

Gather the paperwork; apply online.

January is fast approaching and that means it's time to apply for college financial aid for the upcoming school year. High school seniors across the country can use downtime during the holiday break to take the first step toward financing their education.

Students who plan to attend college during the 2011-2012 school year can apply online through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) website as early as possible starting Jan. 1, 2011. To save time, the U.S. Department of Education recommends students first:

- Gather the documents they need.
- Print a FAFSA on the Web Worksheet.
- Apply for a PIN (personal identification number).
- Check their eligibility for federal student aid.
- Note important deadlines.

Federal financial aid is available for students attending two- or four-year public or private colleges, as well as career or trade schools. The aid is intended to cover school expenses such as tuition, room and board, books, other supplies, and transportation. Most students receive aid based upon their financial need. Individual colleges and universities award financial aid for their

students on a first come, first served basis.

Students can also receive financial aid in the form of grants, loans or work study. Grants include Pell Grants and Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants. Loans include Federal Stafford Loans (made to students) and PLUS loans (made to parents).

There are also direct loans, Perkins Loans, and the Federal Family Education Loan. Work-study programs provide jobs, usually on campus, so students can help pay for educational expenses.

To find out about federal financial aid programs and your rights and responsibilities under these programs, read “Funding Education Beyond High School: The Guide to Federal Student Aid” from the Department of Education. A free paper copy can be obtained by contacting the U.S. Department of Education at 1-800-4-FED-AID. The guide is available in English and Spanish. The FAFSA website is <http://www.fafsa.ed.gov/index.htm>.