

**REPORT ON
PROPRIETARY SCHOOL FOCUS GROUP
December 5-6, 1995**

BACKGROUND

The U.S. Department of Education (ED), Training and Program Information Division (TPID), sponsors focus groups to determine future needs in the area of federal student financial aid program training and to assess TPID's program publications. The Proprietary School Focus Group, which met on December 5 and 6, 1995 in Rockville, Maryland, consisted of nine financial aid administrators from that sector. Attachment A lists the focus group participants and the schools they represent.

TPID GOALS

The overall goals for the two-day meeting were to:

- foster an atmosphere that promoted open, honest, and constructive discussion;
- improve and enhance delivery of training to the financial aid community; and
- explore options for communicating and disseminating information to the financial aid community.

The focus group established general ground rules at the beginning of the meeting to help foster the trust and honesty necessary for effective brainstorming and issue prioritizing. To ensure that ED would consider all ideas, the group maintained an issue bin to keep track of topics and concerns that could not be addressed during the meeting. The second part of Attachment F itemizes the issues in the bin.

RESULTS OF THE MEETINGS

DAY ONE

The objectives for Day 1 focused on delivery of training. The objectives were to:

- identify proprietary school training needs;
- list specific training topics and subtopics;
- discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different methods of delivering training;
- prioritize and link the training topics to the most effective methods of delivery; and
- create an "ideal" training cycle.

In an effort to meet all these objectives, various questions were posed to the focus group. A summary of the questions and the focus group's responses appears below.

What type of training should ED sponsor?

The group briefly discussed the types of training that ED should sponsor. The focus group felt that training delivered as one-day or two-day workshops is preferable to week-long institutes. Longer training creates a hardship for proprietary schools because the extended absence of financial aid staff is administratively difficult.

The group also made suggestions about workshop announcements. The participants believed that publishing the agenda would benefit financial aid administrators who are local to the area where the workshop is held because they can keep their offices open by staggering staff attendance. This issue is extremely important to the proprietary schools.

The participants identified preferences for scheduling workshops because proprietary schools have no "down time." They indicated that Mondays are definitely bad days for training. The majority of the group preferred Fridays.

The participants liked the idea of using videoconferences to increase staff attendance, because travel is difficult for proprietary school administrators. However, the group felt that the current teleconferences should be more interactive. They also mentioned that administrators who cannot travel would look favorably on receiving videotapes of workshops accompanied by training guides.

What topics and subtopics should ED cover in sponsored training?

Participants were given three minutes to jot down a couple of training topics or subtopics they felt ED should sponsor. They then compiled the following list without prioritizing it:

- Internet training;
- 85/15 calculation;
- Recertification;
- Quality Assurance (IQAP and Direct Loan Quality Assurance);
- Reconciliation;
- Clock hour concepts in awarding federal financial aid;
- Default;
- Satisfactory academic progress (definition, maximum program length, and examples applicable to proprietary schools);
- Refunds;

- Top 10 program review items and how to prevent problems with them;
- Cash management (excess cash, overawards, 85/15, Letter of Attestation, reconciliation);
- Recent Title IV changes; and
- Seminars with open discussion on school interpretation of Title IV regulations.

In developing this list, participants emphasized that training should be more interactive and have more lab exercises. In addition, examples should be realistic and not always deal with simple scenarios.

What are the most useful training methods?

Participants were asked to identify the most effective methods to deliver training. Five methods were identified:

- Interactive computer-based training (CD-ROM/Internet/floppy disk);
- Workshops;
- Videotapes;
- Videoconferences; and
- Paper delivery.

The participants discussed the advantages and disadvantages of all five methods. The group decided that at different times it is appropriate to use each of these methods. It was noted that is also often effective to use more than one method for the same training project. Attachment B lists the advantages and disadvantages of each method.

What is the priority order of the identified training topics and the most effective method of training for each topic?

The participants were separated into three-person subgroups. Each subgroup prioritized the identified training topics and linked each topic or subtopic to the most effective method of delivery. Attachment C outlines the responses of the three subgroups. It became obvious that the participants felt that most topics require a variety of delivery methods. Focus group members emphasized that the method for the future is interactive computer-based training. They felt that training in this medium is necessary for financial aid administrators and for ED staff.

Each subgroup then developed a training prototype for one of the topics. The three prototypes are in Attachment D.

When is the best time for training?

The group did not reach unanimity on an ideal training cycle. The participants emphasized once again that proprietary schools never have a down time. However, the group's consensus was that the best months for proprietary schools to attend workshops are December, February, March, April, May, and June. It was suggested that Title IV changes, cash management, and refunds are training topics that should be delivered in March or April. Default training, which should include interpreting a school's default rate, should be held in June, November, or December. Satisfactory academic progress training can be held at any time of year.

DAY TWO

Day 2 focused on current and future ED publications. The objectives were to:

- identify the most helpful ED publications in a financial aid office;
- identify ways to improve ED publications;
- identify needed publications for the future;
- describe the ideal publication design and mode of delivery; and
- identify the most efficient and effective methods of disseminating information to financial aid offices.

In addition, the group participated in a demonstration of the Student Financial Assistance/Bulletin Board System (SFA/BBS). Once again, the focus group responded to a series of discussion questions.

Which are the most helpful and least helpful current ED publications?

The focus group stated that all the publications produced by ED are necessary for a variety of reasons and useful for a variety of customers. As a result, the group did not identify individual ED publications as "most helpful" or "least helpful."

One publication the participants felt had erroneous information is *School Shopping Tips*. They felt that this publication should be updated or eliminated. They referred to the *Federal Student Financial Aid Handbook (SFA Handbook)* as the bible for financial aid. When reviewing the *Postsecondary School Counselor Handbook* and the *34 CFR Compilation*, the phrase "used all the time" was heard throughout the discussion.

How can publications be improved?

The participants felt that the *Verification Guide* could be added to the *SFA Handbook* with errata pages provided each year. This would eliminate the need for a separate

publication. They also suggested that the *SFA Handbook* should be indexed and the pages dated so that it could be updated and not have to be rewritten each year.

The *Student Guide* is distributed by all focus group participants to their students. They liked the idea of putting this publication on the Student Financial Assistance/Bulletin Board System (SFA/BBS). A brief section on packaging was suggested. They also suggested including a section on refunds. The participants felt very strongly that any publication covering refunds should also discuss which financial aid dollars cannot be used by the student.

The *High School Counselor Handbook* received good reviews. However, the participants felt that this booklet should include a section at the front on how to use and how *not* to use the publication. This comment arose out of the concern that high school counselors need to recognize their limits when discussing financial aid and acknowledge financial aid counselors as experts.

One final comment was made about the *Default* brochure. The financial aid administrators felt that, given the nature of the topic, the brochure should not be so attractive. They liked the “ink blot” that was used on the old default brochure.

What publications would you like to see in the future?

The group saw a definite need in the financial aid community for a refund publication. The participants also felt it would be very helpful if the repayment worksheets for the Federal Family Education Loan (FFEL) Program had the ED seal printed on them.

How should publications be delivered?

The focus group felt that all publications should be on the SFA/BBS. However, they saw this as a goal to work toward over the next five or so years. They also felt that putting publications on the SFA/BBS does not always eliminate the need for paper versions of the materials. They felt that both the computer-based and paper-based media are necessary, particularly during the time of transition to computer-based systems and possibly always due to the graphics in some materials.

What are the specific advantages and disadvantages of the SFA Handbook, The Student Guide, and Funding Your Education?

The *SFA Handbook* gives financial aid administrators technical definitions and helps schools with documentation. This publication is used by administrators and also by auditors. To improve the *SFA Handbook*, this group would add interpretive examples, indexing, a more detailed table of contents, and a sidebar on each page for referencing. They felt this publication was very different from the *NASFAA Encyclopedia* and that both are needed.

The group viewed *The Student Guide* as the best publication for financial aid offices to distribute to all postsecondary school students. It is a good reference tool for students. The group was concerned that the new, larger size will cause storage and space problems at schools. For example, many schools have brochure racks that cannot be adjusted.

The participants also discussed *Funding Your Education*. They found it to be a very good publication. The focus group felt that it is a good idea to have a publication just for high school students and not to rely solely on *The Student Guide*. They were concerned that *The Student Guide* can be confusing to high school students because it gives too much detail for that audience. The focus group made many suggestions about the content for a publication designed specifically for high school students. Appendix E outlines these ideas. Participants recommended obtaining input from first-year postsecondary students by convening another focus group.

Should there be a single point of contact for disseminating materials to schools?

The focus group emphasized that a single point of contact for schools that rely on multiple copies of publications could be detrimental. They suggested that schools (on an individual basis) be allowed to provide ED with multiple addresses, if necessary.

The group had a lively discussion about disseminating materials by SFA/BBS versus the paper method. As mentioned earlier in this report, the group encouraged use of the SFA/BBS, but not the elimination of the paper method. They emphasized that training in the use of the SFA/BBS is needed at schools.

The group then participated in a demonstration of the SFA/BBS. All participants signed onto the system.

Biggest concerns

The participants were asked to share their greatest concerns about student financial aid and the U.S. Department of Education. The first part of Attachment F lists these concerns.

SUMMARY

The two-day focus group provided ED with many perspectives, suggestions, and constructive comments on training and publications. In general, the focus group commended ED for holding the meeting. They also expressed an interest in meeting again for further discussions.