

CHALLENGES & RECOMMENDATIONS

A NUMBER OF BARRIERS to furthering FAFSA completion were also identified, including engaging parents and families, local culture and economic conditions, prevailing FAFSA myths and misperceptions, limited staff capacity, data matching, and FAFSA verification.

POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS to help overcome these challenges include:

- Ensuring that the essential conditions and key practices cited above are in place.
- Engaging parents where they are, including the workplace and places of worship.
- Reporting the FAFSA completion rates of individual schools through public-facing dashboards or report cards.
- Continuing FAFSA outreach to help see students through the verification process.
- Advocating for FAFSA completion requirements at the local and state levels, and improvements and simplification at the federal level.

Further, city and school leaders must embrace an understanding of the importance of FAFSA completion and its connection to college degree attainment, social mobility, and the local economy. When local leaders make FAFSA completion a priority, the message reverberates throughout the school and college access staff working directly with students, and throughout the community, that FAFSA completion is not only beneficial, but imperative.

“ [THE CHALLENGE] ALLOWED MORE STUDENTS TO COMPLETE THE FAFSA AND ULTIMATELY OPEN DOORS TO POST HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES. ”
– Challenge site lead

2018-2019

FAFSA COMPLETION CHALLENGE

5 Key Practices and 5 Essential Conditions for Improving FAFSA Completion Rates

IF YOUR CITY OR SCHOOL DISTRICT wants to boost college enrollment and completion rates, start by helping more high school students complete the FAFSA. This effort is especially important in low-income communities, where students are least likely to complete the FAFSA and where the benefits of financial aid are the highest.



of seniors who complete the FAFSA attend college directly from high school, compared to 50% of noncompleters.¹

In most states, high school seniors in higher-poverty school districts are less likely to complete the FAFSA than their peers in wealthier districts.²

Endnotes

- collegeaccess.org/page/WhyInvestFAFSA
- cdn.ymaws.com/collegeaccess.org/resource/resmgr/publications/districtpoverty_fafsa2017.pdf



THE CHALLENGE

THE SECOND FAFSA COMPLETION CHALLENGE awarded grants to 25 cities with lower-than-average FAFSA completion rates, with the charge to raise these rates by five percentage points for the high school graduating class of 2019 over that of the class of 2018. Using these grants, several cities across the country – led by a mix of school districts, postsecondary institutions, community-based organizations, and foundations – improved completion rates with a combination of innovative approaches and long-proven tactics.



Building on findings from the inaugural 2016-17 FAFSA Completion Challenge, the 2018-19 challenge grantees were strongly encouraged to include strategies that addressed the following invitational priorities into their city's plan:

Access and use student-level FAFSA completion data to identify students who need assistance completing the FAFSA.

Engage and coordinate cross-sector partnerships to reach target populations and optimize resources, facilities, and staff time.

Strategic outreach through targeted communications to inform and engage students and their families.

Build capacity to equip staff with the skills and knowledge to implement and continue FAFSA completion assistance.

ESSENTIAL CONDITIONS

AN EVALUATION OF THE CHALLENGE identified five essential conditions that were present in successful sites. These conditions need to be in place to successfully implement key practices necessary to raise FAFSA completion rates.

- 1 Engaged leadership**
An effective school or district-level leader makes the case for a FAFSA completion goal, champions the cause, and helps bring partners together to do the work.
- 2 Trained FAFSA experts**
Advisors who provide students with FAFSA information and assistance must have specific training and experience. Many sites engaged partners to work with school counselors who are often overwhelmed with their large caseloads.
- 3 Core committee planning**
Successful sites involve partners from a variety of sectors at the outset of the project, and have a core committee that meets regularly throughout the grant.
- 4 Tracking and targeting**
Successful sites use student-level data to identify students who are likely to need help completing the FAFSA, keep track of students who have not yet completed it, and follow up with students who started but did not finish or submit their applications.
- 5 Ongoing assessment and adjustment**
Successful sites regularly track progress, overcome barriers with creative solutions, and change their approaches when necessary. They consider multiple viewpoints, including the student perspective, when deciding how to move forward.

KEY PRACTICES

THE EVALUATION IDENTIFIED the following five key practices common among successful sites, and repeatedly cited by grantees as effective at increasing FAFSA completion.



One-on-one assistance

One-on-one, in-person advising is essential. The most effective FAFSA advising is not only individual but also intrusive and intentional. Rather than waiting for students to seek assistance, FAFSA advisors proactively identify students who are likely to need FAFSA assistance, find them during the school day, and help them complete the FAFSA.



Peer and near-peer advising

Peer advisors are students who raise awareness about the FAFSA and encourage their peers to meet with FAFSA advisors. Some cities give peer advisors financial rewards for helping a certain number of students complete the FAFSA. Near-peers, recent college graduates who typically mirror high school students' characteristics, are often trained to provide FAFSA assistance, and share their stories with students to show the impact of getting financial aid and completing college.



District-wide competitions

Through competitions among high schools, monthly awards recognize schools with the highest FAFSA completion rates. Online leaderboards that track progress generate excitement and add urgency.



Incentives for students & staff

Some cities or school districts offer prizes or raffle drawings directly to students who complete the FAFSA. Others distribute micro-grants to schools so staff can determine the best ways to motivate their own students. Non-financial incentives, such as cords or tassels that students wear during graduation ceremonies to signify FAFSA completion, also are powerful motivators.



FAFSA campaigns

Many sites utilize resources provided by NCAN, such as FromYourFuture.org, as well as logos and taglines developed by participants in the first Challenge, to spread the word and generate excitement about FAFSA completion among students and their parents. Sites distribute promotional items such as tshirts and fans at schools and athletic events.