



The Florida FAFSA Challenge

*2020-2021 FAFSA
Completion Toolkit*

FLORIDA
COLLEGE ACCESS NETWORK

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Dear College Access Champion,

On behalf of Florida College Access Network (FCAN),

thank you for participating in the Florida FAFSA Challenge! This initiative aims to increase the proportion of Florida high school seniors who complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

Students must complete this application to 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 to implement strategies that help more students find money for college.

Many communities in the state have already been working hard to boost FAFSA completion rates. This initiative recognizes their achievements and supports their efforts with access to resources and proven strategies. Use this guide as an introduction to the campaign and FCAN's webpage as a one-stop shop for FAFSA resources.

The Florida FAFSA Challenge is one of four statewide initiatives that encourage and support high school seniors as they take their next educational steps. FCAN also coordinates Apply Yourself Florida, Florida College Decision Day, and Plan It Florida. These initiatives assist high school seniors with applying to college, celebrate students for their plans for life after high school, and ensure every Florida student graduates high school with a college or career plan. We look forward to your school participating in the Florida FAFSA Challenge and, we hope, all four College Ready Florida initiatives!

Please share your successful strategies with us! Much of what makes this toolkit helpful is the many successful strategies shared with us from schools like yours around the state. Your story will help fellow coordinators host impactful programs at their schools. We may even feature your achievements throughout the campaign on our blog or social media!

Contact LaVerne Handfield, our Programs Coordinator, at LHandfield@floridacollegeaccess.org or at (813) 974-8712 with questions and suggestions.

FCAN's work is possible thanks to the generous contributions of our supporters:



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About Florida College Access Network

Florida College Access Network (FCAN) is Florida's first collaborative network committed to ensuring all Floridians have the opportunity to achieve an education beyond high school and prosper in Florida's dynamic economy.

Our Mission: We lead the collaborative movement to ensure every Floridian achieves an education beyond high school and a rewarding career.

Our Vision: We envision a Florida working together where education is the pathway to economic mobility for all.

Our work is guided by our Seven Conditions for Success:

1. **Opportunity for Everyone:** To build a talent-strong economy, all Floridians need access to a postsecondary education and the supports to complete it.
2. **Clear information and guidance:** Students of all ages and families need exposure and counseling early and often to make informed decisions about their futures.
3. **Affordable:** Postsecondary education needs to be within everyone's financial reach, regardless of household income or life circumstances.
4. **Multiple Pathways to Success:** Floridians benefit from multiple learning opportunities for academic achievement and career advancement.
5. **Lifelong learning:** No degree or credential is "one and done;" Floridians need to prepare for career changes through continuous learning.
6. **Effective use of data:** Transparent access to data on education and economic outcomes, especially for Florida's diverse populations, help achieve our goals.
7. **Community Collaboration:** When community partners work together toward a shared vision, they remove barriers, build a robust workforce, and improve the quality of life for their regions.



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TOP 5 REASONS TO COMPLETE THE FAFSA

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is the best way to make college affordable. Completing the FAFSA gives access to federal, state, and college-based sources to help pay for college.

1

4 out of 5 Florida college students use some combination of federal, state, and college-based aid to pay for college.



2



Each year, Florida students leave \$100 million on the table by not completing the FAFSA.

3

More than 50% of Florida college students qualify for Pell grants, which is free money in your pocket that does not need to be paid back.



4



Colleges use the information submitted on the FAFSA to determine if students **qualify for college-based aid**, like scholarships.

5

On average, **students with a bachelor's degree earn \$1 million more** over their working lives than someone with only a high school diploma.



**Visit studentaid.gov
to begin your FAFSA!**

Florida Students are Losing Money

Florida Lags in FAFSA Completion

An estimated **53% of all Florida high school seniors** qualified for Pell grants, the 5th highest rate in the nation. But despite the high number of Pell-eligible students, Florida ranks **32nd in the nation** for FAFSA completion.

Last year, **45.5%** of Florida's public-school students had completed the FAFSA by July 3, 2020. According to FCAN estimates, high school graduates in Florida leave behind over **\$100 million in Pell Grants** each year because they do not complete the form.

Completing the FAFSA is the **best way to make college affordable.**

FCAN research shows that FAFSA completion is a strong indicator of **future college attendance.**

The Florida FAFSA Challenge

In 2015, FCAN introduced the Florida FAFSA Challenge as an effort to boost the statewide FAFSA completion rate.

Affordability is still the biggest barrier to future college attendance. Schools and communities participating in the challenge adopt the goal of **increasing their FAFSA completion by at least 5% over the previous year.**

FAFSA Challenge Participation

- 2019-2020: 431 schools in 45 districts
- 2018-2019: 374 schools in 40 districts
- 2017-2018: 290 schools in 37 districts
- 2016-2017: 153 schools in 17 districts
- 2015-2016: 50 schools in 14 districts

In the 2019-2020 school year, **153 schools in 50 districts** met or exceeded their +5% goal.

FAFSA Challenge Outcomes

When the FAFSA Challenge started in the 2014-2015 school year, Florida ranked **41st** in FAFSA completion out of 50 states and DC.

By the end of the 2019-2020 school year, Florida's rank increased to **32nd.**

Taking on The Challenge

Schools, districts, local college access networks (LCANs), and community organizations can **register as participants** in the Florida FAFSA Challenge.

Registrants get access to **free resources and promotional materials**, and updates on the latest FAFSA information and resources.

Registering helps FCAN connect schools and communities with the resources they need to support their students.

Winning the FAFSA Challenge



Each year, FCAN recognizes all schools and districts that achieve their goal of increasing FAFSA completion by at least 5%.

Additionally, FCAN honors the top schools and districts who go above and beyond to help more students afford college by completing the FAFSA. These winners are formally recognized with a trophy during the Awards Luncheon at the annual FCAN Summit.

Winner's Categories

- **MVP:** Schools and districts with the highest overall rates of FAFSA completion.
- **Most Improved:** Schools and districts that have the highest increase in FAFSA completion over the previous year.



Why the March End Date?

While students can complete the FAFSA throughout the year, the Florida FAFSA Challenge ends in March to **encourage early completion**.

Since financial aid is distributed on a **first-come first-served basis**, students who complete the FAFSA early are more likely to receive the full amount of aid they are eligible for.

Additionally, many colleges and universities also have **earlier priority deadlines** for distributing institutional aid. Completing the FAFSA early increases a student's chances of accessing this aid.

2020 – 2021 FAFSA Challenge Dates

October 1, 2020 – Challenge Begins

March 26, 2021 – Challenge Ends

May 12, 2021 – Awards Luncheon

Meeting Your FAFSA Completion Goal

Tips for Setting a FAFSA Goal

- Make your goal **ambitious but attainable**. FCAN recommends a 5% increase goal.
- If your community has a **Local College Access Network (LCAN)**, work with them to set a community-wide goal.
- **Make your goal public!** Share your goal with your school and community to build excitement.

Tracking Your Goal

The [Florida FAFSA Challenge Dashboard](#) allows schools and communities to track their FAFSA completion rates in real time. It is published in January and updated weekly throughout the challenge.

The FCAN dashboard includes FAFSA completion data for 12th graders at over **500 schools across the state of Florida**.

Thanks to FCAN's advocacy with the Department of Education, the dashboard now includes data for high school seniors **up to age 19**.

Accessing Student-Level Data

The Florida Department of Education Office of Student Financial Assistance (OSFA) works with school districts to make **student-level FAFSA completion data** available to schools. This dataset shows, by name, which students have started a FAFSA, completed a FAFSA, or submitted a FAFSA with errors.

On average, nearly 10% of FAFSAs submitted in Florida are incomplete or incorrect. Knowing which students have submitted FAFSAs with errors can help you identify and reach out to students who may need extra help.

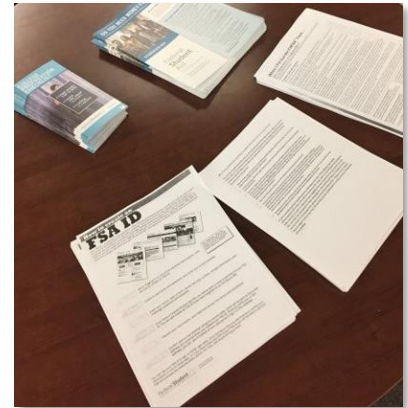


For more information on how school districts can access to this data, **contact Pedro Hernandez**, OSFA Director of Outreach Services, at pedro.hernandez@fldoe.org

Hosting a FAFSA Completion Event

Types of FAFSA Events

- **FAFSA Information Night:** Cover basic financial aid information and familiarize parents and students with the FAFSA.
- **FAFSA Lab:** Provide students and parents the opportunity to complete the FAFSA with the assistance of knowledgeable volunteers.
- **Multi-Purpose Events:** Include FAFSA completion information during other events like a college application drive, back to school night, etc.



Tips for a Successful Event

- Target students whose grades and course history indicate college readiness, and personally invite them and their parents to FAFSA events.
- Serve food or refreshments at after-school events.
- Work with partners at your school to collect items to raffle off (e.g. yearbooks or prom tickets) to incentivize students to complete their FAFSA.
- Note: Incorporate alternate activities, like applying for scholarships, for students who are not eligible to complete the FAFSA.

Contact FCAN for Additional Support

Facilitating conversations with LCANs.

Technical support with the FAFSA Challenge Dashboard.

Identifying financial aid speakers in your area.

Promotional materials like stickers for events.

FAFSA stickers are now available upon request!

Community Partners

- **Local College Access Networks (LCANs):** Last year, communities served by an LCAN saw FAFSA completion rates approximately **6% higher** than those without one. Reach out to the [LCAN in your area](#) who can help with volunteers and spreading the word on the importance of FAFSA completion.
- **Area colleges & universities:** Financial aid representatives can volunteer with, present at, or help host FAFSA events.
- **Local businesses** can donate food and prizes or provide volunteers.
- **Florida Department of Education Office of Student Financial Assistance (OSFA):** OSFA's Speakers Bureau can connect your school with a financial aid expert for your FAFSA information night. Contact Pedro Hernandez at pedro.hernandez@fldoe.org for more information.

Promoting Your FAFSA Event

Many students and parents are unfamiliar with or intimidated by the FAFSA. Others may assume they will not qualify for financial aid. For these reasons, it is important to promote FAFSA completion events in your community.

Promotion Strategies

- **School channels:** Morning announcements, newsletter, school website, marquee, and social media offer many ways to help students know about the importance of completing a FAFSA.
- **Parent engagement:** Mail letters home rather than relying on students to deliver them; personal phone calls take more time, but volunteers such as your PTA can be very effective.
- **Use technology:** Text updates, voicemail blasts, and robocalls can help reach parents.
- **Additional resources:** Reference the [Event Planning and Handouts](#) at the back of this guide for more promotional resources from around the web.



Text Updates

- **UpNext:** Part of former First Lady Michelle Obama's Better Make Room initiative, UpNext connects students with college readiness advisors via text message. Students can enroll in the service at www.bettermakeroom.org/upnext.
- **Remind:** This free texting tool can be used to send text updates to parents and students. Read more at www.remind.com.

Did You Know?

Several communities in Florida have texting projects with reminders specific to local colleges and universities.

Contact FCAN or your community's LCAN to learn about specific resources in your area.

Helping Families with the FAFSA

Completing the FAFSA can be challenging for both students and parents. Use these resources to assist students in the process.

FAFSA Completion

- **Federal Student Aid YouTube Channel:** This YouTube channel includes a variety of video walkthroughs for the FAFSA including creating an FSA ID, learning about the different types of aid, and completing the FAFSA.
- **FAFSA First:** FutureMakers Coalition, an LCAN in Southwest Florida, has created a variety of resources to address common myths and frequently asked questions about the FAFSA.
- **Additional Resources:** Reference the [FAFSA Information Resources](#) at the back of this guide for more FAFSA completion resources.

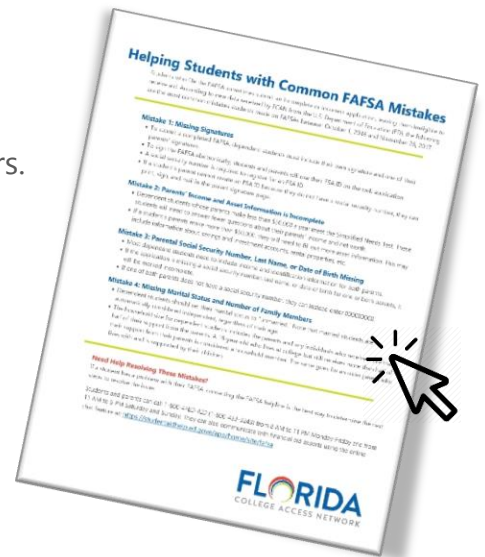


Submitted vs. Completed

In some cases, a student may think they completed the FAFSA but have actually submitted a form that is incomplete or contains errors.

Helping these students correct or complete their forms can help boost FAFSA completion rates.

FCAN's one-pager "Helping Students with Common FAFSA Mistakes" outlines four of the most common FAFSA mistakes and how to resolve them.



FAFSA Verification

Verification is a federal audit of students who submit a FAFSA.

Approximately half of Pell-eligible students are selected for FAFSA verification.

Future Ready Collier's FAFSA verification guide provides helpful tips for assisting students with the verification process.



FAFSA Information Resources

Webinar: *No Dollar Left Behind* (September 2018)

This FCAN webinar features partners from Future Ready Collier and United Way Suncoast discussing community-based strategies to improve FAFSA completion.

<http://floridacollegeaccess.org/events/key-takeaways-no-dollar-left-behind-organizing-community-based-approach-fafsa-completion/>

Webinar: *FAFSA is Not Enough* (August 2018)

This FCAN webinar features staff from the National College Attainment Network (NCAN) discussing how FAFSA verification presents an additional barrier to low-income students.

<http://floridacollegeaccess.org/events/key-takeaways-fafsa-not-enough-verification-keeps-students-entering-college/>

Webinar: *Busting the Affordability Barrier* (December 2017)

This FCAN webinar covers common issues with FAFSA completion, strategies for using the FAFSA Challenge Dashboard, and an overview of Broward County's innovative approach to FAFSA completion.

<http://floridacollegeaccess.org/research-data/busting-affordability-barrier-need-know-years-florida-fafsa-challenge/>

FAFSA Demo Site

This FAFSA demonstration website allows you to walk through the FAFSA process. This is a great training tool for staff and volunteers who will help students and families with the FAFSA. Pre-loaded test data are provided for applications that depend on historical data such as new applications, applications with a signature hold, FAFSA corrections, application status check, and electronic signatures.

<https://fafsademo.test.ed.gov/>

2021-2022 FAFSA on the Web Preview Presentation

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. The slides can also be used or modified to create your own FAFSA presentation.

<https://ifap.ed.gov/sites/default/files/attachments/2020-08/082720fafsadotgov202122PreviewPresentationAttach.pptx>

FutureMakers Coalition *FAFSA First* Resources

FutureMakers Coalition, an LCAN in Southwest Florida, has created a variety of resources to address common myths and frequently asked questions about the FAFSA.

<http://www.futuremakerscoalition.com/fafsafirst/>

Event Planning and Handouts

Form Your Future Event Planning Resources

Form Your Future is a FAFSA completion campaign sponsored by the National College Attainment Network. Their website features a financial aid toolkit and event planning resources.

<https://formyourfuture.org/>

Federal Student Aid Financial Aid Toolkit

The FSA Financial Aid Toolkit provides information and outreach tools for school 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.

<https://financialaidtoolkit.ed.gov/tk/resources/all.jsp>

Navigating Your Financial Future

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.

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

Khan Academy: 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.

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

Top 10 Mistakes Students Make on FAFSA

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

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

Sallie Mae: Paying for College

This website by Sallie Mae provides one-pagers, templates, video tutorials, and much more to students and families figuring out how to pay for college.

<https://www.payingforcollegeresource.com/>

4 the Fall: A Blueprint for Supporting the High School Class of 2021

This guide from the National College Attainment Network (NCAN) outlines four key steps for district and school leaders, school counselors, teachers, and community partners to take to keep seniors on track for education beyond high school.

http://www.ncan.org/resource/resmgr/k12-resources/ncan_4_for_the_fall.pdf

Professional Development

National College Attainment Network Training Resources

The National College Attainment 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. NCAN members can access these modules for free.

<https://collegeaccess.org/page/ELearning>

National Training for Counselors and Mentors (NT4CM) Webinar

The National Training for Counselors and Mentors is a collaboration between several 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.

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

Federal Student Aid Counselors and Mentors Handbook

This handbook is another resource for those that will be assisting students and families complete the FAFSA. It includes information specifically on completing the FAFSA, as well as information on federal student aid more generally.

<https://financialaidtoolkit.ed.gov/resources/counselors-handbook.pdf>

Mapping Your Future: FAFSA Training for Service Providers

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

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

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

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

Contact Pedro Hernandez at pedro.hernandez@fldoe.org.

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

Working with Special Populations

Undocumented Students

College Board: Advising Undocumented Students

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.

<https://professionals.collegeboard.org/guidance/financial-aid/undocumented-students>

Webinar: *Supporting Florida's Undocumented Students* (November 2015)

This FCAN webinar brought together a number of experts to discuss the unique challenges facing Florida's undocumented students.

<http://floridacollegeaccess.org/research-data/supporting-floridas-undocumented-students/>

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

This handout answers a number of frequently asked questions about undocumented students and financial aid.

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

Unique Student Populations

Student Aid Tips for Unique Student Populations

These handouts prepare counselors and volunteers to provide assistance to students in unique situations, including wards of the court, foster youth, single parents and more.

http://www.nasfaa.org/Unique_Student_Circumstances

U.S Department of Education

Federal Student Aid Social Media

YouTube

This YouTube channel includes a number of simple and engaging videos that can be shared with students and families. Be sure to view the most recent videos, as some information has changed.

<https://www.youtube.com/user/FederalStudentAid>

Twitter Page

The FAFSA Twitter page provides reminders of information and deadlines related to federal student aid programs. The site hosts live Q&A sessions during “#AskFAFSA Office Hour” to give students and parents the chance to ask financial aid questions.

<https://twitter.com/fafsa>

Blog

Federal Student Aid’s Homeroom blog publishes timely information and resources relevant to FAFSA completion and federal student aid. Some examples of blog topics include: 5 Things to do After Filing Your FAFSA, Top 5 FAFSA FAQs, 7 Common Myths about Financial Aid, and 7 Common FAFSA Mistakes.

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

Social Media Toolkit

The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Federal Student Aid has a strong social media presence. This page includes some tips on sharing these resources with students and families, such as sample tweets.

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

Data & Research

Policy Brief: *Increasing FAFSA Completion in Florida: A Playbook for Success* (March 2020)

This brief from Helios Education Foundation and FCAN educates community leaders about the importance of the FAFSA and provides tactical information for educators and community members who help support students and families in completing the FAFSA.

<https://www.helios.org/Media/Default/Documents/BRIEF%20-%20V4%20-%20FAFSA%20Playbook%20FL%20032020.pdf>

Policy Brief: *\$100 Million in Pell Grants Left Behind: FAFSA Completion in Florida* (December 2013)

The U.S. Department of Education makes over \$150 billion in federal student aid available to college students each year, yet tens of thousands of Florida students fail to complete the form needed to access these funds. Analyzing state and federal data, FCAN estimated that Florida students graduating in 2019 left behind over \$100 million in Pell grants simply because they didn't complete the form. This December 2013 policy brief highlighted this and other findings, including resources available to students as well as recommendations moving forward.

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

BeyondEducation.org: Florida Economic Security Report

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. Here is the latest report for 2019.

Economic Security Report: [https://floridajobs.org/docs/default-source/state-program-reports/2020-state-program-report/2019-esr-\(final\)143322a4cbbb61cbb02aff01004f56df.pdf?sfvrsn=3a8843b0_0](https://floridajobs.org/docs/default-source/state-program-reports/2020-state-program-report/2019-esr-(final)143322a4cbbb61cbb02aff01004f56df.pdf?sfvrsn=3a8843b0_0)

FCAN Update, Releases

FCAN publishes a monthly newsletter, as well as information and resources for students, families, community leaders, and education professionals. Subscribe for timely updates on college and career readiness, access, and success best practices, including FCAN's free webinar series.

<http://floridacollegeaccess.org/subscribe/>

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Florida College Access Network (FCAN) leads the collaborative movement to ensure that every Floridian achieves an education beyond high school and a rewarding career. We envision a Florida working together where education is the pathway to economic mobility for all.