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New Lela College Planning Center aims to help seniors apply for financial aid, ease transition to college

Effort aligns with Obama Administration's NewFAFSA Completion Initiative

BATON ROUGE - The Louisiana Education Loan Authority (Lela) is announcing the opening of a new College Planning Center to help Louisiana high school seniors, their parents and guidance counselors navigate what can be an intimidating process: planning for a student's next level of education and deciding the best way to pay for it.



With a centrally located office in Baton Rouge, Lela, the education division of the Louisiana Public Facilities Authority, is offering free, one-on-one counseling; computer and Internet access; a resource library and help completing forms that are essential when applying for college grants, loans, scholarships, and admissions. All services through the center are provided free of charge for Louisiana residents.

"For high school seniors and their parents, this is college decision time, and more importantly, it's time to decide how to pay for college. The first step is to apply for financial aid by completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid or FAFSA. For

many, completing this form is complex, especially for first generation students. That's where we hope the College Planning Center will help make the process easier. All they need to do is call to schedule an appointment for one-on-one assistance. They are also welcome to email or phone our center for help," said Tricia Dubroc, LPFA Vice President.

Currently, over 80 percent of undergraduates at U.S. four-year colleges and universities receive some sort of financial aid to help cover the cost of higher education. The FAFSA is the main form used to calculate eligibility for aid. Although the U.S. Department of Education has taken numerous steps to simplify the form, many students still benefit from in-person assistance while completing the application.

Dubroc explained the Center grew out of Lela's statewide outreach to high schools, whose students needed help completing the FAFSA, which is required for all federal grants, loans, work-study, as well as Louisiana's Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) Scholarships and several other state awards and institutional scholarships.

Last year alone, Lela representatives participated in 126 college preparation workshops, events and presentations throughout Louisiana; helped 727 students complete the FAFSA; and provided one-on-one counseling to more than 147 students.

Students and their parents can make an appointment to meet with a counselor by emailing info@lela.org or calling (800) 228-4755, toll free, (225-923-0020 in Baton Rouge). The Center, at 2237 South Acadian Thruway, Suite 603, in Baton Rouge, is open from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday.

"Deadlines are approaching fast, not only for students who expect to receive TOPS scholarships, but also for students who are hoping to obtain other forms of financial assistance in time for the fall semester. That's why we're urging students and parents to complete the FAFSA now. Once they have the necessary documents, it takes less than 30 minutes to complete, on average. With the simplified format, it takes less time than most people realize," said Lela Assistant Vice President Joni Leggio.

In an effort to increase college attendance rates, President Obama announced a new FAFSA Completion Initiative this month to help more high school seniors complete the FAFSA by, among other things, providing information about students' progress toward completing their applications.

According to the [U.S. DOE FAFSA Submissions by High School website](#),

approximately 27,644 applications were successfully completed in Louisiana in 2013. As of February 28, 2014, only 7,760 FAFSA applications had been submitted. "We would like to see this number increase substantially for 2014," Leggio said.

Lela maintains a statewide calendar of free workshops and events, free resources and valuable links online at www.GoFAAM.com. The nonprofit also provides frequent updates on its website at www.AskLela.org and through its [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) feeds.

Since 2004, Lela has sponsored a Cash for College Scholarship contest each spring and regularly offers college scholarships and drawings on its Facebook page and website. The current scholarship contest is underway, with entries due on March 31. In December, Lela awarded \$6,000 in college scholarships to high school seniors through its annual holiday art contest, in partnership with the George Rodrigue Foundation of the Arts. For more information, visit www.AskLela.org.

One-on-one with Lela's Joni Leggio:

Q: What are some of the most common questions you receive from students and parents?

A: Not surprisingly, the most common questions we receive involve the FAFSA. People want to know what documents are required, how long it will take to complete, what the deadlines are and how to find other information about their college plans.

Q: What documents are required for the FAFSA?

A: According to the Federal Student Aid website, to complete the FAFSA, students will need their:

- Social Security Number
- Alien Registration Number (if they are not a U.S. citizen)
- Most recent federal income tax return, as well as W-2s, and other records of money earned. (**Note:** It may be possible to transfer federal tax return information into the FAFSA using the IRS Data Retrieval Tool.)
- Bank statements and records of investments (if applicable)
- Records of untaxed income (if applicable)
- Federal Student Aid PIN to sign electronically. (If you do not already have one, visit www.pin.ed.gov to obtain one.)

If you are a dependent student, then you will also need most of the above information for your parent(s).

Q: What is the deadline to complete the 2014-15 FAFSA?

A: As early as possible after January 1, 2014, for the upcoming academic year for federal aid. In order to minimize any funding delays, most colleges and universities have a recommended priority deadline of March or April to be considered for state or college aid. Students are strongly encouraged to check with the prospective school(s) for specific dates. Make sure you know the deadline so your funding won't be delayed.

Q: Why did you decide to open the College Planning Center? What is your goal?

A: We have found that one-on-one assistance is crucial for many students. We deal with many first-generation students who often can't turn to their parents for help. Lots of these families do not have computer access, and even those who do, feel more comfortable sitting down with someone to guide them. Having a local Center gives families the opportunity to meet with someone in person in a comfortable, quiet and private setting.

Q: Do you have resources for community and technical colleges, as well as four-year universities?

A: A four-year college may not be the answer for all students. We have resources for community and technical colleges, as well as four-year universities. The FAFSA is required for federal funding for community and technical colleges, as well. We can help students and their parents with the paperwork.

Q: What are some online resources that you recommend to students, parents and guidance counselors?

A: First of all, there is a wide array of resources on our website: www.AskLela.org. Besides providing information about Lela scholarships and services, AskLela.org can serve as global site for most of your college planning needs, including the popular [Senior Planning Checklist](#). I would also direct them to:

- **Free Application for Federal Student Aid:** <https://fafsa.ed.gov> is the free government website where the FAFSA is filed electronically. It includes links to videos and other information about financial aid, as well as a link to www.studentaid.gov, which has financial aid information geared to students.
- **Financialaidtoolkit.ed.gov** - www.Financialaidtoolkit.ed.gov is aimed at guidance counselors, nonprofit mentors and other adults who work with students and parents. It provides tutorials about financial aid and about educating others on the topic.

- **Imfirst.org** - www.imfirst.org - An online social networking site for first-generation college students and their supporters. Funded in part by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Facebook, students share stories, discover colleges that are a good fit for first-generation students, find answers to questions about college, and receive guidance.
- **Louisianaconnect.org** - www.LouisianaConnect.org is Louisiana's student portal for college and career planning. It has interactive tools for parents and students: Plan to Geaux, Pay to Geaux and Geaux to Work.
- **Geauxtocollege.la.gov** - www.GeauxtoCollege.la.gov is a web portal connecting Louisiana students, young and old, with a college education and high-demand jobs. It targets middle and high schools students, parents and mentors and adults learners.
- **March2success.com** - www.March2success.com - Sponsored by the U.S. Army, this site provides content and lessons to improve scores on standardized tests (state exit exams, SAT and ACT).

Q: Guidance counselors are often on the front lines in answering student and parent questions about preparing for college. What resources can you offer them?

A: We realize that high school counselors' plates are full, and we are pleased to be able to lighten their load.

- We invite counselors to direct students to Lela for appointments for more detailed one-on-one assistance.
- We provide them with free materials, including our popular "[Junior/Senior Checklist for College Planning](#)" and our new "[College Planning Guide](#)." We also offer materials that summarize Lela's free services and scholarship opportunities. These can all be ordered free of charge in the "[Counselor's Corner](#)" section of the Lela website, www.AskLela.org.
- We also encourage counselors to contact us to assist in coordinating Financial Aid and FAFSA Completion workshops at their high schools.

About Louisiana Education Loan Authority (Lela)

The Louisiana Education Loan Authority (Lela), a division of the Louisiana Public Facilities Authority (LPFA), is Louisiana's non-profit resource for college planning. Lela's mission is to develop projects and programs to make higher education more accessible to the people of Louisiana. Lela has assisted more than 400,000 students since 1984. Find more information at <http://www.lela.org>.

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