Financial Aid Basics

**Types of Aid**

1. Scholarships: can be merit-based (GPA, performance, athletic, leadership, community service, etc.) or need-based
2. Grants: free money based on need
3. Loans: if you need to take out a loan, look at student loans first as they have the lowest interest rates and best repayment terms
4. Work-study: student employment, student receives money in the form of a paycheck

\*Almost always awarded in this order

FAFSA website: http://www.fafsa.gov

CSS/PROFILE website: https://profileonline.collegeboard.com

*What does the FAFSA stand for?*

Free Application for Federal Student Aid—note the word “free”. Never pay to complete the FAFSA. Stay away from sites like fafsa.com that charge you to complete the application…this is a scam. After all, what’s not ‘free’ about ‘free’ application? The official FAFSA site is: fafsa.gov. Use only this site to complete the FAFSA.

*When do students apply for financial aid?*

Students apply for financial aid during their senior year. The FAFSA is available January 1st of the senior year. CSS/PROFILE is typically available October 1st of the senior year – early decision and select early action schools may require this by November 15; all others don’t need it until sometime in February--check college websites for specific dates.

*What’s the difference between the FAFSA and the CSS/PROFILE?*

The FAFSA is the federal application a family completes to determine eligibility for need-based aid, i.e. grants, loans, and work-study. The CSS/PROFILE, required only by a select group of schools, determines a family’s eligibility for need-based institutional (grant) money provided by the college itself. The CSS/PROFILE is a much more comprehensive document asking more detailed information than the FAFSA. Also, where the FAFSA is free, the PROFILE is not. The initial set-up and first school application costs $25; each application after that is $16. One more thing: the FAFSA only asks for the custodial parent information; the CSS/PROFILE usually asks for both parents regardless of which parent the student lives with.

*I’m an undocumented student (non-citizen). Can I apply for financial aid*?

Undocumented students are not eligible to complete the FAFSA, but if planning to attend a college in Texas, you may complete the Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TASFA), which may qualify you for state-funded grants (free money) like the TEXAS Grant at public universities or the Tuition Equalization Grant (TEG) at private universities. As a Texas resident, you are also eligible to pay in-state tuition costs. The TASFA is a paper application available in January of the senior year. See Ms. Kocian for a copy or go to this website: <http://collegeforalltexans.com>. There are also a number of scholarships which don’t require citizenship to apply. See Ms. Kocian for a full list.

*How do I know which application my school accepts?*

All schools accept the FAFSA if you are applying for need-based aid. A list of the schools requesting the CSS/PROFILE is available on the College Board website: https://profileonline.collegeboard.com

If a school requests the CSS/PROFILE, they almost always want you to submit the FAFSA as well.

*We got our EFC from the FAFSA. What does this mean?*

When you submit the FAFSA, an Expected Family Contribution (EFC) is calculated. Your family's taxed and untaxed income, assets, and benefits (such as unemployment or Social Security) are all considered in the formula. Also considered are your family size and the number of family members who will attend college during the year. Schools use the EFC to determine your federal student aid eligibility and financial aid award. The general rule is that the closer the number is to zero, the more need-based aid a student will receive. **Note:** Your EFC is **not** the amount of money your family will have to pay for college **nor** is it the amount of federal student aid you will receive. It is a number used by your school to calculate the amount of federal student aid you are eligible to receive.

*We make too much money to qualify for need-based financial aid. Do we still have to fill out the FAFSA?*

No, there is no rule saying you have to apply. If you don’t apply, the only aid available will be merit-based scholarships (fingers crossed) and perhaps a parent loan. If applying to a private college, it is recommended that you fill out the FAFSA and CSS Profile (if applicable) at least the first year because those schools are known for offering more money than public institutions.

*What happens once I apply for financial aid as a senior*?

You can apply for financial aid as early as the financial aid applications are available, but to receive a financial aid award, a student must first be accepted to the college. And even then, most students won’t receive their aid letters until sometime in March (rolling admissions) or April (selective admissions) unless applying for early decision and select early action programs. If applying early decision, the student will receive their tentative financial aid award at the same time they receive an acceptance letter.

*I’m thinking of applying early decision to my dream college. What does my financial aid timeline look like?*

If applying early decision, you are usually required to submit your financial aid application (CSS/PROFILE or comparable school form) by November 15. If accepted, you will receive the financial aid award at the same time you are notified of your acceptance (mid-December). If the financial aid works for your family, you’re essentially done once you accept the award and pay your enrollment deposit. Since early decision is a binding agreement, you do not have the option of applying to other schools and comparing financial aid awards.

*When do I apply for scholarships?*

We typically group scholarships into two categories: those offered by colleges that can only be used if attending that school and those that are offered by external donors. Scholarships offered by colleges and universities are, typically, the more lucrative because they are renewable each year as long as the student maintains a certain GPA. When applying to public institutions in Texas, there is a separate application for scholarships via Apply Texas. Pay attention to scholarship deadlines as they may fall before admissions deadlines. Most private college use your admissions application to review for scholarship eligibility. The big window of opportunity for external scholarships falls between October/November through April of the senior year. Ms. Kocian will email seniors (and parents) every few weeks starting in October with a list of available scholarship opportunities. Students can also register on any of the free scholarship search sites, like fastweb.com or scholarships.com; however, the daily email can get a tad annoying after awhile.

*If I’m not a senior yet, what can I do right now?*

Families can get an early estimate of eligibility for financial aid by filling out the FAFSA4caster available here: <https://fafsa.ed.gov/FAFSA/app/f4cForm>

The College Board also has a Net Price Calculator to give prospective students a personalized estimate of what it will cost to attend specific colleges: <http://netpricecalculator.collegeboard.org/>

Though the majority of scholarships will come up in the student’s senior year, there are several free scholarship search sites: fastweb.com, scholarships.com, and of course, Naviance: <http://connection.naviance.com/lasa>.

Useful sites for general financial aid information: <http://www.aie.org/paying-for-college>, <http://studentaid.ed.gov>

**April of the senior year is a busy time—comparing financial aid awards, students visiting campuses, making that big decision—both exciting and stressful leading up to May 1 reply date.**

Note to seniors: as you receive notification of scholarships and grants, please submit to Dr. Sneed ALL OFFERS of scholarships or financial aid award packages you have received (either bring in copies or scan and email) even if you do not plan to accept the award or attend the college. This is very important as we are tracking this information for institutional and district research.