



# EDUCATION AFFORDABILITY

## *Tips to Maximize Financial Aid & Minimize Expenses*

Revised 4.19.24

These suggestions are meant to help prepare a student for the nuances in affording a Northwest College education. In addition to financial aid applications, there are specific things a student can do to maintain their financial aid eligibility, limit loss of/reductions in financial aid funding, or minimize their educational expenses (thereby reducing the need for financial aid altogether). These are items students sometimes overlook when considering their educational goals and financial aid needs.

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### TO MAXIMIZE FINANCIAL AID

**Apply for financial aid annually.** Most scholarships (institutional & external), in addition to federal student aid, can be renewed each year. A student should prepare to reapply each year, which may include a new application, an essay on achievement, or verification of continued enrollment & academic accomplishment. Don't miss application deadlines.

**Complete all financial aid application requirements.** Many students begin financial aid applications, but either do not complete them in their entirety or are disqualified when requests for additional information are ignored. Ensuring that each application is complete, or that additional requests for information are completed (including submitting the required "thank you notes" for NWC scholarships!), prevents disqualification or delays in disbursement.

**Read all financial aid policies, procedures, and disclosure documents thoroughly.** Knowing the rules and expectations of each type of award can prevent misunderstandings which may lead to enrollment jeopardy. Each funding method has specific requirements and special attributes. Knowing how each award functions can prevent frustration or loss of eligibility. Additionally, keep a folder specifically for all financial aid / enrollment information. A student is cognizant of his/her aggregate loan balances and debt burden, as well as being well prepared for loan repayment, if all lender and balance information is centralized for ease of retrieval. A comprehensive loan portfolio limits borrowing more than necessary and best prepares a student for the rigors of consolidation as it prevents omission of loan products.

**Financial aid programs usually have a minimum enrollment requirement.** A student is generally considered ineligible for the majority of financial aid programs (federal, Hathaway, institutional & external scholarships, state aid, etc.) if at least half-time enrollment is not maintained (usually 6.0 credits per semester). Additionally, falling below half-time enrollment status can trigger a loan repayment grace period to begin counting down.

**Submit the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) by the College's priority deadlines.** Students who ensure the College receives their annual FAFSA by the appropriate deadline (March 1<sup>st</sup> for fall enrollments, October 1<sup>st</sup> for spring enrollments) are more likely to have their financial aid packages completed prior to the commencement of the enrollment semester. Since the student is responsible for resolving their student account balance on the first day of the semester, ensuring a completed financial aid application reduces the likelihood of out-of-pocket expenses. Additionally, priority filing places students into consideration for campus-based financial aid funds that are on a first come, first served basis.

**Most types of financial aid have a Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) component.** This SAP requirement ensures that the donor/lender does not award funds to students who do not academically succeed. Federal aid SAP always has grade point average, completion pace (how many credits in which the student is successful vs. attempted), and maximum timeframe (length of eligibility) components. Often institutional & external scholarships and grants contain these qualitative & quantitative requirements too (NWC scholarships do!). A student must take academic performance requirements seriously to avoid loss of future eligibility.

**Create a contingency plan in the event of federal aid funding delays or loss of eligibility.** Federal financial aid eligibility can change, even in the middle of a semester. Federal aid disbursements can be influenced by delayed Department of Education eligibility notification (outstanding verification requirements or federal tax filing regulations, past federal aid aggregate and/or repayment calculations, etc.) or changes to a student's course schedule due to canceled courses or non-attendance. Aid disbursements may be delayed while the Financial Aid Office completes required regulatory eligibility review or may be canceled outright if eligibility is lost. Students who utilize federal aid funds should budget for out-of-pocket expenses in case eligibility delays or loss are experienced (especially important at the beginning of the semester when textbook purchases are necessary). Limiting funding disruptions reduces the likelihood of withdrawing from courses or the College (see "making wise withdrawal decisions" section below). Additionally, first-time federal loan borrowers have funding delays. A first-time borrower must wait 30 days after commencement of the semester before receiving a first loan disbursement. This often means that a student must address their student account balance during the first month of the semester. First-time federal loan borrowers are urged to prepare for out-of-pocket textbook expenses during such delays in eligibility.



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### TO MINIMIZE EXPENSES

**Pick a major/program that is enjoyable.** Students who make well-reasoned initial program selections limit unnecessary accumulated credits, reduce extraneous credit hour costs, minimize loss of financial aid eligibility through poor academic performance, and maximize earning potential by graduating sooner. Students who enjoy their major tend to have higher persistence rates and excel academically. Strong academic performance minimizes costly retakes and may influence transferability/employability in the future.

**Make wise course selections.** Federal funds may only be applied to courses that count toward the unfulfilled course requirements of the student's program/major. Hathaway scholarships have course selection eligibility limitations too (Hathaway excludes remedial courses), as do other Wyoming financial aid programs. A student who selects only those courses that are required for his program can maximize federal aid AND limit unnecessary credit hour expenses.

**Enrollment status can differ between the Registrar's Office and the Financial Aid Office.** Since there are restrictions on course funding eligibility for certain financial aid programs, the Financial Aid Office may calculate an enrollment status that differs from that of the Registrar's Office. It is not uncommon that a student will be considered enrolled full time at the College (through the Registrar's Office), but only have half time financial aid enrollment status eligibility based on course selection. Full time enrollment costs with reduced financial aid eligibility can lead to out-of-pocket expenses. It's wise to consult with the Financial Aid Office when considering courses that are outside of program/major requirements.

**Monitor academic accomplishments.** Ownership of student enrollment belongs to the student. A wise student monitors his/her program enrollment, catalog requirements, and academic accomplishments. A student should not rely on administrative departments to keep his/her progress on track. Administrative departments are resources to the student, not caretakers. The successful student knows where he/she is in relation to meeting his/her graduation requirements at all times. This reduces the likelihood of enrolling in unnecessary courses which lead to funding limitations or increased credit hour costs.

**Limit changes of major.** NWC counts all credits attempted in its *Standards of Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP)* policy. Accumulated credits that do not count toward the current enrolled program/major can limit a student's future eligibility (of both federal, state, and institutional funds). Changes of major almost always increase overall education costs to the student.

**Make wise withdrawal decisions.** Students often resolve enrollment difficulties (financing, academic performance, social environment, etc.) by dropping out of courses mid-semester or withdrawing completely from the College. It is important to weigh these decisions carefully, as dropping courses / college withdrawal can affect refund policies (institutional & federal, see below), financial aid's *Standards of Satisfactory Academic Progress/SAP* (credits attempted vs. completed & maximum timeframe), and financial debt (student paid for courses but did not earn the credits). It is wise to pursue all areas of available resources before deciding to withdraw. Resources can include consulting faculty during office hours, student study groups, academic advisor discussion, Student Success Center, tutoring services, enrollment status changes, or course delivery options (residential vs. online classes). Withdrawal often affects future financial aid eligibility and leaves the student with an out-of-pocket expense.

**Know how institutional and federal refund policies differ.** When a student withdraws from the College, the Business Office performs a withdrawal calculation to determine if the student is owed a refund. When a student withdraws from the College AND has utilized federal aid, the Financial Aid Office performs an Unearned Aid calculation (Return to Title IV funds calculation) in addition to the Business Office calculation. There is an important distinction between these two calculations. After a student has attempted 25% of the semester he is ineligible for any NWC refund. However, if a student who is using federal aid withdraws before completing 60.01% of the semester, a prorated portion of the federal aid must be returned to the Department of Education as unearned and therefore ineligible to keep. Since the College's refund policy differs from federal refund calculations, students with federal aid who withdraw before completing at least 60.01% of the semester often are responsible for a balance on their student account. Failure to resolve this balance can lead to disciplinary consequences such as having their transcript withheld (which can affect transferability to another school) or being referred to a collections' agency (which can negatively affect the student's credit score). Generally, future financial aid cannot be used to resolve past semester balances (federal aid applied to prior year charges cannot exceed \$200.00).

## DATA SECURITY

In order to protect students' (& families') Personally Identifiable Information (PII), the College adheres to stringent data safeguard protocols. Therefore, only submit student (& family) personal information to the Financial Aid Office using data security methods which preserve the privacy of your personal information. Secure methods include:

- Faxing documents to the Financial Aid Office using our secure fax number
- Mailing documents to the Financial Aid Office
- Delivering documents to the Financial Aid Office
- Sending documents to the Financial Aid Office using the "Secure File Upload" feature, located in the "Online Forms" section of the NWC Student Portal (<https://my.nwc.edu/>)

**DO NOT EMAIL ANY PERSONAL INFORMATION TO THE FINANCIAL AID OFFICE WITHOUT USING AES 256-BIT ENCRYPTION SOFTWARE.**