

WHY WE SHOULD LEARN ABOUT COLLEGE FINANCIAL AID IN SCHOOL: A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Mei Prasetio, Academy at Palumbo, Class of 2021

Often the first things we ask when thinking about college is, “Can I afford going to college?”

Over the past three years, I have been a part of a youth participatory action research team at the University of Pennsylvania where we conduct research around issues of equity as it relates to the college admissions process. This past spring, twelve of us on the team gathered together to focus on unpacking the college application process with a focus on equity. While our group was interrupted by the pandemic, we moved to virtual space to continue to learn and break down this process so we could fulfill our desire to grasp the college application process.

Although there were challenges in being able to engage in a virtual space, we continued to research aspects of the process that high schools often took too little time to unpack. Knowing that many students did not have the resources and privilege to learn about the process like we did, especially in the midst of a pandemic, we wanted to help. As a team of first-generation low-income students of color, we decided to plan a presentation using our research to support other students and their families to understand the process of applying for college.

My responsibility in this presentation was to break down the FAFSA (Free Application for Student Federal Aid) process. I volunteered being one of the few students to make it to the financial aid inquiry session where we both learned and conducted research around the FAFSA process. This part of the presentation was complicated but also invaluable for families as affording college is a crucial factor for many of us. I worked on this section along with my group member, Owen Setiawan, a student at Central High School, spending late nights learning different terms to understand how to navigate FAFSA, so that it was understandable in the presentation to around 60 students, families, counselors, principals, and teachers over Zoom.

While working on this presentation, I thought of my friends who wouldn't be able to receive this information with our limited resources during quarantine. I recalled that even when school was going on, that some weren't even aware of the FAFSA. This knowledge is critical in helping our generation get the education they deserve, but why isn't it more accessible?

After the presentation, I asked myself how I could be of support to those around me. I recognized my privilege of being a part of this research group and worked to share the resources on federal aid with students who might benefit from it. I still have lingering questions and thoughts as to why this information isn't accessible and understandable enough for many students and their families. I also think about the issues that many of these students from different social classes and races will have to face in the college admissions process. Although this isn't being talked about in schools, I'll continue to inform those around me in hopes of making this process easier to understand.

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