

# Families

## Financial Aid Toolkit

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*This publication was produced in collaboration with the Texas Education Agency and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. For feedback or questions, please contact [info@texasoncourse.org](mailto:info@texasoncourse.org).*

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## Introduction

Have a senior? Starting this school year, **all students must submit a financial aid application to graduate**. Every year, **billions of financial aid dollars go unclaimed**. And in Texas, students miss out on roughly \$300 million in grants (free money) each year by simply not enrolling in college. Texas' financial aid application graduation requirement gives students an extra push to get these funds and pursue education or training after high school.

Families play an important role in the financial aid process. Not only do students benefit from motivation at home, but many students will need to report parental information on their application.

While applying for financial aid can seem confusing, we've gathered some tools and resources to help you through the process. Keep reading to find out how you can best support your student this school year.

Want to better understand how you can support your student this school year? Keep reading to learn:

1. About Texas' financial aid application graduation requirement
2. How financial aid helps students
3. How to help your student prepare for the application
4. Where to get more support
5. How to help your student with next steps

**\*Note:** Texas OnCourse wants to be a resource for all Texas students and their families, no matter where they're coming from or where they're going. When available, we will provide links to documents and resources in both English and Spanish. When translations are not available, or to view links in other languages, consider using a Google Chrome browser and use the [translate function](#).

## Understand Texas' financial aid application graduation requirement

Texas Education Code states that starting with the 2021–22 school year, students must take one of the following actions to graduate:

- Complete and submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
- Complete and submit the Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TASFA)
- Submit a signed opt-out form to their high school counselor

## Who should opt out?

Under certain conditions, students can choose to decline the graduation requirement by submitting [a signed opt-out form](#) to their school counselor. The form is also [available in Spanish](#).

This decision may be made based on personal circumstances. Your student's school counselor can help answer questions, address your concerns, and provide guidance regarding this graduation requirement. Keep in mind that students who opt out of the requirement can still complete and submit financial aid applications if they change their minds.

## Understand how financial aid helps students

Financial aid is money to help pay for college or training after high school. By submitting the FAFSA or the TASFA, students can get financial aid for the upcoming school year. So even if your student isn't sure about attending college now, completing an application leaves the door open for this decision later in the year.

The financial aid application process can be confusing, and some families may not be sure if completing an application is the right choice for their student. Some families may even be nervous about completing an application that requires sensitive personal information. Check out this helpful resource on Debunking Financial Aid Myths [in English](#) or [in Spanish](#) to learn the truth about these applications so that you can make the best decision for your student.

## Availability of aid

Financial aid comes in many forms, including grants, scholarships, and loans. It also comes from many sources. The federal government, state agencies, colleges, private companies, and banks are a few. This variety helps make it possible for students to qualify for financial support, regardless of their family's background or financial situation. Completing a financial aid application does not mean that a student is required to accept any funds offered, including student loans. Families should make a decision about what type of aid and how much they want to accept based on their situation and needs.

## Free aid

As mentioned, student loans aren't the only form of financial aid out there. Students must submit a financial aid application to qualify for federal and state grants, as well as institutional and private scholarships. This is all free money that students don't have to pay back!

## Understanding the lingo

What's the difference between grants and loans? What does net price mean, and what does my estimated family contribution have to do with it? If you find yourself asking these questions, or others, you may want to familiarize yourself with common financial aid terms. [College Board's BigFuture Financial Aid Glossary](#) provides a helpful list of all the terms you need to know.

## Long-term impact on student goals

By the year 2030, it's predicted that at least 60% of jobs in Texas will require some form of higher education credentials or training. So attending college or getting training after high school helps today's students compete in tomorrow's workforce. Why not apply for money that can help them do that?

## Help your student prepare for the application

As your student gets ready to complete a financial aid application, they may need your support in the following areas:

- Figuring out which application to complete
- Determining their dependency status
- Determining which parental income to report on the application
- Gathering necessary information and materials
- Keeping track of important dates and deadlines
- Avoiding common errors

## Figuring out which application to complete

Students will submit **one** of the following applications to apply for financial aid:

- **The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)**
  - [Online application](#) for federal, state, and institutional aid
  - Only available to US citizens, permanent residents, and certain [eligible noncitizens](#)\*
- **The Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TASFA)**
  - [Online or paper application](#) for state and institutional aid
  - Only available to [Texas residents](#) who are not eligible to apply for federal student aid through the FAFSA.\* This resource is also available [in Spanish](#).

**\*Note:** Parental citizenship status does not impact a student's eligibility for financial aid.

## Determining student dependency status and which parent to report

When applying for financial aid, students are considered either dependent or independent. **Financial aid dependency is not the same as IRS/tax dependency.** Dependent students must report parent income information on their application. Here, “parent” only refers to biological or adoptive parents.

The following resources can help you figure out your student’s dependency status and which parent (if any) to report on their financial aid application:

- Financial aid dependency guide [in English](#) or [in Spanish](#)
- Who’s my parent? [in English](#) or [in Spanish](#)
- Special circumstances [in English](#) or [in Spanish](#)

## Gathering necessary information

Completing the FAFSA or TASFA is much easier if you have the information you need to complete the form. Students and parents of dependent students may need the following to complete their application:

- Social Security number or alien registration number (if an eligible noncitizen)
- Federal income tax returns, W-2s, and other records of money earned from the prior-prior tax year (two years before the year you’re completing the application)
- Bank statements and records of investments and businesses
- Records of untaxed income (if applicable)
- An FSA ID\* (FAFSA only) to electronically sign the FAFSA

See the Financial Aid Application Checklist [in English](#) or [in Spanish](#) for a list of materials needed to complete the application. Encourage your student to connect with the college’s financial aid office about any extra documentation they may need from students.

\*Parents who are not eligible to create an FSA ID can sign the FAFSA by printing, signing, and mailing the FAFSA signature page to Federal Student Aid. To learn how visit Federal Student Aid’s What is a signature page? [in English](#) or [in Spanish](#).

**Resource spotlight:** Watch Federal Student Aid’s [How to Create an Account and Username \(FSA ID\) for StudentAid.gov](#) to learn how to create an FSA ID or review this [Instrucciones para sacaruna FSA ID](#).

**Hint:** Students should use a personal email address for any financial aid or college accounts. Students will lose their district-assigned email addresses after they graduate high school.

## Keeping track of important dates and deadlines

Financial aid is offered in annual cycles that run from July 1 to June 30 of the following year. Students should complete an application for the year they are requesting financial aid, and not the current academic year.

The FAFSA and TASFA are available October 1\* each year. This is the earliest date that a student can complete and submit their application to apply for aid during the upcoming school year. Financial aid is often awarded on a first-come, first-served basis, so encourage your student to apply as early as possible after October 1.

**\*Note: Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) announced that, in order to fully implement the FAFSA Simplification Act, the 2024-25 FAFSA will be released in December 2023, a delay from the usual date of October 1.**

Help your student keep track of the following financial aid deadlines:

- **State priority deadline:** In Texas, the state priority deadline is January 15\*. More financial aid is available to students who apply by this deadline.
- **College deadline:** Each college sets its own financial aid deadline. Encourage your student to double check each college's deadline. In some cases, it may be earlier than the state priority deadline.
- **Federal deadline:** The federal filing deadline is June 30 of the financial aid award year. However, we strongly encourage students to apply by the earliest priority deadline set by the state or college. The longer students wait to apply, the less likely that financial aid will be available.

**\*Note: The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has updated the 2024-25 state priority deadline from January 15 to March 15, 2024.**

Keep in mind that students need to apply for financial aid every year they're in school. Visit Federal Student Aid to learn more about when to apply for financial aid [in English](#) or [in Spanish](#).

**Resource Spotlight:** Your student can receive **free** virtual advising support via text message! Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board developed a chatbot named [ADVi](#) – short for advisor – to provide on-demand support to Texas students to help ensure that they receive the

information they need to access higher education. When students sign up to receive messages from ADVi, they get:

- Weekly reminders about upcoming deadlines and nudges to complete key college access milestones
- The ability to ask questions about college 24/7 via text message,
- Backup support from our virtual advisors if a student has needs or questions beyond what ADVi can provide,
- Information and tips to help with their college applications, planning, and financial aid, and
- Resources to help navigate the transition to college.

Students may opt-in to receive ADVi messages when creating their profile on ApplyTexas. On the last page, make sure your student selects **Yes** when asked “Do you consent and agree that ApplyTexas and its partners (the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and AdmitHub) may communicate with you by email or text message (including SMS and MMS messages)?”

Currently, ADVi only sends outgoing text messages in English. However, students can ask ADVi to respond to questions in a different language by using #language. If students are looking to chat in Spanish, they can also ask for a human by using #followup and ADVi will connect you with a Spanish-speaking advisor.

## Avoiding common student errors

Everyone makes mistakes. But when it comes to your student’s financial aid application, making a mistake could cost them. Help your student avoid these [10 common FAFSA mistakes](#) when they fill out their application.

## Know where to get additional support

You aren’t the only person who can help your student complete a financial aid application. Ask your student’s school counselor about financial aid events or other opportunities for support. Some schools host campus-wide events on nights or weekends. Others have financial aid “office hours” during the school day. Your student may also be able to work on their application during class. Remind your student what information they’ll need if this is the case.

Before meeting with a school counselor or other financial aid adviser, preview the application so you better understand where you and your student need help.

- **FAFSA:** Complete the [2022–2023 FAFSA on the Web worksheet](#) (also available in [Spanish](#)) to see all the questions your student will need to answer when completing the application online.

- **TASFA:** Print a copy of the [TASFA application](#) and highlight any confusing places. Be sure to review the notes on pages 7–14, which answer a lot of common questions.

**Important TASFA Note:** The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, in collaboration with the TASFA Advisory Committee, have been working hard to make completing a TASFA form smoother for both students and colleges. Students eligible to complete the TASFA are now able to complete and submit the application online. Visit [this page](#) for more information.

## Help your student with next steps

Submitting a financial aid application is only the first step to getting money for college or training after high school. Learn how to support your student in what comes next.

- **Make sure their application was correctly submitted and received by the college.** FAFSA students can check their [Federal Student Aid account](#) by logging in with the FSA ID and password they created when they submitted the application. TASFA students will need to contact colleges directly.
- **FAFSA only: review the Student Aid Report (SAR).** This document will let students know if any corrections need to be made on their application. Encourage your student to look over the section “What You Must Do Now.” Read [How and when will I get my Student Aid Report \(SAR\)](#) from the Federal Student Aid website for more information.
- **Respond to verification requests.** Students may be asked to submit additional paperwork if their application is selected for verification. If selected for verification, colleges and universities may request a copy of your tax return transcript, or other information to verify eligibility for aid. To learn more about the verification process, read [Frequent Questions: Proving my FAFSA Information is True](#) or find this information in Spanish on page 20 of [The How-To Guide for High School Students FAFSA \(And the Adults Who Help Them\)](#).
- **Decide what aid to accept.** Students can choose to select some, all, or none of the financial aid offered to them. Have your student review this list of questions [in English](#) or [in Spanish](#) to better analyze their financial aid offers. In general, encourage your student to accept gift aid, such as scholarships and grants, before accepting loans. If accepting loans, make sure you and your student understand the loan terms and interest rates. Students should also pay attention to whether the aid they’re receiving is renewable in future years. For more information, read Federal Student Aid’s [Accepting Aid page](#). You can also use uAspire’s [College Cost Calculator](#) to help analyze and compare financial aid offers.
- **Consider if your situation has changed.** Your student’s financial aid award is based on prior prior year income. That means students applying to receive financial aid to attend college in the 2024–2025 school year will provide income information from 2022 tax



returns. A lot can change in two years! People can move or lose jobs. New circumstances may arise that affect your income or ability to pay for tuition. If you feel like your student's financial aid application does not reflect your current situation, your student can appeal their award offers after their application has been processed by their schools. Students should contact the school they plan to attend to confirm their appeal process. Likely the school will request an appeal letter, and students can use [this template from SwiftStudent](#) to help them get started.

- **Learn how aid is paid out.** Depending on the type of aid offered, students may need to complete additional steps. For example, students receiving federal loans must complete entrance counseling and sign a master promissory note. Students offered work-study will need to apply for work-study jobs at their college. Read Federal Student Aid's [Receiving Financial Aid page](#) to learn more about how and when your student can expect to receive their student aid payments.
- **Understand how to stay eligible for aid.** Students must submit a financial aid application every year they need financial aid. Students should get familiar with both federal and school policies for maintaining financial aid eligibility. Read Federal Student Aid's [Staying Eligible page](#) to find more information about what your student must do to keep receiving their federal student aid.

**Big takeaway:** Encourage students to check any communication portals frequently. This includes their email, their FSA account, any college application portals they've created, and regular postal mail.

These steps might look different for students completing the Online TASFA. Encourage your student to contact the colleges they're applying to if they have questions or concerns about applying, receiving, or maintaining eligibility for financial aid.

# Resource library

## General resources

- PDF: Debunking financial aid myths [in English](#) or [in Spanish](#)
- Article: [Financial aid glossary: Learn the lingo](#)
- Article: [Federal aid eligibility](#)
- PDF: Texas residency requirements [in English](#) or [in Spanish](#)
- PDF: Financial aid dependency guide [in English](#) or [in Spanish](#)
- PDF: Who's my parent? [in English](#) or [in Spanish](#)
- Article: Student dependency status: Special circumstances [in English](#) or [in Spanish](#)
- Presentation: Financial Aid FAQs [in English](#) and [in Spanish](#)
- PDF: Financial aid application checklist [in English](#) or [in Spanish](#)

## Resources to support completing and submitting the FAFSA

- Homepage: [Create an FSA ID](#)
- Video: [How to Create an Account and Username \(FSA ID\)](#) (English)
- PDF: [Instrucciones para sacar una FSA ID](#) (Spanish)
- Homepage: [Complete the FAFSA](#) (English) or [Solicitud FAFSA](#) (Spanish)
- PDF: [Download and complete the FAFSA](#) 2023-2024 (English) or [Solicitud Gratuita de Ayuda Federal para Estudiantes](#) 2023-2024 (Spanish)
- PDF: [FAFSA on the Web worksheet](#) 2023-2024 (English) or [Planilla de preparación para FAFSA on the Web](#) 2023-2024 (Spanish)
- Article: [10 common FAFSA mistakes](#)
- Article: [Eight easy steps for parents completing the FAFSA form](#)
- Article: [Important FAFSA dates and deadlines](#) (English) or [Fechas límite de la FAFSA](#) (Spanish)
- Article: [How to review and correct your FAFSA](#)
- Article: [How and when will I get my Student Aid Report \(SAR\)](#)
- Article: [Frequent questions: Proving my FAFSA information is true](#) (English)
- PDF: [¿Qué pasa si me piden pruebas de que la información de mi formulario FAFSA es real?](#) (page 20, Spanish)

## Resources to support completing and submitting the TASFA

- Homepage: [Complete the TASFA](#) (available in both English and Spanish)

## Resources to support analyzing financial aid offers

- Homepage: [College cost calculator](#)
- Homepage: [Student loan information center](#) (English) or [Préstamos estudiantiles](#) (Spanish)
- PDF: Analyzing award letters [in English](#) or [in Spanish](#)
- Article: [Special circumstances appeal letter](#)
- Article: [Accepting financial aid](#)
- Article: [Receiving financial aid](#)
- Article: [Staying eligible](#)