BETTER FAFSA
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Last updated November 28, 2023

FAFSA TIMELINE

Q: When will the 2024-25 Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) open?
A: Federal Student Aid (FSA) has announced that the form will open by December 31, 2023. NCAN recommends starting any FAFSA support assistance or events begin in early January 2024.

Q: Will there be any delays in processing submitted FAFSAs?
A: Yes, initially. The Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA) has indicated that students will receive a confirmation email when their FAFSA is submitted. This email will contain the estimated Student Aid Index (SAI) and federal aid eligibility. However, students will not receive their FAFSA Submission Summary (the new name for the Student Aid Report) until late January. College and state agencies will also not receive the Institutional Student Information Record (ISIR) documents until this time as well. Once the initial backlog of documents has been disbursed, processing should begin to happen daily.

Q: When will students be able to make corrections after submitting the initial FAFSA?
A: Students will not be able to make corrections until after the initial set of FAFSA Submission Summaries are distributed in late January. Students will also not be able to add any colleges/universities until this time. We expect that corrections and adding colleges/universities will be possible in early February.

Q: When can students contact colleges/universities about the FAFSA that has been submitted?
A: Since colleges/universities will not be receiving ISIRs until late January, they will have no information in their systems to answer questions about the submitted document until then. Students can reach out about general FAFSA and financial aid questions at any time.

Q: If a student submits a paper FAFSA, when will it be processed?
A: FSA has indicated that they will not begin to process submitted paper FAFSAs until February 2024.

Q: Will the delayed processing affect the timing of financial aid offers?
A: It is typical that colleges/universities will need several weeks to test their new systems once the ISIRs begin to arrive. The delay will likely lead to aid offers arriving much later than in previous years. Aid offers may not be seen until late February or March at the earliest.

Q: Why is the form opening by December 31 instead of the standard October 1 date?
A: Federal legislation passed in 2020 dictated the largest overhaul of the FAFSA form and filing system since the mid-1990s. The new form and user experience required purchasing new platforms as well as a total redesign which in turn required a long timeframe for preparation. The form should open on October 1 in coming years.
Q: This new process is being referred to as “FAFSA Simplification.” Is the new form really simplified?
A: The number of questions on the form has been reduced. The new form will also allow for a much larger percentage of students and parents to have their financial information transferred from the IRS directly into the FAFSA. This enhanced process should make FAFSA submission a more efficient process.

Q: With the form opening by December 31, when should FAFSA assistance workshops begin?
A: We suggest scheduling FAFSA assistance events starting in January 2024. An organization may want to consider allowing the new system to operate for a few days prior to offering any FAFSA completion workshops.

FSA ID

Q: Will a student or parent be able to access the 2024-25 FAFSA without an FSA ID?
A: No. Every student, parent, or spouse that wishes to log in and complete or sign the FAFSA will need to have a verified FSA ID. You will no longer be able to access a FAFSA with student demographic information only. It takes one-to-three days for an FSA ID to go through the verification process. Everyone should anticipate setting up their FSA ID at least one week prior to starting the FAFSA.

Q: Will individuals without Social Security numbers (SSN) be able to secure an FSA ID to use with the 2024-25 FAFSA?
A: Yes. FSA is in the process of enhancing the FSA ID process so that individuals without SSNs will be able to establish an FSA ID to access and sign the FAFSA. There will be alternative steps for verifying one’s identity within the process. FSA will use TransUnion services to ask knowledge-based questions to help with identity verification. Examples of these questions may include current or former address, a previous phone number, an employer, or a home/auto loan. Answers will be multiple choice (including “none of the above”). The signature page process has been eliminated with the new form. Those without Social Security numbers will not need an ITIN to set up an FSA ID.

Q: What if the parent cannot successfully set up an FSA ID in the new process?
A: If a person is not able to successfully answer the online questions, they will receive an email directing through a process that will require them to submit documents to FSA. They will need to call the FSA Information Center (1-800-433-32d43) to receive a case number and further instructions for submitting the required documents. Each person will need to complete an attestation form that will be available on Studentaid.gov and submit a driver’s license, state ID or foreign passport. None of these documents can be expired. If the person does not have any one of those documents, the second option is to submit a utility bill AND a community, city or consular ID. More details about these documents is expected from FSA in December 2023. If both processes do not allow for establishing an FSA ID, the student and parent(s) will need to complete the paper version of the form and submit it via the regular mail process. Identity verification will still happen when paper forms are submitted. Details of that process have not been released. The paper form has more pages than in previous years and may require extra postage for mailing.
Q: The FSA ID login process requires a two-step verification (i.e., multifactor authentication) process to access the FAFSA. What if the email, text, or authenticator application verification does not work?
A: When establishing your FSA ID or when you last logged in, you should have been provided a one-time back up code. This code can be used when all other forms of verification fail. Make sure to write this code down and keep it in a secure location in case you need to use it. Once you have used the code, you will need to log into your FSA ID account and a new code will be generated. Keep the new code in a secure location.

FSA also has a web page with their FSA ID FAQs.

FAFSA FORM CHANGES

Q: What are the most significant changes coming to the 2024-25 FAFSA form?
A: The are several changes coming with the new form:
- Significant reduction in the number of questions contained in the form.
- The FAFSA will be a strictly role-based form. When the student logs in, they will only have access to student questions. When a parent or spouse logs in, they will only have access to questions that pertain to their role. Only when the final contributor finishes their section will the form be able to be submitted.
- All students, parents, and spouses, regardless of whether they file a US tax return, will be required to check a box that grants the IRS permission to transfer any data they have directly into the FAFSA form. If no information is on file with the IRS, specific codes will be sent indicating that person’s status with the IRS. All contributors providing information on the form must grant permission or the student will not be eligible for any federal student aid.
- Family size will be based on the number of tax exemptions claimed on the tax form(s) that are being transferred into the FAFSA. If the family size has changed since filing the 2022 tax forms, there will be a family size question that allows for reporting the updated family size.
- Families with an adjusted gross income of $60,000 and higher will be required to answer the asset questions on the form. There is no longer an exemption for small businesses with fewer than 100 employees or family farms. The net value of the business and the family farm will need to be reported in the asset section.
- Child support received has been moved to the asset section of the form and therefore will only need to be reported for those families required to report assets. Child support paid out of the household is no longer a question on the form.
- The demographic survey questions regarding race, gender, and ethnicity have been moved to the student demographic section of the form. Students will still have the option to decline to answer the questions. Answers to these questions will not be used in any way to determine aid eligibility and these responses will not be sent to the state agency or any colleges listed on the form. Parents will not be able to view the answers to these questions and they will not be included on the FAFSA Submission Summary. The transgender question has been removed from the form.

Q: What is the new “unusual circumstances” question on the form designed to do?
A: The new legislation includes the creation of a “provisional independent student” for students with unusual circumstances that either (1) prevent them from contacting their parents or (2)
contacting their parents would pose a risk to the student (e.g., abandonment, abusive environment, estrangement). If the student indicates they have unusual circumstances, they can complete the FAFSA without including parental information. Their FAFSA will then be processed and their SAI calculated. However, postsecondary institutions will be required to follow up and gather documentation regarding the situation before any aid can be awarded.

FSA also has a Better FAFSA Simplification resource page.

FEDERAL METHODOLOGY FORMULA

Q: What is the new name for the Expected Family Contribution (EFC)?
A: The EFC has been renamed the Student Aid Index, or SAI, to better reflect that this number is an indicator that colleges can use to determine the need level for the student.

Q: Will the number of family members in college still be used in determining the SAI?
A: No. The new legislation removed the number of family members in college from the formula. However, the question will remain on the form and will be required to be answered. This information may be used by the colleges if they wish to take it into consideration when awarding institutional aid.

Q: Will small business and family farm net values still be exempt when reporting assets?
A: No. The new legislation removed the exemption for reporting the net value of businesses with less than 100 employees and family farms. The net value of these assets will need to be included when the student/family is required to answer the asset questions.

Q: Will annual payments to all tax-deferred pensions need to be reported on the FAFSA?
A: No. Only payments to tax-deferred pensions that are reported on the federal tax form will be taken into consideration for the formula.

Q: What type of guidance will be available to help determine which parent(s)'s financial information is to be submitted on the FAFSA in cases of separation and/or divorce?
A: FSA has produced a parent infographic document that can help guide the answer about which parent(s) to report. The document is available in the StudentAid.gov Financial Aid Toolkit. There will also be a parent wizard set of questions in the web version of the form that can help guide a student about which parent(s) need to provide information on the form.