

Paying for college is a daunting task, but the following steps can help to make the process less intimidating.

Step 1. Determining which form to file

Call **today** the financial aid office of every college you plan on attending or check online to determine what financial aid forms are required. All colleges will require the completion of the **Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)** to be considered for federal student aid. In addition, some colleges will request the completion of the College Scholarship Service's Financial Aid PROFILE, institutional aid forms or other supplemental forms to be considered for collegiate aid. Check the filing deadlines for each school you apply; late filers may lose eligibility for many scholarships and collegiate aid. **Do not miss deadlines!**

Step 2. Completion of PROFILE

If your school requires the **PROFILE**, complete it online now to avoid missing deadlines at www.collegeboard.com. There is a fee for filing.

Step 3. Institutional Aid Forms or Supplemental Forms

Check with the financial aid office on filing procedures for all institutional aid forms and any other supplemental forms necessary for awarding financial aid. **Do not miss deadlines!**

Step 4. Completion of the FAFSA

The FAFSA cannot be completed until after January 1st. If you do not file taxes, you can file the FAFSA after January 1st with no delay. Submit your FAFSA as soon as possible, since financial aid funds are limited at each school. **Many schools operate on a first come, first served basis.** There is no filing fee for completing the FAFSA, if the website you are on requests payment, cancel and go to the Federal site www.fafsa.ed.gov. This year the FAFSA is able to link with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to retrieve tax data for easier and more accurate FAFSA completion. In order to receive the best financial aid award package and to save valuable time, it has been suggested that parents and students utilize the IRS Data Match Retrieval tool. You will need students and parents 2011 income tax returns completed and sent to the IRS. To speed this process and avoid delays, it has been suggested that tax returns be sent electronically. It takes the IRS 1-2 weeks to process electronic tax returns, and 6-8 weeks for paper tax returns. Please note: the IRS Data Match Retrieval tool is not available until February 1st. If the financial aid priority deadline is February 15th or March first, like most local colleges, you need to send tax returns electronically the first of February and then do the FAFSA on Feb 14th to meet the deadline. By using the IRS Data Match Retrieval tool, the chances of being selected for verification is greatly reduced, thus maximizing the ability to receive the most financial aid available. By not using the tool, the chances are high that you will be selected for verification, thus delaying your financial aid package and possibly losing the chance for extra aid. Tip: The name and address must match exactly on the tax return and FAFSA for the IRS Data Retrieval tool to work.

File for a Personal Identification Number (PIN)

In order to complete the FAFSA, **one parent and the student** will need to order a PIN number. Go to www.pin.ed.gov and follow the instructions. Do not lose this number—you will need this to make changes to your application and to file the FAFSA next year. Many schools use the PIN number for other financial aid transactions.

Complete the FAFSA Worksheet

FAFSA worksheets can be downloaded at <http://studentaid.ed.gov/worksheet>. You will need the following to complete the worksheet/FAFSA: 2011 completed 1040 income tax return and W-2's, student driver's license, any non-tax income (such as social security, welfare benefits, or child support) and your family's net worth.

Common Mistakes to Watch For

Using the wrong social security number: Most parents do the FAFSA forms for their children; therefore, it is very easy to copy the wrong SSN or to use their own SSN. Wrong Social Security numbers will not match and will cause an error in submitting. Be careful to use the correct SSN.

Avoid using nicknames: The federal government matches the birth date and SSN with names submitted. Incorrect matches will result in an error.

Special Circumstances

If you have special circumstances (change of income, tuition at an elementary or secondary school, high medical bills, unusual debt or one-time income, or parent in college), file the FAFSA with last year's income and call the financial aid office of the school you plan on attending. In many instances, the financial aid office can change the income reported to reflect this year's income or circumstances.

Parent Information

According to the FAFSA website this is how you answer the question "*Who is my "parent" when filling out the FAFSA*?" If your parents are living and married to each other, answer the questions about them. If your parents are living together and are not married but meet the criteria in your state for a common-law marriage, answer the questions about both of them. If your state does not consider them to be married, fill out the parent information as if they are divorced. If your parents are divorced or separated, answer the questions about the parent with whom you lived more during the past 12 months. If you lived the same amount of time with each parent, give answers about the parent who provided more financial support during the past 12 months or during the most recent year that you actually received support from a parent. If this parent is remarried as of today, answer the questions on the FAFSA about that parent and the person whom your parent married. If your parent is widowed or single, answer the questions about that parent. If your widowed parent is remarried as of the day you sign the FAFSA, answer the questions about that parent and the person whom your parent married. The following people are not your parents unless they have adopted you: grandparents, foster parents, legal guardians, older brothers or sisters, and uncles or aunts. If you have no contact with parents, then contact the financial aid of the college you plan on attending on instructions on how to complete the FAFSA.

Register for the Selective Service

Males (between 18 and 25) will not be eligible for federal financial aid unless they register for Selective Service. To insure that there are no problems with your financial aid, males should say "yes" to the question on the FAFSA that gives permission for the federal government to register the student for the Selective Service.

Complete the FAFSA online

Once the worksheet is complete, you are ready to file the FAFSA online. Go to www.fafsa.ed.gov and file for the FAFSA for 2012-2013 academic year—it is free to file. To avoid scams make sure you use this website only. Before you submit your application, take the time to review your answers for accuracy—make changes now. Correcting mistakes after submitting the FAFSA can waste time and may mean a loss of collegiate aid. Submit the application online and print the confirmation page.

What Happens Next?

The colleges you indicate on your FAFSA will automatically receive your FAFSA information, and within 72 hours you will be emailed your **Student Aid Report (SAR)**, which summarizes your application. This is your official record to be used for financial aid. If you want to make changes to the SAR, go back to the FAFSA—website: www.fafsa.ed.gov. **NOTE:** if you make more than two changes after receiving your first SAR—STOP—call the financial aid office for further assistance. You will be given an **Expected Family Contribution (EFC)** on your SAR. This is the figure that the colleges will use to award financial aid. You may be randomly selected for verification by the Federal government or by your school. You will **not** receive any financial aid until you complete the verification paperwork sent by the financial aid office at each school your SAR was sent. Failure to complete the verification paperwork and mail in along with your IRS Tax Return Transcript (request online at <http://www.irs.gov> or 1-800-908-9946) in a timely manner may result in a loss of some collegiate aid. You should complete verification at all of the schools you plan on attending.

Step 5. The Award Offer

Once the financial aid office at each school you sent your SAR verifies that your SAR is complete, they will work up a financial aid package based on your EFC, PROFILE, or Institutional Aid Forms. Schools determine your financial aid based on the **Cost of Education (COE)**, minus the EFC, to equal the financial need. Schools use this formula to award financial aid. Financial aid may include the following: federal or state grants, institutional grants, scholarships, federal student or parent loans, work-study, and institutional aid or loans. You will be notified of your financial aid package in the form of an award letter. Comparing the award offers from different colleges can help you to decide which college to attend. Do not forget to factor in the loan amount that you will have to repay before making your final decision. Make sure you return the award offer by the priority deadline listed on the award letter. Failure to return the award offer may result in the school canceling your award and giving it away to another student. If you have questions, or if your award letter does not provide enough aid to pay for college expenses, contact the financial aid office.

The biggest key to receiving the maximum financial aid package is meeting the priority deadlines. Do not miss deadlines!