

How bureaucracy destroys dreams for first-generation college students

BY AUDREY FISCH, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 02/08/24 5:00 PM ET



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If you are a college student or have college-age children, you are likely aware that FAFSA (the Free Application for Federal Student Aid) has been revamped. Unfortunately, the overhaul has been beset by problems.

Instead of launching on Oct. 1, as has been typical, the new FAFSA opened for a “soft” launch on Dec. 30. “Soft” launch can be read as code for “with all sorts of problems” including various glitches and unannounced and periodic maintenance during which the system was inaccessible.

These issues have already led the Department of Education to announce that colleges would not begin to receive Institutional Student Information Records until the first half of March, months later than usual. Institutions need those records to create financial aid packages, including the Pell Grant for the lowest-income families. Students and families, in turn, need time to study and compare these packages before decision day

(typically May 1), which is why leading advocacy and professional organizations recently issued a call for an extension of commitment deadlines.

In the meantime, however, insufficient attention has been paid to one group of students who is singularly and dramatically affected by the ongoing FAFSA issues: Students with parents without a Social Security number. These citizen students, who are eligible for federal financial aid like any other citizen student who meets the income eligibility threshold, are currently completely locked out of the FAFSA.

Parents trying to complete the form receive an error message saying “they are unauthorized to act on behalf of the student since they already have a 24-25 FAFSA form.” In other words, not only is there a glitch, but students and their families face a maddeningly inaccurate and unhelpful error message that suggests that there is something wrong on their end rather than a message clarifying that the system is responsible for their inability to file their application.

There is no information on the FAFSA homepage alerting students to this issue. Unless they are being advised by a well-informed FAFSA navigator, these families would have no way of knowing that this is one of several “open issues” with the application. The inability of parents without a Social Security number to complete the FAFSA was identified on Jan. 4, but remains unresolved.

As February moves along, here’s what this problem means for a student I have been working with through More Than Bootstraps, the nonprofit I founded to support first-generation, underrepresented students.

Janely (a pseudonym to protect her identity) has worked hard to achieve her goals and put together a competitive college application. However, due to her parent’s immigration status, she currently cannot complete the FAFSA.

Some of Janely’s top choice schools, like Duke University, have posted deadlines of Feb. 1 for applicants to submit the FAFSA and no explicit directions for those who cannot complete the application right now.

Janely faces the daunting prospect of having to reach out to each and every school to which she is applying to explain why she will not be able to meet the institutional FAFSA deadline.

Meanwhile, Janely’s state aid, should she choose to attend a New Jersey institution, is also in limbo. Many states use the data generated by the FAFSA to award state aid and some have fast-approaching deadlines. Louisiana, for example, has a priority deadline of Feb. 1. Thankfully, in New Jersey, the Higher Education Student Assistance Authority (HESAA) awards generous aid to low-income students and has a late deadline of Sept. 15, 2024. But without an update, it’s unclear how long her application will remain stalled.

For our continuing college students, this is also an issue. They, at least, have one financial aid office and hopefully a friendly face to reach out to and inquire about what they should do, including whether they should attempt to file a paper FAFSA in the interim. But the uncertainty is bound to lead to unnecessary stress and extra work.

When this issue is eventually resolved for parents without a Social Security number, one can only presume that affected students will have a short window (far less time than their peers with citizen parents) to complete the FAFSA. Students who are away at college will face the additional challenge of having to remotely complete the form with their families.

Institutions, meanwhile, especially the under-resourced public institutions that serve the vast majority of Pell-eligible students, are rightly worried about their limited time to create financial aid packages for students and effects on enrollment. Ironically, Federal Student Aid Chief Richard Cordray is quoted in a Jan. 30 [press release](#) celebrating “how easy and fast it is to complete and submit the 2024–25 FAFSA form.”

Bureaucracy is imperfect. The revamp of the FAFSA was expected to be challenging, and it has, unsurprisingly, met those expectations. The new FAFSA should, hopefully, in the long run, make things easier for all students, including those with parents who don't have a Social Security number.

Still, it is still heartbreaking to witness the roadblocks students with parents without a Social Security number now face. These young American citizens embody their families' hopes and dreams. Higher education has the potential to be transformational: for these potential first-generation college students, their families and our society.

Whether intentional or not, the new FAFSA has sent a message to these young people. Your ability to file an application for financial aid, and by extension your education and you, are not a priority.

Immediate clear messaging and a fix to this issue must be at the top of the list for the Department of Education. States and other scholarship organizations that use the FAFSA data must extend their deadlines. And institutions must extend their commitment deadlines.

These students are being left behind. One month into this limbo, we need to respect their dreams and do better.

Audrey Fisch, PhD, is professor of English at New Jersey City University and founder and president of [More Than Bootstraps](#), a nonprofit that employs a stipend-supported, near-peer mentoring model to build a community of first-generation, underrepresented students who empower each other to access and succeed in higher education.

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