

FutureMakers Coalition strives to inform parents and high school seniors about changes to Federal Student Aid

By Amanda Nelson

Immokalee Bulletin

It's well known that college is expensive. Between books, tuition, housing and other expenses the cost of receiving a degree has skyrocketed. Thanks to the efforts of the FutureMakers Coalition and changes with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application process, some of that financial burden may be eased for many students wishing to pursue a college education.

The FutureMakers Coalition is a regional organization that was formed in 2015 with a goal of increasing the number of graduating high school students completing the FAFSA, and having them take advantage of the nearly \$3 billion in unclaimed federal college and post-secondary assistance. According to the website, "their goal is to transform the workforce by increasing the number of college degrees, certificates and high-quality credentials from 27 to 40 percent by 2025 throughout Charlotte, Collier, Glades, Hendry and Lee counties."

FutureMakers is a group of educators, workforce developers, business leaders, economic development professionals and government officials who provided funding for service announcements, scholarships and the development of the Grad App. This mobile app provides extensive information

and resources about careers, job opportunities, education planning, scholarships, financial aid, money management and more. FutureMakers also created a student support network for one-on-one and group mentoring, offer career coaching, provide FAFSA workshops and offer financial aid application support.

According to their press release, FutureMakers Coalition partners, including educators, workforce developers, business leaders, economic development professionals, government officials, residents and students across Southwest Florida have joined together to launch a new educational campaign, called "FAFSA first!," aimed at informing high school seniors and their parents in Charlotte, Collier, Glades, Hendry and Lee counties about FAFSA. The campaign's goal is to "increase the FAFSA completion rate among Southwest Florida high school seniors by 5 percent this year". More information will be presented via schools, social media and other forms of advertisement.

In a recent press release, it was also noted that, "each year, the federal government provides more than \$150 billion in financial aid (grants, work-study and loans) for college and career school. To apply for this aid, every high school senior who plans to attend college or a career school must complete the FAFSA. State governments and

many colleges, career schools and private organizations also use FAFSA information to determine additional financial aid awards". Visit www.FAFSAfirst.org to learn more about the campaign, and for information and resources about FAFSA.

"In order to accomplish the goal of transforming Southwest Florida's workforce, FutureMakers Coalition partners are collaborating to improve access to post-secondary education by increasing the number of students filling out the FAFSA," said Tessa LeSage, director of social innovation and sustainability, Southwest Florida Community Foundation which is serving as the backbone organization for the FutureMakers Coalition. "Research shows FAFSA completion rates correlate with the percentage of workforce who holds degrees, certificates and high-quality credentials."

Changes to the FAFSA will now allow students to submit a 2017-18 Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) as early as Oct. 1, 2016, rather than beginning on Jan. 1, 2017. The earlier submission date will be a permanent change, allowing students to complete and submit their FAFSA's as early as October 1 every year. Beginning with the 2017-18 FAFSA, students will report income and tax information from an earlier tax year. For example, on the 2017-18 FAFSA, students (and parents, as appropriate) will

report their 2015 income and tax information, rather than their 2016 income and tax information.

By receiving financial aid award offers from schools sooner, parents and students will be able to make informed decisions about college or career school affordability rather than having to wait and hope for the best. For more information and important dates regarding FAFSA, please visit www.studentaid.ed.gov.