

Advice of coping with the latest FAFSA delay

By Susan Snyder
Staff Writer

There has been much apprehension and hand-wringing again this week since the U.S. Department of Education announced — again — a delay in its process for federal financial aid for college students.

The department said that student data from the newly revamped Free Application for Federal Student Aid would not be sent to colleges until March, two months later than expected, which will likely mean that students won't get their financial aid packages from colleges until early April. The reason for the delay is aimed at helping students: More will be eligible for aid as a result. But this will significantly shorten the window they have to weigh their options and reply to colleges by the traditional May 1 decision deadline.

In the meantime, financial aid and college access organizations are encouraging colleges to be flexible with students and families in light of the delay.

"During the pandemic, many institutions extended their enrollment, scholarship, and financial aid deadlines beyond the traditional May 1 date, and we urge institutions to make similar accommodations this year," said the nine groups, including the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the American Council on Education. "We all want students and families to have the time they need to consider their financial options before making enrollment decisions."

Widener University announced Friday that it would suspend its May decision day in light of the problems.

"These delays have created a lot of stress for college-bound students in the class of 2024 ...," said Joseph Howard, Widener's vice president for enrollment. "We don't want Widener's deadlines to add anxiety to



The announcement that FAFSA information won't be available until mid-March "is really concerning," said Francesca Reed of Neumann University. Courtesy of Neumann University

the good things.

The frustration right now is families, as well as institutions, were expecting to have the FAFSA information by the end of January, if not February. And so the recent announcement that it won't be until mid-March is really concerning.

Why the new delay?

The Department of Education had created these tables to estimate a family's income and assets. ... When they initially did that, they didn't include inflation-adjusted amounts, which is initially something they wanted to do. Over the past couple weeks, they decided they were going to go ahead and do that. That's for the benefit of the student in the long term. That means potentially more people may fall into Pell [grant] eligibility. (The Washington Post reported that if it hadn't been corrected, it could have cost families \$1.8 billion in aid.) But what that means is now they have to go back in and make these adjustments to the tables.

What will the new delay mean for students and families?

Typically, the FAFSA was available Oct. 1. So families would start receiving financial offers from institutions

institutions. [Before,] you had time to review that, go back to the institution, potentially appeal, and do all those things. Now that window is cut.

Could this be especially difficult for students from first-generation and lower-income families?

Absolutely. They are waiting to find out if they are going to be receiving anything to help cover that gap for them to make college education affordable. This delay just kind of furthers that agony.

Have you been hearing concerns from students and families?

Oh yes, absolutely. We had an open house just this past weekend and a number of students who are kind of ready to commit and make their decision are holding out because they want to make sure they have a clear picture in order to make an informed decision. I was just visiting high schools today, too, and a number of school counselors are also concerned because they are trying to help their students navigate the process.

What should colleges do to assist families at this point?

We have been trying to update our families as soon as changes arise. We are telling them these are the things you can do now: Even with delays, families still should go through and file the FAFSA, because as soon as we are able to receive that information, we want to make sure that families have done all this and don't have to wait any longer. In addition, find out what other types of scholarships or aid may be available through the institution that is not necessarily based on FAFSA information, for example, merit award aid and other types of scholarships.

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Francesca Reed, vice president for enrollment management and marketing at Neumann University, a 2,100-student Catholic university in Aston, shared her insight into what this means for students and families. She has worked in enrollment management for about 23 years, which includes financial aid.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

The first delay in the newly revamped FAFSA came last year. The forms weren't available for students to access until December, right?

Yes, December. It was a soft rollout, they called it. So it was only live for certain hours during the day. A limited number of individuals could actually get on it.

What was the impact of that?

There was a lot of frustration for a number of families who were having a hard time logging in, or they might have been kicked out if they didn't have enough information. I myself have a college-age son ... and so for me to experience it firsthand was very interesting. ... Then, about the second week in January, they finally made an announcement that it was fully operational.

Was the form itself any better after the change?

Some parts of it are better. The ability to add additional schools is promising. The fact that it is available in 11 languages is wonderful. The fact that it is shorter [a lot fewer questions] and saves families a lot of time are all great benefits. And, of course, the major part of this is that more students will have access to need-based aid. So those are all

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What will the new delay mean for students and families?

Typically, the FAFSA was available Oct. 1. So families would start receiving financial offers from institutions late in the fall, early in January. Now, you are talking about institutions not receiving the information until the middle of March. Then we have to do some testing to make sure that everything in our system is working accurately before we're actually able to send out official award notifications.

Right now, the timeline for many institutions is probably looking like early April. When you are talking about a May 1 deadline (for students to accept an enrollment offer), you're really giving families a very, very short window to make decisions, especially families that are first-generation going through this process for the first time, weighing their options from multiple

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Is there anything else that you think is important to add?

Be patient. We're all in the same boat, and so it's really important for families to continue to communicate with the colleges that they are working with. Find out if they have any particular deadlines or things that they are changing. Look at studentaid.gov. They will have updated information. And then, of course, institutions will have their own information, including Neumann. They can go to Neumann.edu/financialaid.

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