



May 16, 2024

Dear high school principals and counselors,

As we wrap up the 2023-24 school year, we extend our heartfelt thanks for your dedication to guiding and mentoring students as they move beyond high school. From offering dual-credit opportunities to preparing graduates for college-level studies, your schools serve as crucial launching pads into higher education. Your students are our students, and so we write to seek your partnership in these essential last weeks of the school year.

#### **A request regarding the FAFSA**

Education beyond high school — whether that be an apprenticeship, certificate, associate degree, or bachelor's degree — puts students in the best position to get well-paying jobs and keep those jobs. To make that a reality, we come together to rally behind a shared cause: encouraging students and families to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). This revamped financial aid form, the most significant update since the 1980s, promises to expand access to federal Pell Grants and other forms of assistance for thousands of low-income students. Additionally, it unlocks opportunities for the Washington College Grant, among the nation's most generous state financial aid programs.

Delays and technical issues with the new FAFSA are causing many students to become frustrated and even wait to apply for financial aid and college. As you know, students who delay their education beyond high school are more likely to not go at all, ultimately putting their long-term financial and social stability at risk.

As the U.S. Department of Education continues to work on fixes to the FAFSA and information it shares with colleges and universities, our campuses are working together to help students complete their FAFSAs and pursue their dreams for higher education. Washington's public and most not-for-profit, private four-year colleges and universities in the state have extended college decision day to June 1, 2024 to provide students more time to navigate the FAFSA process and make informed decisions about where to enroll. Community and technical colleges and other colleges and universities are also:

- Engaging with local high schools on events such as "FAFSA nights";
- Messaging to students who have applied for college and students who are already enrolled;
- Participating in statewide initiatives to increase FAFSA completion rates; and
- Creating toolkits, webinars, and resource pages to help college financial aid officers navigate the new FAFSA.

## Ways to help as a high school principal or counselor

[New research](#) from the Gates Foundation, HCM Strategists, and Edge Research shows that students trust their principals, counselors, and teachers. [Forbes magazine](#) summed it up this way:

*“High school students are more likely to be exposed to positive information about college through school counselors, parents, college web sites and teachers. Whereas non-degree high school graduates [people who graduated from high school but did not pursue a college degree] are more likely to receive mixed messages ... In other words, high school students are inside the college information pipeline, engaging primarily with educators who advocate for college degrees.”*

As high school principals and counselors, you wield immense influence in shaping students’ educational journeys. We invite you to join us in:

- Letting students know there is a place for them at Washington’s colleges and universities, whether they want to earn a 2-year degree, a 4-year degree, train for a specific career in the skilled trades or become an apprentice. Washington’s community and technical colleges are open-door institutions, which means that applicants are automatically accepted. Through the [Washington Guaranteed Admissions Program \(WAGAP\)](#) or other direct admission programs, Washington’s public universities and some private, not-for-profit campuses have seamless pathways to higher education.
- Informing students about the [Washington College Grant](#), one of the most generous and flexible financial aid programs in the country. Students and families can even get an estimate of their potential awards on the [Washington Student Achievement Council website](#).
- Persuading students to complete a [FAFSA or WASFA](#) (Washington Application for State Financial Aid, for people who are undocumented or who do not qualify for federal financial aid but may qualify for state aid.) You can find your school’s FAFSA completion rates on the Washington Student Achievement Council’s [FAFSA Completion Dashboard](#).
- Recommending that students and their parents or guardians sign up for the state’s college text messaging service called [OtterBot](#) for helpful reminders, resources, and encouragement. Students should text "Hi OtterBot" to 360-928-7281 and parents or guardians should text "Hi OtterBot" to 360-634-0354.
- Encouraging students to stick with it! The U.S. Department of Education is working hard to fix technical issues, and many have been resolved. By completing the FAFSA, students can open the doors to education and training that will improve their economic and social mobility for the rest of their lives.

Thank you for your partnership and your unwavering dedication to the success and well-being of students, now and in the future.

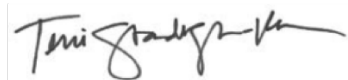
Sincerely,



Paul Francis  
Executive Director  
Washington State Board for  
Community and Technical Colleges



Ruben Flores  
Executive Director  
Council of Presidents



Terri Standish-Kuon  
President and CEO  
Independent Colleges of Washington