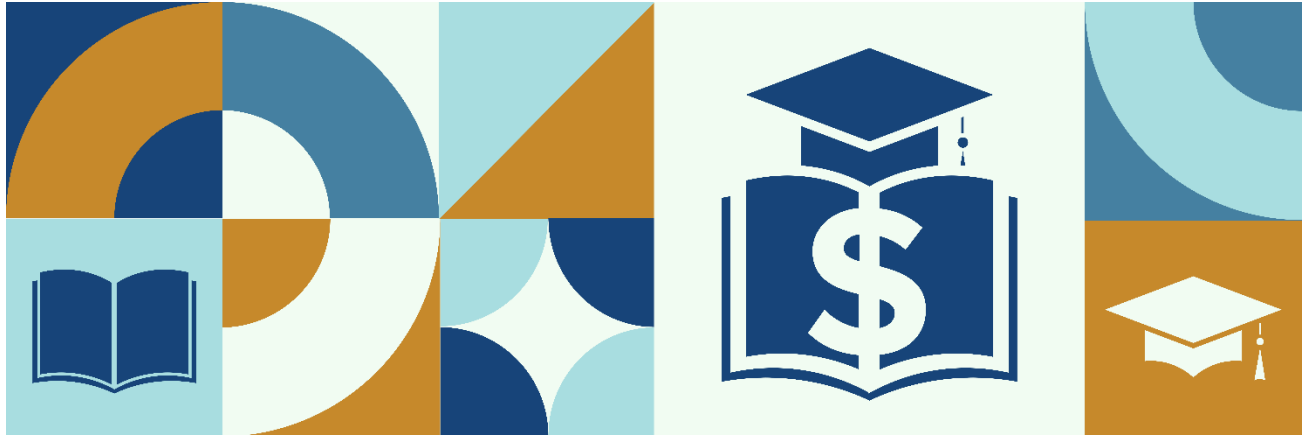


Turning Data into Opportunity



A Case Study of WSAC's Spring 2025 Financial Aid Campaign

By Natalie Alvarado and KC Deane

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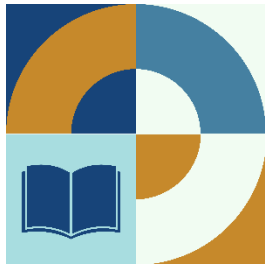
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Isaac Kwakye and Sarah Weiss for supporting us in the development of this report. Additionally, sincere gratitude is owed to the College Access Initiatives (CAI) division for its outreach efforts during the Spring 2025 Financial Aid Campaign.

Preface

In early 2025, the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) embarked on an ambitious spring outreach campaign intended to increase financial aid awareness and FAFSA filing rates among Washington’s high school seniors. This report describes the campaign’s strategies, tracks progress against the campaign’s goals, and shares other data on statewide FAFSA filing trends during the spring campaign.

Executive Summary



In Spring 2025, the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) launched one of its most concentrated financial aid outreach campaigns yet. The goal: Raise Washington’s historically low Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion rates so more students could access the aid they deserve. With only three months left in the school year, WSAC mobilized a complex, equity-centered strategy grounded in urgency, partnerships, and data-driven outreach.

Key Takeaway

By combining statewide coordination with local flexibility, WSAC helped schools, families, and communities complete the FAFSA earlier and more effectively. These efforts ensured that more Washington students can turn the promise of postsecondary opportunity into reality.

Context

FAFSA completion is one of the strongest predictors of postsecondary enrollment. According to the National College Attainment Network (NCAN), 92% of high school seniors who complete the FAFSA proceed to attend college the fall immediately after graduation. In contrast, only 51% of those who do not complete the FAFSA do the same.¹ Washington state makes significant investments in programs like the Washington College Grant (WA Grant), which gives eligible people money for education experiences such as certificate programs, job training, apprenticeships, or college. Even so, many eligible students—especially students from historically underserved populations—fail to apply for financial aid each year. As a result, substantial state aid is left unused. Research shows three keys to improving completion rates: strong local support, trusted messengers, and real-time data use.

Campaign Strategies

WSAC used three main strategies:

- **Priority Schools Outreach:** 25 schools with low prior-year completion rates and high percentages of low-income students were selected. Each school received a \$1,000 microgrant and targeted messaging from OtterBot, the state’s free college access chatbot that provides financial aid guidance, answers student questions in real time, and delivers timely financial aid reminders. Schools used the funds for creative and timely outreach, often paired with existing events and student-led efforts.
- **Governor’s Personalized Communication:** In partnership with Governor Bob Ferguson, WSAC sent letters to more than 45,000 seniors who had not completed the FAFSA. Letters were sent by mail, email, and OtterBot. Within nine weeks, 10% of these students completed the FAFSA.

- **Expanded Student and Parent Outreach:** WSAC enrolled 15,548 additional eligible seniors in OtterBot and launched targeted student and parent campaigns.

Results and Impact

In just three months, WSAC's coordinated spring 2025 campaign produced measurable statewide gains, demonstrating the power of data-driven outreach and local partnership. The concentrated effort mobilized schools, families, and community partners to act quickly and effectively, leading to tangible improvements in FAFSA completion rates and closing gaps across student groups.

Highlights of this progress include:

- The senior FAFSA completion rate reached 48% by July, compared to 45% in July 2024. For students eligible for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL), the completion rate rose from 38% in 2024 to 44% in 2025.
- Washington's national ranking in FAFSA completion for high school seniors improved from 48th to 46th.
- More than 180 high schools, out of approximately 700, saw at least a 6% increase in completions. Eight of the 25 priority schools met or passed this mark despite the short timeline.
- FAFSA completion rates among each racial and ethnic minority group identified in the data rose by 10 percentage points or more in just three months.

Lessons Learned

Drawing on direct feedback from schools and partners, WSAC identified several key areas for improvement to make future campaigns more effective, equitable, and sustainable.

- Start in the fall, not spring, of each academic year.
- Simplify funding processes when administering micro-grants to high schools.
- Provide students and families with more support for StudentAid.gov account creation (i.e., FSA ID creation).
- Offer culturally responsive parent engagement.
- Expand FAFSA portal training for school staff and approved college access providers working with high school seniors.

Next Steps for 2025-26

Building on the momentum of the spring 2025 campaign, WSAC will use the coming year to move from short-term gains to long-term, system-level improvement. The next phase of work emphasizes starting earlier, coordinating more effectively across agencies, and deepening local partnerships to ensure that every student—especially those from historically underrepresented racial/ethnic groups—receives timely, accurate, and personalized financial aid support. Drawing on lessons from this year’s outreach, WSAC will strengthen infrastructure, align messaging, and embed equity into every aspect of implementation. The following goals will guide the 2025-26 campaign and measure progress toward a more accessible, better-coordinated financial aid system statewide.

- Ensure 46,000 seniors complete the FAFSA or Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WASFA).
- Raise FRPL-eligible student completions by 6% or more in at least 150 high schools.
- Close the gap in FAFSA completion between FRPL and non-FRPL students.
- Reduce disparities in completion rates, especially among those from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups.

To achieve these statewide goals, WSAC will translate lessons from the spring campaign into coordinated, actionable steps that strengthen both infrastructure and community engagement. The coming year’s strategy focuses on connecting state and local efforts, reducing fragmentation across programs, and ensuring that students and families receive clear, consistent support no matter where they live. In advancing the initiatives outlined below, WSAC will build a more aligned system that empowers schools and districts to act earlier, share resources effectively, and sustain progress over time.

- Lead a Governor’s workgroup for statewide coordination.
- Provide in-person FAFSA and WASFA support to high-need districts.
- Align messaging across statewide college access campaigns.
- Recognize and support school leaders who build a college-going culture.
- Combine statewide coordination with local flexibility in order to help schools, families, and communities act earlier and more effectively.
- Expand high-impact strategies, such as OtterBot, priority school support, and regional trainings.

WSAC’s next phase of work will strengthen the connection between statewide leadership and local implementation, creating a more coherent system for financial aid access. The goal is not only to

sustain the progress achieved in spring 2025 but to embed effective practices—early outreach, consistent communication, and targeted school support—into the fabric of Washington’s education landscape. Through this coordinated approach, every student, regardless of income, geography, or background, will have clearer pathways to the resources they need to pursue college and career opportunities with confidence.

Introduction



Washington State has lingered in the bottom rankings nationally for FAFSA completion for years, a story too often told about how few of our students apply for the financial aid available to them. Year after year, thousands of Washington seniors leave money on the table that could make college or training more affordable. In response, the state has increasingly invested in coordinated outreach, policy changes, and community partnerships to turn the tide.

This spring, WSAC mounted one of its most concentrated pushes yet to increase FAFSA completion, bringing together new tools, statewide partnerships, and targeted support for schools with the greatest need.

The 2025 12th Year FAFSA campaign was launched with only three months remaining in the school year, calling on us to work urgently and collaboratively so that more students could access the financial aid they deserve. The end result was a hands-on learning experience as WSAC staff partnered with school counselors, Associated Student Body (ASB) members, and trusted messengers to deliver timely support, real-time data, and creative engagement strategies. By the end of June, the campaign had contributed to more than 7,300 new FAFSA completions in a three-month window.

In this case study, we explain the economic imperative of leveraging aid access as an avenue to postsecondary opportunity. We then review WSAC's spring campaign strategies and amplify preliminary evidence of our impact, statewide and across schools, student populations, and geography. Finally, we identify critical lessons and introduce next year's plan, which thoughtfully integrates and responds to lessons learned.

Improving Economic Opportunities



Education is a key driver of economic opportunity. Access to education and job training beyond high school is a fundamental right—one that lays the groundwork for stable careers, upward mobility, and generational wealth. In Washington State, bold investments in need-based aid—most notably the Washington College Grant (WA Grant), alongside federal programs such as the Pell Grant—have substantially reduced financial barriers for students.

Research indicates that, on average, grant aid boosts student persistence and degree attainment by 2 to 3 percentage points.² Furthermore, each additional \$1,000 in grant aid improves year-to-year persistence by approximately 1.2 percentage points.³ Despite significant investments made by the state of Washington, many eligible high school graduates fail to take advantage of education and training opportunities beyond high school. This suggests that making education affordable does not ensure that all students can enroll.

Completing the FAFSA remains one of the strongest predictors of post-high school education and training enrollment. Research shows that completing the FAFSA significantly enhances the likelihood of enrolling in education and training beyond high school.⁴ According to the National College Attainment Network (NCAN), 92% of high school seniors who complete the FAFSA attend college the fall immediately after graduation. In contrast, only 51% of those who do not complete the FAFSA go on to pursue further education.

Although completing the FAFSA is a significant step toward accessing education and training opportunities beyond high school, it does not ensure enrollment. Individual beliefs, experiences, and cultural contexts within families, schools, and communities influence educational journeys.

An effective financial aid campaign must therefore engage those contexts head-on. Evidence suggests that capacity building among local stakeholders—particularly high school counselors and community-based organizations—yields sustained increases in FAFSA completion.⁵ WSAC's outreach strategy operates on two complementary fronts: directly guiding ready learners through the aid application process and equipping trusted intermediaries to weave financial aid knowledge into the fabric of their ongoing community efforts. By shifting the cultural narrative around post-high school credentials, we ensure that FAFSA completions become a byproduct of an empowered, college-going culture rather than a standalone checkbox.

WSAC's Financial Aid Goals for the 2025-26 Academic Year

By June 30, 2026, WSAC aims to:

- Ensure 46,000 seniors complete the FAFSA or WASFA.
- Raise FRPL-eligible student completions by 6% or more in at least 150 high schools.
- Close the gap in FAFSA completion between FRPL and non-FRPL students.
- Reduce disparities in FAFSA completion rates, especially among those from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups.

Together, these goals reflect WSAC's commitment to equitably increasing financial aid access for Washington students, ensuring that every eligible student has the opportunity, encouragement, and support to apply.

FAFSA completion may become an increasingly unreliable measure of financial aid access among graduating seniors

Historically, the primary source of information used to determine income-eligibility for state aid came from FAFSA. As Washington policy evolved, so too did this process. In 2014, WSAC launched the Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WASFA) in response to legislation that determined noncitizen state residents would be eligible for state financial aid. In the upcoming 2025-26 academic year, WSAC will include new sources of means-tested public benefits data to determine income eligibility (for example, Washington's Basic Food program and the Food Assistance Program).

This new source of data that comes directly from partner agencies will allow WSAC to observe which high school seniors are already income-eligible for the WA Grant. With this data, WSAC aims to improve college access by notifying seniors of their income eligibility for the WA Grant and the postsecondary opportunities that are available to them. This novel pathway will allow high school seniors to receive a written guarantee for the WA Grant without having to apply to a postsecondary institution and submit a FAFSA or WASFA.

Because of an evolving landscape in which many students may access the WA Grant without filing a FAFSA, the FAFSA completion rate may become an increasingly unreliable measure of financial aid access among Washington's learners.

- Individuals who complete the WASFA are, by design, excluded from federal data. Emphasizing FAFSA filing rates not only renders invisible those students who are not eligible to file the FAFSA, but also risks underestimating financial aid access overall if learners and families opt for the WASFA over the FAFSA for privacy and safety reasons. In the past year alone, the number of individuals filing the WASFA has increased by 35%.⁶
- Individuals deemed automatically income-eligible for the WA Grant through participation in a public benefits program *will not need to complete an aid application to receive state funds*. Filing a FAFSA is still the only way to access federal financial aid. Even so, the initiative may lead to lower FAFSA completion rates among eligible students if outreach campaigns do not successfully message the benefits of doing so.

Moving forward, we will track the impacts of these policy changes on FAFSA and WASFA completion as well as downstream outcomes such as enrollment and credential attainment in education or training programs beyond high school, particularly for students from historically underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. As needed and based on what we learn, we will refine our metrics of aid opportunity. Doing so will ensure that we gain a fuller, more nuanced understanding of how Washington's residents seize the aid opportunities our state has so generously provided.

Our Spring 2025 Financial Aid Campaign Strategies

We launched three targeted strategies to reverse the slow, downward trend in new FAFSA completions that often occurs near the end of the academic year: intensive outreach and support to 25 priority schools, personalized communication from the governor, and expanded outreach to target audiences. All three strategies were grounded in urgency, equity, and partnership.

(1) Intensive outreach and support to 25 priority schools

We identified 25 high schools based on key metrics, such as the previous year's final FAFSA completion rate and the socioeconomic composition of the senior class. These schools received \$1,000 microgrants to boost on-the-ground FAFSA outreach. Each school chose one of two options:

- *Option 1:* Funds to the school's Associated Student Body (ASB) account to support student-led outreach, including social media campaigns, peer events, and school announcements.
- *Option 2:* Funds to school staff to support a FAFSA completion event, covering costs such as food, printing, staffing, and promotion.

WSAC also offered technical support and personalized progress updates to school staff, as well as localized FAFSA reminders to each school's high school seniors. Messages were sent via OtterBot, the state's free college access chatbot that provides financial aid guidance, answers student

questions in real time, and delivers timely financial aid reminders. This strategy combined immediate funding, trusted messengers, and real-time feedback loops to drive results.

(2) Personalized communication from the Governor to HS seniors

As part of the FAFSA campaign, WSAC partnered with the Office of the Governor Bob Ferguson to deliver a targeted, personalized message to approximately 45,000 students who had not yet started a FAFSA application. This communication strategy aimed to increase urgency and create action through one of the state's most trusted public leaders. In addition to mailed letters, students and their parents also received the letter via email and OtterBot.

(3) Expanded outreach to target audiences

WSAC's College Access Initiatives expanded its existing outreach to two core audiences:

- *Students and families:* WSAC targeted students who had not yet filed a FAFSA, sharing email and OtterBot reminders about timelines and materials needed to complete the application.
- *Trusted messengers:* Through emails and phone calls, WSAC provided school and district staff with personalized information on FAFSA completion rates in their community. When agency staff noticed schools with a large uptick in the number of applicants who had started but not completed the FAFSA, a member of our College Access Initiatives (CAI) team reached out to offer issue-specific guidance on how best to resolve.

Overall Progress toward Campaign Outcomes as of July 1, 2025



The spring campaign officially ended on June 30, amidst early indicators of positive impact that will continue throughout the remainder of this cycle and into next year's outreach. The concentrated outreach campaign generated momentum, established pathways for school-based outreach, and created new opportunities for cross-divisional partnerships within WSAC. Moreover, the campaign served as a reminder of the importance of the WASFA as a vehicle for financial aid access—especially as powerful changes in state policy affect our ability to rely on the FAFSA as a proxy for overall access.

This section highlights WSAC's progress toward achieving the campaign outcomes established in March 2025. Strategy-specific details related to reach and impact are summarized in Appendix A.

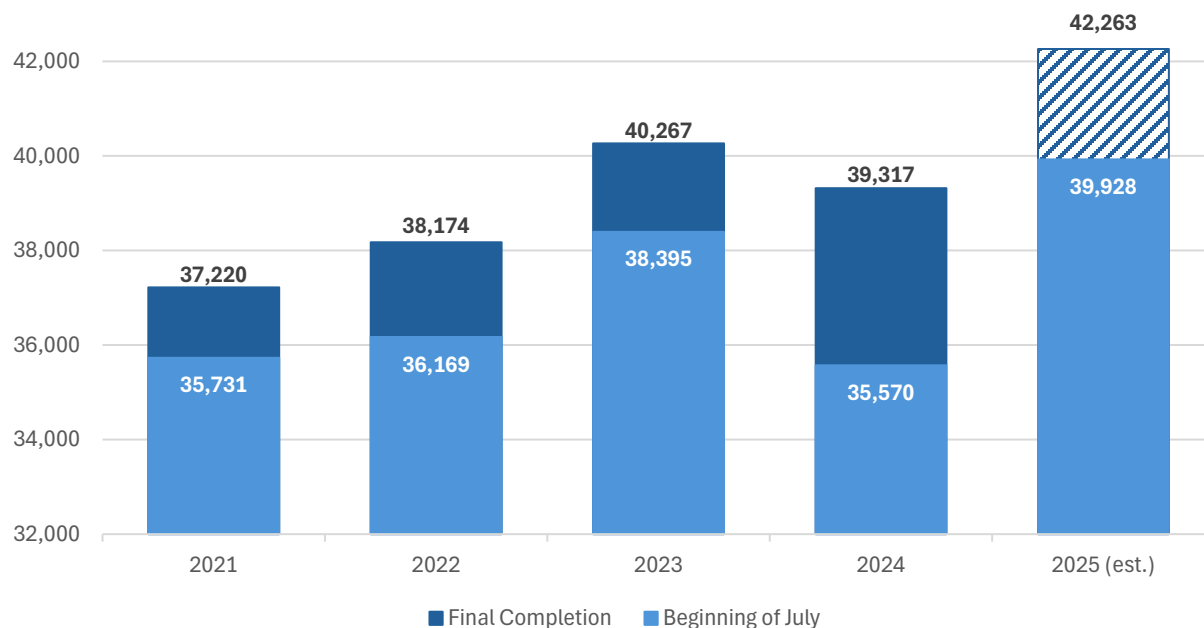
We could still achieve a year-over-year increase in the total number of FAFSA completions

We sought to increase the total number of FAFSA completions among high school seniors by at least 5,000, as compared to last cycle's final tally. At the close of this campaign, a total of 39,928

FAFSA applications had been completed by high school seniors—short of our goal of 42,263 for the Class of 2025 but already ahead of the final count for the Class of 2024.

Moreover, since FAFSA completions continue throughout the summer and early fall, we are on track to achieve our highest count of completions on record. In the past four years, approximately 2,500 additional high school seniors completed the FAFSA between the beginning of July and the end of September (Figure 1).⁷

Figure 1. Final FAFSA Completion Counts relative to early July, by Graduating Class

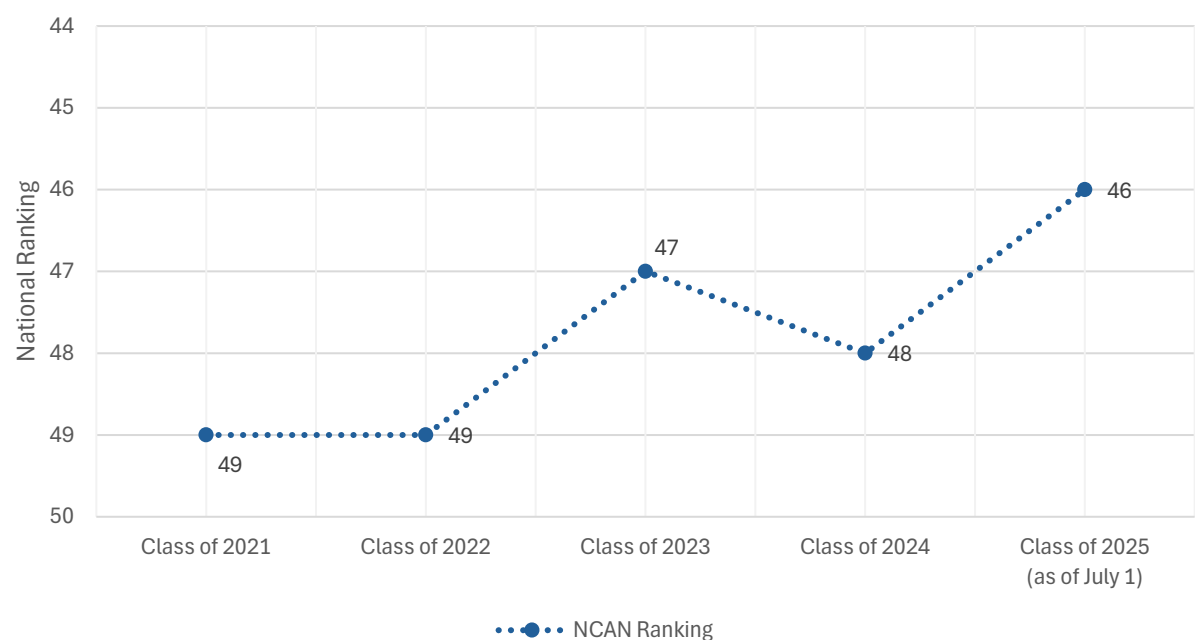


Notes: Precise reporting dates vary across cycles. For the Class of 2021, counts are as of July 19 and October 4. For the Class of 2022, counts are as of July 12 and October 3. For the Class of 2023, counts are as of July 3 and September 25. For the Class of 2024, counts are as of July 1 and October 4. For the Class of 2025, the July count is as of July 1, 2025, and the hatched lines indicate an estimate based on the average number of completions across the previous four cycles.

We improved Washington's national rankings from 48th to 46th

For the first time since 2023, Washington moved up in the national rankings of FAFSA completions. In fact, Washington consistently ranked 45th throughout the Spring 2025 campaign, reflecting a meaningful improvement compared to previous years—49th in 2021 and 2022, 47th in 2023, and 48th in 2024 (Figure 2). This steady improvement in ranking aligns with our upward trend in FAFSA completion rates, which reached 42.7% as of July 2025. Although our current rank of 46th still places us in the bottom ten nationally, these gains suggest that this year's strategies had a positive impact on FAFSA completion for the Class of 2025.

Figure 2. Washington’s National Ranking and Final NCAN FAFSA Filing Rate, by Graduating Class

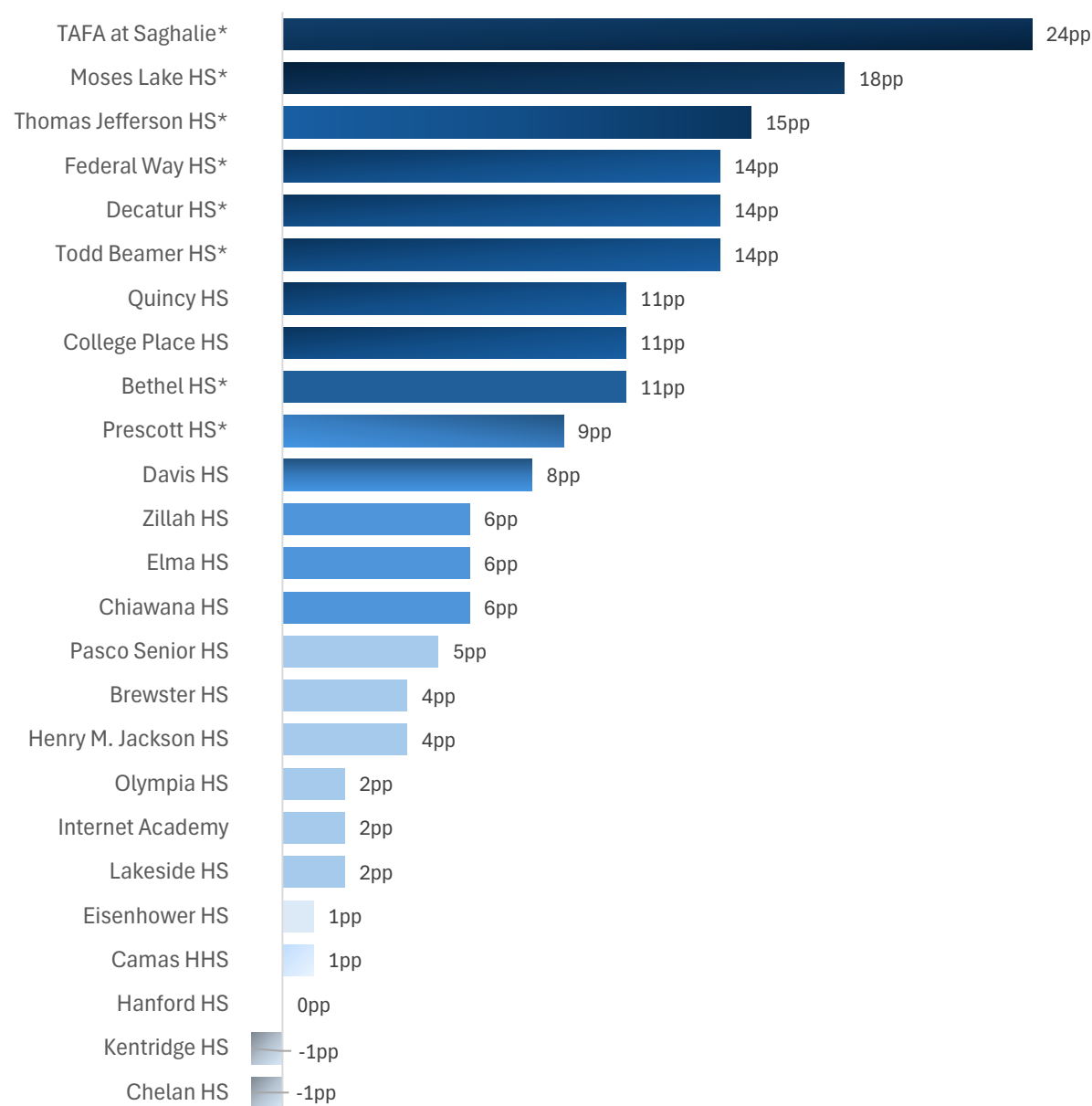


We accelerated FAFSA completion at priority schools

In March, we set the ambitious goal of increasing FAFSA completion rates by at least 6% over the previous year at priority schools with which we would work on targeted outreach. Despite the late launch of the campaign, many schools responded with energy and creativity.

By July 1 of this year, 8 of the 25 schools met or exceeded the minimum 6% goal, while the remaining 17 schools made meaningful gains. As shown in Figure 3, schools like TAFA at Saghalié, Moses Lake, Thomas Jefferson, and Todd Beamer led the way, with several schools seeing an increase of 14 to 20 percentage points in the FAFSA completion rate when comparing July 2024 to July 2025. Even schools that didn’t meet the target showed notable progress, demonstrating the potential of a targeted school-level campaign deployed to align with and adapt to school needs.

Figure 3. Percentage Point Change in FAFSA Completion Rates at Priority Schools (July 2024 vs. July 2025)



Notes: * indicates a school that achieved a minimum 6% increase in the total number of FAFSA completions, calculated as of July 1, 2025.

There is good reason to believe that, with an earlier start and critical adjustments based on school feedback, the priority school model can be leveraged to create powerful momentum in school communities. Additional time for planning, targeted capacity building, and localized support will help accelerate financial aid success where it's most needed.

What We Accomplished Statewide during the Spring Campaign



WSAC’s Spring 2025 FAFSA campaign began in earnest in late March, with less than three months left in the school year. Undeterred by the late start, WSAC and school partners launched a coordinated, end-of-year push to improve FAFSA completion rates. Research staff monitored weekly progress at the school level and statewide, enabling the College Access Initiatives team to engage in data-informed outreach to schools in real time.

FAFSA Completion Rate
As of July 1, 2025

48%

Overall Financial Aid Completion Rate⁸
Estimated as of July 1, 2025

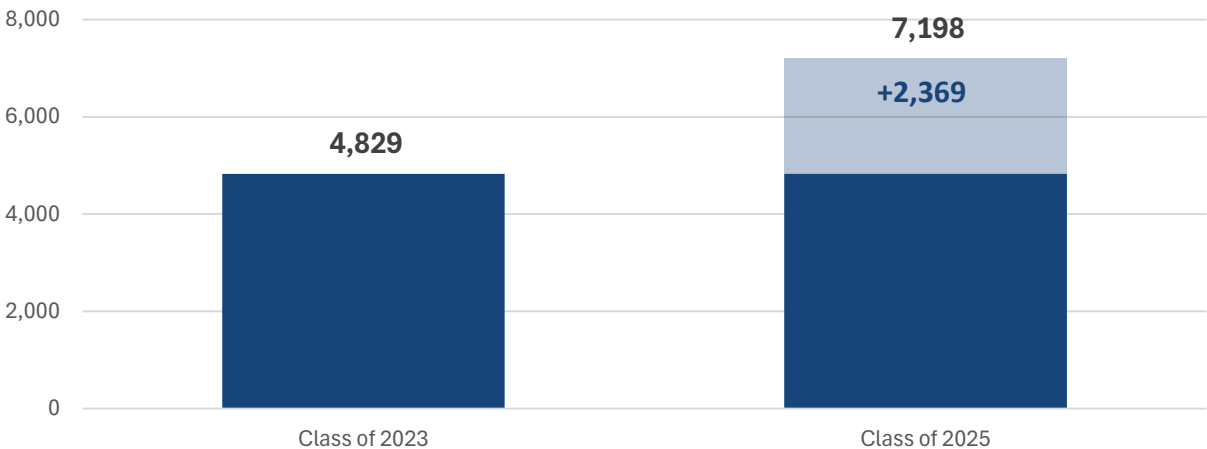
52%

In this section, we identify key trends in statewide FAFSA completion rates as of July 1, 2025. Although this year’s FAFSA cycle does not officially close until next June, completions as of early July 2025 signal intent to matriculate in education or training beyond high school among high school seniors and are therefore a meaningful barometer of progress.

FAFSA completions rose by over 2,000 from spring 2023

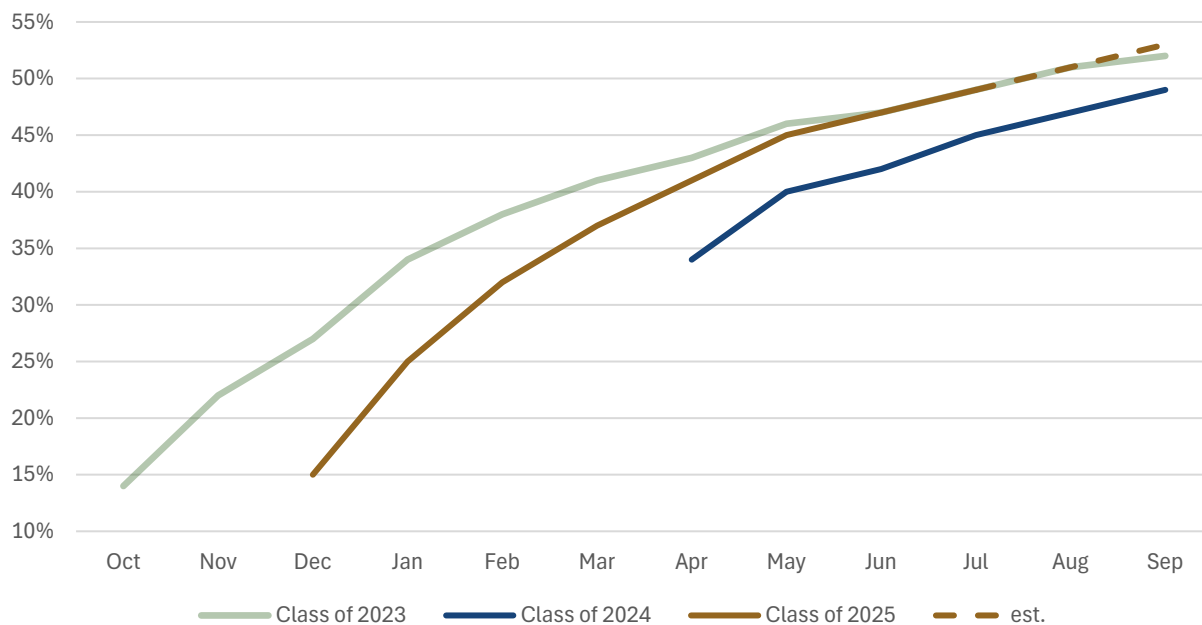
From the beginning of April to the beginning of July, the number of completed FAFSAs grew by 7,198 applications. During this same time period in the Spring 2023 cycle, there were only 4,829 new FAFSA completions (Figure 4).⁹

Figure 4. Total FAFSAs Completed by HS Seniors Between Early April and Early July, Class of 2023 vs Class of 2025



This year's rapid escalation in FAFSA applications is also evident in month-by-month trendlines in the FAFSA completion rate (Figure 5). The FAFSA completion rate increased more quickly this year than in previous years. By July 1, the statewide completion rate had already caught up to the Class of 2023's July 3 completion rate. If the completion rate were to continue increasing at its current pace, the Class of 2025's final completion rate would set a record high for Washington State.

Figure 5. Completion rates over the FAFSA cycle, by Graduating Class



More than 180 high schools achieved a minimum 6% increase in FAFSA completions

Schools remain the most powerful avenue for helping students and families learn about financial aid opportunities and complete the FAFSA. With so much of our outreach focusing on school-level information sharing, we knew that we would need to monitor progress at the school level. As of March 24, 2025, there were only 77 schools (12%) at which the number of FAFSA completions had increased at least 6% over last year's final completion rate. By the end of June 2025, more than 180—or 27%—of all schools had achieved this goal. Of these schools, eight received dedicated outreach through the priority school strategy, and six are schools that receive college access support via the Washington State GEAR UP grant program.

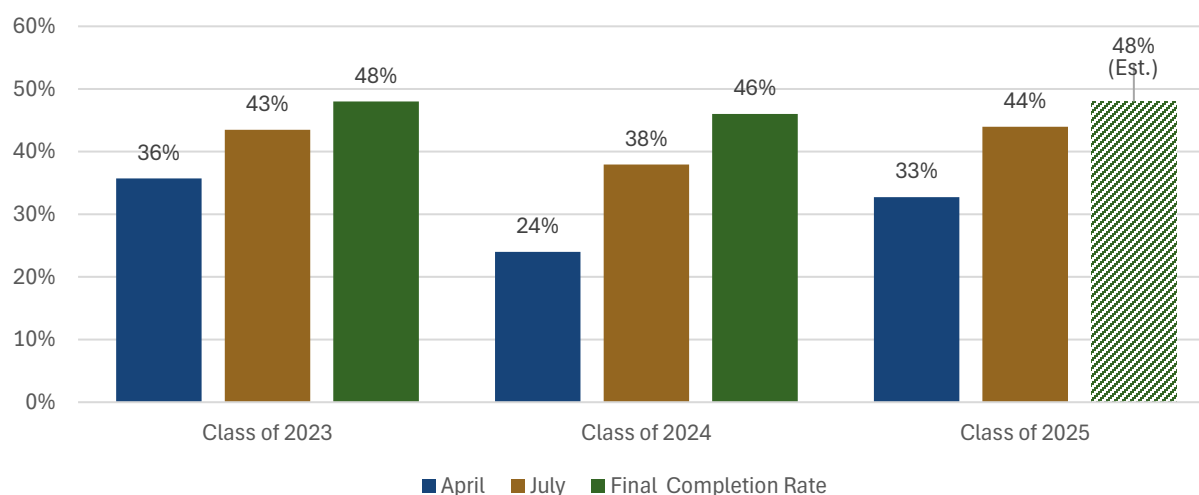
Of note, WSAC focused on increases in the *number* of FAFSA completions, as opposed to the percentage of completions. The decision to do so was based on identifying the total number of completions each school would need if all schools contributed equally to the statewide goal of increasing overall applications by at least 5,000. As a result, even among schools that experienced increases in the total number of applications, there remains an opportunity to improve school-level *rates*. For example, some schools that achieved this goal still have overall completion rates below 10%, whereas others exceed 80%. Moreover, more than 40 schools that achieved a 6% or more

growth rate in the number of applications still have FAFSA filing rates that are more than 20 percentage points below the FRPL eligibility rate in their school.¹⁰ In these schools, there remain meaningful opportunities to increase financial aid access through targeted outreach to low-income student populations.

More low-income students completed the FAFSA by July than in previous years

For the Class of 2025, 44% of FRPL-eligible high school seniors had already filed a FAFSA as of the beginning of July (Figure 6). In contrast, when measured at this same point in time for each of the two previous years, only 38% and 43% of FRPL-eligible seniors had completed a FAFSA by the beginning of June (for the Class of 2024 and 2023, respectively). Although this year's completion rate among FRPL-eligible students has not yet reached the Class of 2023's final rate of 48%, that rate—46%—was within reach as of July 28.

Figure 6. FAFSA Completion Rate among FRPL-eligible students, by Graduating Class (as of early July)



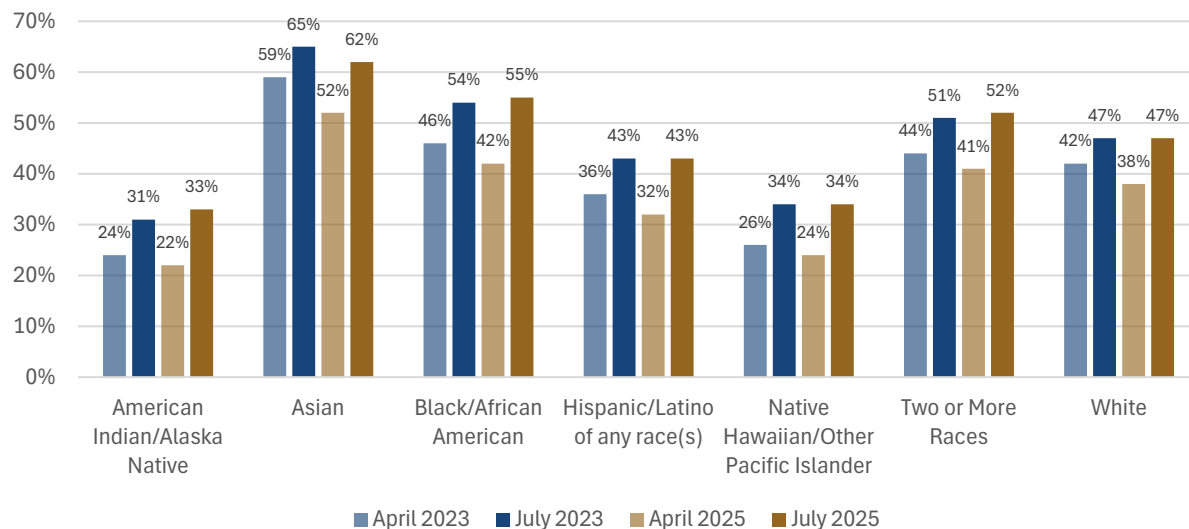
Notes: Precise reporting dates vary across cycles. For the Class of 2023, counts are as of April 3, July 3 and September 25. For the Class of 2024, counts are as of April 1, July 1 and October 4. For the Class of 2025, April and July counts are as of April 1, 2025 and July 1, 2025; the hatched line for Final Completion Rate indicates an estimate based on the Average Number of Completions between July and Final Completion Rates during the previous two cycles.

FAFSA completion rates among racially minoritized students increased by more than 10 percentage points in just 3 months

Central to WSAC's outreach efforts is ensuring that educational opportunity is accessible to all Washingtonians. Achieving this goal begins with equalizing access to state financial aid. Historically, FAFSA completion rates among racially minoritized students—especially those who identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, Hispanic or Latino, or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander—have been below the statewide average for high school graduates. These disparities capture longstanding structural challenges that disproportionately exclude access for some, but not all, learners.

Preliminary data from July show that the disparities remain. However, also evident in these data are drastic increases in the FAFSA completion rate among racially minoritized student populations: more than 10 percentage points in just three short months (Figure 7). Embedded within this data are early signs that intensive outreach and targeted school-level supports can shift the way the system operates so that fewer learners are left without access to aid. In short, an approach to outreach that is grounded in targeted universalism can benefit all learners in the state, especially those for whom access has historically been most difficult.

Figure 7. FAFSA Completion Rates in April vs. July, by Race/Ethnicity and Graduating Class



Notes: Precise reporting dates vary across cycles. For the Class of 2023, counts are as of April 3 and July 3. For the Class of 2025, April and July counts are as of April 1, 2025 and July 1, 2025.

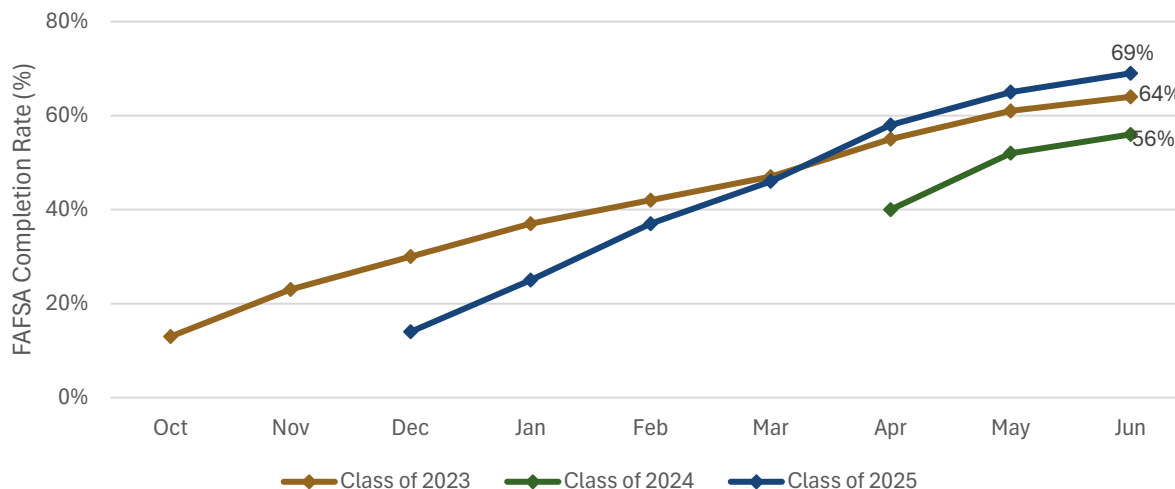
Schools that partnered with one another and with local organizations outpaced statewide progress on FAFSA completion

Early in the spring 2025 campaign, Federal Way School District approached WSAC with an alternative model of priority school investment: Rather than distributing support to individual schools, what if WSAC supported a district-wide strategy that enabled customized outreach within each site? In collaboration with WSAC contact staff, Federal Way implemented coordinated school-based FAFSA completion events and one-on-one online support for all schools.

This approach amounted to more than simply passing funds to a district office. It was a collaboration between district leadership, school leaders, and WSAC staff. District leadership served as a central hub while school leaders retained their autonomy to activate events quickly and in line with their distinct school culture. The outcome was compelling: Almost every one of the six Federal Way priority schools saw year-over-year gains in FAFSA completion, and the district as a whole outpaced statewide averages throughout the spring (Figure 8).

Federal Way School District’s remarkable progress suggests a viable model for future outreach campaigns: Coordinated microgrant funding combined with a regional partnership investment model can dramatically improve FAFSA completion outcomes.

Figure 8. Monthly FAFSA Completion Rates in Federal Way School District, by FAFSA Cycle



Moreover, the sustained implementation of place-based strategies can accelerate progress toward creating an educational culture that supports high school graduates as they pursue education or training beyond high school. Yakima Valley Partners for Education (YVPE), which receives investment from WSAC’s Regional Challenge Grant (RCG) program, implements place-based strategies for shifting the educational culture in the region’s lower and middle Yakima Valley. Their RCG-funded work has had a remarkable influence on the FAFSA completion rates in the region: Three schools in the partnership’s service region exceeded 70% FAFSA completion rates as of July 2025, earning them a spot in the top 25 schools statewide.¹¹ YVPE’s capacity to affect local systems change is an exemplar as WSAC seeks to expand its regional focus going forward.

What We Learned in the Spring Campaign



Statewide initiatives must adapt in real time, so that they can stay attentive to shifts in culture and local context. Toward that end, we elicited feedback throughout the campaign in three ways: as part of regular check-ins with priority schools, through a survey sent to key staff at priority schools, and in feedback sessions with school staff and cross-agency WSAC staff. There were also persistent challenges related to family and school engagement. Integrating community feedback into future planning ensures that our initiative design meets students and families where they are with information and support that is timely, inclusive, and actionable.

Our Goals for 2025-26 Academic Year

Beginning September 2025, WSAC began leading a coordinated, cross-agency campaign to expand financial aid access and drive FAFSA and WASFA completions statewide. Building on lessons from Spring 2025, next year's initiative is designed to start earlier, maximize existing infrastructure, and scale targeted support with an equity-centered approach (for additional details, see Appendix A).

The goals that motivate next year's work are ambitious and equity-driven. By June 30, 2026, we aim to:

- Ensure 46,000 of all expected high school seniors complete an aid application.
- Raise FRPL-eligible student completions by 6% or more in at least 150 high schools.
- Close the gap in FAFSA completion between FRPL and non-FRPL students.¹²
- Reduce disparities in completion rates, especially among those from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups.

Our Plan for the 2025-26 Academic Year

Together, the ten strategies we are implementing to achieve the 2025-26 academic year's goals form a comprehensive statewide plan to ensure every Washington student has the opportunity, encouragement, and support to apply for financial aid.

We will monitor the reliability of FAFSA filing as an instrument that measures financial aid access

The spring campaign reinforced that WSAC must commit to developing a more comprehensive measure of financial aid access. Driven by policy changes and some communities' growing distrust in federal processes, more students appear poised to file the WASFA in place of the FAFSA. School staff reported more students from mixed-status families opting into the WASFA even when the student had a valid Social Security Number, a result of students' and families' concerns about their immigration status or federal data sharing.

Next year's launch of a new state program that provides automatic WA Grant eligibility for select households will further impact the population of high school seniors who complete a FAFSA. Students who are deemed income-eligible for WA Grant by way of a public benefit program will not need to complete an aid application to receive state aid, though they will still need to file the FAFSA if they would like to receive federal financial aid. Even so, the automatic eligibility could lead to a decrease in FAFSA completion among the population of students for whom financial aid access is most beneficial.

In short, FAFSA completion rates will become a less accurate measure of financial aid access for Washington's students. WSAC must and will respond by adapting its own processes to more comprehensively monitor progress in future years. Our state's commitment to educational equity prompts us to consider a more comprehensive and robust measure of financial aid access.

We will launch four new initiatives to strengthen system-wide alignment

Despite the significant gains of this year's campaign, persistent gaps in coordination, capacity, and reach remain across the statewide financial aid landscape. These gaps result not from a lack of effort but rather from fragmented systems, inconsistent messaging, and limited school-level bandwidth to implement effective strategies. The following four initiatives represent WSAC's next phase of investment: building infrastructure that connects state resources, community-based support, and school leadership into a more cohesive and responsive system. By dedicating resources to these emerging strategies, WSAC aims to create a long-term alignment that reduces duplication, strengthens local capacity, and ensures that every student, no matter their geography or background, has a clear pathway to financial aid and post-high school education.

1. **A governor-convened, WSAC-led workgroup tasked with coordinating statewide FAFSA and WASFA completion efforts:** Many agencies and organizations across Washington receive state funding to increase financial aid application rates, but most communication among them is informal. By leading a cross-sector workgroup that brings these agencies and organizations together—the first of its kind—WSAC can create coordinated infrastructure to support FAFSA and WASFA completion efforts, ensuring that messaging is aligned and that efforts are not duplicated.
2. **Strategic deployment of WSAC resources to communities with a demonstrated need for more help:** WSAC will leverage State Work Study (SWS) students, regional partnerships, and GEAR UP staff to provide in-school FAFSA and WASFA support in districts where additional help can give more low-income students direct access to financial aid application support.
3. **Partnerships with the Council of Presidents (COP) and the Washington Guaranteed Admissions Program (WAGAP) to align messaging across key statewide college access campaigns:** WSAC will co-host three virtual events specifically for WAGAP-eligible students, integrating guaranteed admissions with FAFSA and WASFA support.
4. **Collaboration with administrators and principals to recognize school leaders who foster a college-going culture in their community:** WSAC will partner with the Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA) and the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP) to develop an annual award that recognizes both leaders who foster a college-going culture and schools where a robust college-going culture has taken root. Recognizing effective leaders is intended to drive stronger district-level buy-in and encourage peer learning across schools.

We will strengthen and expand three high-impact strategies

Despite the compressed timeline of the 2025 spring campaign, several strategies showed clear promise in helping schools boost FAFSA completions and engage students and families more effectively. These strategies worked not because of perfect conditions but because they tapped into existing relationships, trusted messengers, and scalable communication tools. Looking ahead, WSAC will invest in expanding these high-impact approaches earlier in the year so that schools, families, and community partners have more time, support, and alignment to drive lasting improvements in financial aid access. Specifically, we will strengthen and expand three high-impact strategies:

1. Improve priority school support with earlier outreach and in-person staff support for family FAFSA nights. Both changes directly respond to counselor feedback during Spring 2025.
2. Customize regional trainings so that trusted messengers receive geographically and culturally responsive information while earning clock hours to support their professional development.
3. Optimize OtterBot, the state's free college access chatbot, to support dual-generation messaging and connect families to basic needs support. Our most efficient way to reach tens of thousands of students and families helps carry the message further when adapted based on user feedback and participant needs. In partnership with WSAC's Strategy & Partnerships and Adult Pathways divisions, WSAC's College Access Initiatives team (CAI) will expand OtterBot content to include two-generation messaging, Spanish-language access, and AI-assisted knowledge base updates.

We will adapt and improve three foundational college access activities

CAI is intentionally responsive to ongoing changes in financial aid systems, colleges and training programs, and the communities where learners live. Toward that end, we are committed to continuously adapting our approaches based on what we learn and what changes. As it relates to next year's campaign, we have identified three foundational college access activities that will benefit from adaptations and improvements:

1. Proactively increase FAFSA portal use through dedicated outreach and more comprehensive training.
2. Refine WSAC's delivery of the annual letter from the governor to students who have not yet filed the FAFSA, adapting the timing and delivery method based on student and family feedback.
3. Overhaul CAI's email communications to trusted messengers and amplify how data on the redesigned FAFSA dashboard can inform school-level outreach.

Conclusion

The 2025-26 campaign reflects not only a shift toward earlier action and stronger infrastructure but also a deepening commitment to equity, shared accountability, and sustained student success. By pairing statewide coordination with localized flexibility, WSAC is positioning schools, communities, and families to act early and confidently in securing financial aid. These efforts will ensure that more Washington students, regardless of background, geography, or income, can turn the promise of post-high school education and job training into a reality. Building on the progress of this year, WSAC will continue strengthening early outreach and support systems to sustain momentum into the next financial aid cycle.

Appendix A: Demonstrated Results of Spring 2025 Outreach Strategies

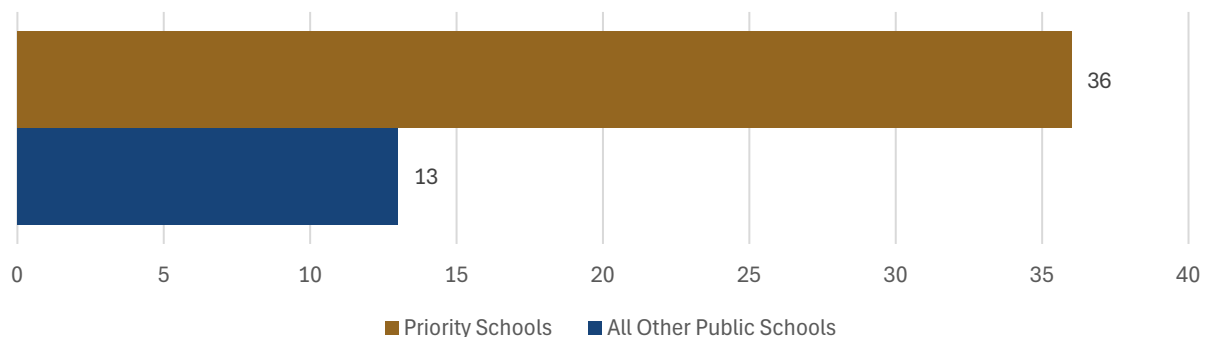
In this section, we highlight key outputs that demonstrate the scale and reach of WSAC’s spring 2025 outreach efforts. Going forward, we can leverage these data to adapt strategies in real time.

(1) Intensive outreach and support to 25 priority schools

As of July 1, 2025, a total of 900 FAFSA applications were attributed to the 25 priority schools during the campaign window. Ten percent of these FAFSA completions were directly attributable to an event made possible by the microgrant funding.¹³ The events varied in format, from large-scale, district-organized FAFSA nights to one-on-one student appointments, and reflected the creativity and responsiveness of each school in meeting student needs on tight timelines.

Moreover, at twelve of the 25 priority schools, more than 40 new FAFSA applications were completed during the campaign window. Across all priority schools, an average of 36 new completions occurred during the campaign window (Figure 9). This is compared to 13 new FAFSA completions at the average (non-priority) public high school in Washington in that same period.

Figure 9. Average Number of New FAFSA Completions between April 1 and July 1, by Priority School Status



In tandem with priority school events, OtterBot outreach played a pivotal role in reinforcing FAFSA-related messaging at scale. Throughout the campaign, WSAC sent more than 40 targeted OtterBot campaigns, which included personalized nudges, interactive messages, and reminders linked to priority school events and statewide events. These messages reached tens of thousands of students who had not yet filed and were strategically timed to coincide with school-based FAFSA support efforts. For example, tailored messages went out in advance of FAFSA nights at Chiawana, Davis, and Eisenhower. Students at Lakeside and in Federal Way received interactive messages linking to online and direct local support options. In total, OtterBot campaigns supported priority schools by increasing visibility, encouraging follow-through, and offering real-time help.

Federal Way's Districtwide Strategy Sets a New Standard

Federal Way Public Schools stood out for both scope and impact. The district hosted four formal events across Decatur High School, Federal Way High School, Thomas Jefferson High School, and Todd Beamer High School, supplemented by additional individualized FAFSA appointments and targeted outreach to schools like Truman Campus and TAFA at Saghalié. Together, these efforts led directly to 64 FAFSA completions and supported the district's overall record-high level of FAFSA completions among graduating seniors. The events were strategically scheduled, offered interpreter support, and included food and incentives to maximize engagement.

The success of the messages was enhanced through the thoughtful use of evidence-based behavioral science principles. Messages relied on strategies such as:

- **Social proof:** Highlight how many other students have filed
- **Reciprocity:** Promote free help or incentives in exchange for taking action
- **Loss aversion:** Emphasize what students might miss by not filing the FAFSA
- **Commitment and consistency:** Ask students to commit to a next step
- **Temporal discounting:** Amplify the urgency and relevance of end-of-year deadlines

By leveraging behavioral science principles in messaging campaigns, we can reduce student and parent or guardian disinterest while increasing the likelihood of timely action. In a campaign where time was limited, OtterBot expanded the reach, personalization, and behavioral impact of our statewide support system.

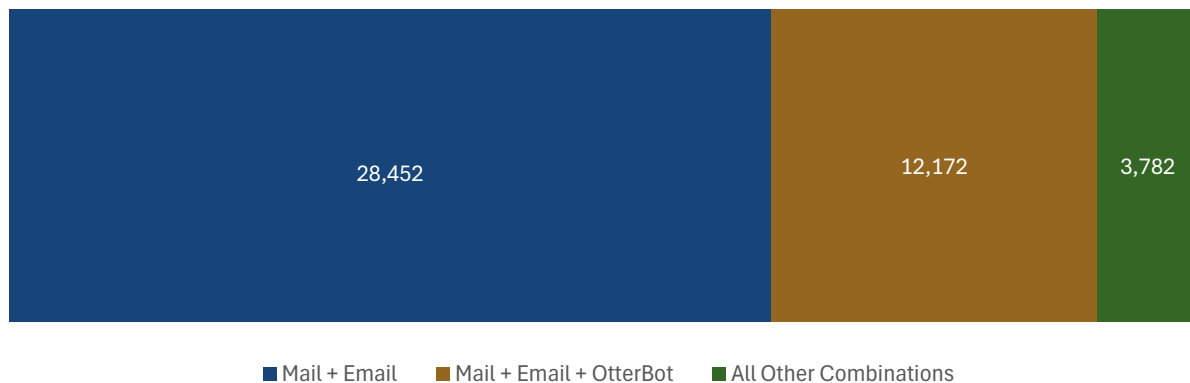
(2) Personalized communication from the Governor to HS seniors

In early May, WSAC mailed physical letters to 45,188 high school seniors across Washington who had not started a FAFSA and for whom WSAC had a valid mailing address. At the same time, WSAC distributed this letter digitally via email and OtterBot to both students and their parents or guardians. School and district leaders, including superintendents, principals, and counselors, received an email encouraging them to amplify the governor's message by sharing the letter directly with students and families, promoting its contents during school events, and using it as a tool to reinforce the importance of completing the FAFSA before the end of the academic year.

The 2024 passage of SB 6053 (RCW 28B.10.041) enabled WSAC to receive from the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) additional student contact information, which allowed us to more effectively reach Washington's students and families. As a result, more than 44,000 non-completing students received the governor's letter through at least one channel—mail, email, or OtterBot—based on the unique combination of contact information available. More than

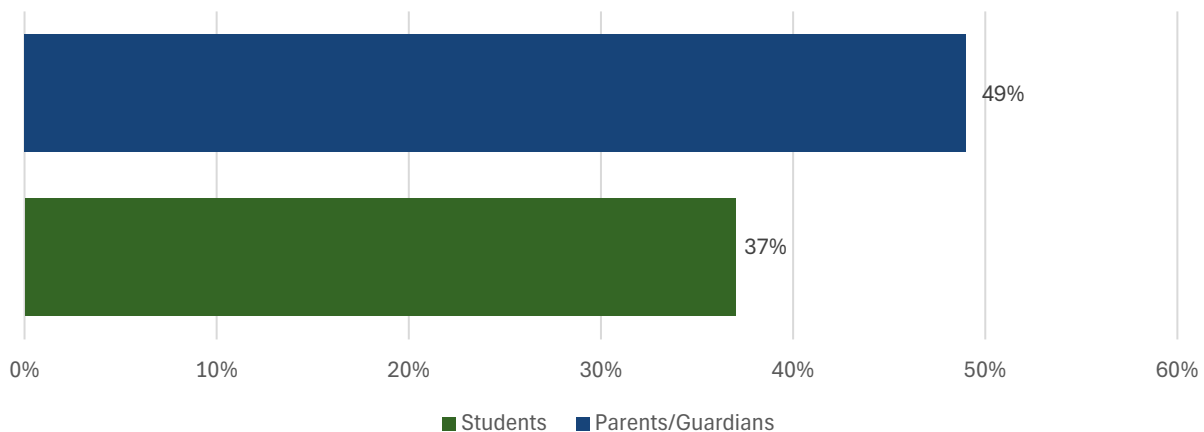
12,000 students received the letter via all three platforms(Figure 10). This layered strategy demonstrates the power of integrated outreach and underscores the importance of statewide data-sharing to strengthen student access.¹⁴ We estimate that approximately 19,000 of these students were contacted only because of the new contact information.

Figure 10. Distribution of the Governor’s Letter by Delivery Method



Open rates for the emailed version of the Governor’s letter suggest that email is a better delivery mode for guardians than for students. Whereas nearly 50% of guardians opened the email sharing the Governor’s letter, the rate was only 37% for students (Figure 11). WSAC can use this evidence on open rates to ensure email is prioritized when communicating directly with parents or guardians about college and financial aid opportunities.

Figure 11. Nearly 50% of Guardians Opened the Email with the Governor’s Letter



The OtterBot campaign announcing the governor’s letter was sent to more than 15,000 students who had not started their FAFSA as of May 5th. As with all OtterBot messages, this campaign was designed using behavioral science principles to increase the likelihood of student engagement and action. Each element of the message was carefully crafted to build trust, highlight urgency, and reinforce the value of early FAFSA filing.

Leveraging Behavioral Science Principles to encourage action

Hey STUDENT, **big news!**^① **WA Governor Bob Ferguson**^② wrote you and **other seniors**^③ a special letter about why applying for financial aid now is so important. He's even been visiting schools to talk about the Better FAFSA—check here: https://otterbot.ws/25GovLetter_sr for the digital copy.

Your physical copy will come by mail in May, but **don't wait**^④—students who finish their FAFSA sooner are more likely to get aid. Need help?

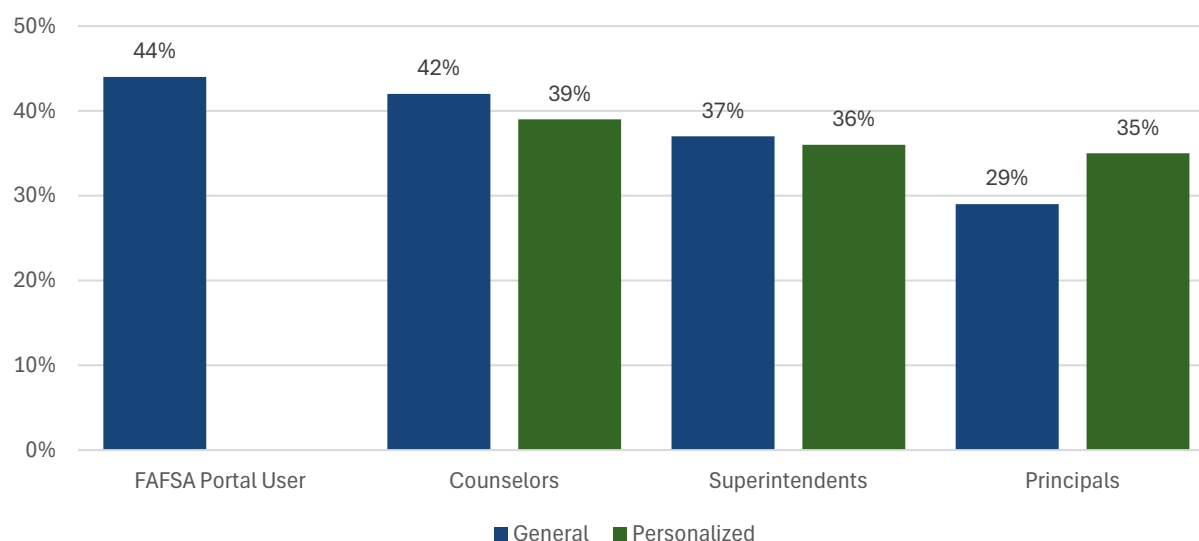
Check out:^⑤ <https://otterbot.ws/PadletStudent> for some useful resources on how to get started!

1. **Priming**
Signals importance
2. **Halo effect**
Credibility from an authority figure
3. **Social proof**
Shows peers are doing it
4. **Temporal discounting**
Emphasizes urgency and benefit
5. **Nudge**
Makes the next step easy and accessible

Passive engagement with text messages is common: Students may read and act on a text's information but not directly respond, as evidenced by the 75% of OtterBot users from the Class of 2023 who, when surveyed, indicated that they changed their behavior based on an OtterBot message. For this reason, we must rely on more robust measures of engagement, such as direct student and counselor feedback. In this case, several counselors shared directly with WSAC that the OtterBot message with the Governor's letter led students to act on filing for financial aid.

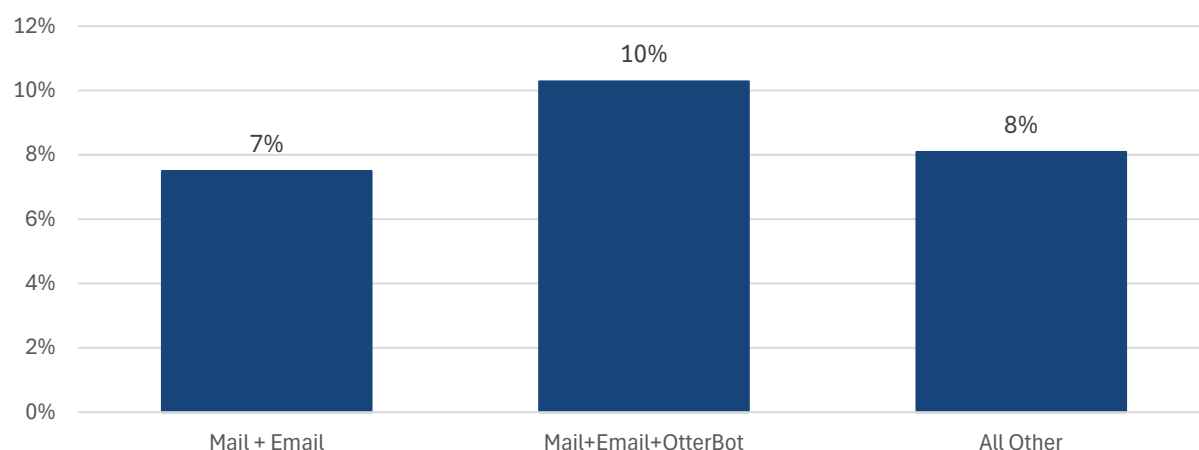
In addition to student and family outreach, WSAC also shared the Governor's letter with more than 2,200 superintendents, principals, counselors, and FAFSA portal users. These messages emphasized the Governor's support and provided contextual data on school or district FAFSA completion rates (when permissions allowed). Counselors and FAFSA portal users had the highest engagement with these emails, likely as a result of their direct role in helping students and families with financial aid support (Figure 12). Although principals generally had lower email open rates, open rates for personalized emails to principals still had markedly higher engagement (35% as compared to 29% for the general email to principals).

Figure 12. Portal Users and Counselors Read the Governor's Letter at the Highest Rates



Lastly, we observe FAFSA completion outcomes among those who received the personalized letter from the governor. Though this evidence cannot affirm that the increases in FAFSA completion were caused by the governor's letter, the higher completion rates among recipients are suggestive of a positive impact. As of July 11, 2025, approximately nine weeks after the letter was first sent, 10% of students who received the governor's letter across all three delivery methods (mail, email, and OtterBot) had filed the FAFSA (Figure 13).

Figure 13. FAFSA Completion Rates Among Letter Recipients, by Delivery Method



(3) Expanded outreach to target audiences

The third and final strategy focused on expanding outreach to two main audiences: students and families who needed help with a financial aid application and the trusted school-based messengers who supported them. Communications to students leveraged OtterBot and email, whereas messenger communications involved calls and personalized email campaigns.

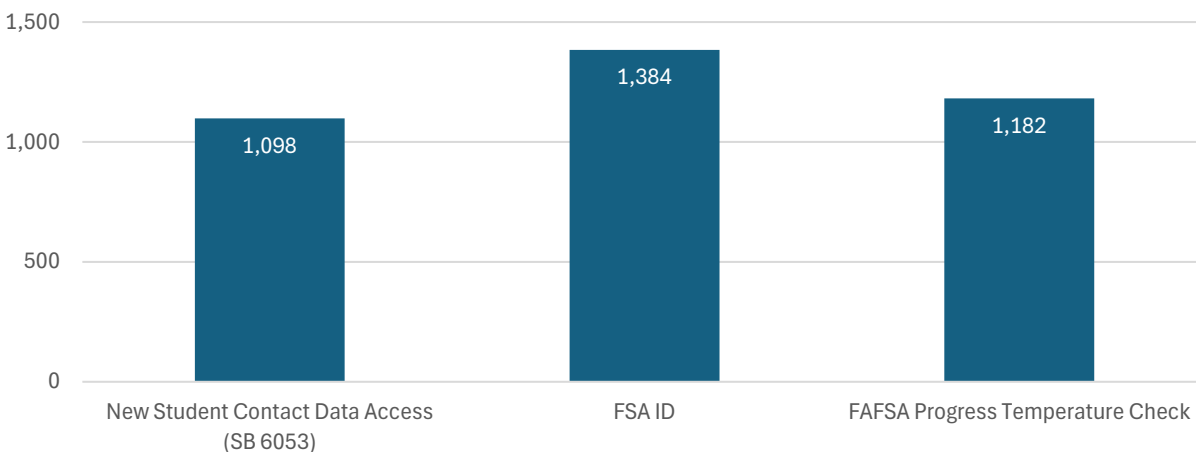
First, CAI leveraged access to expanded student contact information to automatically enroll an additional 15,548 previously unreached high school seniors in the OtterBot platform. Students received a welcome message introducing them to the platform and inviting them to continue the conversation, opt out, or switch to Spanish language messaging. More than 1,300 students responded to this introductory message, one of the highest response rates in OtterBot’s history.

Across the 2025 spring campaign, WSAC launched 47 student-facing email and text message campaigns and 13 parent and guardian campaigns, totaling 60 targeted messages to key audiences. These messages reached tens of thousands of seniors and their families with timely FAFSA-related nudges, reminders, and support resources. Compared to the same time period last year, OtterBot sent more FAFSA-targeted messages with higher engagement rates, indicative of the potential scaling that comes from optimizing OtterBot messaging.

On average, students and parents or guardians received four FAFSA-related messages throughout the campaign period. These messages were intentionally spaced to reduce fatigue and coordinated across multiple channels to reinforce key calls to action. Each campaign leveraged behavioral science principles like social proof, loss aversion, reciprocity, and temporal discounting to increase the likelihood of student action. By combining scale with personalization, WSAC’s outreach strategy helped ensure students and families were supported, informed, and more likely to complete a financial aid application before the end of the year.

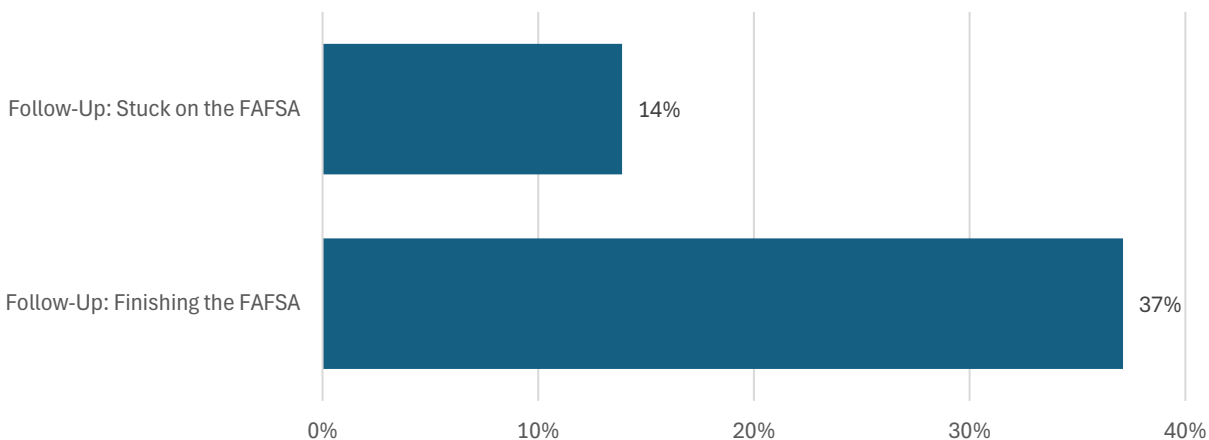
Interactive campaigns generated the highest levels of active engagement compared to passive “nudge” campaigns. Moreover, these interactive campaigns afford WSAC an opportunity to follow up directly with students based on their campaign responses. For example, OtterBot sent a FAFSA “temperature check” message sent to all seniors, and more than 1,100 seniors responded directly to the check-in (Figure 14). WSAC then used these responses to follow up directly with those who had indicated they were either finishing the FAFSA or stuck (Figure 15).

Figure 14. Counts of Student Responses to OtterBot for Spring 2025 Interactive FAFSA Campaigns



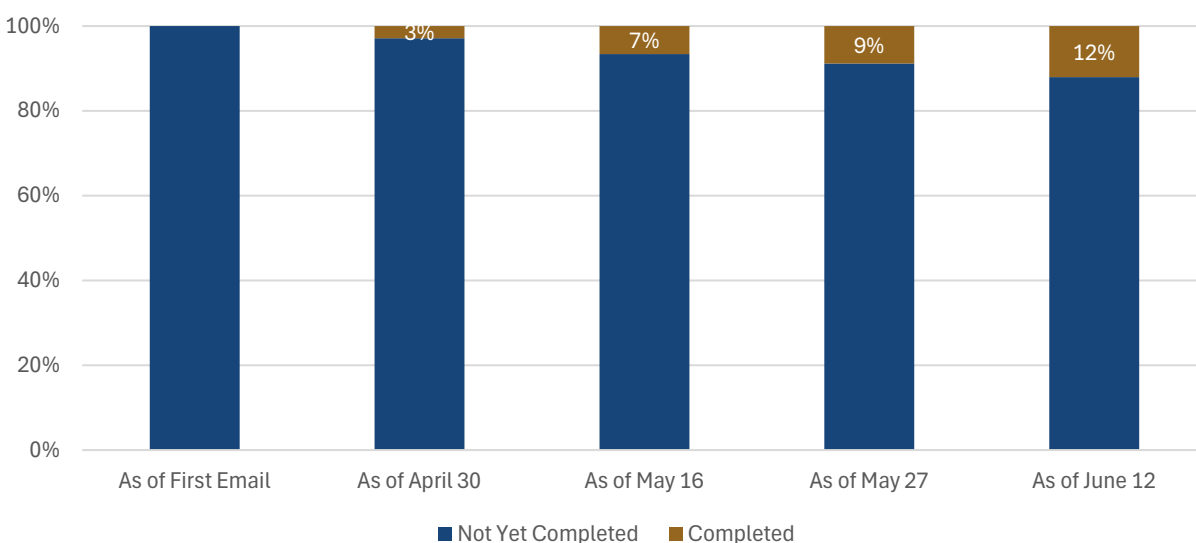
These personalized follow-ups achieved high engagement rates, 37% for the “Finishing the FAFSA” group and 14% for the “Stuck on the FAFSA” group (Figure 15), demonstrating the value of tailoring outreach to specific points in the application journey.

Figure 15. OtterBot Engagement Rates for Interactive Campaigns Assessing FAFSA Progress



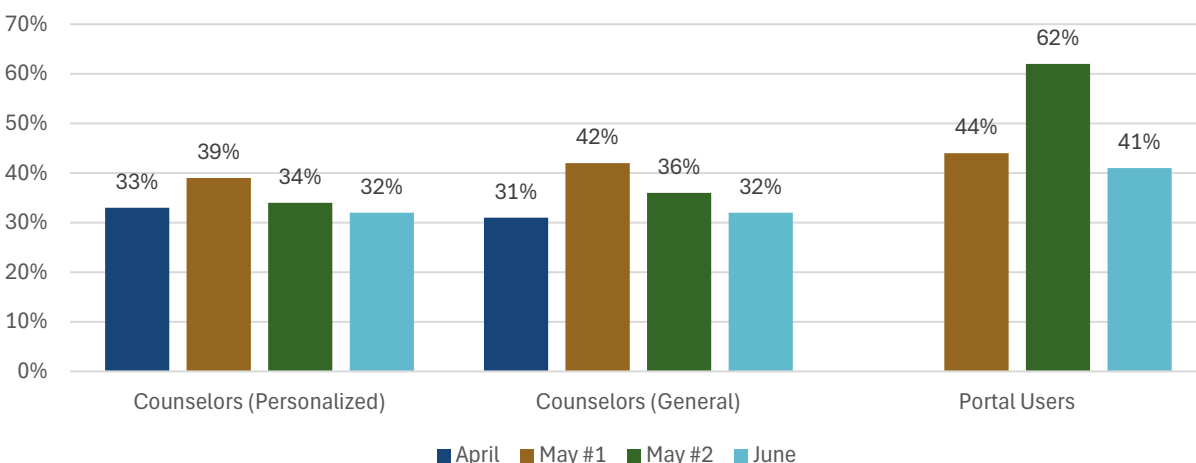
Alongside OtterBot messaging, students and parents or guardians also received emails with messages and resources aligned with their progress toward completing the FAFSA application. For example, students who had started but not yet completed the FAFSA were encouraged to do so, whereas those who had already completed it were congratulated for having done so. Approximately 12% of students who received an email encouraging them to complete the FAFSA ultimately did so by the final message (Figure 16).

Figure 16. FAFSA Completion Rates among Recipients of Targeted Email Messages



Lastly, email newsletters sent to district and school staff in parallel with student and family communications ensured that financial aid messaging was consistent across audiences. Although open rates for trusted messenger campaigns varied throughout the spring, they remained consistently strong across all audiences. Personalized counselor emails achieved open rates ranging from 32% to 39% over the four campaign periods, whereas general counselor emails ranged from 31% to 42%. Portal user messages—targeted to those with direct access to completion data—saw especially high engagement, with open rates as high as 62% in one May outreach. These results suggest that targeted, role-specific messaging can drive meaningful engagement among busy school professionals (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Open rates for Email Campaigns to Trusted Messengers by Audience and Campaign



Appendix B: Lessons Learned during Spring 2025

In this section, we provide an overview of key lessons related to WSAC’s implementation of a statewide outreach campaign.

Microgrants helped schools take action quickly and creatively

Offering flexible microgrants to priority schools helped staff host end-of-year events and conduct family outreach with more flexibility than is afforded by traditional school funding sources.

First, by offering a warm meal and student incentives like gift cards or prize drawings—expenses often disallowed by district procurement policies—staff were able to increase family attendance. Staff hosted events where students came for pizza and burritos but stayed for FAFSA support, or they used raffles and custom school swag to draw in students. Excited by the food and prizes, students proactively asked for guidance on what to bring to access the FAFSA support, showing that food and incentives can lower attendance barriers and create a sense of urgency.

“This [microgrant] approach proved effective and could serve as a strong model for future events, especially to encourage earlier completion of financial aid applications.”

- Staff Member, Davis High School

Second, events were more successful when paired with existing school events. FAFSA booths at senior presentations, embedded time for creating a StudentAid.gov account (i.e., an FSA ID) during advisory, or completion challenges tied to Senior Signing Day helped normalize FAFSA completion as part of the school year. Several schools integrated FAFSA messaging into all senior meetings or announcements.

Partnerships with priority schools need to begin in the fall

Timing was a critical variable. Schools consistently reported that April was too late to launch effective outreach. Many FAFSA events occurred just days before graduation or competed with award ceremonies, exams, or senior trips. Associated Student Body (ASB) leaders were often unable to participate due to burnout or conflicting obligations. Even schools that successfully planned events reported that an earlier start would have allowed more time to plan logistics, promote events, and follow up with students who needed extra help. In the future, shifting the campaigns to start earlier in the school year will allow both WSAC and schools to operate with greater intention and less pressure.

The IAA process needs to be streamlined

Identifying the correct district-level signatures delayed the execution of Interagency Agreements (IAAs), and routing funds through district offices led to delays in schools receiving funds or identifying who had authority to access funds once received. These challenges, combined with the

already tight deadline, made it difficult for priority schools to access funds before the end of the school year.

To address these issues in the upcoming year, WSAC will implement a more streamlined and transparent IAA process. This includes developing a clear checklist for schools and districts outlining each step of the process, from who needs to sign, to how funds can be used, to how reporting should be completed. WSAC will also ensure that all relevant stakeholders, including school- and district-level contacts, are looped in from the beginning. Clearer guidance will be provided around allowable use of funds, timelines, and points of contact to reduce confusion and minimize administrative barriers. The goal is to ensure that funding can be accessed and put to use quickly, giving schools more time to plan and execute effective FAFSA support strategies.

Counselors are best positioned to lead microgrant implementation

The success of a school's microgrant strategy often depended on who was responsible for managing the work. Counselors working directly with students were in the best position to coordinate events, track student FAFSA completion, and communicate directly with families. In contrast, relying on school administrators led to longer gaps in communication and slower implementation. Going forward, WSAC will align point of contact roles with student-facing staff.

The FAFSA Portal remains valuable but underused

WSAC's FAFSA Completion Portal is an important tool for school and district staff working to increase FAFSA completion efforts, but feedback from the Spring 2025 campaign revealed that many schools do not know who in their district has access or that multiple staff can be granted access.

In reality, WSAC already has data-sharing agreements with approximately 220 districts across the state. Ninety-seven percent of public high school seniors in Washington attend a district that has a FAFSA Completion Portal data sharing agreement in place.

Districts and schools can request as many users as needed, as there is no requirement for a single "primary" user. Each year, WSAC works with principals, superintendents, and counselors to encourage key staff to sign up for access, but awareness and use remain uneven. Going forward, WSAC will not only continue this outreach but will also provide targeted training to help staff use the portal effectively for planning and outreach, ensuring the tool fulfills its potential as a driver of FAFSA completion.

We need earlier and clearer support for FSA ID creation

Nearly all priority schools identified FSA ID creation as a critical barrier that prevents students from timely FAFSA completion. Students frequently arrived at events having not created their FSA ID or without knowing that parents also need to create an ID. In the process of creating an FSA ID, families were often confused by multi-factor authentication, or could not log in because of an email mismatch or a locked account. Moreover, if a student's parents were not at an event with

them, they could not quickly retrieve necessary account information to address the issue. In numerous instances, these barriers to ID creation quickly became barriers to FAFSA completion.

Going forward, WSAC will begin FSA ID outreach earlier in the school year, starting in May with juniors who will be seniors in the coming year. This outreach will include school-based events where students create their FSA ID before their senior year begins. WSAC will also host dedicated events for senior parents and other contributors to create email accounts if needed and walk step by step through the FSA ID creation process. This early awareness and action will be reinforced through OtterBot messaging so the information reaches more students and families well in advance.

We will also leverage upcoming federal improvements for the 2026–27 award cycle to reduce these barriers. For example, real-time identity verification (launched in August 2025) will allow users creating an FSA ID with a social security number to have their accounts verified immediately, eliminating the current one to three-day waiting period and enabling instant transfer of IRS tax data.

By combining earlier outreach with new federal tools and policies, WSAC will help schools and families avoid last-minute account setup issues, making FAFSA completion smoother and faster for both students and contributors.

Parent financial aid education should be targeted and culturally responsive

Whereas creating an FSA ID is a mechanical process, parental education about financial aid requires targeted and culturally responsive approaches that can shift the educational culture in a community. Staff at priority schools shared several instances where parents believed that they only needed to file the FAFSA *after* their student was admitted to college, or that filing the FAFSA only led to student loan access. Several schools noted parents' low attendance at FAFSA nights as an opportunity to change the conversation about financial aid earlier in a student's high school career. To better support this need going forward, WSAC will initiate partnerships with schools earlier in the academic year, giving school staff to plan, promote, and host events designed for families.

By contrast, however, events that provided multilingual materials or were embedded in larger family gatherings (such as Senior Nights) saw better turnout and more interaction. WSAC's CAI team had limited capacity in the past to provide multilingual resources directly to families. In recent years, however, the agency has taken intentional steps to strengthen multilingual outreach.

OtterBot now offers the ability to change language preference in more than 100 languages, allowing students and families to receive information in the language they're most comfortable with. WSAC also distributes bilingual communications, most often English and Spanish, to school staff via listservs, enabling them to share timely updates to families. In addition, WSAC maintains a material ordering system through which schools can request printed and digital outreach tools, including posters, flyers, and resources, in several top spoken languages in Washington. Going forward, WSAC will continue to expand its multilingual offering and work more closely with school partners to integrate materials into school-hosted events.

Associated Student Body (ASB) leaders have time and capacity constraints

Priority schools emphasized the limited capacity of Associated Student Bodies (ASBs) to lead outreach during the campaign. Many student leaders were already overwhelmed with end-of-year responsibilities by the time the FAFSA campaign started in April and May. Whereas some ASBs were able to move quickly on innovative peer-led outreach activities, others struggled to build traction so late in the academic year. Feedback suggests that earlier planning, along with structured toolkits, sample announcements, and cross-ASB idea generation, would better position ASBs to lead in the future. Student leaders remain a high-potential asset, and we can conscientiously improve how we engage them so that we are not asking for their input at a time when their availability is already limited.

About the Washington Student Achievement Council

The Washington Student Achievement Council is committed to increasing educational opportunities and attainment in Washington. The Council has three main functions:

- Lead statewide strategic planning to increase educational attainment.
- Administer programs that help people access and pay for college.
- Advocate for the economic, social, and civic benefits of higher education.

The Council has ten members. Four members represent each of Washington's major education sectors: four-year public baccalaureates, four-year private colleges, public community and technical colleges, and K-12 public schools. Six are citizen members, including two current students (one graduate student and one undergraduate student).

If you would like copies of this document in an alternative format, please contact the Washington Student Achievement Council at:

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360-753-7800

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Endnotes

¹ DeBaun, B. (2019). Survey Data Strengthen Association Between FAFSA Completion and Enrollment. Retrieved from National College Attainment Network (NCAN): <https://www.ncan.org/news/news.asp?id=456025>

² Nguyen, T.D., Kramer, J.W., & Evans, B. J. (2018). The Effects of Grant Aid on Student Persistence and Degree Attainment: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Causal Evidence (CEPA Working Paper No.18-04). Retrieved from Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis: <http://cepa.stanford.edu/wp18-04>

³ Nguyen, T.D., Kramer, J.W., & Evans, B. J. (2018). The Effects of Grant Aid on Student Persistence and Degree Attainment: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Causal Evidence (CEPA Working Paper No.18-04). Retrieved from Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis: <http://cepa.stanford.edu/wp18-04>

⁴ DeBaun, B. (2019). Survey Data Strengthen Association Between FAFSA Completion and Enrollment. Retrieved from National College Attainment Network (NCAN): <https://www.ncan.org/news/news.asp?id=456025>.

⁵ Feeney, M. & Heroff, J. (2013). Barriers to Need-Based Financial Aid: Predictors of Timely FAFSA Completion Among Low Income Students. Journal of Student Financial Aid (Vol. 43: Iss. 2, Article 2).

⁶ The 35% increase in year-over-year WASFA filing captures an increase of approximately 1,700 WASFA applicants in June 2025 relative to June 2024. These estimates include the universe of WASFA applicants and are not restricted to only high school senior or FTIC WASFA applicants.

⁷ Calculated based on the total number of completions among high school seniors recorded as of the first weekly report in July and October of each year. For the Class of 2023, the last recorded weekly report occurred on September 25, 2023.

⁸ The percentage on the left includes high school seniors who completed a FAFSA by July 1, 2025. The percentage on the right estimates the total number of high school seniors who completed a FAFSA and individuals who completed a college freshman WASFA application by July 1, 2025. High school seniors have not been matched to the WASFA completion rates to protect student privacy.

⁹ Due to delayed receipt of FAFSA data from the U.S. Department of Education, completion during the Spring 2024 timeframe is not available.

¹⁰ Calculated using FAFSA filing rates as of July 1, 2025.

¹¹ Granger High School met 78 percent, Mabton High School 75 percent, and Toppenish High School 73 percent FAFSA completion rate by July of the 2025 academic year.

¹² Beginning January 2026, students whose households are eligible for public benefits programs will be automatically income-eligible for WA Grant. To accommodate the fact that these low-income students will be encouraged to file a FAFSA but might not do so, WSAC is exploring measures of financial aid access that simultaneously account for FAFSA and WASFA filing as well as automatic eligibility among this population of students.

¹³ Not all schools were able to track exact FAFSA completions at their events.

¹⁴ Parents and guardians only received the governor's letter via GovDelivery email, as WSAC can match FAFSA completion status with parent contact information only through that system. The physical mailing was addressed to students but may have been seen by parents or guardians since it was sent to the student's household address. OtterBot campaigns were student-only.



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