

# Student financial aid still available

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Fewer college students applied for state and federal financial aid in 2020 compared to years past — a drop attributed to the pandemic and economic downturn, hurting colleges' bottom lines.

However, state leaders say the number of students applying for funds is bouncing back, with more financial aid available to Oregon students than previously and plenty of time left for students to apply.

## Connecting with students at home

Each year in the fall, school counselors send emails to seniors asking them to start their post-grad planning since FAFSA opens on Oct. 1 and funds are limited.

In a typical year, longtime Eugene Sheldon High School counselor Michael Voss would help students with the FAFSA, which stands for Free Application for Federal Student Aid, process in person. But during the pandemic, they had to make some changes.

The school held a handful of Zoom sessions for both students and parents, recorded them and sent the videos out as well as follow-up emails to students who had yet to file.

There was more parent engagement with the sessions this year than years past, Voss said, which he believes is due to it being online and more accessible, and parents wanting to ensure students are going through the process.

It was such a success, the school counselors plan to record a how-to video for next year's graduating class.

Voss said he also saw an emotional change in graduating seniors this year versus the year before.

"There was a lot of frustration at the end of that (2019-2020) school year," Voss said. "I do think there was a renewed hope and that renewed hope of things moving forward came when we were able to do in-person graduation."

## What the data shows

As of June 1, 46% of Oregon's graduating high school seniors had applied for financial aid for the 2021-2022 academic year through FAFSA or the Oregon Student Aid Application (which is for undocumented students), state data shows.

This is compared to 52% of seniors in 2020 and 59% the year before that.

Federal data breaks it down even further to the district level.

The Salem-Keizer School District saw a decrease of about 10% year over



Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) concept. SALEM

year, down from 60% to 64% in 2020.

Most students typically apply by February if they have clear college plans. But this year, students are continuing to file through the summer, so the number of applications is coming back up.

"As of July 15, we (had) 159,608 filers" for the 2021-2022 academic year, said Juan Baez-Arevalo, director of Oregon's Office of Student Access and Completion. For the 2020-2021 academic year, there were about 156,000 filers.

This includes returning undergraduates, nontraditional students and those who maybe took a gap year.

"Here you have a high school class, close to 15% of them by now are filing or have filed, and meanwhile there's a much broader, much greater population that has filed. ... So when I say we're up overall, I'm talking about the overall count."

In a more stable economic year, like 2018-2019, the state had 169,000 to 170,000 undergraduates filed at this point.

"Mind you, the FAFSA application is still open for the 2021-2022 academic year so they could still file," he said. "We still have room to grow to get back to (the numbers seen in) 2018-2019 or 2017-2018 school years, and we want to get back up there."

## Decline, rebound repeats history

The Office of Student Access and

Completion has been around for more than 50 years.

It's not uncommon to see FAFSA completion rates fluctuate over the years, Baez-Arevalo said, especially with economic uncertainty.

"Statistically, FAFSA records peaked a few years after the Great Recession took its toll," he said. "So, 2011, 2012, 2013 — those were the peak periods. ... During that peak period, you had a great number of adults who were seeking to enroll, get back to school, get some sort of training, get some sort of credential and get a job. Since that peak, there had been a slight downward slope."

When the economy was strong between 2017 to 2019, the numbers were stable, he said. Going into the 2019-2020 school year, there was a slight decline in applications, which then only got worse.

"That slight decline went into a dire downward spiral because of COVID-19 in the 2020-2021 academic year," Baez-Arevalo said.

For the coming fall, though, he said things are bouncing back. After the state's report closed June 1, another 224 students completed the application in just one week.

This rebound will likely have an impact on college and university enrollment this fall, which also took a dive last year nationally and statewide.

"We're anticipating that enrollment at some of our public universities will regain some steam and be stronger this

fall than last fall," he said.

## Student aid still available

Looking forward to this fall, funds are still available for college students, even if they fill out the application this summer.

"The Oregon Legislature and the governor have supported (an) increase of about \$28.8 million into the Oregon Opportunity Grant," which goes to students attending college in Oregon, Baez-Arevalo said.

"We are now in a position to continue to issue the award to students who are filing late, and to students with a higher (estimated financial contribution) than we were in the last three to four (to) five years."

The grant limit before was about \$3,500 a year for individual students and now the state will raise that to about \$6,000.

The state office took a similar approach to Sheldon High in creating how-to videos on the OSAC Oregon YouTube channel to help students file for different scholarships and aid, which Baez-Arevalo said he hopes will bridge a gap for late applicants if they need help.

"It's never too late to start," he said.

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# Podcast: Best hikes at Oswald West State Park, plus how Oregon's beaches were saved

**Zach Urness** Salem Statesman Journal  
USA TODAY NETWORK

In the latest episode of the Explore Oregon Podcast, Zach and David discuss Oswald West State Park, a relatively compact park on the north coast featuring stunning hikes and fascinating history.

They discuss the best trails at the park nestled between Cannon Beach and Manzanita and how to avoid the crowds, while diving into the legend of buried Spanish gold and the early 1900s fight to make Oregon's beaches public.

The podcast is joined by Jim Moore, a professor and director of political outreach at the Tom McCall Center for Civic Engagement, to discuss how former Governor Oswald West wrestled the beaches and other public lands from private interests and set the path for Oregon as a state that values conservation, public access and scenery.

The podcast includes discussion of movies inspired and filmed on the north coast and how to make up a song about what you're seeing on the trail while hiking with kids.

Listen now at [StatesmanJournal.com/oswaldwest](http://StatesmanJournal.com/oswaldwest)



View of Neahkahnie from the trail leading to Cape Falcon. ZACH URNESS / STATESMAN JOURNAL



Views from the summit of Neahkahnie Mountain. ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL