

Implementing Financial Aid Awareness and Assistance Initiatives

Three Mini Case Studies

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College Access
Foundation of
California

October 2014

Introduction

The College Access Foundation of California (Foundation) is committed to increasing the number of low-income students who attend and complete college across California. Through its Expanding Access to Financial Aid area of work, the Foundation supports school districts, offices of education, and organizations that can assist students in obtaining financial aid and overcoming some of the common financial barriers to college. To this end, the Foundation has supported grantees that are seeking to increase the number and percentage of students who complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and Cal Grant applications, as well as incorporating financial aid awareness and assistance strategies into their broader school- and district-wide college readiness efforts.

WestEd was asked to conduct mini case studies of three grantee sites in order to document effective strategies and highlight some of the challenges and lessons learned. This report provides brief summaries of the three Foundation grantee sites. Following these individual summaries, we discuss key crosscutting themes and lessons learned from across the sites. These common issues provide valuable lessons and guidance both for the Foundation and for other organizations looking to implement or improve financial aid awareness and assistance programs.

Case Studies

WestEd researchers conducted one-day site visits at each of three sites identified by the Foundation: a single school district, a college outreach program, and a county office of education. These sites were selected, in part, because they represent different programmatic entry points and they are all at different stages in their program implementation. Site visits were conducted in September 2014 and included interviews with program directors, as well as visits to one or more schools to meet with staff that are involved in the program. In addition, WestEd researchers reviewed materials provided by the Foundation and the individual sites explaining the programs that were supported by the Foundation grants, as well as available data on student characteristics and FAFSA and Cal Grant completion rates. The summaries that follow include general background and information on the individual programs, as well as a discussion of the key lessons learned, challenges, and next steps.

Intensive Support and Innovation Center in Los Angeles Unified School District

The Intensive Support and Innovation Center (ISIC) is one of five Educational Service Centers in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). ISIC serves 145 schools — including 85 high schools — and 100,000 students across the 710-square-mile span of the school district. While other Educational Service Centers are organized regionally, ISIC includes schools that require the most intensive support as well as schools doing the most innovative work throughout the system.

Pilot program at Fremont High School

The ISIC's grant began in December 2013 with a pilot program to increase financial aid awareness and improve FAFSA completion rates at Fremont High School¹ in South Central Los Angeles. Fremont High School is currently organized into three Small Learning Communities (SLCs) — The School of Global and Media Arts Medical; Environmental Science and Architecture; and The School of Environmental and Social Justice — as well as a Math, Science and Technology Magnet Program. In 2013/14, the school enrolled 2,329 students in grades 9–12; over 90% of the students were Latino, and 8.5% were African American.

Spotlight: LAUSD Intensive Support and Innovation Center

2013/14 pilot year began with Fremont High School. (Program expanding to Crenshaw High School in 2014/15.)

Student characteristics (Fremont High School)

2013/14 enrollment: 2,329

Percent eligible for free and reduced price lunch: 89%

Percent English language learners: 30%

Student/counselor ratio: Approximately 300 to 1

2013 FAFSA Completion Rate: 72%

2014 FAFSA Completion Rate: 77%

One current challenge for the school is that enrolled students face three different sets of graduation requirements related to the University of California's a–g course requirements. New LAUSD policy requires that, starting with the class of 2017, students need to complete the a–g requirements with a grade of C or better in order to graduate. Students in the class

¹ The Fremont High School enrollment data, as well as free and reduced price lunch and English language learners data (shown in the Box) were retrieved from the California Department of Education Dataquest database: <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>. The 2013 FAFSA completion numbers were retrieved from the EdTrust West Financial Aid Tracker: <http://financialaid.edtrustwest.org/>. The 2014 FAFSA completion numbers and student counselor ratios were provided by Malia Bryant-Williams, ISIC's College Access Coordinator.

of 2016 need to complete the a–g courses, but can graduate as long as they receive a D or better. Current-year seniors do not have to fulfill the a–g requirements in order to graduate.

The ISIC program has a coordinator at the district level that works with the team at Fremont High School and is also responsible for moving the program to additional schools in the future. At the school site, the primary point people are Fremont’s counselors, who provide both group and individual counseling to assist seniors with the FAFSA application process. Each SLC at Fremont has two designated counselors: one for students in grades 9–10 and one for students in grades 11–12. While the school formerly had a designated college counselor, the SLC counselors for the upper grades now take on that role. The counselor who previously served in the role of college counselor is now assigned to one of the SLCs, and the counseling team relies on her experience and expertise for many college readiness and financial aid–related issues.

The ISIC program received its grant from the Foundation in December 2013, so, it has had just one full semester to implement this new program thus far. The 2014 spring semester was used as a test case to see if this approach could be implemented at other sites. As former ISIC Instructional Data Coordinator Jose Velasquez noted, “We were testing whether we can create a system, and [we] proved that it can occur.” While the timing of the grant did not allow for the counselors and others at the school to implement the program over an entire academic year, it did provide a unique opportunity for some experimentation with approaches. For instance, counselors sought to reach students through a variety of means, including working with classroom teachers to bring financial aid information into the curriculum, reaching out to students and parents individually to encourage them to fill out the FAFSA, and offering special incentives (usually gift cards for local stores) to encourage students to complete the FAFSA. For the 2014/15 school year, the team at Fremont plans to take what they have learned from the initial semester-long pilot to implement a full-year program.

Now that the 2014/15 school year is underway, ISIC is scaling up its program by taking it to additional LAUSD sites, beginning with Crenshaw High School. ISIC is taking several steps to make sure that this program can take hold on a broader basis. For example, FAFSA completion rates have been incorporated into LAUSD’s Local Control and Accountability Plan, placing priority on this important statistic. In addition, the district has signed Memoranda of Understanding to track financial aid and student success with both the Cal-PASS Plus student data system and the National Student Clearinghouse.

According to district personnel, financial aid completion rates at Fremont, which were already relatively high when this grant program began, have increased in 2014. FAFSA completion rates increased from 72% in 2013 to 77% in 2014; Cal

Grant completion rates rose from 84% in 2013 to 100% in 2014. While it may be difficult to attribute these increases directly to the efforts supported by the Foundation grant, the increases and generally high rates of completion are very promising, especially for a school with such a high-needs population.

Lessons Learned

As noted above, the program at Fremont had been in place for only one semester at the time of our visit. However, the team was able to experiment with different approaches to increasing FAFSA completion rates, and interviewees noted several key lessons that can be built upon for continued success in the future.

Embedding financial aid in the curriculum

Counselors at Fremont found that the most successful approach to improving FAFSA completion was embedding financial aid information into senior year government, economics, and/or English classes, since these are courses that all seniors at the school need to take. Counselors provided financial aid information, lessons, and application assistance during class time. Even though the counselors were providing the information, integrating this information into the curriculum required a partnership with teachers, including working with teachers to make sure that they “speak financial aid.”

FAFSA completion is one component in a larger process

Increasing FAFSA completion rates is just one step in a larger process. Counselors and administrators at Fremont noted that the financial aid awareness and assistance strategies need to start much earlier in the students’ careers and need to be incorporated into schools’ and districts’ larger college-going efforts. Fremont’s principal reflected on a discussion he had with a student who, upon completing his FAFSA form, realized that he wished he had filled out college applications as well. This disconnect between the college application process and the financial aid application process highlights the need to provide earlier and more explicit communication about how college and financial aid application processes fit together. Counselors suggested that this kind of information should be shared with students in grade 9, or even earlier, to help them speak the language of college. Fremont is working to make college more visible on campus through posters and other signage, as part of its overall effort to create a culture of college awareness.

Benefits of the SLC model

Fremont’s SLC model provides many opportunities for collaboration; there are regular meetings of the faculty and counselors on each SLC team, as well as counseling team meetings. The model prioritizes small caseloads — grade 11 and 12 counselors have about 300 students each, which provides more opportunity than

schools without SLCs for one-on-one interactions with students and for closer monitoring of students as they move through the FAFSA and college application process. In addition, students stay with the same counselors for two years, allowing more time to develop personal relationships.

The counseling team felt that they have developed strong relationships with one another and have been able to learn from one another about effective approaches for supporting their students. The SLC model also encourages counselors to inform teachers in their SLC about the value of financial aid and the overall college application process; teachers are encouraged to share this information with their students.

Another attribute of Fremont's SLC structure is that computer labs were set up directly next to the SLC counselor offices. This provides an easily accessible space where counselors can work with students to fill out financial aid forms and college applications.

Connection to support providers

Although the counselors at Fremont take the lead role for this ISIC financial aid awareness program, their connection to support providers outside of the school is critical. For example, the ISIC college access coordinator provides advice to the counselors, organizes events, and serves as a link to other community organizations. In addition, the coordinator has access to information that allows her to provide updates to the counselors about which students still need to complete certain aspects of the FAFSA form.

Fremont also has valued collaborations with various community partners. For instance, the work of the Los Angeles Education Partnership and the Fulfillment Fund are critical to the ongoing development of Fremont's program. Local colleges and universities like UCLA and Santa Monica College send representatives to assist with financial aid information nights. In addition, there are many community organizations on campus, most of which work with a small, targeted number of students; the district is trying to find ways for these organizations to provide services for a greater number of students.

Challenges

While the general feeling at Fremont was that they have seen many successes in the early stages of the program, they do face many challenges as well.

Reaching parents

Fremont serves a high-needs population, with very low-income families. In many cases, parents do not have a high school education. The challenge in reaching parents is to not only educate them on the value of college, but also on the potential

for financial aid to make college viable and affordable. Counselors work hard to gain the trust of parents and to get them to sign individual graduation plans and/or financial aid applications. In some cases, parents have fears about sharing information because of their undocumented status in the United States. Counselors have found that a one-on-one approach with parents, using both personal phone calls and individual meetings, helps to ease some of parents' fears and develop that trust.

Data accessibility

While counselors are using WebGrants to monitor FAFSA completions, Fremont wants to increase the use of data to examine factors such as who applies to and enrolls in college or their success once there. In addition, the principal would like to share this information with parents and teachers to raise awareness of how students fare once they leave the school.

Changing the culture

The continued commitment of all staff is important. Fremont is still building a college-going culture and developing new practices accordingly. Although the counselors are the ones driving the process, in order for the program to truly be successful, there will need to be additional buy-in from teachers and other staff at the school site.

Expanding the program

The SLC structure is a key component of Fremont's approach to raising financial aid awareness. The district must determine how to adapt this model for high schools without SLCs. In addition, there are many different initiatives in the district, and in ISIC itself; it will be important to connect financial aid awareness to other district activities.

Next Steps

During the 2014/15 school year, Fremont will expand its pilot into a full-year format. In the fall, the school will hold information nights for parents and students to raise awareness about financial aid, followed by a Cash for College night in the early spring to provide direct assistance with FAFSA applications. In addition, Fremont will utilize peer mentors. Twelfth grade students will have the opportunity to become service workers by enrolling in a class where counselors train them to mentor freshmen and sophomore students. Recent graduates who have received scholarships will also serve as mentors and receive a small stipend to assist with FAFSA preparation.

The district plans to expand financial aid awareness efforts into Crenshaw High School this year. If the model is successful there, the district will expand the program to several similar schools that are supported by ISIC.

College OPTIONS Outreach Program

College OPTIONS (CO) is a college and financial aid outreach program based in Redding, California, that serves students and families in five of the state's largely rural, far-northern counties including Modoc, Shasta, Siskiyou, Tehama, and Trinity.² This region has a large low-income population with low college-going rates. Founded in 2003, CO works closely with all school districts and higher education institutions in the region. In 2013/14, high school enrollment in the five-county region was 13,853. The school sizes vary greatly, from 1,451 students enrolled at Shasta High School to only 20 students at Southern Trinity High School. Across the region, approximately 50% of the students qualify for free and reduced price lunch.

Schools served by CO have seen their FAFSA and Cal Grant completion rates increase significantly over time.

According to data provided by CO staff, 18% of seniors completed the FAFSA in 2003 when the program began; that figure had increased to 68% by 2013. FAFSA completion rates at individual schools range from 59% to 88%. In 2013, Cal Grant Completion rates for CO schools were 70%, with completion rates at individual schools ranging from 48% to 100%.³ Further analysis of the data shows that schools with the largest percentages of students receiving free and reduced price lunch have even higher FAFSA completion rates; the six high schools with more than 60% of their students receiving free and reduced price lunch had FAFSA completion rates ranging from 50% to 88%, with an average of 72%.

College OPTIONS relies on many different partnerships for funding and for provision of services. While the University of California at Davis serves as the fiscal

Spotlight: College OPTIONS

Works with a total of 26 high schools in five-county region (Modoc, Shasta, Siskiyou, Tehama, Trinity).

Student characteristics (across all 26 schools)

2013/14 enrollment: 13,853

Percent eligible for free and reduced price lunch: 50%

2003 FAFSA completion rate: 18%

2013 FAFSA completion rate: 68%

2003 a–g course completion rate: 8%

2013 a–g course completion rate: 30%

² The enrollment and free and reduced price lunch data on the 26 participating high schools in this region (shown in the Box) were retrieved from the California Department of Education Dataquest database: <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>. The historical FAFSA rates and a–g completion rates were provided by Buffy Tanner, Scholarship Coordinator at College OPTIONS.

³ The 2013 FAFSA and Cal Grant Completion numbers were retrieved from the EdTrust West Financial Aid Tracker: <http://financialaid.edtrustwest.org/>. College Options did not have 2014 rates available.

agent, CO's funding comes from multiple organizations, including the federal government and several foundations, including the College Access Foundation and the McConnell Foundation. With these resources, CO offers college workshops, campus visits, parent outreach, and financial aid advising. CO advisors support 26 high schools. Each advisor is assigned to specific schools and visits those campuses at least once a week.

In Shasta, Siskiyou, and Tehama counties, College OPTIONS advisors support 1,500 low-income, first generation students in grades 7–12 as part of the federally funded Educational Talent Search (ETS) program. Advisors meet with ETS students on a regular basis, provide group workshops, and offer individual advising on college and career readiness. As students near high school graduation, they may meet with advisors weekly. In addition, CO has developed a curriculum that addresses college and career awareness, financial aid awareness, and academic preparation. CO is currently expanding this curriculum to provide more information on financial aid, and plans to deliver this information to other schools and college access programs.

College OPTIONS provides annual trainings for counselors and teachers on financial aid information. In these trainings, CO introduces a curriculum that high school teachers can use to introduce financial aid information to students in their classrooms. This curriculum is used by teachers in senior year social studies classes at 15 of the CO high schools. Ongoing information and financial aid updates are provided through a regional listserv for high school counselors, college access program staff, Indian education staff, migrant education staff, foster youth coordinators, and other student service providers.

To encourage schools to increase their FAFSA completion rates, CO held a competition called FAFSA Frenzy. The program provided cash awards to the schools with the highest increase in FAFSA completion rates, to be used at their discretion on an event for the senior class. CO found that the FAFSA program was less successful than the college application program in part because FAFSA completion requires the involvement of parents.

College OPTIONS manages a resource center in Redding where students and families can go for information and assistance. In addition, CO has a specialist on staff that works directly with families to maximize their financial aid by alerting them to special circumstances. This specialist also provides detailed information for students and families on how to compare award letters and how to understand the full costs of college.

Currently, the high school registrars are primarily responsible for uploading GPAs and graduation confirmations into the WebGrants system. In addition, CO is able to use the University of California at Davis subscription to the National Student Clearinghouse to track the progress of students who go on to college. But using all of

this data can be difficult, according to one of the counselors. She suggests that it would be most helpful to have an administrative person at the district level keep track of data, clean it up, and create reports.

Lessons Learned

Since College OPTIONS has been in place for over a decade, they have refined the program over time to maximize impact.

Financial aid curriculum

Over time, CO staff realized that the best way to reach the largest number of students was through academic curriculum. Accordingly, two years ago CO staff developed and began training teachers on a six-unit financial aid curriculum that can be embedded into grade 12 social studies classes. The content is designed to be provided in one class period per month between November and May and offers step-by-step guidance on how to access financial aid, such as understanding financial aid terminology and processes, filling out applications, and analyzing award letters. Each unit includes a PowerPoint presentation with a detailed script for the teachers so they can easily deliver the information to students. The units also include complementary homework assignments such as having students complete an online worksheet on the cost of college attendance or complete the FAFSA worksheet in preparation for the Cash for College workshop.

Leveraging partnerships

In the ten-year period since its inception, CO has seen FAFSA completion rates increase from 18% to 68%. CO staff attribute this success to using a comprehensive approach with multiple partners to build financial aid awareness. In addition to funding partners like the Foundation, whose support helps CO provide a wide array of services, there are also ongoing partnerships with countywide collaboratives like Reach Higher Shasta and Expect More Tehama, which aim to raise expectations that every student has access to viable career options. Through partnerships with these collaboratives, CO can incorporate its financial aid education and assistance efforts into broader college-readiness efforts in the counties.

Early outreach and information

Over the years, CO has expanded its efforts to reach students before their senior year. Beginning in grade 7, the CO ETS program holds two workshops each year to communicate information on financial aid, budgeting, and learning to distinguish between “wants” and “needs.” To develop a culture of shared experience around college, CO also conducts several countywide events to reach students in kindergarten, grade 5, grade 8, and grades 11 and 12. For the younger students, the focus of these workshops is on introducing the concept of college; workshops for

older students focus on specific aspects of college. These events often take place on college campuses so students can interact with college staff.

Challenges

While CO has had significant success in improving FAFSA completion rates over time, the team continues to address several challenging factors.

Engaging with parents

Educating parents about the importance of college and getting them on board with the idea of providing specific personal information on financial aid applications in order for their children to be eligible has posed challenges at some schools in the district. Some parents are distrustful of government and therefore are wary of giving personal information on FAFSA forms; others are not certain about the value of sending their children to college, or they are concerned that if their children go to college they will not return back to the community.

Staff capacity

Because of the multiple roles that counselors play, their capacity for increasing financial aid awareness can be a challenge. At some of the smaller schools served by CO, the counselor is often also a teacher or has other additional roles. At larger schools with large numbers of feeder middle schools, counselors conduct registration for grade 8 students during January and February — which is when financial aid season is in full swing — making it difficult to devote the time needed to work directly with students.

Achieving and maintaining program buy-in

College OPTIONS staff note that in order to have a comprehensive financial aid awareness and support program at each school, they must maintain positive relationships with school staff and administrators. Because these relationships are often person-to-person, they must be rebuilt when key staff change or move into new roles. In addition, the long-term sustainability of these efforts depends on getting teachers and counselors to take ownership. CO staff try to achieve this through counselor and teacher trainings to help school-site staff see themselves as the experts and to rely less on CO staff for all financial aid-related questions.

Next Steps

Moving forward, CO plans to focus additional attention on developing relationships with and support from superintendents. Specifically, CO plans to approach superintendents about incorporating FAFSA completion into their Local Control and Accountability Plans, so that financial aid awareness and support is measured and valued as a district and school goal.

Another goal for CO is to move toward a cradle-to-career collective impact model that would expand the ongoing county collaboration to reach students earlier than grade 7. CO is currently looking for base funding for this effort.

Stanislaus County Office of Education

Through its Access Success Grant (ASG) and Financial Aid Advising Project, the Stanislaus County of Education (SCOE) works with 10 high schools⁴ in 8 districts throughout the county to promote college and financial aid awareness and support. These schools have high proportions of English language learners and students qualifying for free and reduced priced lunch, as well as low a-g course completion rates. Over the five years that SCOE has offered this program, it has grown rapidly. In the first two years, the program served three schools, then expanded to four schools in year three, eight schools in year four, and ten schools in year five. Enrollment at these ten schools varies from 213 students at Valley Charter to 1,685 students at Central Valley.

Spotlight: Stanislaus County Office of Education

Works with 10 high Schools in 8 school districts, all within Stanislaus County.

Student Characteristics (across all 10 schools)

2013/14 Enrollment: 6,880

Percent eligible for free and reduced price lunch: 71%

Percent English language learners: 16%

2013 Average FAFSA Completion Rate: 50%

2014 Average FAFSA Completion Rate: 65%

The mission of the SCOE program is to increase access to, enrollment in, and graduation from college, particularly among low-income and underrepresented students. The program has four main pillars: two-year scholarships, FAFSA completion, financial aid advising, and sustaining a college-going culture.

Each participating high school has a College Access Team (CAT) composed of key staff. While team composition varies based on the size of the school, it typically includes an administrator or learning director, counselors, a registrar, a student data clerk, and teachers. Each site appoints a team member to be the CAT Liaison to attend countywide meetings where information, support, and training is provided in several areas, including FAFSA submission and completion, financial aid, parent involvement, and ASG scholarships. The CAT Liaisons then take the information, ideas, and strategies back to their site teams.

⁴ The SCOE enrollment data as well as the free and reduced price lunch and English language learners data (shown in the Box) were retrieved from the California Department of Education Dataquest database: <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>. The 2013 FAFSA completion numbers were retrieved from the EdTrust West Financial Aid Tracker: <http://financialaid.edtrustwest.org/>. The 2014 FAFSA completion rates were provided by Kandy Woerz, SCOE's College and Career Coordinator.

Each school site has built FAFSA awareness and completion efforts into the academic curriculum, typically during the student's senior government or economics class. In-class efforts are paired with afterschool options for students to work on FAFSAs as needed. Schools also provide College Awareness, Financial Aid for College, and Cash for College events for students and parents. In the smaller schools, counselors are able to provide more one-on-one support to students throughout the entire process.

The ASG component of the program provides scholarships to low-income students for their first year of college, with potential for renewal in the second year. Scholarships are only available to students at schools participating in the program, and only to students who complete the FAFSA or Dream Act application. Through partnerships with postsecondary institutions, scholarship recipients receive additional customized financial aid assistance to increase the opportunities for additional aid.

The SCOE college access program provides resources for schools to offer incentives to students to participate, but leaves it up to the individual schools what those incentives and policies might be. For example, at Ceres High School, the administration has made FAFSA completion a required assignment in the government course. At other schools, FAFSA completion is an optional class assignment or extra credit activity. Other sites offer raffle prizes for FAFSA completion.

The SCOE program relies extensively on a variety of partnerships. To build stronger academic pipelines, the program works with local colleges and universities as well as the superintendent's Destination Graduation initiative. Regional support is provided by a financial aid roundtable and the Alliance for Regional Collaboration to Heighten Educational Success (ARCHES), a P-16 collaborative that aims to build a college going culture among low-income and underrepresented students. Strong links have been made to the broader community through business and grassroots organizations such as the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE), which helps present information to parents in Spanish.

Data is a key component of participation in this program. All school sites have a person responsible for uploading GPAs and graduation confirmations for Cal Grant eligibility. In addition, through the Foundation's support, the SCOE has a subscription to the National Student Clearinghouse and uses this information to monitor the success of scholarship recipients and other graduates once they have left the county's high schools.

The average FAFSA completion rates in 2014 for the 10 schools participating in the SCOE college access program was 65%, with individual schools ranging from 37% to 91%. This is a sizable increase from the year before, when the average FAFSA

completion rate was 50%. The Cal Grant completion rates in 2014 for the 10 participating schools ranged from 33% to 71%, with an average of 62%, an increase from an average completion rate of 48% in 2013.⁵

Lessons Learned

SCOE staff identified several key factors that they believe have helped with the success of the initiative.

Leveraging partnerships

The SCOE program leverages many partnerships to help reach students and parents. The program has a particularly strong connection to institutions of higher education in the region, especially California State University (CSU) Stanislaus. According to the director of admissions at CSU Stanislaus, the university has worked closely with SCOE since 2005. This relationship involves not only CSU staff helping to facilitate financial aid workshops at the high schools, but also ongoing communication about the support needs and progress of students who move from SCOE schools to the university. This communication allows for early intervention and increasing opportunities for student success once in college.

Changing the culture

A challenge of this effort to build college access and awareness is that it requires a culture shift — teachers and counselors need to go in with the expectation that students are going to go to college, even if the students do not yet believe that they will.

Early outreach

The senior year of high school is too late to reach parents and students with information about going to college. Accordingly, the SCOE program provides information to parents and students as early as middle school. Staff work with middle school students to conduct career assessments to help them look at their interests and to understand how college can fit into achieving those goals. Through its partnership with the Parent Institute for Quality Education, the program is able to reach parents before their children get to high school and to help them understand the value of college, the steps in the college application process, and the availability of financial aid.

⁵ FAFSA and Cal Grant completion numbers provided by the Stanislaus County Office of Education, drawn from <http://financialaid.edtrust.west.org> and <http://studentaid.ed.gov/data-center>.

Embedding financial aid information in the curriculum

As in the other sites, the SCOE schools have found that using class time is the most effective way to reach students and to help them get through the financial aid process. All sites are required to implement financial aid education within their curriculum as a part of participation in the program. According to Kandy Woerz, the project director and college and career coordinator for SCOE, this is part of the SCOE's sustainability plan for the program, as it is the best way to reach the greatest number of students. The challenge, according to school site staff, can be that teachers need to see the value in discussing financial aid and be willing to give up valuable class time.

Developing one-on-one relationships

At the small schools, the ability of the counselor to provide intensive support to students as they go through the process has been important. This one-on-one time allows counselors to determine what portions of the application are not yet complete and to provide support that is tailored to each student's circumstance. It also allows for the counselor to break down the financial aid application process into smaller steps, which helps keep students focused.

Incentives, not competition

Initially, the program adopted a competitive model where schools received bonus scholarships if they implemented automatic Cal Grant GPA uploads and if they attained the highest or second highest FAFSA completion rates. However, this proved too complex to implement, since the scholarships are customized to student needs and costs of attendance. Despite these issues, SCOE awarded 155 scholarships, with each school receiving a fair proportion based on the percent of eligible applicants. Going forward, SCOE intends to use the term "incentive" to encourage schools to participate, rather emphasizing competition.

Challenges

While the Stanislaus sites are making significant progress getting the program implemented in its schools, the SCOE program has faced challenges related to data, logistics, and parent outreach.

Data

In order to ensure high quality data, SCOE brought in the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) to train key staff on FAFSA and the financial aid process. SCOE also encouraged staff to have WebGrant accounts and to assist students in establishing accounts on WebGrant 4 Students. However, SCOE found that staff needed additional training on how to navigate the WebGrant site for data relating to incomplete submissions prior to the deadline. In 2014-15 they are scheduling an

additional training focusing specifically on this problem.

SCOE has also had some difficulty with WebGrants data, particularly getting information from WebGrants to match their own data. For example, SCOE schools report that submission of grade 12 GPAs for prior years seems to be a problem.

Logistics

Depending on the size of the school, it can be challenging to provide adequate resources and support for students to complete financial aid forms all at once. For instance, at larger schools in the county, there may not be enough computers for all the students to complete the forms. Larger schools need to hold smaller group sessions over the course of a week in order to reach all students.

Another logistical difficulty has been providing financial aid workshops for parents. Some issues are space related; larger school sites need to offer multiple sessions because they cannot fit all parents into a single room. In other cases, regulations got in the way. Cash for College sessions stipulated that activities had to start after 4pm. However, Stanislaus has a high percentage of manufacturing and farm workers who work in the afternoon and would only be able to attend sessions during the day. To address these challenges SCOE has received permission for this coming year to offer these sessions as early as 12:30pm.

Reaching parents

As with the other grantees in this report, convincing parents to participate in the financial aid process can present some challenges. In some cases, parents don't think they will qualify and therefore do not want to fill out the forms. One common misconception is that all scholarships are need-based, and so parents don't know that students should fill out the FAFSA to get merit-based scholarships. Additional concerns come from the undocumented population. Accordingly, the program uses Spanish-speaking counselors to work closely with parents to provide information and to reassure them. To address concerns about sending their child away, the program takes parents on college tours and discusses issues such as student safety.

Next Steps

As the SCOE college access program moves forward, it is focused on sustainability. For example, the program is embedding procedures in policy so they will continue beyond the life of the grant. SCOE is also using data to describe the importance of the program and its effect on student success.

The grant director and the CSU administrator we spoke with noted the importance of having a strong partnership across the K-12 and higher education sectors. Together, they can advance a common goal of increasing student access and college success. In addition, it is important to make sure that these partnerships are not

sustained by specific people, but instead are embedded in departments within their institutions. As the grant director said, “We will work hard to train the next people to take on these relationships [with the local institutions of higher education] so the program doesn’t end when a person leaves. This will help to keep the program going and the commitment level high.”

Cross-Case Lessons Learned

Although the three sites examined in these short case studies represent different types of organizations (a local school district, a college outreach program, and a county office of education), there are several common threads. All have had success in raising FAFSA and Cal Grant completion rates and in connecting their efforts to other college readiness efforts in the schools, their counties, and their communities. The lessons learned from these sites can be useful to other organizations trying to increase financial aid awareness and completion of financial aid applications in their region's schools.

Financial aid is part of a larger college-access effort

All three sites have seen FAFSA completion rates increase, both in the short- and long-term. However, those we interviewed suggest that increasing FAFSA completion rates is only part of the challenge. For long-term success, efforts to improve financial aid awareness and FAFSA completion rates must be rooted in a larger college readiness effort in the school, district, and community. Introducing these concepts in the senior year of high school is too late, both for students and for parents. Several interviewees suggested that to ultimately be successful, these financial aid initiatives have to be part of a cultural change — one in which teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents believe that all students can and should be prepared to go to college.

Embedding information into curriculum is best way to reach students

These three programs have all used senior year classes to get financial aid information directly to students. The approaches at the sites vary: at Fremont High School, counselors go in to the classroom and conduct lessons on financial aid definitions and procedures; College OPTIONS provides specific training and curriculum for teachers to present this financial aid information themselves; SCOE requires that financial aid education be included in the academic curriculum, but leaves it up to individual schools as to how to do this. Across the sites, some teachers have been eager to take on financial aid awareness and to embed this concept into their curricula, such as requiring FAFSA completion as a class project or incorporating additional lessons on financial planning and budgeting for college into economics classes. Several interviewees felt that it was important to get initial teacher champions on board and then allow them to be advocates for this approach with their colleagues. While it can take time and effort to get the support of administrators and teachers to use class time to promote financial aid awareness, these sites felt that it is a worthwhile endeavor.

Students need direct support throughout the financial aid process

All of these sites provide information and support in various ways, such as family information nights and presentations to students in classrooms or counseling sessions. However, in order to get students to complete financial aid applications, it is also essential to provide individual support for the application process. It is typically easier to provide intensive assistance in smaller schools or in settings like Fremont High School that have Small Learning Communities; larger schools without sufficient computer labs or with a higher student-to-counselor ratios may find it more challenging to offer this sort of individualized support.

Reaching parents poses challenges

Reaching parents was identified as one of the most difficult challenges in all three case study sites. In Los Angeles and Stanislaus County where there are many undocumented immigrants, parents were often wary of providing information. In the SCOE and College OPTIONS districts, some parents needed to be convinced that they would qualify for aid or that it is worthwhile to file an application. Finally, skepticism about government programs combined with concerns about children leaving for college presented roadblocks to parent participation at some of the College OPTIONS sites. Accordingly, counselors should work closely with parents to develop trusting relationships and to help them see the value in participating in the financial aid process. Educating parents early on about the importance of college and the intricacies of the college and financial aid application process present an ongoing challenge that all sites attempting this work will need to address.

Leveraging support of partners is important

Leveraging other partners — including community organizations, higher education institutions, countywide initiatives, and other funders — played a big role in the ultimate success of financial aid awareness efforts across the three sites. Working with partners can have several benefits, including enabling programs to reach students and parents earlier, allowing greater opportunities for following students once they have left high school, and providing the potential for long-term sustainability once individual grants are no longer available.

Incentives have met with varying degrees of success

Each of these grantees has experimented with the use of incentives for completing financial aid applications. SCOE schools have discretion regarding how to incentivize FAFSA completion. SCOE also uses scholarships as an incentive for schools to participate in the college access program. At Fremont High School, counselors experimented with the use of small incentives, such as gift cards to local sandwich shops, to encourage students to complete the FAFSA. While this approach got students to complete the financial aid application, officials decided that this approach was not sustainable, and instead will motivate students by explaining the

importance of college. College OPTIONS tried a competitive program to encourage schools to aim for the highest percentage of FAFSA completions, but found this approach less successful than expected.

Data use is improving, but sites are still working out some kinks

Interviewees at all of the sites noted the importance of having good data for monitoring financial aid applications in process. They also noted the importance of having data to track whether students receive financial aid and if students succeed once they start college. Sites have found WebGrants to be very helpful for identifying students who have not yet completed their application forms, but some sites have experienced problems with the system. In addition, while all of these grantees automatically upload graduation confirmations and GPAs to CSAC for Cal Grant eligibility, they have experienced challenges such as getting schools to upload GPAs for prior-year students and inconsistencies between state and local numbers.

Another common problem related to data is staffing. Counselors at all three sites held multiple roles and had little bandwidth to manage technology applications. It would be helpful to designate a district-level staff member who can help monitor and clean data, as well as support schools and districts in using the information.

Final Thoughts

WestEd researchers asked interviewees at each site to identify what they saw as the greatest successes of their efforts and to speculate on the reasons for those successes. Most interviewees cited increases in FAFSA completion rates and raising awareness about college opportunities as their primary successes. The sites consistently attributed these gains to the commitment of teachers and counselors. As Tommy Chang, instructional superintendent of ISIC in LAUSD noted, this kind of work takes a massive commitment from staff and in many cases requires a cultural shift that results in “transforming the adult learning in the system.” The entire school needs to believe that their mission is to ensure that students graduate with options that include postsecondary education. However, as one of the teachers we spoke with said, it is a challenge to build an expectation that every student will go to college, regardless of whether students initially envision this future for themselves.

All of our interviewees agreed that this cultural shift requires introducing the concept of college early and often, as well as raising awareness of college options for students and parents in middle school, if not before. At the high school level, while the focused attention on financial aid assistance in the senior year is crucial, it will be much more effective if students are aware of and preparing for college throughout their four years. Finally, college and career readiness — of which FAFSA completion is an important component — must be linked to a larger vision for student success at the school, district, and community level.