FINANCIAL AID 2026–2027

A Parent & Student Guide to Paying for College

Updated for the 2026–27 FAFSA cycle

The FAFSA process has changed significantly since the FAFSA Simplification Act first took effect. For 2026–27, the process is more established, but families still need to understand contributors, tax-year information, the Student Aid Index (SAI), financial aid offers, and important Illinois deadlines.

This guide includes

- Overview of financial aid and how need is determined
- 2026–27 FAFSA basics and what families need before starting
- StudentAid.gov accounts and FAFSA contributors
- Parent information and special family situations
- Federal grants, loans, and work-study
- How to read and compare financial aid offers
- Important financial aid terms and resources
- Illinois MAP Grant information for 2026–27
- Tips for completing the FAFSA accurately and on time

IMPORTANT: *This guide is an educational resource, not a guarantee of eligibility or an individualized financial-aid determination. Federal, state, and college policies can change. Always verify final requirements with the college financial aid office and official government sources.*

Primary resources: StudentAid.gov • ISAC.org

OVERVIEW OF FINANCIAL AID

A simplified way to understand financial need is:

Calculation	What it means
Cost of Attendance (COA)	The college's estimated total cost for one academic year.
– Student Aid Index (SAI)	A federal index calculated from FAFSA information; it is NOT the amount a family must pay.
– Other Financial Assistance	Other aid that must be considered when the college builds the student's package.
= Financial Need	The amount of demonstrated need the college may attempt to meet with available aid.

Cost of Attendance

Cost of Attendance is the college's estimate of the total cost for a student to attend for an academic year. It can include tuition and fees, housing and food, books and supplies, transportation, miscellaneous expenses, and certain other allowable costs such as dependent care or disability-related expenses.

Student Aid Index (SAI)

The SAI is calculated from information on the FAFSA. It is an index used by colleges when determining eligibility for need-based financial aid. A negative SAI indicates higher financial need. The SAI is not a bill, a dollar amount the family is expected to pay, or a guarantee of financial aid.

Financial Aid Offers

- A college generally sends a financial aid offer after the student has been admitted and the college has the information needed to make its aid determination.
- An offer may include grants, scholarships, work-study, and loans.
- Gift aid generally does not have to be repaid, although scholarships and grants can have renewal requirements.
- Loans must be repaid and should be evaluated separately from grants and scholarships.
- The financial aid office at each college is the best source for questions about that school's offer.

FEDERAL FINANCIAL AID PROGRAMS

The FAFSA is used to determine eligibility for federal student aid and is also used by many states and colleges to determine eligibility for their own aid programs.

Federal Pell Grant

A federal grant for eligible undergraduate students with significant financial need. For the 2026–27 award year, the maximum Pell Grant is $7,395. The actual amount depends on the student's FAFSA information, enrollment, and cost of attendance.

TIP: *Do not assume a family will not qualify. Completing the FAFSA is the way to find out.*

Direct Subsidized Loan

A need-based federal student loan for eligible undergraduate students. For loans first disbursed July 1, 2026 through June 30, 2027, the fixed interest rate for undergraduate Direct Subsidized Loans is 6.52%. The federal government generally pays the interest while an eligible student is enrolled at least half-time and during qualifying deferment periods.

Direct Unsubsidized Loan

A federal student loan that is not based on demonstrated financial need. For undergraduate loans first disbursed July 1, 2026 through June 30, 2027, the fixed interest rate is 6.52%. Interest accrues while the student is in school and during other periods when interest applies.

Federal Direct Parent PLUS Loan

A federal loan available to eligible parents of dependent undergraduate students. For loans first disbursed July 1, 2026 through June 30, 2027, the fixed interest rate is 9.07%. The borrower is responsible for repayment.

IMPORTANT: *Beginning July 1, 2026, new Parent PLUS annual and aggregate limits apply in many cases: up to $20,000 per academic year and $65,000 total per dependent undergraduate student. Certain borrowers qualify for a limited exception. Ask the college financial aid office before borrowing.*

Federal Work-Study

A federal program that provides eligible students an opportunity to earn money through part-time employment, often on campus. Work-study is not automatically a tuition discount; students generally earn the funds through employment according to the school's process.

2026–27 Undergraduate Direct Loan Limits

Student level	Dependent undergraduate	Independent undergraduate*
First year	$5,500 total; up to $3,500 subsidized	$9,500 total; up to $3,500 subsidized
Second year	$6,500 total; up to $4,500 subsidized	$10,500 total; up to $4,500 subsidized
Third year and beyond	$7,500 total; up to $5,500 subsidized	$12,500 total; up to $5,500 subsidized
Undergraduate aggregate	$31,000 total; up to $23,000 subsidized	$57,500 total; up to $23,000 subsidized

*The independent-student limits also apply to certain dependent students whose parents are unable to obtain a Parent PLUS Loan. Loan eligibility can also be affected by other federal limits and exceptions.

SUBMITTING THE FAFSA: 2026–27

The 2026–27 FAFSA covers the academic year July 1, 2026 through June 30, 2027. The FAFSA is free and should be completed at StudentAid.gov.

2026–27 Key Dates

Date / deadline	What families should know
October 1, 2026	2026–27 FAFSA became available; families should submit as early as possible.
School deadlines	Vary by college. Some schools have early priority deadlines for institutional aid.
Illinois MAP priority	For 2026–27, ISAC suspended MAP award announcements for initial FAFSAs received after April 23, 2026; applications remain available and may still be considered if funding becomes available.
June 30, 2027	Federal deadline to submit the 2026–27 FAFSA.

REMEMBER: *Federal deadline is NOT the deadline families should aim for. School and state deadlines may be much earlier.*

StudentAid.gov Account

Every person who needs to participate in the FAFSA must have their own StudentAid.gov account. The account is the modern replacement for what families often called an "FSA ID."

- The student needs their own StudentAid.gov account.
- Each required contributor needs their own StudentAid.gov account.
- Do not create duplicate accounts for the same person.
- Keep account login information secure and do not share passwords.

FAFSA Contributors

A contributor is a person whose information is required on the FAFSA. A contributor may be the student, the student's spouse, a biological or adoptive parent, or a parent's spouse/partner, depending on the student's circumstances.

- Each contributor must provide consent and approval for federal tax information to be transferred from the IRS into the FAFSA.
- Each contributor generally needs their own StudentAid.gov account.
- A contributor does not become financially responsible for the student's education simply because they complete a FAFSA section.
- If a required contributor refuses consent and approval, the student may not be eligible for federal student aid.

Which Tax Year Does 2026–27 Use?

The 2026–27 FAFSA uses 2024 federal tax information. Families should have access to their 2024 tax return and other financial records, but much of the federal tax information is transferred directly from the IRS after required consent and approval.

HOW TO COMPLETE THE FAFSA

Have These Items Ready

- StudentAid.gov account for the student
- StudentAid.gov account for each required contributor
- Student and contributor Social Security numbers, if applicable
- 2024 federal tax information
- Records of child support received, if applicable
- Records of savings, investments, and other FAFSA-reportable assets
- List of colleges, career schools, or trade schools the student is considering
- Documentation related to unusual or special circumstances, if applicable

Start With the Student

Federal Student Aid recommends that the student start their own FAFSA and complete the student portion first. The student then invites the required contributor(s). This can reduce errors and make it easier to keep track of who still needs to complete a section.

Invite Contributors Carefully

1. Student begins the FAFSA and completes the student section.
2. Student identifies the required contributor(s).
3. Student invites each contributor using the contributor's email address.
4. Contributor accepts the invitation and signs in using their own StudentAid.gov account.
5. Contributor completes the required questions and provides consent and approval for IRS information transfer.
6. All required contributors complete and sign before the FAFSA can be fully submitted.

Parent Information

Parent information requirements depend on the student's circumstances. For dependent undergraduate students, the FAFSA determines which legal parent(s) must provide information. The rules changed under FAFSA Simplification, so families should use the official "Who's My FAFSA Parent?" guidance when parents are divorced, separated, unmarried, remarried, or living separately.

- Legal parents are generally biological or adoptive parents.
- Grandparents, foster parents, legal guardians, aunts, uncles, and siblings are not FAFSA parents unless they have legally adopted the student.
- If a required parent is remarried, the parent's spouse may also need to provide information depending on the FAFSA questions.
- If parental circumstances have changed since the 2024 tax year, report the FAFSA information as instructed and contact the college financial aid office if the change affects the family's ability to pay.

More Than One Child in College

The FAFSA no longer divides a parent's Student Aid Index among multiple children in college the way the old methodology did. Families with multiple children in college should still complete a FAFSA for each child. Colleges may consider the family’s circumstances through their professional-judgment process, so families should discuss the situation directly with each college’s financial aid office.

FINANCIAL AID TERMS TO KNOW

FAFSA: Free Application for Federal Student Aid. The free federal application used to determine eligibility for federal student aid and used by many states and colleges for their aid programs.

StudentAid.gov Account: The account used to access federal student aid services and complete the FAFSA online. Each required contributor needs their own account.

Contributor: A person whose information is required on a FAFSA and who must provide consent and approval and complete/sign the required section.

FAFSA Submission Summary: The document provided after the FAFSA is processed. It summarizes FAFSA responses, includes the SAI, and may show estimated federal aid eligibility.

Student Aid Index (SAI): An index number used by colleges to help determine eligibility for need-based aid. It is not a bill or the amount a family must pay.

Financial Aid Offer: The college's official offer of financial aid after admission and completion of required financial aid steps.

Gift Aid: Grants and scholarships that generally do not have to be repaid, although eligibility or renewal conditions may apply.

Self-Help Aid: Aid that generally requires work or repayment, such as work-study and student loans.

Special Circumstances: Financial circumstances that may justify a college financial aid administrator reviewing or adjusting certain FAFSA-based information through professional judgment.

Unusual Circumstances: Circumstances involving the student's relationship with or access to parents that may affect dependency status and require review by a financial aid administrator.

Professional Judgment: Authority that allows a college financial aid administrator, when permitted, to review certain special or unusual circumstances and potentially adjust aid eligibility.

Verification: A process in which a college asks a student/family to provide documentation to confirm information reported on the FAFSA.

Net Price Calculator: A college-specific online tool that estimates what a student may pay after grants and scholarships. It is an estimate, not a financial aid offer.

SUCCESSFUL FAFSA COMPLETION TIPS

- Create StudentAid.gov accounts before you begin.
- Use a personal email address that the student will continue to have access to after high school.
- Have each contributor create their own account rather than sharing an account.
- Let the student start the FAFSA whenever possible.
- Make sure contributor names, dates of birth, and other identifying information match the information associated with their StudentAid.gov account.
- Use the IRS tax information transfer when prompted. Do not assume you can simply substitute a tax return when consent and approval are required.
- Review every FAFSA answer before submitting.
- Save or download the FAFSA Submission Summary after processing.
- Check each college's financial aid portal after submission. A college may request additional documentation.
- Watch for verification requests and respond quickly.
- Complete any college-specific financial aid forms or CSS Profile requirements by the college's deadline.
- Do not pay someone to complete the FAFSA. The FAFSA itself is free.
- If your family has experienced a major financial change since the tax year used on the FAFSA, contact each college's financial aid office and ask about a special-circumstances review.

Technology Tips

- Use a current web browser and a reliable internet connection.
- Avoid browser auto-fill when entering account or personal information if it creates errors.
- Double-check email addresses before sending contributor invitations.
- If a contributor cannot access an invitation, use the invitation link/code provided by the FAFSA rather than creating a second account.

After You Submit

7. Watch for confirmation that the FAFSA was successfully submitted and processed.
8. Review the FAFSA Submission Summary for errors.
9. Make corrections when necessary.
10. Confirm that the correct colleges received the FAFSA.
11. Monitor each college's financial aid portal for missing documents.
12. Review financial aid offers carefully and compare actual net costs.

COMPARING FINANCIAL AID OFFERS

Do not compare colleges based only on the total amount of “aid.” The goal is to determine what the family will actually have to pay and how much of that cost is being covered by grants/scholarships versus work or borrowing.

Look at the Bottom Line

A helpful comparison is:

Step	What to calculate
1. Start with Cost of Attendance	Tuition + fees + housing/food + books + transportation + other estimated costs.
2. Subtract grants & scholarships	Focus first on aid that does not have to be repaid.
3. Review work-study separately	Work-study is earned through employment and may not reduce the initial college bill dollar-for-dollar.
4. Review student loans separately	Loans reduce the amount paid now but create future debt.
5. Calculate remaining net cost	Determine what the family/student will actually need to cover through savings, income, payment plans, or borrowing.

Questions to Ask About Scholarships

- Is the scholarship renewable each year?
- What GPA is required to renew it?
- Does the student have to remain in a particular major or college?
- Does the student have to enroll full-time?
- Can the scholarship be lost if the student changes majors?
- Is there a separate application for renewal?
- Does the scholarship cover tuition only, or can it apply to other costs?

Be Careful With Loan Amounts

A larger financial aid offer is not necessarily a better offer. A school that offers $15,000 in aid may still cost more than a school that offers $10,000 if much of the $15,000 is loans or if the underlying cost of attendance is much higher.

TIP: *Before accepting a loan, determine the total amount the student will owe at graduation—not just the amount offered for freshman year.*

Net Price Calculators

Federal law requires colleges to provide a Net Price Calculator for prospective first-time students. Use it early in the college search to estimate what a family might actually pay. The calculator is an estimate, not a guarantee.

WHEN THE FAFSA DOESN'T TELL THE WHOLE STORY

Special Circumstances

Families sometimes experience significant changes that are not reflected in the tax information used by the FAFSA. Examples can include a major reduction in income, loss of employment, significant unreimbursed medical or dental expenses, or other substantial changes in financial circumstances.

- Complete the FAFSA as instructed even if your current finances are very different.
- Contact the financial aid office at each college.
- Ask whether the college has a special-circumstances or professional-judgment process.
- Provide documentation requested by the college.
- Do not assume a college will automatically make an adjustment.

Unusual Circumstances

Some students cannot safely or reasonably provide parent information because of their circumstances. The FAFSA includes questions that help identify situations that may require a financial aid administrator to review dependency status.

Appealing a Financial Aid Offer

13. Contact the financial aid office—not the admission office unless the college directs you there.
14. Explain the specific reason you are requesting a review.
15. Provide documentation when requested.
16. Be factual and specific about the financial change or circumstance.
17. Ask whether the college has an appeal form or special-circumstances process.
18. Keep copies of what you submit and note the deadline for the appeal.

INFORMATION FOR ILLINOIS RESIDENTS

Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC)

ISAC administers several Illinois financial aid programs. The most important state grant for many Illinois families is the Monetary Award Program (MAP) Grant.

2026–27 Illinois MAP Grant

The MAP Grant is an Illinois grant that does not have to be repaid. It can be used toward tuition and mandatory fees at eligible Illinois postsecondary institutions.

2026–27 MAP information	Current information
Maximum award	Up to $8,400 per academic year under the approved formula; the effective maximum after the 4% reduction is $8,064.
Minimum award	$300, when otherwise eligible and funding permits.
Application	FAFSA or, for qualifying students, the Illinois Alternative Application for Illinois Financial Aid.
Credit limit	Students with 135 or more MAP paid credit hours are not eligible.
SAI threshold	Under the 2026–27 recompute formula, applicants with a federal SAI of 9,000 or above are not eligible.
Illinois priority/suspense date	April 23, 2026 was the last day for an initial 2026–27 FAFSA/Alternative Application to receive an announced MAP award; later applications are placed in suspense and may be considered if funding becomes available.

ILLINOIS TIP: *The FAFSA/Alternative Application remains available after the MAP suspense date. Completing the FAFSA can still be important for federal and institutional aid even if a student is ineligible for a newly announced MAP award.*

Questions on the FAFSA That Matter for MAP

- Student's state of legal residence
- Student's grade level
- Whether the student has completed a first bachelor's degree
- Whether the student is pursuing a graduate/professional degree
- Parent's state of legal residence, when applicable
- The Illinois school the student plans to attend and its federal school code

ISAC's rules and funding can change. Families should use ISAC's 2026–27 MAP information for the most current status.

FINANCIAL AID RESOURCES

StudentAid.gov: Federal Student Aid information, FAFSA, account creation, loan information, repayment, and financial aid tools.

https://studentaid.gov/

FAFSA: Start or access the FAFSA.

https://studentaid.gov/h/apply-for-aid/fafsa

FAFSA Help: Federal guidance and troubleshooting for completing the FAFSA.

https://studentaid.gov/fafsahelp

Federal Student Aid Estimator: Estimate federal student aid eligibility before completing the FAFSA.

https://studentaid.gov/aid-estimator/

Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC): Illinois state financial aid programs, MAP, deadlines, and student resources.

https://www.isac.org/

Net Price Calculator: Use each college's calculator to estimate net cost.

Search the college's website for "Net Price Calculator."

A FINAL REMINDER FOR FAMILIES

Financial aid is not a one-time event. Families should **complete the FAFSA every year the student wants to be considered for federal aid**, watch each college's deadlines, respond quickly to requests for documentation, and review the financial aid offer each year.

The best financial aid contact is the financial aid office at the college the student is considering. They can explain the college's policies, deadlines, scholarship requirements, and appeal process.

Prepared as an updated 2026–2027 version of the provided Financial Aid Tips guide.