

**Fill out this form for free money!**

**Earn up to \$6,495/hour!**

**Increase the chances of your student attending college by up to 35% with this hack!**

**Leon County high school seniors – leaving over \$1.1M of free money on the table – where does it go?**

Sound too good to be true? It's not. It is completely true and it happens every year. Despite the promotion and pressure from teachers and financial aid experts, only 60% of our graduating seniors are completing the one form that provides free money which does not need to be paid back, to access education beyond high school.

According to the Florida College Access Network (FCAN), we are not alone. Across the state, despite ranking the 4<sup>th</sup> largest state in Pell-Grant-eligible students, only ½ of Florida seniors completed the FAFSA last year. Last year alone, the class of 2021 left over \$200 million in Pell Grants on the table. Why is this and how can we get this money in the hands of students?

First, let's talk about the FAFSA (Federal Application for Free Student Aid). Many of you may have not-so-fond memories of completing this form as a student or for your own children. Like tax returns, the FAFSA started out as a paper form that often took hours to complete and was about as fun as a root canal. Today, however, using online tools available from [www.studentaid.gov](http://www.studentaid.gov), students can complete the FAFSA in as little as 45 minutes. Not a bad return on your time considering Pell Grants do not need to be repaid. The online tool will connect your tax return right to your FAFSA, eliminating the manual entry and computations formerly required, saving you time and earning you money!

Now why should those of us who don't have students graduating care about FAFSA completion rates at all? Have you noticed the talent gap lately? Are you aware that roughly 60% of open jobs require some education beyond high school? If we want to grow our economy, we must grow our people. For those of you wondering how we attract more business to our region, you need to look at what they are looking for...and that is talent. People with skills. People with training, credentials, degrees, or certificates. People who have continued their education past high school. For many, however, this is financially out of the question. Hence, the FAFSA, Pell Grants, Bright Futures, and a myriad of other scholarships are made available to provide access to all. But it all starts with FAFSA.

Our region is in a workforce crisis. We have more open jobs than we have people looking for jobs. Additionally, according to the Florida Chamber of Commerce, we need to add 17,994 new jobs by 2030 to remain economically competitive. Breaking that down, that is 1,999 new jobs every year. That's two Amazons per year for the next nine years. How can we fill those jobs without increasing the number of students and adults trained and ready for these positions?

The FAFSA is the key to unlocking the funding students need for their postsecondary education. Florida needs a systemwide approach to support students in completing the FAFSA: a high school graduation requirement. This is not a new idea. Louisiana, Texas, and Indiana have each implemented a requirement for FAFSA completion. Two years in, the data is promising, but not conclusive. What we do know is that there must be a robust opt-out option for parents and students over 18. Most importantly, however, this requirement must come with support for additional school counselors and staff, access to student data, and training opportunities for staff, family, and students. The ROI is there. We need to be there for our students and future workforce.