



FAFSA COMPLETION WORK GROUP

REPORT TO GOVERNOR RALPH NORTHAM AND SECRETARY OF EDUCATION ATIF QARNI

SEPTEMBER 2021

Holding a postsecondary degree or credential is essential to many 21st century jobs. Research indicates that those with a college degree have greater lifetime earnings, are healthier, enjoy greater job security, and are more engaged in their communities. Completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, commonly known as the FAFSA, is a critical first step in obtaining a postsecondary credential that can provide Virginians with a wealth of opportunity.

Currently, Virginia is ranked 26th nationally for FAFSA completion, with a 52.7% completion rate. According to a [2018 study](#), approximately 15,000 Virginia high school seniors that would have been eligible for Pell grants did not complete the FAFSA, amounting to more than \$58 million in federal aid that students left on the table. This is aid that could have made the difference in thousands of students continuing their education and collecting greater earnings over their lifetime. The COVID-19 pandemic added to the challenge of getting students to complete the FAFSA. In spring 2021, 4,315 fewer Virginia high school seniors had completed the FAFSA, a 10 percent decline compared to 2020. For students attending Virginia's Title I high schools, FAFSA completions were down even more at 33 percent. These COVID-related declines meant that more than ever, students who had the most to gain from state and federal aid were missing out on thousands of dollars in financial assistance for college and postsecondary training.

To get Virginia back on track and improve completion rates, in March 2021 Governor Northam set a goal of ensuring that every eligible Virginia student completes the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) each year. To meet this goal, and help Virginia meet its larger goal of increasing college access and completion to become the best educated state by 2030, he directed Secretary of Education Atif Qarni to convene a work group tasked with forming long-term legislative and budgetary recommendations to improve Virginia's FAFSA completion rates. The Governor also announced the launch of a statewide effort to offer free, one-on-one FAFSA completion assistance through a partnership between the Virginia College Access Network (VirginiaCAN) and the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV). From March 22 through June 30, 2021, students and families could schedule a virtual meeting and connect with an advisor for help filling out the FAFSA application. With the help of these interventions, Virginia slowed the decline of completion rates to 4.9% for all students.

Before spring 2021, many stakeholders were already working together in Virginia to ensure more students complete the FAFSA and have meaningful access to postsecondary opportunities. These efforts include requiring completion of the FAFSA for most programs under the Governor's G3 initiative, teaching students about the FAFSA in the personal finance course required in Virginia high schools, leveraging Virginia529's investment to scale up the Virginia College Advising Corps (VCAC), and SCHEV's efforts to raise awareness on FAFSA completion. Another important effort in improving college access is Virginia's

expansion of access to state financial aid for undocumented students and creation of a portal for them to apply for funds toward college. Despite these strategic initiatives, a 22.3% decline remained for students attending Virginia high schools with high concentrations of low-income students, indicating that there is much work to be done to address disparities in FAFSA completion rates.

The recommendations below represent the work group’s suggestions to improve FAFSA completion rates through coordinating statewide efforts, providing students with wraparound college access supports, and educating students and families on the FAFSA’s purpose and important deadlines. Some states have recently chosen to make FAFSA completion a graduation requirement, but the work group does not believe this approach would be effective in Virginia, as it could result in a “check the box” mentality that may not lead to meaningful FAFSA completion or further consideration of postsecondary opportunities. Instead, the work group offers a series of recommendations that will ensure students and their families have the information and resources they need to complete the FAFSA—a critical step in their journey to obtain a postsecondary credential.

STATEWIDE COORDINATION & POLICY ALIGNMENT

- Establish a College Access & Completion Advisory Board. The board would help research, establish, support, and monitor statewide strategies to coordinate efforts between college access providers, postsecondary and PK-12 education stakeholders, wraparound student support initiatives, and workforce organizations to address disparities in college access and completion. This group should also regularly provide legislative and budgetary recommendations to the Governor and General Assembly to improve FAFSA completion rates, increase student supports, and expand financial aid as fundamental steps towards boosting college access and completion.
- Launch a state dashboard showing real-time data tracking for school division and individual school FAFSA completion rates. This dashboard would serve as an important information resource to policymakers, school personnel, college access organizations, and postsecondary partners.
- Support engagement among Virginia colleges and universities in efforts to support FAFSA completion. This could mean partnering with university researchers to measure the effectiveness of current college access and completion initiatives, or engaging faculty in research on college access and completion. Institutions should also share best practices around FAFSA completion for new and returning students and consider leveraging existing resources and programs to support college access across Virginia.

PROVIDING STUDENTS WITH WRAPAROUND SUPPORTS

- Ensure all Virginia high schools have a college advisor that provides full-time student and family support with evidence-based interventions. This could mean partnering with college access providers to scale programs until there is one college advisor in every high school. This scaling would address equity with well-resourced public and private schools that already have a dedicated college counselor on staff.
- Develop partnerships to provide free tax prep and FAFSA assistance simultaneously for low-income families. This could remove barriers for individuals to complete the FAFSA by providing them with personalized FAFSA assistance during their tax prep session. In Ohio and North

Carolina, [this intervention](#) increased FAFSA submissions and ultimately college enrollment, college persistence, and financial aid receipt.

- Establish the infrastructure to support a statewide one-on-one FAFSA completion assistance program. Based on the model employed in spring 2021 to increase FAFSA completions, Virginia could partner with SCHEV, VirginiaCAN, VDOE, and other stakeholders to support the creation of a virtual FAFSA completion assistance platform and coordinate in-person FAFSA workshops in different regions of the Commonwealth. During key times of the year, this program could offer virtual appointments in multiple languages, providing families with personalized help in completing the FAFSA.

EDUCATING STUDENTS & FAMILIES

- Set a FAFSA completion goal. The Governor should set a numerical, improvement oriented goal for FAFSA completion and track progress to that goal. This goal should be updated annually, and may be either a percentage of high school seniors or a total number of students completing the FAFSA in Virginia.
- Increase awareness of the importance of FAFSA completion. Provide marketing support to raise FAFSA awareness. This could include providing funds to create incentives for school divisions or students to complete the FAFSA, producing a statewide marketing campaign on FAFSA completion, creating a media tool kit, refining and leveraging the required personal finance course in high school, and including FAFSA completion messaging in marketing for postsecondary opportunities.
- Establish a comprehensive landing page for Virginia FAFSA resources, efforts, data, and FAQs. Similar to those in other states like [North Carolina](#) or [Idaho](#), this page could be a one-stop shop for students, their families, high schools, colleges and access providers.
- Initiate statewide FAFSA completion contests elevated by the Governor’s Office and state agencies. The contests could be held by high school, school division, or region. Awards may be provided for improvement rather than overall completion.

CLOSING

As Virginia seeks to become the best educated state, increasing FAFSA completions and scaling college advising services is essential, especially for students of color and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. We know that only 54% of low-income students enroll in college or postsecondary training—well below the overall state rate of 69%. These disparities indicate that talented students are missing out on postsecondary opportunities that could increase their quality of life, expand their earning potential, and equip them to engage meaningfully in their communities. The equity-centered strategies and investments proposed above will help more Virginia students complete the FAFSA accurately to draw down more financial aid and increase college access across the Commonwealth. To begin moving this work forward, policymakers and education stakeholders must create a statewide advisory board to coordinate, sustain, and advance efforts to improve college access and completion in Virginia.

APPENDIX: FAFSA COMPLETION WORK GROUP ROSTER

The FAFSA Completion Work Group was chaired by **Deputy Secretary of Education Fran Bradford**, and staffed by **Assistant Secretary of Education Tori Feyrer**. Work Group members are listed below.

- **Matthew G. Bailey** of Waynesboro, Director of Counseling, Waynesboro High School, Waynesboro Public Schools
- **Sarah Bazemore** of Chesterfield County, School Counseling Specialist and Student Assistance Systems Coordinator, Office of Student Services, Virginia Department of Education
- **Sherika Charity** of Petersburg, Director of Financial Aid, Reynolds Community College
- **Cherrelle Davis** of Chesterfield County, Professional School Counselor, Petersburg City Public Schools
- **Elizabeth F. Dutton** of Powhatan County, Chief Administrative Officer, Virginia529
- **Juan P. Espinoza** of Blacksburg, Associate Vice Provost for Enrollment Management, Director of Undergraduate Admissions, Virginia Tech
- **Thomas Ferrell** of Henrico County, Director of High School Education at Henrico Public Schools
- **Megan Healy** of Richmond, Secretary of Labor
- **Erin McGrath** of Richmond, Assistant Director of College Access and PK-12 Outreach, State Council of Higher Education for Virginia
- **Sabena Moretz** of Mechanicsville, Director of Government Relations, Council of Independent Colleges in Virginia (CICV)
- **Joy Pugh** of Charlottesville, Executive Director, Virginia College Advising Corps, University of Virginia
- **Judith P. Sams** of Cumberland, Specialist, Business and Information Technology and Related Clusters, Virginia Department of Education
- **Joseph Wharff** of Chesterfield County, Associate Director, Office of Student Services, Virginia Department of Education
- **Van C. Wilson** of Glen Allen, Associate Vice Chancellor, Student Experience and Strategic Initiatives, Virginia Community College System