

EQUITY

*How can FAFSA completion efforts be targeted to support traditionally underserved students and families?
How can institutions ensure their practices are culturally responsive?*

SPOTLIGHT DISTRICT



Puget Sound College & Career Network
Kent, Washington

PARTNERSHIPS

35

SCHOOL DISTRICTS
SERVED BY PSCCN

DISTRICT RESULTS



In a single school year,
PSCCN INCREASED REGIONAL FAFSA
COMPLETION BY 5 PERCENTAGE POINTS

WHY THIS MATTERS

Students who complete the FAFSA are more likely to enroll in higher education, persist in their coursework, and obtain a degree. Despite this, over a third of high school seniors fail to complete the FAFSA each year. And the students who stand to benefit most, including low-income and first-generation students, are the least likely to complete the form. School districts see a three percent decrease in FAFSA completion rates, on average, for every 10 percentage point increase in the proportion of students from low-income families. Students of color are also less likely to complete the FAFSA, with 34 percent of Hispanic students and 26 percent of Black students failing to complete the FAFSA last year, compared to just 18 percent of White students. For this reason, increasing FAFSA completion is not simply a postsecondary success issue—it is an equity issue.

ACTION STEPS

While there is no silver bullet to address the glaring equity gaps in FAFSA completion, states and communities should leverage lessons learned from Washington, Utah, and Texas (highlighted below) to better support traditionally underserved students and their families. Specifically, they should:

- ✓ Target outreach efforts to meet students and families where they are
- ✓ Build partnerships to extend the reach of support provided to students and families
- ✓ Leverage students to provide near-peer support on completing the FAFSA
- ✓ Examine disaggregated and student-level data to target supports to the students who need it most

STRATEGIES

Below, we have highlighted high-impact strategies implemented by schools and districts across the country that support traditionally underserved students and their families with completing the FAFSA.

Engaging Students, Families, and Partners

Puget Sound College & Career Network (PSCCN) provides support to 35 school districts in King and Pierce counties, which serve 40 percent of students in the state of Washington. In developing ways to support students and families in completing the FAFSA, Angelica Alvarez, PSCCN's Manager of Postsecondary Readiness, Student, and Family

Engagement, recognized the importance of meeting them where they are—and she meant that quite literally. PSCCN partnered with the King County Library System to advertise and host financial aid events, and trained the library staff to provide in-person support to families on completing the FAFSA. To reach out to families in public housing, they partnered with the King County Housing Authority to distribute mailers on the importance of the FAFSA and to advertise upcoming dates for FAFSA nights. With a growing Latinx population in the region, Alvarez also went on the local Spanish language radio station for several months to raise awareness about the FAFSA with Latinx families. She also went on the local Univision television station to spread the message even further.

Alvarez had to be intentional about building partnerships with these community organizations, noting that, “A lot of the time we expect partners to come to us as the district. Partners may be unexpected. What are we doing to cross the street to meet our potential partners where they are?” By engaging students and families—and leveraging partnerships to extend their reach—PSCCN was able to increase their regional FAFSA completion rate by nearly five percentage points in a single school year. PSCCN plans to continue to scale the FAFSA work, focusing on providing equitable opportunities for students of color in the region’s most diverse schools.



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– Angelica Alvarez, Manager of Postsecondary Readiness, Student, and Family Engagement, Puget Sound College & Career Network



Near-Peer Mentoring Programs

Vancouver Public Schools (VPS), also located in Washington, trained students to serve as “FAFSA ambassadors,” a newly-designed role in which students provided peer-to-peer mentorship on completing the FAFSA. VPS made sure to select students from various racial and cultural backgrounds, and who spoke a variety of languages, to serve as ambassadors to ensure they could authentically relate to the diverse population of students and families within the district. VPS provided training and incentives to students for fulfilling this role. In the end, VPS met their goal of increasing FAFSA completion rates for the district by five percent, and exceeded their goal in their three target schools, increasing FAFSA completion by an average of 11 percentage points. While just one part of their overall FAFSA strategy, engaging students was key to their success.

SUPPORTING UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS

Many states are grappling with how to ease the fears of undocumented students and families around submitting identifying information to the federal government on the FAFSA. While undocumented students are not eligible for federal aid, some states, such as California, have alternative aid programs, and certain colleges set aside funding each year for undocumented students. Thus, it is important for counselors to build trust with undocumented families to ensure they are maximizing their students’ college-going opportunities. A potential strategy, offered by Amy Lawrence, the Director of Counseling Services at Denton Independent School District (DISD) in Texas, is to tap into the English Language Learning instructors early in the FAFSA cycle. Those instructors often have more personal relationships with families, which can be leveraged in building trust and sharing information about the FAFSA.

Similarly, the Utah Higher Education Assistance Authority (UHEAA) successfully piloted a peer mentoring program where a cohort of current college students received incentives for providing small group and individual support to local high school students on the FAFSA. Like VPS, in selecting students, UHEAA ensured there was representation from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. UHEAA saw a nearly three percentage point increase in FAFSA completion rates at their pilot sites.

Access to Student-Level Data

In Texas, Grand Prairie Independent School District (GPISD) held monthly meetings with college advisors and college access partners on every campus where they examined disaggregated data to identify groups of students who might benefit from targeted outreach or support. GPISD was also able to access student-level data through the state-wide Apply Texas portal and is partnering with Dallas Promise to build an online case management tool to aid counselors in prioritizing individual support for students. In offering advice on how GPISD was able to increase their FAFSA completion rates by seven percentage points, Cornelia McCowan, Executive Director of College Readiness at GPISD, stated, “Make sure to have good student-level data, and involve the community in helping to execute the strategy.”

HOW STATES CAN SUPPORT

The most significant contribution state agencies can make in supporting schools and districts with prioritizing equity is to provide access to timely, accurate, student-level data on FAFSA completion. The state should also monitor completion rates across the state on an ongoing basis, and publicly and transparently report on that data, to enable state agencies and partner organizations to direct specific outreach and support to the schools that need it most.

Additionally, the state should consider developing a targeted assistance program to provide small grants to schools and districts with the lowest FAFSA completion rates, or with the highest proportions of low-income, first-generation, and students of color. These grants should be coupled with ongoing support from a coach or peer district who has demonstrated prior success in moving the needle for traditionally underserved students.