

## A simpler FAFSA could increase applicants



Students at Miami Dade College talk with the college's advisement staff. (Photo: MDC)

BY JOAN MOONEY JANUARY 21, 2021

Financial aid officers have been asking for years for a simplified federal financial aid form, the [Free Application for Federal Student Aid](#) (FAFSA). After much work by financial aid advocates and, in particular, by outgoing Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tennessee), an overhaul was included in the Covid relief and government funding bill signed into law in December.

The changes — which will start July 2023 for the 2023-2024 academic year — will “absolutely” encourage more students to apply for financial aid, said Dena Norris, associate vice chancellor of student financial services, [Metropolitan Community College](#) in Kansas City, Missouri. NerdWallet estimated in 2018 that \$2.6 billion in student loans was left unused because students didn’t submit FAFSA forms.

The new form will be much simpler than the old one. The number of questions was cut from more than 100 to 30-something. (The exact number depends on the

student's financial situation.)

“The more questions you have in the form, the more you're able to confuse the student,” said Mercedes Amaya, associate vice president of financial aid at [Miami Dade College](#) (MDC) in Florida.

Amaya's office encourages students to apply for financial aid and offers guidance.

“Our concern is those that walk away,” she said. “They see the form, they get scared. I will not know how many are walking away, not doing it because they're concerned, or they feel [the form is] asking too many questions.”



Mindi-Kim Schrum, senior director of financial aid for [San Juan College](#) in Farmington, New Mexico, said the simplification of the form is “just fantastic. We're very excited, she said. “We think we're going to get more students completing it.”

Students often struggled to get all the required information from their parents about their income, tax status, assets and other financial details. With the new form, “they just need their parents' names, Social Security number and date of birth.”

## Less intimidating

Megan Corval is vice president of policy and federal relations at the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA), which has pushed for FAFSA changes for years.

“For students or families that may not be financially savvy, [the old FAFSA form] can be intimidating,” she said. “If it's asking for certain tax information, they may not be sure what they're being asked to provide.”

The revision reduces the number of questions for all students, Corval said. But “The lowest-income students or students with the least complicated financial situation will answer the fewest number of questions.”

The FAFSA form determines a student's eligibility for Pell grants, and changes in the higher education bill will expand Pell eligibility by 500,000 students, Corval said.

“This legislation will allow students to assess, based on a few factors, maybe a year or two in advance, whether they will be eligible for the maximum Pell grant,” she said.

## Elimination of barrier questions

Two “barrier” questions have been cut that could make a big difference for some students. One, students are no longer required to state that they have registered for the Selective Service.

“If they're a traditional high school student, FAFSA could automatically check Selective Service,” said MDC's Amaya. “But if they're past the age to register, that's a barrier. They need to explain why they didn't register.”

Many students didn't realize they were required to register for Selective Service,” said Corval. “The best scenario is that they were able to fix it. The worst is, they were so discouraged they didn't pursue it.”



Schrum at San Juan College has had the same experience with students who have not registered for Selective Service, most for legitimate reasons.

“Sometimes they just say, ‘Forget it, I can't come to school,’” she said. “I can't fill out this form.”

The second barrier question that has been eliminated asks whether the student has ever been convicted of a drug offense.

“When you go to answer that question, it terrifies,” said Amaya. “They tend to try to walk away. ‘That happened a long time ago. I just met you, and I'm going to talk to you about it?’”

Carrie Warick, director of policy and advocacy for the National College Attainment Network, has found the same result on a national scale.

“That question was incredibly intimidating for students, particularly those with minor infractions when they were younger,” she said. “Many assumed they weren’t eligible when they were.”

When NCAN asked students why they didn’t fill out the FAFSA form, the drug conviction question was the number one obstacle.

## **Cutting insulting terminology**

For some, replacing “expected family contribution” with “student aid index” is just a question of verbiage. For others, the change eliminates a needlessly fraught term.

“When you tell families, ‘This is the expected family contribution,’ it’s pretty crude. It puts [the student] in a sense of inferiority, this is what your family is supposed to do for the college experience,” said Jackson Nell, senior research analyst at EAB, a Washington-based education research company.

The student aid index assesses true student need, Nell said. It takes into account inflation and cost of living in assessing how much students can pay.

## **Asset questions drastically simplified**

On the old form, “the asset questions are usually the most confusing,” Warick said. “Most families don’t have assets at all and don’t know how to answer those questions, so they’re intimidated.” Or they may be living off their assets but have no income.

That’s what Schrum often found with her student applicants.

“They might have had no income, but they had assets like you wouldn’t believe,” she said. “They weren’t supposed to include their personal home they were living in, or their car, but most did. And they were giving them great value because they were proud.”

Families filing a straightforward tax form without any additional pieces will no longer have to include their assets on the FAFSA form because they will be automatically transferred from the tax form, Warick said.

Another red-tape barrier the FAFSA revision eliminates is the requirement to collect an IRS statement of non-filing for a student.

“This is a huge barrier and takes so much time for students to provide ‘proof’ that they did not file a tax return,” Norris of Metropolitan Community College said in an email. “The direct communication between the IRS and the Department of Education will remove this barrier.”

## Hoping for more applicants

Hopes are high among financial aid administrators and advocates for the FAFSA revision.

“Hopefully, that will make applying for financial aid a much less daunting task,” said Brooke Justice, vice president of student services at [Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College](#).



Nell of EAB foresees an increase in student applicants.

“It will bring more students to apply if it’s marketed as easier and [that] you’re more likely to get money,” he said. “The marketing campaign is pretty weak still. They’re relying on [colleges] to do it.” He hopes the Biden administration will publicize the changes.

In New Mexico, Schrum is optimistic.

“We think we’re going to get more students completing it,” she said. “It’s not such a headache. We’re excited to get this done.”

Norris agrees.

“We’ve been asking for this for years,” she said. “FAFSA used to be 10 pages long when you printed it out.”

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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