

The New York Times

New Phone-Friendly Version of Financial Aid Form Is Coming Out

The FAFSA app means anyone with a smartphone should be able to complete the federal financial aid form.

By Ann Carrns September 7, 2018

The notoriously difficult-to-fill-out federal financial aid form known as FAFSA is going mobile. And, the federal Education Department says, it should be easier to use.

The latest version of the document, formally called the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, will be available next month on a new phone app and on a revamped website that works well on mobile devices.

The digital options, **announced late last year**, mean that anyone with a smartphone should be able to complete the form with less hassle. About 95 percent of Americans have some sort of mobile phone, according to the Federal Student Aid office, an arm of the Education Department.

The FAFSA has been available online for years. But students and their families generally needed a desktop computer to complete the form because it didn't work smoothly on mobile devices.

"It was clunky to use on a phone," said Kim Cook, executive director of the National College Access Network, which promotes college for minority and low-income students.

The form, which calculates how much students and their families are expected to pay for college, is the gateway for federal student aid, and is used by states and schools as well.

Students who file a FAFSA are more likely to attend college, so anything that encourages them to submit the form is welcome, Ms. Cook said.

The Education Department this summer introduced the mobile-friendly Fafsa.gov website, which automatically adjusts to fit on phones and tablets, as well as a test version of the myStudentAid app, which includes the FAFSA.

The new app is getting good marks, including from groups recruited to try it by Ms. Cook's nonprofit group. It's especially helpful, student advocates say, that the form can be started on one device — say, a smartphone — and completed on another, perhaps a computer. That means students and their parents can work on the form separately, Ms. Cook said. They don't have to be sitting down in front of a computer at the same time.

It got good reviews," Ms. Cook said of the app.

The app presents one question per screen, which makes the form less intimidating, said Mark Kantrowitz, a financial-aid expert.

“It was actually fun to complete,” Mr. Kantrowitz said. “It makes completing the FAFSA much easier.”

The testers did flag **some problems** in the early version of the app. For instance, the college access network recommended that the app be more explicit in instructing both students and parents to sign the form.

Crucially, the app doesn’t yet allow automatic transfer of financial information from the Internal Revenue Service’s online Data Retrieval Tool, which makes it easier to fill in financial details accurately. Currently, users must use **FAFSA.gov** to take advantage of the I.R.S. tool. (While the website is now mobile-friendly, the I.R.S. tool itself isn’t “optimized” for mobile use, so that part of the process is still awkward, Ms. Cook said. Users must “scroll and zoom” to see all fields.)

The updated app, which will be released next month, will offer the I.R.S. tool with “full functionality,” according to an Education Department spokesman.

Here are some questions and answers about the FAFSA:

When can I use the new mobile FAFSA app?

The revised app is scheduled to become available October 1, when the new FAFSA for the 2019-20 school year is released. The **myStudentAid app** can be downloaded from Apple’s App Store or from Google Play for Android devices.

The test app is available now for anyone who still wants to submit a FAFSA for the current academic year. But because the app doesn’t support the I.R.S. data tool, Diane Cheng, research director at the Institute for College Access and Success, advises students and their parents to avoid using it for 2018-19. Rather, she recommends using the website, **<https://fafsa.ed.gov>**, which allows automatic transfer of financial information with the I.R.S. tool, reducing the chance of errors that may delay processing of the form.

Do I need a federal student aid ID to use the app?

Yes. Like the website, the mobile app requires users to enter a federal student aid ID, which is a username and a password. If you haven’t established one, you’ll **need to do so**. (And note: Students and parents must establish separate IDs.)

Where can I learn more about the new mobile app?

The National College Access Network has been tracking the development of the mobile app and **offers tips** for users and financial aid counselors. Those tips will be updated when the enhanced app becomes available on Oct. 1.

The Education Department also **offers tips** for the next FAFSA cycle on its website.