

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

## 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.

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Photo courtesy Charleston, WV.



# THE FAFSA COMPLETION CHALLENGE GRANT INITIATIVE

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. The complexity of the FAFSA on its own can be a barrier, along with many other obstacles, for low-income and first-generation college students, but researchers have found that high school seniors who complete the FAFSA are considerably more likely to enroll in college than those who do not, making completion of the FAFSA an important step in college access.<sup>1</sup> Recent efforts in several cities to increase FAFSA completion through cross-sector partnerships, information campaigns, and support for FAFSA completion have led to substantial increases in the FAFSA-completion rates for high school seniors in those cities.<sup>2</sup>

In Fall 2016, two significant changes were made to the FAFSA filing process that offered new opportunities for cities interested in increasing FAFSA completion by high school seniors. The date on which students could begin work on their FAFSAs was moved from January 1 to October 1, providing three extra months during which information and support could be offered to FAFSA filers. In addition, the tax year for which families were required to supply their financial information was moved to a year earlier

than in the past, allowing families to use their already completed 2015 tax returns to fill out the 2017-18 FAFSA rather than having to wait until they could collect tax information for 2016.<sup>3</sup>

To encourage cities to take advantage of these changes and to support their efforts to increase FAFSA completion among high school seniors, The Kresge Foundation partnered with the National College Access Network (NCAN) to launch the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative in March 2016. The 100 largest cities in the United States, as well as cities that are the largest in states without a city in the top 100, were invited to submit proposals for projects intended to improve FAFSA-completion rates by at least five percentage points for the high school class of 2017. Cities selected for the initiative were provided with grants of up to \$55,000 and opportunities for technical assistance from NCAN. After the challenge ended in June 2017, the cities with the highest FAFSA-completion rates and largest increases in FAFSA-completion rates for high school seniors were eligible to share an additional \$300,000 in prizes.

The Kresge Foundation selected Higher Ed Insight to conduct an evaluation of the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative. This evaluation focused on understanding the strategies and

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<sup>1</sup> Melissa Roderick, Jenny Nagaoka, Vanessa Coca, Eliza Moeller with Karen Roddie, Jamiliyah Gilliam, and Desmond Patton. (March 2008) *From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College*. Available at [https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/CCSR\\_Potholes\\_Report.pdf](https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/CCSR_Potholes_Report.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Morgan. (n.d.) *Why Invest in Increasing FAFSA Completion*. National College Access Network. Available at <http://www.collegeaccess.org/WhyInvestFAFSA>.

<sup>3</sup> Federal Student Aid. (n.d.) *FAFSA Changes for 2017–18*. Available at <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/about/announcements/fafsa-changes>; Jeffrey J. Selingo. (October 2017) *Moving the Needle on FAFSA Completion*. National College Access Network. Available at <http://www.collegeaccess.org/images/documents/MovingTheNeedleOnFAFSACompletion.pdf>.

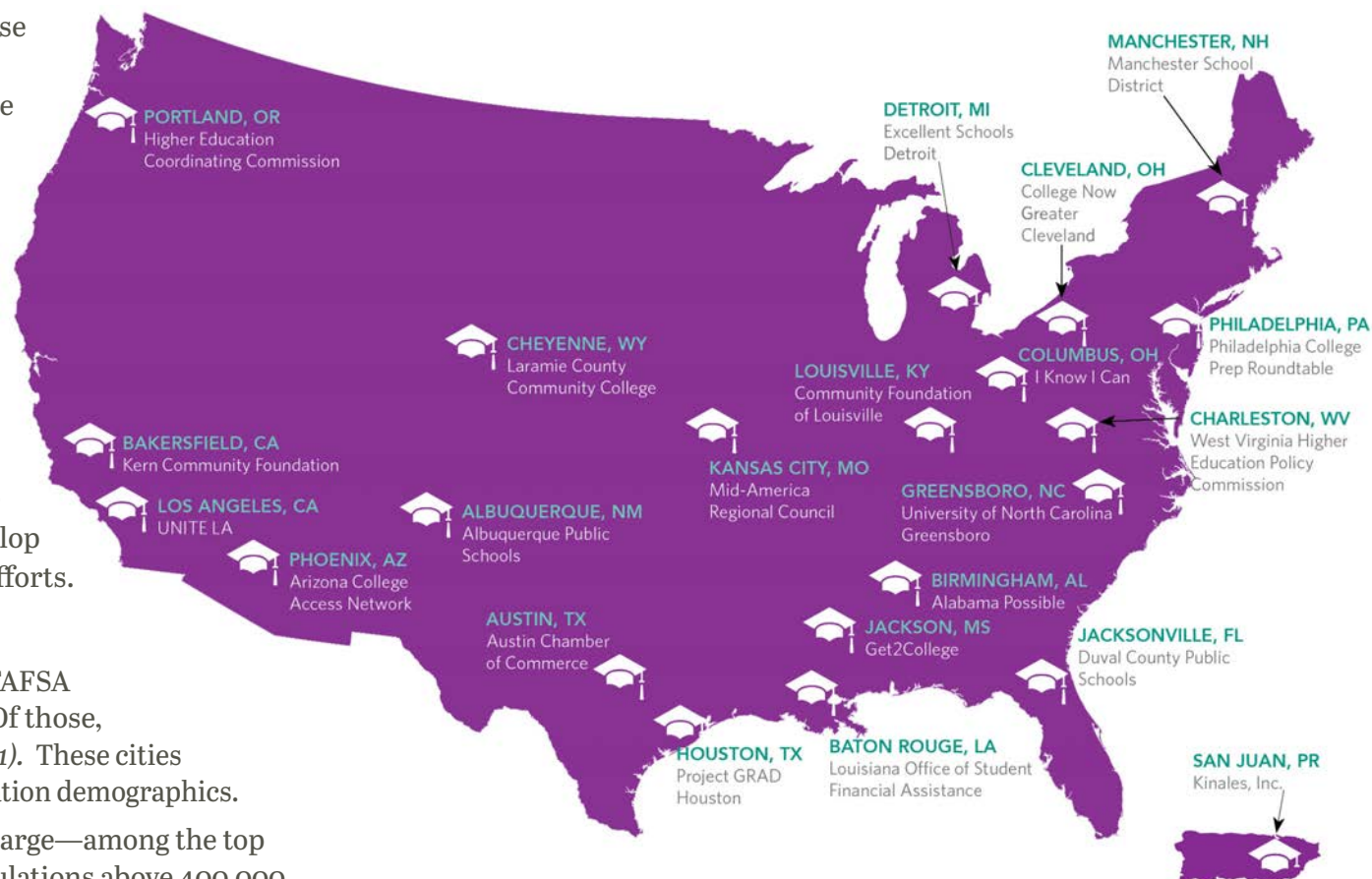
tactics used in participating cities and the challenges they faced during the project, as well as lessons learned about what worked well to increase FAFSA completion among high school seniors. In addition to examining available data on FAFSA-completion rates, Higher Ed Insight conducted several rounds of interviews with project directors and core teams, surveyed project stakeholders in Fall 2016 and again in Summer 2017, and went on site visits to selected cities. The insights gained through the evaluation make up the substance of this report and are directed particularly to cities that may want to use the lessons learned in this project to develop or expand their own FAFSA-completion efforts.

## Participating Cities

Sixty-eight eligible cities applied for the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative.<sup>4</sup> Of those, 22 were selected for the initiative (*Figure 1*). These cities varied considerably in their size and population demographics.

- Twelve of the participating cities are large—among the top 50 in the nation as of 2015—with populations above 400,000. Six are medium cities with populations between 200,000 and 400,000, and another four are small cities. All of the small cities and two of the medium cities are the largest in their respective states.
- Median annual household income in these cities as of 2015 ranged from \$21,243 in San Juan, Puerto Rico, to \$58,219 in Cheyenne, Wyoming, with an average of \$43,714.
- Bachelor's degree attainment for adults age 25 and older as of 2015 ranged from 13.5% in Detroit, Michigan, to 46.9% in Austin, Texas, with an average of 30.1%, similar to the national average of 29.8%.<sup>5</sup>

FIGURE 1: Participating cities



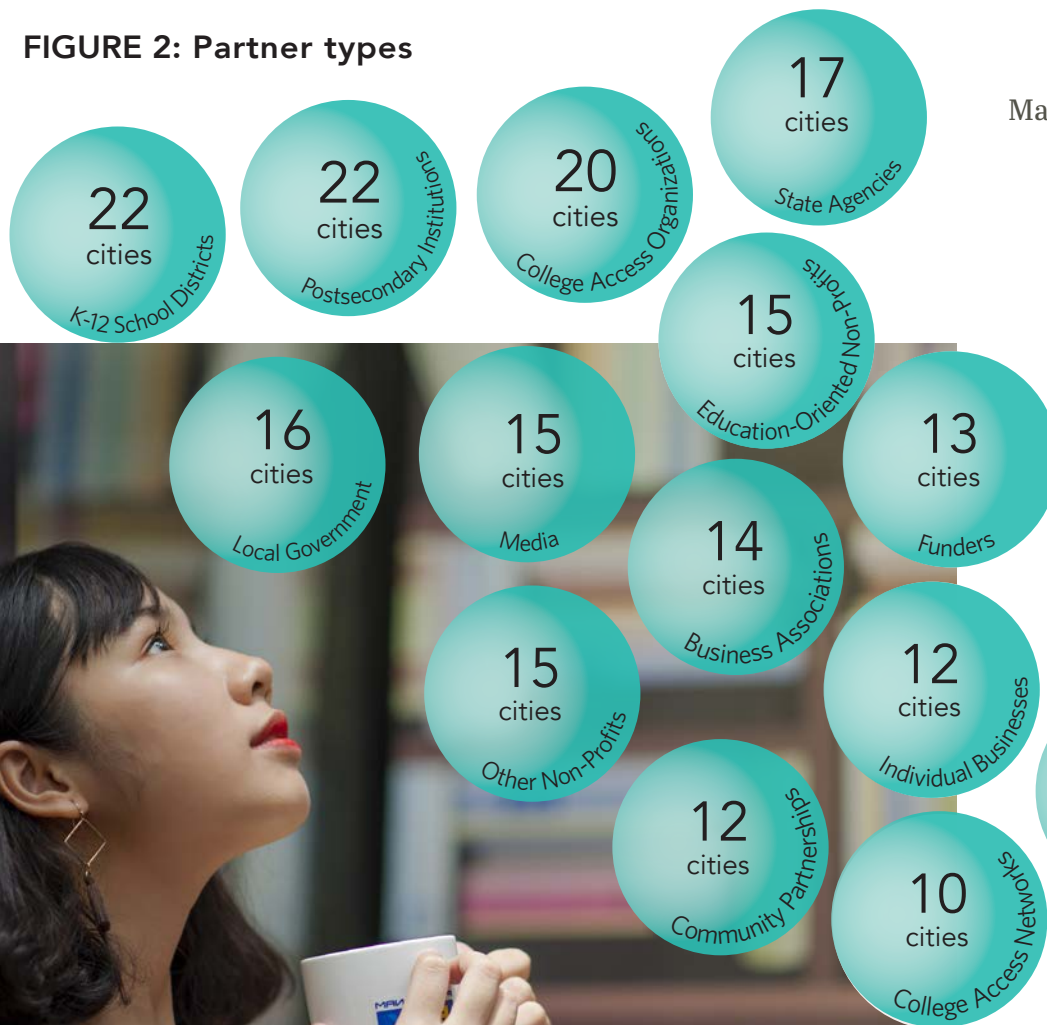
<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Morgan, Courtney Argenti, Bill DeBaun, and Sara Melnick. (December 2016) *FAFSA Completion Rates in 68 U.S. Cities for the High School Class of 2015*. National College Access Network. Available at <http://www.collegeaccess.org/images/documents/68cities.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.) *American FactFinder*. Available at <https://factfinder.census.gov>



The lead organization for the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative varied considerably across the participating cities. College access organizations were the lead partner in six cities and local or state college access networks in four. A k-12 school district, state higher education or financial aid agency, and a chamber of commerce each took the lead in three cities. The remaining lead organizations were a community foundation, a community college system, and a statewide anti-poverty non-profit. Project budgets, which included funds from sources other than The Kresge Foundation, ranged from \$45,000 to \$368,000, with the median budget between \$79,000 and \$85,000.

**FIGURE 2: Partner types**



## Cross-Sector Partnerships

As required by the grant, all of the participating cities established partnerships that included at least one K-12 school district and at least one college or university as well as several nonprofit organizations (Figure 2). Non-profit partners included:

- College access organizations (e.g. TRIO and GEAR UP programs),
- Education-oriented organizations (e.g. Communities in Schools), and
- Youth-serving community-based organizations (e.g. Big Brothers Big Sisters).

Many of the cities also partnered with:

- State higher education or financial aid agencies,
- Local governments (often the mayor's office),
- The media,
- Business associations including chambers of commerce, and/or
- Funders, such as community foundations.

Many of the partnerships in which participating cities engaged existed prior the grant. Of the 22 participating cities, for example, 16 were part of Lumina Foundation's Community Partnerships for Attainment and spent the last several years building cross-sector partnerships around increasing educational attainment. More than three-quarters (77%) of respondents to a stakeholder survey reported that this was not the first time their organization has been involved in FAFSA-completion efforts. In addition, 37% of survey respondents indicated that their organizations were

already working with the lead organization on FAFSA completion, and another 8% said that they were working with the lead organization on other projects.

On the other hand, 49% of survey respondents from business associations and individual businesses, as well as 30% of those from K-12 school districts, said that this was the first time their organization has been involved in FAFSA-completion efforts, suggesting that cities are making some progress in expanding their partnerships into new sectors.

### Strategies for Increasing FAFSA-Completion Rates

The strategies used by cities participating in the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative fall into three key areas (*Figure 3*):

- **Outreach**—Undertaking awareness-raising strategies and communications campaigns to provide information about the new FAFSA timeline and procedures as well as the overall importance of the FAFSA for obtaining college financial aid;
- **Application Support**—Providing students and families with the support and expertise that they need to fill out the FAFSA; and
- **Individualized Follow-Up**—Using data to ensure that students actually followed through and completed the FAFSA.

To raise awareness about the FAFSA, all of the participating cities conducted informational campaigns using traditional and social media as well as doing direct outreach to students and families in their partner school district(s) using postal mail, email, phone calls, and/or text messages. Some cities focused a portion of their outreach efforts on specific populations such as members of diverse communities while others involved high school students

**FIGURE 3: Strategies and perceived effectiveness**

Percentage of stakeholders who found strategy to be very effective.



conducting outreach with their peers. Many of the sites chose to do a city- or district-wide kick-off event to get students and the community excited about applying for financial aid. Many cities also adopted the strategy of offering prizes for the schools with the highest FAFSA-completion rates or provided incentives for all students who completed the FAFSA.

Providing assistance to students as they complete the FAFSA is at the core of this sort of initiative, and all of the cities held FAFSA-completion events in the local community and at high schools in their partner district(s). To provide effective support in completing the FAFSA, most cities offered FAFSA training to high school counselors and/or community volunteers, and others developed FAFSA toolkits to share with schools and community volunteers. A few cities partnered with local organizations to create centers where students can drop in to obtain help in completing their FAFSAs or developed curricula on financial literacy and FAFSA information that can be taught in high school classes. Most cities also conducted follow-up efforts using student-level records on their FAFSA-completion status to reach students who had not yet completed a FAFSA or who had incomplete applications.

## Challenges

Cities faced a number of challenges in trying to execute their plans. The most significant problem was reaching students and families so that they understood the importance of completing the FAFSA and had the necessary support to do so. Many cities pointed, in particular, to a lack of awareness in their communities about the importance of completing the FAFSA, a lack of parental involvement in the FAFSA process, and difficulties in getting both students and families to attend FAFSA-completion events. (Figure 4).

A number of cities found that it was harder than they had expected to encourage high school counselors and college access professionals to focus on helping students with the FAFSA in the fall, a time when these individuals were typically focused on helping students with

*The most significant problem was reaching students and families so that they understood the importance of completing the FAFSA and had the necessary support to do so.*

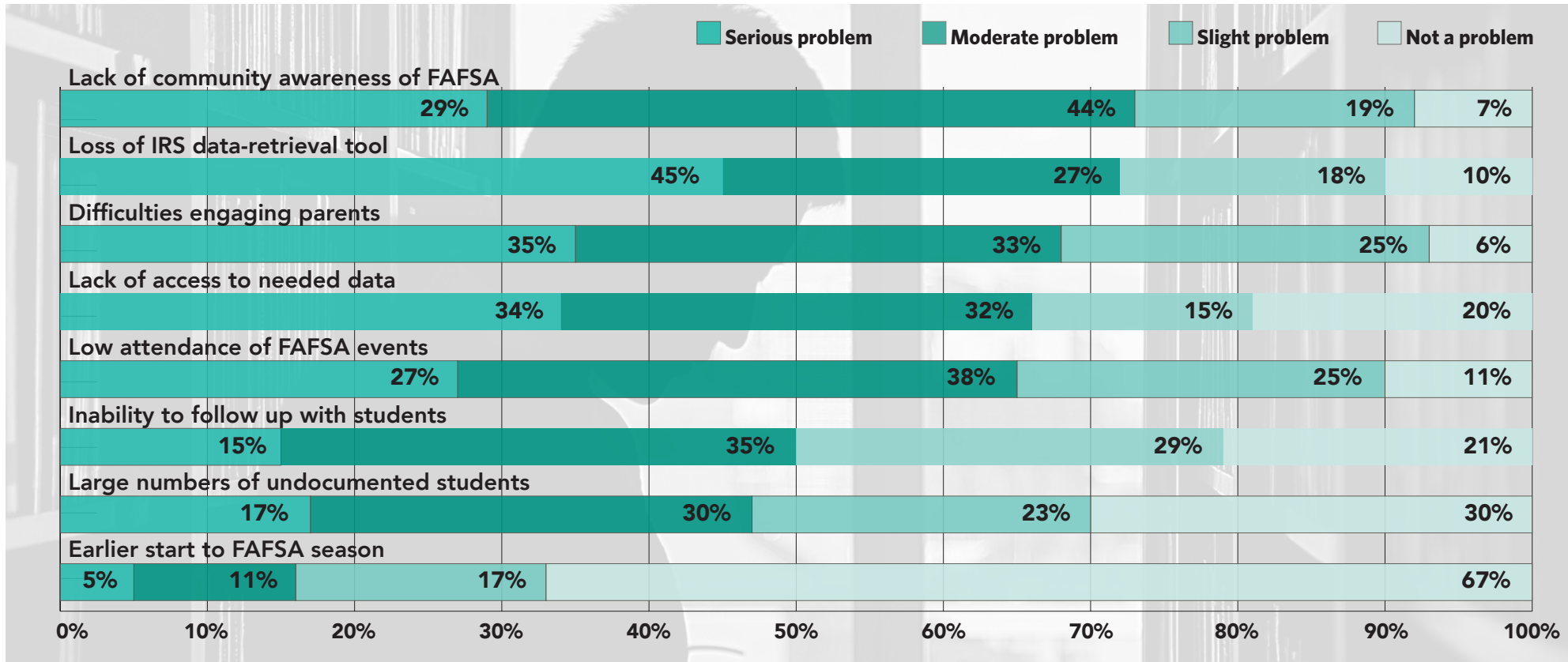


their college applications. Some cities also expressed concerns about sustaining engagement over a much longer timeframe. However, by Summer 2017, only 16% of stakeholders rated the early start to the FAFSA season as a moderate or serious problem.

Project management challenges were a concern for some cities. Several project directors pointed to the challenges of managing a project with many moving parts, particularly in large cities where they had to schedule and staff large numbers of FAFSA-completion events. Staff turnover, particularly within the school district, was also a challenge in several cities, and while project directors were generally



FIGURE 4: Stakeholder perceptions of the severity of challenges



pleased with the partners involved in their projects, several did mention that it was challenging in their cities to engage with certain types of stakeholders, including local government, the media, the business community, and faith-based organizations or houses of worship.

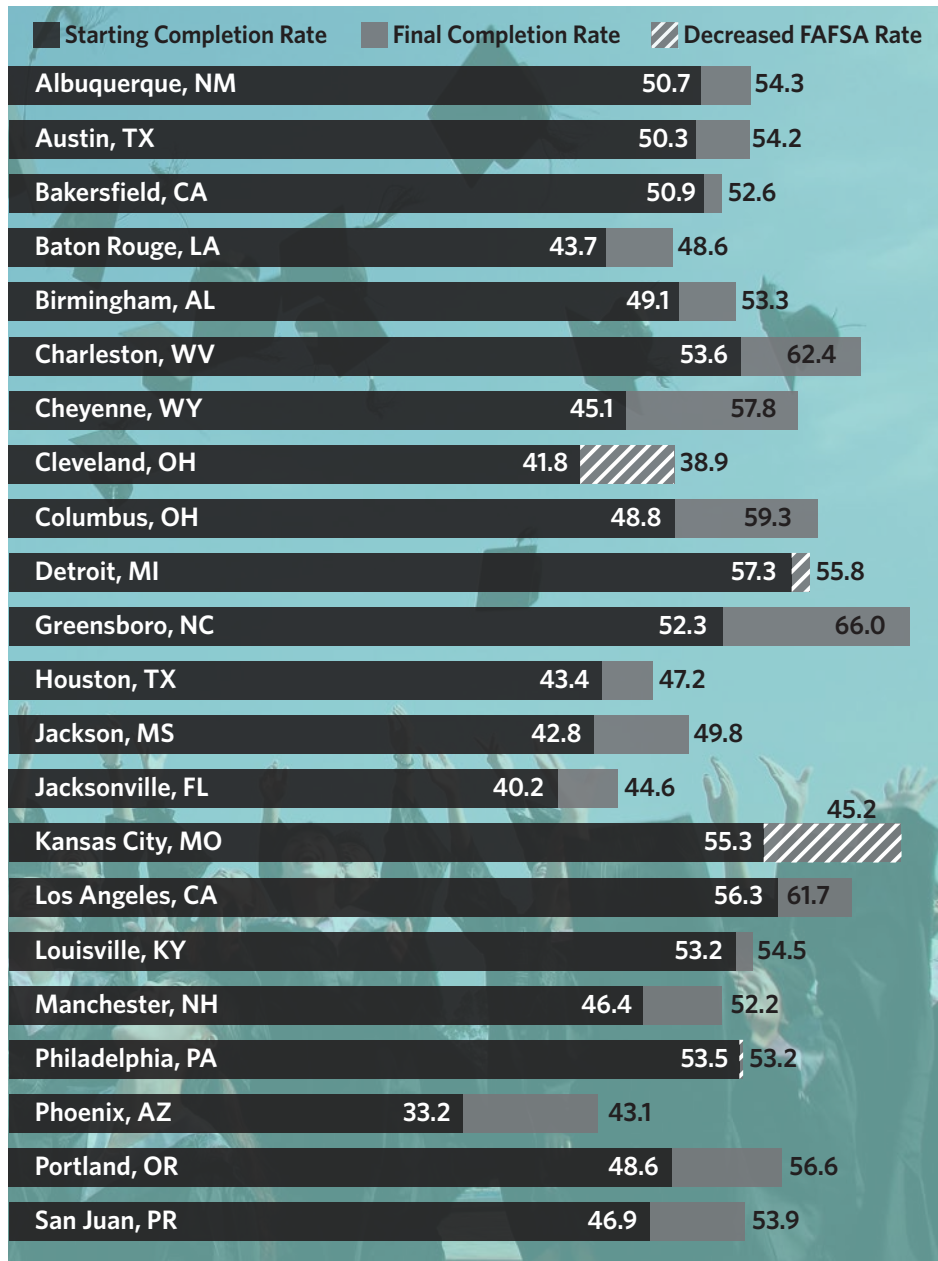
Another important set of challenges relate to what might be thought of as “technical difficulties.” Beginning in March 2017, the loss of access to the IRS Data Retrieval Tool, which allowed families to auto-fill their tax information directly into the FAFSA, created problems for many cities, particularly those in states that do not have early priority

deadlines for financial aid applications. Throughout the project, stakeholders also noted challenges associated with the Federal Student Aid (FSA) ID, including the requirement of having separate IDs for students and parents, families that had no email address, names that were too long to fit in the allowed space, and problems with forgotten usernames and passwords.

### Outcomes

FAFSA-completion rates for the high school class of 2015 in participating cities ranged from 33% in Phoenix, Arizona, to 57%

**FIGURE 5: FAFSA-Completion Rates Pre/Post Competition**



Detroit, with an average of 50.1%, already well above the national average of 44.0% for the high school class of 2015.<sup>6</sup> At the start of the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative, cities set goals for increasing FAFSA completion for the high school class of 2017 ranging from 3 percentage points to 15 percentage points over the class of 2015, with an average goal of 9 percentage points.

By June 2017, most of the participating cities had succeeded in increasing their FAFSA-completion rates over previous years (*Figure 5*). The average FAFSA-completion rate for high school seniors in these cities increased to 54.6%.<sup>7</sup> Ten of the 22 participating cities saw their completion rates increase by more than 5 percentage points, 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 prizes awarded at the conclusion of the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative went to the following cities:

- **\$75,000**
  - Greensboro, North Carolina—Greatest increase in FAFSA-completion rate and highest FAFSA-completion rate
- **\$50,000**
  - Cheyenne, Wyoming—Second greatest increase in FAFSA-completion rate
  - Charleston, West Virginia—Second highest FAFSA-completion rate
- **\$25,000**
  - Columbus, Ohio—Engaging a community ecosystem
  - Jackson, Mississippi—Involving higher education
  - Los Angeles, California—Overcoming barriers
  - Phoenix, Arizona—Taking a strategic approach
  - San Juan, Puerto Rico—Creating systems change

<sup>6</sup> National College Access Network. (n.d.) *National FAFSA Completion Rate for High School Seniors*. Available at <http://www.collegeaccess.org/FAFSACompletionRate>.

<sup>7</sup> Because of the data guidelines established at the beginning of the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative, these FAFSA-completion rates do not include 19-year-old seniors.

# LESSONS LEARNED

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. Most stakeholders agreed that the project strengthened their partnerships, as well, and expressed hope that these strengthened partnerships will be maintained in the future. Above all, these cities learned important lessons about what works and what doesn't when it comes to increasing FAFSA completion in their communities.

A central lesson that arose from this work is the recognition that there is general consensus among the college access and success community about useful strategies for increasing FAFSA-completion rates, particularly for low-income and first-generation college students. Years of research on this topic, together with the experiences of cities that have already made great strides in increasing FAFSA-completion rates, provide important insights into the barriers faced by students and their families and possible interventions that can help overcome these barriers.<sup>8</sup> What became most important for the cities participating in the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative was not to develop wholly new strategies but how to best adapt existing, well-documented strategies to their own community contexts.

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8 J. Cody Davidson. (2013) "Increasing FAFSA Completion Rates: Research, Policies and Practices," Journal of Student Financial Aid 43: 1. Available at <https://publications.nasfaa.org/jsfa/vol43/iss1/4/>; High School and Beyond Leadership Institute. (August 2015) FAFSA Completion Best Practices & Planning. Available at <http://www.roadmapproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/FAFSA-Best-Practices.pdf>; Courtney Argenti, Allie Ciaramella, and Carrie Warick. (August 2017) Increasing FAFSA Completion Rates Among Low-Income Students: Lessons From Four States That Are Doing It Well. National College Access Network. Available at <http://www.collegeaccess.org/images/documents/LessonsFromFourStatesThatAreDoingItWell.pdf>.



Participating cities also recognized that neither informational campaigns nor large-scale FAFSA-completion events on their own are sufficient to reach many low-income students. For these 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.

The experiences of a high school guidance counselor in Albuquerque, New Mexico, help to illustrate this point. Prior to this year, she had held FAFSA-completion events at her school but assumed that the students who did not attend did not need her help or were not interested in postsecondary education. After changing her approach and reaching out to individual students directly, she discovered that some of the students had misconceptions about the FAFSA and others needed encouragement to take the first step. She learned, as a core team member from Albuquerque also noted, that “mass communications worked for highly motivated students, but more reluctant or vulnerable students needed different kinds of approaches.”



Photo courtesy Birmingham, AL (left) and Phoenix, AZ (right).

## Why Reinvent the Wheel?

All of the participating cities had implemented some FAFSA-completion efforts prior to the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative. These efforts, in some cases, were scattered across different organizations and might have even been duplicative. As a result, the task for this project was to pull those disparate activities into one coordinated effort and to ensure that partner organizations could contribute in ways best suited to their missions and resources.

## Coordinated Efforts

For many of the participating cities, coordinating existing FAFSA-completion work was central to their strategies. Many of the lead organizations created community calendars that showed all of the FAFSA-completion events being held in their cities so that students and their families could identify the events most convenient to them in terms of time and location.

- In Los Angeles, the lead organization, Unite LA, took this idea a step further and developed a “heat map” showing where FAFSA-completion workshops were taking place in the community and identifying underserved areas that needed additional support.
- In Louisville, Kentucky, the core team determined that some families were not able to participate in school-based events for reasons that include lack of transportation. They used FAFSA-completion data and high school enrollment data to identify neighborhoods that needed additional support and then partnered with trusted community-based organizations in those neighborhoods to offer FAFSA-completion events.

Coordinated marketing campaigns were a key strategy for many cities, as well.

- In Houston, Texas, the lead organization, Project GRAD, worked with the local school district to create postcards that listed the FAFSA-completion events taking place both at individual high schools and at community sites.

- Kansas City, Missouri, created a marketing toolkit that included an overview of the project, available in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Swahili; a message map that outlined key points to include in all outreach materials; a parent flyer and checklist to be mailed with the students' report card; and thermometer charts to help schools keep track of progress to their goals.

Campaigns such as these helped provide consistent messaging about FAFSA across each city, allowed opportunities for market research to inform the messages, and yielded cost efficiencies in the design and production of materials.

### Leveraging Partner Resources

Another important aspect of identifying the most appropriate strategies for increasing FAFSA completion in a particular city lies in leveraging resources in ways that allow each organization to play to its strengths. As one K-12 employee from Portland, Oregon, explained, “We have learned that FAFSA completion is a gigantic, crucial task. It’s time-consuming and involves lots of technicalities and expertise. Therefore, it is a teamwork project, and that’s the only way to achieve successful completion rates.” Partners contribute a range of resources to FAFSA-completion efforts (*Figure 6*), and the findings from a survey of stakeholders in participating cities show that these resources vary considerably for different partner types.

### School District Engagement

Engagement with the local school district is of critical importance in this work, particularly given the ability of the high schools to offer access to a “captive audience” of students during the school day. Overall, stakeholders from college access organizations (91%), K-12 school districts (89%), and postsecondary institutions (87%) were more likely to note that these organizations contributed connections to students. However, the volume of students served by K-12 schools is typically much greater than what college access organizations can serve, and K-12 schools also serve students who may not have made contact with, or even be considering, any postsecondary institution.

For this reason, most of the cities participating in the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative chose to focus their work in local high schools.

One particularly successful example of leveraging the combined resources of a school district and a community foundation can be seen in Bakersfield, California. The Kern Community Foundation worked with instructors from the local school district to create a financial literacy curriculum aligned to California state standards for a senior economics class that is a graduation requirement in the state. The three-day curriculum was designed to teach students about the value of education after high school and the financial resources available to support them, as well as offer hands-on assistance with FAFSA completion. This approach proved very successful in Bakersfield. The eight high schools that piloted this curriculum had FAFSA completions grow by an average of 6 percentage points, above the average for the district as a whole, and three sites had FAFSA completions grow by 10 percentage points or more.

**FIGURE 6: Resources contributed by partners**



### Volunteer Support at FAFSA-Completion Events

Stakeholders from postsecondary institutions (78%), non-profits (69%), and college access organizations (66%) indicated that their organizations contributed volunteers, reflecting the continued importance of volunteer support at FAFSA-completion events. Colleges and universities are particularly important sources of volunteers for these events. Stakeholders reported that financial aid expertise for their projects came primarily from government agencies (85%) and postsecondary institutions (76%), while postsecondary institutions (74%) and college access organizations (74%) were most likely to contribute college admissions expertise. Other volunteers can play important roles as well. In Birmingham, Alabama, volunteers from churches, local businesses, and retiree groups helped encourage students to complete the FAFSA by sharing their own college and career experience, as well as helping students with financial aid and FAFSA questions.

### Community Connections

Connections in the community are an important resource contributed by college access organizations (80%), community-based organizations (79%), and chambers of commerce (76%). In Manchester, New Hampshire, for example, the core team held a community roundtable event for youth-serving organizations to learn more about the barriers to college access these organizations have identified for the youth they serve. As a result of that meeting, the local Boys and Girls Club partnered with the core team to hold a FAFSA-completion event. The Boys and Girls Club provided space for the event, transportation from four different locations across the city, and staff to host activities for younger children while their parents worked on the FAFSA with their older siblings. The local Boys and Girls Club also played a key role in the work done in San Juan by providing a computer lab where students could drop in on Fridays throughout the school year to receive assistance in completing the FAFSA.

*[M]ost of the cities participating in the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative chose to focus their work in local high schools.*





## CASE STUDY:

# Columbus, Ohio

One of the top 100 largest school districts in the U.S., and Ohio's largest urban school district, Columbus City Schools (CCS) had fewer than half of its seniors submitting a FAFSA. To address this gap, I Know I Can (IKIC) and several community partners worked together to launch a campaign with targeted follow-up and application support, using culturally relevant programming and new technology, counselor training, and some friendly competition. With these efforts, Columbus managed to exceed its goal and grow FAFSA completions to 59% of its senior class.

## Leveraging Partner Resources to Provide One-on-One Support

In addition to an elaborate communications campaign that distributed information through a number of marketing initiatives, IKIC coordinated resources, partners, and schools to ensure that as many students as possible received personal assistance from College Advising Managers and Ohio College Guides (supported through Americorps), reaching over

1,000 students individually with support. They used a case management approach with these students and their families, using data to target those with an interest in postsecondary education or who had met college-ready criteria. A number of higher education institutions also provided important volunteer hours and training to support IKIC's efforts.

## Engaging Families through Community Partners

Through a relationship with the local non-profits serving the Latino, Somali, and Bhutanese Nepali communities in Columbus, IKIC worked to develop a series of workshops in locations convenient for the individual communities where families could obtain

information about college opportunity and FAFSA support. Each of these community partners provided critical translation support for outreach efforts at different junctures of the project.

## Student-Level FAFSA Data

Using data was a critically important element of Columbus' success, and lists were pulled weekly to identify which students intended on attending college but had not filled out a FAFSA. Data also helped IKIC identify which students had incomplete FAFSAs and assisted them individually with resolving whatever issue had come up. As one advisor said, "I was strategic about reaching out to students.... I first started with the top academic tier students in the

fall, and then I reached out to the middle-of-the-road kids in the second or third term, and now I have the stragglers who have some uncertainty about their plans...We go through the same conversations...Did you do the FAFSA? Are your applications finished? Have you done housing? Orientation, etc.? They hear from friends that I helped them do the FAFSA and now they are getting money...and that has helped a lot."



# ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

Just as the cities that participated in the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative found it useful to adapt existing strategies to fit their community contexts, project directors emphasized the importance of recognizing that students and their families have different needs when it comes to FAFSA completion. Similarly, partner organizations have varying needs and operate in different cultural contexts that must be taken into consideration to ensure successful project implementation.

## Taking a Tiered Approach

In most participating cities, project directors and their core teams developed a tiered approach, well-illustrated in a chart provided by the project director from Phoenix (*Figure 7*). This tiered approach to increasing FAFSA completion made effective use of time and resources, while still meeting the needs of different students, and also took advantage of the earlier start to the FAFSA season. Most cities began with informational campaigns, designed both to raise awareness of the importance of the FAFSA in the broader community and to encourage high school seniors to complete a FAFSA. These campaigns generally continued throughout the fall and, in some cases, into the early months of 2017.

## School-Wide and City-Wide FAFSA Events

The top tier of activity involved holding large-scale FAFSA-completion events, open to any student who was looking for help with the FAFSA. The large events enabled cities to assist the “low-hanging fruit,” students who were aware of and eager to complete the FAFSA as part of the college application process. Many of

these events took place at local high schools, some during the school day and others on evenings or weekends. Most cities also offered community-based FAFSA-completion events, often hosted by non-profit partners. In both Jacksonville, Florida, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, project leaders took advantage of the earlier FAFSA season to incorporate FAFSA-completion opportunities into the large-scale college fairs taking place in their communities. While they might have given a presentation on financial aid at these events in previous years, this year they were able to set up computer labs where students and their families could come to work on the FAFSA during the college fair.

**FIGURE 7: Funnel diagram showing tiered approach**

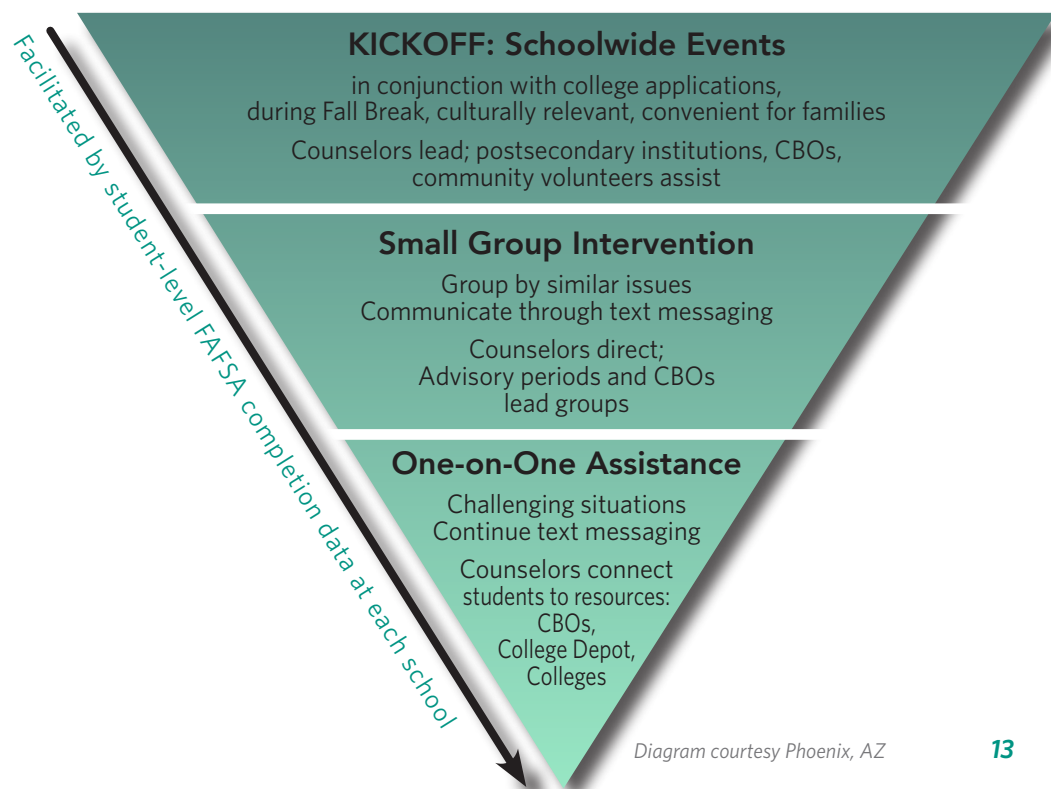


Diagram courtesy Phoenix, AZ

## Small Group Interventions

With the start of the new year, project directors and core teams were able to turn their attention to students who might need more encouragement. Some cities chose to offer a second round of FAFSA-completion events during the early months of 2017, the time when students would have focused on the FAFSA in previous years. Most cities also ramped up outreach targeted to specific groups of students, relying on non-profit partners who had connections in the community. As a core team member from Jacksonville explained, “We’ve front-loaded a lot of what we’ve already been doing into the fall to allow us the opportunity to think creatively and outside the box come winter and spring about using the student-level data to really target and invite

those students and parents to our community based-events.”

Throughout this process, high school counselors and college access professionals engaged in small groups with seniors during the school day and in after-school programs. College access professionals and near-peer mentors visited senior classes to talk about financial aid and held “office hours” for students who needed

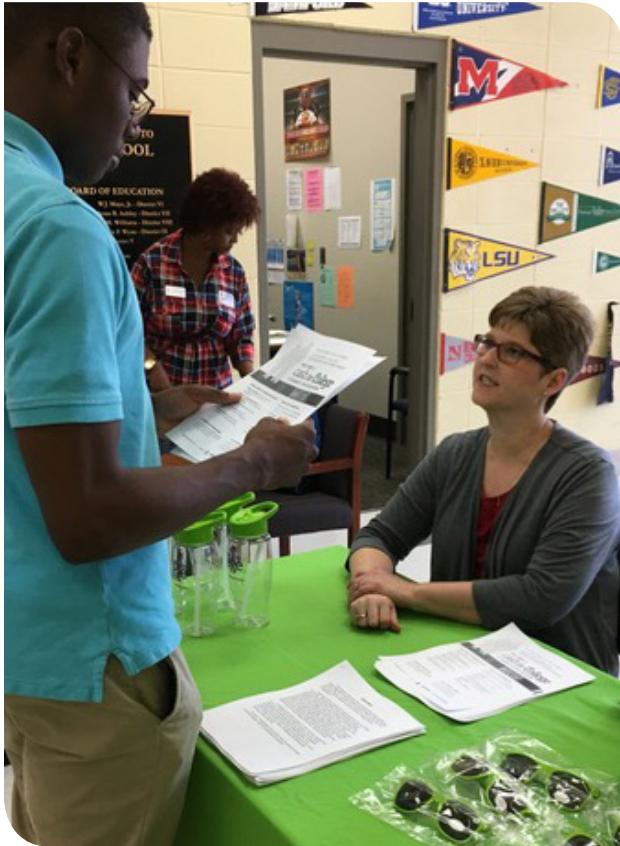


Photo courtesy Birmingham, AL

assistance with the FAFSA. Counselors and college access professionals also pulled students from elective classes individually and in small groups to talk with them about financial aid and the FAFSA. This in-person experience was a crucial aspect of the project for many cities. As a core team member from Greensboro put it:

Once we started engaging with students, it really made a difference in their ability to see the advantages of education beyond high school. So, I would say that’s where we’ve put a lot of our efforts. Instead of expecting families to come to events, it seems to work better to have our experts come to them, come to the students in the school and reach out to them and be able to have conversations with them. So, that’s made a difference.

## One-on-One Assistance

The final tier of this approach relied on one-on-one assistance, primarily to students who had incomplete FAFSAs, whose FAFSAs had been rejected due to errors or whose FAFSAs had been selected for verification. One-on-one assistance was also extended to students who needed help understanding their award letters. Devoting nine months to financial aid, as compared with six months in previous years, allowed counselors and college access professionals more time to shepherd students through the full financial aid process, rather than focusing primarily on one-time assistance with the FAFSA. As the project director for Portland noted,

The extended FAFSA season allowed us more time to focus on students who had submitted a FAFSA but were rejected and therefore had not completed the process. FAFSA submission was our main focus October to January, but now that the FAFSA season is longer, we used student-level FAFSA data to help students who need to make a correction or mail in a signature page after the initial completion push. Being able to assist students with a rejected FAFSA helped shrink the gap between submission and completion.



## Supporting High Schools

The centrality of high schools to the increased FAFSA-completion rates achieved by many of the cities that participated in the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative emphasizes the need for the K-12 sector to take a central role in helping high school seniors complete the FAFSA. The efforts of other partners are undoubtedly important, but without high school participation, they are unlikely to create sustainable increases in the FAFSA-completion rate.

*Bakersfield, where the lead organization was a community foundation, found it challenging to bridge differences in organization cultures. As the project director explained, “Our kind of fast-paced community foundation culture did not work in a fairly large bureaucracy at the high school district.”*



Developing partnerships with local school districts does, of course, take time and effort. Greensboro developed a FAFSA advisory group that brought together counselors, principals, financial aid administrators, and the state financial aid agency. As the project director commented, “It’s pretty powerful just to get those people in the room, and they really informed the proposal that we sent to the district.” Other cities found that the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative helped them get the attention of school administrators. A core team member from Albuquerque, for example noted, “We did make some efforts to educate the high school principals, especially at the beginning of the year as the project was coming on board. And grants can be so helpful for that because the idea that there is money makes everybody sit up and pay attention.”

Several project directors, including those in Phoenix and Philadelphia, noted that their ability to engage with the local school district has increased noticeably since their districts created a position or office focused on postsecondary transition that can serve as a primary point of contact within the district. On the flip side, several other cities struggled after their school district liaison took another position, indicating that having more than one point of contact is a wise back-up plan.

Some cities felt that working directly with high schools was a more effective approach. Charleston created leadership teams made up of principals, counselors, school staff, and students at each of the district’s eight high schools. Each team was responsible for driving the initiative at their high school. Some cities suggested that they may try this approach in the future. As the project director for Houston, which has a very large school district, noted, “We were working closely at the district level, but I would start this over by looking down the list of schools that struggled this year and maybe going to those campuses in particular and offering our services.”

Project directors also emphasized the need to adapt their plans to accommodate the culture and context of the K-12 sector.

- In Portland, the project director had planned a half-day training session for high school counselors but found that it was very difficult for them to leave school for that long. Instead, she opted to hold a number of shorter training sessions focusing on different topics offered at multiple locations around the city so it was easy for counselors to find one near their schools.
- Bakersfield, where the lead organization was a community foundation, found it challenging to bridge differences in organization cultures. As the project director explained, “Our kind of fast-paced community foundation culture did not work in a fairly large bureaucracy at the high school district.”

Even at the level of individual high schools, differences in culture and context are important. As the project director for Birmingham put it, it’s important to recognize “that each school is different and that each relationship is different and that there’s not a one-size-fits-all approach.” Several project teams found differences in the way schools preferred to hold FAFSA-completion events. Some liked a full-day “get everyone involved” approach while others preferred to offer ongoing opportunities for students to complete the FAFSA a few at a time. The project director for Charleston summed up this key point by saying, “Our team acted more as consultants than directors—supporting the schools with supplies, research, technical assistance, and advice but allowing them to vary their tactics according to their needs, strengths, and resources.”

## What Gets Measured Gets Managed

A crucial strategy in most of the cities that participated in the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative was the use of data on FAFSA completion by high school seniors to set goals and track progress toward those goals. Data was at the center of most of these projects and proved to be an incredibly useful mechanism both for understanding what was happening with FAFSA completions in each city and for encouraging accountability on the part of school districts and high schools.

### High School Data

All of the participating cities had access to district- and campus-level data on FAFSA completion through FSA’s “FAFSA Completion by High School and Public School District” tool. This online resource provides, for each school district and its component high schools in the United States, “the number of submitted and completed FAFSAs among first-time filing applicants no older than 19 at the cutoff date who will have received their high school diploma by the start of the school year to which they are applying for aid.”<sup>9</sup> Using this tool, high school counselors and other college access professionals can see how many FAFSAs have been filed by students at their high school and can compare this number to the number of seniors they serve as well as to the number of FAFSAs completed by the same point in the previous year.

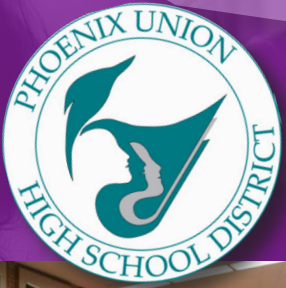
This information, updated weekly throughout the FAFSA season, made it possible for each city to know how it was doing in terms of FAFSA completions and to identify specific high schools that needed additional support. When combined with enrollment data from the high schools, the FSA data allowed cities to see progress toward the FAFSA-completion rate they had set as their goal. As the project director for Albuquerque noted, “With the Department of Education’s

<sup>9</sup> Federal Student Aid. (n.d.) *FAFSA Completion by High School and Public School District*. Available at <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/about/data-center/student/application-volume/fafsa-completion-high-school>.

## CASE STUDY:

# Phoenix, Arizona

Phoenix Union School District (PUSD) has been on a mission to build a stronger college-going culture for a number of years. In 2009, a partnership with the Helios Education Foundation helped to establish a strong commitment to rigorous academic requirements for all students and provided resources to pay for all juniors in the district to take the ACT. Working on FAFSA completions throughout the district was a natural and important next step. Led by the Arizona College Access Network (a program of College Success Arizona), with several key partners, Phoenix sought to execute a comprehensive approach with a three-tiered strategy that included citywide events, small group-level interventions, and one-on-one assistance. The results from their efforts have been a huge success, increasing the senior class FAFSA completions by 10 percentage points in the two-year competition period.



## Centralized Vision, Leadership, and Coordination

PUSD demonstrated its commitment to building a college-going culture by creating a new position, Postsecondary Articulation Specialist. The individual in this role was critical to coordinating the events, volunteers, and training needed to launch the FAFSA

growth efforts in Phoenix over the past year. Several Phoenix partners highlighted the importance of this leadership in advancing the work and helping the many engaged partners to work together in coordination toward their college access goals.

## FAFSA Fiestas

These events were central elements of both awareness-raising and bringing communities together to begin work on FAFSA applications. Community businesses provided dinner, prizes were raffled,

childcare was offered, and these family events were an opportunity for students and parents to fill out their forms on site, or to get individualized support or information in a relaxed and fun setting.

## Targeted Triaged Interventions

Through the Be a Leader Foundation (with support from AmeriCorps), College Transition Specialists supported PUSD by working alongside counselors in outreach to specific groups of students based on a triaged approach. For example, they segmented students according to their needs, first identifying

high GPA students with no FAFSA filed. They reached out with personalized letters home to groups of students, or pulled students out of class for individual postsecondary planning discussions with those scoring above a certain level on the ACT.





# Phoenix, Arizona

## Partnerships and Training

Early on, PUSD brought together the key partners and the high school counselors to share data about FAFSA completions, about prior FAFSA events, and about the district. They sought to listen to the counselors' concerns, ensuring their voices were heard about the kind of training and support that was needed. "We constantly used data to determine what worked in the past and what is needed now to shape the needed training," according to PUSD staff. College Depot, the college access center located in Phoenix's largest public library, provided several FAFSA training sessions and hosted events to support individual students. The staff also worked one-on-one with students and were available to answer questions for counselors as they arose. Local colleges were also active partners in FAFSA completion, hosting training events for PUSD counselors and providing expert advice by phone as needed and at school-based events.

## Going Forward

Phoenix will continue to support counselors through training opportunities at College Depot and rely upon their partnership for one-on-one student support. Other sources for one-on-one support will be key higher education partners and College Transition Specialists working through the Be A Leader Foundation. The FAFSA Fiesta kickoff events appear to be the new normal in Phoenix, with possible sponsorship from a local Hispanic-serving grocery chain.

"That's really the big challenge...In order to get very customized and individualized support, which we're realizing is the winning strategy in FAFSA completion, you have to have a mass of people who are ready, willing, and able to do that. It's a matter of pooling all of your resources and making sure that everyone has the knowledge and the tools that they need to be effective in that work." (College Access Leader in Phoenix)

FAFSA-completion tool, you can actually see in real time how the FAFSA completion rate at different schools is growing. You can pinpoint problems with different schools that may be lagging behind."

Many of the cities opted to work with each participating high school to set individual FAFSA-completion goals that would, when combined, result in the achievement of the overall FAFSA-completion goal for the city. Many of these cities developed data dashboards that used the high school-level FAFSA data to show how each high school, and the city as a whole, were doing (*Figure 8*). The dashboards were updated regularly, as new FAFSA data became available, and served as an effective means of keeping attention on the ultimate goal of the project and each city's progress toward that goal. For many cities, this approach was a new one. As the project director for Bakersfield explained:

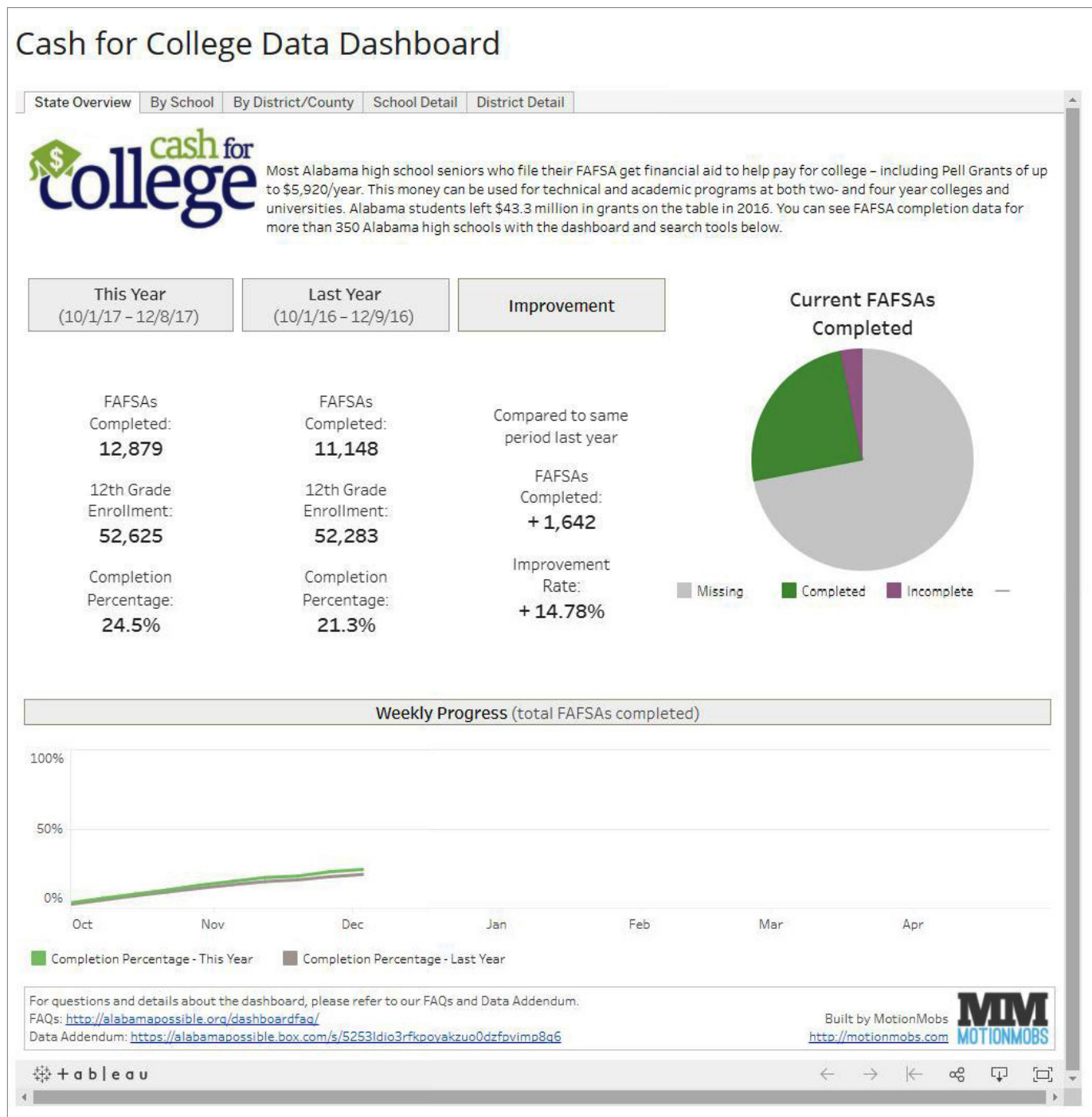
We have created a dashboard that is going out to all the high schools twice a month. It gets updated along with the federal FAFSA numbers that allows for campuses to actually keep track of where they are in their FAFSA completion. Now, that seems pretty basic, but one of the things that we have seen is that campuses are simply not doing this.

Access to FAFSA-completion data can make a difference at the school district level as well. In Jacksonville, for example, the project director shared updated FAFSA-completion data biweekly with district leadership and found that these administrators would often then reach out to high school principals about the data.

### Student Data

In addition, 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 helpful in identifying students whose FAFSAs were rejected due to errors or whose FAFSAs had been selected for verification. The value of this data, in the cities

**FIGURE 8: Screenshot of data dashboard showing FAFSA-completion rates by high school**



that had access to it, cannot be overstated. A high school counselor from Portland put it well by saying, “I think the most important lesson that I have learned from this project has been how valuable individual student data is in our efforts to increase FAFSA completion. It has made a world of difference to be able to see who has completed the FAFSA and to be able to notify students who have errors on their FAFSA.”

Three of the cities—Birmingham, Manchester, and San Juan—did not have access to student-level FAFSA-completion data. Alabama, New Hampshire, and Puerto Rico have not yet developed data-sharing agreements with local school districts that would allow the state to share student-level FAFSA-completion data with the districts and their component high schools. Efforts to develop these data-sharing agreements have begun in both Alabama and New Hampshire, with the expectation that pilot data-sharing programs will soon be underway. Puerto Rico, however, is further behind in this process, especially now that Hurricane Maria has led to such wide-spread destruction on the island.

The cities that did not have access to student-level FAFSA-completion data were at a clear disadvantage in identifying students who had not yet completed the FAFSA. As the project director for Manchester noted, “Everybody we talked to said receiving and utilizing the student-level data was the biggest driver of their increase in FAFSA completion. So it was a little disheartening to find out that we weren’t going to be able to get that this year.” Manchester found a work-around, however, by asking high school counselors to maintain a spreadsheet of students who had completed. Students in the district who showed their counselor their confirmation email or a screenshot of the FAFSA confirmation page were eligible to participate in drawings for prizes, which helped motivate students to share the information with their counselors. Nonetheless, even with that effort, the number of students listed in the spreadsheets lagged behind the total FAFSA-completion numbers for the district.

In addition, even some of the cities that did have access to the student-level data experienced challenges to using it. Several cities did not begin to receive the data from the relevant state agencies until 2017, well into the new extended FAFSA season. Other cities found that too few authorized users were able to access the data and/or that its format was not user-friendly and required considerable work before the data could be easily used by high school counselors and college access professionals. In Los Angeles, for example, the lead organization found that, even though high school counselors in California have access to this information through an online portal, most counselors were not using it. A similar situation existed in Bakersfield, although the project team there was able to resolve the problem when one of their partners, the California Student Opportunity and Access Program, which had already been using the student-level data, was able to convert the data to a more user-friendly format for the school district.

### **Success Yields More Success**

Many of the participating cities found that clear goals, friendly competition, and incentives for schools, counselors, and/or students

*“I think the most important lesson that I have learned from this project has been how valuable individual student data is in our efforts to increase FAFSA completion. It has made a world of difference to be able to see who has completed the FAFSA and to be able to notify students who have errors on their FAFSA.”*



are good ways to spur enthusiasm for engaging in FAFSA-completion efforts. In particular, many cities adapted the FAFSA Completion Challenge model and recognized the high schools with the highest FAFSA-completion rates and those with the largest increases in FAFSA



## CASE STUDY:

# Austin, Texas

Austin's project for the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative was spearheaded by the Austin Chamber of Commerce and included not only the Austin Independent School District but also four smaller districts representing the suburban areas surrounding the city. Building on 11 years of its Financial Aid Saturdays program, the Austin Chamber set the goal of increasing FAFSA-completion rates for high school seniors in these districts by 10 percentage points from an average of 50% in 2015. It has made considerable progress toward that goal, increasing the average FAFSA-completion rate to 58% in June 2017.

## Extending Outreach Efforts

A key aspect of Austin's project was a large-scale integrated outreach effort coordinated by the Austin Chamber. A mass media marketing campaign was complemented by direct text messages to students and families. Social media efforts focused on peer-to-peer communication, with students at each participating high school competing for prizes based on registrations for FAFSA-completion events and

high school-level FAFSA completions. All outreach was conducted in both English and Spanish, and marketing materials directed students and families to a dual-language website—created using funds from the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant—with information about FAFSA completion, scholarships, and opportunities to receive assistance in completing the FAFSA.

## Using Data to Set Goals and Track Student Progress

Throughout the school year, the Austin Chamber tracked FAFSA-completion data at 31 participating high schools and pushed it out to its partner districts, with bi-weekly reports showing FAFSA completion not only at high schools in participating districts but also for other regions across the state of Texas. These reports clearly showed progress towards FAFSA goals at the campus, district, and regional levels, enabling

project partners to refocus their efforts as needed. Districts and high schools used the data to help target their efforts to support students in completing the FAFSA. Each district hosted multiple FAFSA-completion events, which were assisted by business and community volunteers as well as experts from the financial aid offices at local colleges and universities.



# Austin, Texas

## Making Data More User-Friendly

The data-driven aspect of Austin's work was facilitated by use of OneLogos College Ready Portal software, which brought together FAFSA data with data from the state's ApplyTexas common application system and each district's student information system in a user-friendly format. This system allowed high school counselors, supported by near-peer mentors from Advise Texas, to easily see which of their students had completed college applications and/or the FAFSA, which college-ready students had not taken these steps, and which FAFSAs had been flagged for errors or verification. Counselors were then able to address these issues directly with their students. The system's text messaging capability also allowed school districts and campuses to target text messages to parents and students based on FAFSA-completion status during the Chamber's regional financial aid campaign.

## Expanding Partner Capacity

One goal of Austin's project was to extend this capability to their college access partners, which include Breakthrough Austin, College Forward, and Con Mi Madre. Using funds from the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant, the Austin Chamber commissioned OneLogos to design a system that would provide these non-profit partners with information similar to that available to high school counselors. However, progress on this part of the project was slowed by the need to develop data-sharing agreements with each of the school districts in which these college access organizations work as well as by technical capacity limitations at some of the smaller school districts. As a result, the data was not available to the Chamber's college access partners during the 2016-17 school year but is now available for the 2018-19 school year.

completion. In a number of cases, participating cities used their data dashboards to spur competition among high schools and to recognize high schools that were doing particularly well. Each month during the FAFSA season, for example, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, recognized the high school that had most increased the FAFSA completion rate for its seniors. This practice enabled some lower-performing schools to be recognized when their FAFSA-completion rate increased faster than the rate at schools that initially had much higher completion rates.

### Student Incentives

One approach taken in a number of cities was to offer an incentive to the senior class in the high school that was most successful in increasing its FAFSA-completion rate. This incentive often took the form of a party or outing for the winning seniors.

- In Bakersfield, the senior class at the high schools with the highest FAFSA-completion rate and the largest increase in FAFSA completions, together with the schools judged most improved and most creative in their efforts, received ice cream from a local ice cream shop during their senior week at the end of the school year.
- In Detroit, event sponsor Emagine Entertainment provided an all-night party and four VIP movie screenings to the seniors at five winning high schools.

Other cities opted to take an approach to incentivizing students that has been used in FAFSA-completion efforts for many years—entering all students who completed a FAFSA at a specific school or FAFSA-completion event into a drawing for a prize, often a college scholarship. Columbus, Jackson, Baton Rouge, and Manchester all used the raffle approach but opted to award smaller monthly prizes. In Jackson, students were given stickers at FAFSA-completion events and were entered into the drawing if they took a picture of themselves wearing the sticker and posted it to the project's social media.



Some cities offered small incentives to every senior who completed a FAFSA or who completed it by a set date. Cleveland, Ohio, set up a peer-to-peer challenge. Students who had already completed the FAFSA were asked to refer their friends. Once a friend completed the FAFSA, both students were eligible for a \$10 gift card to Chipotle. Other incentives awarded to students included t-shirts and gift certificates to local restaurants, movie theatres, or sporting events, and in many cases, were provided by local businesses.

School-based incentives included extra tickets to graduation, free prom tickets, and vouchers for graduation regalia. In some of the participating school districts around Austin, students could win the chance to skip one final exam. In Puerto Rico, students must complete 20 vocational exploration hours in order to graduate, and San Juan students who attended a FAFSA-completion event were credited with some of these hours. Postsecondary institutions also contributed student incentives. In Manchester, for example, the local community college and university offered application fee waivers to any student who completed a FAFSA.

### School Incentives

Some cities opted to supplement or replace student incentives with incentives for high schools. In Charleston, Jackson, Greensboro, and Philadelphia, for example, the high schools that were most successful in increasing FAFSA completions received cash prizes. Baton Rouge chose to recognize each month the high school that was most successful in increasing FAFSA completions. Other cities chose to focus incentives on the high school counselors whose work was a crucial driver of increases in FAFSA completions.

- In Austin, counselors from the best-performing high schools were invited to attend a group dinner at a local restaurant.
- In Jackson, the counselor whose school showed the largest increase in FAFSA completions and the one whose school first reached 50% FAFSA completion each won a \$100 gift card.



Photo courtesy Charleston, WV.

The project team reported that this incentive was more effective than the smaller gift cards offered to students who completed the FAFSA early and noted that one of the winning counselors hosted an in-school FAFSA-completion event once a month from October through May.

- Louisville sponsored a contest for counselors and rewarded those with the most social media activity and the most creative posts with prizes such as gift cards and breakfast for their team, an activity that they found to be effective and well-received.

While many of the cities that took this approach felt that rewarding schools and counselors for their efforts in increasing FAFSA completions was more valuable than providing incentives to students, they did caution that it is important to focus on the contributions made by schools and counselors to reaching the overall FAFSA-completion goal and not just emphasize competition among schools, which could cause hard feelings and discourage cooperative efforts across schools.

## CASE STUDY:

# Charleston, West Virginia

West Virginia has faced an ongoing struggle to address the challenges of low educational attainment and poverty in their state. The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (WVHEPC), along with many other partners, seek to address these challenges through a variety of efforts to improve educational outcomes. For this grant, WVHEPC expanded upon their previous FAFSA awareness work in rural areas (funded through federal grants) in an effort to greatly increase FAFSA completion in the city of Charleston. Kanawha County schools, which serves Charleston, consists of eight high schools that became the focus of a communication- and competition-based strategy to build momentum and excitement around financial aid and FAFSA completion. Between 2015 and 2017, Charleston increased its FAFSA-completion rate by almost nine percentage points, which represents 16.5% growth.



## Strategic Communications

Each of the Kanawha County high schools carried out their own individualized outreach plans through the calendar year. This involved developing a comprehensive marketing plan with a school calendar of FAFSA events, social media outreach, text

messages, posters, ads and promotional activities at Friday football games. In addition to these school-based strategies, county-wide messaging efforts occurred through recorded phone messages, public service announcements, and local news coverage.

## Targeted Access to Counseling Support

High school counselors devoted a good deal of time to personally inviting families to FAFSA events and explaining the relevance of FAFSA to their student and career interests. This personal outreach was both an opportunity for education and trust-building with

parents. School-based counselors and administrators continuously tracked progress towards reaching their FAFSA completion goals and were able to use student-level to identify and counsel individual students who needed additional help with the FAFSA.

## Friendly Competition

Charleston created a “College Cup” competition among the eight high schools to spur engagement in raising their FAFSA-completion rates. This competition created a great deal of excitement and awareness among students, families, and school staff as schools developed their strategies for success. Most of the

high schools developed portfolios that documented their work and some of the best practices they had used. They also developed sustainability plans to articulate how they will continue to execute FAFSA education and outreach in subsequent years.

## You Don't Know What You Don't Know

Project directors also pointed to the importance of giving school counselors the tools and support they need to assist students in completing the FAFSA and to keep track of their students' progress through the use of student-level data, areas in which the counselors have typically received little training or support. Several cities discovered that counselors in the local school district felt quite insecure about helping students complete their FAFSAs, a reflection of the fact that college access topics such as financial aid are typically not a part of pre- and in-service training for high school counselors. Counselor workloads were also a concern. The project director for Manchester noted, "I think the additional barrier in Manchester is partially the huge caseloads that the guidance counselors have. So, even those people who would be best situated to encourage students to complete the FAFSA simply don't have time to speak to every single student."

## Comfort in Assisting with the FAFSA

Offering training on financial aid and FAFSA completion was a central aspect of the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative for most participating cities. Most cities offered several training opportunities



Photo courtesy Phoenix, AZ (left) and Charleston, WV (right).

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.

- In Albuquerque, local partners provided a hotel conference space, which allowed project coordinators to open their training up to counselors from across the state, as well as serving counselors from the local school district and volunteers from community partners.
- In San Juan, project coordinators strengthened their relationship with the Puerto Rico Department of Education by offering financial aid training to counselors from across the island.
- Louisville developed a two-part toolkit, with one part aimed at groups that want to hold a FAFSA-completion event and the other targeted to students and families doing their FAFSAs at home to make sure they have access to all the best resources.

The training efforts offered in many participating cities included not only technical information on how to complete the FAFSA but also broader college access topics.

- In Greensboro, the school district held its first professional development day on creating a college-going culture, with a focus on financial literacy and financial aid topics and with 178 out of 209 total counselors in attendance.
- In Bakersfield, the core team expanded the training offered each year by the California Student Aid Commission to also include strategies for reaching students and working with special groups such as foster youth and undocumented students.

While training was often one of the first activities undertaken in participating cities, some cities found it important to extend that training to later in the year. In Los Angeles, for example, there was considerable concern over the low number of applications from the Latino community following the presidential election and then the executive orders signed during the first few weeks of the new



administration. To address this concern, the project team worked with the community college and university systems to talk to the counselors about the services provided for undocumented students on campus. At the same event, the California Student Aid Commission addressed questions about data privacy and opportunities for immigrant and undocumented youth. This training, combined with local and statewide outreach about the issue, helped to turn around the decline in applications.

Even when counselors and other volunteers have been well-trained on financial aid and the FAFSA, they may have questions about complicated student situations. One approach used in several cities was to provide expert help to schools when they held FAFSA-completion events. In Albuquerque, for instance, the project team arranged for individuals from their partner organizations to attend the 60 to 70 FAFSA-completion events put on by local high schools. As a team member explained, “It’s an extra set of hands and expertise to address unique situations about a family that maybe a high school counselor doesn’t always see.”

### Many Hands Make Light Work

Even with training and expert help, high school counselors may find it difficult to work one-on-one on FAFSA completion with all of the seniors at their schools. In Cheyenne, where the team used grant funds to pay for a staff person who would work in the schools supporting FAFSA completion, this situation quickly became clear. A team member said, “I think one thing that I underestimated when we first got into it was just how valuable it is to have somebody that can come into your school and help out those counselors.”

An approach that worked well for several cities was to recruit near-peer mentors to work in the schools to supplement the counselors. In Manchester, for instance, the core team worked with a local university to build and train a team of work-study students who, in teams of two, spent time on a weekly basis in their assigned high schools. The

students did presentations on financial aid and FAFSA completion in all senior English classes and held regular office hours during which students could come to them for help with the FAFSA. Because the FAFSA advisors were themselves college students from similar backgrounds as the students with whom they were working, they could share their own experiences and challenges. The project director said of this program, “The FAFSA advisors’ presence in the schools seems to be making a huge difference, because not only does that mean that the guidance counselors have someone to send the student to so that they can free up their own time, it’s someone who is expert and trained on the FAFSA.” Manchester plans to continue this program in the future and to recruit FAFSA advisors from additional universities.

Some cities were able to take advantage of college access programs that already place near-peer mentors in high schools.

- Phoenix, Columbus, and Kansas City all partnered with organizations—Be A Leader Foundation in Phoenix, I Know I Can in Columbus, and the Missouri College Advising Corps in Kansas City—that place Americorps volunteers as near-peer mentors in local high schools.
- In Greensboro, Carolina College Advising Corps advisors work in four local high schools, and FAFSA-completion rates for those high schools have increased considerably since the program began.

Near-peer mentors also proved valuable working with community partners in some cities. In Houston, Project GRAD trained a group of recent high school graduates as “FAFSA Roadies,” and sent them to FAFSA-completion events sponsored by community-based organizations. While they have learned that many of the individuals served by these organizations and many of those who attended an event were not high school seniors and were there to get general information about financial aid rather than to complete a FAFSA, the core team sees these events as serving an important function in raising community awareness about financial aid and the FAFSA.



## CASE STUDY:

# Jackson, Mississippi

Despite recent leadership challenges and relatively low FAFSA-completion rates, Jackson Public Schools (JPS) continues to seek out ways to increase its college-going culture and support families in getting their young people on the path to college. For this grant, the Get2College Program of the Woodward Hines Foundation worked directly with JPS, providing extensive technical expertise on FAFSA completion and bringing together a coalition of many key partners from across Jackson. Jackson increased its seniors FAFSA-completion rate by 7 percentage points in the two-year period of the competition.

## Using Data to Follow Up with Students and to Track Progress

Get2College provided school counselors with biweekly lists of students to help focus follow-up on those who needed to fill out FAFSAs and those with incomplete

applications. This student-level data was central to the success of its campaign to increase FAFSA completion.

## Marketing Mattered

Jackson's marketing campaign slogan, "First you haf-ta FAFSA," was put on t-shirts and flyers, and used

on local radio spots. It was an important element to launching the effort and raising broad awareness.

## Counselors Are Key

At the start of the project many counselors did not know about the FAFSA-completion rates of their students or were unaware that they could access student-level data. Get2College worked to support

and train counselors in accessing this information and provided incentives to jumpstart friendly competition among schools with a sense of accountability on applicant numbers.

## Partnerships Make It Possible

Partnerships were critical to this collective effort. The Mississippi Office of Financial Aid, for instance, gave access to critical data; partnerships with higher education institutions and Phi Theta Kappa yielded volunteers that helped students one-on-one. Many organizations, from the Chamber of Commerce to Parents for Public Schools, 100 Black Men, and the Mississippi Department of Education, contributed to

the effort. The Mississippi community college system, several other postsecondary institutions, the Phi Theta Kappa organization, and the Mississippi Office of Student Financial Aid all provided volunteer hours critical to accomplishing the work. Some of these partnerships have resulted in lasting change in the form of new initiatives like the Get2College Volunteer Corps.



# Jackson, Mississippi

## Looking Forward

Supporting counselors was almost universally viewed as the key to raising FAFSA-completion rates and keeping them high. Project participants hoped to develop professional development webinars to help counselors learn to use FAFSA data: where to access it, how to filter it, and what to do with it (and when) in order to make sure students get the financial aid they need. Also on the docket are efforts to expand the Get2College Volunteer Corps statewide, to be a more consistent presence throughout the year, to bring more principals into the mix (particularly with respect to sharing progress data at their schools), and to re-evaluate what training formats are most effective for counselors.

## Can You Hear Me Now?

Many of the cities participating in the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative found that reaching students and families was not their biggest outreach challenge. Many school districts have systems that send automated messages by phone, text, and/or email, as well as having websites, social media sites, places to post flyers, and in-school announcements—all of which can help ensure that most students and their families are aware of opportunities to complete the FAFSA. The larger concern for participating cities was making sure that these students and their families realize that they can afford to attend a postsecondary institution and that completing the FAFSA will help them get financial aid.

In some cities, where FAFSA-completion work was done largely in the schools, students became the connection to their parents, a process that was aided by the availability of the IRS DATA Retrieval Tool during much of the school year. Students were encouraged to call their parents while they worked on the FAFSA in order to get missing information. Some schools had the students take home worksheets to help them collect the necessary information to complete the FAFSA. However, this approach doesn't work for students or parents who still don't see the importance of completing the FAFSA. To address this outreach challenge, participating cities identified several promising approaches.

## Peer Outreach

Many participating cities found that peer outreach was an important way to inspire high school students to complete a FAFSA. Some cities opted to use student input in designing outreach campaigns. In Phoenix, for example, students from two of the local high schools created print and video marketing campaigns as part of their work in graphic design and broadcasting classes. Detroit challenged each participating high school to create a video in which they accepted the city's challenge of 60% FAFSA completion.



Other cities emphasized peer-to-peer communication in the high schools.

- In Austin, students from each participating high school were provided with content to share on social media promoting FAFSA completion and reminding their peers about upcoming events. The students whose schools saw the best attendance at FAFSA-completion events received rewards, including a very popular incentive—tickets to the Austin City Limits or South by Southwest music festivals.
- In Birmingham, junior and senior FAFSA Ambassadors recommended by their counselors were trained to communicate with their peers the importance of completing college applications, applying for scholarships, and filling out the FAFSA.
- In Baton Rouge, the FAFSA Ambassadors were asked to come up with creative ways to promote FAFSA completion and raise attention about the competition among the high schools. They developed calendars of events and outreach ideas, used their social media to reach out to their peers, and provided useful input on the incentives their peers might respond to best.

## Community Engagement

Community engagement proved to be one of the most challenging areas for cities participating in the FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative. Each city tried different strategies, and while some were successful, none really 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.



FIGURE 9: Outreach materials

Several cities experimented with unusual venues for FAFSA events, an approach that was quite successful in garnering media coverage and increased awareness of the FAFSA but did not always yield large numbers of additional FAFSA completions.

- San Juan chose to hold their two city-wide FAFSA-completion events at a centrally-located local mall, which donated space in an empty storefront that could accommodate 300 to 500 people at a time.
- In Bakersfield, the local Apple Store opened at 8:00 AM on a Saturday, and for two hours, parents and students were invited to fill out the FAFSA on a brand new Apple device.
- Baton Rouge offered FAFSA-completion assistance at a district-wide basketball tournament held in December and discovered that many parents were willing to drop in and work on the FAFSA before or after watching their children compete.
- Charleston, in a similar approach, used the school district's Wi-Fi-enabled school buses as mobile computer labs in order to host FAFSA-completion events at Friday night high school football games.

Other cities tried to take a personal approach to community outreach, rather than relying on mass media campaigns.

- Jacksonville worked with the local chamber of commerce to develop “lunch and learn” sessions for employees working second or third shifts.
- Cheyenne set up a table at the Greater Cheyenne Chamber of Commerce's Business-to-Business Expo and used this popular networking opportunity as a way to spread information about financial aid and the FAFSA.

- Cleveland partnered with the Cleveland Transformation Alliance whose members go door-to-door and attend community events to share information on education-related topics such as high school choice, and now, the financial aid process.
- Columbus made an effort to better serve students in immigrant and refugee communities by connecting with organizations currently working within each community and partnering with them to offer FAFSA workshops with translation services available.





## CASE STUDY:

# Baton Rouge, Louisiana

In 2015, the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education mandated FAFSA completion as a graduation requirement for high school seniors beginning in the 2017-18 academic year. Baton Rouge's FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative project, led by the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance (LOSFA), became a pilot site for this larger initiative, allowing the state agency to try out a variety of approaches for increasing FAFSA completion in the East Baton Rouge school district. LOSFA's goal was to raise the district's completion rate by 4.4 percentage points to 48.4%. It succeeded in reaching this goal, with a FAFSA-completion rate of 48.6% as of June 2017.

### Raising Awareness

With FAFSA completion soon to be a graduation requirement, LOSFA saw the importance of raising awareness of financial aid opportunities, clarifying the role of the FAFSA, and dispelling misconceptions about both the FAFSA and the financial-aid process. It

undertook an outreach campaign that encompassed school-based strategies such as text messaging and postcard mailers as well as wider-ranging approaches such as a televised public service announcement, social media outreach, and local news coverage.

### Connecting with Peers

Recognizing that high school students may be more receptive to messages from their peers, LOSFA identified FAFSA Ambassadors at participating high schools. These students, nominated by their schools, were trained as FAFSA Ambassadors and tasked with coming up with creative ways to convince their fellow students to complete the FAFSA. Ambassadors

developed monthly outreach plans for their schools, brainstormed incentives to motivate their classmates, and engaged with peers on social media. A monthly competition to have their high school named a FAFSA Challenge Champion helped keep the Ambassadors engaged in this work throughout the year.

### Connecting with Families

Finding ways to connect with the families of high school seniors was another challenge for the core project team in Baton Rouge. While in-school outreach efforts were effective at persuading students to complete their portion of the FAFSA, alternative strategies were needed to reach families. Using the school district's automated calling system proved one useful approach, but the team also tried some creative ideas. The partners set up tables at a multi-

day basketball tournament that brings together teams from high schools across Baton Rouge and surrounding areas and encouraged students and parents to take some time away from the tournament to fill out the FAFSA. Participating coaches agreed to encourage the seniors on their teams to take advantage of this opportunity, and the school district requested further FAFSA-completion events in conjunction with similar activities.



# Baton Rouge, Louisiana

## Connecting with the Community

A positive outcome of the work done in Baton Rouge has been increased awareness of financial aid and the FAFSA in the community. As a core team member explains, “Many of the schools and families that we assisted did not know of the resources available to them. Our visibility in both the schools and the community created a word-of-mouth buzz, which also raised awareness of FAFSA completion and how we were helping students.” This community buzz was enhanced by creative activities such as LOSFA’s all-day FAFSA Block Party. Held on a Saturday at a public library in East Baton Rouge, the event combined music, a pizza party, and giveaways from a local media partner with the opportunity to fill out or correct errors on the FAFSA.



## CONCLUSION

The FAFSA Completion Challenge Grant Initiative has yielded tangible and meaningful increases in the FAFSA-completion rates for high school seniors in most participating cities and has generated important lessons for this work in the future. Many of the cities’ successes were characterized by strong leading organizations that coordinated generous collaboration and support amongst partners. Their efforts created new opportunities and energized partnerships among key stakeholders around a shared goal and vision. This energy will most likely persist as these cities continue their efforts to increase FAFSA completion.

The participating cities in this initiative have built an impressive momentum in this work, but they—and other cities—would benefit from further support and investment. Further funding of place-based FAFSA-completion efforts would help address the specific needs of each city and support local financial aid awareness campaigns, ensure access to student-level data, and provide resources for more one-on-one application support for a wider range of students seeking opportunities to earn a college degree. Hopefully the success of these cities in increasing FAFSA-completion rates for high school seniors will serve to motivate other cities and other funders to continue this important work.

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