

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

---

'A LOT OF GRAY AREAS'

## Black Colleges Need the FAFSA to Work. Here's How They're Getting By.

By *Alecia Taylor*

MARCH 21, 2024



## The FAFSA snafus have left historically Black colleges particularly vulnerable.

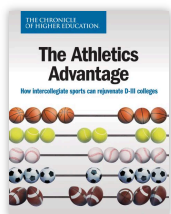
When the new Free Application for Federal Student Aid rolled out, Anthony Jones was excited. The form would be easier to complete. More students at his institution, Bethune-Cookman University, [would be eligible for Pell Grants](#).

But after the FAFSA's shaky debut in January, Jones, Bethune-Cookman's vice president for enrollment management and student experience, began scrambling. Amid delays and confusion, Jones feared that his students wouldn't know how they were going to pay for college.

Jones and his team immediately went to the drawing board to create a strategy to educate students on the changes and delays. Now, they're sending emails. They're holding webinars. They're on call for questions. They're pointing students to the College Board's Net Price Calculator to estimate what their tuition burden might be.

### FROM THE CHRONICLE STORE

---



REPORT

## The Athletics Advantage

How Intercollegiate Sports Can Rejuvenate D-III Colleges

[Visit the Store](#)

---

Bethune-Cookman's extra efforts mirror those of other historically Black colleges nationwide as they navigate the new FAFSA — which was supposed to make it easier for students to get their aid but so far has done the opposite. HBCUs, which educate almost a fifth of Black college graduates, need the FAFSA to work: Over 70 percent of the students attending HBCUs are eligible for Pell Grants, which are reserved for those from low-income families, [according to the Thurgood Marshall College Fund](#).

Colleges [just started to receive](#) students' financial information from the U.S. Education Department — the data institutions use to tell students how much aid they'll be eligible for and how much they'll be paying out of pocket to attend. The department is [providing funding and technical support for HBCUs and other minority-serving colleges](#) that are disproportionately affected by the FAFSA delays.

Usually, students have five to six months to plan out their finances. Now, depending on whether institutions have moved deposit deadlines, they might have a month or less. And as students wait to make decisions, precarity builds for the campuses waiting on them. Most HBCUs are small colleges where tuition dollars are crucial for keeping the lights on.

Looking ahead to the fall semester, experts say, both HBCU students and their institutions are in an especially vulnerable position.

“Our HBCUs will have to be creative in how they secure their incoming class based on this delayed information,” said David D. Page, a consultant with the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, or NASFAA.

## What HBCUs Are Doing

HBCU officials say they're throwing everything at the wall to try to reach students: emails, texts, webpages, and old-fashioned campus announcements. Once a week, Tanya Wilkerson, Morgan State University's director of financial aid, meets with the university's IT team to talk about communication plans.

Grambling State University is working on financial-aid offers and getting them out as soon as possible, said Gavin R. Hamms, associate vice president for enrollment management. Staff members have also been sitting down with students to talk through what cost of attendance means and what options they have. There is no deadline for students to decide to attend Grambling State.

“The financial aid and enrollment process is already a complex process, so this here is going to add another layer of complexity,” Hamms said. “We want to make sure we communicate, with visuals, infographics, to educate the students that this is what’s happening and just how we’re going to work with you to solve this issue.”

Black-college leaders have been especially concerned that changes to federal aid might mean a drop in institutional revenue.

Recently Morgan State tapped into a resource from NASFAA to anticipate potential changes in students’ financial situations, since the Education Department has yet to send out that information for all students.

Page led an effort that allowed 50 colleges, three of which were HBCUs, to use a tool that NASFAA built to estimate whether students’ aid might go up or down this year.

The old FAFSA used the “expected family contribution” to determine how much students and their families would be able to pay for college. The 2024 FAFSA uses the new “Student Aid Index,” which is supposed to offer a more accurate calculation.

Previously the lowest-income students would get an expected family contribution of zero; the scale didn’t go any lower. Now the Student Aid Index can show a negative \$1,500 to reflect those students’ additional needs.

The NASFAA tool showed that Morgan State would not be negatively affected by the federal changes, said Wilkerson, the financial-aid director.

Page, who used to work in Dillard University’s financial-aid office, said he’s concerned that many HBCUs don’t have the staffing to manage the influx of queries from worried students. That problem is exacerbated at a time when Black colleges are [seeing a surge in interest](#).

Harry L. Williams, the president and chief executive of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, said he hopes the Education Department's support will help with those capacity issues.

The White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities also recently hosted a webinar with financial-aid officers about completing the new FAFSA.

## Struggling to Reach Students

Like many of his colleagues, Jones, of Bethune-Cookman, hopes the rocky FAFSA rollout doesn't persist past this year.

"We would not be able to weather multiple years of this kind of discombobulation to the system," he said. "We need clarity and we need it now. We need accuracy and we need it now. We cannot afford to go one more year where we are getting delays or any further concerns as it relates to the FAFSA and FAFSA payouts."

Back in 2011, another federal-aid hiccup caused major problems for HBCU students, Jones said. The Obama administration adjusted the credit requirements for Parent PLUS loans — shutting out Black families at a disproportionate rate compared with white families. Denials shot up by 50 percent for parents of students at historically Black colleges and universities, [The Chronicle reported](#).

Jones is sure HBCUs will survive. He just hopes students won't count out a Black college this year because they're not sure they can afford it.

Trying to educate students about the aid snafus remains a challenge. "The pressure that is on the students, they feel it and it can have an impact in the classroom too," said Williams, of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund.

Amid a sea of other emails about assignments and group-chat notifications, students might miss the FAFSA-related messages that colleges send.

Hailey Jackson, a freshman at Grambling State, said she doesn't feel like there has been enough communication from her institution about the changes and financial-aid delays.

"When it comes to FAFSA, as a student, there are a lot of gray areas," she said. "It doesn't help when our parents haven't been in school for years and the FAFSA has changed so much."

Morghan Blair, a freshman at Morgan State, also believes there's room for improvement in her university's outreach.

As a student-government member who's often working to engage her peers, she said, "I understand that you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink."

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.*

MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTIONS

ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT

## Alecia Taylor

Alecia Taylor is a reporting intern at *The Chronicle*. You can email her at [alecia.taylor@chronicle.com](mailto:alecia.taylor@chronicle.com) or follow her on X/Twitter [@AleciaReports](https://twitter.com/AleciaReports).

## IN THE CHRONICLE STORE