



# The Florida FAFSA Challenge

*2019-2020 FAFSA  
Completion Toolkit*

# Dear Reader,

## On behalf of Florida College Access Network (FCAN),

thank you for participating in the 2019-2020 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 afford 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 as a one-stop shop for FAFSA resources.

**Please share your successful strategies with us!** 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 our Programs Coordinator, LaVerne Handfield, at [lhandfield@floridacollegeaccess.org](mailto:lhandfield@floridacollegeaccess.org) or at (813) 974-8712 with questions and suggestions.

**FCAN thanks Helios Education Foundation for its generous support of the Florida FAFSA Challenge**



# 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:** To create and sustain a statewide network that catalyzes and supports communities to increase college and career preparation, access, and completion for all Florida students.

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

## **Our Guiding Values:**

- **College is postsecondary education.** Florida College Access Network uses the term "college" to refer to the attainment of high-quality postsecondary credentials beyond high school, including technical certificates and academic degrees.
- **College readiness is career readiness.** All Florida students deserve to receive a high-quality Pre K-12 education, which prepares them academically for success in college or a career.
- **College is for everyone.** All Florida students deserve the opportunity to pursue a high-quality postsecondary education that prepares them to effectively communicate, engage, and compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge-based global economy.
- **College is a public good.** Postsecondary educational opportunity and attainment are critical to a just and equitable society, strong democracy, robust economy, and healthy communities.



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# Florida Students are Losing Money

## Florida Lags in FAFSA Completion

As estimated **59% of all Florida high school seniors** qualified for Pell Grants, the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest in the nation. But despite the high number of Pell-eligible students, Florida ranks **35th in the nation** for FAFSA completion.

Last year, **a little over 50%** of Florida's public-school students had completed the FAFSA by June 30, 2019. 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 **first step** to accessing financial aid for college.

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.

Schools and communities participating in the challenge adopt the goal of **increasing FAFSA completion by at least 5%** over the previous year.

In the 2018-2019 school year, **72 schools in 27 districts** met or exceeded the 5% increase goal.

### FAFSA Challenge Participation

- 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

### 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 2018-2019 school year, Florida's rank increased to **35th**.

## Taking on The Challenge

Schools, districts, 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

## 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.
- **FAFSA Champions:** All schools and districts that achieve 5% or more increase in FAFSA completion by the end of the challenge.
- **College Ready Florida Innovator:** Awarded to leaders who are utilizing innovative strategies in creative ways to increase the effectiveness of any of FCAN's College Ready Florida initiatives (Apply Yourself Florida, Florida FAFSA Challenge, Florida College Decision Day, Plan It Florida).



## 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.

### 2019 – 2020 FAFSA Challenge Dates

**October 1, 2019**

Challenge Begins

**March 27, 2020**

Challenge Ends

**May 13, 2020**

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: [link to dashboard].

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.

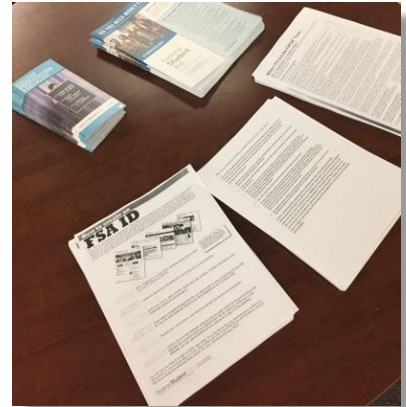
For more information on how school districts can access to this data, **contact Pete Hernandez**, OSFA director of Outreach services, at [pedro.hernandez@fldoe.org](mailto:pedro.hernandez@fldoe.org)



# 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 in other events like a college application drive, back to school night, etc.



## Tip 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 raffle off yearbooks or prom tickets to students who complete their FAFSA to encourage participation.
- Note: Designate alternate activities, like applying for scholarships, for students who are not eligible to complete the FAFSA.

### Contact FCAN for Additional Support

**Promotional materials** like stickers and posters for events.

**Facilitating conversations** with local college access networks (LCANs)

**Technical support** with the FAFSA Challenge Dashboard

**Identifying financial aid speakers** in your area

## Community Partners

- **Local College Access Networks (LCANs):** Last year, communities served by an LCAN saw FAFSA completion rates **6% higher** than those without one.
- **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 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 Pete Hernandez at [pedro.hernandez@fldoe.org](mailto: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's important to promote FAFSA completion events in your community.

## Promotion Strategies

- **School channels:** Morning announcements, newsletter, school website, marquee, social media.
- **Parent engagement:** Mail letters home rather than relying on students to deliver them; personal phone calls take more time/volunteers but can be very effective.
- **Use technology.** Text updates, voicemail blasts, and robocalls can be effective ways to reach parents.
- **Additional resources:** Reference the appendix at the back of this guide for more promotion 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 by enrolling on [www.bettermakeroom.org/upnext](http://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](http://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.
- FAFSA First: FutureMakers Coalition, an LCAN in Southwest Florida, has created a variety of resources to address common myths and frequently asked questions about FAFSA.
- **Additional Resources:** Reference the appendix at the back of this guide for more FAFSA completion resources.

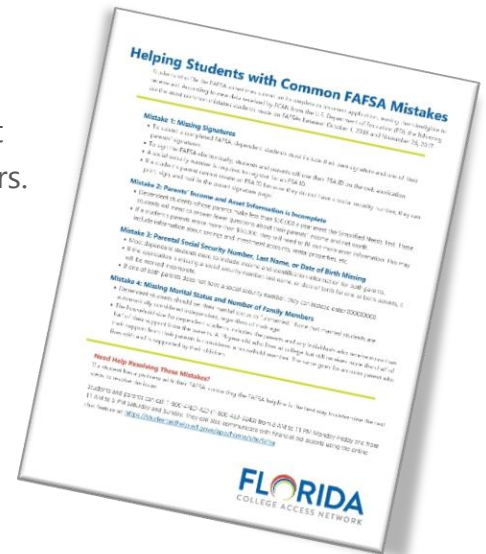


## Submitted vs. Completed

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

In September 2018, FCAN hosted a webinar with 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

This FCAN webinar features staff from National College Access 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

This FCAN webinar from December 2017 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 is provided for applications that depend on historical data such as new applications, applications with signature hold, FAFSA corrections, application status check, and electronic signatures.

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

## 2020-2021 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. [Link coming soon]

## 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/>

## The FAFSA Completion Project: AN Annotated Bibliography

Published in 2011 by the U.S. Department of Education, this annotated bibliography links to free resources available online to support school systems with FAFSA completion programs and policies.

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

# Event Planning and Handouts

## Form Your Future Event Planning Resources

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

<https://formyourfuture.org/>

## Financial Aid Toolkit

The Financial Aid Toolkit 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.

<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>

## Resources 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 NerdScholar 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/>

# Training for Counselors/Access Professionals

## National College Access Network Training Resources

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. 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>

## 2018-2019 Counselors and Mentors Handbook on Federal Student Aid

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.

<https://financialaidtoolkit.ed.gov/resources/counselors-handbook-2018-19.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 the FAFSA and financial aid and can also connect you to outside resources that can provide you with the training you need. OSFA also provides in-person training and resources to schools, districts and community partners on the FAFSA and financial aid. Contact Pete Hernandez at [pedro.hernandez@fldoe.org](mailto:pedro.hernandez@fldoe.org).

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

# 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

This webinar hosted by FCAN 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](http://www.nasfaa.org/Unique_Student_Circumstances)



# Office of 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 use 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 question-and-answer 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: \$100 Million in Pell Grants Left Behind: FAFSA Completion in Florida**

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. The 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>

## **Pell Grants Lost by Florida School Districts**

This analysis of FAFSA completion data was provided in a press release at the end of the 2018-2019 Florida FAFSA Challenge.

<http://floridacollegeaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2019-Florida-FAFSA-Challenge-winners-press-release-1.pdf>

## **Florida Economic Security Report, BeyondEducation.org**

**Economic Security Report:** <http://www.floridajobs.org/docs/default-source/office-of-workforce-services/state-program-reports/2019-state-program-reports/florida-economic-security-report-final-01-10-2019.pdf?sfvrsn=0>

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 useful resource when discussing the costs and benefits of a postsecondary education with students and families.

## **FCAN Update, Releases**

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 timely updates on college and career readiness, access, and success nets and best practices, including FCAN's free webinar series.

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

# FAFSA Contacts at FCAN



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