

Frustrations abound with financial aid office

By Rivers Janssen
Emerald Reporter

Tucker Cruikshank lost his financial aid check.

A phone number for Oregon Hall had been written in the space for college codes on his financial aid worksheet. That phone number happened to coincide with the college code for Treasure Valley Community College in Ontario, Ore.

So his check went there while he stayed here.

That didn't upset him so much. After all, it was a correctable mistake. So he went into the financial aid office to fill out the forms, where they told him it would take three weeks to get it back.

He got the check eight weeks later, once the term was over. In that eight weeks, he grew continually frustrated with the financial aid staff.

"It wasn't their losing the check that got me," Cruikshank said. "The problem was I had to actually blow up at them before they would research where the check was. You don't just go there and get service. You have to demand service."

For many students, Kafka nightmares seem to define Oregon Hall.

For these students, Oregon Hall is a bureaucracy — an authority structure that defies logic, runs on an agenda no one understands and exists simply to make students miserable.

Junior Stefan Smulovitz received an extra \$300 with his Presidential Scholarship last year. Apparently, the financial aid and cashier's offices both paid \$300 to Smulovitz when

only one of them should have. Surprised at his good fortune, he asked a cashier whether it was a mistake. She said she didn't think so and that it was his money.

Two months later, after spending \$400 of the \$600 total, Oregon Hall wrote and requested repayment of the extra \$300. Smulovitz had to face the unpleasant task of asking his dad for the additional money.

Some students, like Cruikshank and Smulovitz, have been the victims of clerical errors. Others have been frustrated by filling out numerous forms or waiting in long lines to pay fees.

But one thing seems to unite them all: Whatever good experiences a student has at the University, Oregon Hall seems to number among the bad ones.

"It's the archetypical bureaucratic monster," said senior Kevin Hatfield. "A totally depersonalized environment."

But while it's true that Oregon Hall makes its share of mistakes, a few Oregon Hall administrators say student frustrations are sometimes misdirected.

"There are a lot of details that affect students' lives," said Associate Registrar Kate Johnson, "like deadlines they may not be aware of. We do try to publish it, and theoretically you can find it. But it just depends how hard a student has looked."

Johnson said registration problems are common because many students don't follow the complete instructions on the Duck Call worksheet.

"There's a series of questions

that Duck Call answers, and frequently we're seeing situations where the student doesn't read the whole thing," she said. "If a student doesn't complete the registration process for a particular course, he or she will run into problems later."

Financial aid receives a variety of student complaints. Edmond Vignoul, director of the financial aid office, said his office hopes to stem these complaints by doing everything possible to make life easier for the students.

"My primary concern in this office is that we treat everybody in the most consistent, equitable, efficient and friendly manner possible," Vignoul said. "And for the most part, I think we can live up to that."

Vignoul said he tries to correct any complaint a student has. When a student is treated poorly, he will make every effort to straighten out the situation.

However, that doesn't cut it for a lot of students. Cruikshank said he believes the best service he ever received was from Vignoul himself, who came out to meet with him after Cruikshank exploded at the front desk personnel.

"That's the point," Cruikshank said. "Why can't the person at the desk give you good service right off? Why must we go to the director for service?"

Vignoul said the staff is under a lot of pressure most of the time — it is perhaps the busiest office on campus, in his estimation — and, thus, occasionally a frustrated student can create a frustrated staff member.

But he pointed out that stu-



Photo by Dylan Coulter
Darrell Sissom, a University accountant, helps senior Laila Macharia with her financial aid forms at Oregon Hall.

dents are often to blame for what they perceive as poor service. Simply put, they want the money as quickly as possible, and often aren't patient enough to learn the processes involved in getting it. They don't bring all the information they need and then become frustrated when the process is slowed.

One way to bypass problems in financial aid is for students to learn the system. Most of the guidelines the office works under are federally mandated. They can't be changed from within. Therefore, the more the students know, the more they can tell the staff, and the better they can be helped.

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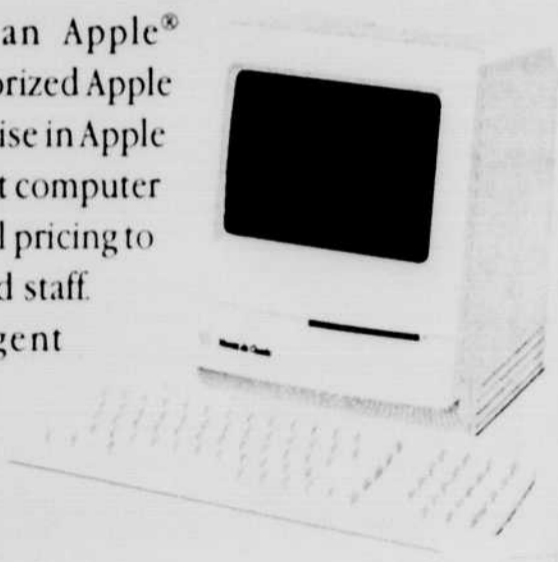
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