

FAFSA glitches impact students seeking aid

By Nanette Asimov

Donovan, 17, glanced up from his laptop at Balboa High School in San Francisco, where he was filling out a federal financial aid application for college next fall.

“I’ve got some bad news,” he told his counselor, John Moreno. After two frustrating hours of trying on Tuesday, Donovan’s Pell grant request still hadn’t gone through.

Applying for the federal aid to help pay for college was supposed to be much easier this year. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, has been overhauled for the first time in three decades, cutting in half, to about 20 minutes, the time it takes to fill out the previously cumbersome form.

But Donovan has been trying to submit his FAFSA for two weeks. He’s one of more than 100,000 high school seniors in California — and an untold number across the country — hit by a glitch that blocks the applications of citizens and other legal residents whose parents don’t have a Social Security number or numbers.

Experts fear the technical snafu preventing these “mixed-immigration status” students from applying for aid will derail or discourage thousands of students across the state and nation from enrolling in college — even more than during the COVID pandemic.

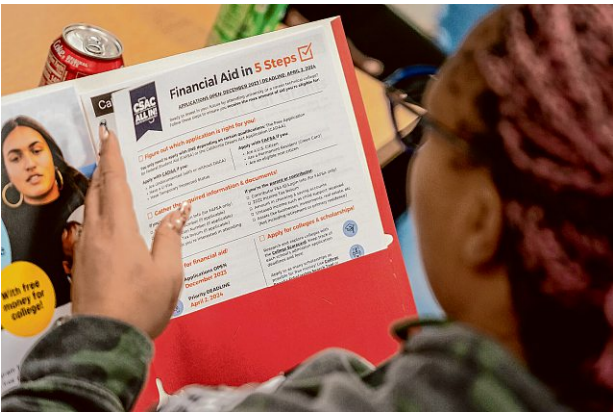
Donovan, a U.S. citizen who wants to study environmental science, said he’s worried he won’t be able to go to college if he doesn’t get the financial aid he’s entitled to. The Chronicle is withholding his last name because his parents lack documentation to be in the country legally.

Yet that problem is just one of many that have tangled up the FAFSA since the streamlined version premiered on Dec. 31, three months late: Signatures vanishing from saved forms. School names truncated. Applicants unable to come back to the form after exiting.

“Kids are upset. They’re super anxious,” said Kateri Dodds, who coordinates college access for the Oakland Unified School District. “This has brought me to tears multiple times in the last few months because of how blatantly unfair this is.”

The U.S. Department of Education has listed more than a dozen errors needing repair. Yet that’s only a partial account that doesn’t even mention problems with the live chat or the help line where no one picks up.

“Phone lines are flooded all over the country,” said Jose Jimenez, a direc-



Loren Elliott/Special to The Chronicle

A parent looks through paperwork Thursday during a workshop about the new FAFSA application at Mission High School in San Francisco.

tor of college access at 10,000 Degrees, a nonprofit that helps students navigate the FAFSA. The group sponsored a workshop on Thursday at Mission High School in San Francisco, like the one Donovan attended at Balboa.

Another problem, it turns out, is twins. “One was able to sign in, but the other couldn’t,” said Iris Castillo, a college student who has been helping applicants at Balboa and ran into the conundrum.

Last year, 40% of high school seniors had submitted their FAFSA by early February, said the National College Attainment Network, which has tracked FAFSA data for seven years. This year, just 20% had done so.

Much of the lag is from the late rollout. If you compare both years five weeks in, “this year’s seniors are running slightly ahead, by about 4%, which is encouraging,” said Bill DeBaun, the nonprofit’s senior director. But since the rollout was late, that puts everything behind schedule.

The delay and multiple snafus threaten crucial timelines, he said. Students have to know how much grant money to expect so they can decide whether to accept a college admission offer by the required deadline.

Although California has pushed deadlines back to accommodate the disruption, college start dates are firm.

“The finish line hasn’t moved,” DeBaun said. “So we need the rate of completion to accelerate very quickly.”

This year, high school seniors heading to four-year colleges will get an extra month, until April 2, to apply for a state Cal Grant because the California Student Aid Commission relies on FAFSA information to determine each student’s eligibility — but there is none.

The U.S. education department has processed no applications yet and isn’t expected to start releasing that data until mid-March.

Last year, 141 Balboa High students had completed their FAFSAs by

this time.

“I share the same frustrations that many students are expressing,” said Moreno, the counselor helping Donovan at Balboa. “In my opinion, the FAFSA launch felt rushed. It obviously wasn’t ready to be used when the application opened on Dec. 31.”

As a work-around, state officials are considering letting students use the California Dream Act application because it generates the same data.

“We’re in close communication with federal officials and exploring other options,” said Jake Brymner, a deputy director at the California Student Aid Commission who called the FAFSA debacle the commission’s “top-most concern” this year.

Ultimately, Brymner expects the new FAFSA to be better than the old one, and “we really want to encourage students to stick with it because higher education unlocks so much in your life.”

The earlier a student submits a FAFSA application, the more Pell grant money may be available.

“We tell them to get their application in ASAP, and they’re trying,” said Lance Cheng, another Balboa High counselor. “But families are not getting the support they need” from the government. “This is totally not on them.”

The University of California and California State University are giving students an extra two weeks, until May 15, to accept admission offers. The exception is for out-of-state applicants to UC Berkeley. Because the campus is trying to reduce the number of non-resident students, administrators haven’t decided yet whether to give those applicants a break, said spokesperson Janet Gilmore.

A major difference in the new FAFSA is that parents or other “contributors” to the application must, for the first time, use a separate login to add their information.

But students whose parents are less skilled technologically — who are often the lowest-in-

come applicants — disproportionately run into trouble with this new requirement, especially because parents are often told to call the help line.

“The number basically doesn’t work,” said Dodds of the Oakland public schools. “They’re put on hold for hours. They hang up on you.”

Most affected are students from mixed-immigration status families and those in foster care, who aren’t in contact with their parents, Dodds said.

“It’s just barrier after barrier. I just think it’s a really great example of institutionalized racism,” she said.

At Balboa High the other day, about 30 students gathered to work on their FAFSAs with counselors and volunteers. One of them, Donovan, had been wrestling with the live chat for about 40 minutes,

GETTING HELP WITH THE FAFSA

The California Student Aid Commission is promoting webinars by Cash for College, a nonprofit that helps high school students fill out FAFSA financial aid forms to receive federal Pell grants for college. Here is a listing of online workshops.

In-person workshops for San Francisco students are taking place from 5-7 p.m. Tuesday at Independence High, 1350 7th Ave.; and Tuesday and Thursday at June Jordan High, 325 La Grande Ave.

- Bring:
- 2022 federal income tax returns
 - Social security number or green card number for students and parents.
 - Month and year of parents’ marriage, separation or divorce.
 - Current bank statements.
 - Records of businesses, farms or other real estate.
 - Records of stocks, bonds and other investments.
- For more information email cashforcollege@jccyc.org

receiving advice that didn’t work.

“It’s very confusing,” Donovan said. He next planned to try using a relative’s phone number, but didn’t really expect it to

work. Of one thing he was sure, though, he said.

“I’m not giving up.”

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