Snapshot: From Statewide to Personal: The Power of Customized College and Career Outreach

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Students' decisions to apply for financial aid and pursue postsecondary education or training are influenced by their schools, families, and communities.

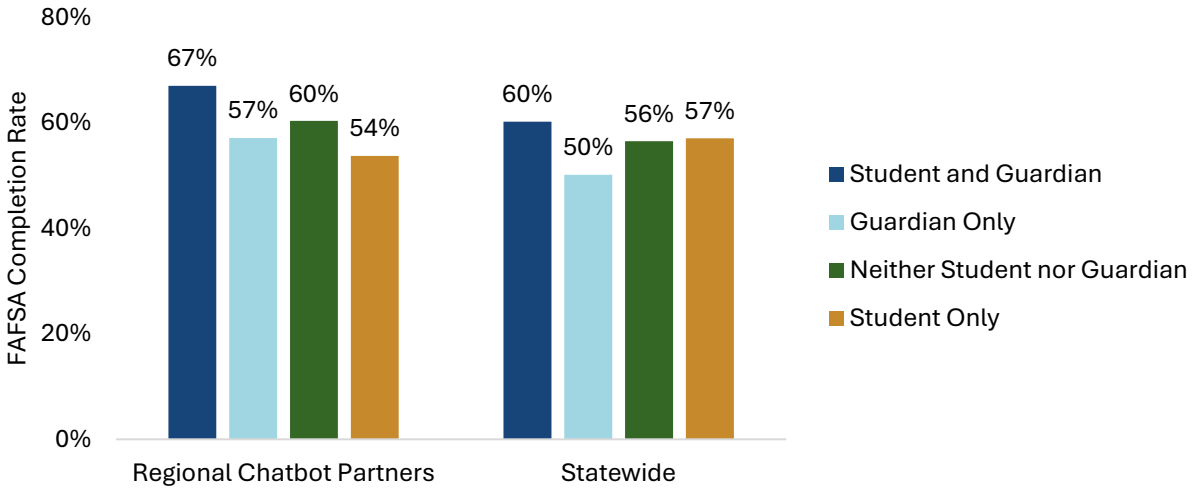
WSAC's OtterBot regionalization pilot tests how messages tailored to specific communities can help students find the support they need when they need it. Such messages not only help students confidently navigate their post–high school planning but also help WSAC identify how to adapt statewide resources for regional contexts. Through the pilot, WSAC learned that:

Regional chatbot partner schools saw stronger FAFSA outcomes during the pilot year.

FAFSA completion rates at pilot schools increased by 5 percentage points, compared with 2 percentage points at non-pilot schools. By the end of the year, completion rates at pilot schools were also higher overall: 60 percent, compared with 55 percent at non-pilot schools. Among students at pilot schools, the largest gains were seen among FRPL-eligible students, non-binary students, Asian students, Hispanic/Latino students, and English Language Learners.

Students in pilot regions who were enrolled in the chatbot along with their guardians had higher FAFSA completion rates than similarly enrolled students statewide.

In pilot regions, students were 7 percentage points more likely to file the FAFSA when they and their parents were enrolled in the chatbot than statewide students with a similar chatbot enrollment status (67 percent compared to 60 percent).



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA and Mainstay chatbot data.

Active engagement declined, but students continued to use OtterBot for financial aid and college planning.

Pilot activities did not seem to protect participating regions from widespread decreases in engagement, which decreased even as FAFSA completion increased. The discrepancy suggests that chatbot engagement metrics may not adequately capture whether the intervention leads to the desired change.

Among students who directly responded to their regional chatbot, the majority asked questions that suggest they were using it as a resource while thinking through their post-high school plans.

Seniors who messaged the chatbot were most interested in:

- Financial aid and scholarships
- Getting started on postsecondary education and college enrollment
- Exploring postsecondary programs

Five Recommendations for Implementing a Regionally Customized Chatbot

A regionalized college access chatbot works best as part of coordinated, relationship-based outreach, not as a stand-alone resource. WSAC identified five necessary steps for implementing a customized college and financial aid chatbot alongside regional partners:

1. ***Standardize the statewide messaging framework.***
   Partners need to know what types of statewide messages are sent and approximately when they are delivered so that they can find ways to provide relevant information to students through regional messaging. A messaging calendar or a similar resource would help all school- and district-level staff—regardless of partnership status—coordinate local messaging more effectively with the statewide tool.

2. ***Plan for regional outreach before the school year begins.***
   During the pilot, delays in receiving key materials, including branding, sign-up links, and QR codes, slowed the initial rollout. Earlier planning would ensure partners have outreach materials in time to integrate promotion into existing student and family touchpoints at the start of the school year.

3. ***Use the pilot year to build reporting infrastructure for tracking outcomes.***
   WSAC set clear outcomes early in the pilot year and strengthened its data infrastructure to track these metrics throughout the year. Now, WSAC can clearly assess engagement data and can consistently identify whether a student is in the chatbot and whether they have at least one parent or guardian enrolled as well.

State agencies committed to improving regional outreach would benefit from identifying their target outcomes early; then, while formal reporting is being developed, identify short-term data points to share with regional partners.

4. ***Partner with school staff to promote regional chatbots and state resources.*** Across six documented events and outreach periods throughout the 2025–26 academic year, 270 junior and senior students registered for the chatbot. This pattern suggests that regional chatbot customization should strengthen the connection between statewide resources and local relationships; the chatbot can provide immediate and relevant support, but trusted messengers help make these messages meaningful and actionable. Prior to starting a regionalization pilot, other states should position counselors, community organizations, and school staff as key partners for introducing the chatbot to students.

5. ***Be ready to pivot outreach approach when local circumstances change.*** When communities are managing urgent challenges and students are worried about the safety of their family and friends during Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids, or when natural disasters are occurring, students and their families are not in a place to take steps toward their postsecondary goals; they need to take care of their families, friends, and communities. Flexible messaging helps ensure that the chatbot remains a responsive resource rather than another demand for students' attention.

The lessons from this work contribute to a more connected, trusted support system that helps advance the state's efforts to ensure that 70 percent of Washingtonians aged 25–44 earn a postsecondary credential or degree. Looking ahead, these lessons should guide future OtterBot efforts, emphasizing regional alignment, early and coordinated promotion, and strategies that make it easier for trusted adults to introduce and reinforce the tool as part of a broader, trust-centered support system for students and families.

See the full report.