

## FAFSA Verification

- The purpose of verification is to double check some of the information entered on the FAFSA. The FAFSA is a complicated form, and it's easy to make mistakes when filling it out.
- Around 20% of all FAFSA filers are chosen for verification by the FAFSA central processor, however, in a few circumstances college financial aid offices (FAOs) also select students to be verified.
- FAOs, not the FAFSA processor, are responsible for managing verification.
- Verification is school specific; a student must complete verification at each college at which s/he wants to be considered for aid.
- When the central processor selects a student for verification, it sends notice to all colleges the student has listed on his/her FAFSA. The colleges' FAOs then notify the student what is required to complete the process.
- It is common for those selected to be required to submit to their FAO:
  - A verification worksheet supplied by the school
  - Federal income tax **return transcripts** or copies of federal **tax returns (form 1040)**. If the student is dependent, his/her parents' tax documents are also required.
    - Tax documentation is not required of those who successfully use the IRS Data Retrieval Tool during FAFSA submission.
    - A tax return transcript is ordered from the IRS on-line at irs.gov. Note that a different transcript, a tax account transcript may not be used in place of a return transcript.
    - The FAO may request other documents or processes.
    - Those who have filed an amended federal tax return (Form 1040X) should contact their FAO for additional instructions.
- *Sibling verification*, which is not a part of FAFSA verification, is pursued by only a small number of private colleges to confirm that siblings of their students do attend college as reported on the FAFSA.

## Special Circumstances

- The primary purpose of the FAFSA is to assess a family's ability to pay for college for one academic year. The evaluation relies heavily on data from the family's federal income tax returns for a year that is typically two years prior to the academic year for which the FAFSA is processed.
- It is understood that family financial situations can change, and that current family income may be significantly different from that reported on the FAFSA.
- FAOs have the authority to adjust FAFSA data to more accurately represent a family's current ability to pay for college.
- Normally not considered are minor income reductions and dollar amounts that are not verifiable. Many colleges also do not consider discretionary reductions in income such as voluntarily quitting a job.
- Most requests for a special circumstances review follow a loss of employment or a reduction in non-taxed income such as child support. However, the death of a parent or parental divorce after FAFSA submission, the incurrence of unusually high medical costs not covered by insurance, or the receipt of a large, one-time cash payout, may also be considered special circumstances.
- A student affected by a special circumstance is encouraged to contact his/her college's FAO to explain the situation.
- Thorough documentation supporting the student's request for review is required.
- FAO evaluations are by nature subjective because they replace actual tax return data with estimated figures, and because evaluations are affected by an FAO's fiscal/operational philosophies. As such, determinations may differ from one FAO to another.
- The FAO's evaluation and determination are final and are not appealable.

## Dependency Appeals

- A student's dependency for financial aid is most always determined by his/her answers to about a dozen questions on the FAFSA. A student who answers "no" to all these is *dependent* and his/her FAFSA requires parent personal and financial information.
- Without any other dependency issue, a dependent student is still considered dependent regardless of the:
  - Student being self-supporting
  - Student living apart from parents
  - Student receiving no financial support from parents
  - Parents refusing to complete their part of the FAFSA
- In a rare and compelling situation, an FAO has the authority to override a standard FAFSA dependency determination and establish a student as *independent* for financial aid.
- A student wishing to appeal his/her dependency, should contact his/her college's FAO.
- A student in *legal guardianship* is independent by definition, whereas a student in *legal custody* is not. A student in custody (such as one who may have been placed with his/her grandparents) is encouraged to contact his/her FAO regarding a dependency appeal.
- Thorough documentation is required for an appeal to be considered.

## Scholarship Searching

- Scholarships are a form of free financial aid; they don't have to be repaid.
- The terms *scholarship* and *grant* are often used interchangeably, they are both free aid. It's commonly thought that a grant is based on demonstrated financial need, whereas a scholarship is based on *merit* such as a skill, ability, or academic achievement.
- Scholarships are provided by colleges, government agencies, employers, unions, churches, for-profit companies, and non-profit organizations.
- Many colleges offer recruiting scholarships to encourage students to attend their institution.
- Make sure you understand the conditions by which the scholarship is offered.
- Don't be too impressed by a fancy name for a scholarship, focus on the scholarship's dollar amount and eligibility requirements.
- Some scholarships are *one time only* while others may be renewed from year to year.
- Students receiving a scholarship are expected to write a letter of thanks to the provider.
- Obtaining a scholarship is seen as the responsibility of the student, and often requires work. Scholarship consideration may require a written application and a personal statement or essay.
- Most scholarships are obtained from providers in the student's home community and high school guidance counselors are often the best source of information about scholarships.
- There is no one, ultimate source of scholarship listings. Students should develop *leads* like a television police detective and follow up on them.
- Those who are most successful in obtaining scholarships report that a *shotgun approach* works best; you should apply for a wide array of scholarships.
- Some scholarships may be identified by conducting an on-line search. Try:
  - [bigfuture.collegeboard.org/scholarship-search](http://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/scholarship-search)
  - [cappex.com](http://cappex.com)
  - [fastweb.com](http://fastweb.com)
  - [scholarships.com](http://scholarships.com)
  - [withfrank.org](http://withfrank.org)
- Beware of scholarship scams. Never pay to receive a scholarship; if you are asked to pay anything or buy anything to receive scholarship consideration, you are being scammed. Also, personal information provided to commercial businesses offering scholarships might be used for sales promotions.
- When in doubt about a scholarship, ask your high school guidance counselor for assistance.