



PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT POLICY & PROCEDURES

Change in Circumstance

Under Federal law, only a financial aid administrator (FAA) has the authority to adjust FAFSA results through a professional judgment in order to decide whether or not a student must provide parental information on the FAFSA or make adjustments that reflect a family's current situation rather than what was reflected on the FAFSA. PJ decisions are made on an individual, case-by-case basis, and not across the board for a group or category of students. Although several students may have similar circumstances that may be resolved in a similar way using PJ, the merit of each student's situation must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Appeals are reviewed by a financial aid administrator (FAA) as quickly as practicable upon receiving all necessary appeal documentation. The decision will be communicated to the student by email, and all decisions are final and cannot be further appealed. Ashland University does not accept professional judgments approved at other institutions.

A change in circumstance may include, but is not limited to:

- Unusual Circumstance (dependency status change)
- Special Circumstance (adjustment to FAFSA data elements)
 - Reduction or loss of taxable or non-taxable
 - Changes in employment status (except due to cause or personal choice)
 - Loss of child support
 - Loss of income due to a federally declared Disaster or Emergency
 - Household size adjustments due to divorce, separation, or death
 - One-time income received
 - Unusual out-of-pocket medical/dental expenses (not covered by insurance)
- Cost of Attendance Budget Adjustments
 - Reasonable allowance for the purchase of a personal computer
 - Reasonable dependent care expenses
- Direct Unsubsidized Loan Eligibility for a Dependent Student Without Parental FAFSA Data

The student must complete the current year FAFSA before the Financial Aid Office will consider a change in circumstance. Students must complete and submit a *Change in Circumstance Form* or *Unusual Circumstance (Dependency Appeal) Form* via Etrieve and provide documentation to support their appeal, allowing approximately 10 business days for the Financial Aid Office to finalize the review. The circumstance that contributed to the need for a review, as well as any action taken, must be adequately documented and the documentation maintained in the student's file. Documentation should be included even if the FAA decides a PJ adjustment is not warranted.

If the student's application has been selected for verification by either the Federal Processing System (FPS) or the school, the school must complete verification before making any PJ adjustment to a data element used to calculate the student's Student Aid Index (SAI) or to a component of the student's COA. However, the school is not required to verify the student's application if the student was not selected for verification.

UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCE (Dependency Status Change from Dependent to Independent)

A student who answers “no” to all FAFSA dependency questions is considered a dependent student and must provide parental information on their FAFSA even if the student does not live with their parents by choice, their parents are not paying any of their college expenses, or do not claim them as a dependent on their taxes. The dependency appeal process allows a student who has *unusual or extenuating circumstances* to appeal to be considered an independent student even though they do not meet any of the independent student criteria on the FAFSA. Unusual or extenuating circumstances may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- The student or their parent are incarcerated.
- The student has left home due to an abusive or threatening environment.
- The student has been abandoned by or estranged from their parents and have not been adopted.
- The student was granted refugee or asylee status and are separated from their parents, or their parents are displaced in a foreign country.
- The student is a victim of human trafficking.
- The student is otherwise unable to contact or locate their parents and have not been adopted.

A dependency appeal will not be approved in the following situations:

- The student is living on their own by choice, not for one of the reasons listed above.
- The student was an independent student due to marriage one year, but since divorced and cannot answer “Yes” to any of the other dependency questions.

If a FAA encounters an unusual or extenuating situation not reflected above, they must seek guidance from an Assistant Director to ensure the situation warrants a dependency appeal for consistency and compliance purposes. That new situation may need added to the above lists for future reference.

Only a college or university FAA has the authority to change a student’s dependency status from dependent to independent. Appeals are reviewed as quickly as practicable, but no later than 60 days after receiving all appeal documentation. *A dependency override for unusual circumstances is considered unique from a determination of independence for homeless youth or at-risk homeless youth. See separate homeless youth policy.*

First-Time Appeal – The student must complete AU’s *Unusual Circumstance (Dependency Appeal) Form* in Etrieve and attach any supporting documentation. Required documentation includes a written statement explaining why the student should be considered independent as well as a written statement from a responsible third-party familiar with the situation (e.g. professor, counselor, medical professional, social worker, religious leader, or non-family member). The student may also submit court or law enforcement documents or other relevant information to explain the extenuating situation. Additional documentation may be requested on a case-by-case basis as deemed necessary. *See the appendix section of this policy for more details.*

After careful review, a decision will be made as to if parental information is required on the student’s FAFSA or if the circumstance allows them to proceed without providing parental data. If it has been determined that the student does not need to provide parental data, the dependency appeal is considered approved, parental income and asset information are excluded in the calculation of the SAI, no parental consent or signature is required on the FAFSA, and the student is considered independent for financial aid purposes.

Reaffirmation – Students approved for a dependency appeal in a previous year, must submit the *Unusual Circumstance: Dependent Status Reaffirmation Form* in Etrieve *annually* reaffirming the circumstance described in their previously approved appeal and that their relationship with their parent(s) remains unchanged.

SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCE (Adjustments to FAFSA Data Elements)

A financial aid administrator (FAA) may be able to adjust FAFSA data elements used in calculating the Student Aid Index (SAI) to reflect what the student and family are *currently* experiencing, rather than what was reflected on the FAFSA. This is done *after* reporting the requested income on the FAFSA. If a student and their family have reason to believe that their FAFSA needs to be updated or adjusted due to a change in circumstance, they can initiate a review by completing AU's *Change in Circumstance Form* based on their dependency status (dependent or independent). Changes in employment status (except due to cause or personal choice), reduction or loss of taxable or non-taxable income (including loss of child support), household size adjustments due to divorce, separation or death, one-time income received, and unusual out-of-pocket medical/dental expenses (not covered by insurance) may be considered. As for the reduction or loss of taxable or non-taxable income, Ashland University will consider using prior tax year income or a 12-month determined period of time that includes current and projected income.

Along with the appropriate *Change in Circumstance Form* in Etrieve, the student or parent must submit a written statement explaining the situation and how the projected income figures provided on the *Change in Circumstance Form* were compiled. Supporting documentation must be submitted as well, including, but not limited to, copies of latest pay stubs, unemployment benefits, child support termination order and year-end statement, out-of-pocket medical expense breakdown, separation/divorce decree, death certificate, etc.

If a change in circumstance is approved, it is not finalized until the FAA adjusts the student's ISIR data in the FAFSA Partner Portal (FPP) and a new ISIR transaction is received that reflects the changes and new SAI.

➔ Reduction or Loss of Taxable or Non-Taxable Income – Reasons for loss of income may include change or loss of employment (except due to cause or personal choice), loss of social security benefits, loss of child support payments, separation, divorce, or death.

The FAA should use alternative-year income such as anticipated calendar-year income, award year income, or income from another 12-month period that realistically reflects current and near-term economic situation, except in the case of death or divorce.

Loss of Child Support – When a student has reached their 18th birthday and graduated from high school, child support payments are no longer received for that child. Since the family must provide prior, prior year income on the FAFSA, a professional judgment may be necessary to remove the child support payments specific to the student from the FAFSA calculation. If a family receives child support for multiple students, a copy of the last page of the child support received year-end statement is required in order to determine the amount that can be removed from untaxed income. Child support received for other children for which the parent is still receiving child support funds must not be removed through PJ.

Loss of Income due to a federally declared Disaster or Emergency – Financial aid administrators may, during a qualifying emergency:

- Determine that the income earned from work for an applicant is zero, if the applicant can provide paper or electronic documentation of receipt of unemployment benefits or confirmation that an application for unemployment benefits was submitted; and
- Make additional appropriate adjustments to the income earned from work for a student, parent, or spouse, as applicable, based on the totality of the family's situation, including consideration of unemployment benefits.

Acceptable documentation of unemployment should be submitted not more than 90 days from the date it was issued. However, institutions may use discretion to accept documentation older than 90 days under an institution's general professional judgment authority if they do not have reason to believe there is conflicting information.

→ Household Size Adjustments Due to Divorce, Separation, or Death – A **student's** or **parent's** marital status or income and asset data generally cannot be updated if it was correct when the FAFSA was signed. However, a financial aid administrator (FAA) could choose to exercise PJ to make any necessary adjustments to address an inequity or to provide a more accurate depiction of the student's or family's ability to pay for education. Generally, verification must be completed prior to exercising PJ, however, the FAA is not required to verify data that will be removed entirely using PJ. All other pertinent information, such as spousal income and taxes paid must be updated. This can be done on the same ISIR transaction.

To verify a separation, a separation agreement along with copies of utility bills and leases must be obtained in order to prove that the student and their spouse are living separately.

→ One-Time Income Received – One-time income received may include, but are not limited to, inheritance, moving allowance, prior-year Social Security payments, severance, IRA/pension distribution, or lottery winnings. If nonrecurring income was received in the base year, the student's AGI may be reduced by that amount. A detailed breakdown of the one-time income must be obtained from the family.

Retirement Account – One-time retirement income may be removed from a parent's AGI if the funds were used to make a payment to a college/university. The FAA must confirm the amount paid toward the student's AU account to ensure it doesn't surpass the retirement withdrawal amount.

IRA Rollover – This is considered an *update* to the FAFSA, not a professional judgment. An eligible rollover of funds from one IRA account to another is a non-taxable transaction and should not be included in the FAFSA calculation. Rollover distributions are exempt from tax when funds are placed in another IRA account within 60 days from the date of distribution. The transaction is reportable on the federal tax return because any taxable amount of a distribution that is not rolled over must be reported as income in the year of the distribution.

Students, parents or spouses who have an IRA or Pension rollover into another IRA or Other Qualified Plan have the opportunity to provide the amounts of those rollovers on their FAFSA. However, if they do not include this information at the time of completing the FAFSA, an FAA may need to make a correction to the FAFSA on behalf of the student, parent, or spouse. In this case, a copy of the Federal 1040 or Form 1099 R Code G is required to ensure *taxable* income is subtracted from the total rollover amount. On the 1040, Line 4B must be subtracted from Line 4A. Then, the FAA may remove the rollover from the student's FAFSA to better reflect the families earned income. A revised ISIR transaction must be received before reevaluating financial aid.

→ Unusual Out-of-Pocket Medical/Dental Expenses (not covered by insurance) may be removed from AGI through a professional judgment if the out-of-pocket medical/dental expenses surpass the 11% income protection allowance for medical/dental expenses already included in the FAFSA need-analysis and/or the expenses are not already itemized deductions on the parents' Schedule A. Annual healthcare premiums paid out-of-pocket also may be included.

COST OF ATTENDANCE (COA) BUDGET ADJUSTMENTS

Cost of attendance (also known as budget) is defined as costs the student is expected to incur during a period of enrollment. AU calculates COA based on a full academic year, which includes the fall and spring semesters with summer as a header or trailer. Actual or average costs may be used, and they must be consistently applied. Budgets are reasonable estimates and allow students to maintain a moderate standard of living.

Cost of attendance components may be adjusted to address special circumstances through a professional judgment (PJ), but adjustments must be made within the accepted categories as defined in the Higher Education Act of 1965. A cost of attendance adjustment may be initiated by the student or a Financial Aid Administrator, and professional judgment (PJ) determinations are made on a case-by-case basis. Cost of attendance adjustments must be documented and supporting documentation pertaining to the student's individual case included in the student's file.

Basic COA Components

- Tuition & Fees – Actual billed costs assessed by the University based on a student's program and enrollment. Ashland University's tuition budget component reflects the full-time comprehensive tuition rate (12-19 credit hours) for traditional undergraduate students and per credit hour tuition amounts for students enrolled in our fully online, partnership, and graduate programs. The fee budget component reflects fees that are either for all students, all students in a particular course of study, or all students in a broad category, such as undergraduate (UG) and graduate (GR) students. Traditional UG students are charged general fees (campus access, activity, and learning technology), and fully online, partnership, and graduate programs are charged a per credit hour learning technology fee.
- Living Expenses (includes food and housing) – Actual billed costs for on-campus students, and a standard allowance determined by the institution to assist off-campus students with housing and food expenses. The student must be enrolled at least half-time to receive the housing and food budget components. Only costs for the student are considered, not others in the household.

For a resident student, the 2025-26 housing allowance component is \$4,047 per year and the food allowance component is \$2,950 per year. If a student is billed for a more expensive room or meal plan, a budget adjustment may be added at the student's request or at the discretion of a financial aid administrator. The standard food allowance provides the equivalent of three meals per day. The food component for a commuter student may be increased if an AU meal plan is purchased.

- Books, Course Materials, Supplies & Equipment – A standard allowance determined by the institution. Ashland University uses a standard allowance for all students in the amount of \$40 per credit hour of enrollment. An adjustment to this standard allowance can be made if the student provides documentation showing that their total costs surpass the standard allowance.
- Transportation – A reasonable, standard allowance determined by the institution to assist students with transportation costs for operating and maintaining an automobile (e.g. mileage, gas, oil, license, insurance, and repair). Payments for the purchase or lease of an automobile are not included in COA and cannot be added through a professional judgment. Students enrolled in a fully online program of study will not be assigned a transportation allowance.
- Miscellaneous Personal Expenses – A standard allowance determined by the institution to assist students with miscellaneous personal expenses. Allowable personal expenses include, but are not limited to, clothing, personal maintenance, grooming aids, and recreation. A student must be enrolled at least half-time for this budget component to count in their COA.

- Federal Direct Loan Fee Allowance – This standard allowance applies consistently toward incurred origination fees borrowed by the student. The allowance is based on a student’s degree type (undergraduate or graduate) and dependency status (dependent or independent). If a federal loan is declined or lowered, the school is not required to recalculate loan fees, but must ensure the standard allowance does not mask an overaward.
 - *Parent or Graduate PLUS Loans* – If a parent or graduate chooses to borrow a federal PLUS loan, the loan origination fees must be added to the student’s cost of attendance.
 - *Private Loans* – Private loan origination fees are not permitted to be included in the student’s COA.

Additional COA Allowances

- Professional Licensure, Certification, or a First Professional Credential – An allowance for the costs associated with obtaining a license, certification, or a first professional credential, for a student in a program that prepares them to enter a profession that requires such a qualification. Costs associated with obtaining a professional credential are added to eligible students’ COA by the Financial Aid Office. The credential cost must be incurred while the student is still enrolled even if the credentialing activity occurs after the student’s enrollment period ends. The costs are not restricted to a one-time allowance. The school must document any professional credential expenses included in the COA on a case-by-case basis.
- Personal Computer Reimbursement – AU will increase a student’s COA up to a maximum amount of \$2,000 towards the purchase of a laptop or desktop computer as well as additional expenses such as a monitor, keyboard, mouse, and/or software purchases necessary to their program of study (i.e. Microsoft 365 or Adobe Suite). This reimbursement applies to all enrolled students and may be purchased outside of when the student is enrolled, such as in the summer for use during the following fall enrollment period. The computer does not have to be required by the student’s program, and it may be added to a student’s COA in multiple years if the school considers it reasonable to do so. Copies of original receipts showing proof of purchase are required.
- Study Abroad Allowance – A reasonable allowance determined by the institution providing the study abroad experience to help toward costs associated with an AU approved study abroad experience. A study abroad budget form is initiated by the Study Abroad Director that includes the costs associated with that particular abroad experience. The financial aid study abroad liaison completes the form adding in additional AU-related budget costs as well as the estimated financial aid the student may be eligible to receive. COA is updated only after the student pays the study abroad deposit.
- Dependent Care Expenses – A reasonable allowance based on the estimated actual expense incurred for dependent care, based on the number and age of such dependents. A “dependent” may include persons other than children, such as elderly parents. This allowance cannot exceed the reasonable cost in the community in which such student resides for the kind of care provided. The period of time for which dependent care is required includes, but is not limited to, class-time, study-time, field work, internships, and commuting time. If an increase to the standard dependent care allowance is needed, the student must submit copies of daycare or care-provider receipts, or other proof of payment, along with a statement from the student or care-provider explaining the reason for the increase, and/or other requested documents.

The dependent care expense allowance can be added upon receiving a written request from the student and proof the student has a dependent who is included in the household size, for whom care is required in order for the student to attend school. It can be based on estimated or actual expenses.

Additional Billed Costs may be added to a student’s budget on a case-by-case basis under a professional judgment. Even though an item may already be factored into the student’s COA, an increase may be possible through PJ if a student can prove that their overall costs within a budget component surpass the set budget amount.

DIRECT UNSUBSIDIZED LOAN ELIGIBILITY (for a Dependent Student Without Parental FAFSA Data)

Dependent students whose parents have ended all financial support (including health insurance) and refuse to file the FAFSA have the option of receiving only Direct Unsubsidized loans, if otherwise eligible. The decision to originate an unsubsidized loan for a student under these circumstances is at the school's discretion. The student must complete the student portion of the FAFSA, and the school must document that the parents refuse to complete the FAFSA and have ceased providing all financial support.

The dependent student who submits the FAFSA without parental data will receive a rejected FAFSA Submission Summary (FSS), and the school will receive a rejected ISIR without an SAI. The school may award the unsubsidized loan as long as the student passed the database matches and is otherwise eligible for the loan. A student cannot avoid verification by accepting only unsubsidized aid.

The student must complete AU's *Change in Circumstances for a Dependent Student* Etrieve form, select "Parental refusal to provide their information on the FAFSA", and provide the information requested. The student should share the nature of the estranged relationship with parents, the details for the break in student-parent relationship, confirmation if the break is temporary or ongoing, and confirmation that the student is estranged from both parents. A signed and dated statement from one of the student's parents would be ideal and sufficient, but not always possible. The letter from the parent should state that financial support has stopped, the date when that support ended, confirmation that the support will not be provided in the future, and that they will not complete the parental section of the FAFSA. If the student is unable to obtain a parent statement, a signed statement from a responsible third party (e.g. professor, counselor, medical professional, social worker, religious leader, or non-family member) with knowledge of the situation, describing the student's relationship with their parents also would be acceptable.

APPENDIX

UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCE DEPENDENCY STATUS CHANGE – Dependent to Independent	
Type of Documentation	Possible Considerations
Letter from the student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the nature of the student’s estranged relationship with parents? • What are the detailed reasons for the break in the student-parent relationship? • Is the break temporary or ongoing in nature? • Is the student estranged from both parents?
Letters from Knowledgeable third parties <i>(e.g., professor, counselor, medical professional, social worker, religious leader, or non-family member.)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the third party’s relationship to the student? • Is the third party unbiased? • Does the third-party testimony confirm or support the claim of estrangement, abuse, abandonment, etc.?
Student’s tax return or documentation of means-tested public benefits, other resources, or in-kind support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the student’s income or the resources justify the claim of living without parental support? • Does someone else claim the student as a dependent for tax purposes? If so, who?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent tax returns • Statement from parents <p><i>Note: In cases of true estrangement, attempts to collect documentation from parents might be undesirable or impossible.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the parent(s) claim the student as a dependent in the current or prior year, or will they claim the student next year? • If the parent(s) did claim the student, would this have any bearing on the student’s claim of estrangement?
Lease/rent receipts or other documentation of living arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does this support the claim of separate domicile from parent(s)? • Are the student’s housing expenses provided by someone other than the student’s parents? • Does the student have roommates to share this expense, making it more manageable? • Does the student receive in-kind support (e.g., free room and board)?
Utility Bills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the student managing utility costs without assistance from his or her parent(s)? • Is there a roommate to share these expenses?
Health Insurance Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the student have insurance in her or his own name? • Is the policy in the parent’s name?
Court Documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do these documents justify claims of estrangement from the parents? <p><i>Note: If documents indicate court-ordered legal emancipation or legal guardianship in the student’s state of legal residence, the student is independent by statutory definition.</i></p>