

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 17, 2024

The Honorable Miguel Cardona
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona,

I am writing to express my concerns with the servicing issues hampering the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) process. There is no doubt that the Biden Administration's Department of Education (the Department) has helped alleviate the student debt burdens saddling millions of Americans, such as cancelling the student debt of more than one million public servants. One key tool the Department has at its disposal is FAFSA, which empowers millions of young Americans to access an ecosystem of financial aid to support their ambitions to obtain higher education. However, the prospect of serious glitches and delays again looms over the FAFSA process ahead of the upcoming 2025-2026 academic year.

The Department of Education must prioritize tackling these problems and provide a functional FAFSA application site prepared for the influx of projected applications, especially following the challenges that impacted the rollout of the 2024-2025 FAFSA application form. It is no exaggeration to say that these ongoing problems with FAFSA are directly impacting the lives of millions of American youth who rely on financial aid to pursue their dreams.

In your letter addressed to FAFSA partners and colleagues dated September 23, 2024, you outlined the steps the Department is taking to ensure that the 2025-2026 FAFSA is broadly available by December 1, 2025.¹ You further noted that the Biden Administration has taken on the challenging congressionally-mandated task of updating a system, form, and process that has not undergone any substantive change in over four decades. I appreciate the complexities presented by such a major undertaking, however, the emotional and economic impact FAFSA's various problems have had on prospective students and their families is unacceptable.

While setbacks are to be expected with updating a comprehensive program like FAFSA, the scope and nature of the missteps with the 2024-2025 FAFSA rollout continue to permeate distrust. They have even had the chilling effect of reducing the number of students who even submit a FAFSA application. The FAFSA completion rate for those graduating high school in 2024 fell *nearly 11 percent* compared to the 2023-2024 application cycle.²

¹ U.S. Dep't of Edu., Secretary's Cover Letter: A Focus on Improving the FAFSA Experience (Sept. 23, 2024) <https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/education-policy/secretarys-cover-letter-focus-improving-fafsa-experience>.

² Cecilia Garzella and Suhail Bhat, *For low-income students, FAFSA can be a lifeline. When it didn't work, they were hardest hit*, USA TODAY (June 6, 2024),

Alarming, schools serving the lowest-income students saw a 48 percent decrease in the number of processed applications.³ Black, Latino, and the lowest-income communities were impacted disproportionately, experiencing the steepest declines in FAFSA participation in the 2024-2025 cycle. The sudden drop in FAFSA participation among some of our most vulnerable communities following the missteps of the 2024-2025 application rollout is clearly no coincidence.

I have heard directly from a number of institutions of higher education in New Jersey, including several minority serving institutions, HSIs and HCBUs, which have detailed their challenges with FAFSA and have confirmed that their enrollment was substantially impacted by the flawed 2024-2025 roll out. It is clear that these institutions of higher education and students – both in New Jersey and across the country – are unhappy and unwilling to accept the status quo. FAFSA’s technical glitches and delays created a ripple effect of delayed form completion, delaying federal issuance of student aid reports. These in turn hampered the ability of institutions of higher education (IHEs) to develop financial aid offers for prospective students because they did not have the necessary information from FAFSA on time. Students waiting for delayed financial aid offers had to make difficult, life-altering decisions about enrolling in college and beginning the next chapter of their education – or not.

Again, I reiterate my admiration for the Biden Administration’s historic efforts to relieve the crippling burden of student debt for millions and lower the cost of education for hard-working, aspiring Americans. But the countless young Americans who rely on FAFSA to help them obtain higher education and achieve their dreams deserve better.

I believe the Department has the chance to rebuild trust in the FAFSA application process. That begins with having a strong, seamless 2025-2026 FAFSA application rollout. I remain concerned that the application launch for the upcoming cycle is not fully operational and has been delayed for a second consecutive year. I understand that the Department began testing the new form on October 1, 2024, to identify and resolve any outstanding errors before launching the form to the public on or before December 1, 2024. I will be monitoring this closely and wish the Department well with this major undertaking that is just too important to get wrong.

With the December 1 deadline quickly approaching, I respectfully request responses to the following questions and concerns by November 13, 2024:

1. Does the Department have a comprehensive action plan detailing how it intends to prevent previous FAFSA application errors from reoccurring and proactively solve major glitches or technical problems with the FAFSA application before the public rollout on December 1, 2024?
 - a. If not, why not?

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/investigations/2024/06/06/fafsa-issues-hardest-low-income-students/73784745007/>.

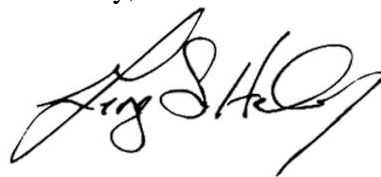
³ Chase, Education Center, Personal Banking, Student, What does the 2024-25 FAFSA delay mean for students <https://www.chase.com/personal/banking/education/student/impact-of-2024-2025-fafsa-delay#:~:text=The%20application%20was%20delayed%20because,application's%20release%20to%20be%20delayed.>

- b. If so, when will the Department provide a copy of any such comprehensive action plan to Congress?
2. How is the Department ensuring that the portal connection between the FAFSA form and the IRS portal functions as intended?
3. Will the Department increase staffing at its call center, and in what languages will assistance be available?
4. What efforts is the Department undertaking with regard to prospective students who forewent entering college due to the 2024-2025 FAFSA rollout? Is the Department attempting to contact these students with resources and information to encourage them to apply to college?
5. Can IHEs expect to receive relevant information from FAFSA that is necessary to formulate financial aid packages in a timely manner for the 2025-2026 cycle? If not, what is the Department doing to ensure data is transmitted at regular and consistent intervals?
6. Will the Department commit to providing a briefing to interested members in Congress on the status of the 2025-2026 FAFSA application site and any outstanding problems to be solved at least two weeks before the intended December 1, 2024 rollout?

I again urge the Department to prepare thoroughly for the upcoming 2025-2026 FAFSA application cycle. The futures of so many young Americans are contingent upon the Department's efforts to make financial aid for higher education accessible to whoever may need it. Improving the FAFSA application process is not just some technocratic exercise; it is about opening doors for the dreams of our next generation of Americans.

I look forward to receiving your responses.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "George S. Helmy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "G" and "H".

George S. Helmy
United States Senator