

Finding a partner to improve system utilization and student service in financial aid offices

Third Coast Higher Education helps improve compliance and business operations for schools through automation of student information systems, training and use of best practices

Donna Salak knew the financial aid office at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio, was not using its Banner student information system to full capacity.

Salak, who is Xavier's director of financial aid, had staff with a user-level understanding of Banner, but there had been knowledge loss on the technical side due to staff turnover. Salak sought a partner to evaluate Xavier's operations, and to plan and implement enhancements that would lead to better use of Banner's automated capabilities. Salak's goal was to enable staff to focus more on assisting students and less on performing time-consuming manual data entry. Though Xavier had not identified compliance issues, Salak knew that improved utilization of Banner would lower the risk of non-compliance and ensure good performance in the annual A-133 audits.

Salak engaged with Third Coast Higher Education, a financial aid consulting firm, to assist in a system-enhancement project. Third Coast helps admissions and financial aid offices by guiding process improvements through assessment of operations, staff training and use of student information systems like Banner.

Assessment-focused approach and services

Third Coast consultants use an assessment-focused approach, which determines the current state, concerns and goals, and then provides a path to reach those goals. Consultants are current financial aid practitioners and have expertise in Banner. This helps develop and implement solutions for managing operations, systems, training and compliance.

When Third Coast began working with Xavier in January 2016, Banner's automation abilities were not being maximized. Staff worked overtime to do data entry, impacting time available to interact with students.

Following the entire financial aid lifecycle, Third Coast utilized automated document tracking solutions for students who were selected for verification, packaged financial aid awards, evaluated satisfactory academic progress, disbursed funds, reconciled student loans and did preparation of the FISAP. Third Coast consultants' knowledge of financial aid process and Banner expertise created an efficiency that reduced overtime and led to better interaction with students.



"Our work with Third Coast is a collaboration to improve service and delivery of financial aid. They focus on applying solutions, rather than just making recommendations and leaving the implementation to the university."

"It was about staff being more effective on a day-to-day basis, which allowed them to focus on completing tasks in a timely manner and ultimately providing better customer service to our students," Salak says

Ideas continue to flow between Third Coast and Xavier to further improve processes in the second year of the relationship.

"Our work with Third Coast is about improving service in the way we deliver financial aid. They focus on applying solutions and not just making recommendations and leaving the implementation to the university," Salak says. "This is something that has been really beneficial for my staff and Xavier."



For more information, visit www.thirdcoasthighereducation.org/services

View, comment, share this story online at UBmag.me/TCHE