

New process simplifies college money aid

By Nichole Davis
Sentinel-Voice

First-time financial aid applicants may imagine the process to be tedious, but there have been some universal changes in the program which have simplified the process, experts said recently.

Changes such as the computerization and simplification of the Free Application for Federal Financial Aid, have made financial aid more user friendly, but on-campus scholarship and grant applications make the process unique to individual schools, financial aid officials said.

For example, the Community College of Southern Nevada and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, both state-funded schools, have markedly different financial aid processes.

Recently profiled by the

Chronicle for Higher Education, the Community College of Southern Nevada grew more than 30 percent last year, forcing school officials to find ways to keep up with the unprecedented number of students enrolled.

Within a week, one solution will be online.

Instead of filing their FAFSAs by mail, CCSN applicants will be able to apply for the federally-based funds in the computer lab on campus or at the financial aid office cutting the processing time in half, according to Arlie Stopes, vice president of admissions, records and financial aid.

Due to federal guidelines, CCSN applicants will be the only Southern Nevada students who can use the computerized system this year, but UNLV officials confirm they too are examining computerized applications.

"It saves a lot of time, especially if the student knows where they want to go," Stopes said.

To use the system, students will need copies of their tax forms and their parents' tax forms if they are considered dependant. They will also need social security numbers.

More than 2,000 students are expected to apply for financial aid at the state's largest institution for higher learning where potential students are told that their first class is free.

Stopes warns first-time applicants to pay close attention to deadlines.

Students "need to be careful to get stuff in on time. There is so little money that they have to do it on time," he said.

Although the priority deadline for filing financial aid applications at CCSN is technically April 15th, officials suggested that applicants try to file no later than March 31st, because state funds are allocated on a first-come, first-serve basis.

"If your parents are not going to file until April 12, don't wait," Stopes said. "Most deadlines for universities are between March 1st and April 1st."

Financial aid applicants at UNLV will need all tax forms to file a FAFSA, just like CCSN

students. But unlike their CCSN counterparts, UNLV applicants will receive Student Aid Report from the federal processor, which must then be turned into their chosen school.

"In a normal year, it takes 4-6 weeks for the federal process," said Kathy Wilson, assistant director for financial aid.

Almost 50 percent of the more than 20,000 UNLV students receive some form of financial aid which could include federal, state, institutional and private funds, loans, grants, scholarships or part-time employment, officials said.

And many find the process frustrating.

"People get frustrated, because there is a lot of reading to do," Wilson said, "but they need to take the time."

To ease the process, UNLV provides assistance to people who "made an effort to fill out the forms themselves," said Wilson, who encouraged all college applicants to apply for financial aid.

Need is no longer the sole criteria for federally-based funds. People who may not have "need" as determined by SARs could still be eligible for loans under new guidelines, she said.

These are the guidelines: Students must be admitted to college, registered at least half-time, a U.S. citizen or qualified non-citizen, making satisfactory progress in school and not in default for a federal loan. If they meet these guidelines, they may be eligible to obtain unsubsidized Stafford and/or a PLUS (parent-student) loans for up to \$10,000 a year depending on their grade level and school budget for
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Community groups support black dads

Special to the Sentinel-Voice

Although numerous community agencies exist for the betterment of single moms, organizations designed to assist single dads primarily are rare, organizers said.

Just like single mothers, single fathers are sometimes in need of housing assistance, parenting training or career counseling. But single dads often turn non-gender-based community agencies when they are in need.

Lifeline Family Life Pregnancy Assistance Vocational Educational Center's First Time Fathers Program is the exception to the rule, but in general single dads go to agencies like the Economic Opportunity Board of Las Vegas or WE CAN for assistance.

The six-month-old First Time Fathers Program offers comprehensive services for dads ages 14-24. Older fathers have also received assistance.

Free diapers, classes, baby food and clothing are just of the few of the services provided by the parent agency, which has helped teen mothers for more than 21 years.

Any male who is taking responsibility for fathering his children for the first time is eligible, and the FTFP already exceeds capacity with 18 young men, organizers said.

The program focuses around three-hour, twice-weekly group meetings held Mondays and Wednesdays. Personal issues are discussed on Mondays and career preparation issues are discussed on Wednesdays.

The structure was one of the many adjustments organizers have made during the FTFP's trial run. Slated to run 20 weeks with up to two years of follow-ups, organizers have added five weeks to this session for fine tuning.

"We set up a curriculum. I never follow it," said Jimmy Cullors, the program coordinator.

Instead, he handles problems as they come up, because he found that members often grapple with similar concerns.

"I may start off with how do you hold the baby's head; I may end up talking about how to keep (the father from fighting) Susie May," (or their girlfriends), he said.

The hands-on work approach works so well Juvenile Courts will begin sending offenders with children to the program this summer. Cullors welcomes the challenge saying:

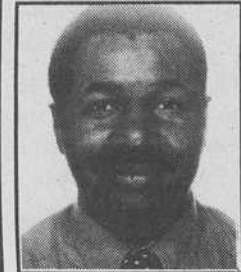
"Everybody has deep-seeded problems now and then. Giving them the opportunity to share their lives and asking me for help will make a difference in their lives."

For more information about the FTFP, call 736-2984.

WE CAN, a child abuse prevention group, takes a different approach to helping single dads. The non-profit agency, whose name stands for Working to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect,

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