

# Erie Times-News

## Financial aid data delays jeopardize students' educational dreams and well-being

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As a means of determining student financial aid, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) has long been a crucial lifeline and beacon of hope for current and prospective students pursuing their higher education dreams.

For more than 17 million students, the FAFSA is the key to unlocking government dollars to help cover the cost of college since it determines eligibility for federal Pell Grants and federal student loans, and in most cases, the financial aid provided by colleges as well. For Pennsylvania students, it is also a requirement to apply for the PA State Grant Program.



*Kathleen A. Getz GREG WOHLFORD/ERIE TIMES-NEWS*

There is already a robust societal debate about the affordability of higher education, and recent delays in processing FAFSA applications exacerbate the challenge, leaving students and families uncertain as to how to cover the costs of their education. Besides the obvious financial strain, the ripple effect of this untenable situation stands to disrupt many other aspects of students' lives, from their academic progress to their mental health.

In 2022, the U.S. Department of Education authorized changes that pushed back the traditional opening of FAFSA in early October by two to three months. When the so-called soft launch debuted in late December, it was plagued with problems.

While intentions were good and a restructuring of the FAFSA long overdue — including a need to streamline the process, simplify the steps, and increase the number of families eligible for financial aid — the new version continues to be riddled with difficulties, from technical issues to errors in calculations.

Just recently, the department announced that it would not be able to provide FAFSA data to universities until March, further delaying the schools' timeline for sending out financial aid offers, most likely until April. So, while ordinarily, students and families would have months to consider their options, they will now be pressured to finalize their college choices within weeks.

Federal financial aid programs were created to make higher education more accessible, bringing a dream within reach for many who would otherwise be unable to realize that future. Members of marginalized groups, especially low-income and first-generation applicants who may already face barriers to accessing higher education are likely to be disproportionately affected by these FAFSA delays. Those who can least afford to pay for college stand to suffer the most.

*“Members of marginalized groups, especially low-income and first-generation applicants who may already face barriers to accessing higher education are likely to be disproportionately affected by these FAFSA delays.”* - Mercyhurst University President Kathleen A. Getz

We must recognize the human costs of these delays and do our best to mitigate the hardships imposed on our students.

With that in mind, Mercyhurst University is suspending the May 1 admissions deadline — traditionally known as National College Decision Day — to June 1 for accepted students to commit.

While some colleges have similarly changed their deadlines, I urge all others to do so as part of a collective response. I also implore students and families to complete the FAFSA immediately, so that they do not miss out on the aid they are entitled to receive. We certainly don't want the current situation to discourage the very students that federal student aid is intended to help from pursuing their dreams.

*Kathleen A. Getz, Ph.D., is the 13th president of Mercyhurst University. Formerly, she was dean at the Sellinger School of Business and Management at Loyola University Maryland, dean at the Quinlan School of Business at Loyola University Chicago, and senior associate dean for Academic Affairs at the Kogod School of Business at American University.*