



As Better FAFSA Rollout Falters, Community Colleges Have Messaging Opportunity

How our institutions can show up for students in the face of uncertainty.

BY CARRIE WARICK-SMITH

Showing up for students in this case means outreach and support to help them complete the FAFSA at all phases, and publicizing that support well into the summer. It also means sharing the message that community colleges are open enrollment, do not have deadlines, and are transfer paths to four-year institutions.

“MESS,” “DISASTER,” “FIASCO,” “BUNGLED,” “TUMULTUOUS,” and “botched” are just some of the adjectives that have been used to describe the U.S. Department of Education’s rollout for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) for the 2024-25 academic year. Depending on the academic year, well over 20 million, and sometimes nearly 30 million, FAFSAs are completed so that students can access federal, and in some cases, state and institutional financial aid. However, the Department’s rocky rollout of changes that Congress intended to improve the process has caused higher education to face a tumultuous enrollment cycle for the second time this decade.

Following legislation passed in December 2020, the Department has been working to implement the “Better FAFSA,” with its promises to make the tedious form easier to complete, knowledge of Pell eligibility available years in advance, and expanded access to the need-based grant. In the long run, I believe (and greatly hope) it is still possible for it to meet and exceed those goals. But first, the decline in FAFSAs filed due to the three-month delayed start date (Dec. 31 instead of Oct. 1) and the repeated processing errors delaying delivery of financial aid information to institutions must be addressed.

Community colleges, and higher education in general, must face this far less than ideal situation — many students are completely up in the air about where to go to college, and even more alarmingly, potential students from low-income backgrounds may be debating not where to go to college, but if to go to college at all.

As of April 5, 38% fewer high school seniors have completed the FAFSA this year, compared to the same point of time in past years. (Check out www.NCANFAFSATracker.org for the latest data.) Over the winter, I’ve heard from community college leaders who are very concerned that this could predict a tremendous drop in enrollment. Some are experiencing an anecdotal drop in adult learners filing the

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FAFSA, in addition to the decrease of high school students submitting the form whose numbers are tracked by the National College Attainment Network. Yet other college leaders say this could be a boon for our sector because students hoping to attend a four-year institution may decide to attend a community college instead.

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Showing up for students in this case means outreach and support to help them complete the FAFSA at all phases, and publicizing that support well into the summer. It also means sharing the message that community colleges are open enrollment, do not have deadlines, and are transfer paths to four-year institutions. Our institutions offer programs throughout the year and, as open-enrollment admissions, provide far more access points on the calendar. Sub-associate programs can offer upskilling that is supported through other sources such as Individual Training Accounts funded through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) or the SNAP Employment and Training funds available to SNAP recipients.

Given the likely delays in financial aid packages, there will be many students in every community wondering whether they can afford college and what their options are. Community colleges need to be vocal about the choices.

This message of affordability and flexibility is one that campuses must bring to their communities. How can trustees help contribute? One encouraged activity is for trustees, as well as presidents, alumni, and other community college leaders and supporters to write opinion pieces in local media sharing the benefits of their college with the region. Another is to have open dialogue with your campus president/ leadership about the local realities and opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a dam that delayed admissions; when the dam broke after the pandemic passed, college leaders have been put into the position of having to swim upstream against the rushing waters.

The federal government has had bumpy rollouts of federal programs

before — Healthcare.gov certainly comes to mind. But now, 14 years later, it has become part of our national expectation that everyone should have an avenue to access healthcare. The headaches caused by the FAFSA delay will also be overcome. It is most likely that in a few years, when the FAFSA is back to opening on time (October 1), the form is shorter and easier to complete, and 8th graders and returning adults are able to predict if they will be eligible, the rollout will be a hazy, unfortunate memory in the higher education landscape.

But for the students who thought 2024 would be their year to begin or return to their postsecondary education but who ultimately do not engage because this was one barrier too many, their lives could be forever altered.

Community colleges have always worn many hats within their respective communities: educational institutions for transfer students, workforce development for the local economy, a source of dual enrollment with high schools, fulfillment for the community at large and, increasingly, as provider of or connector to safety net services.

This moment is yet another in which community colleges can capitalize on our strengths and tell our local students “We are here for you” for a semester, for a degree, through completion, or for transfer — and that *you do not need to opt out of higher education due to uncertainty.*



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