

ARTICLE



# Essential Strategies for PPY-Ready Communications

On October 1, 2016, Prior Prior Year (PPY) went into effect, meaning students can file for federal financial aid three months earlier than in prior years. Previously, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) required the student and parents' past year's tax information. To streamline the process, students can now file the FAFSA using tax data from two years prior (NACAC, 2016). Since nearly everyone has already filed their taxes before October, most families will find it as simple as clicking the IRS retrieval button to load their financial information.

The earlier filing date also means that students and their parents will know their federal financial aid and Expected Family Contribution (EFC) earlier than ever before. This change has many positive implications for students and their parents as earlier awarding provides them with more time to spend reviewing financial aid offers and considering viable college options. According to Baworowsky (2016), "PPY presents an opportunity to build those relationships earlier by providing earlier full financial aid awards and addressing the topic of student loans over a longer period of time."

According to NASFAA (2016), "several schools have already committed to aligning their institutional financial aid applications to use PPY income data beginning with the application for the 2017-18 year." That means that many institutions are moving up their award notifications to earlier in the year.

Some institutions have already adjusted their financial aid processes and timelines in response to PPY; whereas, others are taking a "wait and see" approach. Keep in mind that if you are planning to make changes to your financial aid processing and awarding, you should plan to make adjustments in your communications accordingly, if you haven't already. Even if you are not planning to make changes to your processes in the first year, this article provides several recommended adjustments in communications.



## Why should you create new communications or adjust your existing ones?

Since many families will obtain their EFC earlier, there is a potential pitfall in knowing an EFC without having a financial award and communications discussing the value of the educational experience. Should a family see a larger than expected amount to pay for college, it could discourage them from pursuing some institutions, especially if they are not getting award letters or communications that tell them about institutional scholarships and other forms of aid.

This article provides several communication strategies to help your institution rethink and strengthen your communications with the advent of PPY.

## UPDATE YOUR INTERNAL COMMUNICATION PLANS

Regardless of whether or not your institution has made changes to your financial aid processes this year, PPY should have a definite impact on your communication plans. If you are changing your application deadlines or thinking of moving to rolling admissions, you will need to communicate those changes to your prospective students and influencers such as guidance counselors. In this case, you may need to provide financial aid estimates earlier. You should also consider the timing and content of communication plans to prospective students. Depending on how your institution plans to approach PPY, timing and content will be affected. For instance, if you plan to admit students earlier, a longer admitted student communication sequence is needed. The junior/rising senior communication plan may also need to be adjusted to encourage applications during the later summer months prior to the start of the senior year of high school.

As students learn about their EFC and financial aid awards earlier—often many months before they need to make a college-choice decision—perceptions of cost, value, and affordability should be addressed earlier and more frequently. It is important to address students' costs and to make sure they feel good about it. As Baworowsky (2016) asserts, "PPY offers an excellent opportunity for institutions to enhance their communications to promote accurate information about affordability and the financial aid process."

Financial aid process-related communications need to be adjusted as well.

The earlier FAFSA filing date and any process changes need to be clearly communicated to students. If your institution is moving to rolling admissions, you'll want to encourage students to apply earlier to get their financial aid award letter sooner. If scholarship competitions and deadlines are being moved to earlier in the calendar year, this too needs to be clearly communicated. Take into account that your online application and website need to be ready. Estimated tuition, fees, and room and board also need to be determined earlier to be able to create financial aid packages.



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## RETHINK STUDENT SEARCH

Student search timing and messaging should also be adjusted to account for PPY. The earlier FAFSA filing date may result in earlier search strategies as it creates the opportunity to push your application campaign to mid summer. Then, in the fall, your senior search messaging should encourage both an application and FAFSA completion. If a number of your overlap institutions begin admitting students earlier or providing financial aid offers in the fall, you could find that students begin committing to these other institutions earlier. Consequently, your senior search should clearly communicate your application and financial aid priority deadlines along with the promise of a speedy response to those who apply immediately.

It is important to remind students of the earlier FAFSA filing date and to encourage them to file early and to use your school code on their FAFSA application. Equally important, messages of value and affordability should be addressed early and often as part of student search.

While changing search purchase strategies and targeted messaging may build momentum for earlier applications, it will still require a major change in the thinking of students and their parents who believe that college applications are traditionally filed beginning in the fall of the final year of high school. Nevertheless, keep in mind that many of your overlap institutions may be planning earlier launches of their application searches.

For this reason, KelmscottEDU recommends an extended series of search communications that discuss the advantages of Prior Prior Year as well as urges applying for admission earlier.

## CONSIDER FIRST-GENERATION AND LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

First-generation and low-income students merit careful consideration in your communications. These students could be further disadvantaged, as they tend to apply later in the process and may not be aware of how to apply for financial aid and navigate the admission process in the first place.

As Cross (2011) suggested, part of an institution's overall financial aid communication strategy should include specifically reaching out to first-generation and low-income students if we want these students to realize the full benefit of financial aid. Institutions should also develop assertive outreach communications to community organizations promoting the advantages of PPY.

For low-income students in particular, it is important that they receive early and frequent communications because it is critical for them to complete the FAFSA to learn their EFC and to demonstrate college affordability. Having this information in hand helps these students better understand they type of institutions they can afford.

One inner city guidance counselor in Detroit reported that 25% of their students filed the FAFSA in the first week it was available. This guidance



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counselor is actively promoting the early FAFSA filing as students' ticket to college. If other guidance counselors begin to do the same FAFSA promotions, your institution's messages can have an additive effect of encouraging even higher and earlier FAFSA completion rates than in years past.

## PROMOTE PPY TO CONTINUING STUDENTS

Prospective students are not the only ones who need to hear about PPY. For retention purposes, it is also important that continuing students are also made aware of and reminded of the new filing dates. The good news for current students is that they will be able to file the FAFSA using the same 2015 income and tax information they used for filing this current year.

## REINVENT THE FINANCIAL AID AWARD LETTER

Most schools have traditionally sent a simple financial aid award letter to students outlining the components of the financial aid package. However, with this longer time frame and need to communicate your institution's value, a strategic publication to consider is the variable financial aid award brochure.

**A VARIABLE FINANCIAL AID AWARD BROCHURE** is a full-color, high-impact piece that is printed on demand and can be personalized to students' financial needs and interests. Institutions frequently customize the information in the brochure to include individual payment plan calculations and information about specific academic programs and extracurricular activities.

## MAXIMIZE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF YOUR NET PRICE CALCULATOR

Finally, part of your communication strategy should include streamlining your net price calculator. Since a significant percentage of students have already filed the FAFSA, they will already have their EFCs. Therefore, it is recommended that you update your calculator to allow students to enter an EFC as an option rather than all of their financial information. This way, they can obtain a faster calculation and have a better overall experience on your website.

Do you have follow-up communications for students who have used your net price calculator? If not, consider adding communications specifically to those students. If your calculator does not have automatic communications, you can download those who have completed it into your CRM or work with an outside vendor to send personalized follow up messages.



## CONCLUSION

PPY provides an opportunity for institutions to rethink and strengthen their communications. As college debt is soaring and students and parents are more price-sensitive than ever, colleges and universities need to communicate affordability and value more than ever before. The advent of PPY provides an important opportunity to rethink your communications as part of your affordability outreach to students and families.

## References and Additional Reading

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathleen Cross, Ph.D. serves as Executive Vice President of KelmscottEDU, a nationally recognized higher education enrollment consulting and marketing firm, where she leads consulting, strategy, and marketing. With experience working in both U.S. and international universities, Kathleen is a former Vice President of Enrollment, Chief Technology Officer, and Dean of Studies Abroad.

Serving 500+ higher education institutions over the years, Kathleen's approach is to create authentic experiences that engage and inspire the audience combined with innovative and proven data-driven strategy.

Kathleen holds a doctoral degree in Higher Education Administration from Saint Louis University along with a bachelor's degree from Saint Louis University and master's degrees from the University of Cincinnati and California State University. Kathleen also serves as a professor in the Higher Education Administration Graduate Program at Bay Path University. She is a frequent national speaker and published author.

She has additional experience in corporate and healthcare organizations as a former bilingual Speech-Language Pathologist and former director and part-owner of successful medical device/technology company. She has lived in several countries and fluent or proficient in multiple languages.

## LET'S TALK!

At KelmscottEDU, our experienced enrollment consultants have deep expertise and experience in communication consulting and strategy as well as the creation of new communications. Learn more about our communication products and services related to PPY and financial aid, which are offered à la carte or as part of a comprehensive enrollment solution:

- Communication Plan Audits
- Communication Plan Enhancements
- Variable Financial Aid Brochures
- Accepted Student Packets
- Student Search

—And much more!

If you need any of these services today, do not hesitate to contact us.

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