Draft sample FAFSA Q&A for faculty and staff
Provided by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges
Updated March 21, 2024

Note to system: You can always find the latest version of this document on the [Financial Aid Council web page](#).

Dear faculty and staff:

As you may have heard, there have been significant delays with the nationwide rollout of the new [Free Application for Federal Student Aid](#) (FAFSA) that will affect every college and university in the country, including xxxx College. The U.S. Department of Education started sending out batches of students' financial aid information in mid-March, four months later than usual.

This significant delay, coupled with the need to rewrite software for processing the new form, will prevent our financial aid office from notifying students of their financial aid information for the 2024-25 academic year until mid-June at the earliest. The delays are putting considerable pressure on our financial aid office as they try to work as quickly as possible to help students.

We hope you find the following background information helpful. Thank you, in advance, for supporting our financial aid office and other units — such as outreach, advising, and the business office — as they deal with this nationwide challenge.

What changes are being made to the FAFSA application?

The 2024-25 FAFSA is the most significant revamping of the financial aid form since the 1980s. The [U.S. Department of Education estimates](#) the 2024-25 FAFSA will help 610,000 new students from low-income backgrounds receive federal Pell Grants and 1.5 million more students receive the maximum amount.

Key changes include:

- The FAFSA is shorter, with fewer questions. A new system will allow applicants to pull information directly from their income tax returns.

- New and returning applicants must create logins. Applicants will need to give their consent and create an FSA ID to begin working on the application, and it will take at least three days to get the ID. The FSA ID is a username and password combination used to log in to U.S. Department of Education online systems.

- For mixed citizenship status families, where a student's contributor does not have a Social Security Number, the FSA ID requirement to verify the identity of the contributor will be accomplished through an alternative process.

- Family contribution calculations are changing. The "Estimated Family Contribution" has been renamed the "Student Aid Index." The lower the Student Aid Index value, the higher the financial need and the greater the eligibility for federal financial aid. (The maximum Pell

Grant is now $7,395 per year.)

- When calculating financial need, FAFSA no longer considers how many people in a family are going to college.

- An adjustment to the inclusion of assets in the Student Aid Index changed how small business and farm income are reported.

When are financial aid award letters likely to go out?

Significant delays and the complex nature of adapting policies and practices for the new FAFSA will likely prevent our financial aid office from notifying students of their financial aid information for the 2024-25 academic year until mid-June at the earliest.

Note to colleges: The impact will be most profound for financial aid "header" colleges, which start their academic year in summer quarter rather than fall quarter: Bellevue, Bellingham, Big Bend, Cascadia, Centralia, Clark, Clover Park, Edmonds, Everett, Grays Harbor, Green River, LWTech, Lower Columbia, Olympic, Peninsula, Pierce, Renton, Shoreline, Skagit Valley, SPSCC, Spokane, Spokane Valley, and Walla Walla.

What is an ISIR?

An ISIR (pronounced Eye-Sir) is the Institutional Student Information Record, the electronic output document produced by the federal FAFSA processing system based on the FAFSA data submitted by the student. The ISIR is the data set colleges receive to evaluate awarding aid. Colleges do not receive actual FAFSA forms.

What are the challenges?

All colleges, including Washington community and technical colleges, face considerable challenges in implementing the new FAFSA.

- Upended staffing, policies, and procedures: College financial aid offices must adapt existing processes and systems to align with the new requirements. This involves training staff and reconfiguring internal workflows to accommodate eligibility criteria and application procedure changes. Additionally, the compressed timeframe for processing financial aid, especially with delayed release dates, is straining resources and increasing the workload for financial aid administrators. Changes in Pell Grant eligibility criteria, treatment of multiple family members in college, and adjustments to cost of attendance calculations require updates to institutional policy and procedures.

- Application delays: Typically, the U.S. Department of Education opens the FAFSA process on Oct. 1 every year. Students fill out their applications, the applications go to the U.S. Department of Education, and the department then sends the information, in the form of ISIRs, to colleges and universities to start processing in November. Offices then process applications on an ongoing timeframe in the months leading up to the start of the quarter.

  Due to a number of glitches, the U.S. Department of Education pushed the FAFSA opening back from October to December and delayed sending the ISIRs to colleges from November to mid-March, putting a tight squeeze on financial aid offices.

Software delays: Colleges can only begin processing financial aid applications once the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges receives a bug-free update from Oracle — the parent company of PeopleSoft software, the basis of ctcLink — and then performs its own migration, configuration, security analysis, and testing for our college system. The State Board process will take six to eight weeks, meaning that the FAFSA ctcLink capabilities will be live in early June. The June estimate is subject to change if the U.S. Department of Education further delays sending ISIRs to colleges and/or Oracle delays the necessary code fixes.

While Oracle has released updates to PeopleSoft, including ctcLink, State Board staff and higher education user groups have found dozens of technical bugs that, if left unfixed, could cause errors in financial aid packaging.

What's happening with the WASFA?

The [Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WASFA)](#) is for people who are undocumented or who do not qualify for federal financial aid but may qualify for state financial aid (the Washington College Grant). It can also be used by others in certain limited situations. The 2024-25 WASFA is open now and, like the FAFSA, it will have fewer questions and a simpler form. However, the FAFSA delays are also causing WASFA delays.

How are we communicating with, and supporting, students?

Colleges will need to answer this question. To communicate with students, see the sample student Q&A available on the [Financial Aid Council webpage](#).

To set college policies and procedures, presidents and other college leaders are advised to read "A Unified Approach to FAFSA Simplification Implementation for Washington Community and Technical Colleges," also available on the [Financial Aid Council webpage](#).

What can I do as an employee?

- Keep encouraging students to submit their [FAFSA](#) and [WASFA](#) forms. The sooner students submit their forms, the sooner our financial aid office will get their information from the U.S. Department of Education.

- Visit the [U.S. Department of Education's 2024-25 FAFSA Issue Alert web page](#) regularly for updates.

- Check with the college communications or financial aid offices before sending out information about the FAFSA. It's important for information to be vetted, accurate, and consistent.

- Support financial aid staff in every way possible. Understandably, they are working in a highly stressful environment due to circumstances largely outside their control. Patience, a kind word, and a helpful hand will go a long way in supporting our financial aid office and other divisions impacted by the FAFSA delays.

We are working closely with leaders at other colleges and policymakers at both the state and federal levels to address the FAFSA delays. Thank you for your all your hard work and dedication to

our students and for your support as we adapt to these significant changes.