

## The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

The average Pennsylvania student has over \$28,000 in federal student loans by the time that he/she graduates from a college or university. You should be an educated consumer regarding your choice of post-secondary institution, major and college courses as well as the relative costs. A good rule of thumb – don't borrow more than the average salary for your first year after graduation from a post-secondary institution. Be sure to explore every option for grants, scholarships and work programs that keep borrowing to a minimum.

### Independent Student Status –

Youth in or formerly in out-of-home care or those who are homeless should answer **yes** if one of the following questions on the 2015-2016 FAFSA applies to them: A yes response means that no parent information is included on the FAFSA. The post-secondary will likely require supporting documentation, such as a copy of the court order, before awarding or releasing funds.

1. Since turning 13, were both of your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court?
2. Are you an emancipated minor?
3. Are you in legal guardianship?
4. Has your school district determined that you are homeless?
5. Have you been determined to be an unaccompanied youth?
6. Have you been determined to be self-supporting and at risk of being homeless?

### High School Graduation Verification

The federal government will now randomly select students for verification of their high school graduation, that they have earned a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) or completed a home school course of instruction. Students selected for verification will need to take proof of completion to the Financial Aid Office at the institution in which they enroll.

### Income Verification

Many students are selected for income verification each year. Verification can be avoided if the IRS Data Retrieval tool is used when completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA.) Taxes should be filed electronically prior to the completion of the FAFSA for the information to be available on the IRS Data Retrieval system. **Note:** Demographic information submitted on tax returns and on the FAFSA must match or the IRS Data Retrieval system will not recognize files and information.

If a student is selected for verification, a copy of the Federal 1040 will not be accepted by the Financial Aid Office. Information must be obtained from the IRS Data Retrieval system or through a transcript form the IRS.

## Accountability Statements

The federal government will now require that all students sign an accountability statement at the Financial Aid office in the post-secondary institution in which they enroll. The statement affirms that all federal financial aid received will be used for educational and school-related expenses.

## Tips to Avoid Financial Aid Application Errors

- The FAFSA on the Web (FOTW) includes information about a demonstration site on how to complete the FAFSA. This is a great **free** tool for first time applicants and those who assist them. The website is: <http://fafsademotest.ed.gov>. The user name is **eddemo** and the password is **fafsatest**.
- If you would like to see an estimate of your Expected Family Contribution (EFC) and your federal Pell Grant amount, you can use the U.S. Department of Education's free financial aid forecast website: [www.fafsa.gov](http://www.fafsa.gov). Students who use this site can opt to have their information transferred to the actual FAFSA application.
- Deadlines are critical – **apply early!** *The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, the University of Pittsburgh and Penn State have priority filing deadlines for financial aid applications of March 1, 2014..*
- If your information changes, make sure that you notify your college or university and the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA). PHEAA needs to know so that consideration and processing for your state grant and your Chafee Education and Training Grant (ETG) will not be affected.
- Obtain your PIN number before you start the process or make sure that you have the correct number from prior year applications.
- Use your correct Social Security Number.
- Be sure that you understand the intent of the question and what is being asked. Wrong answers can affect eligibility.
- Do not insert words in spaces where figures must be reported. If the answer is "zero", write "0," not N/A, not applicable or dashes. Only skip an item if instructions specifically tell you that you should.
- Do not report cents – round figures to the nearest dollar.
- Do not report taxes withheld, but rather taxes paid.
- Do not write in margins or outside answer boxes or spaces.

- Do not send photocopies or attach other documents to your application unless specifically requested to do so.
- Make sure all required signatures are on the FAFSA if you are using the paper version. Mail pages 3 through 8 of the FAFSA only.
- **Avoid the following websites:** [www.fafsa.com](http://www.fafsa.com) and [www.edify.com](http://www.edify.com) as they will charge you a fee to complete the FAFSA, which should be free.
- IF IN DOUBT – ASK QUESTIONS FIRST!

## Renewal Applicants

Renewal applicants should receive a reminder to complete the FAFSA via e-mail or regular mail (if they did not provide an e-mail address) in January or February 2015. When renewal applicants go to the FAFSA on the Web (FOTW) website to complete their applications for 2015-2016, they will have the option to include pre-filled information from last year and to correct any questions that need to be changed and to provide new information as needed.

## FAFSA Completion Events

There will be a number of FAFSA completion events sponsored throughout the state in February. Most events are held on college campuses or at other locations in communities. Participants should bring their completed tax returns (if needed) and other information to complete the FAFSA. For locations in your area, go to: [www.pheaa.org](http://www.pheaa.org) for more information.

**Final Note:** If you have any questions regarding completion of the FAFSA or the changes to this year's application, please contact your IL caseworker, the financial aid office where you plan to enroll or the PHEAA Higher Education Access Partner for your county.

