

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 11, 2023

The Honorable Miguel Cardona
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona:

We write to thank you for your work as the U.S. Department of Education (“Department”) prepares for the launch of the new Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and to urge you to provide ample guidance and communication to students and families, educators, college access counselors, schools, and the financial aid community throughout the rollout process.

In recent years, Congress has taken important steps to streamline the complex and burdensome FAFSA process through the passage of the *Fostering Undergraduate Talent by Unlocking Resources for Education (FUTURE) Act* and the *FAFSA Simplification Act*. Prior to these efforts, it was estimated that students left anywhere from \$2 to \$3.5 billion in federal Pell Grants on the table annually by not completing the FAFSA.¹ Now, due to Congressional and Administrative efforts on FAFSA simplification, the Department has estimated that over 610,000 new students from low-income backgrounds will receive Pell Grants, and nearly 1.5 million more students will receive the maximum Pell Grant award.²

We understand that overhauling the current application and reconfiguring the federal student aid system requires significant time, preparation, and resources. However, despite a one-year delay in the implementation process, the Department recently announced the new FAFSA will be available to students by December 31, 2023, with no indication of an actual date.³ This is a considerable departure from the traditional launch date of October 1st. Further, the Department’s latest announcement also revealed that processing delays will take place in the first few months of 2024, meaning that schools will not be able to generate financial aid offers for their students in a timely fashion.

While the simplified FAFSA is meant to provide more students with federal student aid, we fear the most vulnerable students will be negatively impacted by these delays. FAFSA delays can be

¹ <https://www.ncan.org/news/592984/NCAN-Report-3.75-Billion-in-Pell-Grants-Goes-Unclaimed-for-High-School-Class-of-2021.htm>

² <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-releases-new-data-highlighting-how-simplified-streamlined-and-redesigned-better-fafsa%C2%AE-form-will-help-deliver-maximum-pell-grants-15-million-more-students>

³ <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/library/electronic-announcements/2023-11-15/update-simplified-streamlined-redesigned-2024-25-fafsa>

particularly burdensome for students who lack reliable broadband access, students in foster care, students experiencing homelessness, first-generation students, students experiencing financial insecurity, and so many more.⁴ That is why we ask that you work with schools, financial aid administrators, college access organizations, and other key stakeholders to do the following:

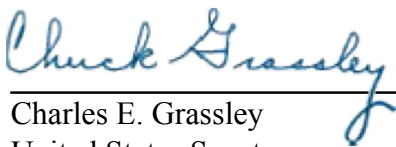
1. Provide clear communication to applicants upon submission of their FAFSA by giving realistic timelines and detailed next steps.
2. Ensure increased availability and adequate staffing of help centers for students and financial aid offices, including the availability of bi- or multi-lingual staff and weekend and evening hours in January and February.
3. Maintain low verification selection rates for the 2024-2025 cycle.
4. Ensure that FAFSA instructions clearly inform applicants that their primary residence should not be included in evaluating the value of a for-profit farm or small business for asset reporting purposes on the FAFSA.
5. Allow parents without Social Security Numbers, who are unable to verify their identities online, to securely upload their documentation to expedite the process of getting them a Federal Student Aid ID.
6. Encourage institutions of higher education (IHE) to push back their financial aid deadlines to March 1st, at the earliest, so that students, families, and counselors have adequate time to complete the form.
7. Allow IHEs to accept electronic copies of verification materials, including electronic signatures.
8. Partner with key stakeholders to strongly encourage students to complete the FAFSA through trusted sources.
9. Offer IHEs timely updates on progress and provide them the resources to address student's questions, concerns, or challenges.
10. Share timely FAFSA completion data with the field to monitor progress.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

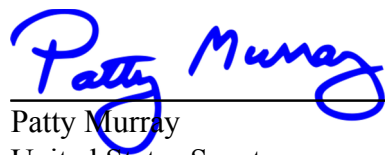
Sincerely,



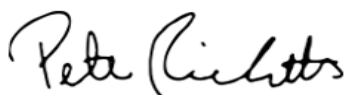
Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Charles E. Grassley
United States Senator



Patty Murray
United States Senator



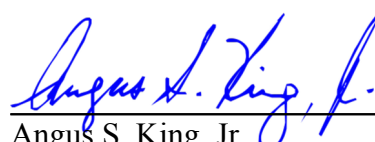
Pete Ricketts
United States Senator



Tina Smith
United States Senator



Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator



Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



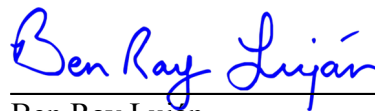
Jack Reed
United States Senator



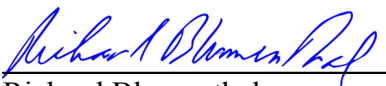
Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Robert Menendez
United States Senator



Ben Ray Lujan
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Alex Padilla
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



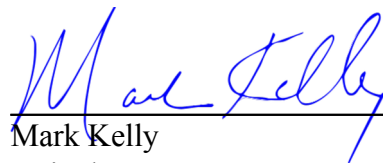
John Fetterman
United States Senator



Peter Welch
United States Senator



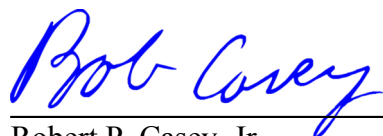
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



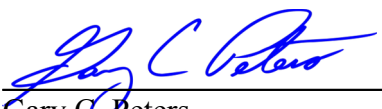
Mark Kelly
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



Gary C. Peters
United States Senator



Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator



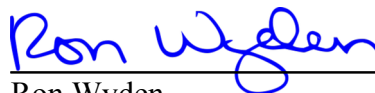
Maria Cantwell
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



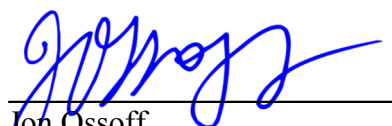
Joe Manchin III
United States Senator



Raphael G. Butler
United States Senator



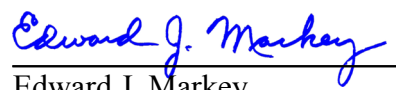
Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



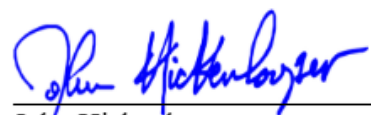
Jon Ossoff
United States Senator



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



John Hickenlooper
United States Senator

CC: Richard Cordray, Chief Operating Officer, Federal Student Aid