

MONEY DOESN'T GROW ON TREES:

How 22 Cities Helped High School Students Complete More FAFSAs and Get More Financial Aid Dollars

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Executive Summary

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is the primary mechanism through which postsecondary students gain access to federal, state, and institutional financial aid. In order to encourage cities to take advantage of recent changes in the FAFSA, The Kresge Foundation partnered with the National College Access Network (NCAN) to launch the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative during the 2016-17 school year. The grant program was designed to support metro-wide efforts to increase FAFSA completion among high school seniors, and 22 cities were selected for the initiative.

By June 2017, most of the participating cities had succeeded in increasing their FAFSA-completion rates over previous years. The average FAFSA-completion rate for high school seniors in these cities increased to 54.6%. Ten of the 22 participating cities saw their completion rates increase by more than 5 percentage points compared to June 2015, and only four cities had a drop in the completion rate. Three cities—Greensboro, North Carolina; Charleston, West Virginia; and Los Angeles, California—had FAFSA-completion rates above 60%.

The FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative led to many positive outcomes in the participating cities. In addition to increasing FAFSA-completion rates, stakeholders noted that the project led to new awareness among partner organizations about both the importance of FAFSA completion in postsecondary access and the support services offered by the lead organization. Above all, these cities learned important lessons about what works and what doesn't when it comes to increasing FAFSA completion in their communities.

STRATEGIES USED FOR INCREASING FAFSA-COMPLETION RATES



AWARENESS RAISING

Cities used communications campaigns to provide information about the new FAFSA timeline and procedures as well as the importance of the FAFSA.

INDIVIDUALIZED APPLICATION SUPPORT

Cities worked with partners to provide students and families with the support and expertise that they need to fill out the FAFSA.

STUDENT-LEVEL DATA

Grantees used data to ensure that students actually followed through and completed the FAFSA.

LESSONS LEARNED:

What College Access Leaders Should Know for Future FAFSA Completion Work

The FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative led to many positive outcomes in the participating cities. Not only did most cities increase the FAFSA-completion rate for their high school seniors, project directors also noted that the project led to new awareness among partner organizations about both the importance of FAFSA completion in postsecondary access and the support services offered by the lead organization.

DON'T REINVENT THE WHEEL.

Increasing FAFSA-completion rates, particularly for low-income and first-generation college students, did not require new strategies but rather adapting existing, well-documented strategies to specific community contexts.

COORDINATING STAKEHOLDERS IS KEY.

All of the participating cities had implemented some FAFSA-completion efforts prior to the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative. These efforts, however, were typically scattered across different organizations and might have even been duplicative. For many of the participating cities, coordinating existing FAFSA-completion work was central to their project strategy.

IDEAS FOR CITY LEADERS



★ Leverage your resources in ways that allow each partner organization to play to its strengths by identifying strategies that key partners are already successfully using.

★ Build a community calendar that shows all of the FAFSA-completion events being held in your city so that students and their families can identify the events most convenient to them in terms of time and location.



TAKE A TIERED APPROACH.

In many participating cities, project teams took advantage of the earlier start to the FAFSA season and developed a tiered approach, starting with a citywide outreach campaign, followed by large-scale FAFSA-completion events, smaller group interventions at high schools and college access organizations, and finally one-on-one assistance with the students most in need of support. This approach made effective use of time and resources, while still meeting the needs of different students.

- ✦ Use the fall term to raise awareness about the FAFSA and assist students who are already college-bound. In winter and spring, target individuals who may need more assistance and provide one-on-one support throughout the financial aid process.

ONE-ON-ONE ASSISTANCE MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE.

Informational campaigns and large-scale FAFSA-completion events must be supplemented with one-on-one assistance. For low-income and first-generation students, many of whom have complicated financial situations, parents who did not attend college, and/or significant responsibilities beyond school, one-on-one outreach and support is needed if they are to successfully navigate the college admissions process. This one-on-one assistance requires considerable investment in time and resources but was consistently seen by participating cities as crucial to their success in increasing FAFSA completions.

- ✦ Engage and support a cadre of individuals who can undertake the time-intensive, one-on-one support required to help students navigate the FAFSA process. In addition to high school counselors and college access professionals, postsecondary financial aid and admissions staff, community volunteers, and retired counselors may all be willing to contribute, although ongoing training and oversight is needed.

SUPPORT HIGH SCHOOLS AND GUIDANCE COUNSELORS.

High school partnerships were central to the increased FAFSA-completion rates achieved by many of the cities and are crucial to the sustainability of FAFSA work. Most cities offered several training opportunities for high school counselors and community volunteers, and several also created FAFSA toolkits that counselors and others could use to refresh their memories over the course of the school year.

- ✦ Reach out to the K-12 sector to identify key partners and learn what high schools already do to engage students on the FAFSA, what challenges they face, and what they need to expand their support of their students during the financial aid process.



SET GOALS AND TRACK PROGRESS.

A crucial strategy in most of the cities was the use of data on FAFSA completion by high school seniors to set goals for the city as a whole and for each participating high school and to track progress toward those goals. FAFSA-completion data proved to be an incredibly useful mechanism for both understanding what was happening with FAFSA completions in each city and encouraging accountability on the part of school districts and high schools.

- ★ Set clear goals and consider setting up a local competition with incentives for schools, counselors, and/or students to spur enthusiasm for engaging in FAFSA-completion efforts.

USE STUDENT-LEVEL DATA WHERE POSSIBLE.

Most of the participating cities had access to student-level FAFSA-completion data, which could be used by high school counselors and/or college access professionals to identify exactly which students had not yet completed FAFSAs. The data was also very helpful in identifying students whose FAFSAs were rejected due to errors or whose FAFSAs had been selected for verification.

- ★ Work with state and school district partners to expand access to student-level FAFSA-completion data and to assist counselors and college access professionals in using the data.

RECRUIT PEER MENTORS.

Several cities recruited peer or near-peer mentors to work in the high schools. They found that peer outreach was an important way to inspire high school students to complete a FAFSA.

- ★ Train peer mentors to give presentations on financial aid and FAFSA completion in classes, and challenge them to come up with innovative outreach strategies. Contact a local university to see if work-study students can be trained to be near-peer mentors in assigned high schools.

ENGAGE IN OUTREACH, EVALUATE, TRY AGAIN.

Community engagement proved to be one of the most challenging areas for cities, and while each city tried different strategies with varying levels of success, none represented a comprehensive approach to bringing the community at-large to awareness of financial aid and the FAFSA. Moreover, some strategies worked well in certain cities but not in others, suggesting that community context is a crucial aspect of determining how well different outreach approaches will work.

- ★ Engage in outreach efforts in your local community and collect data on the success of these efforts (i.e. number engaged, website hits, responses to emails, or informal interviews with staff, volunteer participants, or families). Schedule time to reflect on what you learned and develop your plans for the following FAFSA season.