

Midwestern University models best practices in financial literacy for college students

Universities looking for effective practices in financial literacy programs can look to Midwestern University as a model school. A graduate health care education institution with 4,400 students on campuses in Arizona and Illinois, Midwestern University has stepped up its financial literacy initiatives during the past 18 months. The school's efforts to implement more effective programs in financial literacy are paying off and provide ideas for other financial aid offices to consider.

When Kimberly A. Brown, director of finance for Midwestern University, hired a new director for the Arizona campus in October 2009, she challenged the new staff member to create a best-in-class financial literacy program.

E. Thomas Billard, director of student financial services at the Arizona campus began by reviewing everything related to financial literacy that their office provided — from the traditional exit counseling interviews conducted days prior to graduation to the materials provided by partners such as USA Funds®.

Billard's primary objective was to revise the program to provide a full circle of financial literacy education to students. With nearly 90 percent of the school's students receiving some form of financial aid, the program would benefit most of the students attending Midwestern. Billard used his 30 years of expertise and the insights of his colleagues to assist in the redesign.

Developing exit counseling webinars

Reshaping exit counseling to add greater flexibility in how the information is shared was the first area Billard and his colleagues tackled. Instead of providing large, in-person exit counseling sessions just days before graduation, exit counseling was redesigned to be more conducive to upcoming graduates' schedules. While all graduates are required to participate in the federally mandated exit counseling in order to graduate, additional content now is packaged in a one-hour, Web-based format that allows students to call in to the session. The loan repayment information sessions are offered beginning six weeks prior to graduation. To better match student schedules, especially those on medical rotations in other states and time zones, multiple sessions are available at various times throughout the six-week period.

Each webinar is scheduled with a maximum of 50 students per session to allow participants to ask questions and become more involved in the presentation.

Students receive an email with details regarding their graduation requirements two weeks prior to the start of the webinars. A recap of the loan repayment webinar and questions frequently asked during sessions also are available online on the school's website.

The webinar format has been a success at Midwestern University. The school's creative and flexible approach to providing supplemental content is educating upcoming graduates on the federal terms and conditions of repayment. In addition, the material emphasizes to students that there never is a good reason to be delinquent on a payment because federal student loans offer repayment options and flexibility not available for other types of consumer debt.

The school also implemented an evaluation system to measure the program's success. Midwestern graduates who participated last year in this revised exit counseling approach provided very positive feedback. The financial aid office saw a participation rate of more than 80 percent.

"Like many other schools, our graduates can leave with significant student loan debt," said Billard. "This repayment information is critical to them. Providing supplemental loan repayment information that best fits our students' busy schedules and in a way they like to receive information gets them more engaged in the discussion and ultimately better prepares them to work with their servicer."

Creating a financial experts forum

Another financial literacy initiative the school recently began offering is a Financial Experts Forum series. Launched in April 2010, Billard assembled experts in fields related to the school's colleges and specialty programs to speak to students and their spouses. Billard developed the panel knowing students would be anxious to talk with current professionals and discuss everything from how they repay their loans to how to start a medical practice.

"This is an opportunity for students to gain access to professionals, listen to real-life experiences from someone who has been through it before, and ask questions," he said.

The forums have been very popular, averaging approximately 75 participants per session. Previous panel experts have included a commercial banker, two practicing dentists, a certified financial planner, a graduate of the Nurse Anesthesia program and a resident medical physician from the school's faculty.

Next steps in improving financial literacy

"We have made great progress in our financial literacy program and we're ahead of the game," said Billard. "We can still run faster and offer more, though."

One of the next steps for Midwestern University is to enhance its financial literacy program by implementing USA Funds Life Skills®. Billard hopes to promote information specific to Midwestern students via the Web on a weekly basis with Facebook links to the program.

USA Funds Life Skills is a Web-based program that equips schools to teach students how to manage their finances and time wisely, during school and after graduation.

With the help of USA Funds, Midwestern University is raising the bar and offering enhanced financial literacy program and education information for its students.

"USA Funds has always been a leader in the industry," Billard added. "Working with USA Funds helps us to better serve our students."

About Midwestern University

Midwestern University is one of the largest health professions universities in the country. Its students attend classes on campuses in Downers Grove, Ill., and in Glendale, Ariz. The school's historical and sustaining philosophy dedicates the institution and its resources to the highest standards of academic excellence to meet the educational needs of the health care community.

About USA Funds Life Skills

USA Funds Life Skills is a Web-based financial literacy and student success program designed to help students learn to manage their money and time wisely while in school and after graduation. The content is organized into easy-to-use life lessons that can be customized for a specific audience. Topics include managing credit card debt, living on a budget, and managing school and personal life. USA Funds Life Skills incorporates post-lesson quizzes to help measure knowledge of key personal finance concepts. Visit the USA Funds website at www.usafunds.org or contact your USA Funds representative for more information about USA Funds Life Skills.