

THE FAFSA COMPLETION PROJECT

ABOUT THE PROJECT

In December 2011, Say Yes to Education announced that it would collaborate with the City of Buffalo to create community-based strategy to improve educational opportunity for all graduates of the Buffalo Public and Charter Schools. The key feature of the program was the last dollar tuition guarantee for any public in state two-year or four-year college or participating private institution. To be eligible, students were required to apply for federal and state aid. Researchers at the University at Buffalo created the FAFSA Completion Project to help students and families take advantage of the tuition guarantee. The project was informed by the H & R Block study to integrate tax preparation and FAFSA completion support. Their work reminded us that information only strategies were unlikely to increase college participation or financial aid application rates, but direct support could have a meaningful impact.

STRUCTURE

PHASE I – Site Visits: Beginning in September, the coordinator of the FAFSA completion project visits each of the participating high schools to develop a strategy for implementing the intervention in the school. The site visit helps to develop trust between counselors and the project staff and it allows the team to adapt their strategies to the specific needs of the building.

PHASE II – Classroom Visits: The goal of the project is to help 100% of students complete the financial aid application process. In order to achieve that goal, we need to bring the intervention to all students, particularly those that would not seek out the support on their own. In this phase, a team of volunteers spends a full day in a school visiting with English 12 classes to complete the FSA ID, first half of the FAFSA (through student demographics, school, and dependency status), and the Say Yes to Education online registration.

PHASE III – Individual Weekly Support: Beginning as early as November 1, interns and volunteers are placed in a school for 1-2 shifts per week to work with students on the remaining portions of the FAFSA and the New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) application. The individualized support is provided through the end of April.

PHASE IV – Data Collection and Reporting: In 2013, Federal Student Aid launched a pilot to make FAFSA completion data available to schools, assuming that providing this information to counselors would allow them to target their support to students who needed it. The state now makes this data available to districts and schools and we report these data on a weekly basis to school counselors so they know which students need additional support.

STAFFING

The project is staffed by a combination of volunteers, service learning students, interns, and work study funded students. The project is run in collaboration with Say Yes to Education and the University at Buffalo and is directed by a professor in the Graduate School of Education. A half time staff member manages the staff and relationships with the counselors. In 2017-18, one coordinator, 15 interns, and 14 graduate student assistants working with NYGEAR UP Buffalo provided more than 4600 hours of service to the district and worked with as many as 600 students on portions of the financial aid process.

OUTCOMES

In the first year of the project, FAFSA completion rates increased 61% from May 2012 to the same time one year later. Some of that increase was the result of the public announcement of a tuition guarantee. An additional portion of that increase was the result of accelerating the process for many students who would not apply for financial aid until August. Overall, we found that approximately 20-25% more students applied for financial aid in 2013 than the year prior. Additionally, we found that the accuracy of submissions improved as well. In 2012, the US Department of Education accepted 87% of the applications submitted in Buffalo. In 2013, that rate increased to 92%, meaning fewer students had errors to correct.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- Relationship with school counselors
- Partnership with Say Yes to Education
- Intentional recruitment of students of color for internships, work study, and volunteers
- A comprehensive training program
- FAFSA and TAP application status data from New York State
- Adaptability of project to the needs of each school

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