date on current best practices of financial aid policy, it's important that you dialogue with your colleagues at workshops, conferences and other events.

### **5. Ensure financial aid is integrated into every level of conversation at the college about student success.**

Financial aid offices are essential to the academic success of low-income students. They are also one of the first parts of campus to interact with these students and continue to work with them throughout the students' time at your institution. Thus, their perspective and information are essential to any conversations or planning around student success rates. It's important to include representatives from that office in those discussions.

### **6. Review resources available for Financial Aid operations. Maintenance of effort may not be sufficient by itself.**

Though processing financial aid award applications has grown more complex and reporting requirements to both the federal and state governments have increased, the state budget allocations for financial aid operations have not grown since 2003-04. Thus, it's important to annually review how many resources, if any, your college is putting into the financial aid office above the state allocation and determine if that is enough to reasonably achieve your college's goals.

### **7. Solicit student feedback.**

Obtaining student feedback is critical to ensure that your financial aid offices are student friendly. There are various ways to solicit feedback, ranging from surveys, focus groups, open office hours near the financial aid office and other methods. It's only after you have received systematic feedback from students will you get an accurate picture of how their experience with the financial aid office impacted their time at your institution.

# Appendix C: Best Practices for Student Friendly Financial Aid Policies and Procedures

## Outreach

Specific activities to provide financial aid information to current and prospective students to maximize financial aid applications.

### Best Practices

- Design an outreach program with intentional strategies based on student and program type. For example, orientations could be geared toward adult learners or part-time students or based on program type (CTE, AA/AS, transfer).
- Utilize targeted call/text campaigns to “nudge” students to complete their FASFA or CADAA.
- Use clear and relevant language to explain the available financial aid programs.
- Offer multiple application workshops in different formats such as online webinars or classroom presentations and times that are convenient for both traditional and non-traditional students.
- Engage the parents and guardians of high school students during high school outreach events.
- Identify disproportionately impacted students as defined in the college’s equity plan and provide targeted application support through the entire process for these populations.
- Partner with other student services programs to host “one-stop” outreach events.

## Culture

The overall character and personality of the Financial Aid Office that portrays the attitude, behavior, and policies of your staff

### Best Practices

- “Trust the student” by placing more focus on student needs rather than compliance above all else.
- Design policies and procedures with the student in mind that are flexible and supportive.
- Offer professional development of staff in the areas of emotional intelligence, how to work with a diverse student population, etc.
- Assess key decision-making in the processing of financial aid applications and empower front-line staff to make routine decisions that do not require director-level approval.
- Provide students with resources (in-person and virtual help, computer lab, etc.) to assist them with the financial aid process.

## Community College Promise Grant

The California College Promise Grant is for students attending a California community college and waives per unit tuition fees.

### Best Practices

- Auto package CCPG with import of ISIRs and CALSIR.
- Contact enrolled students that have an outstanding fee balance and no financial aid application to encourage them to apply for the CCPG.
- Partner with Admissions and Records to identify and contact students in danger of being dropped for non-payment who have not applied for CCPG or financial aid.

## File Processing

The review of financial aid applications to determine eligibility, the need for additional documents and awarding of aid.

### Best Practices

- Consider processing financial aid files in other than a first come, first serve basis including the following options:
  - Process files with Zero EFC first.
  - According to disadvantaged categories such as foster youth, veterans, first generation students, homeless, etc.
- Implement an emergency file review procedure.
- For all others, use a first come, first served process.
- Contact students often and early to encourage them to complete their financial aid file.
- Start the file review process without requiring the student to appear in person with a photo ID (unless the student is selected for V4 or V5 verification).
- Leverage available technology to utilize auto-packaging.
- Contact students with rejected FAFSA/CADAA to help them understand and correct fix the reject reason.
- Have clear timelines to help students manage expectations.
- Ensure all staff are trained in basic file processing to help process files during high volume times.

## Verification

The process in which the federal Department of Education where colleges are required to collect specific documents to validate certain data fields on the FAFSA as required by the Department of Education.

### Best Practices

- Verify only the applications selected by FSA or where conflicting information presents itself.
- Use software programs where possible to streamline the verification process.

## Conflicting Information

Conflicting information is any discrepancy between the student's financial aid application and all other information available to the school that could materially affect impact eligibility for financial aid or the amount of aid.

### Best Practices

- Recognize situations seem to require additional documentation, but in fact do not, such as:
  - Low income or no income.
  - \$0 income with dependents.
  - Number of exemptions on tax return.
  - Non-custodial parent claimed dependents on taxes.
- Do not "look for" conflicting information by asking students to verify certain data elements when not selected for verification.

## Award Letters

Financial aid award letters outline the details of the financial aid package offered to students.

### Best Practices

- Help students understand their award by providing true and actual college costs by explaining cost-of-attendance calculations and indicating costs that are actually paid out (fees, books, supplies).
- Provide clear identification and proper grouping of each type of award indicating whether the award can result in a disbursement to the student.
- Inform students about estimated award level as early as possible in the financial aid application process.
- Avoid using financial aid jargon and include a reference to a glossary of terms used in the award letter.



## Disbursement

The payment of financial aid funds to cover outstanding fees or as a refund to the student.

### Best Practices

- Disburse financial aid ten days before the start of the term for students with complete financial aid files. While it could increase a liability risk to the institution, it would increase student success by getting financial aid dollars to students earlier.
- To minimize Return to Title IV risk to students, disburse multiple times per term.
- Utilize a direct deposit mechanism for financial aid refunds.
- If in use at your campus, prioritize bookstore authorization.
- Offer direct deposit to students.

## SAP

Satisfactory Academic Progress – Qualitative and quantitative academic progress standards students must meet to remain eligible to receive financial aid.

### Best Practices

- Adopt SAP policies consistent with FSA requirements, but not more stringent.
- Eliminate or reduce manual verification of satisfactory SAP.
- Counseling and Success Specialists should develop innovative intervention strategies that recognizing that students have unique needs which require tailored guidance and support. Examples might include:
  - Student peer intervention programs.
  - High-tech, low-touch vs. high-touch, low-tech “Refresher” orientations that outline how students remain eligible
  - How changes in their educational plan can affect them and how to complete a successful scholarship search).
- Collaborate with other student services programs to provide resource repository for students.
- Create flexible SAP appeal policies that are clear to students.

## Loans

Direct subsidized and unsubsidized loans.

### Best Practices

- Consider pre-packaging subsidized Direct loans.
- Provide pre-college loan counseling to enable students to make informed choices.
- Provide financial literacy and awareness sessions to help students become financially literate and understand their financial aid status when they leave your campus.
- Participate in the federal subsidized loan program.

## Professional Judgment

The authority of a school's financial aid administrator to make adjustments to the data elements on the FAFSA or CADAA to recalculate the Estimated Family Contribution (EFC) and to override a student's dependency status.

### Best Practices

- Remain flexible with the type and number of documents required to substantiate dependency override requests.
- Documentation should only be sufficient enough to convince a reasonable person that professional judgment was appropriate, it doesn't have to hold up in a court of law.
- Accept copies of documents instead of requiring originals.

## **Appendix D: Utilizing a Business Process Analysis to Identify Roadblocks in Serving Low Income Students**

Various colleges have conducted a Business Process Analysis (BPA) in which they mapped out how a low-income student applies for, gets qualified and receives financial aid. Colleges have successfully used BPA's to identify roadblocks that our low-income students face and make the case for more automation of the financial aid application. The net result of these BPAs have been a more timely delivery of financial aid awards and the ability of financial aid offices to concentrate valuable staff time on difficult to verify applications.

The following are two examples of campus BPAs. The first was created for MiraCosta College and the other for Sierra College. Both campuses found their BPAs to be helpful in adjusting their financial aid policies and procedures to be more student orientated.

## Special thanks to the following California Community College stakeholders who have provided feedback on the report:

**Gina Browne**, Specialist in Student Financial Aid programs, California Community College Chancellor's Office

**Keith Curry**, Superintendent/President, Compton Community College

**Erika Endrijonas**, Superintendent/President, Pasadena City College

**Tammeil Gilkerson**, President, Laney College

**Cynthia Olivo**, Vice President of Student Services, Pasadena City College

**Ryan McElhinney**, Legislative Advocate, Community College League of California

## Taskforce Members

**Linda Wah**, Trustee, Pasadena City College (Co-Chair)

**Linda Williams**, Director of Enrollment Management and Financial Aid, Sierra College (Co-Chair)

**Kenneth Brown**, Trustee, El Camino Community College

**Jana Cox**, Director of Student Financial Services, Santa Rosa Junior College

**Michael Dear**, Director of Financial Aid and Scholarships, MiraCosta College

**Andra Hoffman**, Trustee, Los Angeles Community College District

**Susan Keith**, Trustee, Citrus College

**Marvin Martinez**, Chancellor, Rancho Santiago CCD

**Rhonda Mohr**, Vice Chancellor of Student Services, California Community College Chancellor's Office (Ex-Officio)

**Tammera Shinar**, Director of Financial Aid and Veterans Services, Butte-Glenn CCD

**Loren Steck**, Trustee, Monterey Peninsula College

**John Weispfenning**, Chancellor, Coast Community College District

**Kellie Williams**, Student Trustee, Los Angeles Community College District

**Sierra  
College**

Nov 10-11  
2010

## Business Process Analysis: Financial Aid

**with Strata Information Group**



## **Workshop Objectives**

Over the last three years, Sierra College conducted a successful implementation of Banner. Strata Information Group (SIG) is continuing to work with the College to analyze and improve their processes. The objectives are to develop better processes and to take full advantage of the existing technology.

To meet the objectives, a two-day Business Process Analysis (BPA) workshop was conducted to examine the financial aid processes at Sierra College. The objectives of the workshop included the following:

- Review the principles of Business Process Analysis (BPA)
- Map the existing processes – from receipt of FAFSA data through refunds
- Analyze the process maps and identify obstacles and potential opportunities for improvement
- Design new processes that enhance service to students, reduce steps for staff, and take full advantage of the technology

Participants represented Financial Aid, Admissions and Records, Bursar, Business Office, Bookstore, and ITS. Kari Blinn, from SIG, facilitated the workshop. Participants were engaged and thoughtful. They worked hard to identify the issues with the current processes – and to articulate ideas for improvement. This document contains the contents and outcomes of the group's efforts.

## **Observations**

During the course of the workshop, participants identified issues with the current financial aid processes. Themes included the following:

- Current processes have many steps
- Processes require much manual effort – paper-intensive
- Process does not flow “horizontally” between departments
- Takes a long time from start to finish
- Many “loop-backs” to previous steps

## Top Opportunities

Over the course of the workshop, participants identified many opportunities for process improvement. At the end of the session, they participated in an anonymous weighted voting exercise. Each participant was given fifteen “votes.” An individual could place all her votes on a single opportunity or spread her votes among several. This allows us to identify which opportunities the group deems most important for Sierra College. It also lets us see if there is an emerging consensus around any items. The results are listed below:

# of Votes	Opportunities
53	Discontinue using paper book vouchers, develop an interface between Banner and PeopleSoft
23	Utilize AppWorx for data loads – sequence jobs to run automatically
19	Require direct deposit – eliminate refund checks
17	Deploy Financial Aid staff at the front counter
16	Discontinue using paper files
16	Deploy Banner Workflow
14	Conduct fit/gap analysis between scholarship process (and systems) and Banner
14	Deploy document imaging solution – identify clear owner, ensure IT engagement
12	Deploy real-time process – continuously (daily) run disbursements, refunds, vouchers, etc.
11	Shorten cycle times – e.g. from application to award, from award to disbursement, from disbursement to refund, etc.
7	Create “fillable” web forms – utilize Luminis, require fields to ensure completeness, etc.
4	Catch problems “up stream” – e.g. at the time paperwork is submitted, application of payment for BOG – so College can rely on automated steps
3	Eliminate shadow systems and duplicate data entry – e.g. Excel, Access
1	Provide way for students to submit documents electronically



## Action Plan

After ranking the top opportunities, participants articulated next steps for each of the top vote getters.

ITEMS	STEPS
<b>Book Vouchers</b>	Automate data pass between Banner and PeopleSoft <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linda will present to Team Leaders</li> <li>• When project gets the “green light”               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Identify stakeholders: Financial Aid, Bookstore, Bursar, Purchasing, IT</li> <li>○ Develop project plan</li> <li>○ Develop new process that eliminates paper</li> <li>○ Create communication plan for students</li> <li>○ Identify other related processes that may be affected – e.g. disbursement</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>AppWorx</b>	Utilize AppWorx to automate data load (and other processes where multiple jobs are run sequentially) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linda will submit PSR</li> <li>• Yvonne will list jobs in order with parameters</li> <li>• IT will execute</li> </ul>
<b>Eliminate Checks</b>	Require students to use direct deposit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linda and Bev will call meeting</li> <li>• Brainstorm ideas (see Appendix A: Opportunities)</li> <li>• Research regulations</li> <li>• Poll other colleges</li> <li>• Determine ways to handle students who do not have a bank account</li> <li>• Explore “accountless” banking</li> <li>• Consider the developmental opportunity – e.g. provide instruction for opening and using a bank account</li> <li>• Provide incentives for direct deposit</li> <li>• Provide disincentives for checks</li> <li>• Communicate with students early in the process</li> <li>• Explore partnership with the credit union</li> </ul>
<b>Staff at the Front Window</b>	Explore placing full-time experts at the front window – “do it right once” – put College’s best people at the front, provides professionalism at first contact, better able to handle sensitive information, more appropriate to communication bad news, combined with new efficiencies to free staff up <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ideas               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Schedule based on load</li> <li>○ Designate a staff member “point person”</li> <li>○ Triage – students do basics, staff handles more complex</li> <li>○ “Pit boss” model – redeploy non-verifier for this during peak periods</li> <li>○ Verify at the counter if all docs received</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

ITEMS	STEPS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide training and a “decision tree” for student workers</li> </ul>
<b>Deploy “Ideal” Process</b>	<p><b>Imaging</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify who owns imaging – e.g. training, maintenance, staying up-to-date on new releases, etc.</li> <li>• Identify who will “champion” the project</li> <li>• Identify requirements, determine if Hershey can meet requirements, if not, conduct procurement process</li> <li>• Hold a meeting to discuss – include stakeholders: Banner Steering Committee, Team Leaders, Mandy, Pat, HR, DSPS</li> <li>• Pat will contact Gary</li> </ul> <p><b>Workflow</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Currently in the 3-year Master Plan, but not prioritized</li> <li>• Identify who will “champion” the project</li> <li>• Pat will get this on the Banner Steering Committee agenda</li> <li>• Scott will contact SGHE for a demonstration and a list of examples</li> </ul> <p><b>Write Pop Sels and E-mails</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify students “ready to review” – Patty will write</li> <li>• Patty will write e-mail to send to students when packaging is complete – include link to web to view award</li> </ul> <p><b>Run Disbursement and Refunds Daily</b> (discontinue weekly batches, move toward 24/7)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start after add/drop period</li> <li>• Negotiate with County</li> <li>• Consider one PELL disbursement</li> </ul>
<b>Conduct Fit/Gap Analysis for Scholarships</b>	<p>List requirements for scholarship process – e.g. data fields needed, reports/extracts needed</p> <p>Review Banner fields to find a “home” for the fields identified in step above</p> <p>List any gaps that remain</p> <p>If gaps are small, migrate scholarship process to Banner – or consider entering all scholarships after they are awarded</p> <p>Determine eligibility based on data in Banner – e.g. GPA, major, # of units</p> <p>Bonnie, Linda, and Mike will follow-up</p>

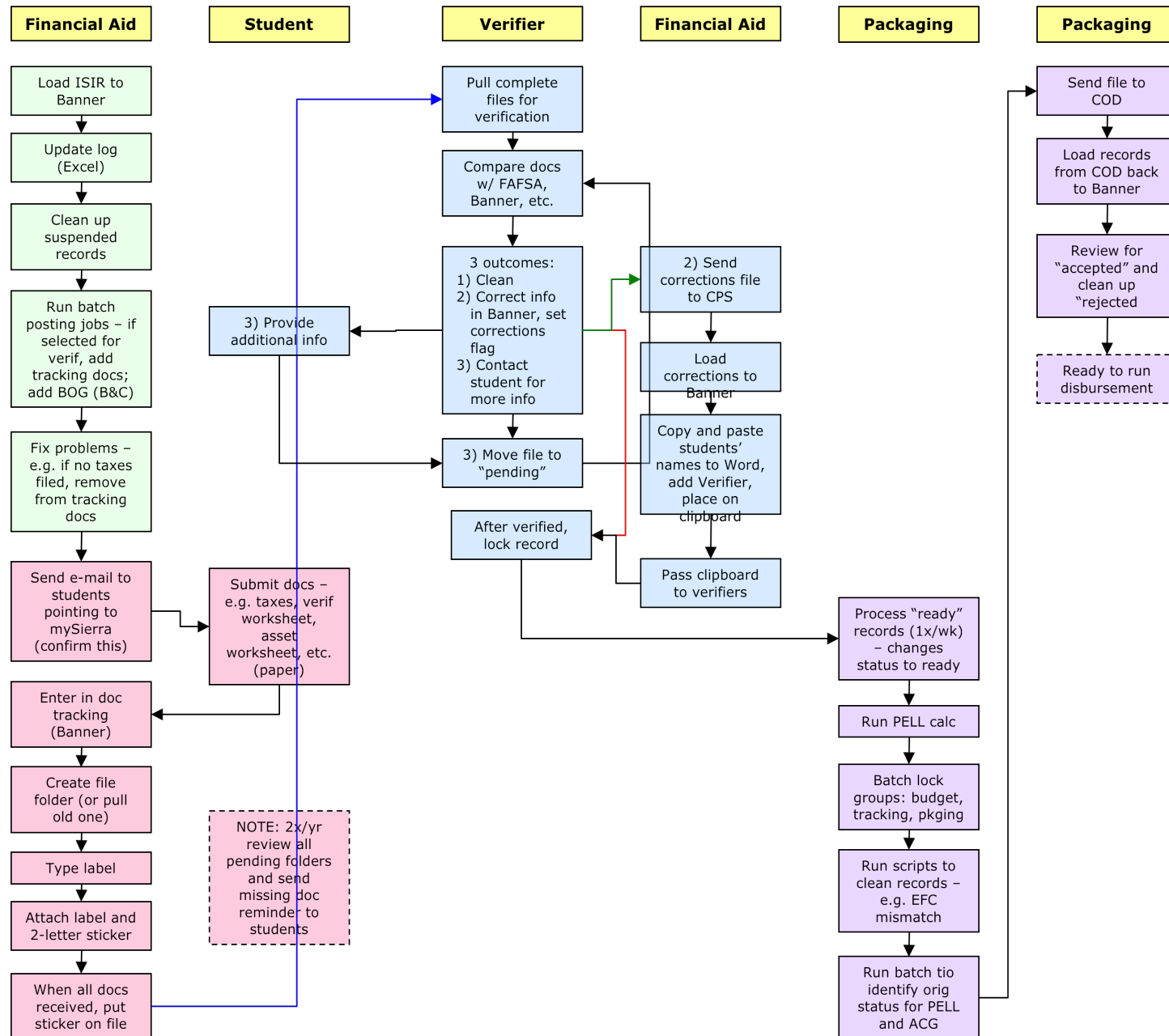
## **Process Maps**

Mapping processes with stakeholders serves as a vehicle to:

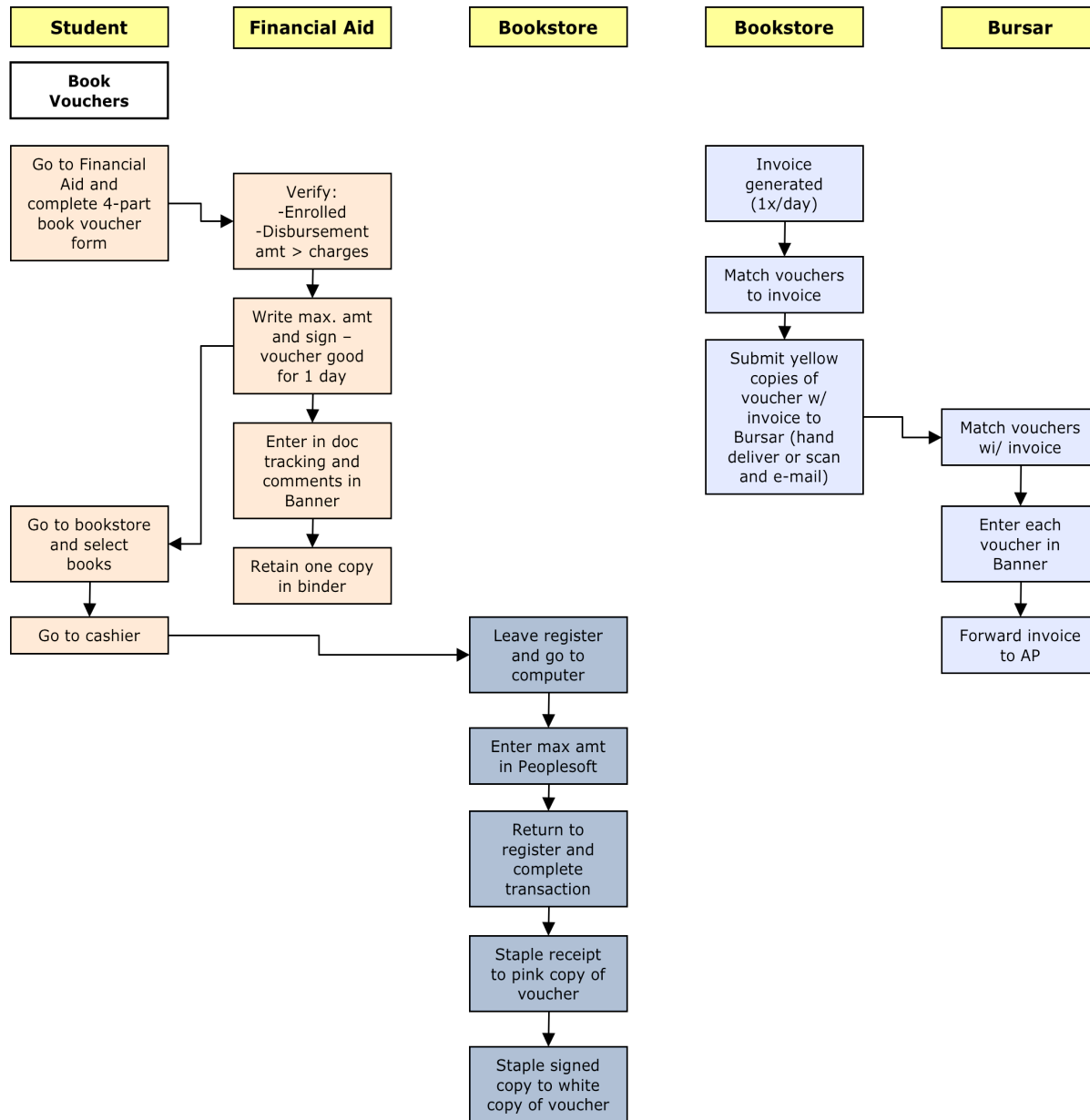
- Identify issues with the current processes
- Work together to develop clear, streamlined, consistent processes
- Take full advantage of new technology

The pages that follow include the maps of the current processes, objectives for the new process, and an “ideal” process map. The idea is to use the ideal map as a guide for the team as they implement the opportunities.

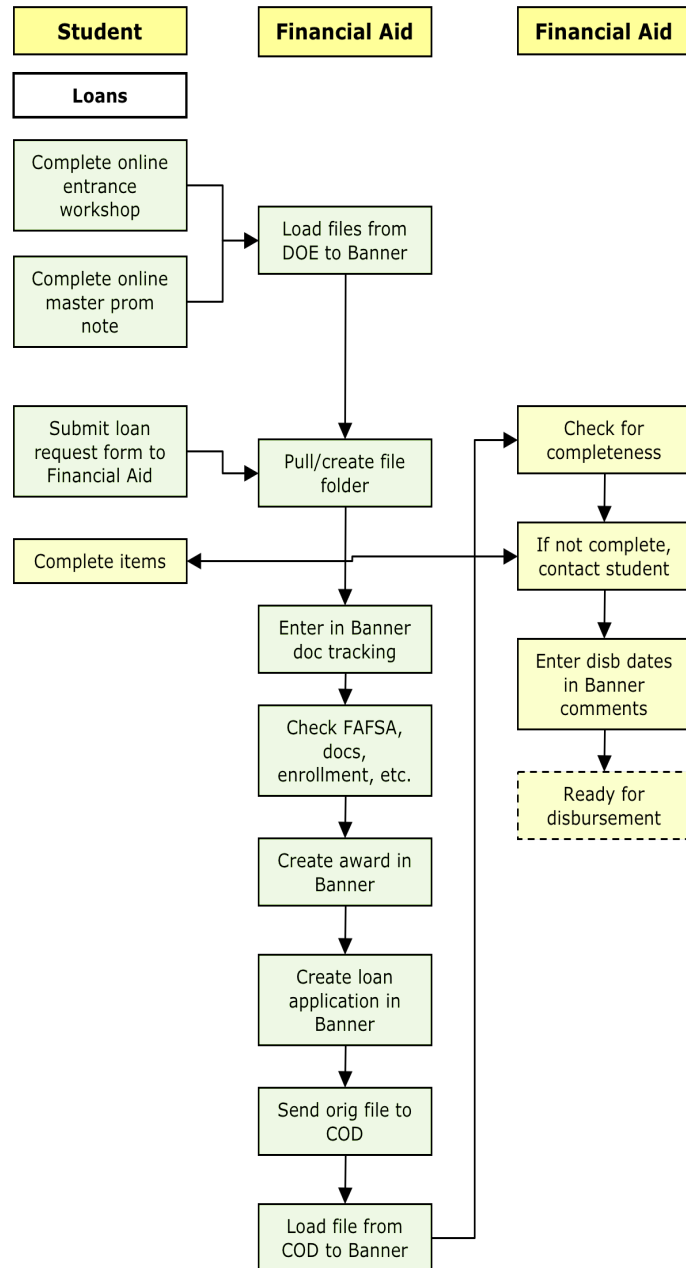
## Current Financial Aid Process



## Current Financial Aid Process (cont.)

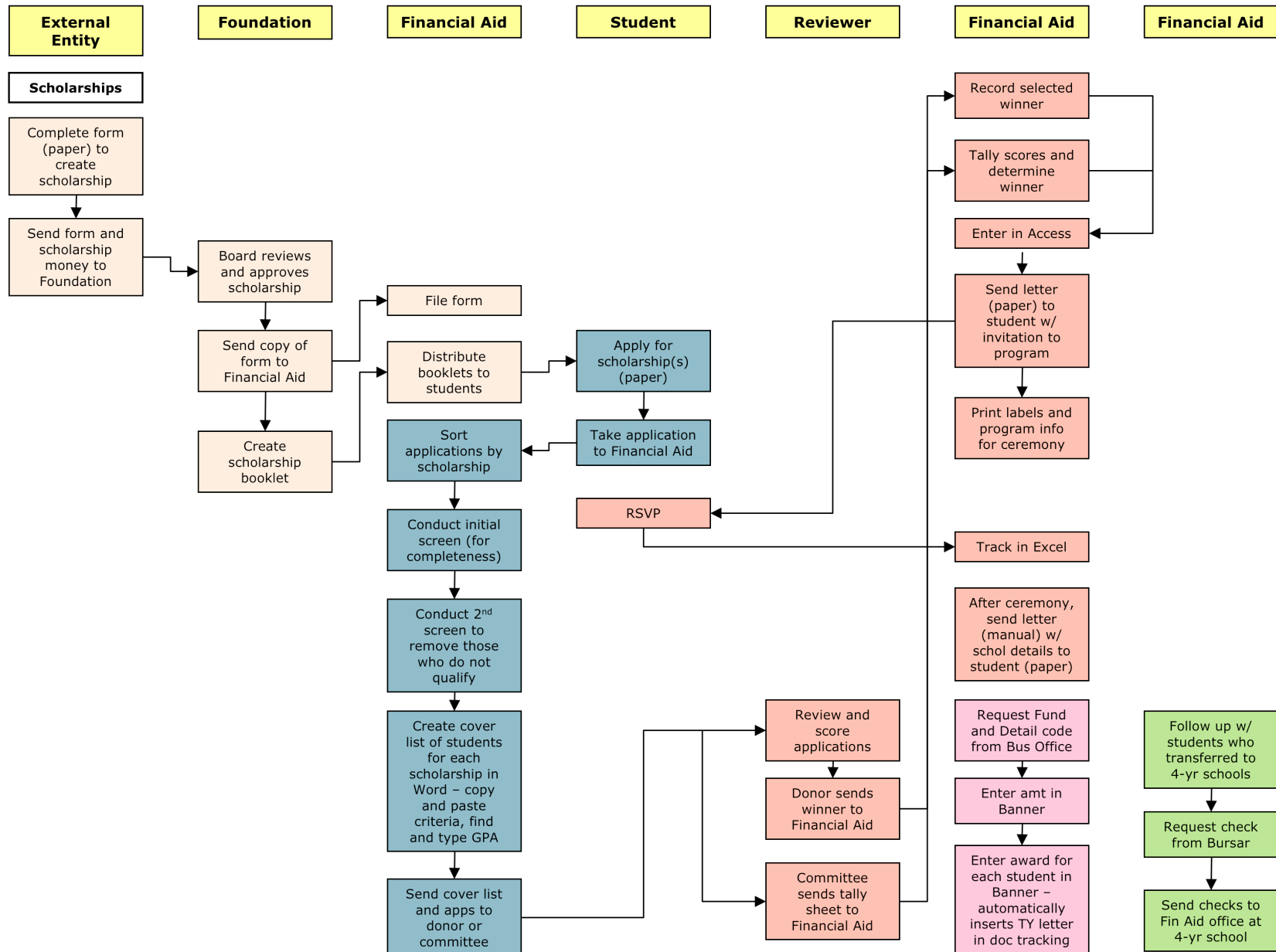


## Current Financial Aid Process (cont.)

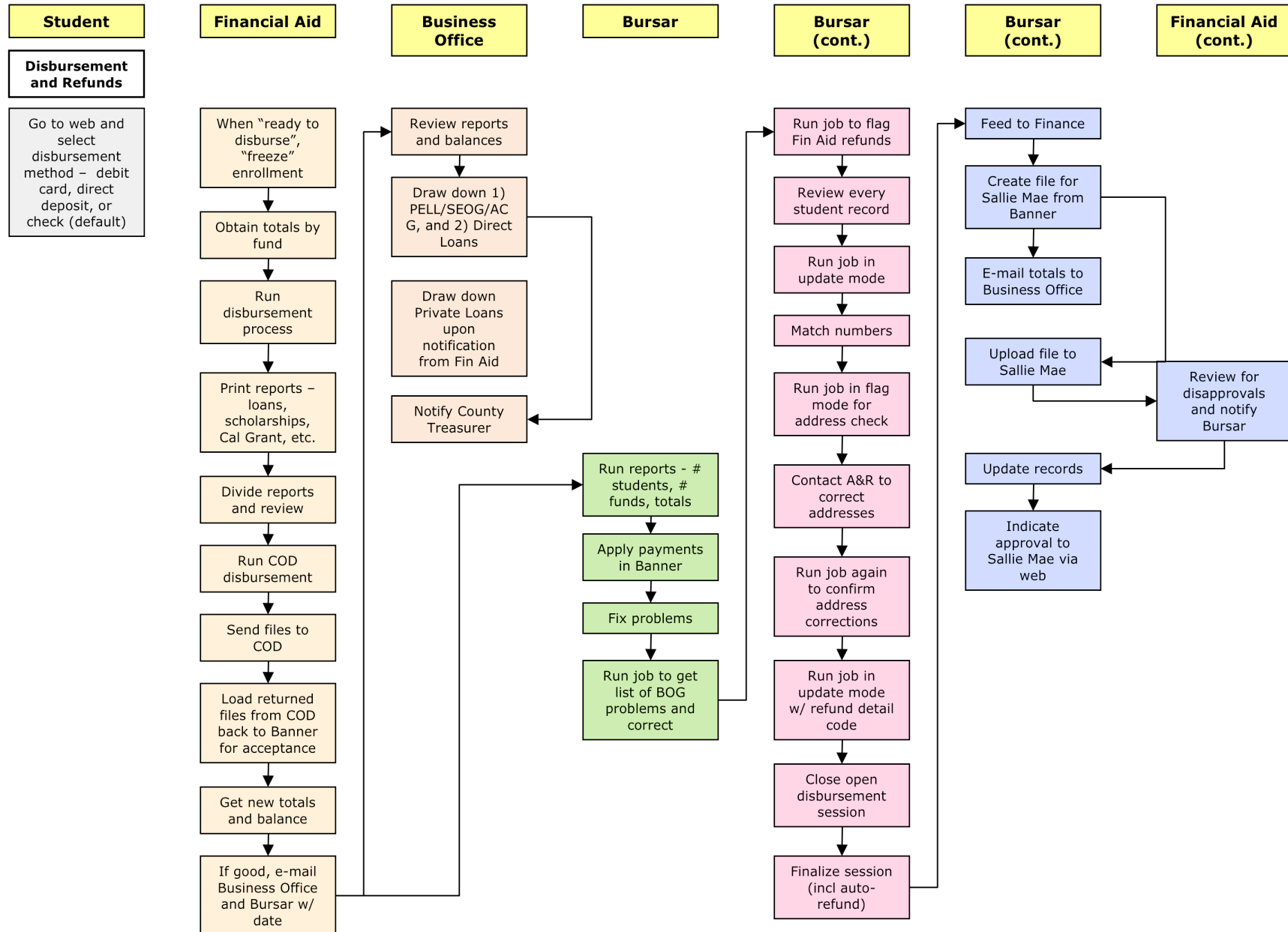




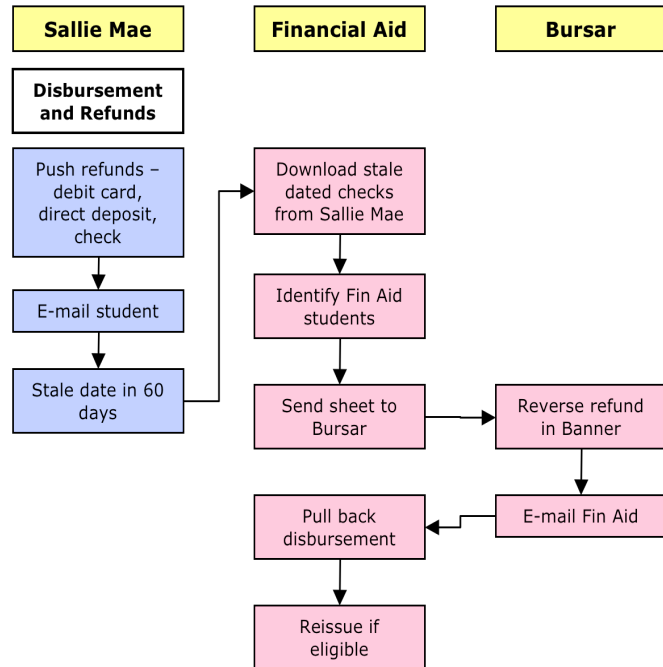
## Current Financial Aid Process (cont.)



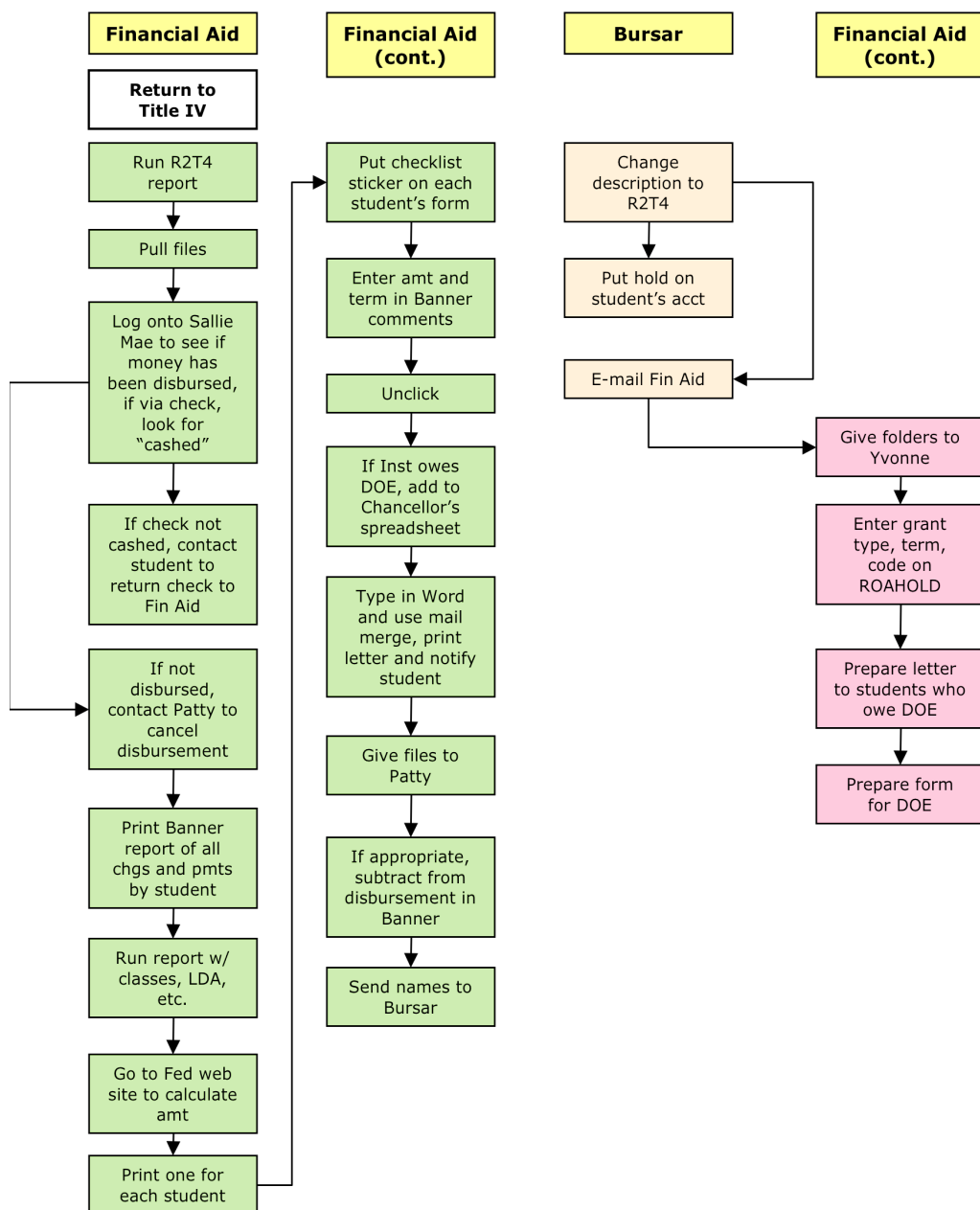
## Current Financial Aid Process (cont.)



## Current Financial Aid Process (cont.)



## Current Financial Aid Process (cont.)

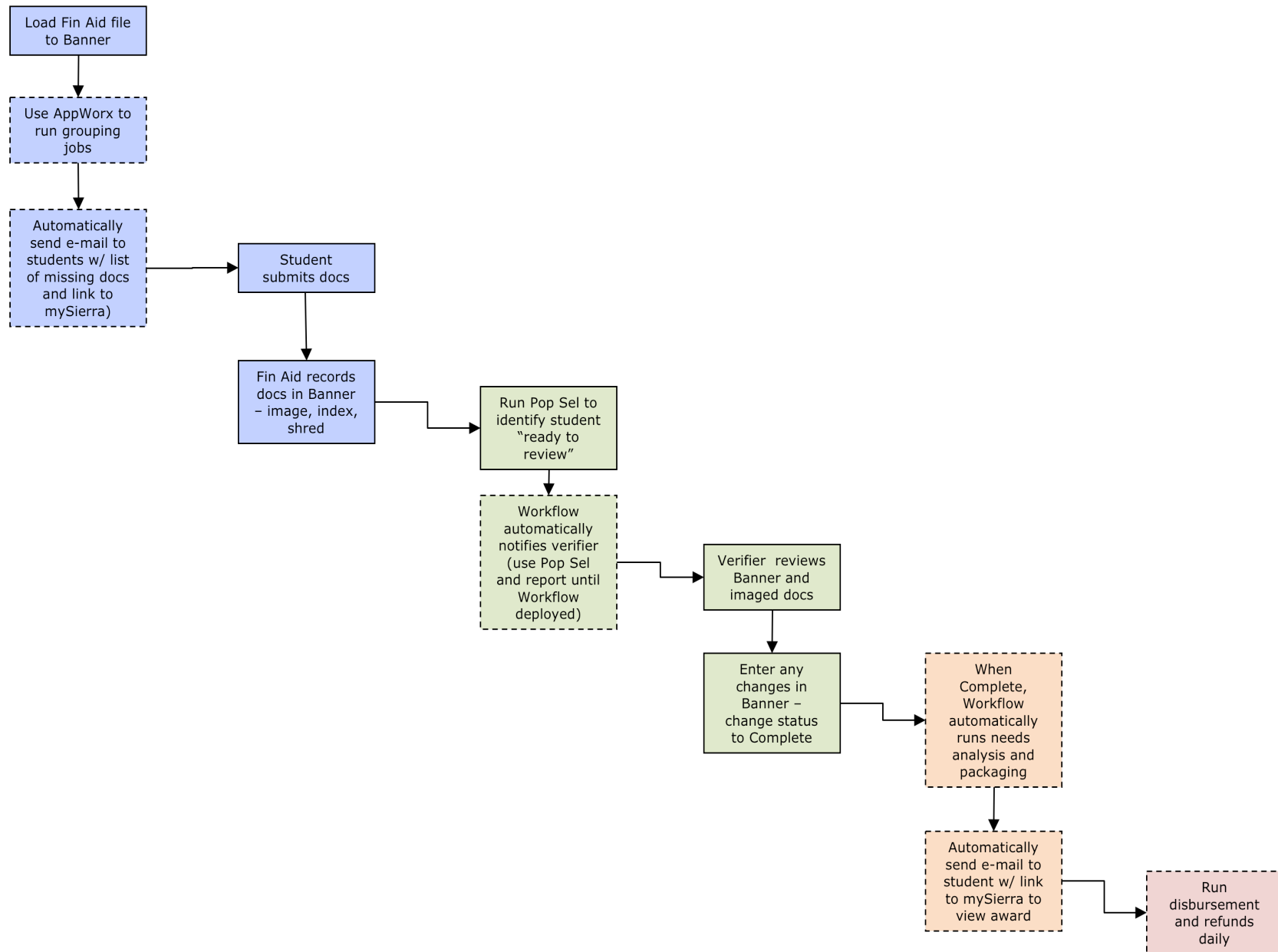


## Objectives for New Process

The following objectives and assumptions were used in developing an “ideal” financial aid process:

- Improve service to students
  - Decrease cycle times – e.g. from application to award, from award to disbursement, from disbursement to refund, etc.
  - Increase convenience
  - Communicate effectively
- Improve operations
  - Make better use of College staff time – to allow for increased focus on service to students
  - Develop process with fewer steps
  - Reduce stress
  - Eliminate folders – and paper in general
  - Discontinue snail mail
  - Fully utilize technology
- Utilize a single source of data – Banner
  - Eliminate shadow systems – e.g. Excel
  - Eliminate duplicate data entry
- Process in real-time rather than in batches
- Provide cross-training
- Create a sense of accomplishment
- “Do it right once” rather than checking and re-checking – key to quality

## "Ideal" Financial Aid Process





## APPENDIX A

### Opportunities for Improvement

In brainstorming fashion, participants identified the following opportunities. (These are not listed in ranked order, nor do they necessarily represent consensus.)

- Obtain job submission log information from Banner rather than retaining a separate spreadsheet
- Shorten time it takes to review suspended records – obtain data about the reasons records are suspended, target action on problem areas
- Consider creating Banner recruiting record when FAFSA data received for non-applicants
- Queue up series of batch posting jobs using AppWorx
- Explore more refined batch posting logic – e.g. identify students who have not submitted taxes and handle the record accordingly
- Confirm that e-mail is being sent to students when FAFSA record is received [*NOTE: confirmed that is was not being sent – now corrected*]
- Submit docs electronically – e.g. e-mail attachment, web form, some trigger workflow for professional review
- Discontinue paper files
- Use Banner to determine order of processing – rather than using paper files and stickers – trigger workflow (or generate a report) from Banner when all docs are received
- Develop written procedure for collecting docs
- Send “missing docs” e-mail more frequently – can extract all information from Banner without touching a paper file
- Develop simple way to notify verifier when corrections have been received – e.g. use a report from Banner – discontinue using the clipboard
- Use workflow to automatically notify verifiers when a student is ready to review – no paper
- Prior to workflow, verifiers can run a report to find their students to review – “pull” rather than “push”
- Encourage eligible students to apply for book vouchers earlier in the process
- Discontinue paper voucher – develop interface between Banner and PeopleSoft
- Allow students to use vouchers online, ship the books, never have to come to the bookstore – serve Tahoe and Truckee well
- When vouchers are approved and processed in real time, won’t need to restrict use to one day
- Pass data from Banner to CSAC and back
- Develop web scholarship application
- Apply for multiple scholarships with a single application – simpler for students and for readers
- Review by student rather than by scholarship – i.e. read a student’s application only once
- Use imaging for scholarship review – allow readers to view from any location
- Enter scholarships in Banner – discontinue use of Access database
- Notify students of scholarship award via e-mail
- If scholarship is in Banner, ensure that it does not display on web until after awards ceremony (flag?)
- Conduct fit/gap analysis between the scholarship database and Banner – find a “home” in Banner and eliminate shadow system and process
- Confirm with Foundation that there is money available before advertising a specific scholarship

- Encourage direct deposit of refunds
- Explore ways to get students to select a disbursement method – e.g. put the link in more places, tie to registration, navigate to after drop, etc.
- Require students to select disbursement method at registration – promote direct deposit
- Explore other mechanisms for refunding money – e.g. PayPal
- Fix address issues – IT to explore Clean Address problems, why is the College using snail mail?
- For R2T4, letter represents due diligence
- Explore Banner’s drop roster
- Enhance scripts to clean data so that fewer records are suspended
- Gather data on suspended records – identify categories (e.g. missing SSN) and then target corrective actions
- Meet with Placer County treasurer to move to a real-time model (eliminate 48 hour delay)
- Start with the higher purpose of this process – free from the current steps – i.e. agree on the business objective and find a new way to get there
- Need clear owner and IT engagement for imaging project
- Put FA staff at the front desk – “do it right once”
- Deploy staff differently
- Provide real-time, in-person verification for students
- Correct some configuration items in Banner – e.g. application of payment for BOG
- Set up appointments for verification – conduct in real-time with the student
- Develop interface between Banner and PeopleSoft – eliminate paper book vouchers
- Conduct a fit/gap exercise between current scholarship process and Banner – if sufficient “fit” (i.e. a natural “home” for scholarships in Banner), migrate current process and shadow systems to Banner

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Obstacles**

In the same manner, participants identified the following obstacles:

- Cleaning suspended records after data loads – takes 1 to 2 days
- Not getting needed info in data loads
- Buried with paper book vouchers
- Students come to FA for a book voucher, but have not completed a financial aid application
- Bookstore on a separate computer system
- Multiple book vouchers
- Voucher dates are constricting the process (and students)
- Lost vouchers – 10 registers at the bookstore
- Incorrect vendors entered in PeopleSoft
- Not getting vouchers to Bursar in time to process
- Too many hands in the voucher process
- Scholarship process is completely paper-driven
- Late submission of scholarship applications
- Long time to sort through scholarship applications
- Read same student's scholarship application several times (if she is applying for more than one)
- Advertising scholarships that are not really there
- Using one account code for all scholarships – concern about controls
- Refund checks require College to maintain snail mail address
- Debit card problems – 200 day close, cross fiscal years
- Stale dated checks – 60 day close
- Sallie Mae interprets rules conservatively
- Must drop everything to meet refund schedule – staff only 1 deep
- Treasury needs 48 hours notice
- Financial Aid has to stop other work on Mondays in order to process refunds
- Financial Aid “freezes” enrollment – creates need for adjustments when students add and drop
- Incorrect addresses – is Clean Address working properly? E.g. PO box numbers
- Holds not being released in Banner – e.g. security, library
- Delays in refunds – gaps in processing, timing of cancellations
- Duplicate data entry in R2T4 process – entering address 4 times then using MS Word mail merge
- When A&R processes late drops, students owe more money
- Instructors who assign an “F” grade in February and a Last Date of Attendance in September
- Late drops for no shows
- Attempted implementation of document imaging previously – the transitions were difficult and data were lost
- No clear “owner” of document imaging – IT has been hands-off
- IT has several pending projects – document imaging, workflow, AppWorx
- Inadequate training – underutilizing current imaging system
- BOG sometimes double posted

- Timing – coordinate with COD (Pell) and County

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# Mira Costa College



## **Business Process Analysis**

### Financial Aid and Student Accounts Receivable Processes

**December 3 and 4, 2018**

Kari Blinn, Senior Executive, Client Services



***Strata Information Group***

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DRAFT

## APPROACH

As part of Mira Costa College's (MCC) efforts to improve student success and equity, a series of Business Process Analysis (BPA) workshops were scheduled. The second session was conducted in December 2018. Strata Information Group (SIG) is working with MCC to facilitate this review. The analysis yields two primary outputs: 1) setting a trajectory toward an "ideal" process, and 2) identifying next steps in order to align policy, processes, people and technology to meet those objectives. The focus of this workshop was on the Financial Aid and Student Accounts Receivable Process.

The BPA workshop included the following activities:

- Review the principles of Business Process Analysis (BPA)
- Map the existing process
- Analyze the process map and identify obstacles and potential opportunities for improvement
- Develop an "ideal" process taking advantage of the opportunities
- Identify next steps in order to improve the student experience, reduce steps, and fully utilize technology

The workshop participants represented Financial Aid, Cashiering, Business Services, Registrar, and IT. Kari Blinn, from SIG, facilitated the workshop. Participants engaged in a very lively and productive discussion. The group worked hard to identify issues with the current processes – and to identify many opportunities for improvement. This document summarizes the contents and outcomes of the group's efforts.

The underlying premise of SIG's BPA methodology is that technology alone cannot solve process issues. But that technology, in concert with reimagining the process, can result in significant gains. By assembling stakeholders around the same table at the same time, the team can take a step back, map the current process, and identify the obstacles and opportunities for improvement. In our experience, by gathering people at the table together – from the beginning of a project – the likelihood of success increases significantly; not simply making marginal improvements, but transformational change. These workshops not only set the trajectory toward "ideal" processes that take full advantage of the technology, they build consensus and momentum for change.

By mapping a process, stakeholders are able to identify common process themes. Examples include:

- Choke points – when all paths lead to a single person
- Layering – adding automated steps on top of paper steps
- End runs – disregarding the established process entirely and jumping to the end
- Shadow systems – entering the same data in multiple systems (e.g. Excel, Word)
- Exception-based – complexity resulting from "one time five years ago, event ABC happened"
- Unintended consequences "downstream"
- Not scalable – the process breaks under increased volume
- Focus on symptoms rather than roots
- Paper-heavy – long, opaque, sequential, and inefficient

The group then pivots to overcome those symptoms by taking a “horizontal” approach – working across organizational boundaries. Outcomes include:

- Better service for “customers” – students, faculty, staff, hiring managers, etc.
- Streamlined operations -- fewer steps, simpler processes, enter data once
- Take location and time out of process – visibility to all stakeholders 24/7
- Greater efficiency and better use of everyone’s time
- Focus on strategic questions
- Shorten cycle times
- Significant improvements, not just marginal change
- Improved collaboration and fewer organizational silos
- Eliminate/reduce errors and re-work
- Take full advantage of technology

## OBSERVATIONS

After mapping the current processes, participants made the following observations:

- Have made significant improvements in the last few years
- Staff have passion and dedication – service-focus
- Current process works for most students
- Enlightening to see the process from start to finish
- Large number of people and processes involved in order for students to receive aid
- Need to revise communications with students
- Requiring students to come in can be inconvenient and intimidating
- Taking data out of Peoplesoft and creating shadow systems (opportunity to maintain data in one place and query it real-time when needed)
- Long, unnecessarily complicated processes
  - Cumbersome
  - Manual
  - Many steps
  - Paper-driven and layered
  - Redundant data entry
  - Silos



## OBJECTIVES

Before developing an “ideal” process, participants articulated the following objectives:

- Open door for students
  - Give more money to more students faster
  - Follow regulations
- Great student experience
  - Make Financial Aid an attractive place to come -- flip from “You don’t qualify” to “Here are your options”, become more open to loans “Invest in your future”, “everyone qualifies”
  - Reduce need to come in to office
  - Reduce length of lines
- Simplify process for students and staff
  - Reduce steps – e.g. eliminate FTCs
  - Clarify terminology
  - Simplify
  - Eliminate paper
- Take full advantage of technology
  - Use more Peoplesoft features
  - Automate data load with TD Client
  - Use Peoplesoft as authoritative source
  - Thank and say goodbye to shadow systems
- Consider new practices
  - Don’t award if selected for verification
  - Don’t e-mail award letter – point to the source
  - Use Peoplesoft disbursement rules
  - Auto-award daily
  - Get rid of “37” – use system to determine complete files
  - Give Promise waiver immediately
  - Use different modalities to connect with students – e.g. Zoom
- Free up staff for higher-value activities – e.g. more personal contact with students
- Strengthen relationships with high school counselors

**NEXT STEPS**

At the end of the workshop participants identified the opportunities with the highest value to MCC and developed a set of next steps. Use the idea of Jane's "Broken Board" to track progress, identify issues, and resolve problems.

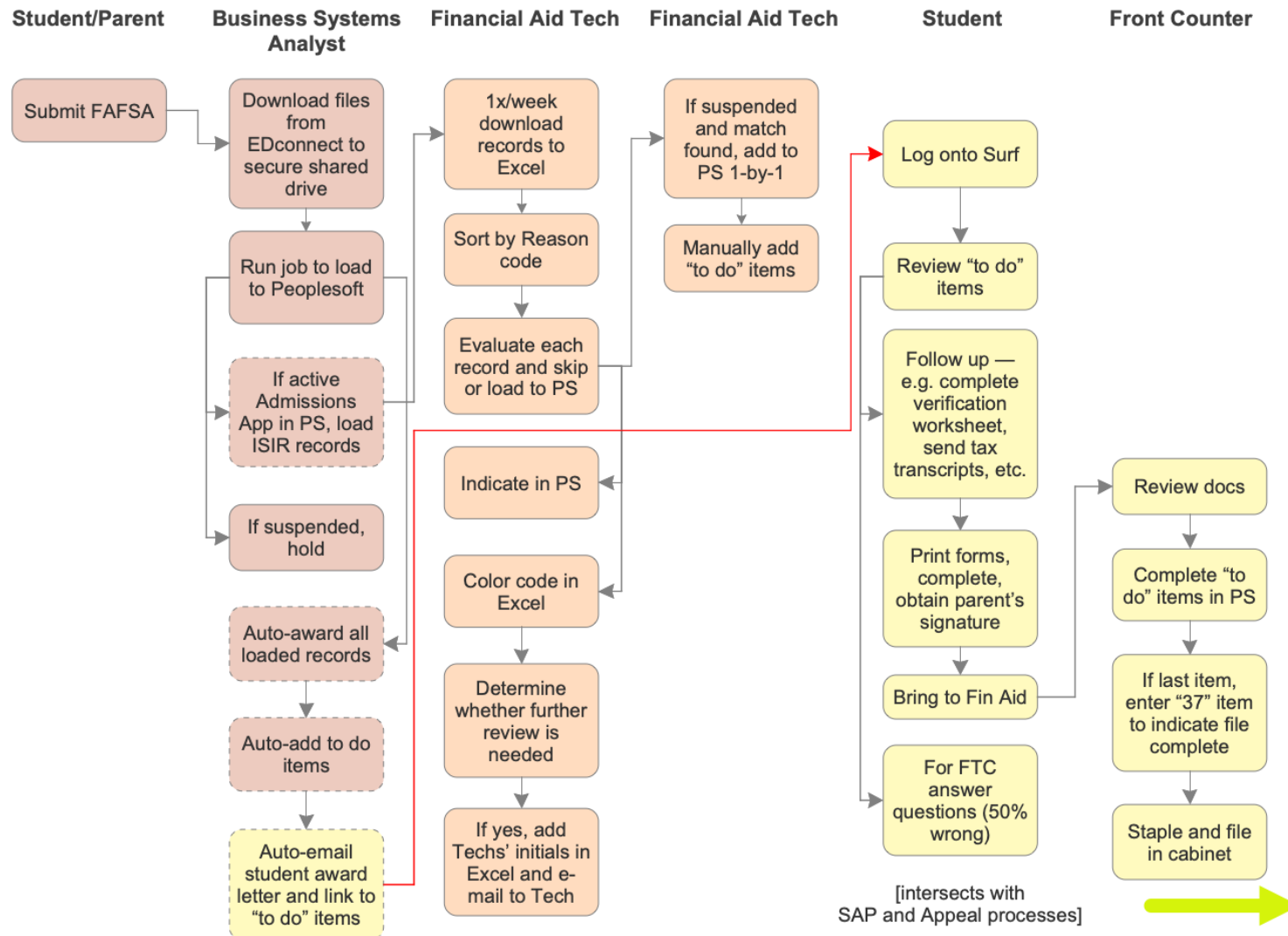
ITEM	DETAILS
<b>Review all communications with students</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Join group currently working on this – coordinate with other departments</li> <li>■ Ensure clarity, brevity, consistency</li> <li>■ Targeted and personalized</li> <li>■ Eliminate paper and USPS</li> <li>■ Discontinue requiring grades/unofficial transcripts for appeals (already reviewed during session with counselor)</li> <li>■ Connect with Ambassadors and reimagine image of Financial Aid</li> <li>■ Lead: Freddie</li> </ul>
<b>Take inventory of all "to do" items</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Eliminate as many as possible – e.g. FTC, 37, ISIR correction</li> <li>■ Use only for true "to dos" assigned to students</li> <li>■ Use status fields when appropriate</li> <li>■ Use other mechanisms to communicate internally – e.g. comments by person</li> </ul>
<b>Implement Campus Logic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Ensure integration between Campus Logic and Peoplesoft</li> <li>■ Capture data wherever possible – "data is better than documents"</li> <li>■ Build auto-packaging rules for State aid, Cal Grants, Student Success, Chaffey, etc.</li> </ul>
<b>Implement TD Client</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Auto-load ISIR records to Peoplesoft daily</li> </ul>
<b>Disburse and pay more frequently</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Start with once a week then look at increasing the frequency</li> <li>■ Explore floating money to make this possible</li> <li>■ Include Financial Aid, Cashiering, and Accounting on the team</li> </ul>
<b>Reimagine FTCs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Display information to students – rather than e-mailing, tracking as a to-do item, etc.</li> </ul>
<b>Award aid faster</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Apply Promise waiver immediately</li> <li>■ Automate Cal Grant load and process – award automatically</li> </ul>
<b>Display progress bars to students</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Explore Campus Logic features</li> <li>■ Explore Peoplesoft 9.2 features</li> </ul>

ITEM	DETAILS
<b>Provide additional access and training to Peoplesoft</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Utilize a single source of data</li> <li>■ Provide query access to more users</li> <li>■ Train staff to fully utilize Peoplesoft</li> <li>■ Discontinue exporting data to shadow systems</li> </ul>
<b>Implement more Peoplesoft features</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Discontinue "37" as a to-do item</li> <li>■ Use the Aid Process Status field in Peoplesoft to indicate status of a file – e.g. under review, complete, waiting for ISIR correction, etc.</li> <li>■ Review payment priorities to correct the "\$1500/\$1470" problem</li> <li>■ Figure out why the vouchers need to be fixed and correct at the source</li> <li>■ Review impact on 1098T process</li> </ul>
<b>Consider not awarding until verification complete</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Implement auto-awarding nightly – triggered from "complete" status</li> <li>■ Only award when all "to dos" are complete</li> <li>■ E-mail link to award letter, not the award letter itself – ensures real-time data</li> </ul>
<b>Auto-complete "to do" when high school transcript is imaged in iLinks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Explore iLinks workflow to update Peoplesoft</li> </ul>
<b>Feed from Bank Mobile to Peoplesoft</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Automatically add and remove the "to do" item</li> </ul>
<b>Open CCCApply and FAFSA submission and processing earlier</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Align with 4-year schools in the fall</li> <li>■ Encourage high school students to apply to MCC as a first-choice school</li> </ul>

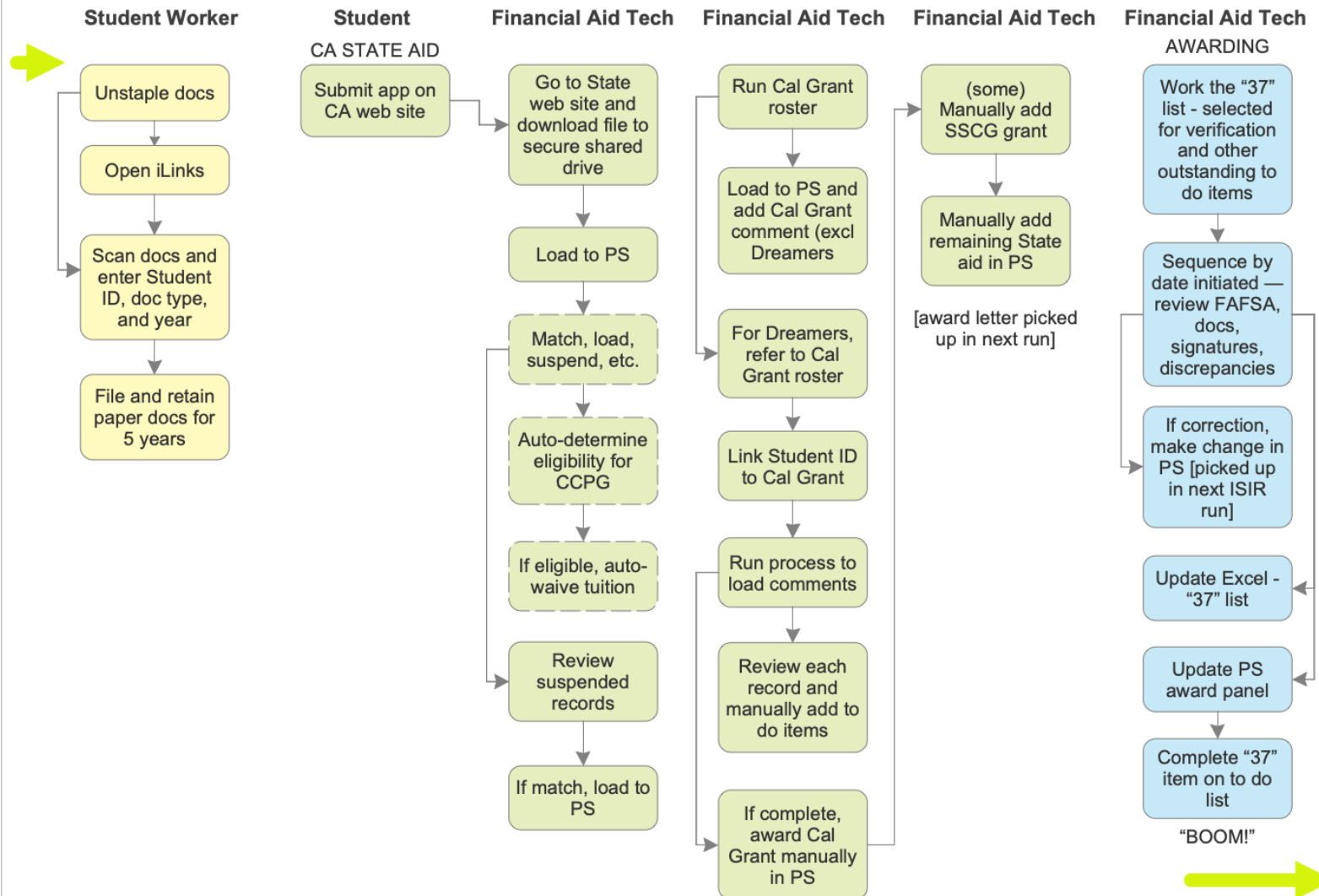
**CURRENT PROCESS**

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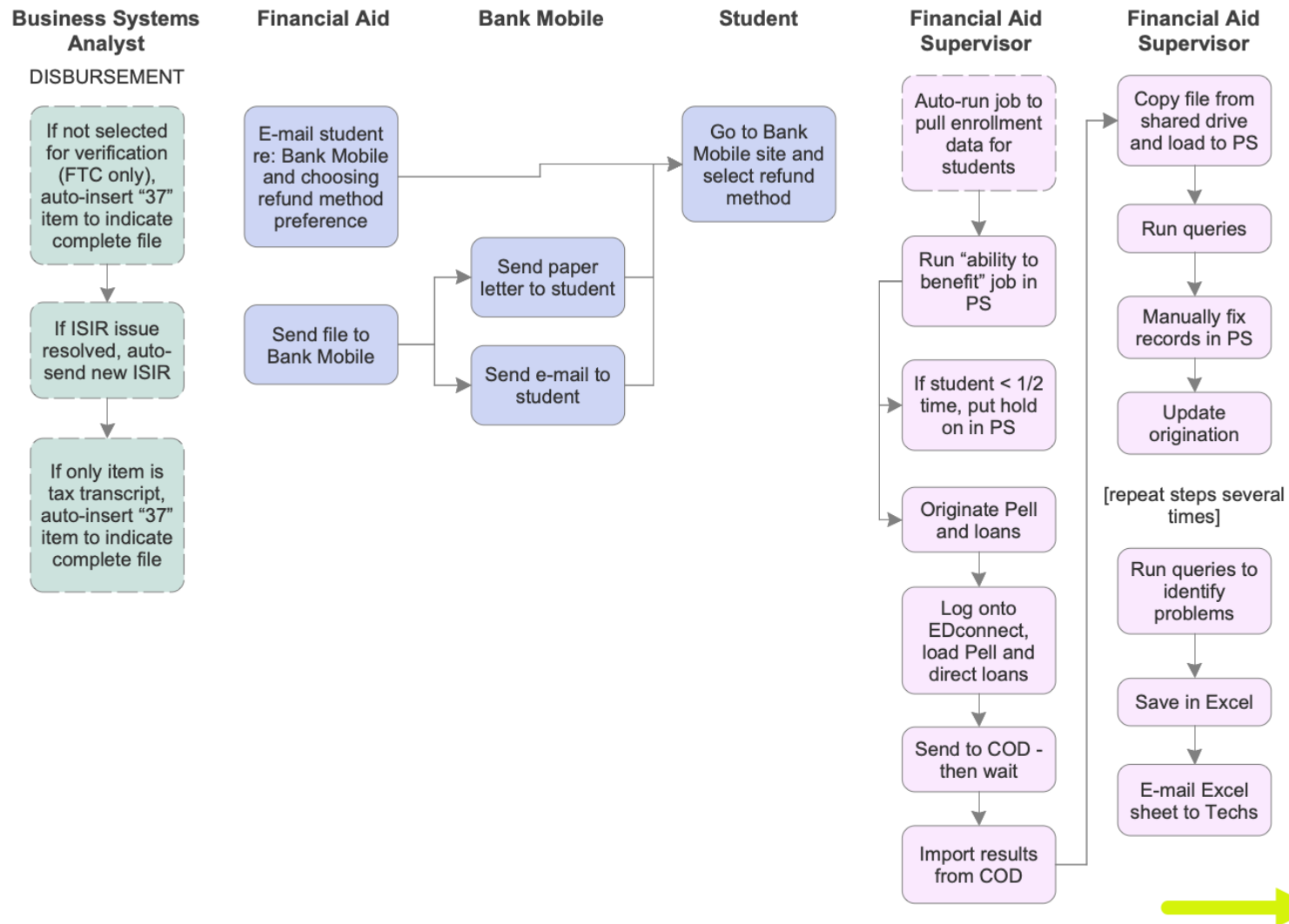
## Current Financial Aid and Disbursement Process



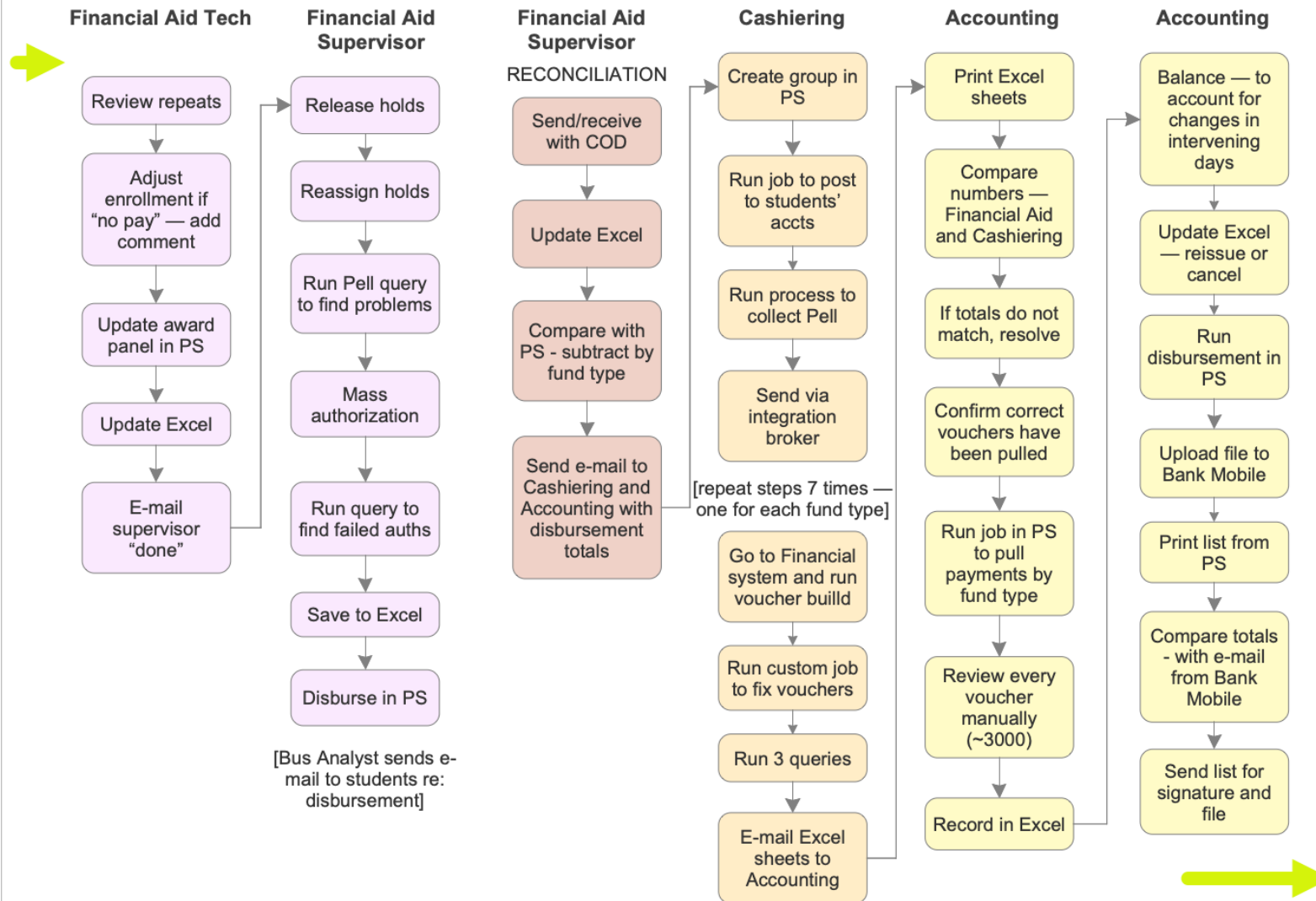
## Current Financial Aid and Disbursement Process (cont.)



## Current Financial Aid and Disbursement Process (cont.)

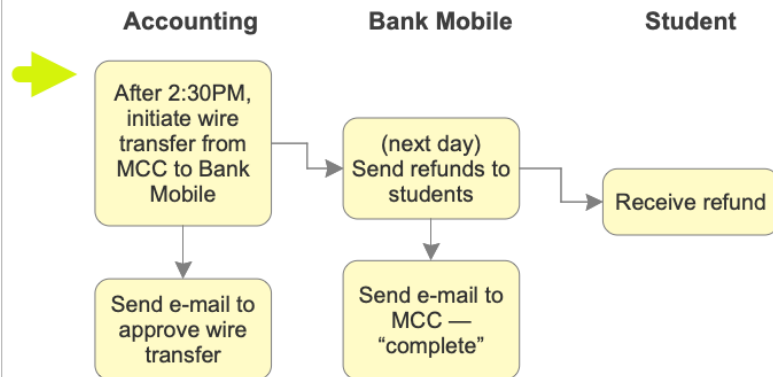


## Current Financial Aid and Disbursement Process (cont.)





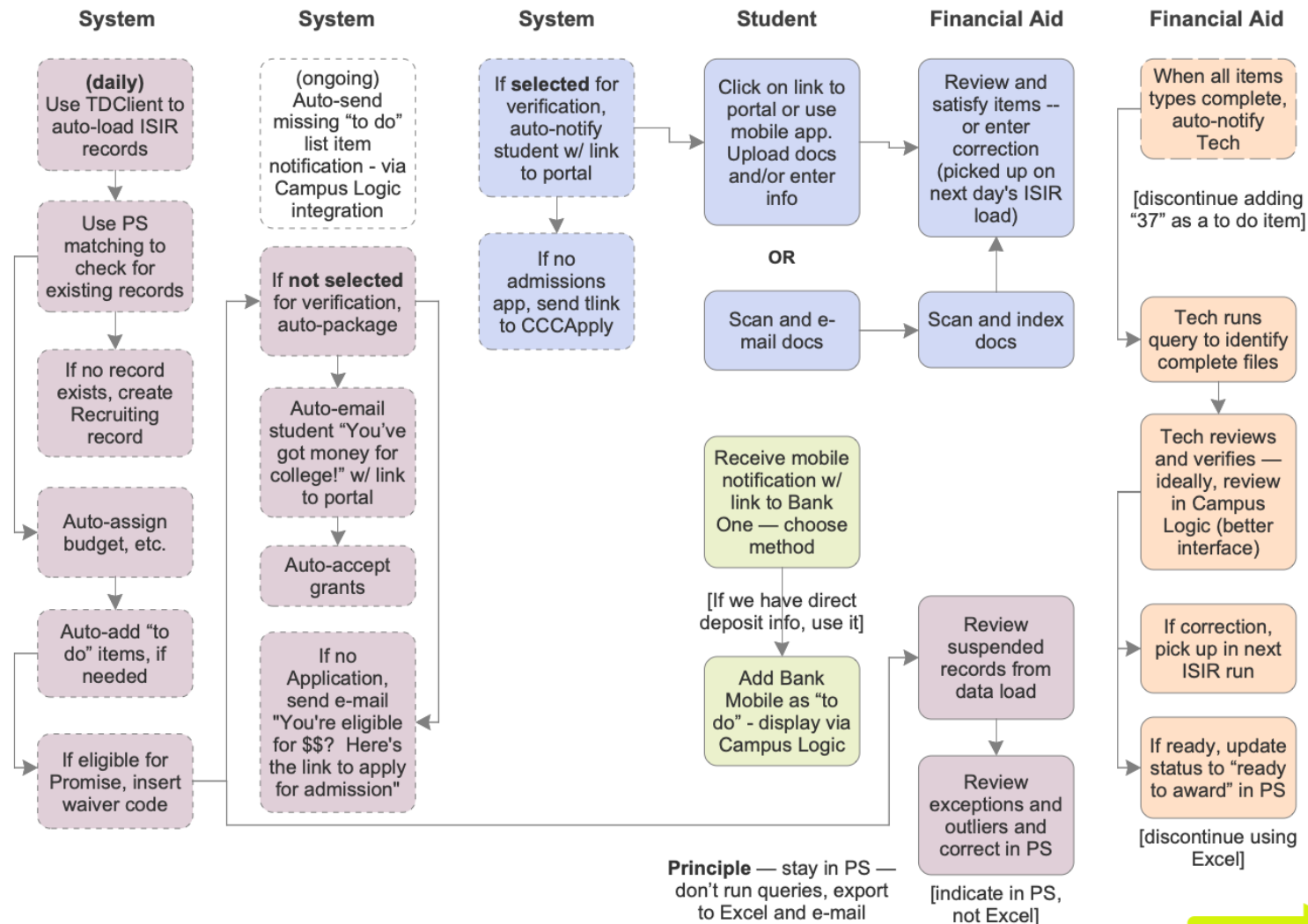
## Current Financial Aid and Disbursement Process (cont.)



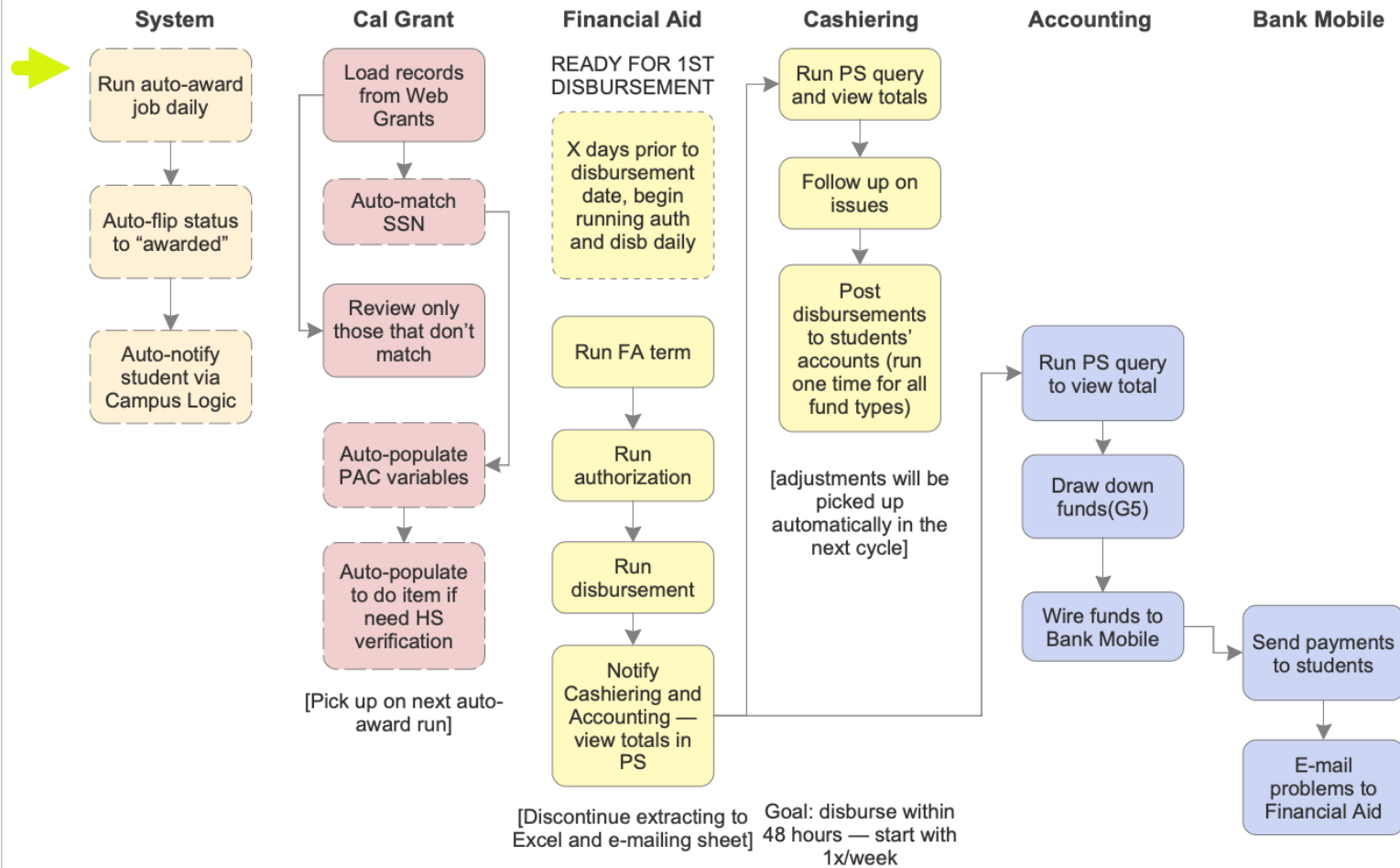
## **IDEAL PROCESS**

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## "Ideal" Financial Aid and Disbursement Process



## "Ideal" Financial Aid and Disbursement Process (cont.)



## APPENDIX A

### Opportunities for Improvement

In brainstorming fashion, workshop participants identified the following opportunities for improvement. Items are not listed in any particular order. Additionally, they do not necessarily represent consensus.

- Implement TD Client to auto-load files
- Explore using job scheduler to load CCCApply files
- Fine tune matching algorithm – suspend the right records – not too many, not too few
- Create person record if FAFSA is first contact with MCC
- Use Peoplesoft recruiting module to reach out to students who have made contact with MCC
- Consider opening CCCApply and terms in Peoplesoft earlier – encourage application and FAFSA in the fall – at the same time as 4-year schools
- Explore communication plans (campaigns) in Peoplesoft
- Use auto-scheduler to run sequence of jobs to load ISIR records
- Consider not packaging students who are selected for verification – wait until complete
- Launch Campus Logic for communication and mobile
- Consider providing students an MCC e-mail address
- Use Peoplesoft message center for all communications
- Combine multiple e-mail messages into a single one
- Display real-time award in Surf – not attached to an e-mail
- Clarify that students can enroll even if some items remain on to do list
- Consider sending targeted reminders
- Find another way to comply with FTCs – discontinue FTC as a to do list item
- Don't look at files that are not selected for verification
- Inform about special circumstance
- Find another, less confusing, path to obtain information about students who are enrolled simultaneously at more than one school
- Explore whether or not Campus Logic can include other colleges attended
- Use Clearinghouse to see all schools attended
- Use Campus Logic true e-Forms – always get data whenever possible – e.g. verification worksheet (rather than uploading docs)
- Let system query incomplete applications and then send reminders automatically
- Discontinue requiring grades/unofficial transcripts for students applying for a waiver – this information is covered during the counseling appointment
- Encourage financial literacy – take a holistic approach
- Develop clear, concise communication
- Explore “Dream Center” on campus to support Dream Act students

- Have one-on-one conversations with Dreamers – overcome intimidation, clarify financial aid options
- Provide additional staffing for California aid
- Check records then audit – rather than conducting 100% audit twice
- Thank and say goodbye to the “37” shadow system – track complete apps in Peoplesoft using queries
- If student has direct deposit for paycheck, use same account for refunds
- Use language like “payment” – “refund” is confusing to some
- Close to the payment date, e-mail only those receiving payments
- Mobile bank registration station
- Automate Cal Grant disbursement
- Using the list from Bank Mobile, follow up with students who have not signed up for refund
- Thank and say goodbye to the Excel “ledger” – get totals and data from Peoplesoft
- Consider recalculating Pell throughout add/drop (repackage daily?) – or freeze
- Fix citizenship issue earlier in the process – at the FA tech step
- Automate jobs – e.g. disbursement
- Run all financial aid types at once – rather than 7 distinct times
- Explore payment priorities in Peoplesoft – ensure the correct payments are applying to the correct charges in priority order
- Diagnose disbursement errors – determine the cause and correct at the source
- Consider floating money and disbursing daily
- Run Fund Total query in Peoplesoft and give to Accounting – discontinue secondary spreadsheets
- Give Accounting totals by term
- Provide Business Analyst support for Business Services (in progress)
- Award CCPG before drop deadline – at least two days prior
- Create a predictable “Thursday” process
- Diagnose why “updated award letter” is sent when no changes are apparent
- Use “Jane’s Board” idea to identify and fix problems
- Create a master calendar/procedure page – easy to search, include videos
- Discontinue using a “to do” item to indicate “all items in” – use a status field in Peoplesoft – e.g. Aid Process Status
- Automate Cal Grants
- Review 1098T implications
- Explore categorizing “to do” items by department

## APPENDIX B

### Obstacles

In a similar fashion, the group identified the following obstacles.

- Suspended records – e.g. SSN mis-match, name change for returning students
- Adding more checklist items than required by Feds
- Many, long e-mails with complicated terminology
- Fed requirement to inform students is being implemented in a “heavy” way – e.g. checklist item with required action
- No MCC e-mail for students – messages overlooked in personal email account
- Skip logic on FAFSA is not always clear
- Number in college is confusing to some on verification worksheet – creating additional steps
- Huge stacks of paper
- Time delays
- Students see completed items still on their to do list
- Front counter is trying to do many things – in-person, phones, forms, Peoplesoft, filing, etc.
- Sending too much e-mail
- Federal SAP guidelines are different from CCPG SAP guidelines – confusing to students
- CADAA is all manual – lots of duplicates, no SSN, difficult to match records, miss some e-mail
- Feds don’t recognize as eligible
- For CA aid, student must go to another web site to update high school graduation status, many miss this step
- Focus on FAFSA, CA Aid is not emphasized
- Need high schools to emphasize March 2<sup>nd</sup> deadline
- Dreamers get stuck on residency process – different from citizenship – confusing
- CA programs change constantly
- Some students throw away mailing from Bank Mobile – miss refund information
- E-mail sent to some students who are not eligible
- Recurring errors
- Pell reconciliation is difficult
- Campus Logic is for Financial Aid only – unfortunately it cannot be generalized so that a student has only one place to go