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Yes, Virginia, Federal Student Aid can be exciting!

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When I attend financial aid conferences, I don't have very high expectations on the excitement scale. In fact, I mostly expect to feel somewhere in the range of mildly interested, utterly confused, or just plain bored by the session topics. So it was an unexpected and welcome change when I attended my first session at the 2013 Federal Student Aid (FSA) conference last December on "How to Leverage FSA Resources to Drive Awareness and Increase Engagement with Students."

The focus of the session was the U.S. Department of Education's new Financial Aid Toolkit, which launched last month – and I'm telling you, this IS exciting!

According to ED, the toolkit is designed "to support counselors, college access professionals, and individuals at community-based organizations helping students and families prepare financially for college or career school…"

The key part of the toolkit for financial aid professionals is the suite of outreach tools, including: social media, videos, infographics, public service announcements and publications. Most all of these tools are designed so you can literally pick what you want and plunk the content into your website, social media post or printed publication. In other words, there's LITTLE OR NO CONTENT DEVELOPMENT REQUIRED, which can be a huge time saver!

For example:

Web Banners: You can access a variety of FSA-branded web banners at StudentAid.gov/link2us (both English and Spanish versions), such as the one displayed on the left, which link to the FAFSA. Adding one of these banners to your financial aid web page can give your page a professional look and provide an instant link to the FAFSA for your students. (Recent studies on social media marketing suggest the importance of using less text and more images to reach your audience, as demonstrated by the increased popularity of sites like Instagram and Pinterest.)

Facebook: When you click "Like" on the FSA Facebook page, you'll get all the FSA content in your Facebook feed. If you want to be more selective, you can "Like" a specific post or "Share" the post, which will display as a post from you via FSA. Going back to this page on the toolkit, you can also access text and images for 10 different Facebook posts about FAFSA completion and simply copy the information into your own posts.

Twitter: There are a lot of options with Twitter, from following FSA's Twitter account, embedding their Twitter feed on your website, retweeting, copying content from FSA for your own tweets, and more. The content copy option includes 45 tweets developed around two separate campaigns: FAFSA completion and loan repayment – just copy and tweet! Find out more at this page on the toolkit.

YouTube: FSA's YouTube channel is organized according to playlists that contain short videos (generally one to three minutes) on topics ranging from types of aid, to applying for aid, to repaying loans. Check out this page on the toolkit to sign up for notifications about new videos, review current playlists, and learn how to download videos or embed them on your website.

Infographics: Want to spruce up your financial aid web page or publications with more visuals? As mentioned above, using more images and less text is a key strategy for communicating information to today's students. The Infographics page on the toolkit explains how to locate the Infographics available from FSA (and how to create your own at Visual.ly), share the images through social media, copy them into your publications, or embed them on your website.

Blog Posts: You can include a link to FSA blog posts on your website or social media, or you can "repurpose" the content for your audience and create your own post.

Public Service Announcements: The concept behind FSA's current

public service campaign, *Proud Sponsor of the American Mind*, is to illustrate what people can achieve with a college education. Along with print versions, PSAs are available for TV and radio in clips of up to 60 seconds – great for financial aid nights or other public events.

Keep in mind that the outreach tools above are only one part of the Financial Aid Toolkit; the other main areas include learning about student aid, training, and a searchable resource library. In fact, the amount of content on the toolkit might seem a little overwhelming… But for busy financial aid professionals, it's definitely worth taking some time to review the outreach tools and determine how to incorporate them into your student communications strategy. When it comes communicating basic information about federal student aid, there's no need to reinvent the wheel with these great resources.

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