



Professional Judgment (PJ) **for Students Applying for Pell Grants in Eligible** **Career & Technical Education (CTE) Programs**

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to outline the procedures and standards by which the CTE Financial Aid Office may exercise **Professional Judgment (PJ)** to adjust a student's FAFSA data elements or cost of attendance (COA) when unusual circumstances or special circumstances significantly affect the student's financial situation or dependency status.

These procedures ensure fair, consistent, and federally compliant decision-making for all students requesting consideration.

Definitions

Special Circumstances (Financial Circumstances)

Situations that may warrant adjustments to FAFSA data elements, including but not limited to:

- Loss or reduction of employment, income, or benefits
- Separation, divorce, or death of a spouse or parent
- Unusually high medical or dental expenses not covered by insurance
- One-time income (e.g., inheritance, early retirement payout)
- Loss of child support or alimony
- Other documented financial changes that reduce a family's ability to pay

Unusual Circumstances (Dependency Overrides)

Situations that may warrant a change to dependency status, including:

- Abandonment or estrangement
- Human trafficking, refugee, or asylee status
- Parental incarceration
- Unsafe or abusive family environment
- Other circumstances where contact with parents is impossible or inappropriate

Not considered unusual circumstances:

- Parents refusing to contribute
- Parents refusing to complete the FAFSA
- Parents not claiming the student on taxes
- Student self-support without documented parental abandonment

Authority

Under Section 479A of the Higher Education Act, financial aid administrators have the authority to make case-by-case adjustments based on adequate documentation. All decisions must:

- Be **documented**,
- Be **reasonable**,
- Be **consistent**, and
- **Not** be made across-the-board for groups of students.

Student Eligibility to Request PJ

A student may request Professional Judgment if:

- They have completed the FAFSA for the current award year, and
- They can provide documentation supporting their special or unusual circumstances.

Required Documentation

Documentation may include, but is not limited to:

- Employer separation letters or pay stubs
- Tax returns or IRS transcripts
- Court documents (divorce, custody, child support)
- Medical bills or insurance statements
- Letters from social workers, counselors, clergy, or shelters
- Police reports or incarceration records
- Signed statements from third parties with knowledge of the situation

The Financial Aid Office reserves the right to request additional documentation.

Review Process

1. Student submits the **Professional Judgment Request Form** and supporting documentation.
2. Financial Aid Office reviews the request within **10–15 business days**.
3. Documents must be received by the Financial Aid department in a timely manner for a decision to be made before the program start date.
4. Additional documentation may be requested if needed.
5. A decision is made and documented in the student's file.
6. If approved, FAFSA corrections or dependency overrides are submitted to the Department of Education.
7. Student is notified in writing of the outcome.

Decision Standards

- Decisions must be made **case-by-case**.
- Decisions must be based on **verifiable documentation**.
- Decisions must be **free of bias** and applied consistently.
- All decisions are **final** and cannot be appealed within the institution.

Confidentiality

All information submitted is confidential and used solely for determining financial aid eligibility.

Annual Review

These professional judgment procedures will be reviewed annually to ensure compliance with federal regulations and institutional practices.