Planning a Financial Aid Awareness Program

The first three steps to planning a financial aid awareness program are to decide on a location (and facility), a date and a time. The following are questions and suggestions to keep in mind.

**Selecting a Location and Facility**

- Is the facility in a convenient location? (Can families who depend on public transportation attend easily?)
- Is parking adequate?
- Is the room large enough to comfortably seat the number of people you expect?
- Is there enough space for participants to spread out their materials and have room to write?
- Is the room well lit?
- Can the room’s lighting be adjusted when using audiovisual equipment?
- Is the facility/room accessible to participants with disabilities?
- Are microphones needed?
- Are they available on site?
- What are your audiovisual needs? PowerPoint projector and laptop? Overhead projector?
- Is there a screen that’s at least 8’ x 8’ (preferably 10’ x 10’)?
- Is there a TV? VCR? DVD player?
- Are there telephone lines available for Internet access?
- Are these items available on site? If not, who will provide them, and is there a fee?
- Is the temperature of the room adjustable?
- Are extra chairs available if there is an overflow crowd?
- Is there a charge for the room? Is it within your budget?
- Is the facility/room available for the date(s) you have in mind?
- Are all video materials closed-captioned?
- Do you need any bilingual materials? What about a translator?
- Is child care available for parents who need it?

**Selecting a Date**

You don’t want to have the program so early in the fall that the participants forget what they learned before they actually complete the FAFSA. (The FAFSA is available January 1.)

You don’t want to hold the program so late in the winter that many schools’ financial aid deadlines have passed. (Many school deadlines are in February.)

After you narrow down the time frame, you need to look carefully for potential conflicts that would prevent people from attending.

For example, planning a financial aid program on the same night as your school’s basketball season opener or during the community’s winter jazz fest means you probably won’t get the large crowd you hope for.

You should consider such things as:

- Does the date conflict with any holidays, religious observances, or planned school closings?
- Are schools sporting events or other extracurricular activities being held that day?
- What times do they begin and end?
- How much of your potential audience would be involved?
• Are there any major community-wide events occurring on that date?
• Is the date far enough in advance that you have time to publicize the program and parents have enough time to make plans to come?

You probably won’t be able to avoid every possible conflict, but if you find a date when there are no major events affecting your school’s population, you are more likely to draw a crowd to your financial aid program.

If you are located in a part of the country that has cold winters, it would be wise also to schedule a “snow date.”

**Selecting a Time**

Once you have a place and date, you need to set times for the program to begin and end.

When setting the time to begin, remember to allow time for parents to get home from work and have some dinner before going to the program.

Set a time for the program to end as well. People usually like to know in advance how long they need to stay. The amount of time you schedule for the program will depend on what activities you have planned. Try to stick to the times you publicize.

Typically, starting at 7:00 p.m. or 7:30 p.m. works well. Be sure, however, to consider any special patterns and needs in your area. For instance, in some areas, a weekend program or an afternoon program might be more effective than an evening program.

**Selecting a Presenter**

Now that you’ve decided on the basic logistics, it’s time to select a presenter for your program.

You can be the presenter! The PowerPoint presentation provided by the U.S. Department of Education, office of Federal Student Aid at www.fsa4schools.ed.gov/counselors, together with other materials, will give you the resources you need to conduct a presentation on financial aid for your students.

If you want the presenter to be someone other than yourself, brainstorm about possible speakers who have the knowledge and experience to present financial aid information accurately.

Look for good public speakers who can hold an audience’s attention.

You might consider asking a financial aid administrator from a postsecondary institution near the facility where you’ll be having the program.

As an alternative approach, you could have two or more speakers take a team-teaching approach or use a panel approach. This can provide some variety in financial aid experience. Be careful, however, not to have so many speakers that all the necessary information can’t be covered in the time allotted. If you have two or more speakers, make sure they coordinate their presentations to avoid duplicating topics.

Ask the prospective presenter(s) to give you a copy of his/her presentation before making the final selection of presenters. You will need to determine whether the materials to be presented are appropriate for your anticipated audience.

You might also consider turning your event into a sort of college fair in order to attract more students. Invite postsecondary institutions in your state or region to set up booths for students and their parents to visit before and after the formal presentation of financial aid information.

Some schools will send admissions counselors, student advisors and financial aid personnel representing the school. The admissions counselors sometimes admit the student on the spot; the
student advisors will then assist the student with class schedules. The financial aid personnel may work with the student to determine the student’s unofficial EFC (Expected Family Contribution) and award the student aid on the spot. The school must use a disclaimer to let the student and his/her parents know that the award is not “official” until the student’s EFC is returned from the FAFSA processor. Not all institutions use this process, but for the institutions that do, this process gives the student and his/her parents a better perspective on the types of aid and amounts of aid the student will receive if the student decides to attend that particular institution.

Gathering Publications and Handouts
You will want to have information for your students and parents to take home and read later. The Department of Education is a good source for free information. You may want to order some of the free publications available at www.FSAPubs.org or from 1-800-394-7084. Additionally, you might find several of the fact sheets at www.studentaid.ed.gov/pubs useful to your students.

Announcement and Notification
You can’t publicize your financial aid awareness program too much! Get the word out as early as possible and in as many ways as possible.

Consider the following:
- a direct e-mail or mailing to parents;
- advertisements and/or articles in local newspaper(s);
- flyers and/or posters in school;
- announcements on the school’s public address system;
- advertisements and/or articles in the school newspaper;
- a notice in the parent/teacher/student association (PTSA) newsletter;
- announcements at PTSA meetings;
- flyers or posters within the community (for example, at grocery stores, libraries, gas stations, recreation centers, convenience stores, places of worship, and community centers);
- notices to social service agencies; and
- public service announcements on local TV and radio.

Think of other publicity sources that might work well in your area or school. For example, some schools send a copy of the FAFSA on the Web Worksheet home with every senior. You might want to staple an announcement about the financial aid awareness program to the front of each worksheet.

Every announcement should include at least:
- the key subject points that will be covered in the program, such as giving instructions on how to complete the FAFSA;
- the date (and the “snow date”);
- the location, including the address and room;
- the time and program length; and
- a telephone number to call for more information.

You might also include the presenter’s name and affiliation, parking instructions, child care information, and other important details.
Organize for Success

It helps to be organized if you want to produce a useful financial aid awareness program. Consider creating a checklist itemizing the tasks you need to complete. Remember, with good planning, your financial aid awareness program is sure to be a success. Good luck!