

FAFSA fiasco hurts students and our future

Mark Zupan

Campus protests have garnered considerable attention as of late. Unfortunately, the attention from media and policymakers has largely overlooked a pervasive and significant challenge facing our prospective students and their families as well as our broader society: the debacle that has been the Department of Education's roll-out of the new Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

Would-be students and their families encounter FAFSA when seeking to determine how much aid is available to help them pay for college.

The well-intended FAFSA Simplification Act was passed by Congress with broad bipartisan support in 2021.

It focused on trimming the number of questions would-be college students and their families had to answer from 108 to 36. Unfortunately, the streamlined FAFSA roll-out has been plagued by mistakes and delays.

In the past, applicants to institutions such as mine, Alfred University, have been able to file a FAFSA in October of the year prior to their matriculation.

This admissions cycle, however, an accurate FAFSA report was delayed until only recently, thereby severely constraining prospective students and their families seeking to determine if they will be able to begin their college studies this fall. During a campus visit day this spring, we heard repeatedly and vocally from the families of our admitted students about their FAFSA frustrations.

With the traditional May 1 deadline for admitted students to make a commitment having been reached, most higher education institutions are reporting that their deposits for matriculation by new undergraduate students for the fall are down by 10-40 percent relative to last year.

The prospective damage to new undergraduate student enrollment is larger than what COVID-19 wreaked during the admissions cycle for fall 2020. It is regrettably self-inflicted, given that the Department of Education had two years to implement the roll-out after Congressional passage of the FAFSA Simplification Act.

The impact of the FAFSA fiasco has been greatest on those who could benefit the most from a college education: first-generation prospective college students and those coming from families with lower economic means.

While FAFSA applications are down 29 percent for all high school seniors relative to the prior admissions cycle, they are 34 percent lower for higher education institutions that enroll more lower-income students.

The recent media and political focus on protests at elite universities eclipses the multitudes of prospective students who will not be able to realize their dreams of earning a college degree on account of the FAFSA failure. The longer-term societal loss from stymying college access for promising prospective students also will be significant. Educated college graduates, after all, are the best hope to solve our most pressing problems.

Alfred University is but one institution producing such needed graduates.

Our graduates have gone on to help create: durable glass vials carrying COVID vaccines; voice and data transmission by fiberoptic cable; composites for hypersonics used in national defense; some of the finest ceramic and glass art in the world; and Marvel Entertainment, to name a few.

Until policymakers and the media pay greater attention to the FAFSA fiasco and how it can be remedied, prospective students and their families will continue to largely suffer in silence – to their detriment and that of our society.

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