

**Bookstore to the Rescue**

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***Abstract***

*Prior to the Bookstore to the Rescue program, students who were receiving an excess of financial aid were required to wait until the release of that money to the university's debit card provider before having access to their funds. This presented a hardship to students as the financial aid release was after the start of classes and many did not have any alternate funding options for academic material purchases. Further frustration for these students developed as many of the used books were sold out by the time they were able to access their funds. This had the effect of forcing them to purchase more expensive new textbooks.*

**Introduction of the Organization**

The University of West Georgia is a coeducational, residential, liberal arts institution located in Carrollton. A state university in the University System of Georgia, it enrolls students from most counties in Georgia as well as from other states and several foreign countries. Enrollment at West Georgia is 11,250 for the 2008 fall semester.

The University has two campuses. The main campus is situated on the western side of Carrollton, the county seat of Carroll County and one of Georgia's fastest growing industrial areas. The Newnan campus is on the eastern side of Newnan and is located along the I-85 Corridor.

**Statement of the Problem**

Financial aid students were being placed at an economic and academic disadvantage when compared to non-financial aid students. The release of their funds after the start of classes meant that many had to go without their academic materials. Moreover, once aid was released many of the used books were sold out and this forced them to purchase more expensive new books and reduced their ability to stretch their financial aid dollars.

## **Design**

The bookstore was aware that financial aid students were having difficulty in obtaining their academic supplies in a timely manner and saw an opportunity to work with other departments in finding a way for qualified financial aid recipients to access a portion of their funds earlier. Initial meetings were held between Auxiliary Services, University Bookstore, Bursar's Office, Financial Aid, Information Technology Services (ITS), Controller's Office, Internal Audit, and the Interim V.P. for Business and Finance. These meetings defined the qualification process and mechanism for students to opt into the program. The technological aspects of data transfer were addressed with ITS, the University Bookstore and the store's Point-of-Sale provider. Financial procedures and concerns were discussed and all was cleared through the Controller's Office and Internal Audit. Chief concerns in the meeting were the safe and secure movement of student aid data, consisting of name, address, student number, balances and the ending date for charges between Banner and the bookstore's POS system. To minimize financial risk to the university it was decided only those students who had an excess of financial aid would qualify and to further limit risk the maximum amount would be \$500. Students would not qualify if they were due a refund because of an over payment in the form of a check. Marketing of this program was handled through multiple departments and campus media. Financial Aid prescreened recipients to identify those who would initially qualify for this program. Those who qualified were contacted via email advising them this new service. Posters were also used to inform students of the program and gave them instructions on how to sign up for the program.

Once student permission had been granted a file was created from Banner data and that data was moved through the campus network to the bookstore's POS system. Students then purchased their books using their existing student ID cards. The bookstore POS maintained a running balance and history of all "Rescue" sales at the store. Each night the bookstore transmitted a file containing student numbers and balances back to the Bursar's Office. This methodology continued until the last date of the program. At the end of the program the POS system used the ending date from the initial downloads to terminate all Rescue sales. Remaining balances were finalized and the money was released according to the normal release schedule.

This program was implemented at no additional cost, other than labor hours in setting up the program, to the university and utilized existing technology.

### **Implementation**

The implementation of the Bookstore to the Rescue program was direct response to a student need. Without adding additional personnel all departments were able to come together and work towards a solution. It was determined that data could be culled from Banner and received by the bookstore in a safe and secure manner that would allow students to purchase their academic materials against their residual financial aid surplus. The timeline on this project was relatively short and the University Bookstore's POS provider provided assistance in accomplishing this goal by working closely with bookstore personnel and the ITS personnel. Advanced file specifications were given to the bookstore and then relayed to ITS. A brief internal test lasting two days took place and the procedure was up and ready in time for spring 2008. Students picked-up their

supplies, presented their ID, the cards were scanned, and the sale concluded with students signing a credit card style receipt. Our testing period for this fall was one day and we started the program on August 1, 2008.

### **Benefits**

The students were the benefactors of this program. They were able to purchase their material prior to the start of classes and conserve their financial aid dollars by purchasing lower cost used books. In the initial spring semester launch the bookstore processed 1828 transactions totaling \$277,238 in sales. With such a positive response it was decided the program would be offered for this current semester, fall. This second offering was well received with the bookstore conducting 2088 transactions and \$342,797 in sales. The number of students participating in this program grew from 1087 in spring to 1865 this fall. Students still received any residual bookstore money and refunds during the customary financial aid transfer date. The store benefited from increased sales, customer satisfaction, and all departments benefited from the positive article in the school paper. Rescue transaction also turned out to be the fastest transactions during the bookrush sales period. The account limit was known, the transaction always cleared and no time was spent making change. This efficiency had the added benefit of reducing checkout lines during the busiest part of the sales cycle.

### **Retrospect**

The Bookstore to the Rescue program truly benefited the financial aid students of West Georgia. Through departmental cooperation we were able to assist our students in

obtaining their course materials earlier and allow them to stretch their aid dollars further at the University Bookstore. Our timeframe for the project was adequate and we were able to test the mechanisms prior to the return of our students. With all departments dedicated to serving the students this project was a priority with all the involved areas.