

Making financial aid simple for students and staff: How Highline College collaborated with AWS on a financial aid tracking tool

by Kristi Wellington Baker



As student enrollment begins to stabilize at colleges and universities, [higher education leaders](#) are focused on supporting equitable access to postsecondary education. Many leaders are turning to technology to address systemic barriers to education by making services more transparent, efficient, and simple for learners and staff. Together with Amazon Web Services (AWS), Highline College's financial aid department created a key tool that helped eliminate one such barrier.

The financial aid department seeks a way to serve more students, faster

Located just south of Seattle in the suburb of Des Moines, [Highline College](#) is the oldest community college in King County. Highline is also the most diverse community college in the state and one of the most diverse in the nation, due in large part to a refugee and immigrant population that relies on the college's popular English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. [Approximately 25% of its 13,000 students](#) are ESOL learners.

Following a major student information system transition, a period of increased staff turnover, and working through the COVID-19 pandemic, the financial aid department experienced an unmanageable load of calls, emails, and visits from students who needed updated information on the status of their financial aid packages. Over the past few years, the department found itself fielding an average of 250-300 contacts per week, with the number quadrupling during peak periods of the year when certain deadlines were due.

"We were looking for a way to turn around the process," said Corinne Soltis, director of financial aid at Highline. "What we needed was a program or a tool that both reduced the load on staff and improved the process for the students."

The answer to Soltis's problem was found in the college's long-term relationship with AWS.

AWS helps Highline College innovate with an automated cloud-based tool

When Soltis inquired with Highline's Information Technology Services (ITS) department about creating a tool that could help her department better manage financial aid inquiries, Tim Wrye, chief information officer (CIO) and executive director of IT services, immediately thought of AWS. While Highline has been a long-time customer of AWS, said Wrye, the college had largely perceived cloud services as a "lift and shift" from their old way of operating—i.e., moving established virtualized systems into the cloud without a lot of innovation. Wrye was looking for a project where they could apply some newer toolsets.

"We had good security and redundancy happening in the cloud," Wrye said, "but we hadn't taken full advantage of more modern AWS Cloud tools."

The financial aid situation presented an opportunity to start leveraging some of the automation services in the AWS toolbox to meet the mission of the college. Under Wrye's direction, AWS brought in a specialized acceleration team, which worked alongside the Highline team to build and deploy the initial pilot of a financial aid tracking tool in just six weeks. The new tool can communicate with students via text and email when the status of their aid application changes. In addition, it displays status information not previously available to students directly and helps explain what that status means, contextualizing information in clear, learner-friendly language and providing students with links that take them directly to action items.

A focus on simplicity and user experience

According to Highline College developer Matthew Fiebig, the AWS team was able to walk into a very traditional environment for application development at the college and help modernize both the technical and logistical aspects of it.

"Honestly, the support from AWS has been outstanding," he said. "They dragged us by our bootstraps into the cloud era. They were responsive to our requests for training, and provided us with architects that made it easy to understand the technologies we were adopting."

For Wrye, the simplicity of the tracking tool is part of its genius. Students simply log into the tool using their "myHighline" account. From there, they can check the status of their financial aid package, receive instructions if action is needed, or be assured that everything is in order and all they have to do is wait to have their application processed.

"The idea came from the way that Amazon tracks packages in transit," said Wrye. "We thought that students should be able to ask the same question: *'where am I in the financial aid process?'* With future improvements already planned, the eventual goal is to turn the tool into a real-time tracker of financial aid packages."

The AWS tool yields immediate results in transparency, efficiency, and morale

Implementing the AWS financial aid tool resulted in immediate benefits for Highline College. First, it created a quicker and more transparent way for students to access their information—anywhere and anytime—not just during office hours. Second, it drastically reduced the manual burden on the financial aid department, lowering the number of emails, calls, and visits about an applicant's status by 75% and allowing team members to devote time and resources to higher priority aspects of serving students.

This ability to pivot to more productive activities has been a game-changer for the Highline financial aid department. In 2022, the financial aid team worked on file reviews right up until the first week of fall quarter; this year, they were finished with initial reviews by May—saving them four months of time. In the past, staff needed

120 days to fully process a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form. Since the launch of the tracking tool, that time has been cut in half. This year, Highline was the first community college in the state to send out its award letters—a substantial morale booster for all involved. And as the department continues to refine the process, integrating the tool more seamlessly into its day-to-day operations, they expect these times to improve even further.

Most importantly, the financial aid staff now feels they have time and energy to devote to helping students.

“The conversation has shifted,” Soltis said. “With the tracker, students now know what their status is, so we can focus on helping them with more complex issues rather than spending that time providing more basic information.”

A quick win on the road to larger projects

With the success of the financial aid tool under its belt, Highline now has even larger projects on the horizon. Namely, the creation of an AWS intelligent document process (IDP) capable of automating document receiving, authentication, and data entry, which would help condense 27 screens of student information into one view. But while the groundwork is still being laid for this larger project, the financial-aid-tracking tool has proved an important win on the road to something bigger.

“I was excited by the opportunity to work on a tool like this,” Soltis said. “There needed to be more student-facing applications, and this is a great proof-of-concept for how we can make financial aid, and other processes, easier for students across the country.”

Hundreds of colleges and universities rely on the AWS Cloud for tools such as financial aid tracking and [intelligent document processing](#). Learn more about the [cloud for higher education](#).