# UNDERSTANDING FAFSA & FINANCIAL AID

## YOUR GUIDE TO PAYING FOR COLLEGE

HIGH SCHOOL EDITION

CLASS OF 2026

October 2025

Updates & More Information:
UnderstandingFAFSA.org

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# What Drives You?

**Going to college is a big commitment**, and there are many paths you can take: a traditional four-year degree, a two-year fast track into work, or certificate programs. You can go now, or later. Think about why you want to go. Choose what's right for you.

## So why do you want to go to college?

BECOME A PROFESSIONAL
START MY LIFE BE FINANCIALLY INDEPENDENT
MAKE NEW FRIENDS EARN MORE MONEY
LEARN MORE ABOUT THE WORLD FIND MORE CAREER OPTIONS PARTY
THE JOB I WANT REQUIRES A DEGREE
GET OUT OF TOWN HELP MY FAMILY GROW UP
MAKE THE WORLD BETTER TRAVEL
SERVE MY COMMUNITY

### Your Sense of Purpose

A sense of purpose helps us set goals and get motivated to accomplish those goals. At this moment in your life, what is most important to you?

#### Career Satisfaction

College may help you find meaningful work, develop a stronger career network, or discover new job options.

#### Social Connections

College may help you make new friends, meet future colleagues, provide for your family, or find a life partner.

#### Serving Community

College may help you make the world a better place, whether in your own community or through global action.

#### Self Improvement

College may make your life more interesting, offering you new skills and inspiring you to constantly broaden your horizons.

# What Is the FAFSA?

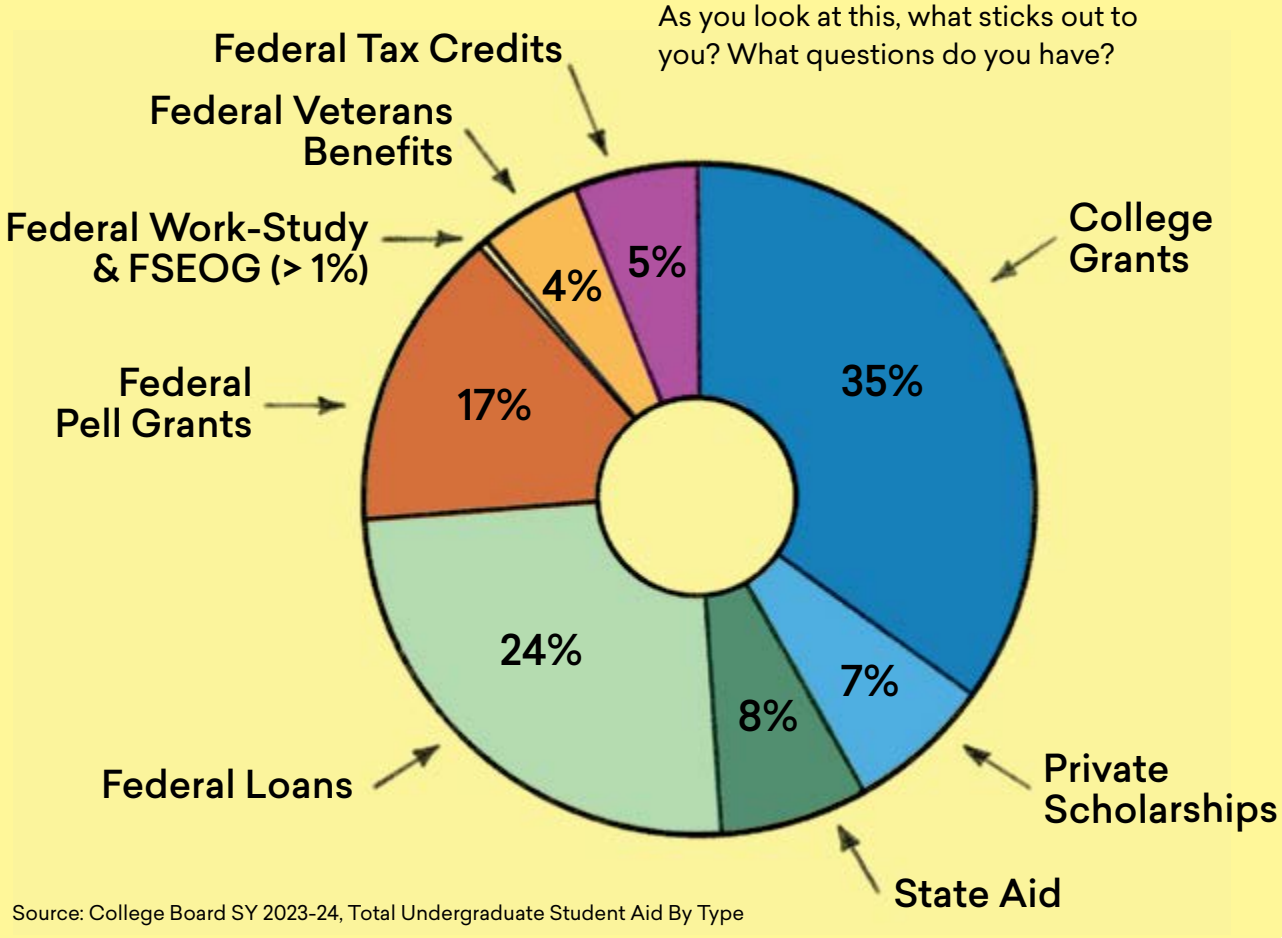
Do you need money to go to college? If you want help from the federal government, you'll need to fill out an online form called the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, better known as the FAFSA.

Your state government and individual colleges may also use the FAFSA to award financial aid. **There is lots of money available, more than most students think.**

The FAFSA takes you step by step through the questions you'll need to answer. It was recently redesigned to be simpler and faster. Learn about the FAFSA today. The effort will be worth it.

## Types of Help To Pay for College

There is a lot of money available to pay for college from many different sources. As you look at this, what sticks out to you? What questions do you have?




Source: College Board SY 2023-24, Total Undergraduate Student Aid By Type

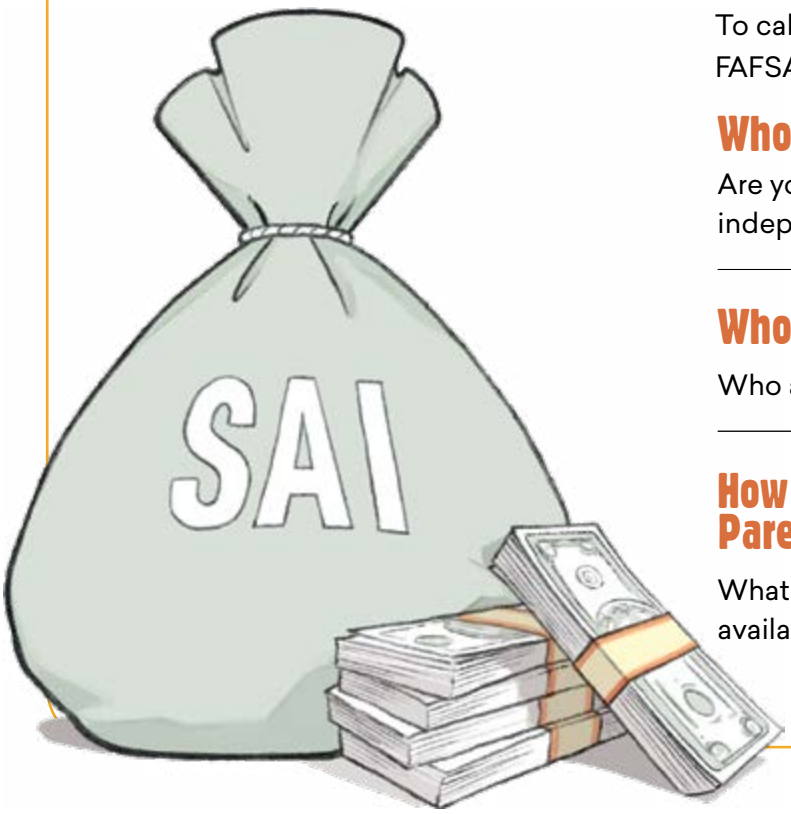
# How Does the FAFSA Work?

The FAFSA asks questions about your family and collects information about what you and your parents earn. Why does the FAFSA need this information?

The federal government aims to give money to students who need it most. Many colleges also use information on the FAFSA to estimate your family's ability to pay for college and how much aid they may need to offer you.

**In a Nutshell:** **Do you and your family have enough money to pay for college? If you don't, how much help can you get from the federal government? And how much more help will you need from the college you attend?**

To figure this out, the FAFSA calculates a number called the **Student Aid Index** or **SAI**, an indicator of your family's ability to pay. (In prior years, this was called the **Expected Family Contribution**.) Your SAI is important. The lower the number, the more aid you may be eligible for.




To calculate your Student Aid Index, the FAFSA needs to know three things:

## Who Are Your Parents?

Are you dependent on them or living independently?

## Who's in Your Household?

Who are your parents supporting financially?

## How Much Do You and Your Parents Earn?

What savings and other assets might be available for college?

# Is the FAFSA for You?

Almost certainly! Filling out the FAFSA opens the door to almost all financial aid — including help from the federal government, state government, the colleges' own funds, and many private scholarships. If you are an undocumented student, you can't receive federal aid and you won't fill out the FAFSA, but there are funds available from many other sources.

## How It Works

**The FAFSA will lead you through the questions that you and your family need to answer.**

The form recognizes that many of today's students live in blended families and a variety of home situations. You'll be given instructions on how to answer the questions. The goal is to make sure you get all of the college money you're eligible for.

Be sure to fill out the FAFSA, even if you think your family earns too much for you to qualify for aid. It's true that Federal Pell Grants are reserved for lower-income families. But higher-income students can get government loans and a variety of scholarships from colleges.

## Money for Undocumented Students

Undocumented students are not eligible for federal aid and can't fill out the FAFSA, but there are other sources of help. Many states, colleges, and scholarship providers offer money. Get our student picks at UnderstandingFAFSA.org.

# Q&A: Citizenship on the FAFSA

## Q: What if I'm not a U.S. citizen?

**A:** You may complete the FAFSA if you are a permanent resident (holding a **green card**) or have certain types of visas. **Get the full list of eligible noncitizens** on the federal government's website StudentAid.gov. Or call the FAFSA help desk at 800-433-3243 for more information.

## Q: What if I'm undocumented?

**A:** You can't receive federal money. This is true for all undocumented students, including those who have been granted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, status. But it is quite possible you will qualify for state or local grants, college scholarships, or private money. New York, for example, offers aid through its **Dream Act portal** and an **alternate path** for mixed-status families. Check out **this map** to see where your state stands.

## Q: What if my parents are undocumented?

**A:** That's OK, as long as *you* are eligible to apply for aid. At least one of your parents will be required to get an FSA ID and fill out the FAFSA with you. The FAFSA offers a **path for undocumented parents to get their FSA ID and fill out the FAFSA online**.

## Q: Is it safe to fill out the FAFSA if my parents are undocumented?

**A:** Financial aid information is supposed to be **private**, but these are uncertain times. Talk to your school counselor or other trusted adults in your community to develop a plan that is best for you and your family. If you are worried about the FAFSA, there are many ways to pay for school and to get the education you deserve.

**More Questions?**
**Get help & resources at UnderstandingFAFSA.org.**

# What To Expect This Year

This is a typical financial aid timeline for students **enrolling in the fall of 2026**. This will differ if you're applying for the spring of 2026 or on rolling admissions. Remember, **colleges set the rules and deadlines**. Use this as a rough guide.

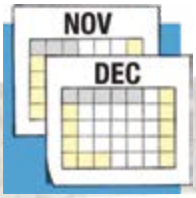
College Application Season Begins

CSS Profile Opens

FAFSA Opens

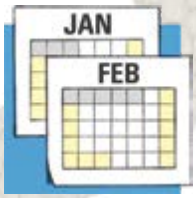
Get FSA ID

Fall Financial Aid Requests




Early Admission & Early Decision Deadlines

Educational Opportunity & Special Program Deadlines




College Admission Deadlines

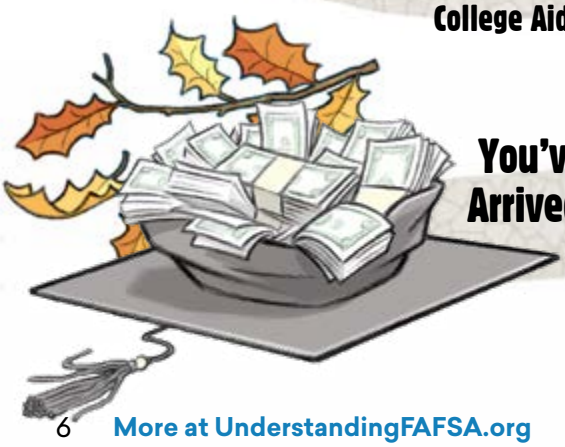
College Information Requests

College Acceptances!

Compare Your College Aid Offers

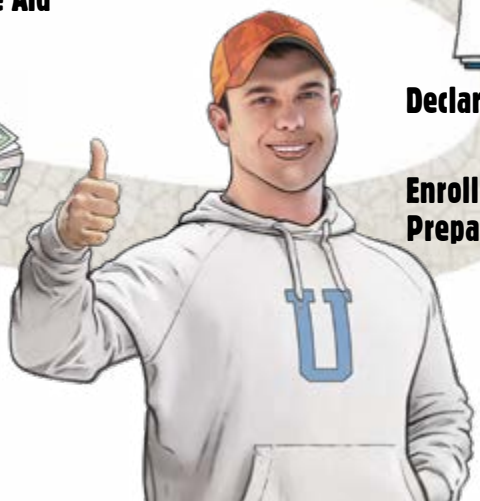
Appeal for More Aid

Declare Your School



You've Arrived!

Make Your Plan To Pay



Enroll & Prepare

# Know Your Deadlines

**Ready for your college journey?** Let's look at what will happen in your senior year. Note: This timeline is designed for students heading to college in the fall of 2026, but you may be on a different schedule. Check with your schools and any special programs you're applying to. **Deadlines will vary.**

| 2025 | | 2026 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **September–November** | **December–January** | **February–March** | **April–May** | **Spring–Summer** |
| **Get Your FSA ID:** One or both of your parents will need to do this too. Try to get this done before the FAFSA opens. | **Regular Admission Applications:** Many college deadlines are in early January. Check! Get your applications in. | **Information Requests:** After you submit your FAFSA, check your email regularly. Colleges may ask you to verify some information. | **Compare Your Offers:** Decode your financial aid offers and figure out how much each school will cost. How do they compare? | **Enroll:** You'll need to pay a deposit to hold your spot. |
| **Fill Out the FAFSA & State Aid Applications:** The FAFSA opens on October 1. Get it done ASAP. Also apply for any state aid you may be eligible for. | **Special Programs:** Check the deadlines for special programs and state grants. | **College Acceptances:** You should start receiving college acceptance letters, which will include award offers. Look these over! | **Consider an Appeal:** Now is the time to ask colleges to review your aid package if you need more money. | **Sign Up for Orientation:** Join your college's groups and clubs, and introduce yourself to fellow students. |
| **CSS Profile:** Some private colleges and state universities require this form. Ask! | **Financial Aid Requests:** Colleges may have their own financial aid forms to fill out. | **Apply for Scholarships:** Use this quiet time to explore your opportunities. Work with a counselor or librarian. | **Declare Your School:** May 1 is often the deadline to make your decision. | **Make a Plan To Pay & Renew Your Aid:** Create your budget for college. And mark your calendar. You will need to renew your FAFSA in the fall. |
| **Early Admission Applications:** If you're applying for early decision or early action, do it now. Deadlines are soon. | **Early Acceptances:** If you applied for an early decision, you should hear whether you've been accepted. | | | **You've Arrived:** Congratulations! |

**Get Organized!**
Head to your college websites to collect your to-do list and due dates.

# Assemble Your Team

Filling out the FAFSA and applying for financial aid can be confusing at times. Almost every student needs guidance along the way.

A good place to start is your school counselor. And there are other adults who are ready to support you as well. They'll have different talents and perspectives. **Help is out there. It's time to assemble your team.**

**So who to ask?** You probably have a wider universe of people in your life than you think. The trick is to know where to look.

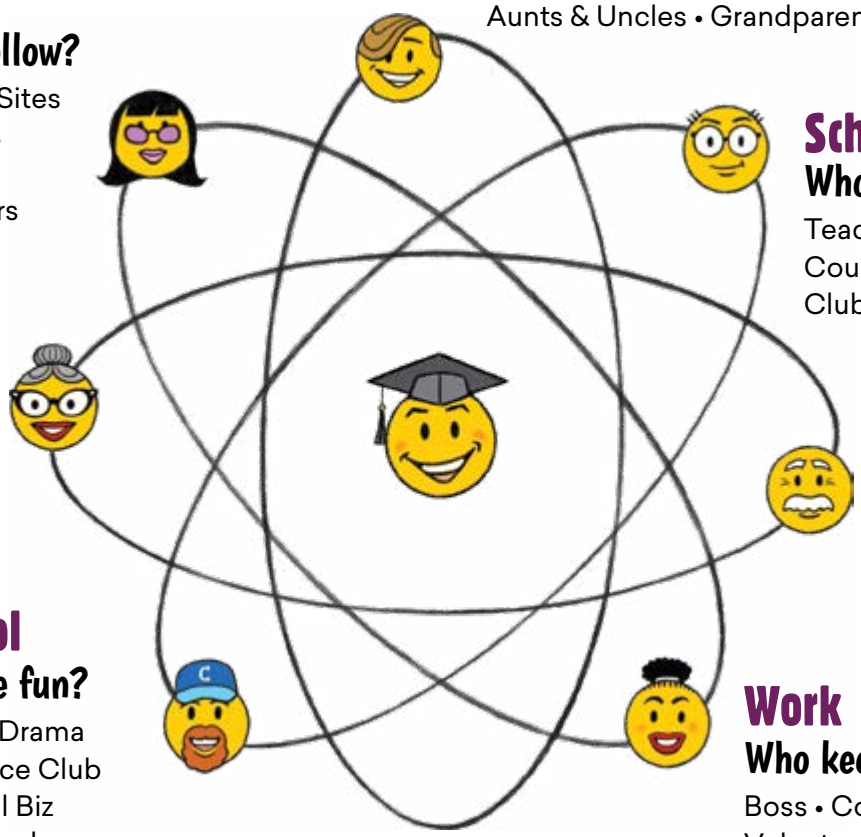
## You Are Not Alone

### Family
**Who are you closest to?**

Parents & Stepparents • Sibs & Cousins
Aunts & Uncles • Grandparents • Foster Parents

### Online
**What do you follow?**

College Hunting Sites
FinAid Resources
College Officers
Nonprofit Advisors



### School
**Who supports you?**

Teacher • Coach
Counselor • Dean
Club Leader • Classmates

### Community
**Who's there to help?**

Neighbor • Librarian
School Counselor
College Advisor

### Inspiration
**Who inspires you?**

Clergy • Counselor
Youth Leader • Friends
Social Worker

### After School
**Who leads the fun?**

Sports Coach • Drama
Director • Science Club
Teacher • Virtual Biz
Advisor • 4-H Leader

### Work
**Who keeps you busy?**

Boss • Co-workers
Volunteer Network
Mentors

# How To Ask For Help

OK, so you have some people to talk to about your college hunt and getting financial aid. Here's what's next.

## 1 Think about each person's skills.

How can their gifts be used to help you?

- Who's really organized?
- Who seems to know everyone around town?
- Who brings the most positive energy?

## 2 Make the first ask.

It doesn't have to be formal. It could be in person, in an email, or on a phone call. If you don't have contact info, find them on Instagram, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Facebook or another social media app that they might use.

## 3 When possible, be specific.

You might not know exactly what kind of help you need. (And that's OK.) But if there is something specific, be sure to mention it.

- Can your **tech-savvy cousin** help you set up an online system to start your planning and store your documents?
- Can your **uber-organized aunt** help you keep track of deadlines?
- Can your **protective big sister** be the one to check in to see how you're feeling every couple weeks?
- Can your **enterprising manager at work** help you find scholarship opportunities around town?

**Who comes to mind? Take two minutes. Write three names.**

**Adult relationships** can make a huge difference, now and into the future. Three good reasons:

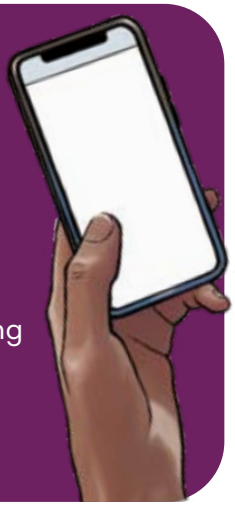
**They can offer encouraging words to keep you motivated.**

**They can keep you organized and on task.**

**They may not have all the info you need, but they can help find answers.**

## CELL PHONE ACTIVITY

**Have a moment right now?** Drop a note or send a DM to someone on your list. Let them know why you're thinking of them. That's it. You might be surprised by their response.



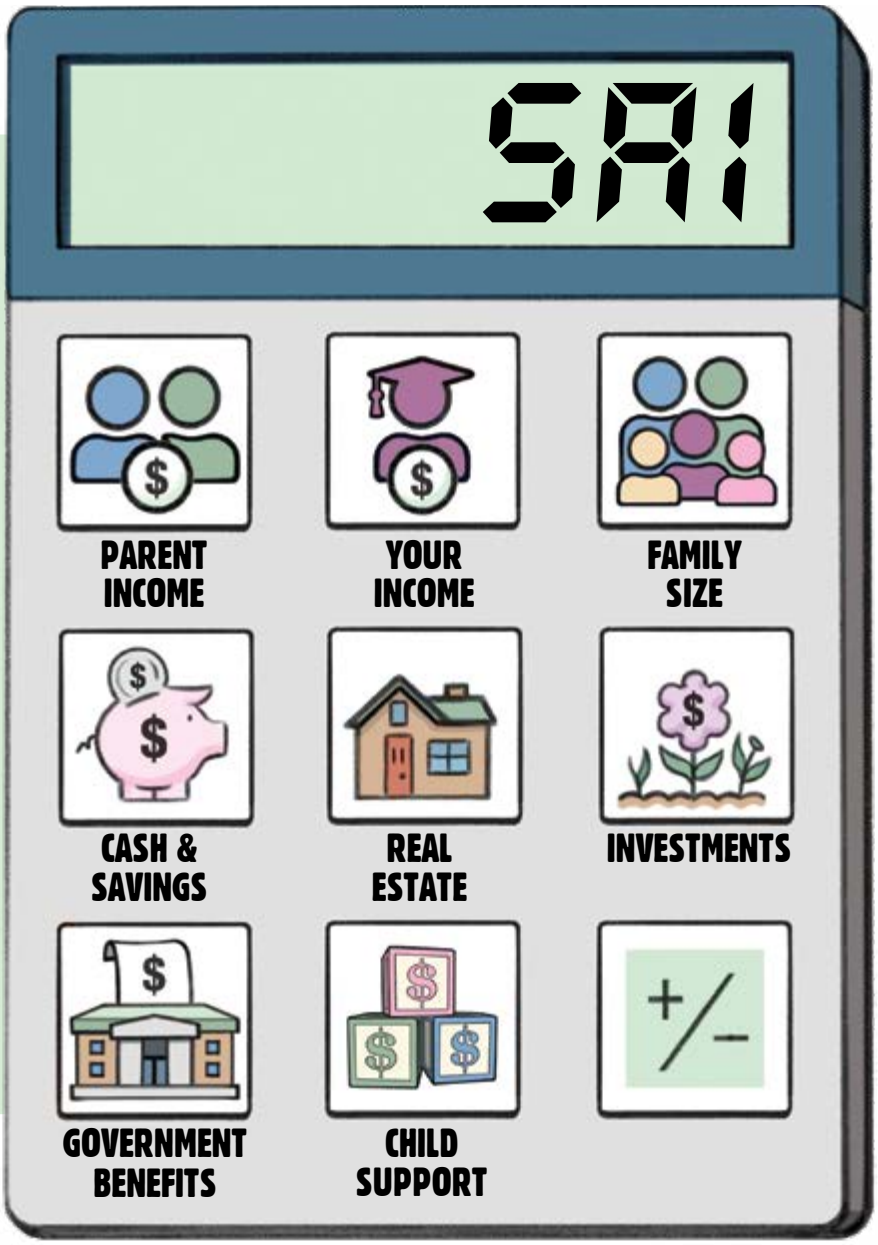
# What's the Student Aid Index?

The FAFSA's Student Aid Index, or SAI, is an important number. It helps determine how much financial help you may get. **The SAI is a measure of your family's ability to pay for college.** The lower the number, the more aid you may be eligible for. Thankfully, you won't need to do the math. Most of this information should be gathered and calculated automatically on the FAFSA.

**To calculate the Student Aid Index, the FAFSA collects information about your family income, savings, and household size.**

There are also questions about any government benefits your family may receive and other circumstances that may entitle you to more financial aid.

**Want to see how much government aid you may receive?** Get a trustworthy number today using the Federal Student Aid Estimator.



# Getting Organized

When you fill out your FAFSA, it's best to have all of the information you need by your side. Take time now to gather everything you'll need.

## Family Information

**For yourself and everyone who will contribute to your FAFSA**

- Full legal name.
- Social Security Number, A-Number, or Individual Taxpayer ID Number.
- Date of birth.
- Permanent email (no high school or junk addresses).
- Cell phone number.
- Mailing address.

## Set Up Your System

Online or on paper, a well-organized system can be a game-changer, allowing you to keep all your documents and materials neatly arranged and easily accessible. Get our tips at UnderstandingFAFSA.org.

## Family Financial Documents

**Collect the items that apply to your family.**

### Tax forms:

Your tax data will likely be automatically uploaded to your FAFSA, but you'll want to have your family's 2024 tax returns available for reference.

- [x] Your 2024 1040 form, if you filed taxes.
- [ ] Your parents' 2024 1040 form, if you are dependent on one or both of them.
- [ ] All attached tax schedules.
- [ ] Estimate of 2024 income, if your family doesn't file taxes.
- [ ] Foreign tax forms, if applicable.

### Savings, investments, other income & assets:

- [ ] Recent bank statements with the current value of your and your family's savings and investments, including any college savings accounts.
- [ ] List of government benefits your family receives, such as Social Security benefits or veterans benefits.
- [ ] Value of a second home or other properties.
- [ ] Record of child support payments.

# Are You Dependent or Independent?

Do you depend financially on at least one of your parents? Or are you on your own and independent? Let's figure out who is required to fill out the FAFSA with you.

## For the FAFSA, you are "dependent" if

**You live with one or both of your parents.**

For the FAFSA, a parent is:

- ◯ Your birth mother or father.
- ◯ A parent who adopted you.
- ◯ A stepparent who's married to your birth or adoptive parent.

**OR**

- ◯ You live with a close relative or friend, but you're still receiving financial support from one or both of your parents.

## For the FAFSA, you are "independent" if

- ◯ You are 24 years old or older, married, serving in the military, or financially supporting children of your own.
- ◯ You are orphaned, in foster care, in legal guardianship, or a ward of the court.
- ◯ You are homeless and on your own, or supporting yourself and at risk of becoming homeless.

If you think you may be independent, the FAFSA form will ask you about these situations. Fill it in accurately and then work with your school counselor and your college financial aid office to get the aid you need.

**Q: What if neither category fits?**

**A:** You may be a candidate for **provisional independence** on the FAFSA. (Colleges also call this a **dependency override**.) This is for students who have no way to get in touch with their parents or are justifiably afraid of contacting them. The FAFSA will ask you questions about this. See Page 15 for details.

# Q&A: About Your Parents & Family

## Q: What if my parents are divorced or separated?

**A:** You need to fill out the FAFSA with the parent who provides you with the most financial support. Usually, this is the parent you live with the most, but there may be exceptions. If the parent who is filling out the FAFSA with you has remarried, you need to include your stepparent's information too.

## Q: What if my parents live together but aren't married?

**A:** If they are your parents, by birth or adoption, both will fill out the FAFSA with you.

## Q: What if my parents are married but live in different places?

**A:** It's common. One parent may be living outside the country, in the military, or working in another state. The FAFSA will need to collect information from both of your parents.

## Q: What if I live with a relative or family friend?

**A:** It depends. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, older siblings, and family friends are not considered parents on the FAFSA unless they have legally adopted you. But you may be an **unaccompanied minor** if you are not in your parents' custody, supporting yourself financially and are at risk of becoming homeless. If so, you will be able to file the FAFSA without your parents' help. The FAFSA will ask about your living situation.

## Q: What if my family and I are homeless or living in temporary housing?

**A:** You will most likely fill out the FAFSA with one or both of your parents since they are available to help. Also contact your college financial aid office to see if there is additional help the college can offer.

# Think You're Independent?

Graduating from high school is a big step toward gaining more independence. But the FAFSA's rules are focused on whether you are **legally independent** from your parents or have **responsibilities that make you an independent adult**.

We know. This can cause a lot of confusion. Here's a quick explanation.

## INDEPENDENT ADULT?

On the FAFSA, you become independent when you turn 24, get married, or start supporting children of your own. You're also independent if you are on active duty in the armed services or have been in the armed services.

## LEGALLY INDEPENDENT?

According to the FAFSA, you are also considered independent if you are:

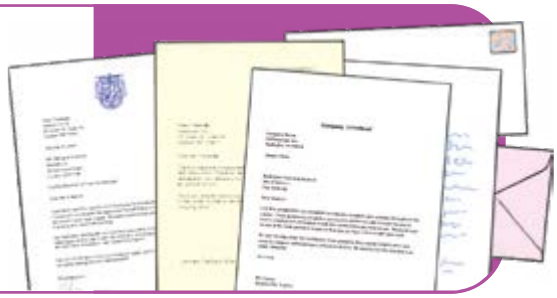
- Orphaned, in foster care, in legal guardianship, or a ward of the court.
- On your own and homeless, or on your own and supporting yourself and at risk of becoming homeless.

If any of these apply to you, the FAFSA will automatically grant you independent status and allow you to fill out the FAFSA on your own. A financial aid administrator from the colleges you are applying to may follow up and ask you for documentation. Use the QR code below to get a list of documents that colleges must accept.

**Colleges are required to help you prove your independence, if you need help.**

## Proving Your Independence

Colleges may need documentation from a school or agency that is familiar with your family or housing situation. Get instructions at UnderstandingFAFSA.org.



# Q&A: Can't Contact Your Parents?

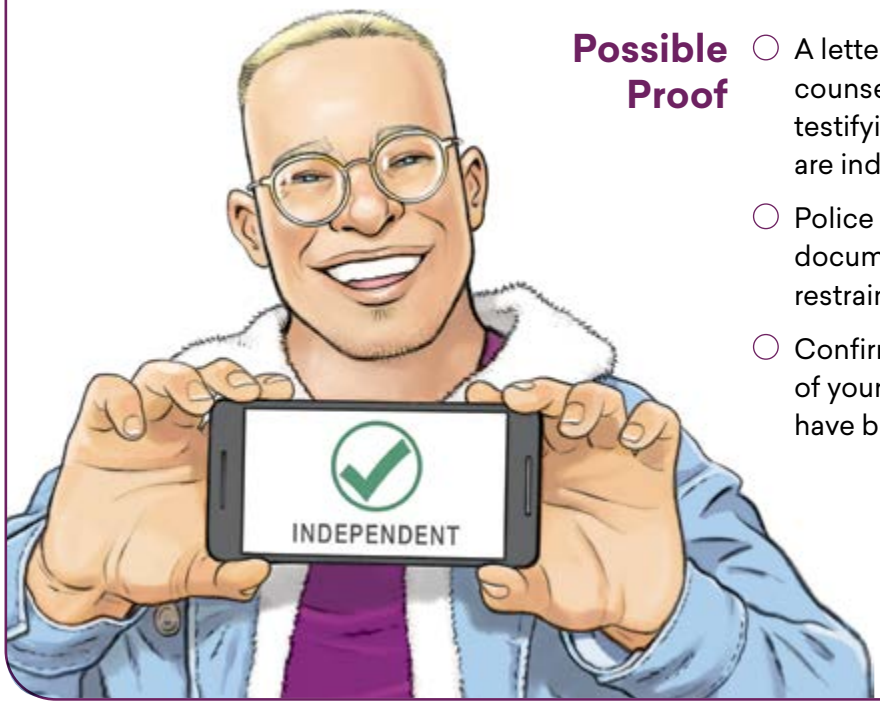
## Q: What if I'm afraid to contact my parents (or can't find them)?

**A:** There are a couple of ways to file your FAFSA independently. If you are on your own and homeless, or self-supporting and at risk of becoming homeless, the FAFSA will ask about this and you will be able to file the FAFSA as an **unaccompanied minor** without your parents' help. Otherwise, you may need to work with your college to get a **dependency override** as a **provisional independent student.**

## Q: How do I get a dependency override?

**A:** If you have stable housing, but cannot provide parent information, the FAFSA will ask about your circumstances. You can submit your FAFSA without your parents' help. Answer truthfully. The FAFSA will process your form and send your information to the colleges on your list. You won't need your parents' help to get the FAFSA done.

But there is an important next step. **You must follow up with the colleges you want to attend.** Call the financial aid offices as soon as you can and let the staff know you need a dependency override. They are required to look into your case quickly and see if you qualify. The financial aid office will let you know what the college will need for proof.




**Possible Proof**

- ○ A letter from your high school counselor or social worker testifying to the fact that you are independent.
- ○ Police reports or court documents, such as a restraining order.
- ○ Confirmation that one or both of your parents are in jail or have been institutionalized.

# Who Fills Out the FAFSA?

If you are dependent on your parents, you'll need the help of one or both of them. Let's figure out who needs to help.

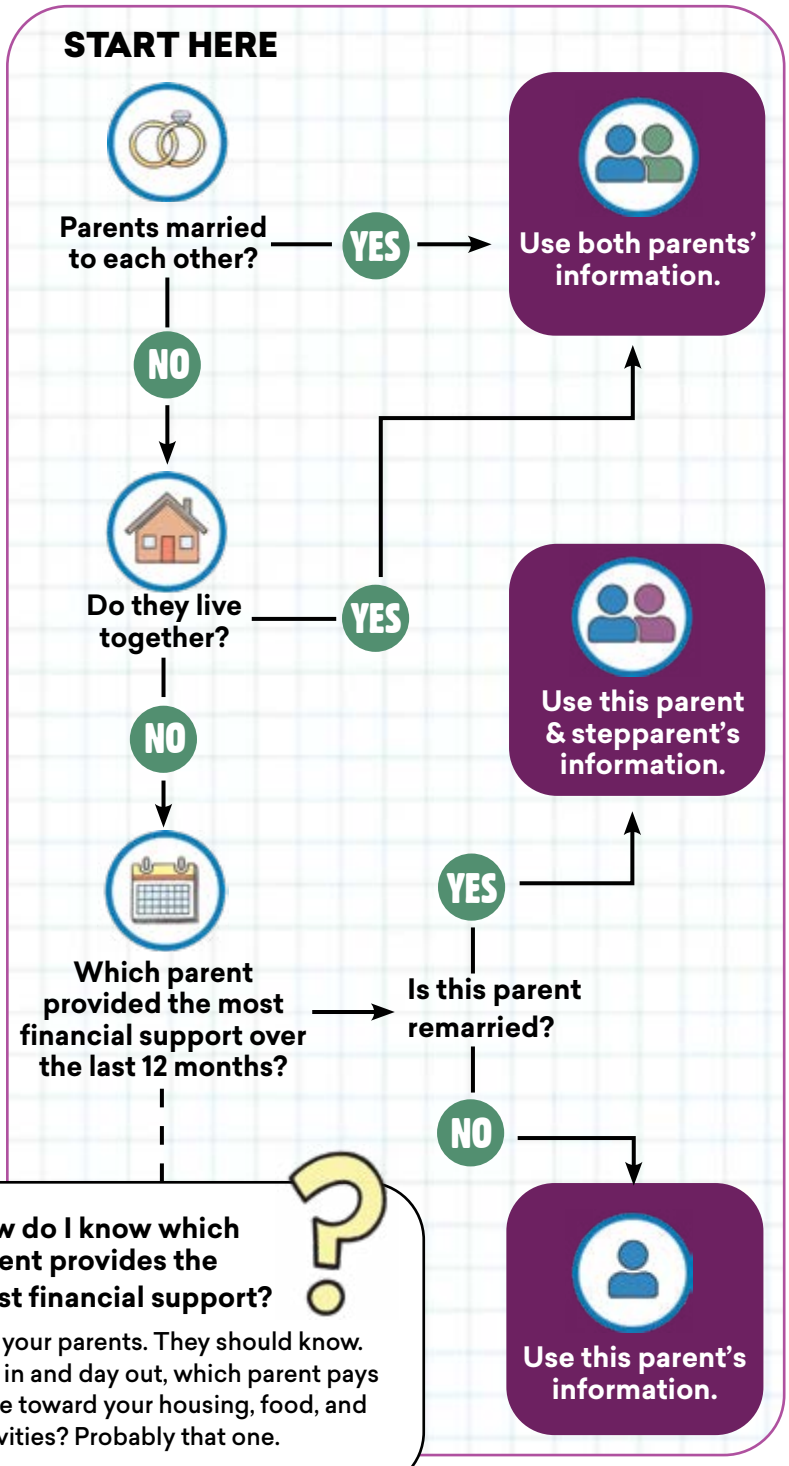
## Who Is a Parent on the FAFSA?

You may live with one parent or both, split time among households, or live with another family member, like a grandmother or aunt. If your parents are legally responsible for you, the FAFSA needs their information.

**This includes your biological parents, adoptive parents, or stepparents.** Other adults are not included on your FAFSA.

## Who Helps?

**So which parent — or set of parents — needs to be included on your FAFSA?** You can figure this out using the chart on this page. There is also a parent wizard tool you can use. Or the FAFSA form will guide you. The FAFSA will ask you questions about your parents and let you know who needs to contribute to your form. The FAFSA will email an invite to whoever needs to help.




**How do I know which parent provides the most financial support?**

Ask your parents. They should know. Day in and day out, which parent pays more toward your housing, food, and activities? Probably that one.

# The FAFSA Is a Team Effort

In years past, it was possible for either a student or parent to start and finish a student's FAFSA in one sitting. This is no longer true.

Why? Students and parents filling out the FAFSA for the first time will need to get a secure login, commonly called an **FSA ID**, in advance of filling out the FAFSA. And each person working on the FAFSA will need to fill out their own section. This is because the FAFSA asks users to upload their federal tax data, which is heavily protected. You'll need to work as a team.

## Four Things To Know

1. **You'll need the help of one or both of your parents to complete the FAFSA.** The exception is if you are considered independent on the FAFSA. See pages 12–15.

2. **Everyone on your FAFSA team will need to legally establish who they are, creating a secure sign-in called an FSA ID.** It is quick to create an FSA ID and families can start on the FAFSA immediately.

3. **Ideally, you should start the FAFSA and the form will tell you which parent to invite.** That parent will complete the FAFSA and will be prompted to invite the second parent, if needed.

4. **Each member of your FAFSA team will provide their own personal and financial information and will need to consent to share their tax data.** This will eliminate many of the financial questions on the FAFSA, making it quicker to fill out. The wrinkle? Everyone must provide consent for you to get federal college aid. If you or your parents have concerns, call the FAFSA help desk at 800-433-3243.

# First Step! Get Your FSA ID

Now it's time to take your first important step: **creating an account on StudentAid.gov**. This is commonly known as an FSA ID. One or both of your parents will need to get an FSA ID as well. This account will get a lot of use in the years to come. Find an easy way to remember your login.

## What You Need

- ✓ A safe place to store login information, password, security question information, and backup code.
- ✓ Your family's tax forms or Social Security cards.
- ✓ Your Social Security number and birthdate.
- ✓ A permanent email address (not your school email address) and cell phone number.

## How To Create an FSA ID

1. Search StudentAid.gov Create Account and click the **Get Started** button. Create a unique username and password that you will remember and record it somewhere safe.
2. Enter your full legal name, date of birth, mailing address, language preference, and Social Security number. Make sure your name and Social Security number match the information on your Social Security card or parents' taxes exactly.
3. Provide your email and cell phone information. Choose a permanent email address that you check frequently. Also, an email address and cell phone number can only be associated with one FSA ID. Make sure yours is different from your parents'.
4. Answer the security questions. Choose questions that are facts, not opinions. Opinions can change over time.
5. Follow the prompts to enable two-step verification, linking your email address to your new FSA ID. You can also link your cell phone. It's best to set up both.
6. Record your one-time backup security code. This can be used to access your account if all else fails.
7. Verify that everything you've entered is correct. Double-check. When you're ready, submit!
8. Congratulations! Your account is ready on StudentAid.gov. You should be able to login and start working on your FAFSA immediately.

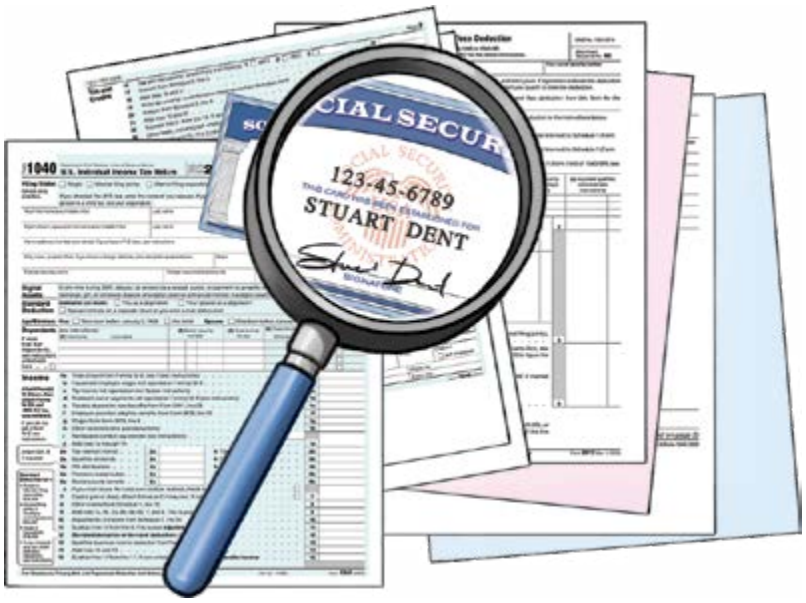
**Do Now!**
**Get your FSA ID done early!**

# FSA ID Tips & Troubleshooting

What is an FSA ID? It's a website login, like the ones you have for your favorite music sites or online stores. But this login connects you to important government websites. It needs to be extra secure. Take your time to set it up right.

## Use Official Documents

The FAFSA needs your full legal name, birthdate, and Social Security number to be sure you are really you. Use your Social Security card or family taxes. Copy this information exactly. Type slowly and carefully.




## Parents Need FSA IDs

Your parents may already have FSA IDs if they filled out the FAFSA for an older sibling. But if you're the first, one or both of your parents will need to get an FSA ID.

## Ready Immediately

In the past, families needed to wait for approval from the Social Security Administration before they could start their FAFSA. This has been fixed. You can create your FSA ID and start your FAFSA immediately.

## Forgotten FSA ID?

If your parents got an FSA ID in the past, they'll need to use that FSA ID for your FAFSA. Forgot the login? They can go online to get it reset or your siblings in college may know what it is. Call the FAFSA help desk at 800-433-3243 if you need help.

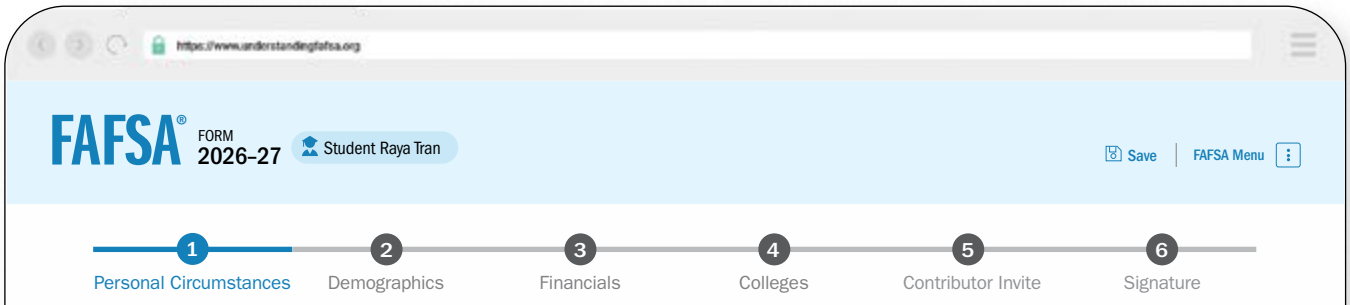
## Help for Parents Without Social Security Numbers

Most students need a Social Security number to get an FSA ID and fill out the FAFSA. But parents do not need Social Security numbers to get an FSA ID. The FAFSA is providing a way for all parents to get their FSA IDs so they can help complete the FAFSA. It's important to stay informed. Get the latest information at UnderstandingFAFSA.org.

# The FAFSA's Six Sections

The FAFSA is designed to be quick and easy. It will walk you through the questions you need to answer. It's broken out into six different sections.

In the pages that follow, learn why you're being asked these questions and how to tackle anything confusing. If you get stuck, ask an adult to help or call the FAFSA help desk at 800-433-3243.




### 1 Personal Circumstances

Most of these questions determine if you are dependent on your parents or independent from them. Other questions may give you access to more financial aid.

### 2 Demographics

These are government research questions. You may answer them if you like, or decline to answer. These questions will not affect your eligibility for aid. All information is kept confidential and is not shared with your family or colleges.

### 3 Financials

To determine your eligibility for financial aid, the FAFSA needs to know your family's income and savings. If you agree to share your tax data (and you should!), this section will be short. If your parents are helping you with the FAFSA, they will provide most of the family's financial information. Ask for help if needed.

### 4 Colleges

The FAFSA will ask you which colleges you are applying to. You can list up to 20 schools. Still getting your applications together? You can add schools at any time. These schools will get your FAFSA information once your application is complete.

### 5 Contributor Invite

Invite your parent or student to login and complete their part of the FAFSA.

### 6 Signature

Agree that the information is correct and sign electronically. Sign and submit.

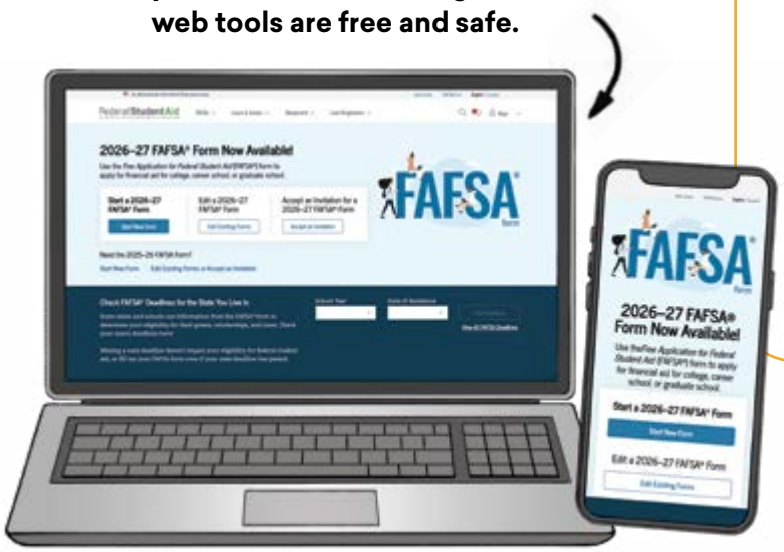
# Start Your FAFSA!

The time has come to fill out the FAFSA form. Choose your favorite device. Go online and get settled in. If you're prepared, this form will go quickly! Feel free to take a break if needed. Save and come back when you're ready.

## Here's what to do, step by step:

1. Search up "FAFSA.gov" on your favorite search engine.
2. Look over the opening screen. Hit the button to start your FAFSA. Going to college in the 2026–27 school year? You will want to launch the **2026–27 FAFSA**.
3. **Log in with your FSA ID** and watch the FAFSA tutorial. Then follow the instructions step by step. The FAFSA will lead the way.
4. **When you're done, it's your parents' turn**. Near the end of the form, you will invite them to do their part. Or your parents can start the form and invite you.

**Be sure to find the correct website. Other websites may charge you to file your FAFSA form. The government's web tools are free and safe.**




## Sharing Your Tax Information

When you first log onto your FAFSA, you'll be greeted with a quick overview of how the form works. One of the most important first steps is to give **consent** to share your tax information.

- ✓ The FAFSA can now automatically import your tax information and your family's from the Internal Revenue Service, or IRS.
- ✓ This feature makes the FAFSA much easier to fill out. Everyone knows your information is accurate.
- ✓ The FAFSA uses tax information to calculate how much federal aid you may be eligible for. States and colleges also use this information to determine how much help they can offer.

**Consent is required to get any financial help from the federal government.** Have questions? Talk to a college counselor or an adult you trust. Or call the FAFSA help desk at 800-433-3243.

# Q&A: Sharing Your Tax Information

**Q: What does it mean to give consent to share my tax information?**

**A:** You're saying that it's OK for the IRS to import some of the information in your tax returns to the FAFSA.

**Q: Does everyone need to give consent?**

**A:** Yes. Anyone providing information on your FAFSA must agree to share their tax information. This includes you and whichever parent or parents need to help you with the form.

**Q: What if my family doesn't file taxes?**

**A:** If your family is not required to file taxes, that's fine. But you still need to give consent to share your tax information. The IRS will notify colleges that you don't file taxes. In many cases, this will mean you get more financial aid.

**Q: What if one or both of my parents don't have Social Security numbers?**

**A:** This is common. They will be asked a few background questions to verify their identity when they sign up for an FSA ID, similar to questions seen on a credit check. **Get our latest information on how this process works.**

**Q: What if my parents don't want to give consent?**

**A:** You won't get federal aid. If your parents are required to help you fill out your FAFSA, they are required to give consent. Ask a school counselor or an adult you trust to reach out and talk through their concerns.

# All About You

Ready to start? The first set of questions should be easy. It's all about you! Students sometimes wonder why they are being asked a lot of personal questions. Let's take a look at the questions and why they're important.

## Questions About Your Identity

This is identifying information, including your name, birthday, email, address, and Social Security number.

**WHY ARE THEY ASKING?** To make sure it's you. This section has been pre-filled with the information you provided to get your FSA ID. Review this information and make sure it's correct.

**TIP** This section can be corrected. Go to "Account Settings" to update your info.

## Questions About Your Demographics

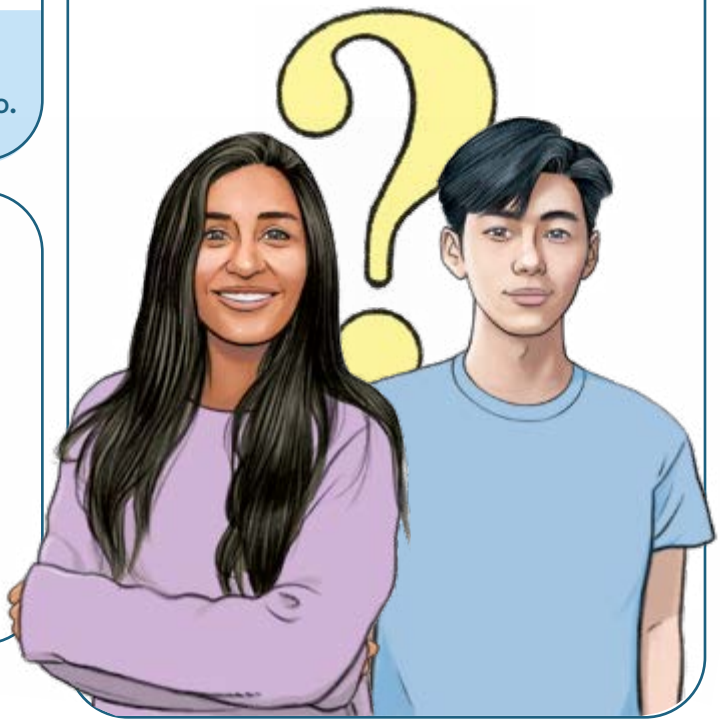
What is your gender? What's your race and ethnicity?

**WHY ARE THEY ASKING?** These questions are for research purposes. They will not affect your federal aid.

## Questions About Your Education

Will you be a freshman next year? Do you have any college degrees? What high school did you attend? Do your parents have college degrees?

**WHY ARE THEY ASKING?** Some of the information will determine what kind of aid you're eligible for. The questions about your parents and high school are for research purposes.



# Who's in Your Household?

The FAFSA form will ask you about the size of your family. The FAFSA is trying to determine who your parents support financially in addition to you. The larger the family, the more aid you may be eligible for.

This question is optional on the FAFSA, but it is very important to fill it out. If you leave the question blank, the FAFSA will use the information from your parents' tax forms. It's possible that the tax forms won't capture the full picture of your household. Use the guide below to calculate how many people your parents support.

## Look at the household of the parent or parents who are filling out the FAFSA with you. How many people will they be supporting next year when you're in college?

**The number will include**

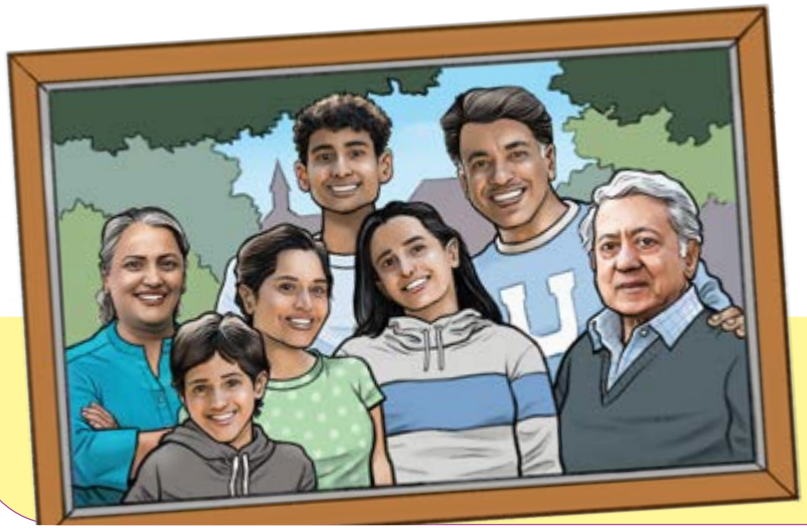
**Either one or both parents:**

- ○ If you live with both parents, count 2 people.
- ○ If you live with a parent and a stepparent, count 2 people.
- ○ If you live with one parent, count 1 person.

+

**Anyone else being supported in this household:**

- ○ This includes you.
- ○ Count brothers and sisters (including full, half, or step) at home or in college.
- ○ Count anyone else in your home (cousins, aunts, grandparents) if your parents are providing more than half of their support.



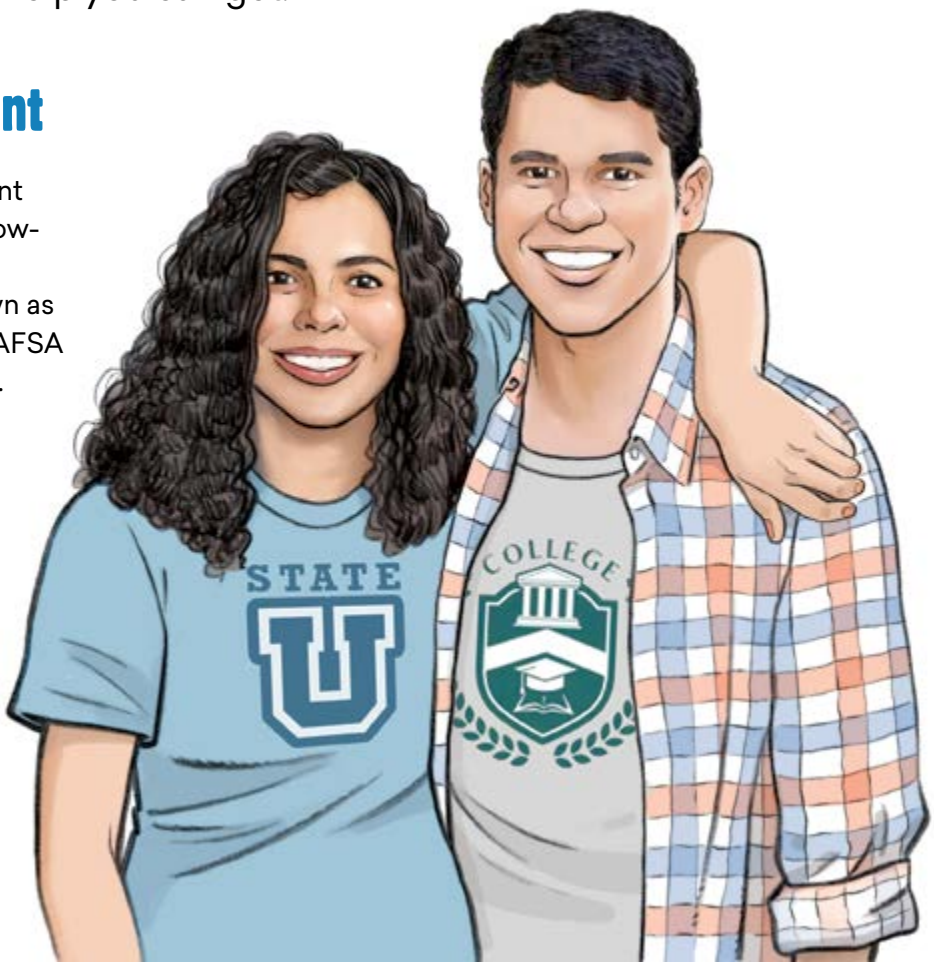
= _____ Total

# Siblings in College?

Will you be attending college at the same time as a brother or sister? Roughly one-third of college students today have siblings in college. That can add up to big bills for the family. You or your parents will probably be looking for all the financial help you can get.

## No More Sibling Discount

In years past, the federal government automatically offered more aid to low-income families with multiple kids enrolled in college, a practice known as the **sibling discount**. The current FAFSA has eliminated the sibling discount.




## What You Can Do

Is your family facing serious financial hardship shouldering the costs of multiple kids in college? You may want to contact your colleges to ask for more help. Financial aid officers may use their own **professional judgment** to help adjust the amount of federal aid you're eligible for. Or colleges may be willing to provide more aid from their own scholarship funds.

You will need to make a strong case. Colleges will need to see that your family is experiencing financial hardship that is greater than a typical family juggling multiple kids in college. But it is worth the effort to ask. (See how to ask for more aid on Page 32.)

### Can You Get More Aid?

College aid officers have the power to adjust your aid to reflect the financial burden of having siblings in college. But you must prove serious financial hardship. Learn how to make your case at UnderstandingFAFSA.org.

# Understanding Income

Your family income is a big factor in determining how much aid you receive for college. Here's what to know about how your income can affect your financial aid eligibility.

1. If you are dependent on your parents, the FAFSA will collect information about your income and the income of one or both of your parents.
2. Most of this information is collected automatically as long as you and your family agree to share your tax information. You won't see many questions about income on the FAFSA.
3. The FAFSA may also ask about family savings, investments and other assets your family may have. (Your parents will see more questions about this than you will.)
4. Your family's income and assets will help determine how much federal **need-based aid** you get.
5. States, colleges, and others will also use your family's FAFSA income information to offer their own need-based grants and scholarships.

## Who Gets Help?

The federal government offers Pell Grants — free money for college — to low-income students and families. What is low income? That will depend on a number of factors in your family, including how many people your parents are supporting and where you live.

You'll be given an estimate of how much federal money you're eligible for as soon as your FAFSA is processed.

## What Counts as Income?

Every family is different. The money you and your parents make may come from a variety of sources. Read the online form carefully to see what information is being collected.

**IMPORTANT:** The FAFSA requires tax information from two years prior to the school year for which you're applying for financial aid. All tax information on this year's FAFSA will be based on your 2024 returns. Is your family earning a lot less now than in 2024? Contact your colleges and let them know.

# All About Assets

The FAFSA should automatically collect most of your family's income information after you and your parents agree to share your tax data. If you and your parents made more than $60,000 in 2024, the FAFSA will also ask about your family's **assets**. This includes things like savings, investments, and college accounts.

As a student filling this out, answer questions about yourself. Your parents may be asked about their assets when they fill out their portion of the FAFSA.

**IMPORTANT:**
For most assets, you will be asked to calculate the value as of *today*. Look for your most recent bank statements. Or ask the family's accountant to help you out.

## Assets you and your family may need to report:

- ✓ **Cash, Checking & Savings**
  This will include the current balance of all checking and savings accounts in banks, as well as apps like Venmo and PayPal.
- ✓ **Investments & Real Estate**
  This is the current value of stocks, bonds, mutual funds, CDs, money market accounts, and brokerage accounts. It also includes investment properties, vacation homes, and land.
- ✓ **College Savings & 529 Plans**
  There are many types of college accounts. The most common are 529 plans and Coverdell savings accounts. Parents report these assets. You may have an UGMA or UTMA account. This is an asset *you* need to report. Read the instructions carefully.

**IMPORTANT:** You do not need to report the value of your family's home or retirement accounts. The FAFSA does not consider those when calculating financial aid.

# Go Team! Submit Your FAFSA

Remember how we said the FAFSA was a team effort? Getting the FAFSA done together is worth celebrating!

If you filled out your section of the FAFSA first, be sure to sign electronically and celebrate. Then remind your parents that they need to do their part. If the opposite is true, your parents will remind you to get the job done. **Work together!**

Whoever is the last to complete the form will see the best part. The FAFSA will offer a big "Congratulations!" You are officially done with your FAFSA.

## Make sure your FAFSA is processed properly!

- ✓ Check your email. Watch for your **FAFSA Submission Summary**. It will contain a calculation of your Student Aid Index along with an estimate of how much federal aid you're eligible for. This will include Pell Grants and federal loans.
- ✓ See a red exclamation point at the top of your summary? There may be something you need to fix. Look over the **Next Steps** section. Your FAFSA will not be processed if information is missing or there are any other problems.

## Apply for state aid now!

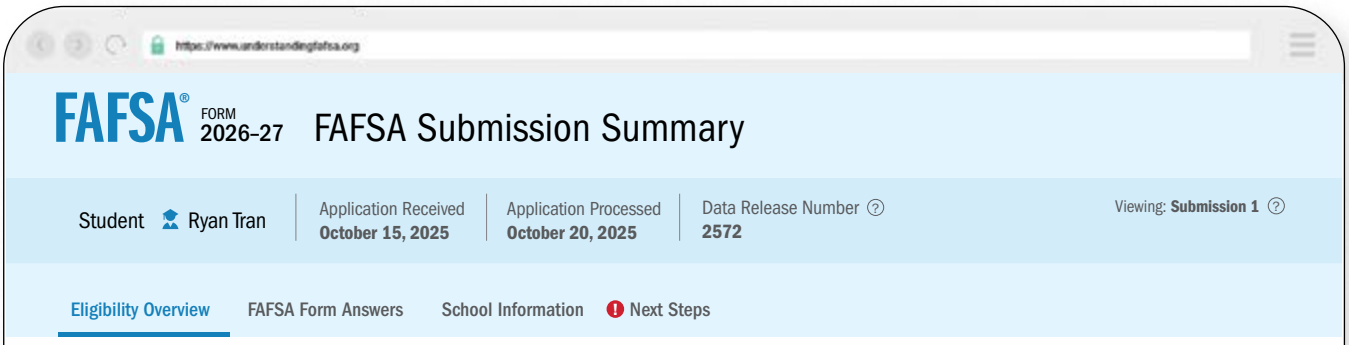
You're on a roll. Don't rest easy yet. The FAFSA is for federal aid. But you should also apply for any help your state might offer. Do some research. Many states offer good money — and some of it is first come, first served. Apply now. Don't put it off.

# Your FAFSA Submission Summary

You and your family have completed the FAFSA and submitted it. Congratulations!

Now watch your email for your FAFSA Submission Summary. It might sound boring, but it's actually the best part. You get an immediate estimate of how much federal aid you may receive. And you'll learn lots more.

Here's a quick description of the four sections you'll see.




## Eligibility Overview

This tab estimates your eligibility for:

- **Federal Pell Grants:** Free money for college.
- **Federal Direct Loans:** Lower-cost loans. (You'll have to pay these back.)
- **Federal Work-Study:** Money for a campus job. (You'll have to find a FWS job.)

This tab also includes your Student Aid Index calculation, a measure of your family's ability to pay. Individual colleges may use this number to calculate how much additional financial aid — beyond any federal aid — they will give you. This number may range from minus 1,500 to 999,999. The lower the number, the more need-based aid you may get.

## FAFSA Form Answers

Use this tab to review your information and make sure it's correct. If you spot an error, you can open up your FAFSA form and correct it.

## School Information

This tab will list the colleges you selected to send your FAFSA information to. Bonus: There is lots of trustworthy information here. Look at graduation rates, average cost, and how much debt students take on. Good to know!

## Next Steps

This important tab will let you know if you need to correct errors or provide additional information. Be sure to take care of any issues quickly.

# Show Me the Money!

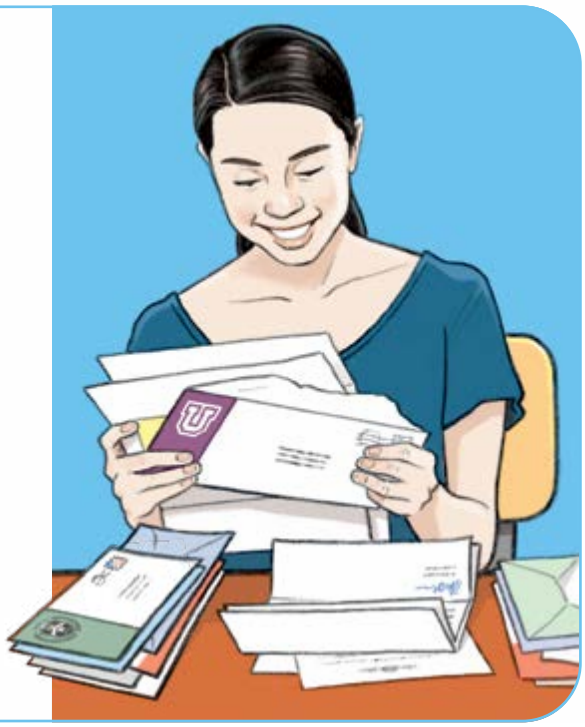
Submitted your FAFSA? Colleges should get your FAFSA information within the next three to five days. Is your college list growing? After you receive your FAFSA Submission Summary, you can log back in to your application and add more schools. You can list up to 20 schools. If you need to add more, swap out schools that already have your FAFSA information.

## My FAFSA is done. What's next?

Watch for your college acceptance letters and your financial aid offers! Your aid offers may take longer to arrive this year due to FAFSA delays, but don't worry, they will be coming!

## What kind of financial help can I expect?

Each college will be different. There will be a mix that may consist of grants and scholarships (free money), loans (which you must pay back), and work-study (money you can earn). This is called a financial aid package. It is important to look at each package carefully so you select a college you can truly afford.



## Next Steps

### Work with the colleges to get the financial aid you need.

- ✓ Go online and check your FAFSA Submission Summary one more time to make sure there are no last-minute complications. There is a chance that colleges will need to verify your information. This is a routine check. Watch your email for instructions. Each college will need paperwork from you.
- ✓ Has your family income gone down over the last two years? Are there other issues, such as a recent job loss, a divorce, or big medical bills, that aren't reflected on your FAFSA? Call the financial aid officers at the colleges you're most interested in. Let them know how your family's finances have changed.

# Q&A: Why Colleges Ask For More Information

**Q: Why am I being asked to prove that my FAFSA information is accurate?**

**A:** This is a process called **verification**. Sometimes applicants are chosen at random. Sometimes it's because the information on the FAFSA form is inconsistent or incomplete. Or you may need to verify your identity. Colleges are responsible for doing the verification.

**Q: What does verification involve?**

**A:** The college financial aid office will contact you and give you instructions. It's usually just a routine request for more information.

**Q: What questions may be asked?**

**A:** The financial aid office may want to confirm the number of people in your family. You may be asked about other family income (like child support) or government aid (like food stamps). You may also be asked to provide legal identification or proof that you are graduating from high school.

**Q: Can I send the same information to all of the colleges?**

**A:** You will need to respond separately to each college. They will contact you and let you know what they need. Be sure to meet each college's deadline. If there is no deadline, provide the information as quickly as possible.

**Q: If I get a verification form, that means the college has accepted me, right?**

**A:** Not necessarily. Some colleges ask to verify your financial information before they've made a decision about admitting you. This is why you need to do this quickly. Stay in close touch with the colleges you hope to attend.

# How To Ask For More Aid

Got your financial aid package but the cost of college still seems way too high? You may be able to convince a college to offer you more help. Remember, they've accepted you and they want you to come.

## Good Reasons To Ask For More Financial Aid

It never hurts to ask for more aid. But some reasons are more persuasive than others. Your best bet: Show them that the information on your FAFSA is incomplete or out of date. Be prepared to offer documents to support your case. Remember, the FAFSA relies on two-year-old tax information. And a lot can change in two years.

### Follow up with documentation:

A financial aid officer will let you know what kind of proof they'll need and how you should submit it. Colleges will probably want to see something in writing, either by email or regular mail.

### For example:

- You or a family member have had very high medical expenses.
- One or both of your parents lost a job and your family's income has gone down a lot.
- A family member had to take unpaid time off to care for a family member.
- The income you reported on the FAFSA was abnormally high. Perhaps a parent had a one-time bump in their income in the tax year reported on the FAFSA because they had to withdraw money from their retirement account.

## Here's What To Do

- ✓ Make your case in writing and add documentation that will prove it.
- ✓ Depending on your circumstances, these documents may include medical bills, unemployment checks, recent payslips, or W-2 forms showing a lower salary than what was reported on the FAFSA. Prove everything with documents.
- ✓ If some of the information you're sharing is sensitive (such as a detailed diagnosis on a medical bill) you can cover up that part with a black marker.

# All About Your Award Letter

It's the day you've been waiting for. Your first college acceptance letter has arrived! Your **financial aid award letter** explains how much this college will cost and lists ways to pay for it. Read this document carefully and compare it to other offers you receive. The following pages will tell you how. Here are terms you may see.

### Cost of Attendance (COA)

This is the total cost of attending college. This will include direct costs paid to the college (like tuition and fees) and indirect costs (like books and transportation).

### Student Aid Index (SAI)

This is a measure of your family's ability to pay for college, based on your FAFSA form. States, colleges, and private donors may also use this number to award financial aid.

### Scholarships & Grants

This is free money for college awarded by the federal government, state government, colleges, or private organizations. One important example is the Federal Pell Grant for lower-income students.

### Federal Work-Study (FWS)

This is federal money you can earn by taking a part-time job on campus. To get this money, you'll need to find an FWS job. The money you earn is yours to use in any way you like.

### Federal Direct Government Loans

These loans come in two forms: **subsidized** and **unsubsidized**. The subsidized loans are for students in need and have easier repayment terms.

### Parent PLUS Loans

These are federal loans that parents can apply for to cover your education expenses. They are more expensive than your student loans.

### Private Loans

These are offered by private lenders. They charge higher fees and interest rates than federal student loans, and repayment terms may not be as flexible.

# First, Check the Price Tag

It's time to get real. You need to figure out what college will cost. This will be different for each school. To get started, take a close look at your financial aid letter. Look for a section called **Cost of Attendance**. Colleges must give you this estimate, but some colleges do a much better job of this than others.

## Two Kinds of Costs To Consider

### Direct costs

**(Your college costs)**

These are the costs that the colleges bill you for directly. There are only a few, but they are the big-ticket items:

- ✓ **Tuition and fees.**
- ✓ **Room and board, if you are living in a dormitory.**

### Comparing Costs Correctly

Every college offer is different. Learn how to compare costs at UnderstandingFAFSA.org.

### Indirect costs

**(Your personal costs)**

These are the expenses you pay out of pocket. The good news is you can control them by being careful. The bad news is that these costs can add up.

- ✓ **Books and supplies.**
- ✓ **Off-campus housing.**
- ✓ **Food, snacks and lots of coffee.**

- ✓ **Transportation, either daily or for home visits.**
- ✓ **Entertainment and fun.**

- ✓ **Clothes and toiletries.**

# Next, Look For the Free Money

Some forms of financial aid are better than others. Start by looking for money you don't need to pay back, like grants and scholarships. Only then should you consider more costly options, like loans. Below is a list of the most common grants and scholarships along with Federal Work-Study opportunities.

## Federal Grants

The two most common are the **Pell Grant** and the **Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant** (look for **SEOG** on your letter). Both are based on financial need.

## State Grants

Many states offer help to students who stay in their home state for college. New York, for example, has the popular **Tuition Assistance Program** (look for **TAP**). Ideally, you apply for state grants at the same time you fill out your FAFSA. Some state programs can be competitive and awarded on a first-come, first-served basis.

## College Grants and Private Scholarships

Colleges offer lots of scholarships. **Need-based scholarships** make college easier to afford. Colleges also use **merit aid** to recruit all kinds of students: academics, artists, athletes, and more. **Private groups** also offer many different kinds of scholarships. You have to look for these opportunities and apply.

## Federal Work-Study

You may be offered the opportunity to **work on campus**. As with any job, you're paid for the number of hours you work. You can use the money any way you want. Your financial aid letter will tell you how much money you can earn under this program, but it's **up to you to find a job** and work the hours needed to get this money.

# Finally, Think About Loans

College costs have been rising steadily, so many students need to take out at least a small loan to get by. Nobody likes debt. But you'll probably make more money with a college degree than without one, so student loans can be an investment in your future.

**Good rules to keep in mind:** If you or your parents need to borrow, borrow as little as possible. Be sure to use government-backed loans first. They're cheaper to pay back and more forgiving if you need extra time.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Best** | **Federal Direct Subsidized Loans:** Subsidized loans are given to college students based on need. The interest costs can be lower than other government loans and you have more time before you need to start paying them back. |
| **Good** | **Federal Direct Unsubsidized Loans:** Unsubsidized loans are available to anyone, but your total repayment costs are higher than with the subsidized loan unless you begin paying it back while you're in school. |
| **Eeek** | **Parent PLUS Loans:** These are government-backed loans that parents can use to help you pay for college. But your parents need to have a good credit rating and interest rates can be high. There are also new limits on how much they can borrow. Like you, they should be careful about taking on too much debt. |
| **Avoid** | **Private Loans:** You can borrow money from banks or other financial institutions, but shop carefully. Fees and interest rates can be high, and you usually need to start paying back the loan while you're still in school. |

## Caution!

**Student loans must be repaid.** The federal government forgave some student debt after COVID, but this was unusual. It's also rare to get help through bankruptcy. One piece of good news? It's relatively easy to reduce or delay payments if you have a government-backed student loan.

# Q&A: Student Loans & College Debt

## Q: What do I need to know about student loans and paying them back?

**A:** There are all kinds of loans. Some lenders require that you start paying them back immediately. Others won't send you a bill until almost a year after you graduate. When looking at a possible loan, ask about two things:

- ✓ **The interest rate.** This determines the amount of money you have to pay back *in addition* to the amount you borrowed. You want this number to be as low as possible. Government-backed loans offer the lowest interest rates.
- ✓ **The repayment terms.** This is how soon you have to begin making payments on the loan, how long you have to repay the loan, and how much you'll need to pay each month.

## Q: How much money can I borrow in federal student loans?

**A:** The amount available in the government's subsidized loan programs changes from year to year. Take out these loans first, if they're offered to you. If you need more money, try to get what you need through unsubsidized loans. Be careful. Borrow only what you need. Ideally, you shouldn't borrow more than you are offered through these two federal loan programs.

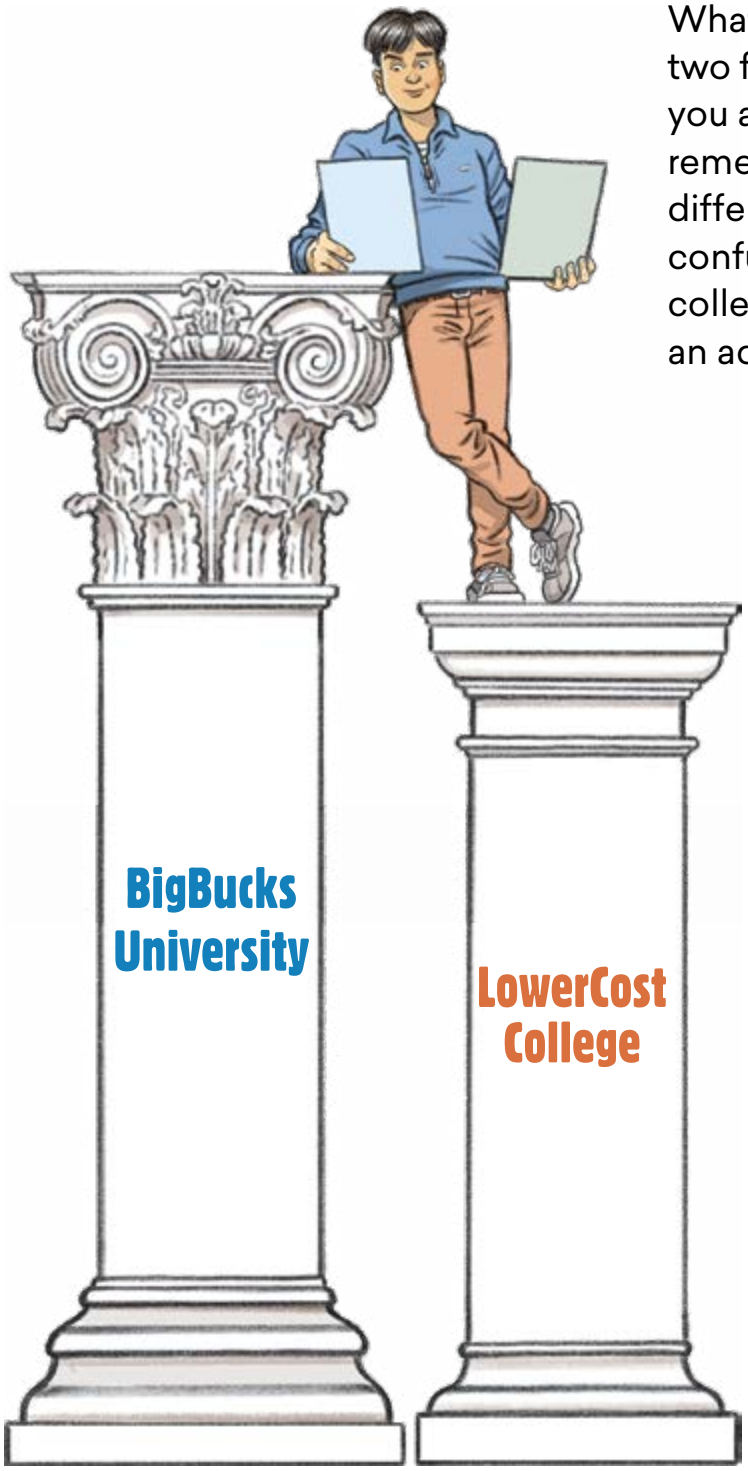
## Q: How much is OK to borrow?

**A:** This depends on a number of things. Will you need to borrow money to get through your first year? What about the remaining years? What kinds of loans are available to you? And what will be the total cost to get your degree?

Once you've gathered this information, it's best to look for a **loan payment calculator** to do the number crunching for you. Most college websites have these now. The website Calculator.net has a calculator that allows you to enter the size of loan you'll be repaying, the interest rate, and other terms. One example: Imagine you have $38,000 in federal student loan debt. (This is the national average for undergraduate and graduate loan borrowers.) You will be expected to pay back about $430 per month for 10 years at today's 6.5% interest rate for undergraduate government-backed loans.

# Comparing College Offers

You have your acceptance letters and financial aid offers. Now you need to compare your offers and figure out what each school will cost. Money matters. You should choose a school you can afford.




What follows is a lesson on comparing two financial aid packages. It will give you a sense of what to look for. But remember, every package will look different. Sometimes they are confusing or incomplete. Call a college financial aid officer or talk to an adult you trust if you need help.

We'll compare two fictitious schools: **BigBucks University** and **LowerCost College.** Let's assume colleges will want your family to contribute $2,000. (This will vary.) Now we need to look at the costs and the various types of aid to see which school is the better deal.

1. BigBucks has a higher **cost of attendance**, while LowerCost is less. Important: Do your *own* budget to get a true sense of your costs. Colleges often do a poor job of estimating personal living expenses in their figures.

2. Both schools offer a lot of **scholarship and grant support**. Colleges look at both financial need and your academics to determine how much to offer — and you did well! But call and ask for details. Is the free money guaranteed for only the first year, or longer? Does the school require that you get good grades? Know the rules.

## BigBucks University

1 Cost of Attending (1st Year) ..... $62,000

2 **Grants and Scholarships**

BigBucks University Scholarship ..... 38,000
Federal Pell Grant ..... 3,500
State Grant ..... 3,000

3 **Net Price ..... $17,500**

4 **Loans and Work-Study**

Federal Direct Subsidized Loan ..... 1,500
Federal Direct Unsubsidized Loan ..... 4,000
Federal Work-Study ..... 3,000

**Final Calculation**

**Total Cost of Attending ..... $62,000**
**Total Financial Aid Offered ..... – $53,000**
**Family Contribution ..... –$2,000**

5 **The gap you need to fill this year ..... $7,000**

6 **(Total loan debt over four years = $22,000)**

## LowerCost College

Cost of Attending (1st Year) ..... $22,000

**Grants and Scholarships**

LowerCost College Scholarship ..... 5,000
Federal Pell Grant ..... 3,500
State Grant ..... 3,000

**Net Price ..... $10,500**

**Loans and Work-Study**

Federal Direct Subsidized Loan ..... 1,500
Federal Direct Unsubsidized Loan ..... 4,000
Federal Work-Study ..... 2,000

**Final Calculation**

**Total Cost of Attending ..... $22,000**
**Total Financial Aid Offered ..... – $19,000**
**Family Contribution ..... –$2,000**

**The gap you need to fill this year ... $1,000**

**(Total loan debt over four years = $22,000)**

**3** Next, look at the **net price**, the cost of college that remains after these grants. This is the amount you will need to raise — through loans, work-study or other means.

**4** Now look at the **loans**. Remember, some loans are cheaper and easier to manage than others. You want the lowest-cost loans possible. The amount you can get through Federal Direct Loans will be the same, but schools can use their judgment for other government-backed loans. (Also, consider total loan debt. Add up the loans offered and multiply by the years it will take to get a degree. At both colleges above, this is $5,500 in loans X 4 years = $22,000.) And look at the **work-study** money offered. This is money you can earn for personal expenses with a campus job. But you need to find the job and work the hours.

**5** Finally, look at the bottom line. **What is the gap you'll need to fill for the first year?** You will need to find this money somewhere: college savings, loans from your family — or another job (eek!) on top of your work-study hours.

**6** Be sure to add up the **total amount you might need to borrow** to get your degree. In this case, BigBucks University requires more loans and has a larger gap to fill. If these costs are too much for you — and you *really* want to go to this school — call the college office. **You may be able to appeal your package and get more aid.** College costs are very important to consider in choosing a school. But also make sure it's a high-quality school that you'll enjoy. Weigh all the factors before saying "yes" to any college.

# How To Decide?

You've analyzed your financial aid letters, calculated the cost, and compared offers. It's time to choose a college. Let's make this big decision easier by looking at it from different perspectives.

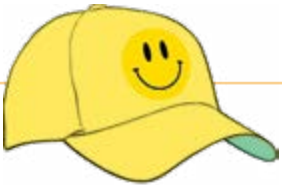
## Use These Thinking Hats To Make Your Decision

Grab your list of finalists. Think about the first college on the list, putting on one hat at a time. Spend two minutes on each hat, jotting down anything you can think of. Then move on. Our examples offer some financial considerations. But you should consider all kinds of questions.

### The Red Hat

**Focus on how you feel with no need to explain.**

*I know it's a lot of money, but this school feels perfect for me. This school seems too hectic and confusing. The students seem nice here.*



### The Yellow Hat

**Focus on the opportunities and benefits.**

*This isn't my top school, but they're giving me the most money. I'm nervous about going to college out of town, but it's pretty affordable to get home for weekend trips.*

### The Black Hat

**Focus on legitimate concerns and risks.**

*I'll have to take out a big loan to go here and my goal is to graduate as close to debt free as possible. The classes are in big lecture halls. Will I get enough attention?*

### The Blue Hat

**Focus on the process and following the rules.**

*How does this college rank among my other choices? Will it be worth my investment? What does my family think about this college?*

### The Green Hat

**Focus on facts and figuring out what you don't know.**

*Do most kids graduate, or do too many drop out? How much will I have to borrow? How does the money I'm getting from this college compare to others?*

# Q&A: Decision Day Financial Considerations

## Q: When do I need to make my decision?

**A:** Your deadline will vary depending on the school and program. Famously, **College Decision Day** is May 1 for many students starting school in the fall. But there are exceptions.

You will need to declare much earlier if you applied for an **early decision**. Career and technical colleges, community colleges, and many public four-year institutions have **rolling admissions**, which have more flexible deadlines. And special programs often have their own deadlines. Be sure to look up all of your deadlines.

## Q: How do I accept a college offer?

**A:** This is typically done online. Find your college acceptance letter. Follow the directions to officially accept.

## Q: What if I'm waitlisted?

**A:** Sad to say, your odds of getting accepted off a waitlist are low. Even if you're eventually accepted, you may be at the back of the line for college institutional aid and any special funding that is first come, first served. Be sure to factor that into your decision. You may accept an offer at one college and take a later waitlist offer, but you will lose your original deposit.

## Q: What if I missed the acceptance deadline?

**A:** Contact your college's admissions office immediately. Let them know why you missed the deadline by being clear and courteous. Each school's response will vary.

## Q: What is a college enrollment deposit?

**A:** It secures your spot in college. The cost ranges between $100 and $300. (It's typically higher at private colleges.) This enrollment deposit is nonrefundable. You won't get this money back if you change your mind. Ask if the deposit can be waived.

# Activate Your Portal

Paid your college deposit? It's time to get your new college email address and explore your online college portal. This is where you manage academics, finances — even social activities. There's is a lot to do before classes start, so be sure to watch your email for instructions and respond quickly to college requests.

### ✓ Confirm Admission

Make sure your name is in the college's computer system and that you're getting all notifications. Sign up for any required placement exams.

### ✓ Attend Orientation

Learn what you need to do before classes start. Plus, make friends!

### ✓ Review Financial Aid

Look through your financial aid package and meet with a counselor to discuss your options.

### ✓ Pay Up

You may be using a mix of grants, scholarships, and loans. Or perhaps you're paying out of pocket with savings or a payment plan.

### ✓ Get Housing

Students living on campus will need to register for housing and a meal plan. Look for an option that fits your budget.

### ✓ Handle Health

Submit your immunization records and arrange for health insurance. If you are covered by your family's plan, opt out of the school's insurance. Otherwise, you'll be charged for coverage you don't need.

### ✓ Register For Classes

Watch your email for instructions on getting in touch with your academic advisor. Sign up for classes if you didn't do this during summer orientation.

### ✓ Ask For Advice

Wondering which classes you should take first? How to get academic help? Best clubs to join? College staff are happy to help.

### ✓ Confirm Your First Day

Living on campus? Confirm your move-in date. Then look at your schedule. What's your first class on your first day? You wouldn't want to miss that!

# Enrollment To-Do List

How do you actually pay for school? Use this to-do list to guide you.

| To Do | Task | Status |
|---|---|---|
| **Enrollment Deposits** | To get things started, you'll need to pay an enrollment deposit. If you're seeking on-campus housing, there will be a deposit for that as well. | Not Started |
| **Financial Aid Award** | Look over your award in the portal. Is anything missing from the financial aid award letter? | In Progress |
| **More Info** | Does the financial aid office need any more information? Do you need to verify anything on your FAFSA? Watch for last-minute information requests. | Completed |
| **Financial Responsibility Statement** | Read the college's description of your costs and payment options carefully. By signing the statement, you acknowledge that you are responsible for payments, even if you drop out. | Completed |
| **Budgeting** | Look at your college costs for the year including tuition, housing, books, equipment, and living expenses. What will all of this cost? | Not Started |
| **Consider Options** | Can you pay for this year with savings, grants, and scholarships? Will you need to take out loans? Get a job? Is a tuition payment plan possible, so you can spread out the payments? | Completed |
| **Ask Questions** | How do student loans work exactly? What kind of grades do you need to get to keep your grants and scholarships? | In Progress |
| **Accept Financial Aid** | Contact the financial aid office and let them know what parts of your aid package you will accept. Grants, scholarships, and work-study, sure! Loans? Maybe? You need to decide. | Completed |
| **Consider Loans** | How much will you have to pay back over the life of the loans? When do you need to start paying them back? Get the required loan counseling. Sign a Master Promissory Note. | In Progress |
| **Pay For College** | Work with financial aid and the bursar's office to make sure that your first college bill is paid. | Not Started |

## Usury Understands: Tips for First-Gen Students

Usury Sacramento, a first-generation college student, shares financial aid tips and advice for high school seniors who've enrolled in college. Get her insider advice at UnderstandingFAFSA.org.

# You've Arrived!

**Congratulations! You made it to college.** Even better, you've figured out a way to pay for it. A hard part of your financial aid journey is behind you. But it's not over. **You need to submit a FAFSA each year to keep the aid coming.** The good news is that it will be *a lot* easier than the first time.

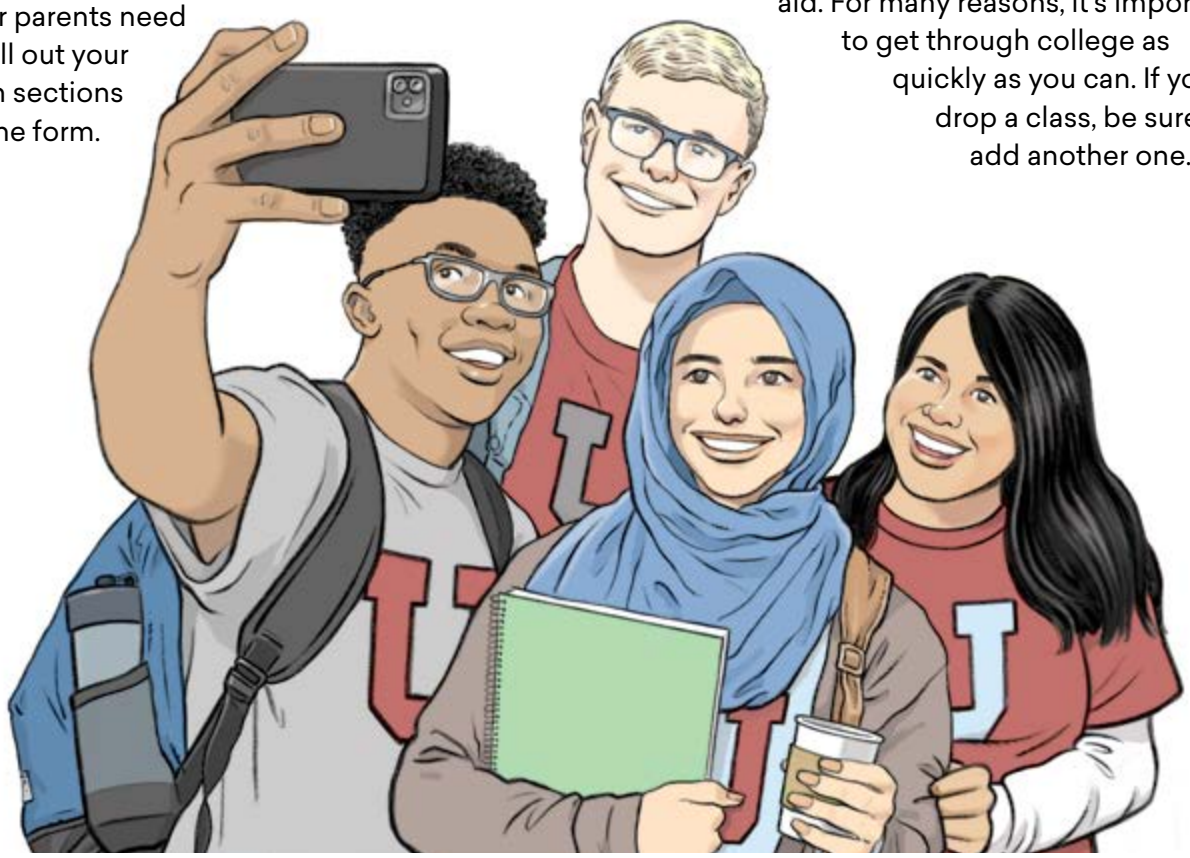
## Four Things To Know

1 **You need to fill out the FAFSA every year.** Going to college in the 2026–27 school year? A new FAFSA will open on Oct. 1, 2026. Try to get the form done as soon as possible. Each college has its own deadlines for FAFSA renewal. As always, get direction from your financial aid office.

2 **The FAFSA will be fast. Most original information will be saved.** You'll just need to consent to sharing your taxes and provide any other updates needed. Remember you and your parents need to fill out your own sections of the form.

3 **Your grades matter.** The federal government and your college will require that you make **satisfactory academic progress** to keep your grants and loans. Each college has its own rules, but you usually need a grade point average of 2.0 (or a C) to keep your grants and loans coming.

4 **Watch your credits.** Your financial aid may change if you drop classes. If your financial aid award was based on taking classes full time, dropping a class could make you a part-time student — and eligible for less aid. For many reasons, it's important to get through college as quickly as you can. If you drop a class, be sure to add another one.



## Help With the FAFSA

**Start at StudentAid.gov, the official home of the FAFSA.** Expert help is available via email, live chat, and on the phone.

**Call the FAFSA help desk at 800-433-3243.** The line is staffed during business hours and often later. Hours are posted on StudentAid.gov's Contact Center.

## Help With the CSS Profile

**Does your college need more information?** In addition to the FAFSA, you may need to fill out the College Board's CSS Profile. You can find the form, assistance, and fee waivers on their website.

## Help at UnderstandingFAFSA.org

We offer in-depth information on the topics covered in this book and much more. Sign up for our emails to get our latest posts weekly.

### Get our best strategies for:

- ☑ Filling out the FAFSA.
- ☑ Comparing college offers.
- ☑ Communicating with colleges.
- ☑ Appealing for more aid.
- ☑ Applying for scholarships.
- ☑ Understanding loans and debt.

### Get resources and advice for:

- ☑ Immigrant families.
- ☑ Undocumented students.
- ☑ Homeless students.
- ☑ Students seeking independence.

# IS THIS GUIDE FOR ME?

Yes! This guide is for any high school student seeking money for college or college-based training. We know many students tackle the FAFSA on their own. Counselors and families need help winding through the financial aid process. And everyone is seeking to keep up with latest dramatic changes in financial aid. We are here to help.


## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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