Long before oil prices fell to $33 a barrel and the Oklahoma State Legislature was grappling with a $1 billion budget shortfall, administration at the University of Oklahoma grew concerned that the cost of a college education was rising beyond the reach of middle- and lower-income families. The unrealized gains of future scientists, doctors, teachers and engineers in the state was a loss the university was unwilling to accept.

In 2004, OU launched the Campaign for Scholarships and in 2015, the Live On, University Campaign in honor of the university's 125th anniversary. With the two efforts combined, more than $315 million has been raised through the generous support of private donors. But raising money alone doesn't help students. Scholarships must be awarded before parents and students can breathe a sigh of relief.

With more than 4,000 scholarships available campus-wide, the former application process could be time-consuming and confusing. Colleges and departments used different forms, different deadlines, and students had to fill out the same information again and again. Even the brightest and

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most deserving found the process daunting and would often overlook scholarships for which they were qualified.

Guy Patton, president of the OU Foundation, and Nick Hathaway, executive vice president of administration and finance, met with Alison Baker, director of the Scholarship Office, to see how all parties could better serve the wishes of scholarship donors and the students they wanted to help.

"We realized the application process for continuing students was difficult to maneuver," says Baker, "Freshmen fill out one application for admission and scholarships; as soon as they become sophomores, they have fifty or more applications to choose from. So that's where we started. We needed something comprehensive and streamlined for sophomores, transfers and upper-division students."

The result of a year's work was the creation of CASH or Centralized Academic Scholarship Hub. The online program is nearly sentient in its ability to direct students to every scholarship for which they are qualified with a minimum of duplication. Personal information—name, hometown, major, GPA—is pulled from the student database and appears on the form after students log in with their university ID. Once they have answered a few broad-based questions and checked boxes relevant to particular needs or disciplines, a flowchart directs them to any follow-up pages that are necessary.

Baker explains: "The system looks at the information and says, 'This student is in Arts and Sciences, they will be available for these scholarships.' So it directs the student to the page that has specific Arts and Sciences questions." If students check the box indicating financial need, interest in study abroad, or a range of other interests, they are directed to any additional questions that apply. Most students will fill out only two to three pages and will have applied for all scholarships for which they are eligible instead of filling out 40 different forms.

In addition to saving time, the intuitive software often finds scholarships that students may not have even known existed. For example, if the work history section shows that an applicant was once a carhop at Sonic, CASH searches and discovers a scholarship for Sonic employees, past or present, majoring in Arts and Sciences with a 3.0 GPA, and will include an additional question from that application. If there is an award that requires a very specific essay, the Scholarship Office will let the student know.

"The frontload of organization on this effort was huge," Baker admits. "The hardest part was getting everyone coordinated. It wasn't that the colleges or departments were doing anything wrong, it was just they were all doing their own thing, different applications, different deadlines, and a student had to fill out the same information over and over.

"This way we only ask an additional question or two. And we now have a deadline of Feb. 1 for the vast majority of applications. On the other side of the system, the committees that award scholarships are only seeing applications that qualify. There is little wasted effort at either end."

The new system is easy for students, easy for committees, and the generosity of donors is rewarded by matching gifts with gifted students. "The whole point of this system is to increase applications and get more students the help they need," concludes Baker. "School is hard, scholarships shouldn't be."

–Lynette Lobban