

Droves of young people with brains, determination and persistence may not make it to college due to the simple facts of economics. As director of Financial Aid Services at the University of Oklahoma, Matt Hamilton is determined to find ways around those facts.

Approximately 60 percent of the nearly 20,000 students who enrolled on OU's Norman campus last fall receive financial aid. Hamilton is keenly aware that for those students, the funding channeled through his office means much more than just books and tuition.

"College represents a student's future," he says. "In many ways, financial aid enables one to fulfill his or her dreams; that's the exciting part of what we do."

Hamilton and OU's financial aid team helped administer more than \$65 million in state and federal funding in 1993-94. In the two years since he assumed the post of director, Hamilton has learned firsthand that there is not enough money to fulfill everyone's dreams. But OU tries.

"If it appears that the lack of financial aid is going to prohibit a student from going to school, that is a great concern to me. The system serves the student body well as a whole, but sometimes systems aren't set up to take into account personal considerations."

Such considerations are taken seriously at Financial Aid Services, where Hamilton and his staff try every available avenue to find funding for promising students. Occasionally a successful hunt uncovers previously unknown resources for grants, loans and scholarships that will send students through college.

"That is absolutely my favorite part of the job," Hamilton says with a smile.

He concedes that finding new sources of educational funding is becoming more difficult. As federal financial aid—in the form of grants and scholarships—becomes less available, greater numbers of students must depend upon federal loan programs to complete their education.

"We are producing a generation of educated students who will owe a lot of money, and that troubles me," says Hamilton, adding that OU alumni and friends have been quick to come to the students' rescue time and again. "Our alumni and friends are the factor that helps the University be competitive for very bright but very needy students."

Hamilton was one of those bright and needy students not so long ago. The 1986 business graduate paid his way through the University with the help of scholarships and in the process earned such honors as the Silver Letzeiser Medal, President's Leadership Class, Pe-et, Mortar Board and Omicron Delta Kappa. He also was very active in the



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Hamilton, right, is a familiar campus figure.

OU Student Association and Lambda Chi Alpha social fraternity. During his senior year, he was named the national fraternity's outstanding undergraduate, as well as OU's Outstanding Greek Man.

"My experiences as an OU student were critical in helping me to be a better advocate for students and understand what they're going through," he says. "I want to make sure that each generation of students have the same kind of positive experience I had."

Hamilton is equally complimentary of the working experience he has had at OU since joining the staff as assistant director of High School and College Relations, now Prospective Student Services. He later headed Prospective Student Services' office in Tulsa.

"The people working at OU are among the most dedicated individuals I've ever met, and that is particularly true of Financial Aid Services," Hamilton says, explaining that the office produces an enormous volume of quality work.

Hamilton hopes to continue expanding services offered by Financial Aid. To better accommodate students, he recently helped initiate extended telephone hours and a voice response system, which he would like to make available around the clock. Other ideas he is exploring include the establishment of a national scholarship database for students and an optical imaging system that would speed up the application process by feeding printed forms directly into a computer's memory.

Another of his goals is the organization of a student advisory committee to evaluate financial aid forms and procedures, suggest changes, facilitate communication, increase accessibility of financial aid and improve students' understanding of the current national financial aid picture.

"One of the best ways to serve your clients is to get their feedback," he says. "There's no question, the process can be improved, and we just want to improve it in the direction that will be appropriate and helpful for students."

Financial Aid Services receives additional feedback from the students and parents Hamilton meets during visits to state high schools and through OU enrollment activities, the University's freshman Gateway courses and the Student Success Series, in which he offers seminars on student financial management.

"It's all about trying to help students solve problems and plan their education," Hamilton contends. "The bottom line is that we educate individuals. Whether one is a teacher in the classroom or a staff member, we all are vital to the educational process. I very much enjoy being part of that process and hope that my work has positively impacted students at OU."

—Anne Barajas