4 for the Fall: A Blueprint for Supporting the High School Class of 2021

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic upended the U.S. education system in spring 2020, another persistent, pernicious pathogen had long plagued American society: inequitable educational outcomes on the basis of income, race, and ethnicity. This is especially true for postsecondary access and attainment.

For example, among high school graduates from the class of 2018, there were 11 and 14 percentage-point disparities in immediate postsecondary enrollment between students from low- and high-minority high schools and low- and higher-income high schools, respectively.[1] Between the lowest- and highest-income high schools, that gap was 22 percentage points.[2] Those disparities also appeared in persistence rates for class of 2016 graduates, and especially in completion rates for the class of 2012, for which there was a 32 percentage-point gap in six-year bachelor's and associate attainment between graduates of the poorest and richest high schools.[3]

More recently, spring 2020 saw completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), a leading predictor of postsecondary intent and enrollment, also reflect resource-based disparities. Title I-eligible public high schools saw FAFSA completions decline 5.2% year-over-year, compared to a 2.6% decline among their better-resourced, non-Title I-eligible counterparts.[4] The National College Attainment Network observed a similar trend in FAFSA renewals by income level among currently enrolled students.[5]

Research shows the benefits of postsecondary attainment to individuals, communities, states, and the nation at large. But those benefits will be hampered by the inequitable pattern of attainment currently observed across the country.

NCAN is a membership association that, for 25 years, has focused exclusively on empowering communities to help more students of color and students from low-income backgrounds enter and complete postsecondary education. Our network of more than 450 member organizations has identified **practices that reliably increase student success after high school.** Our members are experts

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[1] https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/nscblog/research-center-releases-high-school-benchmarks-2019-national-college-progression-rates/

[2] The National Student Clearinghouse defines "low poverty" high schools as having less than 25% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and "high poverty" high schools as having at least 75% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

[3] Ibid.

[4] https://www.formyourfuture.org/fafsa-tracker

[5] https://public.tableau.com/profile/bill.debaun.national.college.access.network#!/vizhome/FAFSARenewals20-21/FAFSARenewals?publish=yes

in postsecondary advising, financial aid, and navigating the college enrollment process, and they work in communities of all shapes and sizes.

This resource will primarily interest district and school leaders looking for the clearest, most concrete ways to keep students on a postsecondary pathway after they graduate high school. But school counselors, teachers, and community partners will also find the approaches here valuable and familiar.

The approaches include:

1. **Understanding students' postsecondary intentions and needs through survey data.**
2. **Obtaining and analyzing postsecondary outcomes data from the National Student Clearinghouse.**
3. **Increasing access to financial aid by improving FAFSA completion rates.**
4. **Examining current activities around fall milestones, and pivoting to virtual where possible.**

Each of the sections below includes a rationale, questions to ask, and the best available resources. The education field will likely be asked to do more with less over at least the next few academic years. With that in mind, many district and school leaders may be understandably wary about taking on new initiatives and expanding existing responsibilities as outlined in this resource. Acknowledging that possibility, it's worth remembering that high-leverage practices and policies can increase a system's efficiency (in this case helping more students succeed on a postsecondary pathway) outsized to the level of effort it takes to implement those practices and policies.

The suggested strategies above are evidence-based, data-driven, and practitioner-tested by NCAN members across the country every day. These members share the same passion for student success as stakeholders in the K-12 and higher education systems. NCAN, as well as our members, welcome the chance to provide guidance and feedback to school districts and partners on their efforts in any of these areas.

1. Understand students' postsecondary intentions and needs through survey data.

Good data drive good practice. To help students succeed after high school, practitioners must understand where students are now and what they need next. Fortunately, many districts and schools issue senior surveys to gather contact information and understand students' postsecondary intentions (college, career, military, etc.). That information (and more) is helpful in shaping the supports seniors receive between now and graduation. But what's good for seniors can also benefit underclassmen.

Schools should issue surveys to seniors in the fall rather than wait until the end of the academic year, when data are less actionable. Those surveys should ask students to share their postsecondary plans, concerns about achieving them, and which key milestones they've already completed. Using these data, counselors and other school staff can triage students into appropriate outreach groups based on their plans and concerns, and provide support throughout the academic year. A follow-up survey in the spring would also be useful to see where students have progressed from the fall baseline.

Issuing a similar survey in the fall to freshmen, sophomores, and juniors is also useful for many of the same reasons. Having these data in-hand to act upon is a huge improvement over guessing what students' plans are and trying to shift those plans at the end of senior year or after graduation. Survey questions can change based on grade level to include relevant milestones, but probably the most important question to ask is around students' postsecondary intentions. With those data in hand, school staff can conduct outreach to students early and often and ensure they get the supports they need.

A practice related to surveys involves sending a guide to students in grades 9-12 with information on high school graduation, college, and career. The District of Columbia Public Schools, Chicago Public Schools, and California's Long Beach Unified School District and Orange County Public Schools (among others) engage in this practice.[6] It involves sending a packet individually customized for students (twice a year for grades 9-11, in the fall only for seniors). Each guide contains:

- An introductory letter and instructions for how to use the data.
- The student's current high school transcript (unofficial).
- The student's progress toward the district's high school graduation requirements, including natural language descriptions of whether a student has completed requirements and, if not, whether or not they are on track to do so.
- The student's likelihood of admission at "a variety of area colleges and universities based on current GPA and test scores."[7]
- Information on career opportunities in the local area.
- Natural language descriptions of whether the student is on track to graduate, and recommended next steps for the student in three categories: high school graduation, postsecondary education, and career.

Questions to Ask

- What is the most current update we have about students' postsecondary aspirations and plans?
- How will the supports we provide to students differ based on what we learn from those data?
- What are the schoolwide supports we have in place that we can connect students with to be responsive to their survey answers (e.g., FAFSA completion initiative; career awareness, exploration, and exposure activities; guidance on college search; schoolwide college admissions testing)?
- What resources can we provide to students to advance or maintain their postsecondary aspirations?
- Do we have partners that can help support students? Who are they and how can they help?

Resources

- [Notes on Senior Exit Survey Administration](#) – College Advising Corps

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[6] https://www.ncan.org/news/457915/DC-Public-Schools-Rolls-Out-Guide-to-Graduation-College-and-Career.htm
[7] Ibid.

- [DC Public Schools Rolls Out Guide to Graduation, College, and Career](#)
- Sample Survey: College Advising Corps: [Full (includes demographic questions)](#) and [modified (no demographic questions)](#) data collection tools
- Sample Survey: [Iowa College Aid – Course to College Beginning of Year Student Survey Questions](#)
- Sample Survey: [Broward County (Florida) Public Schools](#)
- Sample Survey: [I Know I Can (Columbus, Ohio)](#)
- Sample Survey: [College Now Greater Cleveland](#)

2. Obtain and analyze postsecondary outcomes data from the National Student Clearinghouse.

Although surveys are a good measure of postsecondary intent, far too many districts and schools rely on them as a proxy for students' actual postsecondary enrollments. Unfortunately, students' plans often change after high school graduation, and these soft figures often represent gross inflations of real-world outcomes.

The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) is the most valuable resource the education field has for tracking students' postsecondary access and completion outcomes. The NSC includes enrollment data for more than 3,700 public and private postsecondary institutions that cover 99% of enrolled students nationally.

More than 13,600 high schools covering 70% of secondary school students report data through the NSC's StudentTracker service. This service matches lists of high school graduates against enrollments in the Clearinghouse's vast database and returns all of the matches, allowing district and school personnel to observe actual enrollment, persistence, retention, transfer, and completion rates. As of this writing, high schools can enroll in the StudentTracker service for $425 annually, making the data therein affordable, accessible, and most importantly, actionable.

Unfortunately, far too few high school leaders appear to be making good use of this information. Data from the American School Leaders Panel show just a third of principals nationally report having access to student-level data on postsecondary enrollment, and just a quarter have student-level data on the graduation rates of the colleges to which students apply.[8]

Although there are many school districts and partner organizations across the country making effective use of the NSC's data, there is tremendous room for improvement in many other districts. The technical capacity needed to compile, clean, analyze, and report these data can be challenging for some districts, especially those smaller in size and more rural, to achieve.

Just as with the use of student surveys, good data often drive good practice. Accessing students' actual postsecondary enrollments reveals a plethora of data around equity gaps; matriculation, transfer, and completion patterns; and institutions' relative effectiveness in helping students succeed.

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[8] https://k12education.gatesfoundation.org/blog/what-do-high-school-leaders-know-about-their-students-paths-after-high-school-not-enough/

Questions to Ask

- Does my district or school currently measure students' postsecondary outcomes? How?
- Is my district or school already a subscriber to the National Student Clearinghouse's StudentTracker service? How can our use of it be improved?
- If my district or school is a StudentTracker subscriber, how are those data being analyzed and shared with district and school administrators, school counselors, teachers, community-based partners, and others involved with student advising?
- To which institutions are my students most often matriculating? What do those students' persistence and completion patterns look like at those institutions?
- At the state level, which practices and policies, if any, are already in place to connect districts and schools with their students' postsecondary outcomes? What new policies, up to and including a statewide National Student Clearinghouse contract, are viable at this time?

Resources

- [StudentTracker for High Schools](#)
- [Illinois' Governors State University Uses Clearinghouse Data to Benefit Students and Campus](#)
- [San Diego County Chooses StudentTracker for High Schools to Increase College Enrollment and to Complete a College Degree](#)
- [How School Districts in Iowa Turned StudentTracker Data into Action](#)
- [California's Riverside County Office of Education Improves Students' Postsecondary Success with Data and Education Insights](#)

3. Increase access to financial aid by improving FAFSA completion rates.

FAFSA completion is strongly associated with immediate postsecondary enrollment following high school graduation, especially for students from low-income backgrounds.[9] Unfortunately, NCAN's research shows that in many states students from the highest-poverty communities are the least likely to complete a FAFSA.[10] It is critical that districts and schools track this key milestone and have a thoughtful plan for driving FAFSA completion.

The FAFSA cycle begins each year on Oct. 1. During the 2019-20 academic year, 55.6% of the senior class completed a FAFSA by June 30, down 1.4 percentage points from the previous year. Students from low-income backgrounds were particularly negatively affected; Title I-eligible high schools' FAFSA completion deficits were twice as large as those of non-Title I-eligible high schools.[11] Tumult and uncertainty around COVID-19 were responsible for part of this decline. Beyond that, students historically underrepresented on college campuses – namely students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and/or first-generation students – face other uncertainties related to college-going

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[9] https://www.ncan.org/news/news.asp?id=456025

[10] https://www.ncan.org/news/480053/Students-in-Higher-Poverty-School-Districts-Are-Less-Likely-to-Apply-for-Financial-Aid.htm

[11] https://public.tableau.com/profile/api/publish/COVID-19andFAFSACompletion/COVID-19FAFSA

and FAFSA completion on an annual basis. For example, affordability remains a top concern, especially as two- and four-year public institutions become less affordable each year. Beyond that, many students think they are ineligible for financial aid, don't understand the FAFSA form, or don't know how to begin the application process.[12]

All students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, should complete the FAFSA so they know the financial aid for which they will be eligible if they choose to matriculate to a college, university, or credentialing program. Fortunately, there are a number of practices and policies at the state, district, and school level that can drive FAFSA completion.

Districts and schools nationwide have approached FAFSA completion support in a variety of ways. Through multiple friendly competitions, cities across the country participated in FAFSA Completion Challenges that showed some of these approaches. Most recently, Mesa (Arizona) Public Schools and Denton (Texas) Independent School District brought home prizes for their use of peer coaching and external FAFSA completion experts, respectively.[13] Some of the key lessons for city leaders, easily adaptable to district and school leaders, include:

- Leverage your resources in ways that allow each partner organization to play to its strengths by identifying strategies that key partners are already successfully using.
- Build a community calendar that shows all of the FAFSA completion events being held in your city so that students and their families can identify the events most convenient to them in terms of time and location.
- Use the fall term to raise awareness about the FAFSA, and assist students who are already college-bound. In winter and spring, target individuals who may need more assistance, and provide one-on-one support throughout the financial aid process.
- Engage and support a cadre of individuals who can undertake the time-intensive, one-on-one support required to help students navigate the FAFSA process. In addition to high school counselors and college access professionals, postsecondary financial aid and admissions staff, community volunteers, and retired counselors may all be willing to contribute, although ongoing training and oversight is needed.
- Set clear goals and consider setting up a local competition with incentives for schools, counselors, and/or students to spur enthusiasm for engaging in FAFSA completion efforts.[14]

Other suggested approaches include implementing a district-level FAFSA completion requirement for high school graduation. When implemented thoughtfully, this policy can signal to students and families the importance of exploring financial aid for a postsecondary pathway.[15] Additionally, districts and schools should ask policymakers at the state level (either in the legislature or in the state education agency) for student-level FAFSA completion data. These data are made available to states through the Student Aid Internet Gateway and can be passed through to districts and schools. Additionally, partner

[12] https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/high_school_and_beyond/2018/12/why_dont_students_apply_for_financial_aid.html

[13] https://www.ncan.org/news/470952/5-Cities-Receive-Awards-for-FAFSA-Completion-Challenge-Efforts.htm

[14] https://kresge.org/library/report-money-doesnt-grow-trees

[15] https://edsource.org/2019/a-novel-idea-for-california-requiring-students-to-fill-out-financial-aid-forms/619373

community-based organizations that have been properly vetted can also benefit from access to these data to incorporate into their advising efforts.

Questions to Ask

- What are our district's/school's current FAFSA completion activities? Which of these can be converted to virtual delivery?
- What percent of our high school seniors completed the FAFSA last academic year? What is our target for the upcoming academic year?
- What were the FAFSA completion statuses of our seniors last academic year? (FAFSA not started, FAFSA submitted but not processed, FAFSA submitted successfully, selected for verification, Student Aid Report received)
- Are there community partners I could draw on/train to advance our FAFSA completion efforts?

Resources

- NCAN's FAFSA Resource Library - NCAN identified key resources for the major areas all communities should address when creating or strengthening a FAFSA completion initiative. These major areas include:
  - Laying the groundwork for FAFSA completion and identifying/engaging partners.
  - Guiding students through the FAFSA completion process, as well as all that comes after the form is completed.
  - Training partners to understand why FAFSA completion is important, as well as how to help students and families through the process.
  - Communicating with students and families through effective messaging and the appropriate communications vehicles.
  - Accessing and using student-level FAFSA completion data to better target your FAFSA completion efforts.
- Form Your Future's "The Guide" – NCAN's easy-to-follow guide clearly explains the FAFSA process and answers the most common questions from students and parents from low-income backgrounds. The Form Your Future website also includes state-by-state FAFSA completion resources (for students and families) and "Six Things to Do After Filing the FAFSA" (for students and families) in both English and Spanish.
- NCAN's E-Learning for College Access and Success: NCAN has two e-learning courses, FAFSA Completion 101 and FAFSA Completion 201, both developed by uAspire, that are useful for getting staff and volunteers ready to help students and families complete the FAFSA. These resources are free for NCAN members, and $119 each for non-members.
- The Federal Student Aid Information Center operates both a live chat and phone help line for students and families. FSA also has its own guide to Filling Out the FAFSA Form.
- "The Parent's Guide to Filling Out the FAFSA® Form" – Parents completing the FAFSA for their children can follow these eight steps via Federal Student Aid.

- These FAFSA completion videos may help students and families complete the FAFSA without the need for additional assistance. Districts and schools should be prepared for additional questions, but these walk-throughs may answer many of them:
  - Full 2020-21 FAFSA Walk-through – UtahFutures
  - Completing the FAFSA 2020-21 (English version) – Trellis Company
  - Completing the FAFSA 2020-21 (Spanish version) – Trellis Company

As districts and schools pivot to virtual advising, they should consider these social media strategies for spreading the word about FAFSA. There are tips and tricks here that can be adapted to use existing social media accounts and practices to get the word out about financial aid.

4. Examine current activities around fall milestones, and pivot to virtual where possible.

NCAN knows the fall is a busy time in districts and schools. It is also a busy time on the postsecondary milestone calendar. Many students conduct their college searches, build their college lists, and receive advising, especially around postsecondary fit and match, in the fall. Additionally, many students, especially seniors, take college admissions exams in the fall.

The three previously-discussed steps are both specific and tactical approaches to assist students with staying on a postsecondary pathway. This last action is broader and asks district and school leaders to zoom out and consider their college and career advising in general this fall.

Some of the fall activities above adapt well, if not perfectly, to a virtual format. For example, there are myriad college search platforms freely available to students (some include College Raptor, College Greenlight, the College Board's Big Future, and the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard). These are not a 1:1 replacement for the guidance of a school counselor or other adviser, but they help students explore postsecondary options at their own pace.

For many students, setting foot on college campuses will be difficult, if not impossible, this fall, but that doesn't mean students can't explore their prospective institutions. There are more options than ever for virtual campus tours via sites like CampusReel (which provides walkthroughs from students), YouVisit, and the very-directly-named CampusTours.com. These sites can help students get a feel for the campus without leaving their homes, but they can also double as group activities. Scheduling a group viewing of a virtual campus tour (through virtual conference software and screen-sharing) and then a discussion afterward can be a valuable opportunity to help students digest what they saw, discuss what they liked or disliked, and answer resulting questions.

Students often receive advising from school counselors in the fall, and the in-person delivery of that advising has been upended. Virtual delivery of services has been on the minds of professionals across the education field since March. Virtual advising has a lot of moving parts that, frankly, most districts and schools just have not had much of a reason to think through before. Fortunately, the College Advising Corps recently released a virtual advising guide that is required reading for those helping students move to a postsecondary pathway. The guide covers key topics like technology (e.g., communications platforms and tools), virtual caseload management, outreach and engagement strategies, and reaching students with limited technology access.

One area where the shift to virtual does not currently seem likely is college admissions exam testing. SAT and ACT administration is up in the air for the fall. But as possible, districts and schools should consider fleshing out testing plans for seniors, even if their schools aren't open for instruction. Those plans should address questions like school access protocols (e.g., temperature and personal protective equipment [PPE] checks), budgeting for pre- and post-exam cleaning costs, recruitment and provision of proctors (while keeping in mind additional proctors will be needed because of the need to have fewer students per classroom), and the supply and provision of PPE for students and proctors. Although NACAC reports that more than 1,400 postsecondary institutions are going test-optional, at least temporarily,[16] many institutions still have not made such an announcement. This is an opportunity for district and school leaders to talk to the postsecondary institutions to which their students most often matriculate to see if they will consider going test-optional (or test-blind). District and school personnel should continue to follow the College Board and ACT for updates related to test administration this fall.

Questions to Ask

- Which of our current college and career-related activities can we successfully shift to be virtual?
- For those activities where moving to virtual isn't possible, which steps do we need to take to administer them safely in person?
- How can I engage students and families around virtual activities through group viewing and discussion?
- Can we harness advisory periods and/or asynchronous learning time to provide opportunities to explore college and career readiness activities?
- Who needs to be involved to flesh out plans for in-person activities that will not shift well to virtual administration?

Resources

- College Advising Corps' Virtual Advising Guide – This comprehensive guide walks K-12 districts and schools and community-based partners through a wide variety of aspects of providing virtual college advising to students. From preparation to execution, this tactical document will be invaluable for those making the shift from their in-person practices.
- ECMC: "Freshman−senior year student checklists" – As high school students pursue a number of postsecondary milestones with less assistance than they would normally receive, these checklists can help students stay on track and understand what they need to be doing.
- Puget Sound College & Career Network: Family Engagement – Family engagement will be key to student success this academic year. This collection of resources shows approaches that have been effective in the Puget Sound region (in Washington) and links to other examples from the field.
- Become an SAT Test Center / Become an ACT Test Center – Although the process for becoming a testing center will likely look different this year than in past years, having students

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[16] https://www.nacacnet.org/news--publications/newsroom/test-optional-means-test-optional/

sit for their college admissions exam in a familiar environment (either during the school day or outside of school hours) can be helpful to them.

Conclusion

These evidence-based practices and policies draw on the experience of NCAN members and their partners across the country who are working hard every day to assist students not only through this difficult time but beyond and into broader postsecondary success. The burdens faced by the education field will be heavy this academic year, but NCAN's hope is that this guide lightens the load by helping districts and schools think about how to optimize processes in which many of them are already engaging.

Thank you for your interest in transforming students' postsecondary pathways!

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