



Navigating college admissions

By Tracey Wong Briggs, USA TODAY

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As the college application and financial aid season swings into gear, millions of high school students will take their first plunge — by pen and paper or electronically — into complex paperwork.

What are admissions officers looking for? What if you don't understand the financial aid form?

It may not be fun for anybody, but there's no way around the forms.

"It's such a high-stakes time, and getting the paperwork right is so important. It's scary," says J.B. Schramm, founder of College Summit, a mentorship program in four states and the District of Columbia that helps low-income students get to college.

Whether the processes could and should be simpler is up for debate.

Schramm, for instance, draws a distinction between admissions and financial aid. He sees educational value in having students learn how to present themselves on paper for admission: "Learning how to do it benefits the student who, years later, is arguing to create a new department they're going to lead in their corporation."

The 2003 Supreme Court ruling striking down numerical affirmative-action formulas at the University of Michigan means some selective public colleges may be asking for more information to give them more context for making admissions decisions, he says. "The paradox is that the very student who is going to be better gauged by a comprehensive review is the student least likely to produce comprehensive materials."

On the financial aid end, there is a renewed push to simplify the FAFSA form, the government's Free Application for Federal Student Aid that many colleges also require for students applying for institutional aid. In March, Rhodes College president William Troutt outlined suggestions for simplifying the form as part of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

Thomas Kane, UCLA professor of policy studies and economics, and Jacqueline King of the American Council on Education say it may be worth asking fewer questions to make the forms simpler and easier to understand. But then it may not be possible to target who gets aid as precisely.

"Is it better to have a program that's broadly accessible than it is to ask every question and not give away a nickel you shouldn't have?" King says. "There's a trade-off, and different organizations are going to fall different places on the spectrum."

Many admissions and financial aid officers say they need to know answers to everything they ask so they can make good decisions about who gets into their colleges and who needs aid most. The forms, they say, are not merely exercises in making things difficult for students.

"I don't think on the admission side of things what is asked is unreasonable, because once students enroll in college, there are expectations as to what they will do to take responsibility for their learning," says Carol Rowlands, admissions director at Lafayette College in Easton, Pa.

Some of the wording and references to the tax forms may overwhelm people filling out financial aid documents for the first time, but in a previous effort to simplify FAFSA, some of the directions that explained things were simply removed to make it look less intimidating, says Sean Smith, financial aid director at Scripps College in Claremont, Calif. "I suspect there is some value to clearing up some of the language. The challenge is when you do that, you expand the length of the thing and make it look more confusing."

As daunting as the process may be, technology has gone a long way toward making it more accessible. FAFSA on the Web, used by 80% of the 13 million people who file it, flags mistakes immediately and allows students to update their information rather than starting from scratch each year. Critics say there's room for improvement, but the electronic FAFSA does use "skip logic" to bypass some questions based on the applicant's answers.

"For the tech-savvy student and parent, the process may be easier than when you had to do it with paper and pencil," King says. Aside from the electronic applications, the Internet means most any information you might need is a mouse click away. On the other hand, she says, the sheer volume of information out there may make it more difficult to navigate it all.

Ultimately, most students need one-to-one help — both knowledgeable advice and the step-by-step encouragement it takes to get through the process.

"An 18-year-old is an 18-year-old. They're going to do what they did yesterday," Kane says. "It's the capacity to hold hands around the deadlines to make sure the kids get that last box filled in on the FAFSA" that differentiates the higher- and middle-income families from the low-income ones, he says.

And for kids from low-income families trying to get there without parental help, the process can be particularly daunting.

"For middle-class students, college counselors provide the expertise and parents do the nagging," Schramm says. "In first-generation communities, all you've got is the counselors. America is asking first-generation students to do what middle-class kids can't do: Navigate through the process the first time."

The barriers to college for low-income, first-generation students are more complex than simply filling out forms, and it's unrealistic to think everyone is ready for and can benefit from college, Kane says.

Still, there may be a number of students who could do well in college but never get there. Kane points to a recent evaluation of Upward Bound, an intensive federal program that includes tutoring, academic programs and college counseling. The evaluation, by Mathematica Policy Research, found that the program had limited or no effect on total high school credits or grades overall, but raised four-year college enrollment by 5% or 6%, just on the edge of statistical significance.

"You've got to wonder if that's because they got help with the process," says Kane, who co-founded a college counseling program at three inner-city Boston high schools and is analyzing data from it to see if it raised college-going rates.

An analysis of government data released last month by ACE found half of all undergraduates didn't even apply for federal aid, and 20% of the non-filers were from low- and moderate-income families. ACE estimates that perhaps 850,000 students who didn't file the FAFSA probably would have been eligible for federal Pell grants.

The analysis looked only at students who made it to college and didn't count those who were scared off by the process, says King, the author. But the huge differences in filing by college type may be telling, she says: Only 13% of students at for-profit colleges failed to file a FAFSA, compared with 67% of those at community colleges. For-profit colleges, which include the University of Phoenix and trade schools, do

much more to walk students through the process, she says. "For them, it's a business. If they don't get you signed up, they lose your business."

King also found almost half of all undergraduates taking for-credit courses are going part-time, raising a chicken-and-egg question: Are students working so they can afford to go to college part-time? Or are they going part-time and working because they didn't think they could afford full-time tuition?

The reasons why so many low-income students don't apply for financial aid are complex, but include lack of information, misinformation and the process itself, she says.

Brittany Brockenton always knew she wanted to go to college, but even last year, as an honor roll senior at East Mecklenburg High in Charlotte, N.C., she sometimes doubted she'd be able to pay for it.

"I had no clue how hard the application process was," says Brockenton, 18, a freshman at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. Though her parents had attended technical school, they were unable to help. "My father has multiple sclerosis, and my mother is taking care of him," she says.

For Brockenton, an organization called Communities in Schools made all the difference, from taking her on college tours as a junior to steering her through the mountain of paperwork her senior year. The stay-in-school network, which partners with Charlotte schools to provide mentors and other programming, "took the place of what my mother and father would have done."

Last year, she stopped by to see Kim Jones, her school's CIS coordinator, almost every day. Besides keeping Brockenton on track with deadlines, helping with essays, proofreading, signing up for the SAT and staying organized, Jones kept her spirits up.

"The most helpful thing was just reassuring me that I could apply to every school when I had doubts for financial reasons," Brockenton says. "It *is* possible to go to college through financial aid, scholarships and hard work."

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