

ISAC PROVIDES FREE ASSISTANCE STATEWIDE FOR STUDENTS COMPLETING FINANCIAL AID APPLICATIONS

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From the Illinois Student Assistance Commission:

While students are struggling nationwide with remote education and college plans seem to be more up in the air than ever, there is some good news in Illinois: Illinois closed out the year ranking the #1 state for completions of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®), the form most students use to apply for federal and state financial aid for postsecondary education.

Helping to ensure that more Illinois students have the funds to follow a path to education after high school has become increasingly difficult in the midst of a pandemic that is challenging every aspect of our daily lives. To address some of the pandemic-related challenges facing high schools and graduating seniors in completing financial aid applications for next fall, the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) is adding new initiatives to its college outreach programs. From targeted outreach and one-on-one assistance to students and families, to online financial aid modules that teachers can use with their students, the state's college access and financial aid agency is committed to providing free statewide supports for students and schools.

“With many students and families facing illness and loss of loved ones, financial distress, and all the challenges of remote learning, it can be hard to handle the *now*, much less consider the future,” said Eric Zarnikow, executive director of ISAC. “But as we look to better days ahead for next fall, we want to make sure our high school seniors and adult students have

applied for and can receive the financial aid for which they are eligible. Knowing what funding you have available for postsecondary education is an important milestone in making that education happen.”

Indeed, ensuring that students have this important information drove passage of the state’s FAFSA Mandate. This new law, which took effect with the 2020-2021 school year, requires public high school seniors to complete the FAFSA or, if eligible, the Alternative Application for Illinois Financial Aid, as a prerequisite to receiving a high school diploma. (A waiver provision allows a parent, guardian, or the student – if 18 or emancipated – to opt out of the requirement.) Information about FAFSA Mandate training and support for school counselors and other professionals is available at <https://www.isac.org/pd/fafsa-mandate.html>.

Making completion of a financial aid application part of an expectation for high school graduation can increase the number of students who are aware of the resources available to help them afford education or training after high school. This information can also help some students decide to attempt college when they might not otherwise have done so, and it may help some students limit student loan debt and take a fuller course load to more quickly complete a degree or credential.

While ISAC already provides free college planning and financial aid workshops and one-on-one assistance for students during the annual College Changes Everything® (CCE) fall campaign and throughout the year, the agency is extending its outreach and supports to help address the many obstacles for students created by the COVID-19 pandemic, and to meet the state’s new FAFSA Mandate. ISAC has hosted over 750 online financial aid workshops with school partners, as well as 13 statewide virtual financial aid completion workshops since September 2020, with more scheduled in 2021. As high schools focus their efforts on remote learning and keeping connected with students, ISAC is reaching out directly to schools that previously participated in the CCE campaign and is offering the following free supports statewide:

- **Online financial aid completion workshops** for students and parents. See studentportal.isac.org/events for statewide virtual events.
- **Individual assistance to students and parents** in completing financial aid applications, via web conferencing, phone, text, or email. Contact your local ISACorps member for free assistance: studentportal.isac.org/isacorps. Sign up for ISAC’s free text messaging app to get college/financial aid questions answered via text: isac.org/collegeqa.
- **ISAC’s FAFSA Completion Initiative and direct outreach to students.** ISAC’s FAFSA Completion Initiative offers Illinois school districts a way to identify students who have not submitted either a FAFSA or Alternative Application. The application completion information – updated on a weekly basis – can be used by district counselors to help reach students who may need assistance or encouragement to complete an application. ***To support busy school counselors and with school permission, ISAC can directly reach out to and assist students who have not completed a FAFSA.*** Find out more at <https://www.isac.org/home/fafsa/index.html>

• **Financial Aid Online Learning Module for classrooms.** ISAC is developing an online learning module for schools to use as part of their remote learning curriculum, which includes a video and a learning packet.

• **QR code for outreach to students and families.** To improve outreach to students and families during the pandemic, ISAC will be introducing a QR code that links to simple and accessible information for students and families about how to get free assistance with financial aid applications. ISAC is partnering with several schools to pilot a program that will affix stickers with this QR code to free and reduced meal boxes and printed learning materials. Students and families will be able to scan the QR code with their phones to access the information.

“We want to make sure every high school senior and adult student in Illinois knows that completing a financial aid application is a critical step for their future,” said Jacqueline Moreno, ISAC’s director of College Access and Outreach. “We can help make the application process fairly quick and easy for most students.”

ISACorps members are available throughout the state offering free assistance to help students and families complete and submit an application. Find your ISACorps member at studentportal.isac.org/isacorps.
