

October Is College Changes Everything Month In Illinois

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Free assistance is available to complete college and financial aid applications: Don't miss out. Fill it out!

CHICAGO – October is College Changes Everything® (CCE) Month in Illinois, when students are completing both their college applications and financial aid forms at the same time. Launched by the [Illinois Student Assistance Commission](#) (ISAC) five years ago, ISAC and its partners have extended the month-long campaign to provide an intensive schedule of free college and financial aid planning support to students and families from Labor Day through Thanksgiving. The [Free Application for Federal Student Aid \(FAFSA®\)](#) and the [Alternative Application for Illinois Financial Aid](#) for the 2021-22 school year will both be available on October 1, 2020.

This year is unique in many ways. The Covid-19 pandemic has upended not only how education is delivered, but how students are thinking—or perhaps re-thinking—plans for post-secondary education.

“We know that families across the country are suffering financial and other consequences of the pandemic, and that it has disproportionately impacted low income communities and communities of color,” said Eric Zarnikow, executive director of ISAC. “We want students and families to know that there are many options available so students don’t have to put their plans on hold and can still pursue college or other postsecondary education. The first step is exploring those options and completing the FAFSA or other financial aid forms so they don’t miss out on potential funding available for the postsecondary path they choose. There is free assistance across the state to help them do that.”

This year is also unique in Illinois because it marks the first year of the state’s new FAFSA mandate. All graduating seniors attending public high schools in Illinois must complete the FAFSA, or if they are ineligible for federal aid, the Alternative Application for Illinois Financial Aid, as a prerequisite to receiving a high school diploma. (A parent, guardian, or the student – if 18 or emancipated – may opt out for any reason by filing a nonparticipation form.) Making FAFSA completion part of an expectation for high school graduation can increase awareness of resources available to help students afford education or training after high school, perhaps helping some decide to attempt college when they might not otherwise have done so.

The FAFSA is the form that determines eligibility for federal, most state, and some institutional financial aid. Because most state financial aid, such as the [Monetary Award Program](#) (MAP grant) is awarded on a first-come, first-served basis, students are encouraged to complete the FAFSA as soon as possible after October 1 to have the opportunity to receive all the financial aid for which they might be eligible.

The 2021-22 Alternative Application for Illinois Financial Aid will also be available on October 1, **after 12 pm**. The Alternative Application provides a pathway to MAP grants for some undocumented students or for transgender students who may be ineligible for federal student aid because they did not register for selective service. It’s important to note that most students will continue to complete the FAFSA, rather than the Alternative Application, in order to determine their eligibility for federal and state financial aid. If a student is unsure which application to complete, they can contact the financial aid office of the college or university they plan on attending, or an [ISACorps member](#), for assistance. Pre-screening questions on the Alternative Application itself can also assist a student in determining which application to complete.

Activities and resources available to help with college planning and financial aid

CCE activities include free financial aid completion and college application workshops, where students and families can fill out college applications and/or complete their FAFSA or Alternative Application right then and there, with direct assistance from college and financial aid experts. While some schools may be providing in-person college application and financial aid workshops, this year as a result of the pandemic ISAC will be providing all support virtually, through online group events as well as one-on-one assistance by phone, text, email or WebEx videoconferencing. Students and parents can check directly with their high schools for events within or sponsored by their own school. ISAC will be hosting Facebook live events as well as other online events in English and Spanish throughout the fall. For a continuously updated list of ISAC virtual events, visit studentportal.isac.org/events.

Students and families can get free virtual one-on-one assistance from the ISACorps member in their area. The ISACorps are recent college graduates who are extensively trained to serve as near peer mentors to high school students navigating the college and financial aid process. Find your local ISACorps member at studentportal.isac.org/isacorps.

Personalized assistance is also available through [ISAC College Q&A \(isac.org/collegeqa\)](https://isac.org/collegeqa), a free text messaging service where students can get answers to their college and financial aid questions sent directly to their phones. The award-winning [ISAC Student Portal \(isac.org/studentportal\)](https://isac.org/studentportal) offers free online tools and resources for students, as well as short videos about college planning and financial aid. Check out the [Now Playing](#) section of the student portal for our new *ISAC College Minute* videos, where we answer a college or financial aid question in –you guessed it—one minute! ISAC also offers assistance through the agency’s call center, 800-899-4722 (ISAC), and its Online Chat service.

ISAC supports high schools and counselors who would like to participate in CCE fall activities with a downloadable toolkit, materials and event support. Find out more at collegechangepseverything.org/ccemonth.

About ISAC

The mission of the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) is to provide Illinois students with information and assistance to help make education beyond high school accessible and affordable. ISAC provides comprehensive, objective, and timely information on education and financial aid for students and their families—giving them access to the tools they need to make the educational choices that are right for them. Then, through the state scholarship and grant programs ISAC administers, ISAC can help students make those choices a reality. Find us at isac.org and follow us on [Facebook](#) @ILStudentAssistance, [Twitter](#), on Instagram @ISACfinaid and on [YouTube](#).

About College Changes Everything

College Changes Everything® (CCE) is a college access movement that recognizes that college can be a life changing experience not only for students, but also for families and communities. In Illinois and across the nation, those who obtain education beyond high school not only see a significant impact on their potential career prospects and future salary, but also change levels of poverty, life expectancy, crime and obesity rates in their communities. CCE is an essential part of helping Illinois reach its goal of increasing the proportion of adults in the state with high quality degrees or credentials to 60% by 2025. Find out more and join the conversation at collegechangeseverything.org.