

# IMMEDIATE NEXT STEPS FOR HELPING HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS TRANSITION TO A 2-/4-YEAR COLLEGE OR CERTIFICATE PROGRAM

## 5 Actions for Districts and Schools to Take *Right Now*

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The National College Attainment Network (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 in postsecondary advising, financial aid, and navigating the postsecondary process, and they work in communities of all shapes and sizes.

The COVID-19 pandemic is putting immense strain on districts, schools, students, families, and all the stakeholders connected to them. **This resource is aimed at district and school leaders looking for the clearest, most concrete ways to keep students on a postsecondary pathway after they graduate high school**. Research shows that students who enroll immediately after high school are more likely to graduate from college<sup>1</sup> and how equity gaps in postsecondary outcomes according to students' family income, race, and ethnicity are persistent across the country.<sup>2</sup> Recent surveys show **students are reconsidering their postsecondary plans** for next academic year.<sup>3</sup>

During the Great Recession, many people enrolled in a postsecondary pathway based on the job market's weakness. Those without any postsecondary education fared particularly poorly after the Great Recession.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, a similarly weak job market looms now with unemployment soaring and the economy in stasis, and students will again likely choose a postsecondary pathway rather than test the job market. College completion rates vary widely – not all institutions give a student the same likelihood of success.

**This resource provides a rationale, questions to ask, key next steps, and the best available resources for five actions districts and schools can take to improve students' chances of postsecondary success in the next academic year.** NCAN welcomes the chance to provide guidance and feedback to school districts on their efforts in this area.

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<sup>1</sup> Niu, S., & Tienda, M. (2013). Delayed enrollment and college plans: Is there a postponement penalty? *The Journal of Higher Education*, 84(1), 1-26. doi:10.1353/jhe.2013.0007.

<sup>2</sup> National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2019). High school benchmarks 2019: National college progression rates. [https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019\\_HSBenchmarksReport\\_FIN\\_04OCT19.pdf](https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019_HSBenchmarksReport_FIN_04OCT19.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> St. Amour, M. (2020). "Survey: Prospective students rethink the fall." *Inside Higher Ed*. April 7, 2020. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/07/survey-prospective-students-rethink-fall>

<sup>4</sup> Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. (2016). America's divided recovery: College haves and have-nots. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Americas-Divided-Recovery-web.pdf>

## 1. Conduct a Senior Exit Survey Now

**Here's Why:** To help students succeed after high school, understand where they are now and what they need next. Many districts and schools issue senior surveys to gather contact information and understand students' postsecondary intention (college, career, military, etc.). That information (and more) will be helpful in shaping the supports seniors receive between now and graduation.

### Questions to Ask:

- What is the most current update we have about seniors' postsecondary aspirations and plans?
- How will the supports we provide to students differ based on what we learn from those data?
- What resources can we provide to students to maintain their postsecondary aspirations?
- Do we have partners that can help support students? Who are they and how can they help?

### Key Steps:

- Collect (either from existing data systems or a survey) student-level data on the following indicators:
  - Student's postsecondary intention (2- or 4-year college or university [specific institutions are even more useful; see summer melt], certificate or workforce credential program, career/workforce, military, other)
  - Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion status (FAFSA not started, FAFSA submitted but not processed, FAFSA submitted successfully, selected for verification, Student Aid Report received)
  - (If applicable in your state) State financial aid application status
  - Does the student still need to complete any college admissions applications? To where?
  - List of college/university decisions by student (accepted, waitlisted, denied)
  - Has the student made a final choice about where to attend?
- Ensure school counselors and all other personnel engaged in postsecondary advising have both access to this data and a process in place for updating it as students are contacted and new information is obtained.
- Convene all relevant personnel and partners to get on the same page about how you will support students between now and graduation.

### Best Resources:

NCAN members representing both school districts and partner organizations generously shared the senior exit surveys below. These are useful examples for creating a new senior exit survey or refining an existing one.

- [Broward County \(Florida\) Public Schools](#)

- [I Know I Can \(Columbus, Ohio\)](#)
- [College Now Greater Cleveland](#)

## 2. Focus on FAFSA Completion

**Here's Why:** FAFSA completion is [strongly associated](#) with immediate postsecondary enrollment following high school graduation. After March 13, the number of FAFSAs completed by high school seniors from the class of 2020 sharply declined compared to last academic year. There is a lot of uncertainty around postsecondary decisions. That uncertainty is not just COVID-19-related but also connected to concerns about paying for college and not being aware of available financial aid, both of which are common for first-generation students. 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.

### Questions to Ask:

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

### Key Steps:

- Understand current FAFSA completion rates (schoolwide, districtwide, and by student, if possible).
- (If not already receiving this information) Sign agreement with state to receive student-level FAFSA completion data passed through from Federal Student Aid. This process varies by state, but nearly all states make these data available to districts and schools.
- Inventory current FAFSA completion practices with district/school counseling staff, and identify which can continue virtually.
- Brainstorm a list of external partners with capacity to supplement FAFSA completion services for students and families; if those partnerships already exist, brainstorm with them how to provide continuity of services by shifting supports to be virtual.

### Best Resources:

- [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 to answer 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 providing 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.

### 3. Decode Financial Aid Offers and Compare Costs

**Here’s Why:** For students attending a college or university, financial aid offers, sometimes called award letters, are a critical component of deciding where to go. For students to make the best postsecondary decision, they need guidance about what their financial aid offers actually mean.

#### Questions to Ask:

- What is our district’s/school’s current approach to financial aid offer advising?
- What avenues do we have for collecting students’ financial aid offers virtually? How can we help students send these in?
- What are the right tools, platforms, or approaches to adopt to help students and families compare their aid offers?

#### Key Steps:

- Understand the state of seniors’ current acceptances. Who was accepted? To where?
- Compare your list of students who submitted admissions applications with those students who have submitted a FAFSA to make sure that they overlap and there are no college applicants who

haven't applied for federal financial aid. Review Student Aid Reports to ensure students have submitted their FAFSA to all colleges on their lists, especially to the colleges where they have been admitted.

- Survey accepted students to ask if they would like help understanding their financial aid offer(s). Some may not, which will reduce the number of contacts staff need to make. To normalize the practice of getting help understanding financial aid offers, share the percentage of students who have gotten help (e.g. Post on social media – “76% of high school seniors have scheduled their financial aid offer appointment. Have you? Click here to set up a time to chat!”)
- Adopt a comparison tool and map out a process for walking students and families through their financial aid offer(s).
- Brainstorm external partners with capacity to supplement aid offer review services for students and families.
- Keep notes in a centralized place about assisted students and families, especially with regard to any needed follow-up once they consider the aid offer comparison.
- Keep students informed about any local/regional scholarship opportunities and provide assistance for completing/submitted these applications.

### Best Resources:

- [NCAN E-Learning Course](#): Interpreting Award Letters and Understanding Affordability (with the Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis). Free for NCAN members; \$59 for non-members.
- ECMC: “Make Your Decision Worksheet” – When financial aid offers arrive, students need to carefully consider their options and select the types of aid and school that are the best fit for them. This worksheet will help students and families choose the right school, guide them through the final steps for receiving financial aid, and help them financially prepare for college. Available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).
- NerdWallet: [“How to Read a Financial Aid Award Letter”](#)

## 4. Navigate Decision Deadlines

**Here's Why:** May 1 is traditionally National Decision Day for students to make their college commitments. Committing on or before May 1 ensures that a student's place in the fall is secure. But institutions across the country are shifting decision deadlines as both they and students face uncertainty in the fall. Students need support to ensure they make their decision on revised deadlines and to know what the implications are of committing to a college.

### Questions to Ask:

- How many of my students have already made a commitment to an institution? How many more will need to make a commitment?

- How can we celebrate National Decision Day virtually for seniors who are planning to matriculate?
- What is the best way to connect students and families with school counselors if they need advice navigating their enrollment decision? Do we need to set up a system for scheduling and hosting meetings? What does the process look like for meeting virtually?
- What process will students follow to confirm to which college(s) final transcripts should be sent? How will the process of sending those transcripts change for school counselors?
- Will your district increase the number of summer hours for school counselors? What will this look like and what services will they provide?

### Key Steps:

- Look at the institutions where students are most often matriculating (e.g., top 10, from National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data or other data sources), and map out key dates and deadlines for those institutions.
- Contact your local institutions of higher education (where students are most likely to matriculate) to determine the types of outreach they are doing for their applicants. How can you work together to deliver this important messaging?
- Help students investigate and understand if they are eligible for a housing deposit waiver from their institution of choice.

### Best Resources:

- The National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC) is maintaining a [College Admission Status Update](#) that serves as a central resource for information about changes in college admission events, deposit dates, and more as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. This searchable, filterable tool is a good place to start to understand deadline changes. The [Admissions Community Cultivating Equity & Peace Today \(ACCEPT\) Group](#) also has an updated list of colleges that have changed their deposit deadlines.
- Reach Higher and Better Make Room invite schools and communities to celebrate College Signing Day, on May 1 and beyond. [Access the College Signing Day toolkit and register your event.](#)
- [SwiftStudent](#) is a new, free resource that helps students understand the financial aid appeal process and assists them with writing a financial aid appeal letter to their postsecondary institution. Students and families who are now facing a different economic situation than they reported when they filed their FAFSA should start here to learn about their next steps.

## 5. Combat Summer Melt

**Here's Why:** Summer melt occurs when a student who is accepted to a postsecondary institution fails to enroll or attend in the fall, for any number of reasons. Financial, family, and workforce circumstances all can get in the way of a student arriving on campus even when they've made a commitment to do so. Summer melt is one of the most studied phenomena in the college access and success field, and there are proven strategies for supporting students from high school graduation to postsecondary enrollment.

### Questions to Ask:

- What does our district/school currently do to prevent summer melt, if anything? How do we normally follow up with students over the summer? What is the current state of those activities for this year's senior class?
- What staff are available and willing to work extra hours over the summer to support students? What provisions/stipulation does our union contract make for these kinds of additional hours? What funds are available to pay school counselors and other advisers to provide this support?
- For our district/school, is the best approach to combat summer melt in-person (i.e., drop-in centers, summer office hours), virtual (text messaging campaigns), or a hybrid model?
- Are there outreach efforts being made by colleges and universities to provide transition assistance to their applicants/our students?
- Is there a specific person at most-attended colleges and universities who I can connect to students by sending an introductory email, making a phone call, or facilitating an e-intro via a virtual platform?

### Key Steps:

- Recruit staff willing to work summer hours either in-person or virtually.
- If pursuing a text messaging model, gather a list of student and parent phone numbers to enter into the text messaging platform.
- Secure content for text messaging and make a schedule (either from [existing sources](#) or develop in house).
- Identify a point person for the text messaging campaign and determine which platform or vendor you will use to manage the campaign ([Signal Vine](#) is a popular choice in the college access and success field).
- Whenever possible, send texts in English and the students' home language to ensure they understand the content of the message.
- Be prepared to make phone calls and send direct messages via social media to students who are not responsive to texts. **Important: Students/families need to grant permission for schools/districts to reach out to students through authorized channels with messages from authorized users. In all cases, follow district and school guidelines when communicating with students.**

- Look at the institutions where students are most often matriculating (e.g., top 10, from NSC data or other data sources) and map out key dates and deadlines for those institutions.
- Identify or develop a “next steps” checklist for seniors to include steps like: register for orientation, finish housing application/process, file financial aid appeals (if needed), etc.

## Best Resources:

- [NCAN’s Summer Melt Toolkit](#): This resource from NCAN is a good introduction to the concept of summer melt. It includes background information, different approaches to combating summer melt (virtual and non-virtual), and steps various stakeholders can take. Looking for a good place to start with practitioners? This is the perfect spot.
- For text messaging summer melt campaigns, here are some platforms:
  - [Hustle](#) has a whole use case section specifically for recruiting students to college that is adaptable by K-12 to keeping students on a postsecondary pathway.
  - [Remind](#) is a platform used by a number of schools and teachers. A free Remind account lets you create up to 10 classes with up to 150 people each, but accounts are available for districtwide messaging. Includes translation.
  - [Signal Vine](#) is a text messaging platform that engages students and parents, and this platform has extensive experience with conducting summer melt prevention campaigns. NCAN recently hosted [a webinar with Signal Vine](#) where they walked through their platform.
- [Signal Vine – “Communicating with Your Students During the Coronavirus”](#) – “Students and staff have questions and you want to be proactive. To help, we put together a guide of preventative measures to take as well response management tips when communicating with your students during the Coronavirus. Download the full guide with 10 message examples.”

## Contact NCAN – We’re Here to Help

We hope this guide is useful to districts and schools as they move quickly to provide students with the best postsecondary supports possible. NCAN’s mission is to close equity gaps in the postsecondary outcomes of underrepresented students. If we can provide you with additional support, connect you with one of our members across the country, or address any comments or questions, please contact an NCAN staff member below.

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