

PRIOR-PRIOR YEAR: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

Applying for financial aid is one of the most misunderstood—yet important—parts of the college admission process.

With changes coming to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), it's doubly important to understand the steps you must take to secure funds for college.

Starting this fall:

- Students will be able to file for aid beginning Oct. 1—a full three months earlier than previously allowed.
- And for the first time, applicants will use prior-prior year (PPY) tax information when reporting personal and family income. Currently, the FAFSA uses the previous year's tax data.

Familiarize yourself with the frequently asked questions below, and discuss the new financial aid process with your counselor and college representatives.

Remember: Completing the FAFSA is essential for securing most types of financial aid for college. In addition to federal grants and loans, many colleges, states, and scholarship programs use the form to assess eligibility for their aid programs.

What do I need to do differently? To make sure you are in the running for financial aid:

- Complete the FAFSA using 2015 tax information.
- File your FAFSA as soon as possible. The form becomes available Oct. 1.

Who will be affected by the changes? The Class of 2017 will be the first high school cohort to file the FAFSA on the new timeline using PPY tax data. All returning college students will also submit their applications following the new procedure.

When should I complete the FAFSA? File the FAFSA as soon as you are able. The federal government awards roughly \$150 billion annually to college students through need-based grants, loans, and work-study funds. In addition to determining your eligibility for federal student aid, many colleges and states use the FAFSA when distributing grants. Money is limited in some instances, so don't delay. If you file your application late, you run the risk of finding out that certain funds—such as work-study awards—are already gone.

Will other college application deadlines move earlier into the fall? At this point, it's too early to tell how or whether changes to the FAFSA will affect the admission application process. What will remain the same is that colleges may not set college application deadlines prior to Oct. 15, nor can they require students to make an enrollment decision prior to May 1 of their senior year (with the exception of Early Decision and Restrictive Early Action).

When will I learn my financial aid eligibility? Institutional and state deadlines for awarding aid will differ. Hundreds of colleges and universities are expected to provide financial aid packages earlier than in previous years. But not all schools will be on the same timeline. Despite having earlier access to students' financial data, colleges may need to estimate awards if state grant totals aren't approved by legislatures in a timely fashion. Additionally, many colleges don't finalize tuition for the coming academic year until the spring, a critical piece of information when estimating cost of attendance.