



Supporting Washington with FAFSA Simplification: WSAC Update

Spring 2024

The Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) has been preparing for FAFSA simplification since it was first announced. Significant issues with the rollout of the new FAFSA have necessitated ongoing intervention, adjustments, and support for students, families, educators, and advocates. WSAC is committed to engaging with each of these groups on FAFSA simplification through direct outreach and supporting a statewide infrastructure that is nimble, responsive to emerging needs, and proactive in anticipating them.

In early spring 2023, WSAC kicked off this work by convening a small group of partners engaged in FAFSA completion work. This included members from OSPI, the College Success Foundation, and SBCTC (related to HB 1835 implementation). WSAC has adapted its tools, resources, training, and student and college supports as delays arose and additional changes and errors were announced.

WSAC is committed to ensuring that community and education leaders have the most up-to-date information and resources available to encourage and support students in filing a FAFSA. WSAC has also provided timely messaging and created new materials about FAFSA simplification for educators and advocates to share with students and families.

Highlights of WSAC's 2024-25 FAFSA outreach activities in the last 9 months

- Over 2,000 educators and advocates trained
- Over 30 virtual and in-person trainings hosted by WSAC
- 50 partner events attended by WSAC staff to provide direct support to HS seniors & parents
- 53,000 College Bound seniors and family members receiving direct email communication
- 15,500 counselors and other partners equipped with FAFSA messaging for students & families
- Over 41,000 visitors to WSAC's 2024-25 FAFSA Updates webpage (since 3/25/2024)

Direct student & family outreach

OtterBot: WSAC's texting platform, [OtterBot](#), has been connecting with over 35,000 College Bound senior students and parents since early last fall to provide support regarding the FAFSA delays. Anyone can sign up for OtterBot, and the tool will continue to support students and parents throughout the

summer. WSAC uses behavioral science principles to enhance communication and engagement with students and parents. A/B testing provides valuable insight into what types of messages resonate, and this information is used to improve communication. WSAC continually updates the chatbot's knowledge base to reflect up-to-date, relevant information for students and families.



College Bound emails: In the midst of the FAFSA delays and challenges, WSAC is sending emails with reminders, support, and resources to 53,000 College Bound-enrolled high school seniors and family members who have email addresses on file with WSAC. Students and parents have engaged with these emails at high rates, and WSAC is iterating and updating future messages based on what is learned from previous email campaign data.

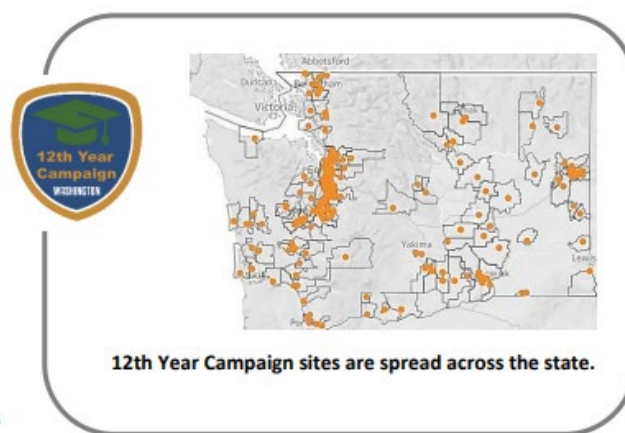
Student & family messaging campaign: WSAC has gone beyond communicating with just College Bound students. Because WSAC does not have direct contact information for non-College Bound students, the agency provides ready-to-use resources and messaging to approximately 15,500 counselors, nonprofits, and other partners who work directly with students and families across the state. In the last seven months, ten of these messages have included FAFSA simplification information and/or links to related resources.

Governor's letter: WSAC developed a letter from Governor Inslee that will be delivered to nearly 30,000 College Bound seniors in May, encouraging them to apply for financial aid and sharing how to access Washington's generous financial aid programs. This letter will also be made available to schools and partner organizations for broader distribution to non-College Bound students. WSAC is working with the Governor's Office on potential additional outreach activities that would amplify the Washington College Grant with students in high school.

Events: In anticipation of FAFSA delays and potential issues, WSAC proactively held two virtual preparation events for seniors and parents/caregivers in the fall. WSAC hosted four virtual filing events in the winter. These events are ongoing, and WSAC will host six virtual presentations and events targeting common errors and additional application completion pushes for students and families this spring. WSAC events are held in both English and Spanish. WSAC promotes statewide and regional [financial aid events](#) hosted by partners engaged in this work throughout the state. In the last nine months, WSAC staff attended and supported 50 events held by partners such as the King County Library System, Skokomish Indian Tribe, Hispanic Roundtable, the NACAC college fair, and Spokane Teachers Credit Union, along with many school districts.

Training and partner outreach

12th Year Campaign: During this time of FAFSA simplification efforts, WSAC's [12th Year Campaign](#) is directly supporting nearly 250 high schools and over 40 community and education partners with customized support, student appointments, and resources (printed and digital). 12th Year staff are also using an [online educator platform](#) to provide up-to-date notices and information about the changes released by the U.S. Department of Education, as well as critical resources and tools.



FAFSA data: In the last two months, WSAC began receiving FAFSA data from the U.S. Department of Education. Since then, the WSAC portal has been updated to include student-level FAFSA status information for school-based staff supporting FAFSA completion efforts. The portal provides near real-time FAFSA status information so educators know which of their students have not filed a FAFSA and those who did but have errors. Additionally, WSAC created an updated version of the [FAFSA Completion dashboard](#). This highlights FAFSA completion by district, school, and several subgroups of students, and is a tool for communities to understand trends in FAFSA filing and be able to act on that information.

Training & events: Training for educators and advocates began last summer, as information was released about the updated FAFSA and the delay in opening. WSAC staff attended National College Attainment Network (NCAN)-led trainings in July so that WSAC could push out the most updated information available at the start of the 2023-24 academic year. Since then, WSAC has trained over 2,000 educators and advocates both in person and virtually in over 30 trainings on financial aid basics, navigation, and FAFSA simplification-related content. The Aim Higher Washington Training Steering Committee helped shape training recommendations and needs. This committee consists of higher education sector leads from SBCTC, COP, and ICW, as well as campus representatives and community-based organizations. In early March 2024, WSAC staff were exhibitors and presenters at the Washington School Counselor Association (WSCA) conference. This opportunity to present and connect with counselors around FAFSA simplification put information and resources in front of nearly 700 counselors from across the state.

Educator & advocate email campaign: During the last nine months, WSAC has been in constant communication with partners through emails with FAFSA information specifically for educators and advocates. Timely messages have included updates on the FAFSA rollout, technical tips, and resources for partners to support and communicate with students and families in their communities. For example, through its [Financial Aid Toolkit](#), WSAC offers “Better FAFSA/WASFA” flyers and ready-made social media content for use by schools and partner organizations.

Personalized school outreach: WSAC began tracking and monitoring FAFSA completion data as soon as it became available. Using insights from the data, WSAC staff began direct school outreach phone calls and emails this spring to those with the largest FAFSA application decreases compared to the previous year. The goal of this outreach is to connect individually, share WSAC resources, and offer support and encouragement to school staff supporting their seniors.

Virtual FAFSA convening: In mid-April 2024, WSAC co-hosted a virtual FAFSA convening with the College Success Foundation in alignment with the U.S. Department of Education’s *FAFSA Week of Action*. Approximately 200 higher education, K-12, and community partners attended. The goal of this convening was to share critical data insights and timely resources and explain technical issues while building momentum around FAFSA completion work. Additionally, the convening provided information about mini-grants available through the College Success Foundation.

FAFSA marketing campaign

In March 2024, WSAC launched a paid FAFSA promotional campaign to encourage more students to apply for financial aid, and to offer resources to those who have run into issues with the process.

- Ads point to WSAC's [2024-25 FAFSA updates page](#), which is designed to help Washington students, families, educators, and advocates with FAFSA changes.
- The webpage includes supportive messaging and resources, such as demo videos that walk through the application process step-by-step for students and parents. It will soon house short videos on common FAFSA errors and how to fix them.
- A Spanish version of the page is also available, where users are guided through the process of engaging with OtterBot in Spanish, and Spanish-language versions of each video are being developed and posted as available.



Since the campaign launched, over 41,000 users¹ have visited this key webpage:

- Over 30,000 users have visited the English FAFSA landing page.
- Over 11,000 users have visited the Spanish FAFSA landing page.

This campaign complements WSAC's ongoing WA Grant marketing campaign. Both the WA Grant and FAFSA campaigns are running in English and Spanish, so messages about the importance of applying are promoted alongside advertisements about Washington's generous financial aid offerings.

Alignment of state aid to federal aid process

For the last nine months, WSAC has met at least monthly with the state financial aid workgroup, which includes financial aid directors from all sectors, to ensure alignment between the federal changes and state financial aid programs. Some examples include a change to how child support is treated, number in college, and awards based on enrollment intensity. WSAC also aligned the Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WASFA) to the changes to the FAFSA and provided WASFA application information to colleges in early January.

¹Google Analytics defines "users" as active users who trigger an engaged session and/or an event. Events includes page views, clicks to FAFSA application, video views, etc. An engaged session is a session that lasts longer than 10 seconds, has a key event, or has at least two pageviews or screenviews.