

YOUR MONEY

FAFSA's Expected Family Contribution Is Going Away. Good Riddance.

The dollar figure that the federal financial aid form spits out has long left families confused and despondent. And then there are those great expectations.



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The Expected Family Contribution — a dreaded and confusing term for parents about to send their children to college — made little sense in the best of times. Now, it's finally going away.

Among the orders and edicts spilling into the 5,000-plus pages of the bill that President Trump signed into law on Sunday night was one that strikes the three words from the federal Higher Education Act and replaces them with “student aid index.”

As many as 19 million students and their families encounter the E.F.C. each year. It's the dollar figure they see after they've answered scores of questions on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form, which they must file annually to qualify, and then requalify, for federal loans, grants and certain jobs.

And good riddance, too.

For decades now, families have been baffled by the E.F.C., the output of a federal formula that uses income and some household assets. Given that it doesn't account for parents' own student debts, for instance, plenty of people wondered whether the extra-large number was what they were supposed to pay for four years of college, not just one. It wasn't.

Then there are the words themselves. The great expectation that felt more like a demand. The unspoken assumption that, of course, families would step up and pay — parents, really, in the case of most students hoping to matriculate straight from high school. And the notion that this was a mere contribution, bathed in niceties, when in reality the bill could spiral well into the six figures.

Goodbye to all that — to the judgment those words implied, to the things they meant but did not say and to all of the euphemisms that have seeped into a system that has led to so much anxiety for so many families and the professionals who counsel them.

The underlying formula that determines the new index will change some, too — many more people will get federal Pell grants for lower-income students or qualify for the maximum amount. Other tweaks may mean even more disappointment for higher-income parents when the new index produces an even larger dollar figure than the E.F.C. did. (Their children could still get a more generous need-based aid offer from many schools than what the new index computes, or they might receive merit aid — which does not depend on financial need — from a college that wants them badly enough.)

But for now, let us celebrate the banishment, as of the 2022-23 application season, of each of these hateful words from our lives, one by one — and the emotional toll they took on countless parents.

Great Expectations

The E.F.C. has been around at least since the Higher Education Act of 1992, though its inventor did not take a bow then. That person almost certainly needed better high school English instruction.

Where I come from, teachers drilled passive verbs like “expected” right out of us. I can still hear Bill Duffy, in our 20th-century British literature class, raising his voice in a tone both innocent and offended. “By whom?” he wondered.

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Good question. A few years ago, I went to Washington and showed up for an appointment at the Department of Education with the intent of confronting the “expecter” doing the expecting, this destroyer of countless dreams of affordable college. But there is no such person, since the federal aid formula comes from statutes, not assistant secretaries acting on their own.

Still, it’s worth answering Mr. Duffy’s question. First and foremost, it’s the federal government doing the expecting here. Its demands carry a kind of psychic weight, according to Caitlin Zaloom, an economic anthropologist and professor at New York University and author of the book “Indebted: How Families Make College Work at Any Cost.”

“Policies like the E.F.C. are instructions to families and not simply numbers that have to be paid,” she said. “They are moral messages that the government is sending to mothers and fathers about what they are supposed to do to be good parents.”

In other words, kids need education. The government expects parents to pay for it. If you don’t, you just may hinder their success in life. And if any part of your identity is wrapped up in helping your children do better than you have done, well, here’s an advance look at the bill. Got that?

Those children may become expecters, too. After all, if the government is saying that parents are supposed to pay but that they are unable or unwilling to do so, the kids could begin resenting their parents. And then, parental guilt. And some borrowing, or a lot of it.

The colleges have expectations, too. They see that E.F.C. figure and may want even more information. You fill out another form, and then comes more judgment about your supposed ability to pay.

“The idea is that the university knows you well enough to expect something from you,” said Sara Goldrick-Rab, professor of sociology and medicine at Temple University and author of “Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream.” “You get those words very early in the relationship, and they don’t really know you at all. It doesn’t build trust.”

Then comes the kicker: That expectation may be just the beginning. “A college often expects students to pay more than the E.F.C.,” said Robert Kelchen, associate professor of higher education at Seton Hall University and author of “Higher Education Accountability.”

All in the Family

For students applying for college right out of high school, the “family” in the E.F.C. usually means parents, since it’s nearly impossible for students to work their way through college in any reasonable period of time anymore.

But the E.F.C. makes no allowance for families where the parent or parents believe a child should try to pull that off. Or when parents look askance at higher education because they see no value in it, and then decide not to help. Or when students feel an obligation to help parents, even (or especially) if parents can't help them.

Estrangement complicates things, too. "With L.G.B.T.Q. students, people really begin to immediately understand the problem," Dr. Goldrick-Rab said. "When a 19-year-old comes out and gets cut off, what is family now?"

The E.F.C. also makes no allowance for extended families and obligations to aging parents, aunts, brothers or chosen family.

"It denies any responsibility that may lie elsewhere," Dr. Zaloom said.

And Contributions?!

By couching the E.F.C.'s final word in the language of charity, the federal financial aid system attempts to soften the blow. Sure, powerful forces are making demands of parents whether they like it or not, but at least it is a kind of gift. Right?

Of course it isn't. "A contribution is not supposed to be a payment that inflicts pain," Dr. Zaloom said. (A disclosure: She married a good friend of mine who also absorbed Mr. Duffy's wisdom back in the day.) "It is voluntary, something that you give easily. The word belies the weight that it puts on families."

Will a more neutral phrase, like student aid index, defuse the emotional land mines around what we can and should pay (and borrow and sacrifice) for college? Almost certainly not. The federal financial aid system can't solve for stagnant incomes, inequality or the high costs of the residential undergraduate experience that many families crave for their children.

But we can use better words. Language matters. It need not heap shame and blame on parents who are doing their level best.

So we come not to praise the E.F.C. but to bury it, smother it in dirt and leave it in the ground. Let it be compost, born from a bitter word salad that nobody ordered in the first place. May a more gentle conversation emerge around our obligations to our children, as soon as humanly possible.