

05/12/2020

M E M O R A N D U M

To: Governors' Policy Advisors, Interested Parties
From: National Governors Association
Re: FAFSA Completion and COVID-19

Background

Eligibility for institutional, state, and federal financial aid is largely determined by information that students submit on the Free Application for Federal Aid (FAFSA). The application has about 80 questions and must be completed annually. In addition to the federal government's June 30 deadline, each state has its own FAFSA deadline that generally corresponds with the administration of state financial aid programs.¹

Restricted access to traditionally available support services may have had a significant impact on students' ability to complete the FAFSA. According to the National College Attainment Network (NCAN), FAFSA completions by high school seniors were approximately on pace with last year but began to decline amid widespread social distancing measures. NCAN analyses show that the percent change in year-over-year FAFSA completion decreased by 3.3 percentage points from March 13 to May 1, which amounts to 61,465 fewer FAFSAs completed by high school seniors nationwide.² As of May 1, all but two states are on pace for a decline in year-over-year FAFSA completion.³

There has also been a recent and substantial decline in FAFSA submission among students currently enrolled in higher education, according to NCAN's analyses. Compared to this time last year, FAFSA renewals are down by 4.7 percent, which amounts to about 350,000 fewer college students resubmitting the application.⁴ Renewals for much of this academic year trailed last year's, but similar to the year-over-year figures for high school seniors, FAFSA renewals started to decrease even more substantially around the time social distancing measures were put in place; the year-over-year decline more than doubled between February 29 and April 15.⁵ This decline is largely driven by fewer submissions from low-income students, as renewals among those with a household income of \$25,000 or less have declined by 8 percent as of April 15. Meanwhile, only 1 percent fewer students with a household income of \$50,000 or more have resubmitted the FAFSA compared to last year.⁶

FAFSA completion is strongly associated with college enrollment, as those who complete the application are 84 percent more likely to enroll than those who do not.⁷ Louisiana, which recently began mandating FAFSA completion as a high school graduation requirement, set a new state record for postsecondary enrollment in its first year under the new policy.⁸ Thus, a significant drop in FAFSA completion would likely result in fewer students enrolling in postsecondary education this coming fall.

¹ <https://studentaid.gov/sites/default/files/2019-20-fafsa-state-deadlines.pdf>

² <https://public.tableau.com/profile/bill.debaun.national.college.access.network#!/vizhome/COVID-19andFAFSACompletion/COVID-19FAFSA?publish=yes>

³ <https://formyourfuture.org/fafsa-tracker/>

⁴ <https://www.ncan.org/news/505741/New-Data-Nearly-250000-Fewer-Low-Income-FAFSA-Renewals-This-Cycle-Nationally.htm>

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ <https://www.ncan.org/news/news.asp?id=456025>

⁸ <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/newsroom/news-releases/2019/05/22/number-of-louisiana-graduates-enrolling-in-college-climbs-to-all-time-high>

Policy Options

The FAFSA often serves as the gateway to higher education, as completing the form is the first step to securing federal grants and loans that millions of students rely on to enroll. Consequently, students who are unable to complete the form during the COVID-19 pandemic will have their higher education plans derailed. Governors should coordinate support for students who need help navigating the complex application while widespread social distancing measures remain in place.

- **Elevate the issue publicly.** Governors and other state policymakers can elevate the importance of completing the FAFSA during their COVID-19 public addresses, through social media, and in partnership with their school districts and higher education institutions.
 - *State example:* New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy used his daily COVID-19 briefing to announce his state's FAFSA deadline extension in early April.⁹
- **Extend the state deadline.** Many state deadlines for the FAFSA have not passed but are coming up soon.¹⁰ Governors can work in partnership with their state higher education executive officers to provide students more time to complete the application.
 - *State examples:* Indiana, Massachusetts, and New Jersey have all extended their FAFSA deadlines.
- **Convert previously scheduled in-person activities to virtual events.**¹¹ FAFSA completion support often requires tailored assistance to meet the needs of complex family financial situations. States should ensure that virtual platforms include the opportunity for students and families to receive personalized assistance.
 - *State example:* The Indiana Commission for Higher Education held virtual FAFSA question and answer sessions with staff on-hand to meet the unique needs of students and families.¹²
- **Leverage datasets to monitor FAFSA completion and conduct targeted outreach.** FAFSA completion data can help states decide where to dedicate resources for technical assistance. The Education Finance Council, whose membership is largely comprised of statewide financial aid organizations, is recommending this practice for its members.
 - *State example:* The Minnesota Office of Higher Education is increasing targeted social media efforts and technical assistance based off student-level FAFSA completion data.

Conclusion

Prospective and current college students could be denied access to higher education due to the lack of support that they were relying on to complete the FAFSA. Moreover, current college students whose personal financial situation has changed significantly may need help completing the application to remain enrolled. Governors should help facilitate the collaboration necessary to ensure that students who need to fill out the FAFSA get the support they need.

⁹ <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/coronavirus/nj-announces-new-fafsa-deadline-due-to-covid-19-crisis/2355249/>

¹⁰ <https://studentaid.gov/apply-for-aid/fafsa/fafsa-deadlines#federal>

¹¹ https://ngaorg1-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/jporter_nga_org/ESHqAzoNNmBFhJQ0V-X_dmMBoXNE4-NmeWDMDI3ROA0LMg?e=6ag9j9

¹² <https://learnmoreindiana.org/cost/can-i-get-help-paying-for-college/frenzy/>