

READING - Fixing The Freshman Year: Here's What College Sophomores Say

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The billing office is one of the friendliest places on campus, says Aja Beckham, a junior at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. What wasn't friendly: her bill, and the big number on it.

Ever since her freshman year, she says, her biggest struggle in college has been figuring out how to pay for it.

It's a problem that colleges might want to pay more attention to. At least that's what a lot of sophomores told us. [...] We asked some students who've just lived through it what they would fix.

While schools are focusing on policy changes, like more advising and a revamped curriculum, the biggest thing we heard? It's all about financial aid.

The students told us they need a lot more information than merely how to access funding. They want to know: How much should I borrow? What loans should I apply for? And wait, what do all those numbers mean again?

Surveys show that students don't know much at all about their financial aid packages. [...] Marquez Cartharn, a sophomore at Missouri Southern State University, wishes there were somebody on campus to walk you through the process. "I feel like if we had something that actually teaches you how to go through that and get through that thoroughly," he says. "That would be a lot easier."

Kyle Wickham, a sophomore at the University of Chicago, agrees: "You get this piece of paper with all these numbers, so how does this work?" His school has a student-run organization that tries to walk underclassmen through the financial aid process, and the group is encouraging the university to take over the program officially.

Students also need guidance on how much financial aid to accept, according to Garnell Purcell, a sophomore at Stevenson University in Maryland, just

north of Baltimore. If students aren't careful, he says, they accept loans for more than they need to cover tuition, which increases their debt.

[...] In addition to the billing office at her school, Aja Beckham spent a lot of time in the financial aid office during her freshman year. "I think that's why my grades were suffering during that time," she explains. She says school officials couldn't help her find other funding sources. "So I would just give up on when it came to doing homework. Because I don't know if I'm even going to be here, so why waste my time with homework and studying?"

Several students spoke about the problems they had connecting with students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. That made it harder to cultivate friendships — a crucial element in feeling at home on campus.

Cynthia Lockwood, a sophomore at Tuskegee University in Alabama, says she was able to bridge the gap between two friends who grew up in very different circumstances.

One of those friends grew up much like she did. "When we were younger, we went without food some nights," Lockwood explains, "whereas, my other friend, she never experienced any of that. But now we kind of share our stories and we can understand, 'Well this is where you came from and this is where I came from.' "

Another issue the sophomores raised? Connecting with professors. As a University of Oregon freshman from a low-income family, Caden Williams says it was harder for him to approach teachers who weren't empathetic.

Like Williams, many students said they wished there had been specific sensitivity training for faculty and professors on how to best work with students from low-income backgrounds.