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FLORIDA FAFSA CHALLENGE

FAFSA COMPLETION TOOLKIT 2016 – 2017

October 11, 2016

On behalf of the Florida College Access Network (Florida CAN), thank you for participating in the 2016 - 17 Florida FAFSA Challenge! This is an exciting initiative that aims to increase the proportion of Florida high school seniors who complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which helps students qualify for financial aid, like Pell Grants, to help pay for college. The Florida FAFSA Challenge encourages schools, districts, and communities to set bold and attainable FAFSA completion goals and implement strategies designed to help more students afford college.

While many schools, districts, local college access networks, and nonprofits in the state have already been working hard to boost FAFSA completion rates, this initiative will recognize their achievements and support their efforts with access to resources and proven strategies. This guide introduces the campaign and provides a one-stop shop for FAFSA resources to support your success—and ultimately, the success of your students. We also ask that you share your successful strategies with us. We may even feature your achievements throughout the campaign! Contact our Special Projects Coordinator, Arianna Pineiro, at apineiro@floridacollegeaccess.org with your promising practices.

The Florida FAFSA Challenge is made possible thanks to the support of the Helios Education Foundation and the Swift Family Foundation.

INTRODUCTION

About Florida CAN

Florida College Access Network (Florida CAN) is a statewide network of leaders, organizations, and educators who are collectively committed to dramatically increasing postsecondary opportunities for all Florida students—especially students traditionally underrepresented in higher education, such as low income students and those who are the first in their families to go to college.

Our Mission: To create and strengthen a statewide network that catalyzes and supports communities to improve college and career readiness, access, and completion for all students.

Our Vision: At least 60% of working-age Floridians will hold a high-quality post-secondary degree or credential by the year 2025.

Our Guiding Values:

- College is postsecondary education
- College readiness is career readiness
- College is for everyone
- College is a public good
- Reaching Goal 2025 will require collective action

About the Florida FAFSA Challenge

Florida FAFSA Challenge is a new statewide campaign that aims to increase the proportion of Florida high school seniors who complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The campaign encourages districts and schools to set a FAFSA completion goal to increase the proportion of their high school seniors who complete the FAFSA by 5% from the prior year. The challenge runs from October 1, 2016 through March 31, 2017, and is open to all public high schools in Florida.

Florida CAN will celebrate your school's or district's progress and ultimately, your success. Working together, Florida can and will ensure that all students have access to the financial resources they need to afford a postsecondary education.

Florida FAFSA Challenge Awards

What does your school or district get if you meet the Florida FAFSA Challenge?

Two words: bragging rights! Florida CAN will publicly celebrate your achievement and your commitment to ensuring that your high school seniors have the financial resources they need to afford a postsecondary education. You might even win a cool trophy!



Mater Academy Lakes High School



Sarasota County School District

The Winners Circle

“MVP” (Have the highest FAFSA completion rate through March 31st)

“Most Improved” (Improved their FAFSA completion rate the most compared to last year through March 31st)

“Biggest Boost” (Largest week to week improvement in FAFSAs completed)

Within each category, schools and districts compete against those of a similar size. Winners in each of these categories will win a trophy. Florida CAN will also congratulate your school or district in a press release, in its newsletter, and on its website.

Champions

Florida schools and districts that achieve a boost in FAFSA completion by at least 5% over last year, or who meet a goal that they set for their school. Florida CAN will list your school’s name in a press release and on its website and provide a certificate to your school.

Why the FAFSA is Important

While most Floridians would agree that a college degree is important, college seems out of reach for many Florida students who fear they won't be able to afford it. Completing the FAFSA is the first step in making college affordable for students. By helping students through this sometimes confusing process, schools and communities can help students make their dreams of postsecondary education a reality.

According to a 2015 analysis by Florida CAN, completing the FAFSA was found to be a significant predictor of college attendance using data from over 450 schools. Yet Florida lags most states in the country in FAFSA completion, ranking 39th in the proportion of our seniors who completed the FAFSA in 2014-15. Florida CAN calculates that the Florida graduating high school class of 2015 collectively left behind over \$100 million in Pell Grant monies alone—free money they could have used to help pay for college or career school.

Not only is it important for students to complete the FAFSA, but they should also do so as early as possible. Although students can complete the FAFSA application throughout the year, many colleges and universities have deadlines for institutional financial aid. The earlier students complete the FAFSA, the more money they are likely to get. Research shows students who complete the FAFSA in the first three months after it opens receive twice as much state and institutional aid as students who complete the form later.

STRATEGIES

Your school or community may already organize a FAFSA completion initiative, such as College Goal Sunday or FAFSA night. If so, you're well on your way to meeting your goal! If your school does not yet have an initiative for helping students with the FAFSA, now is a great time to start.

(1) Set a goal and track your data

We recommend that you set a goal that is **5% higher** than your school's FAFSA completion rate as of March 31st of last year. However, schools are welcome and encouraged to set more ambitious goals, or goals that fit your school's unique circumstances. To find your school's FAFSA completion rate for last year as of March 31st, visit the [Florida FAFSA Finish Line Data Dashboard](#). There you can look up your high school's and/or district's FAFSA completion rate for last spring and, beginning in October 2016, track your progress toward your goal.



Seminole Ridge Community High School

Once you have decided on a goal for your school, please register with us by completing this [brief form](#). By registering, you will receive regular updates and technical assistance.

Tips!

- Make your goal ambitious but attainable, keeping in mind your school's unique needs.
- Work with a broad team within your school to set and support your high school's goal.
- If you have a local college access network in your community, make sure your school's goal aligns with any community-wide FAFSA goals.
- Make your goal public! Post your goal in a prominent location in the school and track and report on your progress throughout the challenge through announcements over the loudspeaker and other means.

Resources

Tracking Your School's Progress: Florida FAFSA Finish Line Data Dashboard

https://public.tableau.com/views/FloridaFAFSAFinishLine/BySchool?:embed=y&:display_count=yes

The Florida FAFSA Finish Line data dashboard features FAFSA completion rates for 12th graders at over 500 public schools in Florida, including district- and state-level figures. During FAFSA season, the dashboard is updated regularly, giving you near-real-time information on the FAFSA completion rates at your school. Use this dashboard to easily keep track of your school's progress towards its goal.

Student-Level Data

The Florida Department of Education Office of Student Financial Assistance (OFSA) is working with school districts to make student-level FAFSA completion data available to schools. Knowing which of your students have completed the FAFSA can help you identify and reach out to those students who have not. For more information on how school districts can have access to this data, contact Lori Auxier, OFSA Director of Outreach, at lauxier@fldoe.org.

(2) Hold a FAFSA event

There are a number of different types of events that a school or community can hold to help students and families successfully complete the FAFSA. Some examples:



North Port High School

- Host a FAFSA Information Night where students and families can learn about what they need to successfully complete the FAFSA, stressing the importance of completing the FAFSA early.
- Host a FAFSA Lab where students and families have the opportunity to complete their FAFSA application with the assistance of on-site volunteers. Staff from the financial aid office at a local college are often willing to assist with or even organize such labs and can provide valuable expertise on the process.
- Sign up to host a College Goal Sunday (CGS!Florida) event, or partner with an existing event in your community, promoting the event at your school. These events provide personalized FAFSA completion assistance at sites across the state.

Resources

Form Your Future Event Toolkit

<http://formyourfuture.org/>

The National College Access Network's Form Your Future initiative includes an event toolkit with everything you need to host a FAFSA completion event in your community, including planning guidance, invitation templates, flyers, handouts and more.

College Goal Sunday (CGS!Florida)

<http://www.navigatingyourfinancialfuture.org/CGS!FLORIDA/>

In partnership with the Florida Association of Financial Aid Administrators (FASFAA), the Florida Department of Education's Office of Student Financial Assistance (OSFA) coordinates CGS!Florida, a free program that provides personalized FAFSA completion assistance to students and families. CGS!Florida takes place during FAFSA season at sites throughout Florida. Sites and dates posted at the link above.

Financial Aid Toolkit: Hosting an Event

Overview: <https://financialaidtoolkit.ed.gov/tk/outreach/host-event.jsp>

Planning Toolkit: <https://financialaidtoolkit.ed.gov/resources/how-to-host-a-financial-aid-event-in-your-community.pdf>

Additional Tips for a FAFSA Workshop: <https://financialaidtoolkit.ed.gov/tk/outreach/host-event/fafsa-completion.jsp#host-fafsa-workshop>

The Office of Federal Student Aid has created a useful and easy to follow guide for hosting a FAFSA event. From the overview page, you can also access their vast collection of free tools and resources, which can be used to market the event or at the event itself.

FAFSA Event Volunteer Training

<http://www.collegegoalsundayusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/FAFSA-Training-for-Volunteers.pdf>

This PowerPoint from College Goal Washington is an example of a training that might be provided to volunteers for a FAFSA completion event that can be used as a guide for your own event.

(3) Promote the importance of FAFSA to students and families

One of the biggest barriers to FAFSA completion is misinformation and lack of information. Students and families might not know about the resource or think they would qualify. Others may be intimidated by the form. Yet others may not realize that the form is a prerequisite to qualify for other types of aid, beyond federal aid. By developing a strong outreach plan for students and families, your school can provide valuable information and encourage all seniors to complete the FAFSA.

- Promote FAFSA completion through all channels available: morning announcements, posters and flyers, social media, letters home, newsletters, etc.
- Stress the importance of FAFSA completion, address common misconceptions, build excitement around your goal, and provide helpful tips on completion to students and families.
- Utilize the many available resources for student and family outreach described in the “Additional Resources” section, including flyers, posters, modules and YouTube videos on the FAFSA and financial aid.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE: STUDENT VIDEO CONTEST

Last year, Sarasota’s Talent4Tomorrow Partnership’s local college access network (LCAN) partnered with a local film festival and schools to hold a student video contest, in which students were tasked with creating a PSA to increase awareness about the importance of the FAFSA. Winners received a cash prize, and the first place winner was invited to a red carpet event at the film festival. The winners and honorable mentions can be viewed [here](#).

Not only did this raise awareness of the importance of the FAFSA among those that participated in the contest, but it resulted in a number of unique student-created videos that could be used to appeal to their peers.

Resources

Form Your Future Event Toolkit

<http://formyourfuture.org/>

The National College Access Network's Form Your Future initiative also includes a FAFSA Guide, which provides an overview of the FAFSA process, as well as an Outreach Toolkit, which includes flyers, emails, social media posts, and more!

Office of Federal Student Aid YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCEnu3BHoR9IYgBnCkqQdgmA>

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Federal Student Aid has a YouTube channel with a number of simple and engaging videos that can be shared with students and families. Be sure to use the most recent videos, as some information has changed.

Office of Federal Student Aid Twitter Page

<https://twitter.com/FAFSA>

The FAFSA Twitter page, maintained by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Federal Student Aid, provides timely reminders of relevant information and deadlines related to federal student aid programs. The site hosts live question and answer sessions during "#AskFAFSA Office Hour" to allow students, parents and others the chance to get FAFSA and financial aid questions answered from federal officials.

U.S. Department of Education's Homeroom Blog: Federal Student Aid

<http://www.ed.gov/blog/topic/federal-student-aid/>

Homeroom is the official blog of the U.S. Department of Education and publishes timely information and resources relevant to FAFSA completion and federal student aid. Some examples of blog topics, which are great for including in newsletters or emails to parents, include: 5 Things to do After Filing Your FAFSA, Top 5 FAFSA FAQs, 7 Common Myths about Financial Aid, and 7 Common FAFSA Mistakes.

Federal Student Aid on Social Media

<https://financialaidtoolkit.ed.gov/tk/outreach/social-media.jsp>

The Department of Education's Office of Federal Student Aid has a strong social media presence, which can be leveraged to promote the importance of FAFSA in your school and community. In addition to providing links to all of their social media channels, this page includes some tips on sharing these resources with students and families, such as sample tweets.

(4) Text students with important reminders

One proven way to improve FAFSA completion rates is through text message reminders to students. As part of the Better Make Room initiative, the U.S. Department of Education has partnered with **Up Next** (<https://www.whatsupnext.us/>), a service that sends text reminders to guide students through the application and financial aid process. This service is free to schools and students.

Several communities have texting projects with reminders specific to local and state colleges, including FAFSA reminders.

- Heart of Florida United Way/Central Florida College Access Network: <http://www.hfuw.org/going2college/>
- Earn Up!/Northeast Florida College Access Network: <http://earnup.org/earn-up-text-alerts>
- United Way of North Central Florida: <http://www.unitedwayncfl.org/going2college>

If you are interested in setting up a text-based outreach platform for FAFSA completion for students in your school/district/community, the National College Access Network (NCAN) partners with Signal Vine, a technology company which provides this service for NCAN members [at a discounted price](#).

Another tool, which is free for educators, is [Remind](#), formerly known as Remind101. Many schools are already using Remind for a variety of purposes, and FAFSA messaging can be easily added in.

(5) Provide incentives and engage in friendly competition



Nova High School

- Create an incentive for students who complete the FAFSA. Door prizes, raffles, and food (like pizza at a FAFSA night) are great examples.
- Districts can host a challenge among their high schools with awards and prizes. Post weekly updates in a public place where school counselors, teachers and administrators can see them.
- Some schools require eligible students to complete the FAFSA in order to buy prom tickets, or offer a discount on tickets to FAFSA completers.

Tip: If your school has students who are not eligible to complete the FAFSA, be sure to include them by encouraging them to apply to a scholarship as an alternate way of participating!

(6) Collaborate with community partners and champions

FAFSA completion should be a goal not just for high schools, but for the community as a whole. For example, several local college access networks in Florida have set FAFSA completion goals for their regions and partner with local schools and districts to meet their goals. Community partners can help support your school's efforts and promote the importance of FAFSA completion beyond your school's walls. For example:

- Ask your mayor or city council for a proclamation to celebrate your goal or to adopt a city-wide FAFSA completion goal.
- Partner with the financial aid office at a local college or university to provide expertise, resources, and volunteers for a FAFSA information night or a FAFSA completion lab.
- Ask local businesses to donate prizes or food or provide volunteers for a FAFSA event.
- Many local college access networks have set goals to boost FAFSA completion in their regions. If you would like to connect with a local college access network in your region, contact Florida CAN's Special Projects Coordinator at apineiro@floridacollegeaccess.org.
- Check with your local education foundation. Many education foundations support or lead college access programs in their districts.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

General FAFSA Information

Webinar: Announcing the 2016 Florida FAFSA Challenge

<http://www.floridacollegeaccess.org/event/florida-can-webinar-announcing-the-2016-florida-fafsa-challenge/>

The Florida College Access Network hosted a webinar in December 2015 to announce the 2016 Florida FAFSA Challenge and highlight strategies to benefit students in completing the application. The webinar recording and slides will be made available at the above link.

Webinar: It's FAFSA Season, Let the "Funds" Begin!

<http://www.floridacollegeaccess.org/event/its-fafsa-season-let-the-funds-begin/>

In January 2015, the Florida College Access Network hosted a webinar featuring strategies and resources for boosting FAFSA completion. The webinar recording and slides are available through the above link.

FAFSA Demo Website

<http://fafsademotest.ed.gov/>

This FAFSA demonstration website allows you to walk through the FAFSA process as a student would. This is a great training tool for staff and volunteers who will be helping students and families with the FAFSA. You can access the demonstration site using *eddemo* as the User name and *fafsatest* as the Password.

2017-2018 FAFSA on the Web Preview Presentation

<https://www.ifap.ed.gov/eannouncements/attachments/1718FOTWPreviewPresentation.pptx>

This presentation, produced by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Federal Student Aid, provides a step-by-step preview of this year's FAFSA on the Web site. It's a great way for counselors, college access professionals, and others to familiarize themselves with the ins and outs of this year's FAFSA application. The slides can also be used or modified to create your own FAFSA presentation.

English-Spanish Glossary

<http://www.tgslc.org/spanish/glossary/index.cfm?id=A>

This extensive glossary can help financial aid professionals and others find the Spanish-language equivalents for common financial aid terms.

The FAFSA Completion Project: An Annotated Bibliography

<http://www.floridacollegeaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/FAFSABibliography.pdf>

Published in 2011 by the U.S. Department of Education, this annotated bibliography links to free resources available online to support school systems in their development of FAFSA completion programs and policies. The resources are grouped into categories by audience: research, policy, and programmatic studies and practical guides for principals and administrators; training and support materials, publicity, handouts, troubleshooting guides, and background information for counselors; and informational and supportive guides for students and their families. In addition, specific resources supporting a data-driven program are also included.

Trainings for Counselors & College Access Professionals

National College Access Network Training Resources

<http://www.collegeaccess.org/ELearning>

The National College Access Network (NCAN) provides e-learning resources to college access professionals, with select modules focusing on federal student aid programs, financial aid and FAFSA completion. The modules are self-paced, available year-round, and reflect evidence-based practices. While some of the modules are free, the two FAFSA-focused modules are \$119 each.

National Training for Counselors and Mentors (NT4CM) Webinar

Archived webinar & slides: <https://financialaidtoolkit.ed.gov/tk/training/trainers/training.jsp>

Additional training materials: <https://financialaidtoolkit.ed.gov/tk/training/trainers/elibrary.jsp>

Offered live August 18th, from 1:30pm - 3:00pm. The National Training for Counselors and Mentors is a collaboration between a number of agencies to provide financial aid training to school counselors and mentors. The webinar is 90 minutes long, and covers Federal Student Aid programs, Scholarship searches and Financial Aid fraud.

2017–18 Counselors and Mentors Handbook on Federal Student Aid

<https://www.edpubs.gov/document/en1341p.pdf?ck=1>

Compiled by the U.S. Department of Education, this handbook is another resource for those that will be assisting students and families complete the FAFSA. It includes both information specifically on completing the FAFSA, as well as information on federal student aid more generally.

Mapping Your Future: FAFSA Training for Service Providers

<https://mappingyourfuture.org/services/webinars.cfm>

Mapping Your Future offers a free FAFSA training to financial aid professionals and others helping students complete the FAFSA, as well as a webinar for students and parents. To register for one of these webinars, follow the link above. Past webinars are also available on-demand.

Florida Department of Education Office of Student Financial Assistance (OSFA)

<http://www.navigatingyourfinancialfuture.org/>

OSFA provides in-person training and resources to districts, schools, and community partners on the FAFSA and financial aid, and can also connect you to outside resources that can provide you with the training you need.

Fundamentals of Financial Aid PowerPoint

<http://www.collegegoalsundayusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Fundamentals-of-Financial-Aid.pdf>

This PowerPoint by the Illinois Student Assistance Commission aims to help participants identify key financial aid terms and concepts, outline the process of establishing eligibility and applying for aid, and identify trusted sources of information. While some aspects of the presentation are Illinois-specific or outdated, there is a great deal of useful information that is not state-specific.

Working with Special Populations

College Board: Advising Undocumented Students

<http://professionals.collegeboard.com/guidance/financial-aid/undocumented-students>

Geared towards education professionals, this page provides a brief introduction to the basics of advising undocumented students through the college admissions and financial aid process. While this is primarily intended for school counselors, it may also be helpful to share with any volunteers you have at a FAFSA completion event.

Student Aid Tips for Unique Student Populations

http://www.nasfaa.org/Unusual_Student_Circumstances

These handouts can be used as part of a training to prepare counselors and volunteers to provide assistance to students in unique situations, including wards of the court, foster youth, single parents and more.

Special Student Populations PowerPoint

<http://www.collegegoalsundayusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/2014-2015-3-Special-Student-Populations.pdf>

For more in-depth information on supporting unique student populations, review this PowerPoint prepared by the Illinois Student Assistance Commission. The PowerPoint focused on homeless and unaccompanied students, students in DCFS/foster care, undocumented students, and students with unique situations that may require professional judgement.

U.S. Department of Education: Financial Aid and Undocumented Students

<https://studentaid.ed.gov/sites/default/files/financial-aid-and-undocumented-students.pdf>

This handout by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Federal Aid provides answers to a number of frequently asked questions about undocumented students and financial aid. Not only is this a helpful resource for counselors and professionals, but it can also be shared with students.

Webinar: Supporting Florida's Undocumented Students

<http://www.floridacollegeaccess.org/event/florida-can-webinar-supporting-floridas-undocumented-students/>

This webinar hosted by Florida CAN brought together a number of experts to discuss the unique challenges facing Florida's undocumented students, the resources available to them, and how college access practitioners, advisors and educators can best support these students in their quest to achieve a postsecondary education.

Data and Research

Policy Brief: \$100 Million in Pell Grants Left Behind: FAFSA Completion in Florida

<http://www.floridacollegeaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/FAFSA-Completion-in-Florida.pdf>

The U.S. Department of Education makes available over \$150 billion in federal student aid to college students each year, yet tens of thousands of Florida students failed to complete the form needed to access these funds. Analyzing state and federal data, Florida CAN estimated that Florida students graduating in 2013 left behind over \$100 million in Pell grants, simply because they didn't complete the form. The December 2013 policy brief highlighted this and other findings, including resources available to students as well as recommendations moving forward.

Pell Grants Lost by Florida School Districts

<http://www.floridacollegeaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Printable-2014-Summit-FAFSACompletion-Data.pdf>

This analysis of FAFSA completion data was provided to attendees of the 3rd Annual Summit on Florida College Access and Success in October 2014. It includes a district-level breakdown of Pell Grants left behind for Florida students graduating in 2013.

Florida Economic Security Report, Beyondeducation.org

Economic Security Report: http://beyondeducation.org/temp/ER_Report.pdf

Report Landing Page: <http://beyondeducation.org/>

Accompanying Workforce Outcomes Database: <http://esm.beyondeducation.org/esm/florida/>

School counselors and educators faced with providing information to students about financial assistance for college are sometimes faced with questions such as, “Is college worth it?” In 2013, the Florida Legislature passed a bill to provide economic and workforce outcome data for graduates of all public postsecondary institutions in the state, which can be a useful resource when discussing the costs and benefits of a postsecondary education with students and families.

Handouts and Other Resources to Share

Financial Aid Toolkit

<http://www.financialaidtoolkit.ed.gov/tk/>

The Financial Aid Toolkit, a resource from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Federal Student Aid, provides information and outreach tools for counselors, college access professionals, nonprofit mentors, and others. It includes videos, infographics, how-to guides, event planning assistance, presentation templates, and a variety of other financial assistance resources.

Navigating Your Financial Future: Resources

<http://www.navigatingyourfinancialfuture.org/Resources.aspx>

This resource guide, produced by the Florida Department of Education’s Office of Student Financial Assistance, includes a variety of tools to help schools and communities promote FAFSA completion.

Khan Academy: Paying for College

<https://www.khanacademy.org/college-admissions/paying-for-college>

This Khan Academy module consists of free video tutorials to help guide students and families through the process of paying for college, including a step-by-step guide to filling out the FAFSA.

Top 10 Mistakes Students Make on the FAFSA

<http://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/loans/student-loans/top-10-fafsa-mistakes/>

This short article by NerdScholar highlights some of the most common FAFSA mistakes, and is a useful tool to share with students and families.

Stay Informed!

Florida CAN Updates, Releases

<http://www.floridacollegeaccess.org/contact/>

The Florida College Access Network publishes a monthly e-newsletter, as well as information and resources for students, families, community leaders, and education professionals. Sign up for free to stay in the know on college and career readiness, access and success news and best practices, including Florida CAN's free webinar series.

10/11: Updated links that became available in September

Added Form Your Future resources to toolkit