

What you should know about FAFSA: The Free Application for Federal Student Aid

Read the form

Many questions on the FAFSA are straightforward, such as asking for your social security number or your date of birth. But many require you to read the instructions to make sure you answer the question correctly. Words like *household*, *investments*, and even *parent* all have common meanings but are specifically defined for purposes of student financial aid. So be sure to read the instructions.

If you have a special family situation, you may have additional questions. You should ask for clarification from a financial aid administrator at a college you wish to attend.

Apply early

Deadlines for aid from your state, school, and private sources tend to be much earlier than deadlines for federal aid. To make sure that any financial aid package your school offers you will contain aid from as many sources as possible, apply as soon as you can after January 1 of your senior year or the year you apply to college.

The U.S. Department of Education will process your FAFSA right up until June 30 of the year you will enroll in college. However, for you to actually receive aid, your high school must have your correct, complete information before your last day of enrollment as a high school student. So it is important to apply early to make sure you leave enough time for your high school to receive your information and make any necessary corrections.

Your family doesn't need to file a tax return before you submit your FAFSA

Filing out a tax return first will make completing the FAFSA easier. However, your parent or guardian does not need to submit a tax return to the IRS before you submit your FAFSA. Once the tax return is filed, you must correct, on your FAFSA, any income or tax information that may have changed. Inaccurate information on your FAFSA may delay your receipt of federal student aid. Also, you will be required to return federal aid you improperly received based upon incorrect information.

You can file your FAFSA electronically

The fastest way to apply for financial aid is to fill out and submit a FAFSA over the Internet. Also, your information is edited before you submit it, so if you made errors or left out any information, you can make the necessary corrections before you submit the form. This reduces the chance that your data will be rejected and makes it less likely that you will have to correct your information later. To submit your application using FAFSA on the Web, go to www.fafsa.ed.gov.

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There may be additional forms

The FAFSA is the one application for federal student aid. Many schools and states rely solely on this information. However, the college or state may require you to fill out additional forms. These additional forms may have deadlines that are earlier than the federal student aid deadlines, so be sure to check with the financial aid office at the college you plan to attend.

Source: U.S. Department of Education