



FAFSA Federal Student Aid Logo Image via CreativeCommons.

## Navigating FAFSA

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As the school year begins and the class of 2026 begin their college application process, emotions of anxiety and stress may start to settle in. For most seniors, FAFSA may seem like just another concern in the overwhelming world of college applications. Although it's a crucial step in the application process, it doesn't have to be difficult to complete. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid could essentially be your ticket to making college financially possible.

There are a few steps that need to be completed before beginning the application itself. Both you and your parents need to create an FSA ID at StudentAid.gov. Ms. Katz, a guidance counselor at Westhill, emphasizes matching your information exactly to your social security card: "It is always simple mistakes; students use their middle name in FSA ID and then not in FAFSA. Everything needs to be the same," she said. These little details can cause delays, so take the time to double-check before hitting the submit button.

FAFSA determines your eligibility for federal financial aid, including grants, work-study programs, and federal student loans. The application uses

your family's financial information to calculate your Expected Family Contribution (EFC), which colleges then use to create your financial aid package. Even if you think your family makes too much to qualify, you should still apply. Many schools require FAFSA for merit-based scholarships, and you might be surprised by what you're eligible for. FAFSA opens October 1st every year, however, for the 2025-2026 school year, it opened up even earlier. Mr. Stepkoski, another guidance counselor, advises starting early. He said, "start gathering all documents that will be needed [even before October 1st]." Various forms such as tax returns, W-2 forms, and bank statements are needed for the application, so it's best to give your parents a heads up as early as possible. One of the biggest mistakes is, "Forgetting to hit the submit button at the end," Mr. Stepkoski said. After spending so much time on the application, don't let it go to waste. Even after it's submitted, the process isn't over yet. Students should check their email regularly for any requests for additional information.

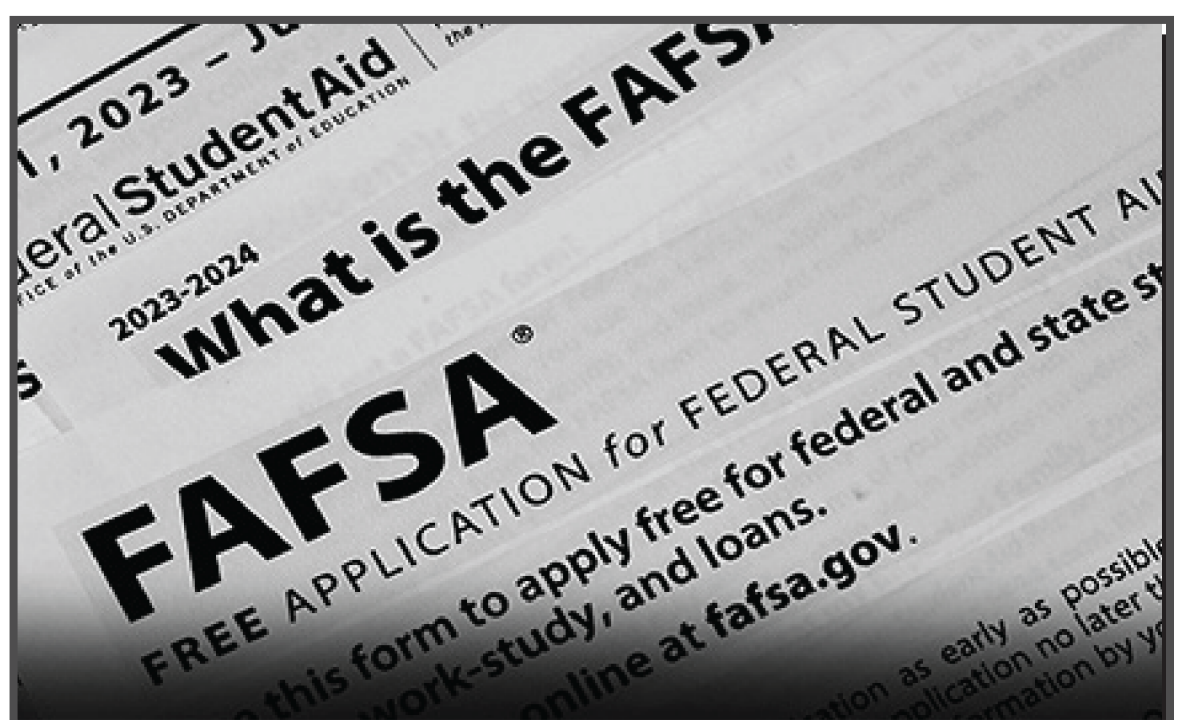
Ms. Katz also recommends using a personal

email instead of a school one, since you'll need access to that account throughout college. "Use a strong password and keep it somewhere safe. You will need it for at least four years," Ms. Katz said. Though this may seem overwhelming, the good news is that you don't have to figure this out by yourself. Westhill offers free FAFSA assistance through CONNTAC on Monday mornings in the Media

FAFSA might seem daunting, but breaking it into smaller steps makes the process far less confusing. Start early and stay organized. Your future self will thank you.



"A WALL OF COLLEGE PRIDE."  
Photo by Jamie DaSilva ('26)."



FAFSA Application Application form instructions for FAFSA. Image via Creative Commons.