

ROUNDTABLE
REPORT

The Student Perspective:

The Hidden Hurdles to Financial Aid

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INTRODUCTION

Students have a variety of financial-aid options to help pay for college — federal loans, Pell Grants, scholarships from institutions and nonprofit groups. But many students, especially those from low-income and first-generation families, face major hurdles in gaining access to aid sources. While the federal process has recently been streamlined, the forms and procedures required to apply for institutional support can be onerous.

To help colleges better understand where the financial-aid process trips up students and how institutions can help, *The Chronicle* recently brought together a diverse group of students and college counselors from across the country. They included two recent college graduates, Angel Ornelas and Will Walker Jr.; Carolyn Blair, director of counseling services at Clayton High School, in Clayton, Mo.; and Sara Urquidez, executive director of Academic Success Program, which provides college advising to public and charter high schools in Dallas and Houston.

This report reflects key points made during the round-table discussion, which was moderated by Eric Hoover, a *Chronicle* senior writer who reports on the challenges of getting to, and through, college. The following excerpts have been edited for length and clarity.

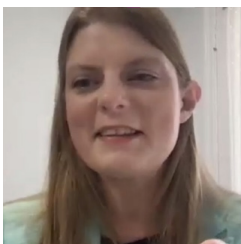
PANELISTS



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The Hurdles: Form Fatigue, Cost Confusion, and More

To succeed in college, students must first get there. But for many, the burdensome application process is an education in itself. Students from low-income and first-generation families are often the ones who fill out those lengthy and onerous forms, despite having little knowledge of family finances, not to mention tax regulations. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or Fafsa, which families use to get government grants and loans, is complicated enough. But to hear our panelists, the Fafsa is a breeze compared with the

dreaded College Scholarship Service (CSS) Profile, which provides a comprehensive picture of family income and is used as a gatekeeper for aid awarded by the nation's wealthiest colleges.

And when that financial-aid letter finally does come, it often fails to clearly spell out what students will owe. Nor does it mention many unforeseen expenses — including, as the student panelist Will Walker explained, winter clothing and simply “the cost of living.” Even when colleges offer food pantries and special funds to help pay expenses not covered by financial aid, such resources aren't always easy to locate.

Eric Hoover: I want to start with the students. Will, tell us about a barrier that might have seemed hidden to you as you were applying to college, and what you learned from it.

Will Walker Jr.: The snag for me was the financial component of undergrad, and it started at the very beginning of that journey. Simply the act of applying to a school is expensive. And if the school does not offer fee waivers for admissions, or if you're not eligible, you're looking at anywhere between \$30 to \$100 just to apply. Beyond that, depending on the requirements for financial aid or admissions, now you have to pay for a CSS profile, since this is typically the case for private institutions.

And then, once you get your financial aid, depending on the way it's packaged, in theory they give you funds for books and all these other things. But sometimes there is a disconnect between what they're packaging and the reality. They don't give you enough money, or, if you are taking a very specialized class where you need a whole lot of specialized equipment — for instance, a photography class — a camera's pretty expensive on top of other books.

And what they don't factor into your financial aid is the cost of living. You're in a residence hall with your meal plan and your housing, but there are a number of additional costs. Winter clothing — I moved from Louisiana to Richmond and saw snow for the first time. There's just not a whole lot of flexibility given to students. My solution was quite simple. I worked myself to the bone. And my academics kind of faltered. I had two or three part-time jobs each semester to pay for my living expenses.

Hoover: What might have helped in terms of communication from the institution?

Walker: It would have been helpful to have communication from a multicultural-affairs department or first-generation-college programming board or something like that — or from upperclass students that have that kind of lived experience. It would

have been extremely helpful for those folks to reach out and say, Here are some tips on how to navigate, here are some resources.

Two years into my education I found out we had a fellowship that would pay for professional dress. I found out we had a food pantry for folks that are food-insecure. It could have helped students like me early on had we known about them when we were being admitted. Same thing for textbooks — you should email your professor and ask how much of the book you're actually going to use, because if you're going to read only a chapter, you can copy it or use your institution's interlibrary loan to get the chapter. So it was very small things like that.

“Simply the act of applying to a school is expensive.”

—Will Walker Jr.

Hoover: At one level, it boils down to communication and talking about expenses that aren't necessarily going to show up on that letter, but that are going to impact your day-to-day life. Angel, what jumped out at you that you weren't expecting?

Angel Ornelas: My main challenge was filling out the CSS Profile when I was accepted to Claremont McKenna. My parents are small-business owners — they sell school uniforms — and, being Mexican immigrants, have no formal accounting experience. I remember senior year trying to finish up my application form and not knowing how to figure out what these numbers meant. I sort of just guessed. Ironically, it wasn't until the pandemic hit [that I learned] I should have qualified for Pell Grants these past three years, but I never did because the CSS Profile overestimated my parents' income.

“My parents are small-business owners and, being Mexican immigrants, have no formal accounting experience. I remember senior year trying to finish up my application form and not knowing how to figure out what these numbers meant. I sort of just guessed.”

—Angel Ornelas

I wish I had had individualized counseling from the financial-aid office. This is a common narrative among immigrant families who have parents who are small-business owners. I wish there would have been a more streamlined process of finding help.

And especially as a senior in high school, you’re applying to other colleges, you have Advanced Placement exams, you’re wanting to hang out with your friends. Had the CSS Profile been shorter and more intuitive, I probably would not have made the mistakes that I made. But over all I think Claremont McKenna was supportive in providing fee waivers for the CSS Profile. It is shocking that I would have to pay for a financial form that would give me money to go to school — \$30 wasted, that just doesn’t make sense.

The University of Chicago has a much easier financial-aid form, and that is something I wish every school had. Schools should also be a lot more transparent with the way that Parent Plus loans function. I really wish that we had received a lot more counseling on that — what the implications are for long-term interest rates, how they work once you graduate.

Hoover: Carolyn, can you give me your counseling perspective? You have helped many students tackle the CSS Profile form that Will and Angel both had to complete. What should colleges know about how it impacts students?

Carolyn Blair: It is surprising that most colleges think a parent is filling out that form, when very often it is the student, which is a setup for doing it incorrectly. It’s really important for colleges to know that when a student is filling out those forms, they don’t know what a W-2 is. They have a hard time accessing your retirement income. And Angel is correct: If you have a family business, forget about it. It is so difficult to expect a 17- or 18-year-old to fill out that level of form, with the stakes as high as they are with regard to what they stand to lose or gain based on the nuance and correctness of those forms.

And a huge thing in the financial-aid world is that gap for living expenses. I

was talking to a student recently who was saying, The cafeteria isn't always open — it closes at a certain time. What do I do when they're closed?

I had a student recently who didn't have a computer. Just like Will said, unbeknownst to him, this school actually did have a great plan; it just was hidden. Once we figured it out, they bought him a computer. But it took a year and a half of suffering for that to actually come to fruition.

“It is surprising that most colleges think a parent is filling out that form, when very often it is the student, which is a setup for doing it incorrectly.”

—Carolyn Blair

You can have doctors and lawyers who are completely confused about these forms, right? So let financial-aid people know you have a business that is going to be super-complicated. Colleges should workshop that — “Here's a workshop for all the students whose parents have a business. We can show you how to get through this form.”

Walker: I just want to say, I learned so much about tax law from four and a half years of filling out that CSS and Fafsa. The first time I asked, my parents didn't even know how to access their retirement accounts. Medicaid, mortgage — we spent three and a half months chasing documents before we could even start the process.

Hoover: If someone had missed what Carolyn and Angel just said about financial-aid forms, what would you want them to know if

they were thinking that there can't be a better way to get all this essential information?

Sara Urquidez: I would tell them that they need to take one and a half hours multiplied times 100, or times 200, and think about the burden that is putting on a single high-school counselor to try to navigate that with families. People need to think about the time implication for the adults and the professionals who are tasked with helping guide students through this process.

Hoover: Sara, so many pieces of the admissions and aid process seem to go most easily for students and families who fit a very particular kind of description. It's worth thinking about all the different kinds of students — the sons and daughters of immigrants. When you think of students who could really benefit from a great aid package, but who might have great difficulty getting to the finish line with everything that's required to apply, what do you see as needing fixing in financial-aid land?

Urquidez: I think that financial-aid land needs to fix the process for anyone that doesn't have a double-parent household with W-2s. I think that we do not realize that there is a large population of families who are a 1099 [a tax form for self-employed people], and don't fit neatly into any financial-aid form. Then you start to run into parents who don't have Social Security numbers, who aren't eligible to use the data-retrieval tool, who are going to need verification of nonfiling letters from the IRS because they don't file taxes because they don't work. There are all kinds of challenges once you get outside of the box of “I have two working parents, and they both get paid in W-2s.”

Hoover: Carolyn, you can solve any problem by just putting your password and login into a portal, right? You can figure everything out these days just by entering some secret information and getting access to solutions that you might be seeking, right?

Blair: That, my friend, is one of the largest obstacles in the college-admissions process — all the different portals and passwords and places that you have to go. “Oh, it’s College Board where I have to go to fill out that profile? Fafsa? That’s a different login? What’s an FSAID? That’s a whole different thing I have to do? And every single college, after I do all these forms individually, the CSS Profile and all, now I have to log into your specific portal and I have to go to your actual financial-aid page that I didn’t know was there. Oh, and I realized that I have to fill out this health form or you’re going to charge me an extra \$2,000 because I don’t have health insurance. Thanks for telling me.”

Hoover: I was just looking at my list of passwords on my Google Doc, and it’s kind of overwhelming. I wonder, Will or Angel,

aid. So I think a streamlined system — linking everything into one central portal, so you apply for financial aid at the same time that you are applying for admission — you do all of that at one time.

Another thing institutions can do is create a student-centric guidebook. I hear a lot about online forums where there are commonly asked questions. And you get into those pages, and those platforms are not thinking about students who are having these kinds of issues. And then if you can find the information to contact someone, the response time is trash. Two to three weeks’ processing time for something that’s due tomorrow? So I would like to see centralized due dates or deadlines; a student-centered guidebook that says, Here are the actual scenarios you’re going to have to deal with and how we troubleshoot them; and timely responses.

“There is very little transparency in how fast the state and institutional aid goes, and no discussion whatsoever about the fact that funds are allocated on a first-come-first-served basis.”

—Sara Urquidez

what is a small way that a college could help prepare you for that — give you a diagram or send you a particular kind of nudge?

Walker: I think people forget that we have lives outside of academics. Even for high-school students, when you have three sports, leadership courses, family, really small things slip your mind. It also doesn’t help that institutions have very strange and arbitrary due dates: Oh, this form opens October 1, it technically doesn’t have a deadline, but you have to fill it out by May 15 or you’re going to lose 2 percent of your

Ornelas: I remember not being able to set up an appointment with any financial-aid counselor because they were too busy. I think a lot of schools are understaffed or not trained to handle a lot of specific cases, like undocumented students. I think there needs to be more training for underrepresented communities, and more investment in the number of people working in the financial-aid office. A more personalized, appointment-based system would be much more efficient, instead of students waiting for an email response within three to five business days.

Hoover: What would you like those communications to include?

Ornelas: Some sort of instructional videos or guides as to how to correct this issue, and other things you should consider — for example, if there was a pantry application process. A lot of schools have merit-based awards that students don't even know about because they're so focused on the financial-aid side. So if a student can be flagged for potentially being a first-generation student — streamlining that process so when students submit a financial-aid-application form, that application will be considered for other scholarships that they might not have applied for, but they're potentially really good contenders for, at that institution.

Hoover: Sara, what else should we know about deadlines? Are there hidden facts about financial-aid deadlines that some people don't know?

Urquidez: I will speak for Texas and the fact that we do have a state priority deadline for financial aid of January 15, but if you submit your Fafsa on January 15, the public institutions have already run out of money. There is very little transparency in how fast the state and institutional aid goes, and no discussion whatsoever about the fact that funds are allocated on a first-come-first-served basis.

So if a family thinks they're doing everything right for their student by filing that Fafsa in January, if they're only sending it to our public universities, chances are they are not going to receive any additional funds outside of what they would have been guaranteed through the federal government under the Pell Grant program. If you have the institutional knowledge of navigating the system, then you know to file it on October 1.

We're not talking to people about the realities of how this process works. When do you really want the Fafsa by? Because if you're going to allocate all your institutional aid by November 15, then say you want the Fafsa by November 15.

And I'm going to cosign on all of the conversations about additional financial-aid officers. Sometimes there's a lack of humanity, because they are so overburdened and you're dealing with a very sensitive subject for a lot of people who are trying to do everything right.

[A college degree] is the only commodity that you buy and you have no idea what it's going to cost until eight months after all the deadlines have passed. And that's if you did everything right and got all of those forms in by all of the deadlines.

Walker: To add to that, on a more-basic level, the pandemic has shown us that a lot of them don't even have access to the internet or technology.

How Can Colleges Improve the Process?

The obstacles in the financial-aid process are clear: complicated aid forms that require far too much time for students, families, and counselors alike; gaps in aid once it does arrive; dizzying deadlines; and too little communication from colleges, among other issues.

As the panel moved on to identify ways colleges could make the process simpler and less intimidating, recurring themes included the need for transparency, increased staffing in financial-aid offices, a simpler deadline schedule, better and more-frequent communication with students, and — this one really touched a nerve — aid letters to students that treat loans sepa-

rately from grants. That step would make it clear what students would actually owe for their education. And as one panelist said, colleges also need to do a better job of reaching out to students who need it.

Eric Hoover: Carolyn, what should colleges know about this moment that we're in now, with immense disruption in access to counselors? What would you want colleges to absorb?

Carolyn Blair: Students don't come out of the gate looking for the financial-aid deadline. So make it really, really clear: These are the hoops you're going to have to jump through, and this is the deadline by which you are going to have to jump through them.

Another thing that colleges really could do — I have seen more of this, and if you're not doing this, shame on you — is when the financial-aid package does come, differentiating the fact that a loan is not aid, right? It is self-help. And yes, it's important that a student has it, but to package that within the award letter as if it is aid is shameful. And many, many schools have done it for years. I have seen schools pull up on that, and I'm highly grateful for the schools that have the common sense to say, It's just going to come out the back end, and students are going to drop out because after freshman year they're not going to be able to afford it anymore.

Hoover: Carolyn, you're making such an important point here. When you see a letter where you think this is done well and done differently, can you tell us what that looks like?

Blair: At a minimum, don't list institutional aid and loan, and then at the bottom say that what you owe is zero. That is fraud, in my opinion. No, you owe that loan. What I have seen institutions begin to do is to say, Here's your institutional aid, and then put that loan information underneath. I have even seen a school put in almost like an amortization schedule — this is how long it would take you to pay this off, this is what would be a payment on this. That's next level.

Sara Urquidez: We should not be treating the Plus loan as a way to subsidize education. You may get it for Year 1. Years 2, 3, 4 — what happens then? And the interest rate is 7 percent. The loan goes on a separate page on how to finance your education, if that's what you need. It does not go on Page 1 of a letter, it does not go in the aid, and it definitely doesn't go into zeroed-out balance, because it is credit-dependent and people don't understand that

those are loans. That's my push to colleges: Move it to Page 2 on your financing letter.

Hoover: This discussion in some way relates to good communication versus poor communication. Will, you have in the past shared that you were struck by the difference in the frequency and quality of communication among colleges, and that might

“To package a loan within the award letter as if it is aid is shameful. And many, many schools have done it for years.”

—Carolyn Blair

have shaped your thinking about where you wanted to go. Can you tell us more?

Will Walker Jr.: I had two undergrad options, in Virginia and California, and one of them offered me significantly more money than the other. The school on the West Coast was going to be something like \$25,000 in loans. I really saw myself at that school, and I was strongly considering taking out that loan. In retrospect, had I taken out that loan, I definitely would not have come back.

I had applied for a couple of scholarships and been informed that I was a strong contender, and so I emailed this institution's financial-aid office several times to say, Hi, I just have a list of questions. At this time I'm 18, 19 years old, and didn't really know how to communicate with the financial-aid office. I did this multiple times, and every time you get that automated response: “Thank you for contacting the office of financial aid, we're busy, we're trying to respond in three to five days.” And that's a very small and petty thing, but when you're getting emails from another institution that say, Here's how our process works ...

“When you’re making a decision about where you want to spend the next four years, if a college can’t communicate with me, why go?”

—Will Walker Jr.

My first day on campus I went into the financial-aid office just to say hello, and people knew who I was. So that difference in communication is very important. I would double down on that for students who are low-income, minority, or first-generation. If the financial-aid office can’t provide that individualized approach for students asking that question, and it’s something as simple as an email, I think they really need to reassess what they’re doing. I think they really need to give some time and energy to building relationships with students.

When you’re making a decision about where you want to spend the next four years, if a college can’t communicate with me, why go? Why even start that struggle if it’s clear to me that communication would be an issue already?

Hoover: So what you’re describing is not only a financial-aid issue, it’s on the human level. Are there other small things, good things, that financial-aid offices are doing that are new and promising, or some ways in which a college has lightened the load?

Blair: One college had on their financial-aid page a help site for students who are actually at the college, where they can go on the page and say, I need a computer, or whatever. Now they could make it bigger and more shiny, and advertise it a little more, but at least they had it.

Urquidez: I can weigh in on a seemingly small change, particularly if you are using Slate.org, which many colleges do. When you choose what to let counselors access, you should be including financial-aid information as part of that communication so that counselors can follow up with students. I will shout out Case Western Reserve University, which does this extremely well. Not only will they list the Fafsa, the CSS Profile, but they will also list the additional verification or documents that students are missing. And they have a phone number of who to call if the student has questions, so you can very quickly know to give a student guidance.

As much as we want to believe that this can be a student-driven process, students have no idea what happens after they submit that application.

I want to leave with this: I worry that colleges, counselors, and people in education in general have become so afraid of the possibility of offending someone that we are inhibiting students by not doing outreach to them. We expect them to want to come to us. We expect them to know what questions to ask. I would challenge colleges to set that aside: Stop worrying if somebody’s going to call you out because you connected a student with resources.

You have enough information to know who is the most vulnerable population on your campus. You absolutely can and should be doing direct outreach to help them navigate systems that they and their

families do not have knowledge of. Stop being afraid of that, because students and parents do not know the questions to ask.

“I know colleges are proud of the work they do in terms of food pantries and professional dress. But if nobody knows about them, who cares?”

—Sara Urquidez

I know colleges are proud of the work they do in terms of food pantries and professional dress. But if nobody knows about them except for your donors, and you're not reaching the intended population, who cares? And stop relying on students to tell other students how to access your resources.

Hoover: I'd like to give a student the last word here. Angel, is there anything that colleges can do that might help empower students to have conversations with mom and dad, grandma and grandpa, their

guardians? Something that might help students feel a little bit less alone when they're carrying this weight, and their parents might be confused or maybe not totally cooperative?

Angel Ornelas: I think having a more transparent and clear picture of what you're going to owe to the school — the cost of attendance over all — is the main thing that will relieve a lot of pressure on families.

Walker: They absolutely should demystify that financial-aid process. There are often entire populations of students who use that net-price calculator, myself included. Every year I've used it, it spit out a number that was nowhere close to what I actually was given in aid or cost. Maybe we prioritize those students in the admissions review. Once we know that student is admitted, we work to figure out what that aid package is going to look like, and we set an early deadline. Our low-income, first-generation students need this information by February. They need an extra month to figure out what that aid looks like.

And then I think about smaller things that can be done. Institutional websites are really important. If the financial-aid office can work with students to design a web page that is interactive, with videos and a step-by-step guide on how to fill this out, anything that can provide more information is monumental — especially for parents who want to be a part of the process. They just don't know how to be a part of that process.

FURTHER READING

[“Why Some Colleges Are Rethinking the Most Grueling Financial-Aid Form of All,”](#) by Eric Hoover, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 13, 2021

[“U.S. Education Department Will Relax Aid-Verification Rules in 2021-22,”](#) by Eric Hoover, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 13, 2021

[“Big Changes in the Federal Student-Aid System Are Coming. Here’s Why They Matter,”](#) by Eric Hoover, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 22, 2020

[“Recipients of Title IV Federal Financial Aid, by Income Level,”](#) *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 15, 2021

[“Race on Campus: Rooting Out Bias in Financial Aid,”](#) by Katherine Mangan, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 27, 2021

The [Implicit Bias Tool Kit](#), from the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, is designed to help colleges identify and reduce bias in the administration of financial aid.

[The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice](#) at Temple University, founded by Sara Goldrick-Rab, is a research and advocacy institute that focuses on students’ basic needs.



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