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FREE is the Operative Word in FAFSA Completion

(HELENA) It's crunch time for parents with children planning on attending college in the fall, but financial advisors at Student Assistance Foundation (SAF) urge families to keep their cool and be smart consumers when looking for methods of financing those educational goals.

It may be tempting to avoid the hassle of the financial aid process by responding to advertisements from for-profit companies who offer to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and search and apply for scholarships on a student's behalf. But parents should exercise caution before paying money to a scholarship or FAFSA completion service.

"College is a big investment, and sometimes parents find solace in paying an organization to fill out the FAFSA or help with scholarship searches," said Kelly Chapman, executive vice president of Foundation Activities at SAF. "But we encourage parents to dedicate some time to the task — it'll save you money. The FAFSA is a free resource for obtaining financial aid, and there are a multitude of free scholarship searches available through the Internet. High school guidance counselors and career center staff are also great resources for finding money for school."

The FAFSA is the key to obtaining federal funding to help cover the cost of postsecondary education. In addition, some schools use information provided on the FAFSA as a reference for awarding certain scholarships.

While Chapman acknowledges that completing the form is labor intensive, she says high school counselors, college financial aid directors and loan education counselors at SAF are available to provide free advice to families who are having difficulties.

"We hear stories about people charging hundreds of dollars to fill out the FAFSA or do scholarship searches for students and their families," she said. "Families would be further ahead to invest time doing the FAFSA and searching for a college that matches their student's interests and aptitudes. Many colleges offer other kinds of grants and scholarships, and an intermediary is not necessary to access these funds."

In addition, she reminds students that they must fill out the FAFSA each year they want to obtain federal financial aid — as soon after Jan. 1 the better.

“Next year, start thinking about getting the FAFSA finished early,” Chapman said. “And remember that SAF sponsors Montana College Goal Sunday the second Sunday in February at sites across the state so students can get free, one-on-one help completing the FAFSA from financial professionals.”

For more information about completing the FAFSA or obtaining scholarship information, visit www.safmt.org or call (800) 504-7324.

Student Assistance Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit Montana corporation that provides students with knowledge and tools to finance and pursue their postsecondary education. Funds generated by SAF are returned to Montanans in the form of education grants and public benefit programs - to date more than \$7.1 million. For more information, visit www.safmt.org.