

Guide to Planning and Conducting a Financial Aid Night

INTRODUCTION

High school and financial aid counselors, as well as counselors employed by community social service agencies, are major sources of information about financing education beyond high school. Counselors share their basic knowledge and information about financial aid with interested students and parents via many different methods.

Perhaps the most obvious way of providing financial aid information to students and parents is through individual counseling sessions. However, individual sessions may not be practical given increasing student to counselor ratios and other counselor duties. Other methods, such as financial aid newsletters and brochures, the Internet, group sessions, e-mail, and public presentations are more efficient in getting basic and essential information to those who need financial assistance for college.

Conducting a financial aid information night is a great way to deliver important financial aid information to students and parents. Properly planned and executed, it can save counselors hours of time in disseminating information. Because of unique family circumstances, individual sessions still may be necessary and desirable for some families. However, by providing general information in a written format and through group presentations to the majority of families, more time will be available for those families who require special attention.

NASFAA has developed its *Financial Aid Night* materials to assist counselors in planning and conducting a financial aid night for students and parents and is divided into three parts:

1. Part one is this ***Guide to Planning and Conducting a Financial Aid Night***.
2. Part two is ***What You Need to Know about Financial Aid***, a financial aid night presentation slide show and a presentation guide providing the basic information students and parents need to know when applying for financial aid.
3. Part three consists of handouts that can be copied and given to students to help them through the financial aid application process. These include:
 - ***Student Aid Program Summary***: This chart describes the eligibility requirements and features of the various aid programs. It should be used in conjunction with the financial night presentation.
 - ***Financial Aid Application Checklist***: This running list of necessary actions has space for the student to enter due dates and to check off accomplished items. Designed to be used over a period of months, it can be used independently by the student or serve as a progress review sheet in counseling sessions with individual students.
 - ***Application Form Tracking Worksheet***: A student should use one of these worksheets to keep track of the many application and documentation requirements for each school to which he or she applies. Like the *Application Checklist*, it can also be used as a review sheet in counseling sessions.
 - ***Cost of Attendance Comparison Worksheet***: This chart allows the student and parent to record and compare the costs for each school under consideration. Using this worksheet

ensures that the family has *all* costs for each school. Wide discrepancies in estimates for living costs (expenses other than tuition and books) should be questioned. It can also be used by the counselor to help focus a student's expectations to what is reasonably manageable given the family's financial situation.

- ***Award Package Comparison Worksheet***: Once actual aid offers are received from the schools to which the student has been admitted, this tool guides the family and counselor in comparing aid packages.
- ***Financial Aid Consultants and Scholarship Search Services Fact Sheet***: Should a family pay for someone to help them through the financial aid process? This fact sheet helps families avoid being scammed by unnecessary and costly reliance on paid consultants to obtain help and advice that is available from true experts at no charge.
- ***Sample Scholarship Inquiry Letter***: This letter suggests how a student might inquire about financial aid from a private organization (that is, a source of funding other than the school or a governmental agency).

Counselors who do not have a financial aid knowledge base should consider asking a financial aid administrator from a nearby college or a representative of the state student assistance agency to conduct a financial aid information night. Many state associations of financial aid administrators routinely conduct or provide support for such presentations. Whoever makes the presentation, the following ***Eight Steps from Start to Finish*** will be helpful in making the necessary arrangements.

PLANNING AND CONDUCTING A FINANCIAL AID NIGHT: EIGHT STEPS FROM START TO FINISH

1 Setting the date

Selecting an appropriate date for a financial aid information night is critical to its success. When selecting a date, consider the following:

- **Do** pick a date far enough in advance of the application deadline for your state's student assistance program(s) and the priority filing dates announced by the schools to which your students typically apply. Check state and institutional application instructions, Web sites, and catalogues to determine these dates and count back four to six weeks to allow sufficient time for application completion and processing.
- **Do** pick a date that complements other school related activities for parents. For example, you might make the financial aid information night part of the program for a monthly PTA meeting. If not, be sure to pick a date that does not compete with the PTA meeting or other school or community events appealing to college-bound students and their parents.
- **Do** be sensitive to religious observances affecting the families that may need financial aid information.
- **Don't** pick a date too close to major holidays or holiday weekends. Family scheduling conflicts will affect your attendance.
- **Don't** host a Financial Aid Night without the FAFSA on the Web (FOTW) Worksheet. This "pre-application" worksheet includes the same questions as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). It is available for download and printing prior to both the paper and on-line versions of the FAFSA via the Federal Student Aid Publications Web site at <http://studentaid.ed.gov/PORTALSWebApp/students/english/fafsaworksheet.jsp?tab=preparing>.

Though students are encouraged to file the FAFSA on-line, the on-line version is not available until on or after January 1 each year. The paper FAFSA on the Web Worksheet is normally distributed to secondary schools in October, although changes to the Worksheet or procedures for distributing it may delay its availability. Since one of the main presentation items is the proper completion of the FOTW Worksheet, it would be difficult to proceed without it.

- **Don't** try to compete with entertainment or athletic events that attract parents and students.
- **Don't** ignore the possibility of inclement weather. Plan for and advertise inclement weather procedures and an alternate date.

2 Setting a time

Financial aid is a topic that concerns most parents, so you should hold financial aid presentations at a time convenient to students and parents, most likely weekday evenings or weekends. To schedule the presentation during the day when parents are working deprives you of many of your potential participants and deprives parents of the information they seek.

3 Selecting a facility

Based on anticipated attendance, identify a facility with a room that will comfortably accommodate the group and the following:

- **Tables, or at least chairs with writing arms**, since many parents and students will take extensive notes;
- **Lighting control** to accommodate visual aids such as PowerPoint presentations, overhead transparencies, etc.;
- **Data projector or overhead projector and screen**, if required by the presenter;
- **Chalkboard or flipchart** at the front of the room for impromptu notes and calculations; and
- **Microphone** if the presenter or the size of the room requires it.

The facility should be readily accessible to individuals with disabilities and from available parking areas. Plan to provide signs that direct participants to the appropriate location. Some facilities require special notification or arrangements for meetings held after normal business hours. To avoid problems with heat, air conditioning, lighting, and so on, be sure that the proper persons are advised of your meeting and what is needed.

4 Advertising the event

Once the date, time, and facility have been determined, you are ready to advertise the financial aid information night. Begin promotion at least two to four weeks in advance so that parents can “pencil it in” their calendars, yet late enough that they don’t forget about it.

Beyond the obvious announcements at schools and in flyers sent home to parents, consider using public service announcements by local television and radio stations, news or calendar items in local newspapers, items in PTA or school newsletters, posters in shopping areas, and public address announcements at sporting events and other school or community activities. If possible, send an e-mail announcement to parents at your school who might have interest in your event.

5 Determining the presenters

If you are making the presentation yourself, you may want to consider getting assistance from others with specialized information to share with your audience. It is likely not easy on you or the audience to cover two hours of information by yourself, and it frequently makes for a more interesting presentation to have an occasional change of pace and voice.

Since it may be impossible for you to be an authority on all aspects of college financing, consider bringing in an outside “expert.” Having additional speakers often increases the credibility of the presentation. We suggest inviting a local financial aid administrator to address federal assistance and a representative from the state agency to describe state aid programs. These outside presenters will add a positive touch to most presentations.

6 Making a list, checking it twice

The rest of the planning process involves following up to make sure that all arrangements are implemented as requested. Confirm everything about a week before your presentation and then again the day before. It is only human to forget, and periodic reminders are more easily manageable than a last-minute frantic phone call ten minutes after the auditorium should have been opened, with 50 participants waiting in the hallway.

7 Delivering the information

With thorough planning, the presentation should go smoothly. Arrive well in advance of the stated starting time to make sure doors are unlocked, the lights are on, the room is properly arranged, and audio-visual equipment is set up and in working order. Put out directional signs early and as necessary to help people find their way. Have the registration materials organized and set up by the time the first audience member arrives.

Make every effort to start at the scheduled time. If anyone is to miss a portion of the session, it should be those who arrive late, not those who arrived on time but had to leave before you were finished.

Leave ample time for questions either during or after the formal presentation. The presenter(s) should expect that some families will want to ask personal questions after the session.

8 Finishing touches

If the room and/or building needs to be secured after the event, be sure you have made those arrangements with the appropriate individuals.

If outside presenters have assisted with the financial aid information night, thank them both publicly during the presentation and in writing shortly thereafter. Also be sure to thank those individuals who assisted with arranging and/or managing the facility where the presentation was held. In most cases, these individuals will have donated their time and perhaps some expenses for which they will not be reimbursed. A sincere and timely “thank you” may encourage them to assist you in the future.