Over the past 15 years, I have had the opportunity to work closely with student services and enrollment management in my capacity as an associate vice provost, provost and president. My passion always has been to create opportunities for first generation, underserved, and ethnically diverse students who otherwise might not have the good fortune to attend college. Working closely with admissions and financial aid representatives opened my eyes to a strategy for recruitment and retention that I had missed in my role as a dean, department chair and faculty member. The packaging of financial aid is a complex process that must evaluate a student's need holistically, leading to improved packaging of upfront merit and need. This is particularly important for Hispanic Serving Institutions, which often serve a large minority population.

When I became president of Colorado State University-Pueblo in 2011, I immediately began to collaborate with our financial aid office to determine the most efficient way to attract students through appropriate aid packaging. CSU-Pueblo is a four-year, regional comprehensive campus located in southern Colorado. It is a Hispanic Serving Institution whose students are first generation, low-income and Pell grant eligible (95 percent of CSU-Pueblo students receive financial aid in the form of scholarships, grants or loans). Through initial discussions, the staff and I realized that awarding $2,000 per year in merit monies to large numbers of students was not attracting the demographic who were at the heart of our mission. Through deeper analysis, we identified a number of strategies that would attract and retain diverse students within the region we serve:

- Evaluate student need holistically, leading to improved packaging of upfront merit and need. Studies have shown that both parents and students react more positively to merit awards than to the exact same amount of need-based awards (https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2007/03/27/merit).

- Provide merit aid at point of admission rather than after completion of FAFSA. Merit aid does not need to be tied to FAFSA completion, and encourages early commitment to the university.

- Create tiered levels of merit. Four categories of merit were implemented, ranging from $1,000 to $8,000 per year, and increased both overall scholarship awards and those received by our Hispanic demographic.

- Eliminate third-party verification vendor. Originally, the university had outsourced the verification process, which caused a slowdown in awarding student aid. Bringing verification back in-house allowed the financial aid office to provide students with an on-site single point of contact. Students have provided positive feedback indicating that they are receiving aid in a more timely fashion.

In a two-year period, CSU-Pueblo increased the number of annual merit awards by 183 overall and increased the number of merit awards to Hispanic students by 67. As of fall 2016, our numbers continue to increase, which indicates to us that these strategies are effective and student-centered. We will continue to review our financial aid packaging and awarding processes to optimize student recruitment and retention.

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