

Report Number
A-106-14-24905

SAM HOUSTON STATE UNIVERSITY

Sam Houston State University

Reference No. 2013-121

Eligibility

Student Financial Assistance Cluster

Award year – July 1, 2012 to June 30, 2013

Award number – CFDA 84.063, Federal Pell Grant Program, P063P122301

Type of finding – Significant Deficiency and Non-Compliance

For the federal Pell Grant program, institutions use the payment and disbursement schedules provided each year by the U.S. Department of Education for determining award amounts (Title 34, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Section 690.62). Those schedules provide the maximum annual amount a student would receive for a full academic year for a given enrollment status, estimated family contribution (EFC), and cost of attendance (COA). There are separate schedules for three-quarter-time, half-time, and less-than-half-time students. Additionally, a student’s eligibility for a Pell Grant must first be determined and considered before the student is awarded other assistance, such as Direct Subsidized or Direct Unsubsidized loans (Title 34, CFR, Section 685.200). Students who are enrolled less-than-half-time are eligible for Pell based on the Pell disbursement tables, which include calculations based on less-than-half-time enrollment. Institutions do not have the discretion to refuse to provide Pell funds to an eligible part-time student, including during a summer term or intersession (U.S. Department of Education 2012-2013 *Federal Student Aid Handbook*).

Questioned Cost:	\$0
U.S. Department of Education	

An institution must establish a reasonable satisfactory academic progress (SAP) policy for determining whether an otherwise eligible student is making satisfactory academic progress in his or her educational program and may receive assistance under the Title IV, Higher Education Act programs. The Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education considers the institution’s SAP policy to be reasonable if it meets certain conditions. To be considered reasonable, the policy must be at least as strict as the policy the institution applies to a student who is not receiving federal financial assistance and provide for consistent application of standards to all students within categories of students (for example, full-time, part-time, undergraduate, and graduate students). The policy also must specify the grade point average that a student must achieve at each evaluation and the pace at which a student must progress through his or her educational program. An institution calculates the pace at which a student is progressing by dividing the cumulative number of hours the student has successfully completed by the cumulative number of hours the student has attempted (Title 34, CFR, Section 668.34).

The determination of the federal student financial assistance award amount is based on financial need. Financial need is defined as a student’s COA minus the EFC (Title 20, United States Code, Chapter 28, Subchapter IV, Section 1087kk). The phrase “cost of attendance” refers to the “tuition and fees normally assessed a student carrying the same academic workload as determined by the institution, and including costs for rental or purchase of any equipment, materials, or supplies required of all students in the same course of study.” An institution may also include an allowance for books, supplies, transportation, miscellaneous personal expenses, and room and board (Title 20, United States Code, Chapter 28, Subchapter IV, Section 1087ll).

Sam Houston State University (University) did not disburse federal student financial assistance to students enrolled in fewer than six course hours in a semester, even when those students were eligible to receive financial assistance. As a result, for 1 (2 percent) of 60 students tested, the University underawarded the student \$694 in federal Pell Grant assistance for which the student was eligible. That underaward was associated with award number P063P122301.

The University requires that students be enrolled in at least six hours each semester to make satisfactory academic progress toward a degree and be eligible to receive financial aid. The University has implemented a disbursement rule in its financial aid system that prevents disbursement to students who are enrolled in fewer than six hours for a semester. However, that policy contradicts federal requirements related to Pell Grant eligibility determination and does not meet federal requirements for a reasonable SAP policy. As a result, students enrolled in fewer than six course hours may not receive financial assistance for which they are eligible.

Additionally, for 11 (18 percent) of 60 students tested, the University did not determine the students' COA based on tuition and fees normally assessed for students carrying the same academic workload. Those students were enrolled in fewer than six hours in one or more semesters, and the University assigned them COA budgets that did not reflect their actual enrollment. Because the University does not disburse federal student financial assistance to students enrolled in fewer than six hours, it did not have correct COA budgets to assign to those students. Incorrectly calculating COA increases the risk that students may be overawarded or underawarded assistance.

Recommendations:

The University should:

- Award federal Pell Grant funds to eligible part-time students based on the applicable Pell disbursement tables.
- Ensure that its SAP policy meets federal requirements for reasonableness.
- Revise its COA budgets to include a less-than-half-time enrollment category.

Recommendation has been implemented

Management Response and Corrective Action Plan:

Sam Houston State University acknowledges and agrees with the finding. As of August 2013, Pell was disbursed to all eligible students enrolled in less than half time for the 2012-2013 academic year. Management has modified disbursement rules to allow Pell disbursement for eligible students enrolled in less than half.

Management concurs with the State Auditor's Office (SAO) regarding the Satisfactory Academic Progress Policy (SAP). The SAP policy has been modified as of June 2013 to meet federal requirements for reasonableness. In the future, the Financial Aid and Scholarships Office will conduct an annual review of the policy.

Management recognizes the need for less than half time cost of attendance (COA) budgets. As indicated by the finding, Sam Houston State University identified all affected students and has taken corrective action as necessary. As of August 2013, COA budgets for less than half-time have been implemented. In the future, the Financial Aid and Scholarships Office will conduct an annual, secondary review of both the programmatic and business elements to ensure correct calculations.

Implementation Dates: SAP-June 2013
COA-August 2013

Responsible Person: Lydia T. Hall

Reference No. 2013-122

Special Tests and Provisions – Verification

Student Financial Assistance Cluster

Award year – July 1, 2012 to June 30, 2013

Award number – CFDA 84.063, Federal Pell Grant Program, P063P122301

Type of finding – Non-Compliance

Verification of Applications

For each applicant whose Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is selected for verification by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, an institution must verify all of the applicable items, which include household size, number of household members who are in college, adjusted gross income (AGI), U.S. income taxes paid, child support paid, food stamps, education credits, IRA deductions, and other untaxed income (Title 34, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Sections 668.54 and 668.56 and *Federal Register*, Volume 76, Number 134). When the

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U.S. Department of Education	

verification of an applicant's eligibility results in any change to a non-dollar item or a change to a single dollar item of \$25 or more from the student's FAFSA, the institution must submit a correction to the U.S. Department of Education and adjust the applicant's financial aid package on the basis of the expected family contribution (EFC) on the corrected Institutional Student Information Record (ISIR). For the Federal Pell Grant Program, if an applicant's FAFSA information changes as a result of verification, an institution must recalculate the applicant's Federal Pell Grant on the basis of the EFC on the corrected ISIR and disburse any additional funds under that award (Title 34, CFR, Section 668.59).

For 1 (3 percent) of 40 students tested, Sam Houston State University (University) did not accurately verify all required items on the FAFSA; therefore, it did not subsequently update its records and request an updated ISIR as required. Specifically, the University incorrectly verified that student's education credit amount because of a manual data entry error. As a result, the University overstated the student's EFC by \$46 and underawarded the student \$100 in Pell grants. After auditors brought the error to its attention, the University corrected the error and awarded the student the additional \$100 in Pell grant funds.

Not properly verifying FAFSA information could result in the University overawarding or underawarding student federal financial assistance.

Verification Policies and Procedures

An institution must establish and use written policies and procedures for verifying an applicant's FAFSA information. Those policies must include: (1) the time period within which an applicant shall provide the documentation; (2) the consequences of an applicant's failure to provide required documentation within the specified time period; (3) the method by which the institution notifies an applicant of the results of verification if, as a result of verification, the applicant's EFC changes and results in a change in the applicant's award or loan; (4) the procedures the institution requires an applicant to follow to correct application information determined to be in error; and (5) the procedures for making referrals under Title 34, CFR, Section 668.16. The procedures must provide that the institution shall furnish, in a timely manner, to each applicant selected for verification a clear explanation of (1) the documentation needed to satisfy the verification requirements and (2) the applicant's responsibilities with respect to the verification of application information, including the deadlines for completing required actions and the consequences of failing to complete any required action. An institution's procedures must also provide that an applicant whose FAFSA information is selected for verification is required to complete verification before the institution makes changes to the applicant's cost of attendance or to the values of the data items required to calculate the EFC. (Title 34, CFR, Section 668.53).

The University's written policies and procedures for verifying an applicant's FAFSA information did not include all of the required elements. Specifically, the University's verification policies and procedures did not include:

- The procedures for making referrals under Title 34, CFR, Section 668.16.
- The procedures the institution will follow and the procedures the institution will require an applicant to follow to correct FAFSA information determined to be in error.

Having inadequate policies and procedures increases the risk that the University may not perform verification in accordance with federal requirements and that applicants may not understand their responsibilities when their FAFSAs are verified.

Recommendations:

The University should:

- Accurately verify all required FAFSA information for applicants selected for verification and request updated ISIRs when required.
- Include in its written verification policies and procedures all elements required by Title 34, CFR, Section 668.53.

*Recommendation
has been
implemented*

Management Response and Corrective Action Plan:

Sam Houston State University acknowledges and agrees with the finding. Manual review and entry of data for the verification process allows for human error. Therefore, we have implemented a quality assurance program review of completed verification.

Management has addressed the issue with the employee responsible for making the error for the student in question. While the auditors were on site, the student in question was reviewed, corrections were made, and additional funds were paid to student.

At present, we have re-trained staff, emphasizing the need to carefully review their work. We have implemented the quality assurance review as of November 2013.

Management acknowledges and agrees with the finding that written policy/procedures were lacking required verbiage. As of June 2013, a verification policy/procedure containing the required elements was implemented. Along with the policy/procedure being implemented, the financial aid website and all forms were updated to inform students of the ramifications of not completing the verification process.

Implementation Dates: Quality Assurance - November 2013
 Policy/Procedure Update - June 2013
 Verification forms/website Update - July 2013

Responsible Person: Lydia T. Hall