



U.S. Department of Education, Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA),  
Front End Business Integration (FEBI) Operations

*Providing High-Volume, Multi-Channel Customer  
Contact Services for FSA*



Case Study

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#### The Challenge

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA) administers programs that disburse more than \$70 billion in financial aid annually to help students pay for post-secondary education. To assist students and their families with these programs, FSA provides large-scale government-to-citizen customer service centers that must respond to more than 7.5 million telephone inquiries, nearly 60,000 postal mail inquiries (including Congressional correspondence), and nearly 500,000 e-mail inquiries per year in an environment of greatly fluctuating volumes and unplanned spikes due to ongoing outreach efforts. These inquiries often involve complex subject matter and sensitive financial and demographic information protected by the Federal Privacy Act. Customer service must be provided in English, Spanish, and other languages, and service must be available for the hearing-impaired and others with special accessibility needs. Information provided by these customer service centers must be timely, accurate, complete, and consistent across all channels. To meet its goals as the government's first performance-based organization (PBO), FSA is challenged to reduce unit costs while expanding the services it provides and improving customer satisfaction.

#### The Solution

Vangent designed and operates a state-of-the-art contact center environment for FSA under the Front End Business Integration (FEBI) contract, and has operated these customer service centers on behalf of FSA since 1994 (formerly under the Public Inquiry Contract and Editorial Services Contract). Our solution is built on the latest integrated customer relationship management (CRM) desktop, providing an end-to-end view of customer interactions, and offers enhanced self-service options. We provide assistance to FSA's customers via multiple communication channels-including telephone, postal mail, e-mail, and the Web-with the goals of first-contact resolution and the right answer every time.

To efficiently handle high-volume telephone inquiries, Vangent operates multiple call center sites linked in a "virtual call center" environment and managed as a

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single, integrated operation. We use a sophisticated call management system to efficiently handle large volumes of calls, and industry-leading workforce management software to schedule the right number of customer service representatives (CSRs) at the right times.

For written correspondence, Vangent developed an image-based correspondence processing system that reduces paper handling, increases efficiency and accuracy, and improves document tracking, archival, and retrieval. We also developed a text management tool to assist our information specialists and technical writers in creating high-quality, timely written responses. We maintain an extensive library of FSA-approved text which, combined with original text, we use to provide complete, accurate, and clear responses to often-complex inquiries, including inquiries from members of Congress on behalf of their constituents. Numerous quality control checkpoints are built into our correspondence processing system to ensure our written responses meet FSA's stringent quality standards.

We recruit and hire well-qualified personnel from the highly educated labor pools available at our contact center locations, and provide them with extensive initial training and periodic training updates to equip them to handle complex subject matter. We retain our high-quality personnel through empowerment and recognition programs and by providing cross-training and professional growth opportunities. All of our FEBI employees pass a security clearance and receive training in the Privacy Act before beginning work.

To ensure that the information we provide under FEBI is timely, accurate, complete, and consistent, we perform extensive quality monitoring and provide FSA with the capability to perform remote quality monitoring from their offices. We also use an IVR-based customer satisfaction survey to assess the quality of our telephone service. We provide complete services in both English and Spanish, and translation services for other languages. Telephone customer service is provided through TDD/TTY for the hearing-impaired, and Web-based services are Section 508-compliant for those with special accessibility needs.

## The Results

FSA's Federal Student Aid Information Center (1-800-4FEDAID), one of the contact centers operated by Vangent under FEBI, has received an American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) rating of 85.4, one of the highest ratings awarded a government agency (when the average rating for government agencies was 68.6). This line also received the highest scores in all nine categories in an independent telephone service quality assessment commissioned by ED in 1997. In addition, the percentage of customer satisfaction survey scores of 4 or greater (on a scale of 1 to 5) has surpassed the contract standard for this measure.

Throughout our performance of these contracts, Vangent has continually improved the services provided to FSA's customers. We have implemented self-service options for customers via an interactive voice response unit (IVRU); an Internet correspondence service and Web chat to respond electronically to inquiries submitted via e-mail links from FSA's Web site and directly from students; student financial aid awareness campaigns and focus groups; and a "knowledge kiosk" to provide quick, easy access to answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs) via the Web.

In addition, we have implemented numerous continuous improvement initiatives to reduce operational costs for FSA. These initiatives include combining a technical help desk with a general information contact center serving the same population; the cross-training of telephone and correspondence staff; workstation and equipment sharing; streamlined correspondence processes; and time-saving enhancements to the correspondence creation system. Through cross-training and other employee retention programs, we have been able to help FSA reduce the significant costs of recruiting, hiring, and training qualified contact center staff.

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