Navigating the financial aid process

This article and linked resources will provide an overview of the financial aid process and can be used by PCs to help students to successfully navigate the complexities of the financial aid process. Many students often worry about how they can afford to attend college, so it's important to help them understand that financial aid can help them to pay for college. Applying for financial aid can be an overwhelming and confusing process for many students and is often one of the biggest obstacles to college access and success. Read on to learn about the many resources and supports out there!

Click the link to jump to the specific section.

- Overview of the financial aid process
- Types of financial aid
- Eligibility for financial aid
- Applying for financial aid
- Comparing financial aid award packages
- The role of iMentor in the financial aid process

Overview of the financial aid process

Learn about the steps of the financial aid process here (http://thumbnails-visually.netdna-ssl.com/the-financial-aid-process_50291c83d5c3b.png).

Types of financial aid

The first step to navigating the financial aid process is to help students understand the different types of aid available to help them pay for college! Financial aid is any grant or scholarship, loan, or paid employment offered to help a student meet his/her college expenses. Financial aid can come from a variety of sources, including the U.S. federal government, the state where you live, the college you attend, or nonprofit or private organizations.

Federal financial aid

Learn about the types of federal financial aid here (https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/sites/default/files/types-of-aid.png).

Loans — It's important to help students understand the specifics of each type of loan and repayment options.

Work study — Students often misunderstand that work study awards are immediately available to pay for tuition but it's important to help students understand that they must apply for jobs on their college campus in order to earn any work study money awarded to them.

State financial aid

Most states offer grants or scholarships to help students pay for college. State financial aid can be merit- or need-based and often requires a separate application from federal financial aid.

> Help students research what financial aid programs are available in their state and confirm specific eligibility requirements. Learn more about available financial aid programs in your state: State Financial Aid Programs (http://www.nasfaa.org/State_Financial_Aid_Programs) | State Education Agency Contact Information (http://www2.ed.gov/about/contacts/state/index.html)

Institutional aid

Most colleges or universities also offer financial aid, in the form of scholarships or grants. Institutional aid can be merit- or need-based. Students can inquire with a school's financial aid office to learn more about available institutional aid and confirm specific eligibility requirements.

Scholarships

Money awarded to students based on merit or need to help pay for college expenses. Many nonprofit or private organizations offer scholarships annually. Scholarships often have specific eligibility requirements, an application process, and deadlines.

> Encourage students to start their scholarship search early! Here are some scholarship search databases to share with students: College Board's Scholarship Search (https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/scholarship-search) | Fastweb (http://www.fastweb.com/)| Scholarships.com (https://www.scholarships.com/) | CareerOneStop (http://careerinfonet.org/scholarshipsearch/ScholarshipCategory.asp?searchtype=category&nodeid=22)

Eligibility for financial aid

Once students understand the types of financial aid available, the next step is to review eligibility requirements.

Federal financial aid

Learn about the eligibility requirements for federal financial aid here (https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/sites/default/files/FSA-Eligibility-11.16.12.png).

State financial aid

Eligibility is usually restricted to state residents attending an in-state college. Students who are not eligible for federal financial aid might be eligible for state financial aid. Advise students to research and confirm eligibility requirements for state financial aid programs by contacting their State Education

Agency (http://www2.ed.gov/about/contacts/state/index.html).

Institutional aid and scholarships

These types of aid may be merit- or need-based and may have specific eligibility requirements, an application process, and deadlines. Students should confirm eligibility requirements and the application process with the institution or scholarship-granting organization.

> Learn about supporting undocumented students in the college and financial aid process here (partners.imentor.org/help/supporting-undocumented-students-in-the-college-process).

Applying for financial aid

This section will review the process for applying to each type of financial aid.

Federal Student Aid - FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid)

Students must complete the FAFSA (https://fafsa.ed.gov/)to apply for federal financial aid. Colleges will use a student's FAFSA information to determine eligibility for federal, state, and institutional aid. Learn about the steps to complete the FAFSA here (https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/d4/b4/39/d4b439baf403188a22bc8d5445c23044.jpg).

> You can best support students by familiarizing yourself with the FAFSA. Preview the FAFSA using the FAFSA on the Web Worksheet (https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/sites/default/files/2015-16-fafsa-worksheet.pdf) to get an idea of the questions that students and their parents may be asked to answer.
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> The Federal Student Aid Information Center (1-800-4FED-AID/1-800-433-3243) is also a great resource if students have any questions about completing the FAFSA. Representatives are available over the phone Monday through Friday: 8 a.m. – 10 p.m. ET and Saturday: 8 a.m. – 5 p.m. ET.

- **Deadlines**: The FAFSA is available from January 1st to June 30th each year. Most colleges have filing deadlines as early as the first week of January so advise students to confirm school-specific deadlines. Federal financial aid is limited and offered on a first-come, first-served basis so encourage students to apply as soon as possible!
- **Getting Ready to Apply**: The FAFSA asks for personal and financial information for the student and his/her parent/guardian. Advise students to review and gather the necessary documents (https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/fafsa/filling-out#documents) prior to beginning the FAFSA.
- **Filling out the FAFSA**: It's helpful to review the steps of the FAFSA (https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/fafsa/filling-out#log-in) with students prior to starting the FAFSA. Advise students to fill out the FAFSA first using the FAFSA on the Web Worksheet (https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/sites/default/files/2015-16-fafsa-worksheet.pdf) to avoid making

mistakes. Once students are ready to complete the FAFSA online, they can visit https://fafsa.ed.gov/index.htm and click "Start a New FAFSA."

- **Student Aid Report (SAR)**: After students submit their FAFSA, they will receive a Student Aid Report (SAR) (http://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/fafsa/next-steps/student-aid-report), a summary of the information submitted on the FAFSA. The SAR will contain a student's Expected Family Contribution (EFC) (http://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/fafsa/next-steps/how-calculated#whats-the-expected-family-contribution), which is the number that's used by colleges to calculate how much financial aid a student is eligible to receive. Advise students to review their SAR carefully to confirm that all the information is correct.

- **Updating the FAFSA**: Updates (https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/fafsa/next-steps/correct-update#how-change)to the FAFSA can be made after it is processed. Situations in which students may need to make updates include: updated financial information, adding or removing colleges, any mistakes in reported information.

- **Financial Aid Verification**: After completing the FAFSA, some students may be informed that their application has been selected for financial aid verification, which is the process that colleges use to confirm that the data reported in the FAFSA is accurate. Being selected for financial aid verification doesn't mean you are accused of doing something wrong. If students find themselves selected for verification, it's important to complete the verification and submit the requested documentation by the school's deadline, or they may not be able to receive financial aid. Learn more about the financial aid verification process and what to do, if selected, here (http://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/paying-for-college/articles/2015/03/02/do-4-things-if-your-fafsa-is-selected-for-verification).

State financial aid

Most state financial aid programs require a separate application from federal financial aid. The FAFSA may link a student to their specific state's financial aid application at confirmation of submission page. However, advise students to research their specific state's financial aid program and application process.

CSS/Financial Aid PROFILE

The PROFILE (http://css.collegeboard.org/) is an application for nonfederal financial aid, such as institutional aid, developed by The College Board. There is a fee for completing The PROFILE, however, fee waivers are granted automatically based on financial information entered in the application. The PROFILE is often used by private schools and scholarship programs to award institutional aid — see list of participating institutions and programs here (https://profileonline.collegeboard.org/prf/PXRemotePartInstitutionServlet/PXRemotePartInstitutionServlet.srv). Advise students to confirm with specific colleges or scholarship programs to confirm deadlines and determine whether The PROFILE is required.

Comparing financial aid award packages

Financial aid award packages will often be sent out in March or April and will detail the total amount of financial aid a student is offered by a college. Packages may be sent out on paper or electronically and will include federal financial aid, such as grants, loans, and work study, state aid, and institutional aid.

> If students do not receive their financial aid packages by March or April, advise students to call their college's financial aid office. Financial aid offices may sometimes require additional forms or documentation.

As students start to receive financial aid packages, it's important to have a good understanding of college costs (https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/pay-for-college/college-costs/quick-guide-college-costs). Students should compare their financial aid award packages before accepting a school's offer of admission. Here's a useful tool that students can use to compare award packages (https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/pay-for-college/financial-aid-awards/compare-aid-calculator).

Lastly, it's important to keep in mind that students do not have to accept all the financial aid that a school offers. For example, the grants and scholarships offered may cover the entire cost of attendance so a student will not need to take out the loans, which need to be repaid. Students can accept, reduce, or decline the aid offered.

The role of iMentor in the financial aid process

Schools often provide various levels of guidance for students throughout the financial aid process. It's important that the PC connect with the school college counselor prior to the start of the school year to learn more about the school's specific financial aid process.

In addition to reading this Learning Center article on financial aid, here are other ways that iMentor can support students to navigate the complex financial aid process.

Program Coordinator

- Help students to understand the financial aid process and types of aid in the classroom
- Direct students and mentors to resources, such as the ones listed in this article or to other supports in the community (free FAFSA workshops)
- Coach students to speak with their families about the cost of college and the financial aid

Mentor

- Help students to understand the cost of college and the financial aid process and types of aid, especially loans
- Remind students of important deadlines
- Coach students to speak with their families about the cost of college and applying for financial aid (especially if parents are reluctant to provide the necessary information)
- Assist students with scholarship search and application process