

Frequently Asked Questions:

Q1. How soon do I need to file the FAFSA, and should I still apply if I think my family makes too much money?

The sooner you fill out the FAFSA, the better. The application is free, and it's not just a way to determine how much federal student aid you'll receive. State governments, and some colleges and universities use information from the FAFSA to determine what state and institutional aid you qualify for. But state agencies and individual schools also have different deadlines to qualify for aid -- so keep track of all of the deadlines, and get a head start. Even if your household income is too high for you to qualify for federal grants or work-study funds, the FAFSA is also used to determine federal student loan eligibility. There's no harm in applying; on average, it only takes 23 minutes to fill out the FAFSA!

Q2. What are some common mistakes students and families make when filling out the FAFSA?

The first mistake you can make is not filling out the FAFSA in the first place! Don't assume that you can't afford college - the FAFSA opens the door to many different opportunities for financial aid, and the sooner you apply, the better, as state grant agencies and scholarship organizations— which often have a limited pot of funds to give out on a first come, first served basis— usually require you to have filed a FAFSA in order to receive aid. Keep in mind that you don't need to know where you'll be attending school in order to file the FAFSA, and you don't need to have your taxes completed yet for the previous year because starting with the 2017-18 FAFSA, you will use tax information from two years prior ([learn more](#) about the Early FAFSA and the move to [using prior-year tax information](#)). Applying online makes filling out the FAFSA easier because the online form uses skip logic to only ask relevant questions. You will also have the option to retrieve your IRS data to automatically populate the FAFSA, which simplifies the application process, helps reduce errors and lowers your chances of being selected to verify the information on your FAFSA. When filling out the FAFSA, make sure to pay attention to federal, state, and institutional deadlines, take your time to avoid information errors, and not leave too many spaces blank. Be sure to use your legal name, have official documents you need, and see what other [common mistakes you can avoid](#).

Q3. Besides federal grants and loans, where can I go to find college financial aid?

In addition to federal grants, loans, and other types of aid (such as Pell Grants, Direct Loans, and the Federal Work-Study Program), students can receive financial aid from state agencies, individual schools, and a variety of community organizations. Usually, the FAFSA is the only form you need to apply for state financial aid, but you should check with your [state agency](#) to see if more information is required. Most schools have their own financial aid programs, and use your FAFSA results for those too. There are other independent sources -- through community organizations, churches, and private organizations -- that award financial aid to students. Remember that you do not have to pay anyone to help you find aid, and if you have questions, you can reach out to your school's, or a prospective school's, financial aid office.

Q4. Besides tuition and fees, room and board, what else should I include in a budget for the school year, and how can I stay on track?

It's important to make sure you have enough money and financial aid to cover tuition and fees, and living expenses, but there are other expenses that make up the entire cost of attending college. Be sure to also budget for textbooks and supplies, transportation,

travel to and from home during breaks, and emergencies. In some cases, you might also be required to purchase certain supplies specific to your major that might not be listed in the overall estimate for the cost of attendance.

Q5. How can I set myself up for success when repaying my student loans?

There are several different repayment plans for student loan borrowers. The best way to set yourself up for success is to pick the repayment plan that's best for you to avoid falling into default. Borrowers start out on a standard 10-year repayment plan after a six-month grace period passes, but if that's too much to handle, there are other repayment plans based on your income that can adjust your monthly payments. If you aren't sure which repayment plan best fits your needs, you can learn more and see what your monthly payments would look like with different plans on StudentLoans.gov. It's also important to communicate with your student loan servicer and let them know if you need help in repayment. You can find out who your servicer is through the [National Student Loan Data System for Students](#) by clicking on "Financial Aid Review."

Frequent Misconceptions:

Myth #1: My family makes too much money for me to qualify for aid.

There is no income cut-off for federal student aid. Your [eligibility for financial aid](#) is based on a number of factors and not just your income. Plus, many states and schools use your FAFSA data to determine your eligibility for their aid. If you're not sure what you will get, the best way to know for sure is to complete the application!

Myth #2: I need to file taxes before completing the *Free Application for Federal Student Aid* or (FAFSA).

You can use [estimated information](#) on your FAFSA so you'll be able to submit it before you file taxes. In fact, many states and schools have financial aid deadlines well before the tax deadline. So completing your FAFSA earlier is a good idea. You might want to base your estimates on last year's tax return, and once you file your taxes, you can log back in and update the information. You may even be able to use the IRS Data Retrieval Tool to automatically import your tax information into your FAFSA.

Myth #3: The FAFSA is too hard to fill out.

This is a very common misconception, but the FAFSA has come a long way! It's easier than ever to complete online. The form uses "skip logic," so you are only asked the questions that are relevant to you. And if you've filed your taxes, you can transfer your tax return data into your FAFSA automatically. As a result of improvements like these, the average time to complete the FAFSA is now less than 21 minutes. If you do get stuck, help is available by Web chat, e-mail and phone.

Myth #4: My grades aren't good enough for me to get aid.

Eligibility for most federal student aid programs is not linked to your academic performance. However, you will need to [maintain grades](#) that your school considers satisfactory in order to continue receiving financial aid.

Myth #5: My ethnicity or age makes me ineligible for aid.

There are [basic eligibility requirements](#), but ethnicity and age are not considered.

Myth #6: I support myself, so I don't have to include parent info on the FAFSA.

This is not necessarily true. Even if you support yourself and file taxes on your own, you may still be considered a dependent student for federal student aid purposes. You can determine your dependency status by answering [these questions](#). If you are independent, you won't need to include your parents' information on your FAFSA. But if you are dependent, you must provide your parents' information.

Myth #7: I already completed the FAFSA so I don't need to complete it again.

You need to complete the FAFSA every year you plan to attend college or career school. Don't worry; it will be even easier the second or third time around since a lot of your information will be pre-populated on the application.

Millions of students complete the FAFSA each year and receive financial aid to help pay for college. Don't let these myths stop you from achieving your goals. Take the first step by completing the FAFSA at fafsa.gov.

Frequent Mistakes

Mistakes can delay your application and limit the amount of aid you are eligible to receive. To avoid errors, carefully read all of the questions on the FAFSA.

Some of the most common FAFSA errors are:

1. Leaving blank fields: Too many blanks may cause miscalculations and an application rejection. Enter a '0' or 'not applicable' instead of leaving a blank.
2. Using commas or decimal points in numeric fields: Always round to the nearest dollar.
3. Listing an incorrect Social Security Number or driver's license number: Double-check and triple-check these entries to ensure accuracy. If your parents do not have Social Security Numbers, list 000-00-0000. Do not make up a number or include a Taxpayer Identification Number.
4. Failing to use your legal name: Your name must be listed on your FAFSA as it appears on your Social Security card. Don't enter nicknames or other variations on your name.
5. Entering the wrong address: Don't enter a temporary campus or summer address as your permanent address.
6. Entering the wrong federal income tax paid amount: This amount is on your income tax return forms from two years prior, not your W-2 form(s).
7. Listing Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) as equal to total income from working: AGI and total income from working are not necessarily the same. In most cases, the AGI is larger than the total income from working.
8. Incorrectly filing income taxes as head of household: If there is an error in the head of household filing status, the school will need an amended tax return to be filed with the IRS before paying out aid awards.
9. Listing marital status incorrectly: The Department of Education wants to know your marital status on the day you sign the FAFSA. If you are in a legally recognized same-sex marriage, you will need to provide your spouse's information as well.
10. Listing parent marital status incorrectly: If your custodial parent has remarried, you'll need to include the stepparent's information on the FAFSA. If you have two parents in a legally-recognized same-sex marriage, you'll need to list both parents (one as Parent 1, and one as Parent 2)
11. Failure to list both parents if they live together: If both your legal parents (defined as biological or adoptive parents) live in the same household, you are required to list both parents on the FAFSA even if they are not married.
12. Failure to report unborn children: If you have a child that will be born before or during the award year and you will provide the child with more than half of his or her support, count that child as a member of the household.
13. Failing to count yourself as a student: The student completing the FAFSA must count himself or herself as a member of the household attending college during the award year.
14. Failing to register with Selective Service: If you are a male, aged 18 to 26, you must register with Selective Service. Failure to register will make you ineligible for federal student aid.
15. Forgetting to list the college: Obtain the Federal School Code for the college you plan on attending and list it along with any other schools you've applied to attend.
16. Forgetting to sign and date: If you're filling out the paper FAFSA, be sure to sign it.
17. Sending in a copy of your income tax returns: You do not need to include a copy of your tax returns with your FAFSA. Any information sent with your FAFSA will be destroyed. In addition, do not write any notes in the margins of your FAFSA.