

Next few days will 'make or break' some Oregon colleges' enrollment amid FAFSA problems



By [Tiffany Camhi](#) (OPB)

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This week is college decision time for many Oregon high school seniors, and admissions staff say this year's flawed FAFSA has made enrollment extremely unpredictable.



FILE - A flyer informing Benson Polytechnic High School seniors about FAFSA, April 17, 2024. This year's new FAFSA was intended to be simpler for students and their families to fill out, including students with undocumented parents. But it has so far been the opposite.

Tiffany Camhi / OPB

Usually this time of year, high school seniors would know which school they're heading to next fall. And universities would have a good handle on their incoming freshman class students.

But this year has been very unusual.

Many colleges and high school seniors are months behind schedule due to the U.S. Department of Education's botched rollout of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA. Now students and their families are scrambling as key enrollment and aid deadlines approach in the coming days. Meanwhile, recent figures show FAFSA completion rates for seniors are down across the state, especially among high schools serving low-income students and families of color.

The new application, which had not been updated in decades, was designed to be simpler for people to fill out. It also touted expanded eligibility for the federal government's Pell Grant program, allowing more low-income students to access a higher education. But the so-called "Better FAFSA" has been plagued by repeated delays, technical glitches and aid miscalculations.

The problems have barred [some students from filling out the FAFSA](#) for months. High school counselors and college financial aid and admissions staff worry the multiple barriers associated with the FAFSA this year have stopped low-income and first-generation students from applying at all. Some postsecondary schools have responded to the delays by [pushing back enrollment deadlines](#).

The Education Department has fixed many of FAFSA's early problems, but application numbers suggest the issues had a significant effect on high school students and families. Among high school seniors in Oregon, the number of completed applications is down by about 13% compared to this time last year, [according to federal data](#). Breaking it down further among Portland public high schools, that percentage is even higher in more racially diverse schools. Both Roosevelt and Benson Polytechnic high schools are down by 41%. Jefferson is down by 36%.



Oregon State University's campus in Corvallis in February 2024. OSU is one of a number of universities to postpone enrollment deadlines as a result of problems with the FAFSA process. *Courtesy of Maia Insinga/Oregon State University*

“I don’t know if it’s going to even itself out in the end,” said Jon Boeckenstedt, vice provost of enrollment management at Oregon State University, of the drop in completed FAFSAs. “I don’t know if those are students that weren’t going to enroll in college anyway? We don’t have any insight into that.”

This month the Education Department announced a new initiative to help more high school seniors successfully complete the FAFSA. The FAFSA Student Support Strategy is targeted towards bringing more staff and resources to school districts, nonprofits and community-based organizations that are actively working with seniors to fill out applications. Organizations can apply for a cut of \$50 million in program grants to implement FAFSA clinics, hire more staff and cover things like transportation costs to FAFSA events.

Even though enrollment deadlines are approaching, some colleges and universities say they will continue to work with admitted students who are unable to complete the FAFSA after June 1. Oregon State University, which pushed back its enrollment deadline to June 1, is one of them.

OSU began awarding full financial aid packages to admitted students the first week of May, about a month and a half later than usual. Now admissions staff are waiting to hear back from students.

Boeckenstedt said enrollment for the freshman class overall is behind but OSU could be looking at a record enrollment next fall, if trends from the past few weeks continue.

“Roughly 20 days out [from the deadline] we were about 20% behind,” said Boeckenstedt. “We have closed that gap by about a point a day, every single day.”

Boeckenstedt said he is cautiously optimistic, but isn’t sure where things will land.

Enrollment numbers at private schools, like Lewis & Clark College in Portland, are also looking unpredictable. Eric Staab, vice president for admissions and financial aid at the college, said full financial aid packages started going out to prospective students in early April. Like OSU, Lewis & Clark pushed back its enrollment deadline to June 1, and Staab is hoping to see a rush of commitments this week.

Staab said the admissions process is at a critical point.

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“The jury is really still out regarding where our enrollment numbers are heading,” Staab said, noting that many small liberal arts colleges rely heavily on deposits landing in the last 10 days before the enrollment deadline. “So we are in now the last 10 days and so this will make or break whether or not we’re gonna have a good year.”

The anxiety extends to students, families and to higher education officials across the board, Staab said.

“There’s been a lot of quietness among families as they’re going through [graduation] rituals this month,” said Staab. “A lot of us, including my friends at the public institutions, are on pins and needles, waiting to find out how this year is going to play out.”

Staab said Lewis & Clark will continue to work with admitted students who are having trouble completing the FAFSA after the Saturday deadline passes.



Students walk on the Eastern Oregon University campus during the 2021 fall term.

Courtesy of Eastern Oregon University

But the impact is not as apparent in some schools in Oregon's rural areas. At Eastern Oregon University in La Grande, enrollment for the fall incoming freshman class is actually up compared to this time last year.

"Our enrollment numbers look about where we would expect them to be," said LeeAnn Case, EOU's interim vice president for finance and administration. "What we'll never know is the impact of the student that just didn't go through the FAFSA process."

EOU has rolling admissions, with virtually no hard enrollment deadlines, but its financial aid office has deadlines to apply for institutional assistance. It began sending out full financial aid offers to students in mid-May.

Community colleges, which often serve a high number of Pell-eligible students, are also waiting to see how the problems with this year's FAFSA will play out on their campuses. Rogue Community College in Southern Oregon is still waiting on half of its newly admitted students to fill out the FAFSA. But RCC Director of Financial Aid Frankie Everett said there's still time for these prospective students to get the application done.

“Compared to May of last year, we’re about 900 FAFSAs short,” said Everett. “We still have all of this year for people to be able to submit their applications so we’ll probably catch up on that number.”

Last year, more than half — 57% — of RCC’s students were eligible for federal Pell Grants.

Everett said RCC has been focused on helping its community jump over the hurdles brought by the FAFSA this year. The community college has held FAFSA clinics at nearly every high school in Southern Oregon.

“We don’t care if they’re coming to RCC or not,” said Everett. “We just want to help seniors get their FAFSA completed successfully.”

While June 1 is a big day, many Oregon families with college-bound students should have another day circled on their calendars: The deadline for high school graduates to apply for state aid for community college is coming up on June 3. The Oregon Promise Grant is awarded to recent high school graduates or GED earners and helps cover the average cost of tuition at Oregon’s community colleges.

Applications for the Promise Grant are up compared to this time last year. But not all of those applications are finished; it also requires students to successfully complete a FAFSA or Oregon Student Aid Application to be considered for the award.

A completed FAFSA or ORSAA is also required for the state’s largest need-based financial aid program, the Oregon Opportunity Grant. The grant has no hard deadline and is awarded until funds run out. Combined with the Pell Grant, it could cover nearly \$15,000 in college costs at a four-year university for the state’s lowest-income students this upcoming school year.

The state Office of Student Access and Completion is planning to continue efforts to boost FAFSA and ORSAA completion rates among recently graduated seniors this summer.

As financial aid offices scramble to help catch up students who want to attend their schools this fall, staff will barely have time to catch a breath before entering the next financial aid gauntlet in October. All the delays and technical problems over the last six months have slowed down preparations for students about to start the college application process for fall 2025.

“There’s genuine worry and concern among people in higher education that next year is still going to be very complicated because the federal government hasn’t even begun the process of putting together the aid application form for next year,” said Staab. “Normally the Education Department would have finalized that by February. And here we are in May.”

Editor’s note: *The numbers related to grant programs from the state have been changed slightly to better reflect how much money they include.*

