

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Frederica Wilson (FL-24)

Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development

"FAFSA Fail: Examining the Impact on Students, Families, and Schools"

2175 Rayburn House Office Building

Wednesday, April 10, 2024 | 10:15 a.m.

Thank you so much, Chairman Owens, and thank you to the witnesses for coming today.

We know that a college degree is the surest pathway to economic mobility in America.

Unfortunately, for many low-income students, particularly those at HBCUs such as Florida Memorial University in South Florida, where I live, the cost of a college degree remains out of reach without federal student aid.

For years, the Pell Grants have helped our want-to-be-somebody students achieve the promise of higher education.

This is why, in 2020, Democrats and Republicans in Congress passed the *FAFSA Simplification Act*, which aimed to streamline the Free Application for Federal Student Assistance form and expand student aid eligibility, especially for those who usually would not be able to afford to go to college.

Sadly, the hold-up with this law raises questions about whether going to college in the fall is even doable for those who can't foot the bill.

Students needed their financial aid information months ago to make college decisions, yet many still don't have that information today.

I'd like to remind everyone that College Decision Day, which should be a joyous event where students declare where they'll go in the fall, is May 1st, less than a month away, and we don't want children all dressed up on that day with no place to go. I even have a signing day in my district where the boys and the 5000 role models of excellence sign just like athletes, but they are signing for academic scholarships. But guess what? Many students won't even have what they need to make that choice.

Additionally, this has made things more complicated for colleges and high school counselors as well.

They, just like students, have had to quickly adapt to the frequent changes from the Department of Education.

These setbacks put decades of progress in jeopardy, slamming the brakes on efforts to widen access to higher education and financial stability for students of color, first-generation students, and those from low-income backgrounds.

According to the National College Attainment Network, only 32.3 percent of students from low-income high schools completed the FAFSA form, a 32.9 percent decrease from the previous year. And only 32.2 percent of students in high-minority high schools have completed the form, a 33.3 percent decrease from the previous year.

This stark reality directly opposes the *Simplification Act's* intended purpose, serving as a slap in the promise of higher education.

While I agree that holding the Department accountable and investigating its mishandling is crucial, our immediate priority— immediate priority— must be ensuring students and their families have the necessary resources to make informed decisions about their future.

We must also ensure that schools and organizations are prepared to assist them.

The clock is ticking, and students need answers now.