



# **After 'botched' rollout of federal student-aid system, Biden administration aims to fix the relaunch**

Glitches in FAFSA system have driven down college enrollment as uncertainty over available aid has made thousands hesitant to pursue higher education.



Education Secretary Miguel Cardona (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein, File)

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**T**he percentage of high school seniors filing for federal financial aid has declined significantly due to technical glitches with an Education Department program that prevented many students from knowing whether they could afford the college of their choice.

The result: Thousands of aspiring college students are staying home because they didn't want to take a chance attending a university without knowing how much federal assistance they were entitled to for tuition and other costs.

The Education Department says [it has worked to resolve](https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-announces-jeremy-singer-fafsa-executive-advisor-office-federal-student-aid)

[. \(https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-announces-jeremy-singer-fafsa-executive-advisor-office-federal-student-aid\)](https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-announces-jeremy-singer-fafsa-executive-advisor-office-federal-student-aid) all major issues for the 2024-25 year and is targeting Oct. 1 to kick off the 2025-26 application process. But that's little comfort for students who deferred their decision to attend this fall.

Those advising high school seniors are seeing the fallout first-hand.

Angel Pérez, CEO of the National Association for College Admission Counseling, said many public-school counselors have told him that their students are waiting until next year to apply to college.

“If we do not mobilize as a college-access community, we are at risk of losing thousands of students from the pipeline to higher education,”

Pérez wrote in a March [opinion](https://hechingerreport.org/opinion-school-counselors-cant-undo-the-fafsa-mess-on-their-own-we-need-a-national-movement-right-now/) [\(https://hechingerreport.org/opinion-school-counselors-cant-undo-the-fafsa-mess-on-their-own-we-need-a-national-movement-right-now/\)](https://hechingerreport.org/opinion-school-counselors-cant-undo-the-fafsa-mess-on-their-own-we-need-a-national-movement-right-now/) piece in *The Hechinger Report*.

High school seniors rely on the [Free Application for Federal Student Aid](https://studentaid.gov/h/apply-for-aid/fafsa) (FAFSA) to determine the out-of-pocket expenses for each college they were accepted to.

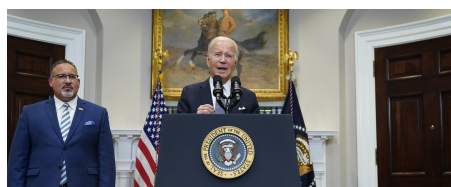
## **Technical glitches hampered applications**

The Education Department launched a new FAFSA form in December to simplify the application from over 100 questions to as few as 18, following congressional action in 2020 directing the agency to make it easier to apply for federal aid.

Although the new form was intended to make FAFSA less cumbersome, it was rife with glitches and delays, complicating the process for many students and families.

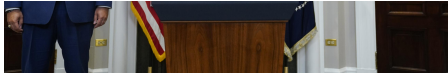
As of late June, 45.4 percent of the more than 3 million high school seniors completed the FAFSA, down from 52.2 percent last school year, according to [data](https://www.ncan.org/page/FAFSATracker) from the National College Attainment Network.

The American Council on Education, which represents more than 1,600 colleges and universities, blames technical issues with the new FAFSA for the low application filings this year, said Emmanuel Guillory, the organization's senior director of government relations.



DAILY

**OUTLOOK: Biden seeks alternatives after Supreme Court strikes down student loan forgiveness plan**



Plus, Lawmakers to attend NATO summit that could determine Ukraine membership, HHS warns of affirmative-action ruling's impact on health care.

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“We can’t help but predict that there’s going to be a drop in enrollment,” Guillory said.

Nine organizations representing higher education, including ACE, released a [joint statement](https://www.acenet.edu/News-Room/Pages/Joint-Statement-Financial-Aid-Deadlines.aspx) (<https://www.acenet.edu/News-Room/Pages/Joint-Statement-Financial-Aid-Deadlines.aspx>) in January encouraging institutions to increase flexibility with their deadlines because of FAFSA’s shortcomings.

Dozens of institutions responded by extending their deadlines. Others did not, forcing some students and families to make college decisions without knowledge about their federal aid.

## **Lawmakers push for student-friendly relaunch**

Sens. Mark Warner and Tim Kaine, both Virginia Democrats, last month asked the Education Department to address lingering issues with the form before FAFSA reopens later this year for incoming high school seniors.

“Such FAFSA hurdles particularly impact individuals who need financial aid the most, including low-income, first-generation, and traditionally underserved students,” the lawmakers wrote in a [statement](https://www.kaine.senate.gov/press-releases/warner-kaine-push-department-statement) ([https://www.kaine.senate.gov/press-releases/warner-kaine-push-department-](https://www.kaine.senate.gov/press-releases/warner-kaine-push-department-statement)

[of-education-for-faster-review-of-fafsa-issues](#)). “For many of these students, the biggest consideration in committing to a college is deciding how to finance it.”

Kaine and Warner are requesting the department act swiftly to review errors with FAFSA and issue a management alert ahead of the relaunch. The department says the 2025-26 FAFSA will largely remain consistent with this past year’s shorter form.

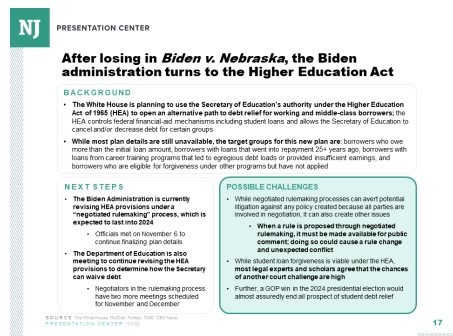
It [announced](#) (<https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-announces-jeremy-singer-fafsa-executive-advisor-office-federal-student-aid>) last month that Jeremy Singer, who is the president of the College Board, will serve as the new FAFSA executive adviser in the Office of Federal Student Aid to help relaunch the form that will be used for the 2025-26 academic cycle.

Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said Singer “will be integral to improving the FAFSA experience and ensuring millions of students and families can easily access the federal financial aid they are entitled to.”

### **Looking to avoid another delay**

This year’s FAFSA was postponed from October to late December because of delays in implementing the [FAFSA Simplification Act](#) (<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46909>), which overhauled the federal student-aid system.

That measure, which was enacted by Congress as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, expanded Pell grant eligibility and removed some restrictions on receiving federal financial aid.



## PRESENTATION

### Student loan debt forgiveness

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More than 20 systems within the Office of Federal Student Aid were rebuilt in the past year, enabling an additional 665,000 students to receive Pell grants during this FAFSA cycle.

But parents and students encountered problems with the rollout that took place at the same time the admissions process was in full swing. The chaos prompted an uproar that forced the agency to take steps.

In May, the department launched the [FAFSA Student Support Strategy](#)

(<https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-launches-next-phase-fafsa-support-strategy-boost-completion-rate-among-high-school-students>) to help

students fill out the form. The \$50 million program provided funding for programming including media campaigns, FAFSA clinics, and translation services.



The Government Accountability Office is working with the department's Office of Inspector General to conduct a full-scale review of this year's FAFSA rollout.

## **GOP lawmakers complain about 'botched' rollout**

Sen. Bill Cassidy and Rep. Virginia Foxx in early June accused the Education Department of obstructing the GAO investigation. The Republican lawmakers said the department had repeatedly failed to provide GAO with requested information.

“Instead of owning up to its mistake, the Biden administration is hiding evidence relating to its botched FAFSA rollout from Congress and the American people,” the lawmakers wrote in a [statement](#)

(<https://www.help.senate.gov/ranking/newsroom/press/ranking-member-cassidy-chairwoman-foxx-slam-biden-admin-for-illegally-obstructing-federal-investigation-into-botched-fafsa-rollout-demand-compliance>). “GAO is investigating the FAFSA rollout at our request, and by stonewalling, the Department is interfering with our ability to carry out our constitutionally-mandated oversight responsibilities.”

In a letter obtained by [Politico](#)

(<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2024/06/how-the-education-department-is-responding-to-gaos-fafsa-probe-00161320?source=email>), the department said last month it was working on responding to GAO's requests.



“GAO and the Department accordingly agreed that we would produce readily available documents that we could pull without interfering with the critical work and high priority deadlines on FAFSA,” the agency said. “Consistent with this agreement, the Department has responded where it could to GAO’s extensive initial requests in these two engagements, working to transmit documents and make staff available as possible while continuing to complete the FAFSA.”

Warner and Kaine are asking the OIG and the GAO to specifically assess delays, technical malfunctions, form management, the impact of funding, the department’s communications, potential challenges ahead, and recommendations for corrective action.

The department says it’s targeting next year’s FAFSA application window to open Oct. 1, the traditional start date for the FAFSA process.

The department stated last month that it “has heard from students, families, institutions, states, and those that support them that it is most important for the 2025-26 FAFSA form to be available on October 1st,” adding that it “is working toward that goal.” 