Published on *University of Colorado* (https://www.cu.edu)

Rolling with the changes: CU financial aid officers and their IT partners adapt to uneven federal FAFSA rollout by putting student support first [1]



September 5, 2024 by ES & UIS Communications [2]

The 2024-25 Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) [3]ushered in major changes to the financial aid process. Significant U.S. Department of Education delays created a rollercoaster of challenges for University of Colorado financial aid officers and the UIS teams who support them.

Based on a congressional mandate, the FAFSA underwent a comprehensive overhaul to simplify the application process and make it more accessible. Changes streamlined the application form, expanded eligibility for Pell Grants and introduced a new income verification system that relies on Federal Tax Information (FTI) fed directly from the IRS to the FAFSA.

“The intentions were noble,” said Rick Rowcotsky, UIS lead solutions manager. “The application was considered grueling for students and making it easier for students and families to complete was a great goal.”

The federal rollout hit numerous delays and glitches. Students had to wait to apply. They waited again to receive financial aid notifications that let them compare universities and select a school.

Behind the scenes, universities worked nonstop to adapt to the changes, update integrations with the U.S. Department of Education, meet new regulations, and process applications on a shorter timeline. Rowcotsky worked closely with Oracle, the vendor for CU’s financial aid application software.

“We looked to HEUG (Higher Education User Group) and our peer community because every university was facing the same challenges. Even though each has unique processes, we were able to share glitches and solutions,” Rowcotsky said.

The UIS Student IT Services team’s biggest challenges: Preparing patches, adding retrofits for every new release and making campus-specific modifications. Testing and implementation normally follow predictable timelines, but nothing was predictable about this rollout.
A new UIS automation eliminated the hours-long process of retrieving files from the federal government

[4]. For every step forward, there seemed to be a new challenge. This summer, the U.S. Department of Education announced that universities will be unable to process changes in batch.

“The campus financial aid officers are the real rock stars here,” Rowcotsky said. “They have dealt with one challenge after another and, ultimately, just cared about how students could be affected and focused on serving students and their families.”

Despite these challenges, many financial aid officers still think they have the best job at CU.

“We have the privilege of making college possible and affordable for so many people. We help them select our university, be successful at school, educate them to make good financial decisions they’ll carry through life and years later — after we’ve cheered for them as they crossed the stage and received their diploma— they may come back as successful alumni and create an endowment fund for the Financial Aid Office to do it all over again for the next generation,” said Jevita R. Rogers, UCCS interim assistant vice chancellor of Enrollment Management.

The rollercoaster ride isn’t over. The U.S. Department of Education recently announced the 2025-26 application will open late again this year. As universities and students alike brace for potential delays and complications, CU financial aid officers and the UIS teams will continue to work to ensure students receive the financial aid that is key to their university education.

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