



Taft College: Modernizes its financial aid disbursement process



- › One campus with approx 2,668 FTE
- › Offers Associate in Arts and Science degrees as well as a number of certificates

Challenges

- › Financial aid disbursement started during the third week of school and took 3–4 weeks to complete
- › No way to meet student requests for electronic ACH or debit card financial aid payments
- › More than \$700 per semester on financial aid check-related expenses
- › Population of AB-540 students lacked bank accounts for check cashing/depositing

Solution

- › Modernized financial aid disbursement and provides streamlined distribution to students, saving staff time and improving student satisfaction and participation.

Established in 1922, Taft College in Taft, California, underwent a \$100-million modernization and construction project to completely transform the rural campus. As part of this push, and as a way to better meet the needs of its growing student body, the college adopted BlackboardPay in its financial aid department.

“We had a lot of students coming up to the counter and asking for direct deposit and debit cards,” said Barbara Amerio, Director of Financial Aid. “Another college in our area had offered financial aid electronically for a few years now, so we were behind the times.”

Taft College also wanted to speed up its slow financial aid disbursement process. Student credit balance (aka “refund”) checks, for example, were processed by the financial aid office, sent over to the college’s business office, sent to a county office that actually cut the checks, and then sent back to the college for mailing.

“It easily took three-to-four weeks from the time of disbursement until the students received their funds,” recalled Amerio, whose team doesn’t begin that process until the third week of the school semester. “We knew we needed a faster and more streamlined approach.”



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Barbara Amerio
Director of Financial Aid
Taft College

uses to fund check batches and then monitor the distribution of those checks. “I use the dashboard to watch every single card get funded, address any ACHs that were denied (due to invalid bank account numbers, for example),” said Amerio, “and share information with our auditors, who in turn can see that every student account received every penny that was allocated to those accounts.”

Saving Money, Time, and Hassle

Taft College has realized key benefits from its BlackboardPay implementation. With 56% of its students receiving funds electronically during the first semester the platform was in use, the school received positive feedback from students. Rather than waiting weeks for their credit balance checks to arrive via mail, students received their funds via ACH or debit card within just a few days. The solution has also greatly reduced the number of checks that have to be verified, processed, and routed through three different departments—including the county office.

During the fall of 2014, the school disbursed 1,016 PELL checks—an undertaking that used to eat up both time and money (to the tune of about \$426.75 in check costs alone). “The same process now costs us just \$25.80,” said Amerio. “That’s a significant savings for a school like ours.”

Amerio, whose goal is to add institutional and state aid disbursements in addition to federal aid to the Blackboard platform in the near future, said the solution allows Taft College to better service its population of non-banked students. “We have a large population of AB-540 students who don’t have social security numbers and who cannot pass the Patriot Act, so they don’t have bank accounts,” said Amerio. “Our new platform helps us serve them better as well.”

Modernizing the Financial Aid Office

Intent on modernizing the way her department handled financial aid disbursements, Amerio attended a few educational conferences and talked to colleagues from other California colleges about the solutions they were using. She heard a mix of horror stories (most of them involving bank-based solutions) and positive feedback on the solutions currently available on the market. “We wanted a vendor that knew how to service a small school like ours,” said Amerio.

After hearing positive feedback about BlackboardPay from several colleagues, Amerio worked closely with Blackboard to roll out the solution at Taft. Total implementation time was about 12 weeks and the platform went live in August 2014. Amerio credits Blackboard with making the implementation seamless and non-disruptive. “They walked us through every single step,” she said.

In addition to automating the disbursement of student financial aid checks, BlackboardPay features a management system that Amerio