

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 21, 2024

Secretary Miguel Cardona
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona:

Amidst the ongoing updates from the rollout of the FAFSA Simplification Act, we write today requesting temporary policy changes to the FAFSA process for this school year. We appreciate the Department of Education's efforts to mitigate delays so far, including lowering verification selection rates, pausing standard program reviews, and providing technical assistance directly to schools. Yet, even with the on-time rollout of the Institutional Student Information Record data to schools this month, colleges and universities across the nation will still be delayed in rolling out their financial aid packages to prospective students.

This delay, as the Department surely knows, has caused great uncertainty for students who will soon be running up against decision deadlines without any further guidance on their financial aid. Further, the delay in student decision is causing great concern among our schools, especially smaller institutions and institutions serving higher percentages of students qualifying for federal financial aid. At community colleges across the nation, for example, nearly one quarter of their funding comes from tuition.¹ Couple this with the smaller size and resources of community and independent colleges, the potential loss of students will have an even greater impact than on their four-year counterparts. Our community and independent colleges provide invaluable skills to its students, who then go on to provide invaluable services in their towns and cities. The impact of these schools cannot be overstated, and we cannot overlook their needs as we move through this FAFSA rollout.

To that end, we first request that the Department delay institutional gainful employment (GE) and financial value transparency reporting deadlines without delaying accountability deadlines. Institutions are currently required to report data by July 1, 2024, yet the Department will not publish data or require student warnings or acknowledgments for GE and financial value transparency until July 1, 2026. Giving institutions more time to complete this reporting will have no negative impact on students and families in terms of institutional accountability or transparency, but will certainly benefit them by having financial aid administrators focused in these upcoming months on getting their financial aid in order. ED could still open the reporting process per its planned schedule to allow institutions the option of reporting by July 1, 2024.

¹ chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnibpcjpeglclefindmkaj/https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Fast_Facts_2024.pdf

Additionally, we would like the Department to permit schools to accept electronic copies of verification materials, including electronic signatures. There is precedent for this administrative fix, as the Department allowed V4 and V5 applicants to submit an e-signature for the statement of educational purpose during the COVID-19 pandemic. Barring any fraudulent activity noticed by the Department during this waiver period, allowing for electronic signatures significantly shortened the timespan for applications to be processed and can be a key policy change to provide students more time to make an informed decision about where they will continue their education.

Congress passed legislation to simplify the FAFSA process in order to ease the burden on institutions, prospective students, and their families. Thus far, the Department has made the implementation process more onerous and burdensome for all parties. The Department now has the opportunity to course correct and help ease that burden by allowing these flexibilities.

With financial aid offices already dealing with staffing difficulties², any administrative streamlining the Department can provide will have an outsized impact on our small colleges. We urge the Department to enact these changes for the 2024-2025 FAFSA process so we can further alleviate financial aid offices and provide students with their financial aid offers in a timelier manner.

Sincerely,



Roger Marshall, M.D.
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Tommy Tuberville
United States Senator



John Hickenlooper
United States Senator

² <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/workplace/staff-issues/2023/12/05/colleges-outsource-financial-aid-offices-amid-staffing>