

FAFSA: Big changes are on the way for 2017-18 academic year

Montana students accustomed to completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) at the beginning of the calendar year may now fill out this important form in the fall.

In September 2015, President Obama announced that change to the federal student aid process, along with the opportunity for families to use income information from their “prior-prior year’s” taxes to complete the FAFSA.

“This is a big change and Montana school administrators, counselors and financial aid officers are revising their processes to address the new circumstances of the FAFSA,” said Rhonda Safford, statewide coordinator of Reach Higher Montana College Goal, previously College Goal Montana. “But at Reach Higher Montana, we believe it will make filling out the FAFSA easier and less stressful for Montana families.”

As part of the FAFSA changes, this form — that allows students and families to access federal student aid for the 2017-18 academic year— will be available on Oct. 1, 2016. The new priority FAFSA filing date for Montana is Dec. 1. However, Safford recommends confirming that date with the individual schools.

Safford says this shift in timing better aligns with college application efforts, providing students and families with the ability to tackle both of these tasks at once rather than separately.

In addition, she is particularly encouraged that FAFSA filers this fall will be able to use their 2015 tax information (prior-prior year) to fill out the form.

“FAFSA filers who are trying to meet the priority filing date at Montana colleges on the previous system were often unable to take advantage of the IRS data retrieval tool because they hadn’t completed their taxes,” Safford said. “By allowing the use of tax information from the prior-prior year, more families will be able to use this tool that automatically populates information in the FAFSA.”

Safford emphasizes that the FAFSA process for the 2016-17 academic year remains the same, but students and parents should keep their eyes and ears open for information about changes to the process in coming months.

For more information about the FAFSA, or other postsecondary preparation-related topics, visit ReachHigherMontana.org or call (866) COLG4ME.

