

Colorado State University

IMPROVING FINANCIAL AID COMMUNICATION

CSU has almost 24,000 undergraduate students and disperses approximately \$330 million in financial aid each year. A high priority is to recruit a student body that reflects Colorado's demographics. Clearly conveying finances in offer letters is central to meeting the institution's goal of enrolling a diverse study body.



Tom Biedscheid

Vice President
Enrollment & Access

For Tom Biedscheid, then director of the Office of Financial Aid at Colorado State University (CSU), a phone call in 2018 from a counselor at Alameda International High School changed the trajectory of CSU's financial aid offer process. The counselor explained that none of the 13 students that CSU had accepted could afford to attend. "Almost all of these students were receiving our best financial aid package," says Tom, "and they had support from GEARUP, so I was puzzled. I asked if we could come to the school and meet with the students."

In that meeting Tom and his staff talked through the award letter, starting with cost. "At no point in that letter did we spell out net cost, and the students got hung up on cost out of the gate," says Tom. The CSU team then went through the math in detail with the students "and we saw the lights go on. This was an aha moment for me. I realized we had a terrible offer letter!" Shortly thereafter, Tom engaged uAspire to help strengthen CSU's communication of college costs and financial aid to students.

Learning from Critical Audiences

uAspire undertook a comprehensive review of all financial aid notification and communications documentation (aid offer, budget sheet, financial aid guide), conducted focus groups, led a training on award letters, and provided recommendations. “They brought all of their knowledge and experience to the table, providing us with the opportunity to be on the leading edge of this work,” says Tom.

“The uAspire team started with internal conversations and then facilitated a meeting with our extensive network of partners, which provided an external perspective on our communications,” says Tom.

“uAspire was exceptional at connecting with people—in a way that we could not have done inhouse—which led to the surfacing of some serious pain points.”

The most impactful conversations, though, according to Tom took place with students. “We made a big effort to reach out to people who had relationships with marginalized students—first-generation, low-income, undocumented, etc.—and bring students together in focus groups,” says Tom.

“uAspire’s ability to create immediate rapport with students was astounding. Students engaged quickly and were very honest about their experience.”

“I am confident that, as an older white man, I would not have been as successful in speaking with these students.”

Building an Informative Aid Offer

According to Tom, there were several salient learnings, which he has now incorporated into the aid offer:

- Clearly articulate cost and show the full cost of attendance, including tuition, room and board, books, transportation, and personal supplies
- Ensure that costs reflect a student’s specific needs
- Use terminology that makes sense to an 18 year old, such as clarifying what “room and board” means
- Be very clear about the different forms of aid: articulate what doesn’t need to be paid back, remove parent loans from the letter, and highlight student loans in a separate section

Impacting Student Success

“We now have created the best financial aid offer letter in the country,” says Tom. “The immediate win came from our partners—they were thrilled to report that they now had CSU letters that allowed them to easily convey our offers to students.”

“This work is critically important, especially at a time when the national narrative is ‘is college worth it?’” says Tom. “All schools should be examining their offer letter.”

“Articulating the real cost of attendance can make all the difference between a student making a decision that leads to success or not.”

Tom comments that the impact of the assessment with uAspire was multilayered: “First, they connected with our staff at a values level: we are all doing this work to help students. Second, uAspire brought both a national perspective—including testifying at a congressional committee on student needs—as well as the ability to analyze qualitative and quantitative data at our particular institution. And, last, but by no means least, they understand their positionality and excelled at building rapport, yielding conversations we could never have had on our own.”

“Without hesitation, I would recommend working with uAspire on this kind of assessment. It has made a world of difference for CSU and its students.”

Want to improve postsecondary outcomes for your students?
Contact Michelle Murphy at michellem@uaspire.org