

College financial aid offices brace for 'growing pains' as new FAFSA rolls out

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In a typical year, the push to get Anna Maria College students to fill out their Free Application for Federal Student Aid — better known as the FAFSA — for the next school year would have already started back in October.

But because of technical issues accompanying the soft launch of the new, streamlined version of the application for college aid, those plans have been delayed, causing students and college financial aid offices some stress.

“We are not actively encouraging students right now to go on and access the form,” said Nicole Lenares, director of financial aid at Anna Maria. “Many have encountered roadblocks. Whether they're stuck in the waiting room or they're unable to complete the form due to technological issues.”

In past years, the application would have been available to students Oct. 1 giving students and financial aid staff several months to make sure applications are correctly completed before the April 1 priority deadline.

But the new application, which soft-launched in late December and is meant to make the process faster and easier for students, has sometimes had the opposite effect.

Many students, Lenares said, are unable to access the application and those that have accessed it have experienced technical issues, such as being unable to access portions of the application.

'Still kind of in a waiting game'

Previously, she would have been able to immediately step in and help students complete an application, correct an error or resolve an issue, but because

financial aid offices don't have access to the applications yet, their ability to assist students has been hindered.

"We can't help them resolve some of those issues until we have increased access at the campus level," Lenares said. "So some of the students are still kind of in a waiting game."

And that waiting game is causing some students anxiety about their aid eligibility.

Thankfully, Lenares said, the delay will not impact their overall eligibility for aid, since "at the campus level, we understand that these couple of weeks might be experiencing additional delays."

The office is prepared to assist students who have already reached out and will be ready to assist those who haven't yet once the application is accessible.

But with the rollout coming later than usual, there is a concern that the April 1 priority deadline will be impacted, Lenares said.

"We have that deadline in place to ensure that the students are maximizing their potential for aid," she said. "So the delay in the rollout is somewhat shortening the amount of time that we have to work with our students to make sure that they're able to get the FAFSA completed successfully within that time frame."

Quinsigamond Community College

Due to lack of access to the applications, it's not clear if the streamlined process will also streamline things from the perspective of college financial aid offices, said Amy Lawson, associate director of financial aid at Quinsigamond Community College.



“Our systems need to be updated with that information too, so that's kind of a standstill on what we can do with that information,” she said.

Quinsigamond Community College’s deadline is also in April, giving the school a shortened time frame to process the applications. However, there should still be enough time to look through the data and send out financial aid letters, Lawson said.

The issue may be at schools that have an earlier deadline, which “will be in an entirely different situation.”

Like at Anna Maria, the financial aid office at Quinsigamond Community College has held off on handling students’ requests for help with the FAFSA applications for now, Lawson said.

Mixed results

Lawson had a chance to preview the new application during a recent financial aid event when it was open and available to students.

She took time to assist students with the application, but saw mixed results. For some students, the process was quick, while for others, “there were some challenges.”

One of the primary challenges lies with the federal student aid identification, which is what students and families use to log into the application.

“I think some of the challenges for our students at the community college level is that some of our students who are 18 or older are not considered independent, although they may live on their own,” she said. “We have the challenge now of some parents unwilling to provide information on the FAFSA or students not being able to get the information or a parent having an issue creating a FSA ID.”

Changes

When a student starts a FAFSA, contributors have 45 days to go in and complete their portion of the application, she said. If they don’t complete it in that timeframe, the student has to start all over again.

The new application has also removed the option of printing out the signature page of the application and mailing it in to the federal processor, which could prove difficult for people who struggle with technology or have trouble creating a Federal Student Aid ID.

There have also been changes made to the expected family contribution section. Previously the lowest possible result was zero.

The expected family contribution has been replaced with the student aid index, ranging from negative 1,500 and up. The change is meant to help signal which students are the most in need.

“That is different as well — figuring out how we're going to award financial aid to students, since we are waiting for updates for our software, as well as guidance from the state on state funding that may be available,” Lawson said.

Some benefits

But while these changes can be challenging, Lawson and Lenares also see some benefits.

One change, for example, involves the way tax information from the Internal Revenue Service is submitted to the FAFSA.

“Now each contributor will need to access the form to provide acknowledgments and accept that the FAFSA will automatically receive the information from the IRS,” Lawson said. “I think that does make it easier for students and parents.”

Lenares highlighted a reduction in the number of questions students have to answer on the application.

But for now, college financial aid offices are bracing themselves for the “growing pains” that are coming along as the new application is rolled out.

Once the issues have been resolved and the application is open to students at all times, Lenares and her staff can get back on track with FAFSA completion efforts.

“We're kind of waiting for this soft-launch period to come to an end before we do a major push for students to do the FAFSA completion and before we hold our on campus events to facilitate that,” she said.

Despite the short-term issues, the new application will, ultimately, have a long-term benefit for students and their families, Lenares said.

“Accessing federal financial aid is essential to really providing access to college,” Lenares said. “Especially for our first-generation, low-income

students, which is a large percentage that we have here at Anna Maria. So I do see the benefit in the long run.”