

Mississippi Colleges Urged to Extend Deadlines Amid FAFSA Delays

On March 28, the Woodward Hines Education Foundation (WHEF) sent a letter to Mississippi's community, public and private colleges and universities requesting extensions of institutional deadlines due to the delays with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) for the 2024-25 academic year. Below is the letter sent to each institution's President, addressing the decreased FAFSA completion rate in Mississippi compared to previous years and the potential impact on future college enrollment in Mississippi.

Dear College and University Presidents,

As the President and CEO of Woodward Hines Education Foundation (WHEF), a non-profit organization dedicated to helping more Mississippians obtain postsecondary credentials that lead to meaningful employment, I am writing to bring to your attention a matter of great importance that affects the future of many aspiring students in Mississippi.

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) opening for the upcoming academic year was delayed by three months, and processing of the completed form is slowly beginning to be released by Federal Student Aid in late March, creating challenges for students navigating the financial aid process. We recognize your institution's efforts in fostering a conducive learning environment and providing opportunities for students to achieve academic success.

However, the delay of the FAFSA may pose a significant obstacle for students seeking financial assistance to pursue their higher education goals. As you know, many Mississippi students rely on the FAFSA to determine their eligibility for various forms of financial aid, including scholarships, grants, and work-study programs. The delay in the FAFSA opening and the Institutional Student Information Record (ISIR) release debacle has created a situation where students may face difficulties meeting enrollment deadlines at your institution.

Given the circumstances, **I request your understanding and consideration in extending enrollment deadlines such as housing deposit, scholarships, orientation, etc., at your institution beyond April 2024.** This extension will allow students ample time to complete their FAFSA applications and receive their financial aid offers, ensuring they have the necessary financial information to make informed decisions about their education and access the financial aid opportunities available.

Normally, Mississippi leads the nation in FAFSA completions, consistently ranking in the top five states and last year concluding at third as of August 30, 2023. Currently, the 2024-25 FAFSA completion rate for high school seniors is only 29.8%, which is a **-37.6% change (-5,724 submissions)** compared to last academic year. Nationally, high school FAFSA submissions are down by -30.7% year over year.

Nationally, the high school class of 2023 left more than \$4 billion in Pell Grant on the table by not completing the FAFSA. With a 63.5% high school FAFSA completion rate in Mississippi, \$39.7 million in Pell Grants remained on the table. With the current 24-25 FAFSA issues, we are concerned these numbers will be drastically higher for the class of 2024.

In addition to the delayed FAFSA, the online system has experienced significant issues. From dropped signatures with no way to make a correction and add signatures to not allowing students with mixed citizen-status families to create a

mandatory log-in. While some of these issues have been resolved in the past three months, there are still many students who are apprehensive about beginning or frustrated by the system issues and don't feel it is worth the hassle. In response to these issues, the Mississippi Office of Student Financial Aid, which administers the state's financial aid programs, has extended the FAFSA deadline for the HELP grant until June 30, 2024, for this year only.

By extending the enrollment deadlines, we can collectively alleviate the stress and uncertainty that students may experience during this transitional period. We believe that such a gesture will demonstrate your commitment to the well-being and success of your student body, ultimately contributing to higher enrollment rates and a more inclusive academic environment.

In 2019, WHEF partnered with the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University to evaluate which pre-enrollment activities (campus tour, number of applications, etc.) were the highest indicators of Mississippi students enrolling in postsecondary education. FAFSA completion was the most robust predictor of college enrollment. **Mississippi students who completed a FAFSA had 4.6 times greater odds of enrolling in college than those who did not.** Nationally, there is significant concern that these low FAFSA completion numbers are early indicators of catastrophically lower fall 2024 enrollment numbers, and we have similar concerns in Mississippi.

WHEF is committed to collaborating with educational institutions and stakeholders to address the challenges faced by our students. We understand the importance of a timely and well-coordinated FAFSA process in shaping the educational landscape of our state.

I appreciate your attention to this matter and your commitment to the success of Mississippi's students. I am confident that your leadership will play a crucial role in ensuring that the needs of our aspiring learners are met during this unique FAFSA roll-out.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to the positive impact our collaboration can have on the educational journey of Mississippi's students.

Yours in service,

Jim McHale

President and CEO
Woodward Hines Education Foundation