Strategies & Instructions

*Activity Guide #1 – **Analyzing Changes to FAFSA Fields** – April 2002*

Dear Partners,

The purpose of this document – and the follow-up activity guides we are preparing – is to give you strategies and instructions for making the most of the Quality Analysis Verification Tool. You can use the information to:

➢ **Identify the most problematic ISIR data elements that your verification system needs to address**

➢ **Help determine which information is most important to document for applicants who are selected for institutional verification**

➢ **Identify areas that may benefit from improved education efforts**

To achieve these and other analytic goals, each activity guide will present detailed instructions on which reports to run and what to look for while carrying out your analyses. The instructions assume that:

➢ **"Initial" and "paid on" data have been imported into the software and the validation process has been completed (for help on importing data see http://qaprogram.air.org/ download/toolforschool-ISIR%20Guidance.doc and the desk reference at http://sfadownload.ed.gov/softqat0203.htm).**

➢ **Institutional verification edit profiles have been established and initial verification flag has been set (for step-by-step instructions on establishing verification flags refer to http:// qaprogram.air.org/download/ReportingVerification.doc).**

The steps spelled out here in Activity Guide #1 will let you identify which FAFSA fields are most likely to change after an initial application. The analysis also will help you assess the impact that changes to a given field have on EFC or Pell Grant eligibility. (Activity Guide #2 is designed to center on **identifying the applicants most likely to experience change to their FAFSA information that alters aid awards**, while Activity Guide #3 deals with **evaluating your current institutional verification profiles**). But first, identifying problematic FAFSA fields is an excellent place to begin your analysis of 2002-03 data.

About this document …
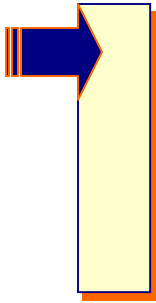
Step 1
Create Queries that Separate Verified and Non-Verified ISIRs

There are two types of changes to FAFSA information: changes stemming from verification and changes applicants make on their own. We recommend that you analyze these separately. Your efforts to fine tune institutional verification practices will benefit from examining changes that result from verification *apart from* changes that applicants make on their own. While verified applicants may also make changes on their own, the key analytic difference between the two is the ability to assume that the "paid on" information is correct that is unique to verified applications. This assumption is, of course, limited to the FAFSA data elements that are actually confirmed during your institution's verification process.

Changes to FAFSA information that students make on their own may or may not be accurate. Analyzing these "spontaneous corrections" separately is, however, also a worthwhile activity. Analyzing changes among the non-verified population could provide insight into changes your verification profiles may be missing and also identify areas that a large portion of the applicant population "corrects" by themselves.

Therefore, the first choice you must make when analyzing FAFSA change is deciding which type of FAFSA change to focus on. You need to create a query associated with the type of change you want to analyze. Once your verification flags have been set (see ReportingVerification.doc), you can use the initial school verification flag to select only verified (or not verified) students. We recommend that most schools focus their analysis on the verified population for the simple reason that "paid on" values are correct for this sub-population.

1. Within the software select *Tools/Query*
2. Press the *Add* button
3. Enter an appropriate title (i.e., "verified students"), in the *Title* box
4. In the *Field* box select *School Verification Flag*
5. In the *operator* box select the equals sign (=)
6. In the *value* box enter the letter "*Y*"
7. Press the *Append* button, bringing the logical condition into the large *Criteria* box
8. Press the *Save* button.

If you wish you may also create a query for the non-verified population, substitute "Not Verified" in step 3's title and indicate "N" in step 6 of the directions above. For more help with the Query function select *Help / How do I…? / Create a Query* within the QA Tool software or review (http://qaprogram.air.org/download/toolforschool-Queries.doc).

Step 2
Plan Analysis

After establishing queries that can restrict analysis to verified (or non-verified) applicants, you have other decisions to make before proceeding with your analysis:

➢ **Are you interested in examining the relationship between FAFSA changes and EFC or Pell Grant eligibility?**

The *Field Change Report with Corrected Field Counts* displays information about changes to FAFSA fields and the consequences in terms of changes to EFC. The *Corrected Records in Initial EFC Range Report* examines changes to FAFSA data elements and accompanying changes in Pell Grant eligibility. Choose the report that meets your institution's needs. You may want to conduct parallel analysis using both types of reports.

➢ **Which FAFSA items do you want to examine?**

The QA Tool software has three *selected field codes* built in to the software: "*All Fields*," "*Verification Worksheet-Dependent*," and "*Verification Worksheet-Independent*." The verification worksheets include only the FAFSA fields that directly factor into EFC calculations for the respective dependency status applicants and they serve as excellent places to begin your analysis. If you

would like to further tailor the fields you examine in your analysis create new selected fields by pressing *Tools / Custom Formats / Selected Fields* within the QA Tool. For help with this processes select *Help / How do I…? / Create a Selected Fields Format*.

➢ **Do you want to look at dependent and independent students separately?**

Both the *Field Change Report with Corrected Records Counts* and the *Corrected Records in Initial EFC Range Report* provide an option of looking at results for only dependent or independent students, this is an option in addition to the *Selection Criteria / Query* functionality available in all reports. Obviously, FAFSA items that measure parent attributes are not applicable to independent student need calculations. Therefore, analysis of parent reports should be restricted to dependent students. You may also want to examine student items separately by dependency status if your institutional verification practices treat student reported information differently for dependent and independent applicants.
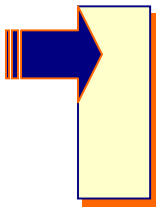
It is important that you take the time to think through your answers to the above three questions before you begin generating reports. Without a little forethought, it is easy to get lost in a sea of numbers that aren't focused on the issues of importance to your school.

➢ Are you most concerned with changes to Pell Grants? If so, the *Corrected Records in Initial EFC Range Report* may be the place for you to start.

➢ Are you equally concerned in accurately awarding subsidized loans, institutional resources, and state need-based grants? Then you may be better off focusing on the *Field Change Report with Corrected Records Counts*.

➢ What FAFSA information does your institution confirm during verification? This is the only information that you can assume is correct for the paid on transaction so you may want to limit the *Selected Fields* you analyze to these data elements.

➢ How does your school treat student information differently during your verification process based on the dependency status

of the applicant? If you verify information differently by dependency status you should consider analyzing changes to FAFSA information separately by dependency status.
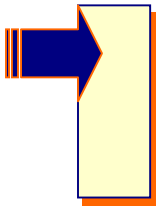
The answers to the above questions will help you set up an analysis plan that meets your institution's situation and needs. See Step 3 if you decide you want to examine the impact of FAFSA changes on EFC. See Step 4 if you are interested in how changes to the ISIR affect Pell eligibility.

Step 3
Which FAFSA Field Changes Affect EFC the Most?

If you are interested in how EFC is affected by changes to the various FAFSA fields, then run the *Field Change Report with Corrected Field Counts*. This report will help you to answer the following questions:

➢ Which FAFSA field(s) had the greatest degree of change, after initial application?

➢ Which field(s) change was associated with EFC increase?

➢ Which field(s) change was associated with EFC decrease?

To run this report, follow the directions below:

1. Select *File / Print* or press the *Printer Icon* on the toolbar

2. In the *Print Dialog* window choose "*Field Change Report with Corrected Field Counts*" in the Report box .

3. Make sure "*Multiple*" is selected to the right of the report title

4. Select *Report File Destination* (printer, file, or screen). The first time you run a report you will probably want to send the report to the screen for review. After ensuring that you are getting the output you want, choose printer or file to create a permanent copy.

5. In the *Options* box, choose the *Selected Field Code* associated with the FAFSA data elements you wish to examine. We recommend concentrating on the dependent and independent

verification worksheets (*VERDEP* and *VERIND*) that are predefined in the software.

6. In the *Dependency Status* box select *dependent* or independent depending on which verification worksheet you are looking at. Please note that the default, "*D or I,"* will select cases of either dependency status.

7. The final choice in the *Options* box is *Sort Order*. This option allows you to sort the output in a variety of ways. Please note that only the organization, and not the content, of the report is affected by the *Sort Order* option. We recommend sorting your output so the most problematic FAFSA elements are list at the top of the report. Therefore, use the *Record Corrected – Descending, EFC Increase – Descending, or EFC Decrease – Descending* to sort the output depending on whether you are most interested in the total degree of change to FAFSA fields, potential over-awards of aid, or potential under-awards of aid.

8. In order to limit the analysis to only one kind of FAFSA change ("verified" or "spontaneous") press the *Selection Criteria* button on the bottom left corner of the *Print* window.

9. Once in the *Selection Criteria* window, select the (…) button next to *Query Title* box. This opens the *Query Grid*. We recommend that you begin your analysis by using the "Verified Students" query we set up in Step 1 of this document to select only verified students. Select *OK* in the *Query Grid* window and select *OK* in the *Selection Criteria* window to limit analysis to only those students that have been verified.

10.   Press *OK* in the *Print* window to generate the report.
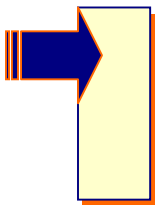
We recommend that you complete steps 1-10 separately for dependent and independent applicants, making the appropriate dependency status choices in steps 5 and 6. This will give you two reports to examine, one related to dependent students and the other for independent students.

What should you look for? Look for FAFSA fields associated with:

➢ The greatest degree of change

➢ The greatest extent of EFC increase

➢ The greatest extent of EFC decrease

You can make use of the *Sort Option* in the *Field Change with Corrected Field Counts* report to help identify problematic FAFSA fields.

After identifying your most problematic FAFSA fields, relate your finding to your verification practices. That is, ask yourself and team members:

➢ How does our school currently address the problematic FAFSA data elements identified in this analysis?

➢ Is our school potentially missing applicants that are making mistakes similar to the ones identified in this analysis? Would these unverified mistakes have the same impact upon EFC if they were corrected by adding the missed applicants to our verification process?

➢ Is there reason to suspect systematic differences between the applicants with and without changes to the problematic FAFSA elements? (See **Activity Guide #2** for instructions on to use the *Field Range Report* to confirm or deny these suspicions)

➢ Are there changes my school could make in education efforts that would help reduce these reporting mistakes?
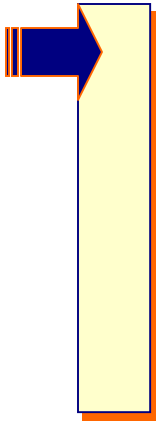
Identifying problematic FAFSA elements provides useful benchmarks to measure your current verification and educational efforts against.

Step 4
Which FAFSA Field Changes Affect Pell Grant Eligibility the Most?

If you are interested in how Pell Grant eligibility is affected by changes to the various FAFSA fields, then use the "*Corrected Records within an Initial EFC Range*" report. This report will help you to answer the following questions:

➤ Which FAFSA field had the greatest degree of change, within a specified EFC range?
➤ Which field change is associated with reductions to Pell Awards (EFC increase), within a specified EFC range?
➤ Which field change is associated with increases to Pell Awards (EFC decrease), within a specified EFC range?

It is critical that you remember that in the *Corrected Records within Initial EFC Range* report, "EFC Increase" and "EFC Decrease" take on a special meaning. They refer to changes "out of" or "into" the selected initial EFC range. Therefore, in order to get the complete picture on how changes to FAFSA data influence Pell eligibility we recommend that you use tandem versions of this report, choosing *initial Pell eligible* as your initial EFC range in the first and *initial Pell ineligible* as your initial EFC range in the second. To run these two reports, follow the directions below (cycling through twice, changing the EFC range selection in step 5):

1. Select *File / Print* or press the *Printer Icon* on the toolbar

2. In the *Print Dialog* window choose "*Corrected Records within an Initial EFC Range*" in the Report box.

3. Make sure "*Multiple*" is selected to the right of the report title

4. Select *Report File Destination* (printer, file, or screen). The first time you run a report you will probably want to send the report to the screen for review. After ensuring that you are getting the output you want, choose printer or file to create a permanent copy.

5. In the *Options* box, choose the initial EFC range. The first time through choose *EFC42_ "All Initial Pell Eligible."* This report presents the changes for applicants you were eligible

to receive a Pell Grant based on their initial application. Complete steps 6 through 11 to analyze FAFSA changes for this group. After printing this version of the report, conduct a second analysis selecting *EFC40_ "All Initial Pell Ineligible"* as your initial EFC range. These two reports will, together, reflect the entire impact of FAFSA changes on Pell eligibility.

6. In the *Options* box, choose the *Selected Field Code* associated with the FAFSA data elements you wish to examine. We recommend concentrating on the dependent and independent verification worksheets (*VERDEP* and *VERIND*) that are predefined in the software.

7. In the *Dependency Status* box select *dependent* or independent depending on which verification worksheet you are looking at. Please note that the default, "*D or I*" will select cases of either dependency status*.*

8. The final choice in the *Options* box is *Sort Order*. This option allows you to sort the output in a variety of ways. Please note that only the organization, and not the content, of the report is affected by the *Sort Order* option. We recommend sorting your output so the most problematic FAFSA elements are list at the top of the report. Therefore, use the *EFC Increase – Descending* in the initially Pell eligible version of the report and *EFC Decrease – Descending* to sort the output in the initially Pell ineligible version of the report. This will highlight the FAFSA fields associated with potential over and under-awards of Pell, respectively.

9. In order to limit the analysis to only one kind of FAFSA change ("verified" or "spontaneous") press the *Selection Criteria* button on the bottom left corner of the *Print* window.

10. Once in the *Selection Criteria* window, select the (…) button next to *Query Title* box. This opens the *Query Grid*. We recommend that you begin your analysis by using the "Verified Students" query we set up in Step 1 of this document to select only verified students. Select *OK* in the *Query Grid* window and select *OK* in the *Selection Criteria* window to limit analysis to only those students that have been verified.

11. Press *OK* in the *Print* window to generate the report.

We recommend that you complete the two-stage (initial eligible and initial ineligible) analysis described in steps 1-11 separately for dependent and independent applicants, making the appropriate dependency status choices in steps 6 and 7. This will give you a total of four reports to examine, two for dependent students and two others for independent students.

What should you look for? Look for FAFSA fields associated with:

➢ The largest EFC *increases* in the initial Pell eligible version of the report: These are the students *losing* Pell eligibility.

➢ The largest EFC *decreases* in the initial Pell ineligible version of the report: These are the students *gaining* Pell eligibility.

You can make use of the *Sort Option* in the *Field Change with Corrected Field Counts* report to help identifying problematic FAFSA fields.
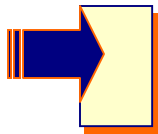
After identifying your most problematic FAFSA fields, relate your finding to your verification practices. That is, ask yourself and team members:

➢ How does our school currently address the problematic FAFSA data elements identified in this analysis?

➢ Is our school potentially missing applicants that are making mistakes similar to the ones identified in this analysis and would these unverified mistakes have the same impact upon EFC if they were corrected?

➢ Is there reason to suspect systematic differences between the applicants with and without changes to the problematic FAFSA elements? (See **Activity Guide #2** for instructions on how to confirm or deny these suspicions using the *Pell Corrected Records Report*.)

➢ Are there changes my school could make in education efforts that would help reduce these reporting mistakes?

Identifying problematic FAFSA elements provides useful benchmarks to measure your current verification and educational efforts against.