

**About North Park University**  
**Enrollment:** 3,100

### Objective

Implement a financial aid solution that would empower students, provide transparency, and help the financial aid department operate more efficiently

### Solution

- Colleague® Self-Service Financial Aid

### Business benefit

- Improved student experience, more efficient operations

### IT Improvement

- Less burden on IT; the easy-to-use interface allows financial aid departments to handle most issues themselves

## On track and organized

### North Park University empowers its students through Colleague Self-Service Financial Aid

#### Seeking a solution

North Park University is a private, Christian liberal arts university located in the heart of Chicago, Illinois. The institution prides itself on offering a personalized, faith-based education within an urban setting, which allows students an opportunity to immerse themselves in a diverse, dynamic learning environment. The university's small class sizes helps boost student achievement by permitting easy access to instructors while helping to ensure that they don't get lost in the crowd.

Although a small university may offer numerous benefits for students, it sometimes means that such an institution will have a small staff—which means that it must make the most of every resource available to operate as smoothly and efficiently as possible.

North Park University's financial aid office has a small staff of just a handful of professionals. The department is

responsible for the aid processing and reporting for the institution's 3,000-plus students, and was frequently operating at capacity. In 2015, North Park University began searching for a technology-based solution to help ease the burden, while helping its students to become more fully engaged with the financial aid process.

#### Helping students to help themselves

North Park University was looking for a financial aid solution that would guide its students through the financial aid process, and help them become more cognizant of the amount of debt they were taking on. "One of the reasons our students weren't paying attention to their loan debt and student borrowing was that they just weren't aware of how much they were borrowing," says Lindsay Mitchell, North Park University's assistant director of financial aid/data systems.

The university chose Ellucian's Colleague Self-Service Financial Aid solution to address its needs. This intuitive, self-service solution features several tabs and

web forms that guide students, step-by-step, through the process for applying for and accepting the financial aid they need in order to achieve their academic goals. Additionally, counselors see the same information students see—so they can provide relevant, timely support. The solution also assists students in another area: “Colleague Self-Service Financial Aid has the student’s debt right there on the homepage, in real time,” notes Mitchell.

The university was keen to have the solution up and running for new students beginning in Fall 2015. The institution began implementing it in February of that year, and after testing, the solution was live by August—just seven short months from start to finish.

The solution also includes a checklist—specific to each student—that allows him or her to see which tasks remain to be completed, or which forms are needed in order to complete the financial aid process. “I love the checklist,” says Mitchell. “In the past, there would be many emails between the school and the student, with the student wondering what was still needing to be done, and forms being emailed back and forth. Now, with the checklist, the proper form is hyperlinked right there, with all the instructions, so the student can find everything in one place and get it done.”

### Efficiency through technology

Because North Park’s financial aid office employs fewer than six professionals to handle the institution’s financial aid requirements, keeping the department running as efficiently as possible is paramount. With Colleague Self-Service Financial Aid, the department has been able to streamline operations and more easily assist students. “It improved our customer service greatly,” says Mitchell. “Students don’t want to stand in line and wait to talk to someone on staff. They can now access their information, follow along with the financial aid process, and find out what they need to know about their aid, anytime, in real time.”

And aside from granting students easy access to their information, Colleague Self-Service Financial Aid has allowed North Park to focus its staff on those students who may need additional help.

Most students are now able to find answers to their questions and handle a majority of the financial aid process themselves, which relieves the burden on North Park’s financial aid staff and allows them to focus their attention the students who require more intensive, personalized, and in-depth counseling.

Colleague Self-Service Financial Aid utilizes a dynamic user-interface, and Mitchell notes that’s just one reason why the solution has been so popular for students. “It just looks really cool,” she says. “It’s so easy to use. The students can navigate it easily.”

And Mitchell finds the solution user-friendly as well. “I’m not an IT person,” she says. “So I appreciate the fact that I can test scenarios for what students may need, and also make adjustments to it. I can tweak the communications we send to students and their parents, adapting the messaging as needed. It’s so easy to do, I don’t have to call IT if I need something done.”

### Engaged students

Now that North Park University has implemented Colleague Self-Service Financial Aid, students are more educated about their borrowing—and the financial aid process. “They have taken ownership,” says Mitchell. “The kinds of questions I’m getting from students are far more complex. I love that they have these kinds of questions. It tells me that they’re able to deeply examine and understand their loan and aid information through Colleague Self-Service Financial Aid. They’re better informed.”

Yet another positive outcome since implementing the solution has been an increase in parental involvement: through “person proxy,” parents can access the student’s online information as well. “There’s a lot more transparency,” says Mitchell. “Parents can be more involved, which is what they want, and it has been a huge benefit to offer them that kind of access and service.”

What advice does Mitchell have for other institutions considering Colleague Self-Service Financial Aid? “Get ready,” she says. “You’ll experience an uptick in traffic, but a different kind of traffic. Your students will become more engaged, which is refreshing.”

Mitchell also believes that the support offered by Ellucian is a major factor in the success North Park has had with its new financial aid solution. “With Ellucian, I know I’ll always get an answer to my questions,” says Mitchell. “There’s so much support. With e-Communities I can connect with other schools and see what they’re doing. There’s plenty of documentation, the Support Center, and consulting is always available. Ellucian is responsive to what I need. I really don’t know of another higher ed software and services company that’s so involved with its client base.”

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