

A Parent's Guide to FAFSA

Parents: You got this.

Helping your favorite student file their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) just got a whole lot easier with our FAFSA Guide.

Follow our guide to file your FAFSA quickly and efficiently!



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 Services are provided at no cost to Montana families. Reach Higher Montana is a nonprofit that helps students strategically pursue educational opportunities.

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Why do I need to do the FAFSA in the first place?

A person needs an FSA ID in order to sign FAFSA electronically as well as access any federal financial aid info that is attached to them such as looking up loan servicers/balances as well as it is needed in order to consolidate student loan debt. By doing the FAFSA, it unlocks any potential federal financial aid funding as well as some institutional scholarship opportunities.

1 Create an account

Visit fsaid.ed.gov to create an FSA ID. When completing the [FAFSA](#) online, two unique FSA ID's are needed: yours and the students. The FSA ID essentially confirms who you say you are.

Please note: Your child or dependent must create his or her own FSA ID; you cannot create an FSA ID on behalf of someone else.

FSA ID

■ What information do I need to create my [FSA ID](#)?

Your name exactly as it is printed on your social security card, your social security number, your date of birth, and a professional email address that is not shared by a student and parent.

■ When should I create my [FSA ID](#)?

The best time is the spring semester of your student's junior year. FAFSA filing kicks off the fall semester of their senior year, which means it's important to save FSA ID login information.

■ Parent - Just one parent is needed for [FAFSA](#).

Yes, at least one biological parent or legal guardian will need an FSA ID as well as the dependent student in order to fill out and sign the FAFSA electronically. It allows the parent to use the IRS data retrieval tool to import tax information directly from the IRS using secure means. A parent's electronic signature only acknowledges that the parent financial information entered is accurate and does not create further financial obligations for the parent.

■ Student - Create a personal email account.

Use a separate, personal email from the parent. The student should not use school email as access to school email accounts typically ends when the student graduates. They will need to be able to access their FAFSA information through a valid, working, email account.

■ How long does it take to create an [FSA ID](#)?

It can take as few as 10 minutes, especially if you have all the necessary items listed in the first bullet point. Beware, it can take several days for FAFSA to verify that the name, date of birth and social security number match Social Security Administration records. This means you may not have immediate access to use your FSA ID. You will receive a separate email letting you know when your information has been verified.

FSA ID *(cont.)*

■ Why can't I create an [FSA ID](#) on behalf of my student?

It's important to know that this is the student's FAFSA, and the student will need to reapply each year they are in college.

■ What if I have remarried/been adopted and my name has not been officially changed with the Social Security Administration?

You must use the name exactly as it appears on your social security card. You will either need to request a change of name with the Social Security Administration before creating your FSA ID, or use your previous name as it is printed on your Social Security Card.

■ Can I use a shortened version of my name or a nickname to create my FSA ID?

No, you must use your name and Social Security Number exactly as it appears on your Social Security Card in order to create your FSA ID username and password. You can use nicknames or shortened versions of your name for your username and/or password.

2 FAFSA Filing begins October 1.

File that FAFSA!

FAFSA Filing

■ Information Parent Needs

FSA ID, correct social security numbers, dates of birth, separation/divorce, knowledge of current assets especially in cash, checking, and savings accounts. Knowledge of untaxed income such as child support paid or received. Knowledge of any supplemental net worth such as rental property and tax information going back two years.

■ Information Student needs

All the same information listed for the parent that applies to the student.

■ Reasons why the [FAFSA](#) matters

It is the starting point for most need-based financial aid including access to Pell Grants, federal student loans, work-study and need-based scholarships. It provides colleges with an expected family contribution (an estimate of how much the family can provide directly from their financial resources) which is used to determine financial need and may open opportunities for grants, loans, and scholarships from federal, institutional and private providers.

■ How long does it take to complete the [FAFSA](#)

It can take anywhere from 20 minutes to one hour to complete. The time involved can vary if the student is dependent or independent, the complexity of tax information and if the student has any special circumstances. If the student and parent have things in order before logging in to complete the [FAFSA](#), it shouldn't take very long.





FAFSA Filing *(cont.)*

■ **What year taxes do I need for the FAFSA?**

Prior, prior year. That means going back two years. For instance, the 2019-2020 [FAFSA](#), both parents, and students would use tax information from 2017.

■ **I screwed up, what do I do?**

Depending on where the error was made, you can log into [FAFSA](#) and make corrections. If it does not allow for you to do so electronically, you can receive assistance by calling the US Department of Education at 1-800-4-FEDAID, or you can contact the financial aid office at your school to see how to correct the error.

■ **I have special circumstances and need to speak with someone, who can I speak with?**

Contact the financial aid office of your school because there will be documentation paperwork to fill out with them. Examples of special circumstances: significant loss of income since the tax year reported on the FAFSA, change in marital status or birth of a child since completing the FAFSA but before school begins.

■ **I'm divorced - how does that impact the FAFSA?**

It impacts the [FAFSA](#) by the student needing to use the parent who they have lived with more than half the time over the course of the year as well as the parent who provides more than half the support for the student. So if the student lives with each parent equally, it would then be determined by which parent pays health insurance for the student. It would be that parent who the student would use for parental information on that year's [FAFSA](#) regardless if they are remarried or not. Keep in mind that step parent information is also recorded in the parental information, regardless of adoption or not, for a dependent student who is living with and dependent on the remarried parent as determined by FAFSA dependency questions. Dependent status for FAFSA purposes is not related to who claims the student on their taxes.

■ **I don't know what college I will be attending or have changed my mind about the school I will be attending. What do I need to do?**

The [FAFSA](#) allows you to list up to 10 schools you are thinking about attending. Your FAFSA information will be automatically submitted to each school you list for review by their financial aid officers. If you have more than 10 schools you are considering, you can update the list or request the financial aid offices pull your information into their system for review. If you decide to attend a school you did not list initially, contact their financial aid office for support to have your FAFSA reviewed by them.

FAFSA Filing *(cont.)*

■ Am I finished after I submit my FAFSA?

Nope! By completing the [FAFSA](#), you are only beginning the process. Once you and your student decide on the school he or she wishes to attend, additional steps will be required by the Financial Aid Office at the chosen institution. Your child will need to read every letter and/or email sent by the school to make sure they complete necessary steps to accept or decline aid offers, complete federal student loan counseling and sign their Master Promissory Note if they choose to accept any federal loans.

■ Will I or my student need to apply for other types of financial aid?

YES! Completion of the [FAFSA](#) only qualifies you for Federal loans, grants, and work-study opportunities. Additional applications will be required for institutional and private scholarships. Check with the financial aid office about how to locate and apply for scholarships specific to the school you choose. Connect with an RHM advisor in your area.

■ I have a student who wants to file independently; can they?

They can always opt out of having to provide parental information, but be prepared to have the [FAFSA](#) flagged and the financial aid office requesting documentation as to their circumstances and why they are unable to do so. That is why it is important for the student to contact the financial aid office and ask what documentation is required so that it save them time as well as give them an explanation if they can file as being independent or not.

3 Know FAFSA Deadlines

FSA ID

■ **Spring of junior year - create your [FSA ID](#).** This can be done the fall of your senior year too, but make sure it is created prior to October 1st of your senior year so you can get started on your FAFSA as soon as it becomes available!

FAFSA filing

■ **Fall of senior year, October 1 through December 1; Every year you attend college, October 1 through December 1**

You can always complete a [FAFSA](#) after December 1 of your senior year but you may lose out on receiving funds you may have been qualified to receive.

■ What are priority deadlines?

Priority deadlines are what schools use to determine disbursements of funds. All schools have so much funding to divide out amongst students and those students who have submitted FAFSA by the priority deadline have a greater chance to receive those types of funds. This is especially important for need-based funds and work-study opportunities! **December 1 is the priority deadline for most Montana colleges. Check with your college to confirm.**

**FAFSA
OPENS**



**PRIORITY
DEADLINE**



4 Resources

■ **Reach Higher Montana Outreach Advisors** are available across Montana. To contact the nearest RHM Advisor, <https://www.reachhighermontana.org/advisors/>

■ **Contact the Financial Aid office** at the school you plan to attend.

■ **Your High School Counselor** is available for simple questions and “how to” advice.

■ fafsa.gov, and www.studentaid.gov

■ [FAFSA preview](#)

■ [FOTW](#) (FAFSA on the web worksheet)

■ [FAFSA4Caster](#)

Use this site to see how much financial aid you might be eligible to receive based on different financial situations (ie: How will my parent’s income affect me if they are divorced and I can use either one, what if I sell some of my assets before applying for FAFSA, what effect will the cost of attendance at two or more schools have on my aid potential at each school, etc.)

5 FAFSA Filing Checklist

- FSA ID** (both parent and student)
- Parents’ date of birth** (If considered dependent; i.e. under 24 without children)
- Alien Registration Card** or **Permanent Resident Card** (if not a U.S. citizen)
- Month and year of parents’ marriage, divorce** or **separation** (if considered dependent; ie under 24 without children)
- Driver’s license** (if you have one)
- Social security number** (both parent and student)
- Prior, prior year untaxed income records**, such as child support or veteran’s non-educational benefits (For instance, the 2019-2020 FAFSA, both parents, and students would use tax information from 2017)
- Prior, prior year federal tax returns** and **W2 forms** (For instance, the 2019-2020 FAFSA, both parents, and students would use tax information from 2017)
- Information on savings, investments, business** and/or **farm assets** (if applicable)