



Special and Unusual Circumstances

The Higher Education Act of 1992 allows financial aid administrators to make professional judgment (PJ) decisions for special or unusual family or student circumstances to adjust elements on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). These circumstances must be documented. The financial services department must analyze special and/or unusual circumstance(s) requiring professional judgment decisions on a case-by-case basis, and only the financial services department has the authority to adjust a student's eligibility using professional judgment.

The reason for the adjustment must relate to that student's special and/or unusual circumstance(s) and must be documented in the student's file. All requested documentation must be submitted to the financial services department to evaluate the PJ request.

To account for special or unusual circumstance(s) of a student, a school may choose to exercise professional judgment (PJ) to adjust a student's cost of attendance (COA), modify the data used to calculate the student aid index (SAI), perform a dependency override, or determine a student to be an unaccompanied homeless youth. The school's decision regarding adjustments is final and cannot be appealed to the Department of Education.

Professional Judgment Categories

- **SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES** refer to the financial situations (loss of a job, etc.) that justify an aid administrator adjusting data elements in the COA or in the SAI calculation.
- **UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCES** refer to the conditions that justify an aid administrator making an adjustment to a student's dependency status based on a unique situation (e.g., human trafficking, refugee or asylee status, parental abuse or abandonment, incarceration), more commonly referred to as a dependency override.

Special Circumstances

SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES THAT COULD WARRANT A PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT

The law gives some examples of special circumstances that may be considered (HEA Sec. 479A):

- Change in employment status, income, or assets
- Change in housing status (e.g., homelessness)
- Tuition expenses at an elementary or secondary school
- Additional family members enrolled in college
- Medical, dental, or nursing home expenses not covered by insurance
- Child or dependent care expenses
- Severe disability of the student or other member of the student's household
- Other changes or adjustments that impact the student's costs or ability to pay for college

This is not an exhaustive list. As part of the special circumstances process, the financial services department requires personal statements detailing the special circumstance(s) and supporting documentation for the special circumstance(s).

Unusual Circumstances

DEPENDENCY OVERRIDE — A dependency override occurs when a financial aid administrator exercises professional judgment and overrides the Department of Education’s criteria for dependent students. An override may only be granted on a case-by-case basis for students with unusual circumstances. These circumstances must show compelling reason for a student to be considered independent rather than dependent.

UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCES INCLUDE (*but are not limited to*):

- Documented parental abandonment or severe estrangement from parents
- Human trafficking, as described in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (22 U.S.C. 7101 et seq)
- Legally granted refugee or asylum status
- Parental drug use
- Parental mental incapacity
- Physical or emotional abuse
- Parental incarceration

As part of the dependency override process, the financial services department requires personal statements detailing the unusual circumstance, third-party statements, and other supporting documentation (if applicable).

Once a dependency override is approved, it will generally apply to subsequent years if the student’s unusual circumstance has not changed and there is no conflicting information about the student’s independence.

Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Determinations

A student who is an unaccompanied homeless youth or is self-supporting and at risk of being homeless may qualify for a homeless youth determination.

The Higher Education Act (HEA) uses the McKinney-Vento Act’s definition of “homeless,” which includes youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and the McKinney-Vento Act’s definition of “unaccompanied,” which includes youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. This definition is broader than shelters or living “on the street.” It includes but is not limited to:

- Youth temporarily staying with others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason and had nowhere else to go
- Youth living in emergency or transitional shelters, for example, trailers provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency after disasters
- Youth living in motels, campgrounds, cars, parks, abandoned buildings, bus or train stations, substandard housing, or any public or private place not designed for humans to live in

Documentation from the following entities can be provided by the student to support the student’s independence due to homelessness:

- A school district homeless liaison or their designee;
- The director of an emergency or transitional shelter, street outreach program, homeless youth drop-in center, or other program serving individuals who are experiencing homelessness or a designee of the director;
- The director of a Federal TRIO program or a Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program (GEAR UP) grant, or a designee of the director; or
- A financial aid administrator at another institution who documented the student’s circumstance in the same or a prior award year.

If documentation from the above sources is unavailable, the school's financial services department is authorized to request alternative documentation to make a case-by-case determination regarding the unique situation. This documentation may include, but is not limited to, a detailed written statement and documented interview.

Professional Judgment Request

If you feel you have special and/or unusual circumstances warranting a professional judgment, contact the financial services department to discuss your unique situation. You will need to complete the necessary forms and provide supporting documentation. Depending on your individual situation, additional documentation may be requested. Please be aware that a request for professional judgment does not guarantee approval or eligibility of additional aid.