



Technical Appendix: Methodology

Data Collection

To gather the data for **Simplification May Not Be So Simple**, Education Commission of the States solicited responses from state-level financial aid directors to a survey related to FAFSA simplification. State financial aid directors answered questions regarding how their state currently uses data obtained from the FAFSA. Education Commission of the States began by distributing the survey over the listserv for the National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs (NASSGAP) and continued to solicit responses by state until we believed all potential responses had been gathered.

Twenty-three states plus the District of Columbia responded to the survey. In order to provide a full picture of FAFSA usage across the nation, Education Commission of the States analyzed the remaining 27 states using its 50-State Financial Aid Policy Database.¹ The database provides links to the statutes and regulations for the 100 largest state financial aid programs in the country. Our research team populated state survey questions three and four (see full survey in Appendix B) based on statutes and regulations for the largest financial aid program(s) within the state.

Limitations

As with any research involving survey sampling, the research presented in this report is subject to limitations. By using the NASSGAP listserv to gather responses, we may not cover the complete universe of state financial aid directors. Several states are historically un-engaged with the association and therefore may be predisposed not to respond to the request, contributing coverage error to the study.

All questions to the survey were mandatory for the survey to be submitted, effectively eliminating item nonresponse. The overall response rate to the survey, 47 percent, may be too low to yield the most reliable results. We attempt to mitigate this by completing questions three and four for all 50 states based on our reading of policy. This approach is also subject to limitation, however. First, not all state-level uses of the FAFSA information are found in legislation. For example, several states' use of the institutions listed on a student's FAFSA is common practice, but not stipulated in state statute or regulation. As a result, using only policy as a data source without gathering on-the-ground evidence in states risks inaccuracy. However, given the focus of this report on federal and state aid program administration, Education Commission of the States chose to accept this limitation in the methodology. The chart below indicates whether Education Commission of the States collected the data via survey responses or from statutes and regulations.

STATE DATA COLLECTED FROM SURVEY RESPONSES	STATE DATA COLLECTED FROM STATE FINANCIAL AID STATUTES AND REGULATIONS
California	Alabama
Colorado	Alaska
Connecticut	Arizona
District of Columbia	Arkansas
Iowa	Delaware
Kansas	Florida
Kentucky	Georgia
Louisiana	Hawaii
Maine	Idaho



STATE DATA COLLECTED FROM SURVEY RESPONSES	STATE DATA COLLECTED FROM STATE FINANCIAL AID STATUTES AND REGULATIONS
Massachusetts	Illinois
Minnesota	Indiana
Mississippi	Maryland
Nebraska	Michigan
Nevada	Missouri
New York	Montana
Oklahoma	New Hampshire
Pennsylvania	New Jersey
Rhode Island	New Mexico
Texas	North Carolina
Utah	North Dakota
Virginia	Ohio
Washington	Oregon
West Virginia	South Carolina
Wisconsin	South Dakota
	Tennessee
	Vermont
	Wyoming

Cases where a state failed to respond to the survey may also be due to nonresponse bias. Potential respondents may have opened the survey and not wanted to respond or may not want to broach the topic of FAFSA simplification in general. Conversely, state financial aid directors with particularly strong opinions on the subject may have been more apt to respond to the survey. In the cases of nonresponse, an alternative survey design may or may not have ultimately impacted our response rate.

The following section contains the full text of the survey.

Survey Instrument

Thank you for taking time to share your perspectives surrounding the financial aid application process with Education Commission of the States. The following questions should take you about 15-20 minutes to answer. You must complete one page before proceeding to the next, however you can go back. Once you click “Submit,” you will not be able to access the survey again or change your responses.

Completing this survey will assist Education Commission of the States in understanding the importance of the FAFSA to state financial aid administration. These results will form the basis of a policy brief to be released in the spring of 2017. Our goal is to augment the state-level voice in conversations surrounding FAFSA simplification.

Please contact us with any questions.



1. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements regarding federal and state financial aid policy linkages.

	No Opinion	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
States have an important role to play in informing federal financial aid policy development					
States have clear pathways to act to influence federal financial aid policy development					

2. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements regarding the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form.

	No Opinion	Do Not Know	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The FAFSA is overly complicated						
The FAFSA takes too much time to complete						
The FAFSA process is overly burdensome for students						
The FAFSA process is overly burdensome for parents						
The FAFSA process is overly burdensome for states						
Congress should act to simplify the FAFSA process						

3. Does your state utilize any of the following information from the FAFSA?

	Yes	No	Do Not Know
Demographic information (i.e. gender, race/ethnicity, or first-generation status)			
Estimated Family Contribution (EFC)			
Other income or asset information (i.e. student or parent adjusted gross income)			
Date the application was filed			
Institution(s) listed by the student			

If you answered yes to any of the selections above, please share how your state uses this information.

4. Does your state use a secondary application for state aid?

- A) Yes, in addition to the FAFSA
- B) Yes, in place of the FAFSA
- C) No
- D) Do Not Know

5. Would your state develop a secondary application if the FAFSA removed needed information?

- A) Yes
- B) No



6. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements regarding the use of a secondary financial aid application

	No Opinion	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Would your state continue the use of a secondary application even if the FAFSA provided the information needed					
Would your state remove the use of a secondary application if the FAFSA provided the information needed					

Why does your state use a secondary application?

7. In 2016, the FAFSA timeline moved forward to allow earlier access to students. Has the earlier availability of the FAFSA change your state’s priority deadline?

- A) Yes
- B) No
- C) Do Not Know

If you would like to provide additional details on your state’s decision, please share.

8. Is there anything else you would like to share with ECS regarding FAFSA simplification?

9. Thank you for completing this survey. Your responses will remain anonymous. Providing your contact information below will assist our team in clarifying any responses and in aggregating results by state.

- A) Name
- B) Organization
- C) Title
- D) State/Province

10. Thank you for completing this survey. You may use the “Previous” button to go back to edit any responses. Once you click “Submit” below, your link to the survey will be deactivated and your responses submitted to Education Commission of the States.

Endnote

1. “50-State Policy Database on State Financial Aid,” Education Commission of the States, <http://statefinancialaidredesign.org/state-financial-aid-database/> (accessed January 27, 2017).