

THE 2020-2021 FAFSA APPLICATION DECLINE:

A CALL FOR EDUCATORS



As families endure the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is even more critical for students to gain access to federal assistance to cover college costs and avoid disruption in their education journey. The most important step for students and families to take in order to receive aid—including grants, scholarships, work-study, and low-interest federally subsidized and unsubsidized loans—is filing the **Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)**. Each year, the FAFSA provides more than 13 million students with nearly \$150 billion toward their higher education pursuits.

However, the rate of submission has fallen 16 percent from this time last year. There are many reasons that may be the cause of this decline—such as a decreased interest in higher education, lack of knowledge about the process, and pressing issues due to the pandemic like food and housing insecurity and technology challenges—and the decline is steepest and most pronounced for students of color and students from under-resourced communities.

It is important to note that many institutions of higher education establish priority deadlines for federal student aid, which means applicants are awarded on a first-come, first-served basis. Students who wait to submit the FAFSA might suffer significant consequences.

To ensure that all students—particularly, students of color and students from under-resourced communities—have unfettered access to federal aid for higher education, we are calling on educators to raise awareness and build support around this issue. In this time of crisis, it is essential that students and their families are able to navigate the daunting process of applying for federal aid.

HOW TO RAISE AWARENESS

Here are some actions you can take to help set your students up for success as they consider their postsecondary plans:

- Ensure** your students know what the FAFSA is and how this application can be used for a variety of educational pursuits.
- Encourage** ALL of your students to complete the FAFSA, even if they are not certain of their postsecondary plans or if they have concerns such as family income status, disabilities, criminal convictions, etc.
- Provide** immigrant students with information—accessible in their native language—about eligibility; refer them to the [Federal Student Aid website](#) for more information.
- Ensure** your students and at least one parent or guardian know they must create an FSA ID prior to filling out a FAFSA application. They can create an FSA ID through the [Department of Education website](#).
- Share** this [list of items students will need to fill out the FAFSA](#).
- Explain** to your students that the FAFSA does not take long to complete—they should reserve about an hour of time after they have gathered all the necessary items.
- Tell** your students to fill out the [FAFSA online through the official Department of Education website](#); this application is FREE to submit and students should not be required to pay a fee of any kind.

IN ADDITION TO THE ACTION ITEMS ABOVE, HERE ARE ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS:

- Most students are learning remotely due to the pandemic and, therefore, have easy access to the paperwork that is required to file the FAFSA. **Encourage** them to work with their families to collect the necessary documents.
- Recommend** that your students use local resources when filing the FAFSA; your school might have counselors who are trained to help students complete the FAFSA process. Students can also reach out directly to college financial aid officers with questions about filing.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EQUITY

As we witness a decline in FAFSA applications among students of color and students from under-resourced communities, we must also acknowledge the resulting lack of enrollment in higher education for these students may further exacerbate already-large opportunity gaps.

Indigenous students, students of color, and students from under-resourced communities have been hit hardest by COVID-19, making the decision to remain in college during the pandemic difficult.

COVID-19 has only highlighted the many challenges that Indigenous students and students of color face as they pursue higher education and emphasized the work that still needs to be done around racism, prejudice, and microaggressions both virtually and while on campus.

The inequities and structural hurdles that go unresolved in K-12 education make the transition to higher education difficult for student populations in under-resourced communities.