

From the Frontline: Principals’ views on engaging students about the benefits of acquiring postsecondary education and training using financial aid

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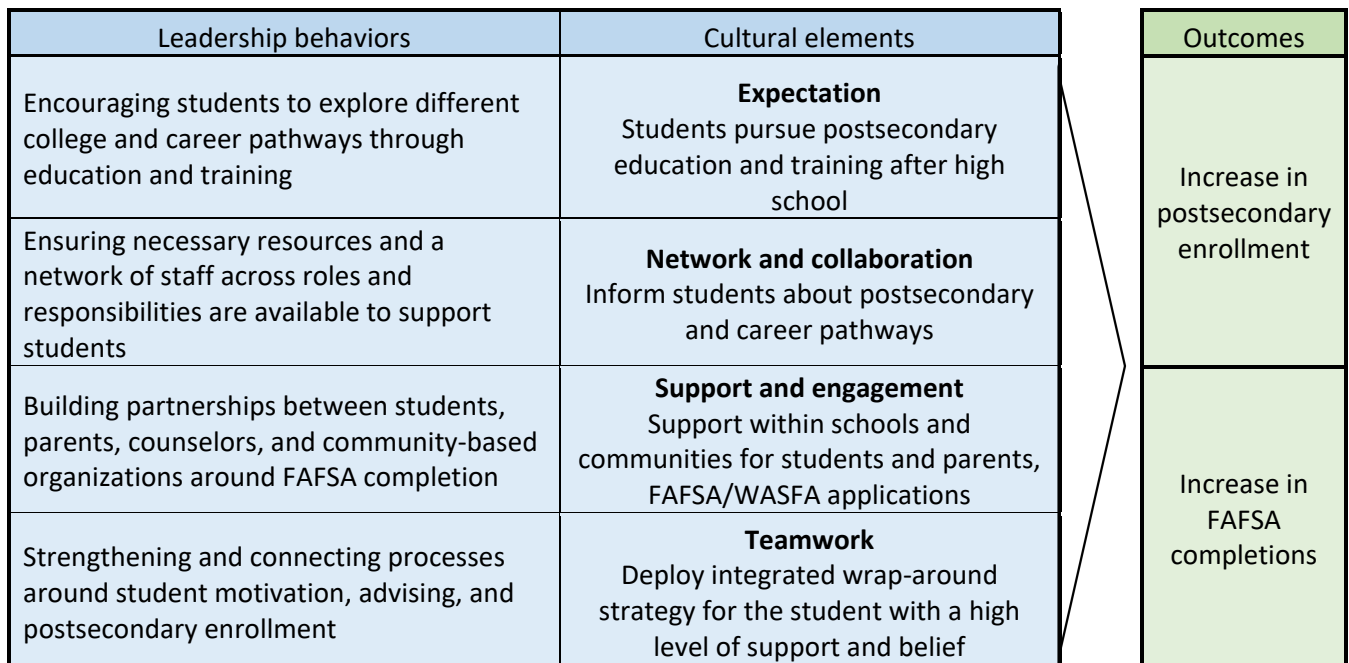
Introduction

This report summarizes the key findings of the focus group discussion conducted with 13 high school principals from multiple geographic locations with varying school sizes. The focus group sought to gather essential information on the primary barriers to postsecondary education and financial aid that principals hear about from their students, and how the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) can effectively address these barriers.

Purpose

WSAC wants to encourage all students to take advantage of the outstanding financial aid opportunity offered through the new Washington College Grant (WCG) by submitting a completed FAFSA or WASFA financial aid application. Despite consistently ranking top in the nation for providing generous state financial aid programs, Washington steadily ranks in the bottom five states in FAFSA completion, even with the hard work and efforts taking place within high schools across the state. To develop and implement effective policies that will increase postsecondary attainment, WSAC conducted exploratory field work with high school principals.

Leadership Effect Framework



The primary purpose of the fieldwork was to learn strategies WSAC can use to successfully engage with students to promote the benefits of acquiring postsecondary education and training, increase FAFSA/WASFA completion, and spread awareness about the WCG.

Methodology

There was a good variation in the representation of the focus group participants, consisting of high school principals with varying student population sizes, ranging from 237 students to 1,865 students. Schools also ranged from high poverty to low poverty and were located in rural, suburban, and urban geographic regions. Participants provided information about their students on the following topics: ***Postsecondary Enrollment, FAFSA Completion, and Promotion of the Washington College Grant.***

Key Findings

Postsecondary Enrollment

There was general agreement among the focus group participants that the essential aspect of successful postsecondary advising is being able to give students one-on-one attention as they develop their postsecondary plan so they can “articulate that plan for life after high school” and be exposed to the different options that align with their individual goals.

Principals stressed the importance of putting equal value on all pathways and not just tracking students into a four-year college path if that isn’t where their interests are. Overall, they worried that “we have overdone the college emphasis. Now a bunch of kids believe it’s a four-year or failure.”

“Depending on the student demographic, they might not have been exposed to all of the career opportunities.”

-Principal

“We all want these students going to college but what about our electrical and plumbing in the future? I was talking to a student that wants to be an electrician but his teachers have it set up for him to go to college and he doesn’t want to go. He wants to know, ‘How can they help me become an electrician?’”

-Principal

“If policy makers think it’s a good idea, then they need to put their money where their mouth is and actually fund it. They make a huge change and offer no money to implement, and it’s very frustrating.”

-Principal

“Kids have done everything, but someone was holding their hand. Then the hand is gone, and they show up and they don’t go through because there is no one there on the other side of the fence saying ‘I got you.’”

-Principal

The vast majority indicated that they did not have the resources and counseling staff needed to successfully advise students about their college and career options, encourage postsecondary enrollment, and support their students emotionally. The principals are worried about “the unfunded mandate” and said

they couldn’t ask counselors to do more, “especially with the social and emotional stuff they need to do. We’ve seen a significant uptick in suicide issues, and we have three counselors in a school of 1,440 students. Where is the funding for school counselors?”

Most participants also indicated that the “summer melt” is a major issue for postsecondary enrollment, and even when students have a postsecondary plan in high school, there is a “big gap in support for the

transition” to college. Many students complete a High School and Beyond Plan that includes college, but often when the principals see them again after high school graduation, these same students are not enrolling or pursuing postsecondary education.

FAFSA/WASFA Completion

The majority of principals who participated in the focus group felt that the best way to boost FAFSA/WASFA completion was to connect it to a student’s pathway and to make sure that it was more than “just a check the box” exercise.

Most of the participants also pointed to the difficulty of completing the long and confusing FAFSA form and discussed the importance of providing technical assistance to students and families at after-school events. However, they are worried that the parents who show up to FAFSA night events are also the parents who are already likely to help their students submit the FAFSA.

“Students have to know that FAFSA is connected to a meaningful post high school opportunity and that they have options so they aren’t limited in the doors they can open.”

-Principal

“These kids are historically disadvantaged anyway, and their parents can’t come in for FAFSA nights because they are working two jobs, and working nights and weekends.”

-Principal

“Requiring it is scary for the counselors. We keep getting new requirements. Plus having it as a grad requirement in a year, when we should plan for it years before. My seniors fill out a FAFSA in their civics class. I’m a small school and the effort that takes is enormous. Counselors will have to take the responsibility and it should be well thought out.”

-Principal

Almost all the principals expressed concerns about making FAFSA/WASFA completion a high school graduation requirement, especially if this mandate did not come with additional implementation funding and a realistic timetable.

“We are competitive people. It does change leadership behavior in the building.”

-Principal

Some of the principals voiced interest in receiving reports with publicly available FAFSA completion data that showed how their school was performing in comparison to other schools in their region or across the state.

Washington College Grant Promotion

The most commonly cited point amongst the participating principals regarding the promotion of the WCG was to make sure students understand the flexibility of the grant to fund short-term and apprentice programs. Some of the principals did not know this themselves before the focus group meeting and felt that getting this information to students was vital.

The focus group discussed the price of college as one of the primary barriers to postsecondary enrollment and found that “the cost of the in-state tuition is brutal. It’s difficult to say that we value education, but don’t make it affordable.” A lack of financial planning and awareness for parents and families also contributed to the issue. Principals advocated for presenting clear and accessible information about the WCG to students and families early on in their school experience.

“I did not know that the WCG could be used for technical degrees, thought it was only two to four-years. Kids don’t know they can access that so that communication needs to be better.”

-Principal

“We need to engage the parents early on. A lot of parents have the illusion that their kids can just go to college and somehow they can pay for it. Then they realize, ‘we haven’t really planned for this’ and they can’t even pay for the state college. Even for someone in the system it’s a big challenge.”

-Principal

Recommendations

Overall, the following fundamental recommendations emerged from the focus group:

Postsecondary Enrollment. Washington State should:

- Distribute and promote consistent messaging to students that value all postsecondary and training pathways, not just those that lead to a four-year degree.
- Develop and implement additional planned supports for students as they make the transition from high school to postsecondary education. For example, the state could collaborate with schools to offer summer programs for graduating seniors to successfully transition them into college by providing mentorship and help with late applications, housing issues, and class registration.
- Provide additional funding for high school counselors to better support students in preparing for their life after high school.

FAFSA/WASFA Completion. WSAC will:

- Prepare evidence-based guidance documents, highlighting best practices using successful FAFSA completion efforts from nationally high-ranking FAFSA completion rate states. WSAC will share this material with principals to adapt and possibly replicate within Washington schools.
- Collaborate with schools to develop strategies both within the school and out in the broader community that support FAFSA/WASFA application completion and submission for students and their families.
- Provide real-time FAFSA completion data reports to school leadership, showing progress on students completing the FAFSA in their schools.

Washington College Grant Promotion. WSAC will:

- Develop and promote communication for students about all of the different college and career pathways that the WCG will fund.
- Collaborate with schools to develop and distribute financial preparation resources that support early postsecondary planning for students currently in middle school.
- Organize and provide communication resources that promote the WCG to principals for distribution throughout their schools and communities.

Appendix

Focus Group Protocol

INTRODUCTION (5 minutes)

First of all, I'd like to welcome you all this morning and thank you for taking the time to participate in this discussion. My name is [NAME], and I'm a [TITLE] with the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC).

To develop effective strategies to shape policies that will increase postsecondary attainment, WSAC wants to hear from principals and gain their insight into how we can successfully engage with students to promote the benefits of acquiring postsecondary education and training beyond high school. As we encourage students to plan for life after high school, we would like to use essential information obtained from this focus group to gain insights on the primary barriers that principals hear about from their students, and how we can address these barriers.

Another policy area of interest is financial aid. Washington has consistently ranked high in the nation for offering generous state financial aid programs. However, Washington consistently ranks in the bottom five states in the nation in FAFSA completion, despite the hard work and efforts taking place within high schools across the state. With the new Washington College Grant (WCG), WSAC would like to learn from the principals' understanding and perspective about how we can promote the grant to students. A vital component of this grant is completing the FAFSA. WSAC wants to hear from principals about how we can increase the FAFSA completions for the class of 2020.

WSAC wants to encourage all students to take advantage of the outstanding financial aid opportunity offered through the WCG by submitting a complete FAFSA/WASFA. We hope that this informal focus group will provide valuable information as we develop and implement effective policies.

CONSENT

Before we get into the focus group questions, I'd like to spend a couple of minutes talking about how this focus group will be done, and your rights as a participant.

- ❖ Your participation here is **voluntary**. If you'd prefer not to respond to a particular question, please feel free to do so; you could say something like "I'll pass on this one."
- ❖ The information you provide today will be **confidential and anonymous**. We will not use your name in any of our reports and, if we quote something you say, you will not be identified as the person who said it.
 - *We ask everyone in the group to refrain from talking about what is said today with others.*
- ❖ During the discussion, you will notice my colleague [NAME] taking notes. The notes will only be read by me and my team present today.

FOCUS GROUP GUIDELINES: The best group discussions are those where everyone feels comfortable sharing their experiences, and there is an atmosphere of mutual respect. For this to happen, I'd like to suggest we keep the following in mind:

- ✓ At no point in today's discussion should you feel obliged to disclose any personal information
- ✓ There are no right or wrong answers
- ✓ Everyone's opinion has equal weight
- ✓ Everyone is encouraged to talk
- ✓ As much as possible, only one person talks at a time – this will help everyone participate in the discussion

Are there any other guidelines you'd like to suggest we use for our discussion today?
For my part, I will make sure we wrap up the discussion on time, that is, by XX o'clock.
Does anyone have any questions before we begin? [YES/NO]

PERSONAL INTRODUCTIONS: Can I ask that we go around the table and give our names as a way to get to know each other?

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

How can WSAC encourage:

- *PS Enrollment*
- *FAFSA Completion*
- *Access to the WCG?*

POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT (Enrollment Cluster)

Class of 2016 direct enrollment rate to PSE:
WA: 62%; 4-Year: 34%; 2-Year: 28%

1. How does your school encourage and support students to plan for life after high school?
 - **Follow-up:** What postsecondary expectations does your school set for students within the culture of the school? How do these expectations feed into students' postsecondary planning?
2. How does your school help students explore their different postsecondary education options? *I'm thinking here of things like short-term programs (one year or less), apprenticeships, 2-year & transfer degrees from CTCs, public & private 4-year colleges. (Probe if needed)*
3. What are the primary barriers to postsecondary education that you hear about from your students? (Poll the room on common themes)
4. What else can be done to encourage postsecondary enrollment?

5. What are some of the strategies you suggest to WSAC to support schools in encouraging students to plan for life after high school?

NCAN 2018-19 academic year for WA:
Rate: 46%; Ranking: 49th

FAFSA COMPLETION (Affordability Cluster)

6. How does your school encourage and support students to file their FAFSA/WASFA?
 - **Follow-up:** Do you have a program at your school that provides direct assistance to students and families in completing and filing a FAFSA/WASFA?
7. What are the reasons you have heard about for students not to submit a FAFSA or WASFA? (Poll the room on common themes)
8. What else can be done to encourage FAFSA/ WASFA completion in high schools?
9. What are some of the strategies you suggest to WSAC to support schools in encouraging students to file a FAFSA/ WASFA? (Affordability)

WASHINGTON COLLEGE GRANT (WCG) (Affordability Cluster)

10. What have you heard about from your students regarding concerns about paying for college?
 - **Follow-up:** How big of a concern is paying for college for the majority of your students?
11. What is your school's approach to advising students about how to pay for their postsecondary education?
 - **Follow-up:** Is there a network of people across different roles at your school that collaborate on this approach?
12. What suggestions do you have for us as we're developing a statewide initiative to inform the Class of 2020 of the WCG opportunity?
 - **Follow-up:** What strategies do you recommend specific to 9-11 graders?

CONCLUSION

Would anyone like to share some final thoughts? (If time persists)

I'd like to thank everyone for participating today. We appreciate the thoughtfulness and richness of the ideas and opinion that you've shared with us today. This is exactly the kind of information we were looking for. It will help us a great deal to better shape policies that will increase postsecondary attainment in our state.