

Secretary Responds With Action Plan for More Accessible, Affordable, Accountable System

## Report Finds U.S. Higher Education in Need of Change

To help keep America competitive and provide students with more affordable access to college, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings announced on Sept. 26 her plans to strengthen the U.S. higher education system, based on the recommendations in the final report of her Commission on the Future of Higher Education.

"We know higher education is the key to our children's future and the American dream, yet it is becoming more unaffordable and less attainable," said Secretary Spellings. "To remain competitive in the 21st-century global economy, we must act now ... and work together to find the right solutions."

Secretary Spellings created the 19-member commission in September 2005 to examine America's postsecondary education system and develop recommendations that would make it more



accessible, affordable and accountable. Following a yearlong examination, which involved a series of public meetings held across the country, the commission's report revealed:

> While about 34 percent of white adults have obtained bachelor's degrees by ages 25–29, the same is true for just 17 percent of black adults and 11 percent of Hispanic adults in the same age cohort.

> From 1995 to 2005, average tuition and fees at public four-year colleges and universities rose 51 percent after adjusting for inflation; for private institutions, the increase was 36 percent.

> The percentage of college graduates deemed proficient in prose literacy (the ability to understand narrative texts such as newspaper articles) declined from 40 to 31 percent between 1992 and 2003.

> The U.S. position among major industrialized

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### Meeting a Critical Need

## Foreign Languages, Academic Rigor Help Prepare Virginia Students for Global Marketplace

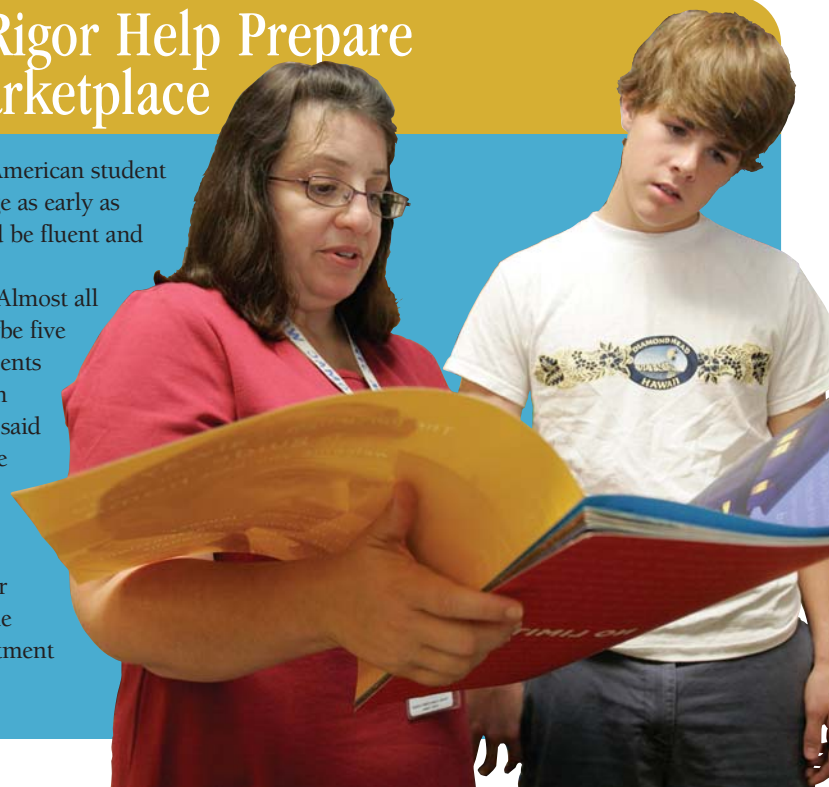
"We're pushing ... our kids to take the biggest challenges they can."

In Dan Fitzgerald's ideal world, every American student would begin learning a foreign language as early as kindergarten and by high school would be fluent and primed to learn another one.

"Look at our students from Ghana. Almost all of them speak English and two ... maybe five other languages. We have Bosnian students who already speak German and English and are interested in learning French," said Fitzgerald, chair of the foreign language department at West Potomac High School in Alexandria, Va.

An idea not far-fetched, Fitzgerald's utopia is starting to become a reality for many schools across the nation with the support of a grant from the U.S. Department

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countries has fallen to 12th place with regard to higher education attainment.

In response, Secretary Spellings' plan calls for increasing rigor in high schools to better prepare students for college; increasing need-based financial aid; and providing matching funds to colleges, universities and states that

collect and publicly report student learning outcomes. (For strategies on accomplishing these plans, see actions listed in excerpted speech below.)

Additionally, this spring, the secretary will convene a summit with representatives from the higher education and business communi-

ties as well as groups of students, parents and policymakers to address these issues and build partnerships that would help more Americans achieve a college education.

For a full copy of the report, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, visit <http://www.ed.gov>.

## Spellings Introduces Higher Education Plan

**O**n Sept. 26, Secretary Spellings introduced her action plan for higher education at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. An excerpt from her speech follows.

... A lot of people will tell you things are going just fine. But when 90-percent of the fastest-growing jobs require postsecondary education, are we satisfied with 'just fine'? ...

Is it 'fine' that college tuition has outpaced inflation, family income, even doubling the cost of health care? Is it 'fine' that only half of our students graduate on time? Is it 'fine' that students often graduate so saddled with debt that they can't buy a home or start a family? ...

### SAFETY

Following several recent incidents of violence in schools, Secretary Spellings and U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales convened a conference on school safety at the request of President Bush, on Oct. 10, near Washington, D.C.

They were joined by experts in the fields of threat assessment, law, crisis counseling and intervention as well as elected officials, teachers, school administrators, students and parents for a discussion on how to prevent future acts of violence in schools. For a transcript and online video of the conference, visit <http://www.whitehouse.gov> and click on "Education."

I'm not the first to grapple with these issues. States, local leaders, the business community and many in higher education are already hard-at-work tackling challenges from affordability to measuring student learning. ...

First: How do we make college more accessible? ...

A million kids drop out [of high school] every single year. And those who do graduate often aren't prepared for college. As a result, colleges, students and taxpayers spend over a billion dollars a year on remedial classes after graduation. Ultimately, we pay the bill twice, because students don't get what they need in high school. ...

**... Action One** under my plan is to build on [President Bush's plan for increasing academic rigor in high schools] by expanding the effective principles of *No Child Left Behind* and holding high schools accountable for results. And we will continue efforts to align high school standards with college work by increasing access to college-prep classes such as Advanced Placement.

Next, how do we make college more affordable? ...

... At the federal level, [the financial aid system is] a maze of 60 Web sites, dozens of toll-free numbers, and 17 different programs ... the main federal student aid form is longer and more complicated than the federal tax form! ...

**... Action Two** under my plan is for my Department to streamline the process, cut the application time in half, and notify students of their aid eligibility earlier than spring of their senior year to help families plan. ...

... Money's important. But we're going to keep chasing our tail on price until we realize that a good deal of the solution comes down to information. Like any other investment or enterprise, meaningful data is critical to better manage the system. ...

Which brings me to my final point: How are we going to make college more accountable for results? ...

We live in the 'Information Age.' If you want to buy a new car, you go online and compare a full range of models, makes and pricing options.

... The same transparency and ease should be the case when students and families shop for colleges, especially when one year of college can cost a lot more than a car!

**... Action Three** under my plan will work

to pull together privacy-protected student-level data similar to data already collected for K-12 students to create a higher education information system. ...

Information will not only help with decision-making, it will also hold schools accountable for quality. **... Action Four** under my plan will provide matching funds to colleges, universities and states that collect and publicly report student learning outcomes.

Right now, accreditation is the system we use to put a stamp of approval on higher education quality. It's largely focused on inputs, more on how many books are in a college library, than whether students can actually understand them. ...

**... Action Five** under my plan will convene members of the accrediting community this November to move toward measures that place more emphasis on learning. ...

This is the beginning of a process of long overdue reform. And let me be clear: at the end of it we neither envision, nor want, a national system of higher education. On the contrary, one of the greatest assets of our system is its diversity—something we must protect and preserve.

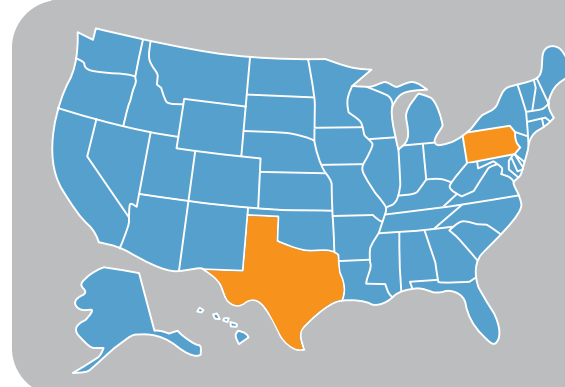
Our aim is simply to make sure the countless opportunities a college education provides is a reality for every American who chooses to pursue it. ...

For the full speech, visit <http://www.ed.gov> and click on "Speeches" for the Sept. 26, 2006, remarks.



Photo by Paul Wood

## AROUND THE COUNTRY



**PENNSYLVANIA**—The first Microsoft School of the Future, born out of a partnership between the School District of Philadelphia and Microsoft Corporation, opened its doors this fall. A high-tech building erected in the working class neighborhood of West Philadelphia, the public high school



of Education. In September, through its Foreign Language Assistance Program, the Department began awarding to states and school districts nationwide the first of 131 grants for fiscal year 2006 totaling more than \$22 million. The funds are for teaching Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Korean, Russian and other languages Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings considers “essential not only for trade in the global economy, but also to our national security.”

The program is part of President George W. Bush’s National Security Language Initiative, for which the departments of Education, State and Defense along with the Office of the Director of National Intelligence have joined forces to increase the number of Americans learning critical foreign languages through new and expanded programs from kindergarten through college and into the workforce. The shortage of capacity in these critical languages is so severe, for instance, that less than half of the 1 percent of

U.S. students taking a foreign language in grades K–12 study Chinese, although it is the most widely spoken language in the world.

To boost that rate, a \$188,511 grant was awarded to Fairfax County Public Schools—of which West Potomac will be one of seven to benefit initially from the federal funds—to help more than 1,500 students learn Chinese and Arabic. Bolstered by partnerships with academia and the state, the grant will help to improve instruction in the primary grades and help secondary schools lacking these languages offer virtual courses.

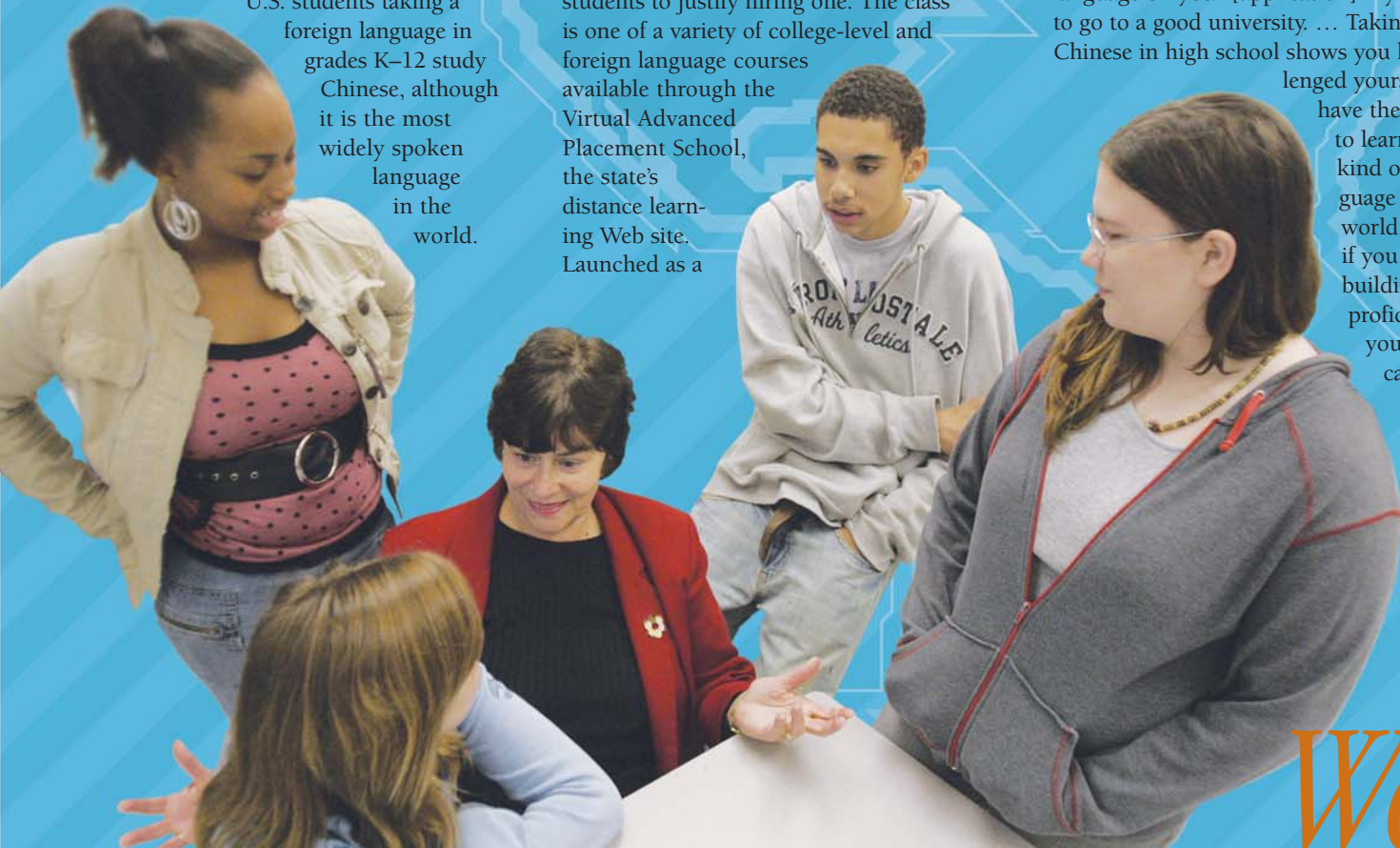
Charged with a vital role in this effort is West Potomac’s Chinese language teacher, Yunian Zhang. A native of Shanghai, China, who moved to the United States in 1990 following a career as a theater professor, Zhang has been teaching Chinese at the beginning to intermediate levels for the past eight years. This fall, in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Education, he began leading a virtual Chinese class for schools not only in the district but across the state, particularly for those that have been unable to find a qualified teacher or have too few students to justify hiring one. The class is one of a variety of college-level and foreign language courses available through the Virtual Advanced Placement School, the state’s distance learning Web site. Launched as a



level-one course—more advanced classes will be added later—it covers a total of 165 lessons enhanced through PowerPoint slides and five-minute training videos that Zhang prepares.

For the first year, enrollment in the pilot program has been limited to 28 students statewide. Zhang believes interest will grow as students increasingly realize both the prestigious and practical benefits of learning Chinese: “Eventually you want to have that language on your [application] if you want to go to a good university. ... Taking Chinese in high school shows you have challenged yourself and

have the potential to learn any kind of language in the world. And if you are building some proficiency, you really can make a difference in your



West

features digital lockers, an interactive learning center where some library holdings are electronic, and specially designed software for students’ laptops that monitors how quickly they are learning. About 170 students, mostly African-American and from low-income families, were chosen by lottery to make up the freshman class; enrollment is expected to grow to 750 by 2010.

**TEXAS**—The Brownsville Independent School District has experienced a sudden surge of interest in dual enrollment, which gives students both high school and college credit for completing college-level work. The increase in participation, which jumped from 2,000 students in 2005 to 3,587 this year, is partly credited to a fee reduction for nonresi-

dents of the state. Due to a policy change at the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College, the fee for students regardless of their resident status is just \$5, which the district pays. Previously, the charge for students living outside of Texas was more than \$1,400 per course.



career because there'll be more choices for you—and probably more pay.”

The Chinese class at West Potomac, which in 1996 was one of the first in the county, is part of an academically rigorous curriculum designed to graduate students ready to compete in the global marketplace. The

school's robust foreign language program, which also offers Spanish, French, German and Latin, enrolls more than half of the student population and has created opportunities for trips abroad, including a visit to China that Zhang sponsors during spring break.

Located in a suburb of Washington, D.C., between George Washington's Mount Vernon mansion and downtown Alexandria, West Potomac is one of the most diverse schools in northern Virginia. It's a bird's-eye view of American society: culturally, students come from 67 countries and speak 41 different languages; economically, local residences range from multi-million dollar homes to housing projects; and academically, English language learners and students with disabilities account for one in three students.

And, in the midst of this broad diversity, all 2,000 students are held to high standards. “We're pushing really hard to get our kids to take the biggest challenges they can,” said Principal Rima Vesilind.

That means encouraging more students to take rigorous course work that would prepare them to succeed in college. This year, an additional 69 juniors and seniors enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, bringing the total enrollment to 566 students. The school's AP network offers an extensive selection of college-level classes in biology, calculus, computer science, foreign languages, physics, psychology, statistics and

**From left to right:** Principal Rima Vesilind (center) with students Mary Boxley, Victoria Barnett, Shelton Coates and Rebecca Young; Chinese language teacher Yunian Zhang during a videotaping session for his distance learning class; and Foreign Language Department Chair Dan Fitzgerald. On the cover, College and Career Center Specialist Barbara Conner with Alex Keckeisen. Photos by Maisie Crow.

world history, among others.

In addition, as part of the college preparation plan, last spring West Potomac kicked off an SAT-prep program that faculty members have credited partly with a 56-point gain on last year's test score average of 1540 (on a 2400-point scale), the largest jump in the district's recorded history. Provided at no cost to students, the 15-week program required participants to attend Saturday morning sessions and complete daily online drills that involve grammar checks, math probes and other activities that “really strengthen a kid's academic prowess,” said Barbara Conner, who helped to initiate the program.

Conner is a specialist in the school's College and Career Center, which helps students identify potential careers, write resumes, find internships and navigate the college application process. To help introduce upper-classmen to the college experience, she arranges one-on-one sessions at the school with college representatives from all over the country to discuss, for example, life as a freshman, unique trends in majors, scholarship opportunities and new developments on campuses. This year, at least 80 deans of admissions or their staff members are expected to visit. Such efforts help explain the college matriculation rate at

West Potomac: 90 percent of the Class of 2006 went on to pursue higher education.

The school is also home to one of the district's five professional technical centers, which offers advanced career-oriented electives in 12 subject areas, including Chinese, criminal justice, early childhood education, medical health technologies and television production. As the newest facility, the West Potomac Academy has instructional labs with technologies used by professionals in the field; for instance, aspiring dentists can perform X-rays and construct mouth guards.

The increasing demand to graduate students who are technologically savvy,



foreign language proficient, and academically advanced is an indicator of the changing times, perceives Conner: “Gone is the sleepy little world of the red schoolhouse with the bell. We are now preparing students to be successful in a global world.”

—BY NICOLE ASHBY

# Potomac High School



- > **Grade Span:** 9–12
- > **Locale:** Suburb
- > **Total Students:** 2,000
- > **Race/Ethnicity Enrollment:** 46% white, 25% black, 18% Hispanic, 8% Asian, 2% multiracial, 1% American Indian
- > **Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Eligible:** 34%
- > **English Language Learners:** 17%
- > **Special Education Students:** 13%
- > **Percentage Proficient:** In English, 88%; in math, 79% (based on 9th- through 12th-graders assessed on the 2006 state exam).
- > **Interesting Fact:** The Chinese language teacher at West Potomac leads a foreign language course for students across the state through a distance learning program.



**November 12–18**

**Geography Awareness Week**, initiated in 1987 by the National Geographic Society. This year, the observance has been launched as a multi-year campaign to highlight the diversity of peoples, places and natural wonders around the globe, starting with Africa. For events and K–12 resources, visit <http://www.mywonderfulworld.org>.

**November 16**

**White House Faith-Based and Community Initiatives Conference**, Charlotte, N.C., sponsored by a consortium of federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Education. Part of a series of regional conferences being held around the country, this meeting for grassroots leaders will provide information about federal grant opportunities. To register, visit <http://www.fbc.gov> or call (202) 456-6718.

**December 5**

**International Volunteer Day**, established in 1985 by the United Nations General Assembly. The day provides an opportunity for individuals and organizations to spotlight their contributions toward the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals: to combat poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation and discrimination against women. For promotional materials and event ideas, visit <http://www.worldvolunteerweb.org>.

# Q & A GLOSSARY

*What academically rigorous courses are available for high school students?*

**R**esearch has shown that students who take academically rigorous courses in high school are more likely to graduate from college in five years or fewer.

Most widely known among them is the Advanced Placement program, a set of 37 college-level courses that allows high school students to earn credit or advanced standing at most of the nation's colleges and universities on the basis of their AP exam grades. Many of these institutions grant up to a full year of college credit (sophomore standing) to students who earn a sufficient number of qualifying AP grades. For more information, visit <http://www.collegeboard.com>, or call 1-888-225-5427.

Becoming more widespread, the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme is a two-year, college-prep curriculum that leads to an advanced high school diploma and the potential for college credit based on final exam scores. Taught in English, French,

and/or Spanish in 124 countries worldwide, the program covers six interdisciplinary subject groups in the areas of literature, foreign language, social science, experimental science, mathematics and the arts, and has three core requirements. For more information, visit <http://www.ibo.org>.

Another option for academic rigor, the dual enrollment program allows students to enroll in courses that count for both high school and college credit. Different from AP and IB programs, dual enrollment programs are shaped by state policies and thus differ considerably from state to state. Also, unlike other credit-based programs, they do not require students to pass end-of-course exams to earn credit, but they may require students to gain admission to the postsecondary institution in order to participate. For more information, contact your state department of education by visiting <http://www.ed.gov> and click on "About ED" and then "Contacts" for a state-by-state listing.

**academically rigorous course:** a challenging program of study that provides high school students with the knowledge and skills necessary for college readiness.

## News Show Discusses Foreign Language Study

**T**he importance of critical languages to U.S. diplomacy, security and the economy, and the ways in which the U.S. Department of Education and other agencies are working to dramatically increase student learning of these languages through the National Security Language Initiative, will be the focus of the November edition of *Education News Parents Can Use*, the Department's monthly television program.

The National Security Language Initiative is designed to increase the number of Americans learning critical-need foreign languages—such as Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Hindi, Korean and Russian—through new and expanded programs from kindergarten through college and into the workforce. November's show will explore the efforts under way in America's schools and communities to ensure that students graduate with the ability to

communicate in these critical languages. Panelists and guests will discuss how the initiative will provide students with the language skills necessary to engage foreign governments and peoples, especially in critical regions; to encourage reform and promote understanding; to convey respect for other cultures; and to

help others learn more about America and its citizens.

Each month, *Education News Parents Can Use* showcases: schools and school districts from across the country; conversations with school officials, parents and education experts; and advice and free resources for parents and educators.

To learn about viewing options, including webcasts, visit <http://www.ed.gov> and click on "Parents," then "News Parents Can Use," or call toll-free 1-800-USA-LEARN.

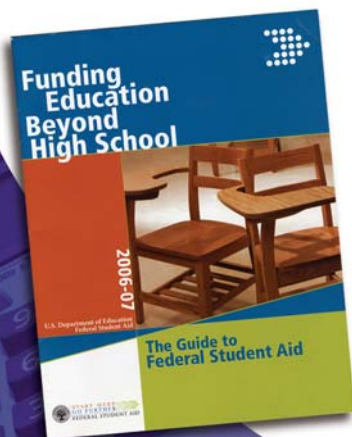


## Funding Education Beyond High School

The U.S. Department of Education recently released a comprehensive guide to federal student aid for students and their families looking to fund a college education.

Published by the Department's Office of Federal Student Aid, *Funding Education Beyond High School* provides an overview of the process for applying for federal student aid as well as detailed steps for taking action during each phase. With illustrative charts, the 41-page guide addresses such topics as:

- > Basic eligibility requirements



- > Three types of federal student aid—grants, work-study and loans—and other student aid resources
- > Completing the *Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)* for new and renewal applicants
- > Grace period and payment schedule for repaying loans
- > Options for postponement: deferment and forbearance
- > Loan consolidation and cancellation

The guide concludes with a glossary clarifying financial aid terminology and a complete list of state higher education agencies.

Last year, federal student aid helped approximately 10 million students meet the cost of higher education. For a copy of the 2006–07 guide, which is recommended for current college students, visit <http://www.edpubs.org> or call 1-877-4ED-PUBS, with identification number EN0648P, while supplies last. (The 2007–08 version, suggested for high school students, will be available in December.) For the online version or to reach the Federal Student Aid Information Center, visit <http://www.studentaid.ed.gov> or call 1-800-4-FED-AID.



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