

Do You Need Money for College?

Revised September 2026





Apply for Federal Student Aid

What is federal student aid?

It's money from the federal government that helps you pay for college, career school, trade school, or graduate school expenses. Federal student aid is available through grants, work-study funds, and loans.

How do I apply for aid?

Complete the *Free Application for Federal Student Aid* (FAFSA®) form by logging in at fafsa.gov to apply online or by filling out and mailing the FAFSA PDF.

When completing the FAFSA form, you and any required contributors must provide information to determine your eligibility for federal student aid. A contributor is anyone (a student, the student's spouse, a biological or adoptive parent, and/or the parent's spouse) who is required to provide information on the FAFSA form, sign the FAFSA form, and provide consent and approval to have their federal tax information transferred directly from the IRS into the form.

Consent and approval for transferring federal tax information are required, even if you didn't file a U.S. tax return or are asked to enter your federal tax information manually into the FAFSA form. If you or your contributor(s) don't provide consent and approval, you won't be eligible for federal student aid. By providing consent and approval, you agree to

- share your personally identifiable information provided on the FAFSA form with the IRS;
- have your federal tax information transferred directly into the FAFSA form via the *FUTURE Act* Direct Data Exchange with the IRS;
- allow the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to use the federal tax information to determine eligibility for federal student aid;
- allow ED to share the federal tax information with colleges, career/trade schools, and states for awarding and administering financial aid; and
- allow ED to reuse your federal tax information on another FAFSA form where you are listed as a contributor (e.g., parents with multiple dependent children submitting FAFSA forms).



Each contributor, including you (the student), will need their own StudentAid.gov account to complete and sign the FAFSA form online. You can create a StudentAid.gov account before you fill out the FAFSA form.

As the student, you must provide your Social Security number (SSN) when creating your StudentAid.gov account unless you are a citizen of the Freely Associated States (the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, or the Republic of Palau). If your parent, spouse, or parent's spouse doesn't have an SSN, they can still create their own StudentAid.gov account to fill out your FAFSA form. Note: StudentAid.gov accounts created without an SSN can be used only to access, complete, and sign the required sections of the FAFSA form.

To find out more about StudentAid.gov accounts, visit

[StudentAid.gov/resources/prepare-for-college/creating-your-account](https://studentaid.gov/resources/prepare-for-college/creating-your-account).

When should I apply?

The FAFSA form becomes available each year by Oct. 1 for the upcoming school year. You must submit a new FAFSA form every year you're in school to receive financial aid. Here's a summary of the three key FAFSA deadlines:

3 FAFSA® Deadlines

School

Typically, colleges and career/trade schools have the earliest FAFSA deadlines. Check for deadlines on each school's financial aid web page or contact the school's financial aid office.

State

Check your state's deadline at [StudentAid.gov/fafsa-deadlines](https://studentaid.gov/fafsa-deadlines). Some states have strict deadlines, while others suggest dates to make sure you get priority consideration for aid.

Federal

You can submit the FAFSA form until June 30 of each year. However, that may be near the end of your school's academic year and may limit your aid eligibility.



The FAFSA® form is free!

Completing and submitting the FAFSA form is free and quick, and it gives you access to most sources of financial aid—federal, state, and school—to help pay for college or career/trade school.

Who gets federal student aid?

Every student who meets certain eligibility requirements can get some type of federal student aid. Some of the most basic eligibility requirements for students are that you must

- demonstrate financial need (for need-based programs);
- be a U.S. citizen or an eligible noncitizen;
- have a valid SSN (unless you're a citizen of the Freely Associated States);
- be enrolled or accepted for enrollment in an eligible degree or certificate program;
- maintain satisfactory academic progress in college, career/trade school, or graduate school;
- provide consent and approval to have your federal tax information transferred directly into the FAFSA form;
- sign the certification statement that you aren't in default on a federal student loan, don't owe money on a federal student grant, and will use federal student aid only for educational purposes; and
- show you're qualified to obtain a college or career/trade school education by having a high school diploma or equivalent, completing a high school education in an approved homeschool setting, or meeting the criteria for an ability-to-benefit alternative.

For the full list of eligibility requirements, visit [StudentAid.gov/eligibility](https://studentaid.gov/eligibility).





Dependency Status

All applicants for federal student aid are considered either “independent” or “dependent.”

Independent Student

If you answer **YES** to any of the questions below, then you’re considered an independent student. You won’t have to provide parent information on your FAFSA form.

Dependent Student

If you answer **NO** to ALL of the questions below, then you’re considered a dependent student. You’ll be required to provide parent information on your FAFSA form, and a parent will be identified as a contributor on your form.

- 1. Will you be 24 years old or older by Jan. 1 of the school year for which you are applying for financial aid?
- 2. Are you married and not separated?
- 3. Are you a graduate or professional student (working toward a master’s or doctorate degree)?
- 4. Do you have children or other legal dependents, other than your spouse, who live with you and receive more than half of their support from you now and throughout the school year for which you’re applying for aid?
- 5. Are you a veteran of or currently serving on active duty in the U.S. armed forces?
- 6. At any time since you turned 13, were both of your parents deceased, were you in foster care, or were you a ward or dependent of the court?
- 7. Are you an emancipated minor or are you in a legal guardianship as determined by a court?
- 8. Are you an unaccompanied youth who is homeless or self-supporting and at risk of being homeless?

Some students who indicate on their FAFSA form that they have unusual circumstances may be granted a dependency status of “provisionally independent.” Unusual circumstances include situations where a student can’t contact a parent or where contact would put the student at risk. Examples include human trafficking, legally granted refugee or asylum status, parental abandonment or estrangement, or incarceration of the student or parent.

Students with unusual circumstances will be able to skip questions about their parents on the FAFSA form and submit the form without a parent signature. After submitting, the student must provide documentation of their unusual circumstances to the college, career school, or trade school they plan to attend.

 For more information about dependency status on the FAFSA form, visit [StudentAid.gov/dependency](https://studentaid.gov/dependency).

Types of Aid

*Amounts awarded vary annually and are subject to change.
Visit [StudentAid.gov](https://studentaid.gov) for the most up-to-date details.*

1 **Federal Grants:** Money that generally doesn't have to be paid back

Federal Pell Grant

The Federal Pell Grant is for undergraduates with financial need who have not earned a bachelor's or professional degree. Eligibility is linked to family size and the federal poverty line. Federal Pell Grant access has been expanded to include students who are confined or incarcerated and enrolled in an approved prison education program; and Federal Pell Grant lifetime eligibility has been restored for students who had an eligible federal student loan discharge. Additionally, students who are under 33 years old as of Jan. 1 prior to the school year when they'll be receiving aid and whose parent or guardian died in the line of duty while either serving on active duty as a member of the U.S. armed forces on or after Sept. 11, 2001, or while actively serving as a public safety officer may be eligible for the maximum Pell Grant award. For details and updates, visit [StudentAid.gov/pell-grant](https://studentaid.gov/pell-grant).

Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (FSEOG)

The FSEOG is for undergraduates with exceptional financial need. Federal Pell Grant recipients take priority. Funds depend on availability at the student's college or career/trade school. For details and updates, visit [StudentAid.gov/fseog](https://studentaid.gov/fseog).

2 **Federal Work-Study:** Money is earned through a job and doesn't have to be repaid

Your total work-study award depends on

- ✓ when you apply,
- ✓ your level of financial need, and
- ✓ your school's funding level.



For Federal Work-Study program details and updates, visit [StudentAid.gov/workstudy](https://studentaid.gov/workstudy).

3 Federal Student Loans: Borrowed money that must be repaid with interest

Who is it for?

Direct Subsidized Loan

- For undergraduate students who have financial need. A student must be enrolled at least half time. No interest is charged while a student is enrolled at least half time, during the grace period, and during deferment periods.

Direct Unsubsidized Loan

- For undergraduate and graduate or professional students. A student must be enrolled at least half time. Financial need is not required. Interest is charged during all periods.

Direct PLUS Loans

- For parents of dependent undergraduate students and for some graduate or professional students. Starting July 1, 2026, borrowing will be limited to specific graduate or professional students who meet previous borrowing and enrollment requirements. No new graduate or professional students will be eligible. Interest is charged during all periods.

What is the maximum annual loan amount?

Direct Subsidized Loan

- Up to \$5,500, depending on grade level.
- For details about the maximum annual loan amount for each grade level, visit [StudentAid.gov/loanlimits](https://studentaid.gov/loanlimits).

Direct Unsubsidized Loan

- For undergraduate students, up to \$12,500 (minus any subsidized amounts received for the same period), depending on grade level and dependency status. For graduate or professional students, up to \$20,500.
- For details, visit [StudentAid.gov/loanlimits](https://studentaid.gov/loanlimits).

Direct PLUS Loans

- Maximum amount for parent PLUS loans is \$20,000 per student per academic year.

What is the interest rate?

- Direct Loans have fixed interest rates that vary by loan type and by award year. The rates are determined each year, and when they are determined, they apply to all loans that have a first disbursement date during the period beginning on July 1 of one year and ending on June 30 of the following year. Loans received during different award years may have different fixed interest rates. For information on interest rates and details about the most up-to-date interest rates, visit [StudentAid.gov/interest](https://studentaid.gov/interest).

Where do I get more details and updates on loans?

Direct Subsidized and Unsubsidized Loans

- [StudentAid.gov/sub-unsub](https://studentaid.gov/sub-unsub)

Direct PLUS Loans

- [StudentAid.gov/plus](https://studentaid.gov/plus)

\$ Do I have to repay my loans?

Yes. Student loans, unlike grants and work-study funds, are borrowed money that must be repaid with interest, just like car loans and home mortgages. They can't be canceled because you didn't like the education you received, didn't get a job in your field of study, or are having financial difficulty. So, think about how much you'll have to repay before you take out a loan and borrow only what you need. Learn about loan repayment at [StudentAid.gov/repay](https://studentaid.gov/repay).



I completed the FAFSA® form. Now what?

After you submit your FAFSA form, you'll receive a FAFSA Submission Summary. Your FAFSA Submission Summary will include the answers that you provided on your FAFSA form (except the federal tax information transferred directly from the IRS), an estimate of federal student aid you may be eligible to receive, and your Student Aid Index (SAI). The SAI isn't a dollar amount—it's a number used by your school to calculate how much and what types of financial aid you would be eligible to receive if you attended the school.

If you applied online and provided a valid email address in your application, you'll receive an email with instructions on how to access an online copy of your FAFSA Submission Summary within three days. If you mailed in the FAFSA PDF and didn't provide an email address, you'll receive a paper copy of your FAFSA Submission Summary within three weeks.

When you receive your FAFSA Submission Summary, review it carefully to ensure all the information on your FAFSA form is correct:

- If the information on your FAFSA Submission Summary is accurate, keep it for your records.
- If you need to update or correct information on your FAFSA form, visit [StudentAid.gov/apply-for-aid/fafsa/review-and-correct](https://studentaid.gov/apply-for-aid/fafsa/review-and-correct) or contact the school(s) to which you applied.



What's an aid offer and how much aid will I get?

The colleges or career/trade schools that you listed on your FAFSA form will automatically receive your FAFSA information. Each school will use that information and your SAI to make a final determination of your eligibility and financial aid need. The school will calculate your aid and send you an aid offer (often electronically) after you're accepted for admission.

Your aid offer will tell you how much aid you're eligible to receive at that school and will include the types and amounts of financial aid you may receive from federal, state, private, and school sources. This combination of help from different sources is your financial aid package. How much aid you receive depends on some factors, including

- the school's cost of attendance;
- your Student Aid Index (SAI);
- your year in school; and
- your enrollment status (e.g., full time, half time, etc.).

Compare your aid offers to see which school will be most affordable after financial aid. Contact the school's financial aid office if you have any questions about the aid offer. For information on how aid is calculated, visit [StudentAid.gov/how-calculated](https://studentaid.gov/how-calculated).



How will I receive my aid?

Your college or career/trade school—not the U.S. Department of Education—will distribute your aid. In most cases, your federal student aid will be applied directly to your school account. The financial aid staff at your school will explain exactly how and when your aid will be disbursed (paid out).

What else do I need to remember when applying for federal student aid?

- ✓ Borrow only what you need and what you can afford to pay back.
 - ✓ Make sure the information you provide on your FAFSA form is correct so you receive your aid on time and in the right amount.
 - ✓ Respond promptly to any messages from your school and meet all deadlines.
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Where can I find additional help?

Free help is available anytime during the application process. In the online FAFSA form, select the info icon or question mark icon next to a FAFSA question to view a “tool tip” that provides information about how to answer that question, or chat with Aidan®, our virtual assistant, while you fill out your application. Visit the “FAFSA® Help” page at StudentAid.gov/fafsa-help to find answers to common questions. You can also get free information and help from your school counselor, the financial aid office at the college or career/trade school you plan to attend, or the U.S. Department of Education at StudentAid.gov. You should never have to pay for help!

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