

EDUCATION

Students race to beat aid deadline

FAFSA glitch frustrates county's college-bound high school seniors

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Victor Quiroz Garcia, a senior at Petaluma High School, joined his peers at the start of the year in filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, the portal that millions of American students and families depend on to help find money to pay for college.

What was supposed to be a straightforward process has been anything but, especially for Quiroz Garcia, whose family's mixed citizenship status turned the process into a three month ordeal.

Last year, FAFSA relaunched its application portal, with the intent of fixing bugs in their system. When the new application launched at the end of 2023, thousands of students were suddenly booted from the website — with some unable to access the application at all.

"It got to the point where we had to wake up at 6 a.m. and call FAFSA early in the morning, or else the call line would be too long, or they wouldn't pick up, in order to get assistance through the phone," Quiroz Garcia said.

As of March 18, 15 issues remained unresolved on the federal government's list of fixes with less than two weeks to go before the deadline.

"All of this was done with the best intentions and feedback that has been provided to FAFSA for years from high school

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Director of college and career counseling Sean Kerr, top left, helps seniors Ivan Cerezo, Leylanni Batista, and Jennifer Ruiz with their FAFSA and college applications Friday at Roseland University Prep in Santa Rosa.

FAFSA

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colleges, financial aid institutions, et cetera," said Eli Weinzveg, the director of college pathways at 10,000 Degrees, a California non-profit that helps put underserved students on the path to college. "Unfortunately, the rollout did not go smoothly, and is not going smoothly."

The organization works each year with students across the state who are furthest from opportunity — including undocumented, homeless, foster care, or low income students — in part by placing dedicated staff members on high school campuses to help them submit their aid applications.

FAFSA money is often the largest chunk of financial aid students will receive to fund higher education, followed by the California Pell Grant, Weinzveg said.

Because some of the grants are based on financial need, applicants and their parents are required to submit financial information, which is one of the roadblocks in the system.

"(A) student is a citizen, but parents are undocumented and have been unable to submit or complete FAFSA, because the parents don't have a Social Security number, which has prevented them from accessing certain portions of the parents' side of the application," Weinzveg said.

In past years, parents could bypass the form that asked for their Social Security number, as long as their student had entered their own. A parent could then submit their tax forms and proof of income, which would be included in the calculation that determines their student's financial need.

The new website format eliminated that off-ramp, creating a full stop for students with undocumented parents.

Students like Quiroz Garcia with mixed status — meaning at least one of their parents is not a United States citizen — could not submit the application at all.

"At first, 10,000 Degrees and the school told me to just do the student section of FAFSA, as my parents didn't have a Social Security number," Quiroz Garcia said.

Only last week, on March 13, was a work-



Roseland University Prep senior Ivan Cerezo, right, talks with Sean Kerr, director of college and career counseling, while filling out FAFSA and college applications Friday in Santa Rosa.

around created for families like his, where parents can enter in personally identifiable information and tax information manually.

"It was very frustrating finding different problems at all the stages of the FAFSA form," Quiroz Garcia said. "It also didn't help that because of this I had to delay some scholarship applications that required FAFSA to be already complete."

What FAFSA determines as the financial need for a student is labeled their Student Aid Index, a calculation that other scholarships and grants often ask for as part of their qualification for additional scholarship money.

Quiroz Garcia, who is headed to University of California, Berkeley, hopes to study computer science. And while he has finally completed the FAFSA application, he continues to resubmit additional scholarships that now include his Student Aid Index.

"It's a huge issue as historically this underrepresented, under advocated community of undocumented people have yet again, another barrier or roadblock put in their way when trying to access these funds and the information for their students to access higher education," Weinzveg said.

An uphill climb now begins for college counselors and advisers who'll have to support families in submitting the application, waiting for results, and explaining the financial aid offers in the final weeks of the school year.

At Roseland University Prep, a high school with a large number of Latino college-bound students, the problem hangs over the

students who would otherwise be narrowing in on their four-year decision.

In the 2020-21 graduating class, 98% of seniors submitted forms for FAFSA or DREAM Act, another financial aid application for students who entered the U.S. at age 16 or younger.

"Regardless of the status of the parents or the students, there is a significant delay," said Sean Kerr, Roseland University Prep's head counselor. "Kids who have input completely their FAFSA and parent information since Jan. 10 still have no answer. To say it's a problem is an understatement."

The charter school, which offers all students college preparatory classes, provides access to college tours and tailored services that ease the transition to higher education for students and their families.

"These are kids that have spent their whole educational career waiting for this moment, and the federal California and state grants are the biggest part — it's a game changer," Kerr said.

And while a significant number of University Prep students have mixed status, the website bugs have affected nearly every student in one way or another, Kerr said. That, paired with no easy route for students, their parents or counselors to reach out to the portal officials has exacerbated the problem even more.

As of March 13, this year's national application completion rate lags 34% behind last year's. Kerr is worried about the bottleneck the situation might create for schools with

May 1 deadlines for students to commit to their chosen university.

The Student Aid Index also determines the additional aid students get directly from universities that now must wait for FAFSA applications to roll in from the students they've already accepted.

"It's hard on the students to hear from the schools: 'This is the money you should expect, but I don't know if it's going to be there,'" Kerr said.

For many University Prep students, the amount of financial aid they receive is a major determinant for the universities they choose, Kerr said.

Schools in the University of California and California State Universities systems have extended the deadline for students to commit to any of their schools, citing the FAFSA delays.

This decision allows some wiggle room for Sonoma County students, Weinzveg said, but ultimately it's up to FAFSA technicians to create workarounds to the site's glitches and process the applications with enough time for students to prepare for their college financial obligations.

"It's just a matter of how far back are decisions going to be able to be pushed," Kerr said. "For me, we just need to wait and see. I don't see how these students can collectively not get served."

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