## The Daily Dish

# FAFSA Follies

**DOUGLAS HOLTZ-EAKIN | APRIL 11, 2024**

I remember the first time I saw former Senator Lamar Alexander unrolling the 10-page Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and railing about the need for simplification. I also recall his speech in 2020 as he saw FAFSA simplification heading to the finish line:

> *After nearly seven years of work on these issues, it boils down to this: It makes no sense to make it this complicated to apply for federal aid for college. It makes no sense to discourage the very students Congress wants to encourage to attend college and benefit from federal financial aid…So today, we've got a piece of legislation that would finish the job. It has broad bipartisan support and is based on recommendations that four of today's witnesses gave us nearly seven years ago.*

Indeed, legislation was passed in 2021. And after three years…fiasco!

The FAFSA was delayed for three months as the Department of Education belatedly adjusted the formulas for the inflation that had occurred. Roughly 200,000 applications had to be redone because of mistakes in the computation associated with applicants' assets. There have been problems associated with obtaining Federal Student Aid IDs. Some of the workarounds offered by the Education Department do not work. Not surprisingly, there are reports that the call center is overwhelmed and applicants cannot get help.

But the really shocking fact is that applications are way down from last year. Nearly 1.5 million high school seniors have submitted a FAFSA through March 2024, 27.1 percent lower than the same time last year, according to an analysis from the National College Attainment Network. So, the ironic outcome of an effort to simplify the process so that more students would apply, get aid, and attend college is that fewer – deserving – students are applying, fewer will get aid, and fewer will go to college. Nice job.

It feels a little bit like the FAFSA launch exists only to make the launch of healthcare.gov look good. The comparison is not completely unfair because the Obama Administration went ahead with healthcare.gov even though the staff knew it did not work. In this case, the only thing the Department of Education needed to do was to request a one-year delay to get the new system absolutely right. It did not.

The administration's education priorities are baffling. Getting kids ready for college (or life) in the K-12 system? Not important. Processing student aid applications so they can go to college? Not important. Forgiving the student loans of some 45-year-old whose education and career are baked in the cake? Priceless.