

Financial aid computer not yet in use

By Randy Lyons
Staff Reporter

Students visiting the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid at UNL may find themselves learning the virtue of patience as they wait in line.

Lack of automation has plagued the financial aid office for several years and has slowed processing and transferring information, said Bill McFarland, director of scholarships and financial aid.

While most other major universities in the U.S., including all of the Big 8 schools, have acquired advanced computer systems to increase efficiency and integrate admissions, registration, student accounts and financial aid, UNL has lagged behind, said Larry Apel, associate director of scholarships and financial aid.

Although portions of a new computer have been installed in the office, Apel said, the office still does its work by hand.

The computer system is from Information Associates, a company that produces software packages for business and educational institutions. The system is the most advanced produced by the company and is an improved version of what many other universities are using, McFarland said.

The cost of the new system was to be disclosed by university officials.

Nancy Walz, computer support specialist for UNL, said the system was purchased through a special project fund of the chancellor's budget. The purchase included 13 new terminals and one additional printer, she said.

Portions of the system were installed during the summer, but the complete system won't be fully operational until the 1988-89 school year.

Because UNL only purchased the financial aid portion of the software, several months will be needed to build links between financial aid, admissions and registration, Apel said. Time also will be required to write procedures and initiate trial of the system.

The office is using one component of the system, the "tracking screen," this fall, McFarland said. The tracking screen allows workers to call up on a screen the forms a student has turned in, whether the student has completed all forms needed, or whether they have been returned to the student, he said.

The office also is using a message screen that allows workers to call up Guaranteed Student Loan information.

"We can log in when the application was processed by the office and returned to either the student or lender the amount of the loan, and when the check came in," McFarland said.

Until the system is completely operational, award information such as scholarships and grants will be compiled by keypunch into a system of Alpha files. Alpha files are binders containing names of nearly 40,000 students who receive awards.

Each time a student asks information on awards, the appropriate Alpha file must be retrieved manually. If the file is not in its place, a delay results.

New information is written into the files by hand each time an award changes.

When the award screen is operational, most of the information will be at a finger's reach and a student's questions can be answered in just a few seconds.

"Sometimes we had two people

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