

Common Origination and Disbursement System Full Participant External Outreach Plan

Overview

The Office of Student Financial Assistance (SFA) is implementing a new information system for administering student financial aid called the Common Origination and Disbursement System (COD). All institutions participating in the Federal Pell Grant and Federal Direct Loan programs for the 2002 – 2003 financial aid processing cycle will use the COD System. COD integrates leading edge technology and data transmission protocols with community-developed data standards. COD positions SFA for real-time processing over the Internet in subsequent aid cycles. For this first year, a choice of data transmission protocols with COD is available. An institution may choose to communicate electronically using either the new COD Common Record or the fixed position or legacy records. Full Participants use the new Common Record in XML. Phase-in Participants use the legacy record formats. All institutions are either Full Participants or Phase-In Participants for this next processing year.

The goal of this External Outreach Plan is to maximize the probability of success for those organizations that volunteered as Full Participants in 2002 – 2003 and to document the experiences. This is accomplished by recruiting institutions, software vendors, and third party servicers prepared to integrate the Common Record in their systems, by offering a forum to this community with support activities, meeting, and presentations, by leveraging the knowledge and resources in the Office of Student Financial Assistance and the Modernization Partner to resolve issues efficiently, by developing information tools for their use and by documenting the “lessons learned.” The documented results from this Full Participant community will benefit the Phase-in Participants as all institutions become Full Participants over the next three financial aid processing cycles.

Purpose

The Common Origination and Disbursement System is a significant component of the Modernization Blueprint of the Department of Education’s Office of Student Financial Assistance. COD is designed to address several of the goals of SFA’s modernization: cost reduction by eliminating discrete administrative systems for each financial aid program and taking advantage of information technology standards; improve customer service by combining multiple support centers into one with experienced staff; and streamlining the financial aid reporting process for institutions by using one data transmission format rather than the more than fourteen currently in use. To support those institutions volunteering to be Full Participants this first year and to measure the accomplishment of these goals, SFA requested this plan. The Full Participant External Outreach Plan and the attachments describe the strategy for the Full Participants community, the activities to be completed, the deliverables and the metrics for these accomplishments.

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Strategy

The strategy of the External Outreach Plan for the Full Participants is to recruit participants; to inform and coordinate with other members of the COD teams about COD systems, technology and processes; and to assess the effectiveness of these activities for the subsequent processing cycles. In the higher education systems marketplace today, there is an evolutionary shift from batch-based processing to real-time web-based processing techniques. COD takes advantage of these changes, especially with the staggered functionality for each of the successive processing cycles. By recruiting the change agents, informing them of the process and technology, and assessing the effectiveness of these techniques, the Full Participants and SFA are successful with COD.

Recruit: This plan is for the student financial aid community who are partners in the delivery of Title IV Student Financial Aid programs: institutions, software vendors and third party servicers. Some institutions develop their own system solutions; however, many utilize the products and services of vendors and servicers. By increasing our recruitment efforts to software vendors and third party servicers committed to adopt the Common Record as well as institutions that develop their own system solutions, the solutions are more comprehensive. This added talent incorporates more experience within the group and encourages the group to share their successes with the Phase-In Participants interested in joining the next cycle. By integrating the software vendors and third party servicers this first year, more institutions will be able to seriously consider participation the second processing cycle.

Inform and Coordinate: This component is defined as communications between the Full Participants, SFA and the COD Modernization Partner teams to ensure the success of all involved. This includes the coordination of schedules, information demands and written tools developed from the knowledge of all players. It also includes coordination with the Training and Outreach, Capability Development, Testing and Customer Service Teams. This leverages the resources each member of this community is willing to offer and produces tools for the Phase-In Participants in subsequent years.

Assess: The public success of COD depends in large part on the ease with which the initial Full Participants are able to implement the XML-based Common Record to communicate with COD. To the extent their experiences are shared, are without undue expenditure of resources, and do not adversely impact their students; the overall transition to COD will be well received. If the implementation experiences of the Full Participants are consistent with the Department's messages, convincing additional schools to adopt the Common Record will be straightforward. Therefore, it is important to carefully consider the technical tools and support provided to the Full Participant institutions.

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Activities

The principle activities to support the Full Participants are:

- Reference materials including file formats, the COD Technical Reference, COD Implementation Guide, and other materials.
- Testing environment to confirm data transmission compatibility, efficient data throughput, and correct system operability.
- Communications and training, including regular information and FAQs posted to IFAP; ED/SFA and user community conference presentations; possible site visits; regular conference calls with institutions, software vendors, and third party servicers; and COD process and on-line training.
- Recruitment of Full Participants for both the 2002 – 2003 and the 2003 – 2004 processing cycles.

To provide the wide-range of support described above, SFA will coordinate the activities of several teams identified on the COD organization chart. Specifically, the Technical Architecture team is responsible for the technical platforms for transmission of the XML-based Common Record using the Student Aid Internet Gateway and the associated security of these transmissions. The Capability Development and Testing teams are responsible for COD functionality and process testing, respectively, through the EAI Bus and TSYS system. The Training and Outreach team is responsible for training Full and Phase-In Participants, preparation and distribution of materials, and external messages. Coordinating these teams to anticipate and resolve the Full Participants' needs is integral to the success of COD external outreach. Knowledge of both the Title IV Student Financial Aid Programs and the software developer schedules is extremely useful in resolving these issues.

To implement the Common Record in XML for the 2002 – 2003 cycle is aggressive. As a result, the system solution chosen by some of these institutions, vendors or servicers for the first year may be an interim solution to meet the needs of both the Full Participant and Phase-In Participant customer base and to implement within the current system's limitations. This interim solution may evolve into the "elegant" solution over subsequent processing cycles as additional functionality is available in COD, such as real-time processing, and as the customers integrate the power of the COD process into their organization and workflow. SFA will work with the Full Participants toward the "elegant" solution, communicating both the functional and technical benefits of COD and the Common Record. In addition to providing schools and software developers with the above support, SFA will monitor their Common Record implementation efforts to gain the knowledge necessary to support future, full

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community adoption efforts. The objectives of these monitoring activities should identify:

- Identify system design considerations that best take advantage of the benefits inherent in COD. Identifying the best system implementation strategies will also assist the effort to modernize EDEExpress;
- Produce implementation aids and perform customer support activities to increase the likelihood an institution's successful implementation of the Common Record;
- Document implementation strategy strengths and weaknesses; and
- Document investment requirements and the return on that investment. Institutions may be sensitive to the costs associated with systems' development activity for aid administration. Development of simple tools to assist this measurement, if desired.

Scope and Description of Activities

Establish communications with and commitment from Full Participants, whether institutions, software vendors or servicers by:

1. Contacting schools on the Full Participant list, assessing their levels of interest and identifying principle contacts. Maintain interest level matrix.
2. Following-up with Full Participants to identify their annual development timelines and support requirements. Provide information about school/client testing support. Maintain anticipated development schedules for each school, vendor and third party servicer.
3. Conducting monthly conference calls with Full Participants to insure ongoing progress with each organization's system solution.
4. Coordinating the COD sessions at ED/SFA conferences.
5. Developing the Implementation Guide for use by the Full Participants in the first and subsequent years.
6. Coordinating high-level sessions with senior management of SFA with the Full Participants on a quarterly basis.

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7. Monitoring deployment of the testing environments and following-up with schools to resolve testing delays or other problems.
8. Monitoring the submission of “live” records and coordinating follow-up activities with customer support staff.
9. Possibly conducting site-visits to review implementation experiences, document creative strategies and ‘lessons learned’. Prepare site-visit reports.

Encourage a culture of collaboration between SFA, institutions, software vendors and third party servicers by:

1. Conducting presentations for vendor development staff and user groups.
2. Providing on-going support (answering questions, etc.) and design assistance.
3. Coordinating testing support activities with the Technical Architecture, Test Management, Capability Development, Customer Service teams, TSYS and the Full Participants.
4. Participating on the Training & Outreach team by identifying implementation aids, by directing their preparation, by reviewing training presentations.
5. Participating in vendor user group/advisory council meetings.
6. Identifying implementation “best practices” and soliciting suggestions for improving COD.

The attached Full Participant –Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) provides a graphic representation of the activities described above. The WBS used in combination with the documentation and project plans prepared by the external outreach team supports an efficient means of managing efforts to support adoption of COD by fully participating schools and software vendors.

Conclusion

To encourage schools to transition to the Common Record and full use of COD, the fully participating schools and software developers should have good experiences. SFA needs to make every effort to provide them with the tools and assistance needed to implement COD fully this first year. Further, by carefully monitoring early implementation activities, SFA will gain valuable information that

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will facilitate future efforts to transition schools to COD using the Common Record as the transmission mechanism.

Appendices

- A) Full Participant – Work Breakdown Structure (WBS)
- B) Workplan for External Outreach for Full Participant Software Vendors, Third Party Servicers and Institutions