

October 13, 2014

Director of the Information Collection Clearance Division
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW., LBJ, Mailstop L-OM-2-2E319 Room 2E115
Washington, DC 20202
(submitted electronically via: <http://www.regulations.gov>)

Re: Docket ID ED–2014–ICCD–0126

Dear Director,

In response to the Federal Register notice published on August 27, 2014, I am writing to comment on the draft paper and online versions of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) that the Secretary proposes to use for the 2015-16 award year.

The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS) is an independent, nonprofit organization that works to make higher education more available and affordable for people of all backgrounds. Through nonpartisan research, analysis, and advocacy, we aim to improve the processes and public policies that can pave the way to successful educational outcomes for students and for society.

Our goal in submitting these comments is to ensure that applying for student aid is as easy as possible for students and their families. We appreciate that the Department has continued to improve the process of applying for federal aid, including improving and calling more attention to the IRS Data Retrieval Tool, which is the easiest way for applicants to provide accurate tax information. We also thank the Department for incorporating several of our June 2013 suggestions, such as more clearly encouraging students to consult with financial aid offices if they or their family's financial situation changed significantly (in *Filling Out the FAFSA*). However, many of our outstanding recommendations are reiterated below.¹ We have also added a new recommendation to ensure that independent aid applicants have the opportunity to identify whether they are veterans or service members.

Our comments focus on areas where more clarity and streamlining will make the FAFSA easier to understand and use. Unless otherwise specified, our recommendations about questions, notes, and instructions follow the format of the 2015-16 draft paper FAFSA, and italics indicate suggested modifications. Our recommendations are also for the FAFSA on the Web (FOTW) and FAFSA on the Phone (FOTP), wherever applicable. As discussed further below, it is essential that simplification efforts extend to all print and online products and interactions, so that all potential aid applicants can benefit.

¹ Many but not all of the comments in this document are similar to those we [submitted in June 2013](#) on the draft 2014-15 FAFSA materials, in response to the Federal Register notice posted on May 6, 2013 (FR Doc. 2013-10600). These similarities reflect aspects of the materials that did not change and that we still believe should be improved. Our previous comments are all available online at www.ticas.org.

Our comments below are organized into three main sections: the FAFSA public comment process, the FAFSA, and the IRS Data Retrieval Tool. Limited comments on FOTW are included throughout this document.

The FAFSA Public Comment Process

We urge the Department to *release draft FOTW materials at the same time as the draft paper FAFSA and to encourage public review* so that students, financial aid administrators, and other stakeholders can provide the Department with important, timely, and coordinated feedback on these interrelated forms and processes.

We understand that updating the FOTW is a substantial undertaking. However, given that almost all (99%) FAFSAs are now expected to be filed online,² we continue to urge the Department to make a preview version of the FOTW available during the public comment period, to provide stakeholders the opportunity to weigh in on proposed changes and suggest improvements. Some information about FOTW is available in the “Data Elements and Justification” chart, but these textual descriptions of aspects of the online application are of limited use without an accompanying visual depiction of how applicants work their way through the process.

The FAFSA

Order of elements in Paper FAFSA

We recommend that the Department *move “What is the FAFSA?” (currently page 10) to page 2* (in place of the first page of the Notes section that is currently on page 2). This important contextual information should be at the beginning, not the end, of the paper FAFSA. Moving it to the front of the form would allow students to learn more about the FAFSA before they start filling it out.

To prevent confusion and make all the relevant information in the Notes section easier for applicants to see and use, we suggest *moving the text currently on pages 2 and 9 to the end of the form*, creating one continuous Notes section on pages 9 through 10. In its response to our 2013 comments, the Department said it would “consider this as a potential future enhancement,” but it is unclear why this common-sense change requires so much time to consider.³

Step Three (Student)

Questions 49 and 50: Active Duty Service Members and Veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces

Because the FOTW uses a “skip-logic” function to simplify completion, many service members and veterans never have the opportunity to identify their status when they apply for federal student aid. Instead, those who are identified as independent students based on their answers to earlier questions about their dependency status (including age, degree-level, and marital status) never see the active duty and veteran status questions.

² See pages 10 and 11 of “Supporting Statement for Paperwork Reduction Act Submission.”

³ See page 5 of “2014-2015 Federal Student Aid Application Comments Tracking Summary.”

While we recognize and applaud the overall benefits of FAFSA simplification, the questions about military background are both important and easy to answer in a matter of seconds. We recommend that these questions be restored for all FOTW users, as requested by U.S. Senators Carper and Hirono in a letter to Secretary Duncan on July 30, 2014 and referenced in the comments submitted by Walter Ochinko on October 2, 2014.⁴ This change would increase the ability of states and colleges to conduct targeted outreach to veterans and service members who may be eligible for additional aid and/or services, and would also improve the available data on federal student aid usage by veterans and service members.

Questions 56-58: Unaccompanied homeless youth

For several years, we have urged the Department to fix a persistent statutory problem in the FAFSA questions regarding homelessness, and to make it easier for students using the paper FAFSA to understand what they are being asked. We are pleased to see that applicants who are “self-supporting and at risk of being homeless” have now been added to these questions, addressing the statutory issue. But we must continue to recommend that instead of asking three separate questions in the paper FAFSA to try to capture the various ways an applicant might qualify as an independent student due to being homeless or at risk of homelessness, the paper form should ask just one simple question – as the FOTW already does – accompanied by a more detailed Notes section. Specifically, we recommend replacing questions 56, 57, and 58 – which are long, confusing, and still do not cover all of the potential combinations of status and source of determination – with the following single question, which is already used as a filtering question in FOTW:

On or after July 1, ____ [relevant year], were you homeless or at risk of being homeless? (See Notes on p. __ for how to answer this question.)

The new question would be accompanied by a reference to the Notes section, and the first paragraph of the Notes for this question would read:

Answer “Yes” if you received a determination at any time on or after July 1, 2014, that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless, or *self-supporting and* at risk of being homeless, *from any of the following sources:*

- *Your high school or school district homeless liaison*
- *The director, or designated staff, of an emergency shelter program funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development*
- *The director, or designated staff, of a runaway or homeless youth center or transitional living program.*
- *A financial aid administrator at the school you attend or plan to attend.*

⁴⁴ See comment posted on regulations.gov at <http://www.regulations.gov/#!documentDetail;D=ED-2014-ICCD-0126-0029>.

Step Four (Parent)

Questions 59, 61-64, 65-68

We understand that the Department is developing additional resources to assist students whose parents are “unmarried and both parents living together” in answering questions 80-94, as we recommended in our June 2013 comments. The current instructions on page 6 and page 9 (Notes for Step Four, questions 59-94) refer students to 1-800-4FED-AID. Students unable to call during the operating hours for that hotline (Monday-Friday, 8am-10pm ET) or with frequently asked questions would benefit from user-friendly online information, which could also reduce the need for phone assistance. We look forward to seeing the completed resources and hope that they are easy for applicants to find and understand.

Notes

As stated above, we recommend creating a continuous Notes section on pages 9 through 10 of the paper FAFSA, rather than awkwardly splitting the section between pages 2 and 9.

Notes for questions 56-58

Since 2008, we have urged the Department to *revise the Notes for questions 56-58 as follows* to simplify the application process for homeless youth and maintain consistency with legislative intent:

- “**Youth**” means you are ~~21~~ 23 years of age or younger...

The 21-or-younger definition of “Youth” in the draft Notes for questions 56-58 appears to conflict with legislative intent. While the statutory language of Title 20 does not specify ages pertaining to “unaccompanied homeless youth,” the congressional record shows clear intent to provide federal student aid access to unaccompanied homeless youth who would not otherwise qualify as “independent” and are unable to provide parental information.⁵ Additionally, the Government Accountability Office, in advising Congress on this and related issues, has defined disconnected youth as “youth aged 14 to 24 who are not in school and not working, or who lack family or other support networks.”⁶ Defining homeless youth aged 22 and 23 as independent, just like homeless youth aged 21 and younger, would address an unintended, unfair, and unnecessary disparity in the treatment of these vulnerable young people, simplifying their application process and ensuring they receive the aid for which they are eligible.

⁵ Rep. Judy Biggert (R-IL): “The current Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, creates insurmountable barriers for unaccompanied homeless youth – youth that are homeless and alone. These children do not receive financial support from their parents, and many do not have access to parental financial information or a parental signature required by the FAFSA. As a result, unaccompanied homeless youth are prevented from accessing the financial aid they need because they cannot supply the information required by the FAFSA. The FAFSA Fix for Homeless Kids Act addresses these barriers by allowing unaccompanied homeless youth to apply for federal financial aid without providing parental income information or a parent signature. This will open the doors of higher education to some of our nation’s most vulnerable youth, and I am pleased that H.R. 2669 includes the FAFSA Fix for Homeless Kids Act.” Congressional Record Vol. 153, No. 132 (September 7, 2007), H10267. http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getpage.cgi?dbname=2007_record&page=H10267&position=all.

⁶ GAO noted that the various statutes relating to homeless and disconnected youth do not prescribe an age range. U.S. Government Accountability Office. 2008. *Report to the Chairman, Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives: Disconnected Youth - Federal Action Could Address Some of the Challenges Faced by Local Programs That Reconnect Youth to Education and Employment*. <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08313.pdf>.

In its response to our most recent comments on this issue, the Department said, “The Policy team at the Department of Education is researching this issue. For now, the change recommended in this comment will not be made for the 2014-15 FAFSA.” Now that a year has passed, we hope that the Department is prepared to address this issue and move forward with defining homeless youth aged 22 and 23 as independent in the 2015-16 FAFSA and FOTW.

What is the FAFSA?

As mentioned above, we recommend moving this text to page 2 of the paper FAFSA, so that students learn more about the FAFSA before they start filling it out.

We also recommend adding the following language in italics to the last sentence of the “How do I find out what my Expected Family Contribution (EFC) is?” section for clarification:

You can make corrections or provide additional information, as necessary, online at www.fafsa.gov (using your PIN) or by following the instructions on page 5 of your SAR.

Space constraints understandably limit the amount of information on the paper form, but applicants would benefit from knowing a little more about what to expect after submitting the paper FAFSA. It would be helpful for this section to briefly explain the next steps in the aid process: after filling out the FAFSA, students will receive a Student Aid Report (SAR), which summarizes the data they submitted on the FAFSA and provides information on federal aid eligibility. Later, they will receive financial aid award letters from colleges where they apply and are accepted with more details about all the aid for which they qualify. The Department has already recognized the need for such information by answering the question, “Who will I hear from, and when?” at <http://studentaid.ed.gov/fafsa/next-steps#who-will-i-hear-from-and-when>.

The IRS Data Retrieval Tool

We applaud the Department for continuing to improve the IRS Data Retrieval Tool (DRT), and for highlighting the tool in draft materials for the 2015-16 cycle. However, these materials could further emphasize the tool’s benefits and ease of use. We strongly encourage the Department to mark the questions on the paper FAFSA that could be pre-populated using the DRT, which could encourage applicants to shift from paper to the FOTW to benefit from the DRT. If the Department is developing an FOTW Worksheet for 2015-16, it should also note which questions could be answered with the DRT.

Additional suggestions for improvements related to the DRT

1) We continue to strongly urge the Department to work with the IRS to extend the substantial benefits of the DRT process to more applicants and potential applicants, as discussed in our comments from previous years. In its current form, the DRT draws data only from IRS 1040 forms, not from the W-2 or 1099 forms that can provide important earnings information for those who do not file a 1040 because they earn too little to owe federal income tax. Almost three-quarters of Pell Grant recipients have incomes so low that they do not owe federal income tax, as discussed in more detail in our report, [After the FAFSA: How Red Tape Can Prevent](#)

[Eligible Students from Receiving Financial Aid](#).⁷ The Department has stated that it will have conversations to explore this issue, and we look forward to learning about the status of those discussions.

2) We continue to encourage the Department to consider how the DRT could be integrated into the FAFSA4caster so that the user has the option of a more precise aid estimate, in addition to the current format. This would not only help provide early aid eligibility estimates to students and parents just beginning to explore college options and affordability, but also make them aware of the DRT well before they face the FAFSA itself.

3) As mentioned above, we recommend that the Department provide at least screenshots, if not a demo site, for future planned enhancements to the FOTW, including the IRS DRT features, to facilitate public input before they are finalized.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed 2015-16 Federal Student Aid application materials. If you have any questions or concerns regarding our comments, please feel free to contact me by phone at (510) 318-7900, or via email at ljasher@ticas.org.

Sincerely,



Lauren J. Asher
President

⁷ TICAS. 2010. *After the FAFSA: How Red Tape Can Prevent Eligible Students from Receiving Financial Aid*. http://www.ticas.org/pub_view.php?id=643.