

Supporting Students and Families Through FAFSA

Best Practices

Because FAFSA is such a critical component of student's eligibility for financial aid, it is incredibly important for counselors to regularly communicate information about the FAFSA to

students and families and provide ongoing support. **Use the best practices noted below to inform your work with students and families.**



Plan now for 2024 financial aid events.

Though the FAFSA will not be released until December, counselors can begin scheduling information sessions for 2024. Once dates are selected, counselors can begin organizing information for the event, advertising the event to students and families, and reading about any and all updates to the FAFSA as new information and guidance is released. It is important to note that students, families, and other contributors cannot begin the FAFSA until they have a verified FSA ID, which takes 1-3 days. Encouraging students and families to verify their FSA ID beforehand will alleviate significant frustration during completion events.



Update old materials and modify website language.

With the number of substantial changes to the FAFSA, likely materials from past years are now outdated. Similarly, many websites still list erroneous opening dates and links to previous years' FAFSA. Take time to review and update any materials from past years, and begin communicating the updated information to students and families. This will help to alleviate frustrations from families reading conflicting information about a process that can already feel overwhelming.



Consider how to broaden the reach and deepen the support of financial aid information sharing and events.

During the last school year, \$3.6 billion in Pell Grant funding went unclaimed because students did not complete the FAFSA. Counselors, administrators, and educators must find ways to engage more students and families in the financial aid process and increase FAFSA completion rates. Counselors might consider hosting live, virtual events that are recorded and then available on-demand to ensure that all families can access important financial aid information. Counselors might also work to ensure information being sent to families is translated or offer live translation during events. To support students and families who might require additional scaffolding to complete the FAFSA, counselors might offer one-on-one or small group opportunities to help provide more targeted assistance. And, for any families who seem to be unable or resistant to completing the FAFSA, counselors might consider which adult at the school—whether it be an administrator, teacher, or coach—might be best poised to nudge the family and offer support as they work through the FAFSA documentation.



Offer thoughtful, compassionate support.

The FAFSA requires data and information that can be sensitive for some students. For example, students might need to document biological parents that are no longer active in their lives or use legal names they no longer identify with. Students might also learn about a divorce within their family or the undocumented status of a family member. With this in mind, counselors should consider how best to support students and families through these challenging conversations. For any financial aid event with multiple families meeting together, counselors can open nearby offices or smaller rooms for any student or family wanting some privacy to complete forms or ask questions. Counselors might also offer a way for students and families to ask private, personal questions that are not noted publicly or shared with the broader group. Counselors might also consider having multiple counselors, administrators, or educators available to ensure discretion when supporting students and families.



Send regular reminders to students and families.

A student's FAFSA information is cleared after 45 days of inactivity in an unsubmitted form. To avoid the frustration of having to start over, counselors should consider how to time their reminders strategically. They might send emails or texts a few days after completion events to encourage students and families to keep moving through the application. They also offer one-on-one support over the phone for any questions or share additional resources with families. Counselors might also consider what incentives for completion would encourage students and families to get their FAFSA submitted. Sometimes, knowing that a counselor will notice if a form has been completed by a specific date is enough of an incentive to encourage completion.



Develop a FAFSA support team.

Because of the importance of FAFSA completion, no single counselor should be responsible for school-wide efforts. A school or district team of administrators, counselors, educators, and other school staff can work together to strategize and thoughtfully plan communication and events. A broader group of support offers an influx of energy as well as additional insights and communicates to students and families that the entire school community is invested in their future success.