

# Best Practices

The following best practices are from Arizona high schools that have received state recognition from the Arizona FAFSA Challenge program regarding their innovative FAFSA best practices.

## Small Schools (1-100 Seniors)

### Ash Fork High School

- **Partnerships:** Formed partnerships with their local community college, college reps, and other post-secondary organizations in their area. For their FAFSA night last year, they had two college reps attend that were incredible resources for answering in depth FAFSA questions that students and parents had. This year, they are partnering with the Northern Arizona College Resource Center, who will provide with even more support to their students. These partnerships are key in supporting students and their families so that they have the most accurate information.
- **Forming Personalized Relationships:** While many small schools do not have any certified guidance counselors, the staff taking on those roles have the advantage of knowing their kids. While the student to guidance counselor ratio across Arizona is over 900 to 1. Staff in small schools often have much deeper, personalized relationships with their students, and can use that to persuade seniors to complete the FAFSA in ways that larger districts cannot accomplish.
- **Advertisement:** Start with a FAFSA night that is well advertised and supported by college reps, but don't stop there. At Ashfork High School they achieved 40-50% of the senior class complete the FAFSA during their FAFSA night event, but were able to have follow-up conversations with the remaining students to gauge whether they and their parents were completely unwilling to participate (which unfortunately happened regularly), or if they just needed individualized assistance to get that submission.
- **Boosting CCRI:** Do not forget that FAFSA submission is now tied to Arizona Department of Education's College and Career Readiness Index (CCRI), which directly influences your school's letter grade. FAFSA points are very flexible, and count for either blue points or red points. Use this fact to leverage attention to your cause with administration. This may be persuasive enough to get funds to provide free dinner for FAFSA night attendees, or pay staff to serve as assistants or translators during your FAFSA night.
- **Scholarship Preparation:** Make sure that kids know that even if they anticipate a full scholarship to their post-secondary school of choice, FAFSA is often required in order to receive those scholarships. Also remind them that many "full" scholarships pay tuition, but not housing, books, or fees - which Pell Grants can help with. FAFSA is important for all students, even those who think they may not need it.

### BASIS Flagstaff

- **Inform Students and Parents:** Send an email and hard copy newsletter to all parents of seniors as soon as the FAFSA opens on Oct 1. Explain what the FAFSA is and why it's so important to fill out. It is not just for kids going to a 4-year college. FAFSA money will work for community college and trade/vocational school as well. Explain that they can import information from their tax return very easily if they file electronically. If they filed their taxes by paper, it still should only take about an hour. An hour of your time is worth potentially thousands of dollars of free money!

- **Communication:** Explain to both parents and seniors that the FAFSA isn't just for need-based aid: some institutional awards will require a FAFSA on file to be eligible. Everyone needs to fill it out, even if they think they won't qualify for any grants.
- **CCRI:** Talk to your seniors (pop into a class, or hold an assembly) and tell them about the FAFSA. Ask them to remind their parents about the importance of filling it out. Tell them that your school's letter grade rating from the state is partly tied to the FAFSA completion rate – it makes the school look better to colleges when your FAFSA completion rate is high. If you won't do it for yourself, do it for your friends! (See the AZ Dept. of Ed's School Accountability Plan for more info [https://azsbe.az.gov/sites/default/files/media/18-19%209-12%20A-F%20Plan\\_1.pdf](https://azsbe.az.gov/sites/default/files/media/18-19%209-12%20A-F%20Plan_1.pdf))
- **Newsletters:** In your FAFSA newsletter, include information about free FAFSA workshops in your community (consider hosting one yourself!)
- **Reminders:** Send periodic reminders to parents who haven't filed the FAFSA yet, especially a few weeks before any Priority Dates – for example, NAU's priority date for incoming freshman is November 15! If parents complete it by then, students are eligible for extra grant money. ASU and UA have priority filing dates in January.

## **Medium Schools (101-399 Seniors)**

### **Washington High School**

- **Personalized Communication:** The College and Career Specialist at Washington High School, utilizes FAFSA Finish Line data to send personalized emails to students regarding their FAFSA completion status. For example: if students are missing a parent signature, she sends an email to the student informing them that their parent signature is needed to complete their application as well as directions on how the parent can submit their signature by using their parent FSA ID or submitting a signature page.
- **Marketing and Promotion:** Their DECA (a club for business, marketing and management students in high school) and marketing students at Washington High School were recruited to create videos that would promote FAFSA and college-going events on campus. The videos are aired during the Monday morning announcements so that all students and staff are aware of the exciting upcoming events.
- **Family FAFSA Events:** Keeping family work schedules in mind, Washington High School organizes FAFSA and college-going campus events after school, and early morning on late start days. Washington High School also provides dinner and childcare at many of their evening events so that students can make it a family experience without their parents having to worry about childcare or planning dinner after the event.

### **Douglas High School**

**"Our partnership with Cochise College has been essential with all of the support that they have provided for our students." -Diego Guerrero, DHS Counselor**

- **Partnerships-** Cochise College partners with Douglas High School to assist at their on-campus FAFSA events and college-going efforts.

- **FAFSA Training:** Counselors and all senior advisory teachers participated in a FAFSA training workshop given by the Arizona College Access Network (AzCAN). This training was given at the beginning of the school year so that they were prepared to assist students with the FAFSA process when the application became available on October 1st.
- **Creating a Plan:** Counselors, teachers and administrators at Douglas High School create a plan each school year to ensure that their students have access to the assistance needed to pursue their post high school education goals.
- **Utilizing FAFSA Finish Line Reports:** Staff at Douglas High School utilize the FAFSA Finish Line reports frequently throughout the school year. Counselors use the data to follow up with students on their incomplete FAFSA applications during their student enrichment period.
- **Keeping up the Momentum:** FAFSA and college-going events are planned throughout the year. Douglas High School counselors plan FAFSA events in the Fall and Spring in order to ensure that all of their students have the opportunity to complete the FAFSA. Events are held during the day and in the evening to accommodate parent work schedules

### Moon Valley High School

**"I've learned that one-on-one conversations are the most important factor in getting a student to complete his/her FAFSA." - Jennifer Emanuel, MVHS Counselor**

- **Hosting Multiple FAFSA Completion Workshops** throughout the 18-19 School Year Moon Valley HS has hosted over 12 FAFSA completion workshops for their students and parents to attend. They held 8 in the month of October and continue to work with students to ensure that all seniors complete a FAFSA. They also collaborate with college reps on hosting next steps workshops for admitted students.
- **Innovative Themes:** They created fun themes for their FAFSA events to encourage students to attend, such as "FAFSA and Donuts". They also created fun posters to display around campus to remind students to complete their FAFSA and market their college-going events.
- **Communication:** Communication is key! Counselors keep parents informed by sending e-mail announcements every two weeks informing them about upcoming FAFSA and college-going events on campus. Counselors also reach out to students individually about completing their FAFSA and remind them about upcoming FAFSA events on campus.
- **College T-Shirt Day:** Once a month MVHS teachers, counselors, staff and students are encouraged to wear their college/university t-shirts to create a college-going atmosphere.
- **Campus Tours:** The Career Center Specialist coordinates college/university campus tours for students to attend. During these tours, students have the opportunity to learn about the different campuses and program offerings. So far they have visited over 5 different college campuses throughout Arizona.
- **FAFSA Announcements:** Social Studies/Government teachers set up a designated bulletin board in their classrooms for all things FAFSA and college and career related announcements.
- **Collaboration:** The principal, counselors, and teachers collaborated to create a FAFSA completion campaign.

- **FSA ID's:** Counselors, in groups of two, visited all senior social studies classrooms to help students create FSA IDs. The teachers reminded students in advance to make sure they had their social security numbers when the counselors visited, and sent many reminders to the teachers about what students needed in order to create an FSA ID. During this activity, counselors passed out information about their financial aid night and district FAFSA completion nights. Counselors also passed out bracelets and stickers from College Goal Arizona to hype up their students regarding college and our future events.
- **Monitor FAFSA Finish Line Data:** A designated counselor took the lead in monitoring student FAFSA Finish Line Data, and pulled the data once a week to identify students who met the following criteria: a completed FAFSA application, incomplete/missing signatures or information, and students who are selected for verification.

## **Large Schools (400+ Seniors)**

### Millennium High School

**"I believe our success is a direct result of our counseling team working cooperatively with administration and classroom teachers" - Jennifer Grumbling, MHS Counselor**

- **Collaboration:** The principal, counselors, and teachers collaborated to create a FAFSA completion campaign.
- **FSA ID's:** Counselors, in groups of two, visited all senior social studies classrooms to help students create FSA IDs. The teachers reminded students in advance to make sure they had their social security numbers when the counselors visited, and sent many reminders to the teachers about what students needed in order to create an FSA ID. During this activity, counselors passed out information about their financial aid night and district FAFSA completion nights. Counselors also passed out bracelets and stickers from College Goal Arizona to hype up their students regarding college and our future events.
- **Monitor FAFSA Finish Line Data:** A designated counselor took the lead in monitoring student FAFSA Finish Line Data, and pulled the data once a week to identify students who met the following criteria: a completed FAFSA application, incomplete/missing signatures or information, and students who are selected for verification.

### Tolleson Union High School

**"Our Goal is to make sure that when our students walk across the stage at graduation, that they know what their plan is." - Andrea Wolochuck, TUHS Counselor**

- **Ensuring students know all of their post-secondary education options:** When meeting with students, counselors ensure that students are informed about their post-secondary options including: colleges, universities, certificate programs, trade schools, and military.
- **Hosting FAFSA Events in Fall and Spring with Community Collaboration:** Counselors coordinate FAFSA events in October to kick-off FAFSA season and in early spring to catch any students who may not have completed an application in the Fall. They also partner with local businesses to

provide food for their FAFSA nights so that students and their parents can have assistance completing their FAFSA application while dinner is provided.

- **Access and Resources for all students:** All counselors have a laptop in their office so that students can schedule an appointment with their counselor to complete their FAFSA, scholarship and college applications. This has allowed students to get the one-on-one assistance needed.
- **Collaborated with Be A Leader and The Helios Education Foundation:** Tolleson Union High School District has partnered with Be A Leader Foundation and The Helios Education Foundation to provide a College Transition Specialist on their campus 1-2 days a week that is dedicated to assist students in completing their FAFSA and college applications. The counselors at TUHS have expressed that their College Transition Specialist Cecilia has played a vital role in assisting with their FAFSA completion efforts.
- **Dedicated Counseling Department Website:** Counselors created a website that provides easily accessible post-secondary resources for their students which includes information about scholarships, FAFSA, colleges and universities.
- **Evaluating and Planning for the next school year:** The counselors and administration continuously evaluate their school data throughout the year and set FAFSA completion goals each school year. Setting goals assists in their strategic planning for the upcoming school year so that they can continue to offer innovative best practices that work for their students to promote post-secondary success.

### **Additional Links & Summaries of Content with Best Practices from other states:**

- NY Dept. of Ed. Created a presentation about their FAFSA Completion Challenge and how they not only run and organize their dashboard, but also how schools can promote the FAFSA in schools (including activities, discussions, help forms, etc.). Some best practices included class discussions, activities (reflections and ed. games)- [http://graduatenyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/OPSR-FASA-Completion-Presentation\\_feb1.pdf](http://graduatenyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/OPSR-FASA-Completion-Presentation_feb1.pdf)
- Not sure where to start when filling out your FAFSA application? Above are helpful links for students and counselors to get answers to FAFSA questions, information for undocumented students and resources to share. Tulsa Success Toolkit: <https://www.impacttulsa.org/fafsa/>
- This is a toolkit created by MaineCAN to highlight best practices around the state. The type of initiatives are data dashboards, marketing/FAFSA promotion, student outreach, incentives, progress tracking, etc. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56263ab0e4b08b375368ef9b/t/5638b5e5e4b01c4506dabdb0/1446557157654/FAFSA+Completion+and+Best+Practices.pdf>
- This article examines testimony given by state/school reps that discuss their own success and best practices. <https://www.strivetogether.org/library/increasing-fafsa-completion/> AND <https://www.strivetogether.org/library/six-communities-partner-to-increase-fafsa-completions/>
- Go Alliance staff presented a strategic planning outline for how plan and implement a statewide FAFSA completion campaign. Representatives from Tennessee and West Virginia, who lead the nation in FAFSA completion rates, shared best practices, lessons learned, and effective

strategies for engaging, training and supporting partners, as well as grassroots marketing tactics that compel students and families to take action. Stephanie Ricker from the Colorado Department of Higher Education then discussed data sharing agreements and how states can get involved in their Kresge-funded FAFSA completion tracking tool. Finally, Allie Ciaramella from the National College Access Network (NCAN) provided an overview of the national Form Your Future campaign and how state FAFSA efforts can link with Form Your Future and/or use NCAN's resources. **(THERE ARE MANY FORMS ATTACHED TO WEBSITE @ BOTTOM)**  
<https://www.sreb.org/webinar/effective-strategies-increase-fafsa-completion>

- School Counselors and FAFSA Completion: Systemic Best Practices to Increase FAFSA Submissions and Completions in Your School & District (NOSCA National Office for School Counselor Advocacy). A national advocacy campaign to galvanize and mobilize school counselors to “own the turf” of college and career readiness counseling and take the lead in establishing a college-going culture in their schools, districts, communities and/or states. This PDF guides counselors in helping students to achieve their postsecondary goals, including best practices in completing the FAFSA. <http://secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/nosca/nosca-school-counselors-fafsa-completion.pdf>
- This guide introduces the campaign and provides a one-stop shop for FAFSA resources to support counselor success—and ultimately, the success of students. With tips for student engagement, setting goals, text reminders, incentivizing students, and community collaboration. <http://floridacollegeaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/2016-17-FL-FAFSA-Challenge-Toolkit.pdf>
- This toolkit highlight numerous best practices for multiple college application and FAFSA completion initiatives. Some included help with event planning, creating activities (i.e. scavenger hunts, bingo, etc.), One-on-one appointments, Classroom visits, FAFSA nights, Visuals, Social Media, Influencers, FinancialAidToolkit.ed.gov, FAFSA Ready Iowa <https://www.forbes.com/sites/civcnation/2018/11/16/how-louisiana-led-the-nation-in-fafsa-completion/#18d4e4dc6413>
- With an overall FAFSA completion rate of 77.1%, Louisiana increased its completion rate over the previous year by 25.9%. Louisiana's success can be attributed to both Louisiana's new state financial aid policy and best practices developed by the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance (LOSFA). Best practices include, FAFSA Ambassadors, events, FAFSA lab, and communication. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/civcnation/2018/11/16/how-louisiana-led-the-nation-in-fafsa-completion/#18d4e4dc6413>
- This article discussed 10 ways to boost FAFSA completion within a community (on a micro/meso-level). It discusses tactics such as in-class interventions, data reporting and analysis, hosting events, creating appointment times, creating comm. Partnerships, holding a “phone bank”, etc. <https://www.strivetogether.org/library/strategies-increase-fafsa-completion/>