



A CASE STUDY OF RECLASSIFICATION EFFORTS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Reclassification can help financial aid offices attract and retain skilled staff, improve efficiency, and ensure roles align with institutional needs. Read more about our overall work on reclassification at nasfaa.org/reclassification.¹

This case study summarizes the interviews on reclassification efforts at five Community Colleges and provides practical insights to help directors navigate the process effectively.

KEY DRIVERS AND COMMON PRACTICES FOR RECLASSIFICATION

Reclassification as a Tool for Retention and Equity

- Many directors initiated reclassification efforts to retain skilled employees who were underpaid or working at a higher level than their official job title reflected.
- In several cases, financial aid staff were reclassified to higher positions to recognize their level of responsibility and prevent turnover.
- Directors often had to advocate for equitable pay and classification by demonstrating that financial aid staff had greater compliance and institutional impact than similarly paid positions in other departments.

Formal But Complex Reclassification Processes

- While most institutions had a formalized reclassification process, the actual steps were often unclear, requiring directors to independently navigate HR policies, job description reviews, and salary justifications.
- Directors frequently needed to gather external benchmarking data (e.g., salary comparisons with peer institutions) to strengthen their case for reclassification.
- At some institutions, HR required staff to apply for newly reclassified positions, while others allowed a direct transition to higher-level roles without requiring a new application process.

Leadership, Advocacy, and Budget Constraints Shape Outcomes

- Strong support from leadership (e.g., vice presidents, deans, or HR partners) often determined whether reclassification efforts succeeded or stalled.
- Budget constraints frequently delayed or limited reclassification efforts, requiring directors to justify financial aid staffing changes in the context of institutional priorities.
- In some cases, reclassification took years due to administrative delays, turnover in leadership, or resistance from HR, making persistence and strategic timing crucial for success.



There were two formal processes for reclassification at my institution, one of which was tied to a larger institutional transformation. When the institution underwent this restructuring, it provided an opportunity to re-evaluate positions, salaries, and responsibilities. That's how I accomplished many of the reclassifications in my office.

Director, Community College



It took me about five years as a director before I could start reclassification in earnest. When I first attempted to reorganize the office, we only managed to shift some staff into different roles, but the full reclassification didn't happen immediately. A year later, HR finally recognized that some positions should be moved up, even though I had been advocating for the change much earlier.

Director, Community College

¹ This summary was written with the assistance of generative AI, 2025.

Reclassification at community colleges is often a long and complex process, requiring persistence and strategic advocacy. Directors should be prepared to build a strong case by gathering data on pay equity, workload distribution, and institutional alignment to justify changes. Securing leadership support early and understanding their institution's formal and informal processes can help navigate bureaucratic challenges. By anticipating delays and proactively engaging HR and key decision-makers, directors can improve their chances of achieving successful reclassification outcomes for their staff.

HOW FINANCIAL AID LEADERS NAVIGATE RECLASSIFICATION CHALLENGES

Transparency and Consistent Communication

- Directors found that being open about reclassification helped reduce staff anxiety and uncertainty. Regular updates ensured that employees understood the goals and progress of the reclassification efforts.
- Some directors held department-wide meetings, retreats, and [SWOT analysis](#) sessions to involve staff in the discussion and solicit input. Employees appreciated having a voice in the process, even if final decisions were out of their hands.
- Clear timelines and expectations helped manage emotions and allowed staff to prepare for role changes, reporting structures, or compensation adjustments.

Managing Staff Expectations and Emotional Reactions

- Many directors acknowledged that reclassification can create high emotions, especially when salary adjustments or promotions are not immediately possible.
- To mitigate frustration, directors were honest with staff about the financial limitations and approval barriers they faced. In cases where raises could not be granted, directors focused on recognizing employees' contributions and seeking alternative retention strategies.
- Some institutions required employees to reapply for newly classified positions, leading to staff uncertainty. Directors found it helpful to prepare employees for this requirement early and offer support throughout the application process.

Leveraging Leadership Support and Staff Advocacy

- Directors who successfully reclassified positions often worked closely with senior leadership and HR to advocate for changes. Those who secured buy-in from executive leadership could navigate the process more effectively.
- Some directors encouraged staff members to take an active role by sharing their perspectives in meetings or assisting with justification efforts. Employees who felt included in discussions about reclassification were more likely to support the outcomes, even if they did not receive immediate benefits.
- Leaders who positioned reclassification as part of a more significant institutional effort, such as improving student service, enhancing compliance, or increasing operational efficiency, found it easier to justify changes and gain administrative approval.

Leading staff through reclassification requires a balance of transparency, expectation management, and strategic advocacy. Directors who openly communicated the process, prepared staff for potential challenges, and secured leadership buy-in found the transition smoother and more successful. While not every staff member may see immediate benefits, keeping them informed and engaged fosters trust and helps maintain morale. By positioning reclassification as part of broader institutional improvements, directors can gain more substantial support and ensure long-term benefits for their teams.



It was important to me to keep staff informed as the process was unfolding. I had to have open conversations with my assistant directors, explaining how the changes would impact their teams, particularly in terms of salary compression. I needed them to be supportive and understand that this was not a final step, but part of an ongoing effort to ensure fair classification and pay equity.

Director, Community College



To make sure the process was collaborative, I wrote the initial draft of our reclassification request, then had my assistant directors and associate director review it. They, in turn, talked to their teams to gather feedback before we finalized our appeal. While not everything we requested was approved, we succeeded in having our department classified as its own distinct unit and secured adjustments to some pay bands, which was a step in the right direction.

Director, Community College

SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF RECLASSIFICATION EFFORTS

Reclassifying Financial Aid Staff Into Tiered Roles for Career Progression: A director identified that five financial aid officers were performing significantly different levels of work despite having the same title. To create a clear career progression and support staff retention, the director reclassified these positions into three regional manager roles and six coordinator roles. This restructuring provided defined leadership opportunities and helped with long-term succession planning.

Using Vacant Positions to Justify Reclassification and Salary Adjustments: One institution took advantage of staff turnover by reallocating vacant positions to reclassify and increase salaries for existing staff. Instead of hiring a direct replacement, they shifted responsibilities and updated job descriptions to align with the office's changing needs, which resulted in improved pay scales and job alignment.

Restructuring Positions to Address Compliance and System Responsibilities: A financial aid officer initially hired for student advising took on increasing compliance and system management responsibilities. Over time, the position was formally reclassified from an advisor to a training specialist and later into a senior business analyst role. This gradual reclassification ensured that the individual's responsibilities and compensation accurately reflected their contributions while addressing the office's growing compliance needs.

Advocating for Title and Salary Changes Through a Comprehensive Appeal: A director led a department-wide reclassification appeal, gathering benchmarking data from peer institutions and compiling a detailed justification for HR. While not all requested changes were approved, this effort resulted in salary band adjustments, updated job descriptions, and the financial aid office being formally classified as a distinct department within the institution, strengthening its position in future staffing decisions.

All other departments had director positions, so reclassifying my role created more alignment than misalignment. My case was strong because I had done thorough research and justification. The informal process involved talking to people and making the case that I was likely to lose someone with critical knowledge and talent, which would leave us in a difficult position.

Director, Community College

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR FINANCIAL AID DIRECTORS

Engage HR early and build strong relationships. Directors who built strong relationships with HR found it easier to navigate the reclassification process and advocate for necessary changes. Having a key HR contact who understands financial aid roles can be advantageous.

Use data to justify reclassification requests. Gathering comparable salary data and job descriptions from peer institutions strengthened reclassification requests. Some directors reached out to colleagues at other colleges to benchmark salaries and roles before submitting proposals.

Help manage staff expectations with transparency and communication. Keeping staff informed about the process, potential challenges, and expected timelines reduces uncertainty and frustration. Regular updates and staff involvement in discussions help maintain morale.

Reclassification is often a long-term process. Many directors found that reclassification took years, requiring persistence and patience. Leadership changes, budget constraints, and HR review timelines contributed to delays.

Tying reclassification to institutional priorities improves success. Directors who framed reclassification in the context of student service improvements, compliance needs, or institutional goals had better success in securing approvals. Showing how staffing changes align with broader institutional strategies helped gain leadership support.

Leadership support is critical. Directors who had backing from senior leadership, such as deans, vice presidents, or chancellors, were more successful in achieving reclassification. Strong leadership advocacy helped push requests through bureaucratic hurdles.

Using vacant positions to fund reclassification can be effective. Some directors leveraged vacancies to adjust staffing structures and reclassify positions without increasing overall payroll costs. This strategy allowed them to shift resources to areas of greatest need.

Financial aid offices must advocate for their unique work. Some directors noted that financial aid roles were undervalued compared to similar student services positions. Making a case for the financial aid staff's complexity, compliance responsibilities, and workload helped justify salary adjustments.

Reclassification can improve staff retention. Many directors pursued reclassification to retain experienced employees at risk of leaving due to pay disparities or a lack of career progression. Even when salary increases weren't possible, adjusting job titles and responsibilities provided a sense of growth and recognition.

NEXT STEPS:

Applying These Lessons to Your Institution

- Reclassification is a complex but valuable process for financial aid offices seeking to align job roles, responsibilities, and compensation with institutional needs. While this case study highlights real-world experiences from community colleges, successfully implementing reclassification requires strategic planning, collaboration with HR, and strong advocacy.
- Explore our [Tips and Resources for Reclassification](#) document for practical strategies, key considerations, and resources to guide your reclassification efforts. This companion guide provides actionable steps financial aid directors can take, including how to justify a reclassification request, navigate institutional processes, and manage staff expectations.
- Visit NASFAA's [Career Awareness Toolkit](#), a comprehensive resource developed to help promote financial aid as a profession. The toolkit includes templates, outreach materials, and strategies to help raise awareness of the financial aid profession on campus and beyond.

For Employees Seeking Reclassification

If you are an employee looking to advocate for your reclassification — whether for a title change, salary adjustment, or better alignment of responsibilities — we have developed a dedicated guide to help you navigate the process. This resource provides practical steps to assess your role, gather supporting documentation, and approach your supervisor with a well-prepared request. For detailed guidance, access our [Employee Reclassification Guide](#).



202.785.0453 FAX. 202.785.1487 WWW.NASFAA.ORG

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