The FAFSA: Step by Step

Students and families often find the thought of completing the FAFSA overwhelming and intimidating, but it doesn't have to be. By following these simple steps, you can complete the FAFSA quickly and easily, and be on your way to achieving your college goals.

Scan to visit fafsa.gov

Step 1: Gather your materials

To complete the FAFSA, you and your parents will need the following: social security or Alien Registration number; driver's license; federal income tax return, W-2, and other financial records; cash, checking, and savings balances; records of untaxed income; and your list of up to 20 colleges.

Step 2: Create an FSA ID

Your FSA ID is a unique username and password combination that is used every time you log in to complete or edit the FAFSA. If you file as a dependent, you and at least one parent (and possibly both) will need to create your own individual accounts. Visit studentaid.gov/fsa-id.

Step 3: Complete the application

The FAFSA opens each year on October 1. There are separate sections for you and your parents. Parents are referred to as "contributors" on the FAFSA. If you filed taxes, and give your consent at the beginning of your application, your tax information will be transferred into the FAFSA directly from the IRS.

Step 4: Review your summary

If you submit the FAFSA electronically, you will receive a FAFSA Submission Summary (FSS). This report will also be sent to the colleges you listed on the FAFSA. Your FSS will include:

1) your Student Aid Index (SAI)—the figure colleges use to calculate financial need and determine financial aid awards.

2) a summary of all of the information you and your parents provided on the FAFSA.

Review your FSS carefully to ensure that everything is correct.

Step 5: Make necessary changes

If you need to make any changes, you can do this once your FAFSA has been processed. Log in and choose the menu option for making corrections. You will receive confirmation that your corrections were processed.

Step 6: Compare packages

Colleges that have accepted you will use the information from your FSS to put together a financial aid package for you. This package will be made up of grants, scholarships, work-study, and/or loans. Financial aid packages will vary from college to college, so it's important to compare these packages carefully.

Step 7: Do it again next year

You're required to submit a new FAFSA every year, but it gets easier each time you do it.