

MEETING THE CONSUMERISM REGULATIONS: THE PROJECT AT U. C. BERKELEY

by Douglas McKenzie

The 1976 Amendments to the Higher Education Act, commonly called the Student Consumer Information Services regulations, provoked considerable concern among financial aid administrators. It once again raised the question of burdensome federal intrusions into the operation of campus financial aid offices. This article will describe the University of California (U.C.) at Berkeley's response to these regulations and some insights gained from that experience.

In late August of 1977, a working task force of six Financial Aid staff members drawn from various sections in the office was established. Shortly after the first meeting, a graduate student in counseling joined the group. She was funded under College Work-Study. The stated objective was to plan and implement Berkeley's response to the Student Consumer Information regulations. Under the guidance of the Associate Director of Financial Aid, the group began by reviewing the language of the law, determining what requirements had already been met and what sections needed additional effort.

The task was divided into component projects with priority completion dates. The first task was to develop a publication that substantially met the specific requirements of the regulations. The committee reviewed section 178.4 (Information Dissemination topics) and decided that several areas such as retention data and description of the academic program could best be published in other campus documents such as the General Catalogue. Most of the subjects, however, would be included in the Financial Aid Handbook then being planned. The Handbook was to be used for the 1978-79 academic year admission cycle which began in November.

Three of the task force members were given principal responsibility for authorship of the Handbook. They decided to organize it under a series of topics posed as questions that students typically ask (e.g., what types of aid are available, how do I apply, etc.)

Douglas McKenzie served as a member of the Student Consumerism Task Force at U. C. Berkeley discussed in this article. He is currently a Financial Aid Counselor at California State University, San Francisco.

The Handbook began with a brief introduction and directory. It was followed by a section entitled "Alphabet Soup" — a glossary of financial aid acronyms often so glibly used by staff but which are meaningless to students. Sections followed which discussed the type of aid available, the application procedure, the eligibility determination, the awarding process, and the notification of payments.

Following this factual discussion of financial aid procedures, the Handbook treated the issue of the students' responsibilities as financial aid recipients, avenues of appeal, and ended with several pages of advice on money management and prudent buying habits. To blunt the dry recitation of details, the text was interlaced with humorous but related graphics, examples of award letters and payment schedules and the experiences of two example financial aid applicants (and recipients) who represented common situations facing students at the U.C. Berkeley campus.

With the expert help of the campus publication office, the draft of the brochure was typeset, laid out with graphics, and 50,000 copies were produced. Handbook production costs, exclusive of staff time, came to about \$.28 per copy. The Handbooks were included in all application packets mailed to prospective students and handed out with the application materials to continuing students. In 1000 application packets, a questionnaire and stamped envelope were included. The former asked for reactions to specific aspects of the material covered in the publication. About 10 percent of the questionnaires were returned. Information gathered from this survey will be used in planning next year's edition.

The Handbook, however, was but the first of several projects undertaken as a response to student consumerism. The task force believes that the regulations are an admonition to take a considered, critical look at the information financial aid offices make available to current, and just as importantly, prospective students. The task force agreed that an expanded outreach as well as publication program was needed.

With the Handbook finished, the next priority was to advertise the approaching financial aid deadlines. Initially, this was considered most important for entering students who are required to submit preliminary documents to start their application. To reach out to these prospective students in the Bay Area, the Financial Aid Office contracted with a local blues and jazz radio station to run a month long series of announcements encouraging interested high school and community college students to apply. On-campus advertising directed at prospective graduate students included arranging for large advertisements in the daily student newspaper, posting handbills at department offices and large lecture halls, enlisting the help of the campus radio station to run spot announcements, and locating large posters around the building that houses the Financial Aid Office and other student services.

A month later, the advertising/outreach campaign for continuing students began. Once again, the Office purchased time on the same radio station and asked the campus station to carry spot advertisements announcing the deadline. A month long series of advertisements were placed in the student newspaper highlighting both the deadline as well as a series of workshops which will be describe later in this article. The campus' academic departments, the undergraduate li-

brary, and lecture halls were saturated with handbills. Posters were placed in the main library foyer and the building where the Financial Aid Office is located. A staff member drafted a general public service announcement and sent a request for air time to all the radio and television stations in the area. Local high school counselors were surveyed to determine the accuracy and completeness of their information regarding the deadline. Four local newspapers were contacted and asked to carry public service notices to publicize the deadline.

In conjunction with the advertising campaign, the task force members coordinated application "help sessions" that were staffed by financial aid counselors. Counselors visited students in living groups (e.g., dormitories, fraternities, sororities, and the student cooperatives) during the early evening to answer questions about completing the forms. During the two weeks prior to the deadline, a meeting room adjacent to the Financial Aid Office was reserved and help was made available to individuals in completing their applications. In an effort to serve academic department personnel, a survey was circulated to ascertain their interest in receiving more financial aid information. A workshop was held for interested University staff so that they might be more informed about financial aid procedures. For the final deadline of the application cycle (copies of the parents' and students' 1040 income tax returns are due by April 15), the task force has planned a comparable advertising campaign.

In order to have the staff needed to carry out effectively the projects planned and to meet the stipulations of the consumerism regulations, two new jobs were created. Funded by the "consumerism" allowance, the two new financial aid counselors took over the principal responsibility for the projects. After the two new positions were filled in mid-December, the task force continued to meet in an advisory capacity. The two counselors have some conventional counselor functions (i.e., need analysis, some advising appointments) in addition to their consumerism responsibilities.

In early October, two of the task force members undertook a student "Expenditure Diary Survey". This project had two purposes: 1) to develop information necessary in formulating the 1978-79 standard student budgets used in need analysis, and 2) as a reference for developing a money management service to be offered by financial aid counselors. The diary survey methodology had been designed in 1975 by William Bowman, a staff analyst then working with the campus Office of Student Affairs Research. On a standard form, students keep daily records of all their expenses in pre-determined categories. Once the two month survey is completed, students return their survey forms and a smaller group is retained to continue the survey over the rest of the academic year. This survey provides hard evidence of educational and living costs incurred by students; consequently, the budgets used by the office are well supported by empirical data.

In an effort to develop information and referral services for students as economic consumers in the community, the task force planned another project. This involved two parts: 1) a money management service for students who have difficulty allocating their money judiciously, and 2) a consumer information library that will have pamphlets, booklets, and fact sheets which might help students save money and provide information on the assistance available from other

non-University sources. To put this plan into action, information from the Expenditure Diary Survey was refined and a budgeting form designed. Students could use the form to keep track of their resources and expenditures. With the aid of a counselor, students could then identify the areas of spending which they can control and thus be able to live within a budget. This service will be integrated with the emerging loan resources by informing students requesting short-term assistance of the money management service.

In addition, the task force gathered information from various public and private agencies that have expertise on consumer issues. Members met with representatives from Consumer Action of San Francisco, CalPIRG (a campus based public interest research group), and corresponded with federal and state consumer information agencies. From these contacts, a small library of materials was collected and assurance of future supplies was obtained. The materials covered such topics as prescription drugs, credit laws, rental rights and responsibilities, and food cooperatives. These materials were readily available from the agencies contacted. Once the task force has gathered an adequate supply of these materials, racks to hold the materials will be constructed in the reception rotunda. The reception area will then become an informative place for students awaiting service.

For this spring and into the early summer, the task force plans to publish several pamphlets to accompany the forms used to notify students of their offer of financial aid. For the initial offer, an award letter publication will detail specific information that the student needs in order to fulfill the terms of the offer. Included will be a complete description of the sections of the offer letter and explanations of what information it contains, a brief outline of the programs that may be listed on the offer, a statement of the responsibilities implicit in the acceptance of the offer, and a selection of other immediately pertinent information. The publication itself will visually follow the graphic art theme used in the Financial Aid Handbook.

Another pamphlet will explain the award payment schedule employed at Berkeley. The Payment Schedule, a tripart form used by the Accounting Office as well as Financial Aid, details the amount and date of payments to be made according to the offer of assistance. As an accounting document, many students find it difficult to decipher the information it contains. It is useful, however, because it gives a firm commitment of disbursement dates for aid checks. Because of past problems, the publication accompanying the payment schedule will be designed to simplify and clarify the purpose of the form. With these two publications, the task force hopes that the frequent ambiguities and misunderstandings regarding the actual receipt of financial aid will be minimized. These publications will not solve the problems; rather, they will reduce the volume of repetitive and unnecessary questions asked by students after receiving an award offer.

Among other pamphlets contemplated is one that compiles eligibility and application information for a variety of special programs available only to certain students. This brochure will explain the Health Profession Student Loan program which is available only to Optometry students at Berkeley, Bureau of Indian Affairs grants, restricted grant and scholarship funds, and other programs of interest to limited numbers of students. By treating these unrelated pro-

grams under one cover, information can be provided to those students who qualify for this specialized aid without the high cost of separate publications. Another pamphlet under consideration is a general informational reference for Spanish-speaking students and particularly for their parents. The University of California at Davis has already produced an impressive aid brochure in Spanish.¹

In addition to publication plans, the Financial Aid Office participates with the Offices of Admissions and Relations with Schools in a recently initiated effort to recruit regularly admissible minority students to Berkeley. This is an in-the-field effort of the three offices to attract high school minority students who qualify for regular admission. These students will receive an admission acceptance when U.C. Berkeley staff meets with them at their high schools. As an important adjunct to this plan, a specially trained financial aid counselor will also be present to perform a preliminary needs analysis, using some basic financial information the students will provide, to give an estimate of financial aid these students might receive. University officials believe that a concrete admission offer along with a tentative financial aid offer will encourage qualified minority students to attend U.C. Berkeley who might be tempted to go elsewhere. Connected to this specific effort is a general project to inform U.C. Berkeley field representatives about basic financial aid procedures and policies so that they can answer particular questions interested high schoolers might ask. By raising the visibility of financial aid among student affairs units, it is hoped that a new level of consistent, accurate information will result.

Even though the overall consumerism project is still in its infancy and many of the long range goals are still being determined, the experiences at Berkeley may be enlightening. The federal regulations mandate that a minimum of information must be provided to current as well as prospective students. Task force members believe that the regulations do more than prescribe; they encourage offices of financial aid to go beyond the letter of the law. The regulations implicitly acknowledge the pivotal role that financial aid plays in the decisions students make about their education. The impact of rising educational and living costs can be offset by the financial aid resources available. However, the financial aid community generally has not provided consistent information to students regarding what aid is available and how they might receive it. At U.C. Berkeley, the student grapevine has been a far more effective communication system than any advertising conducted by the staff. Entering students, who have not had the benefit of that word of mouth communication, are unsure about what they must do to receive assistance. Added to this muddle is the conflicting maze of federal, state and institutional programs and qualifications. Previous outreach efforts have been sporadic and not very effective.

The Student Consumer Information Services regulations focus federal, and hence, local attention on the need for better information. Due to the complexi-

¹ "Costeando los Gastos de la Education Universitaria", Financial Aid Office, U. C. Davis, 1977.

ties of scale, Berkeley chose publications as the principal medium for disseminating this important information to those who need it most. The questionnaire surveying the Handbook's worth indicated a very favorable response. Several commenters noted that it was the most complete description of financial aid they had seen. That kind of response is gratifying; it suggests that the consumerism project is on the right track. In the survey of personnel who staff the academic departments, many said that more information about financial aid would be most helpful. Often those individuals receive general questions about financial aid from students interested in a particular academic field but they are unable to help them directly. On several occasions, prospective students received misinformation from departmental personnel about financial aid deadlines and lost out on priority consideration. With the expanded outreach efforts, it is hoped these unnecessary crises can be prevented. By advertising heavily and improving the publications, confusion and ambiguity should be reduced.

By conscientiously applying the spirit as well as the letter of the law to the particular situation at Berkeley, the task force is attempting to make the Financial Aid Office an information terminal. It is responsible for providing students with the information they need. More than just furnishing this financial aid information, they can help students resolve a host of financial problems. Harsh economic realities can easily intimidate a new student who has never faced them before. Older students have unique problems that a financial aid office may resolve. By recognizing these problems, financial aid officers can develop the resources to help such students. Done tactfully, some pointed advice might help prevent a student from getting in way over his or her head. It is in such a spirit that the task force developed the various projects described above.

The increased administrative allowance finally opens up possibilities for better communications that financial aid officers can consider. Clearly, the experience of U.C. Berkeley is not applicable to all offices; scale alone limits many offices of financial aid in the type of programs they can attempt. However, the regulations encourage individual schools to re-evaluate and improve their efforts to communicate with students.