

# Increasing FAFSA Completion in Arizona: A Business Playbook



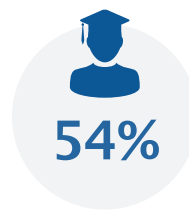
## **i** What is FAFSA?

FAFSA is an acronym that stands for Free Application for Federal Student Aid. Colleges and universities use this form to determine eligibility for federal, state, and college-sponsored financial aid, including grants, educational loans, and work-study programs. Nationwide, FAFSA provides over 13 million students with nearly \$120 billion for aid annually in grant, work-study, and loan funds to help pay for college or career education. Arizona postsecondary institutions and the federal government use FAFSA data to determine which students get financial aid, and how much they'll get.

The intent of this brief is to educate corporate and community leaders about the importance of the FAFSA and provide information for businesses who want to help support students and families in completing this critical form.

**Arizona currently ranks 49th in the number of high school seniors who complete the FAFSA each year** — an alarming statistic given that completing the FAFSA is one of the strongest predictors that a student will pursue further education post-high school. This past year alone 54% of Arizona high school seniors did not complete a FAFSA, leaving over \$55 million of Pell Grant money on the

table. Your support to increase FAFSA completion rates will improve postsecondary access for all students, including those of your employees, making it more likely that Arizona and its students will achieve their postsecondary goals. Achieve60AZ, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, community-based alliance of over 150 member organizations and more than 40 municipalities, established goals in education and workforce alignment necessary for Arizona to have a thriving economy. As its North Star Goal, Achieve60AZ has set forth a goal of 60% postsecondary attainment by 2030. **When Arizona reaches its goal of 60% attainment this increases the likelihood that your business will not just survive, but thrive, will increase.**



Arizona high school seniors who did not complete a FAFSA



Pell Grant money left unused



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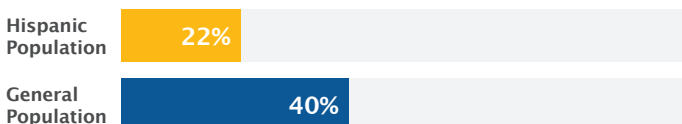
## **...** Why Is It Important for the Business Community to Get Involved?

### Issue

Arizona is at a critical juncture in determining its economic future. **Currently, only 40% of Arizona's population holds an associate degree or higher. For the Hispanic population, Arizona's fastest-growing demographic, this proportion is even lower (22%). Yet, according to the Georgetown Public Policy Institute, it is estimated that more than 68% of current Arizona jobs require at least some amount of postsecondary education.**

Considering the importance of attaining a higher education, a critical question the state must answer is: **How can Arizona increase postsecondary opportunities for its residents to further economic prosperity and viability?**

### Arizona Population With Associate Degree or Higher



One very effective way to increase economic opportunities is to increase the proportion of high school students who pursue a higher education post-graduation. Unfortunately, over the last seven years, the college-attendance rate in Arizona has remained relatively flat. For example, in 2017, Arizona's postsecondary enrollment rate was 52.6%, while in 2013 the rate was 53.5%. Moreover, while postsecondary enrollment rates among Hispanic, Native American, and African American graduates improved between 2013 and 2017, they fell far behind those of Asian and white graduates (ABOR College Enrollment Report, 2018). **FAFSA completion is one of the strongest predictors of postsecondary enrollment**, which is why it is such an important lever in our efforts to achieve Arizona's postsecondary attainment goals.

## How Can the Business Community Get Involved?

**Participate** in the [Arizona FAFSA Challenge](#), a statewide initiative to increase FAFSA completion among Arizona high school seniors. Of the 429 participating high schools in the 2019–20 Arizona FAFSA Challenge, only 46% of high school seniors completed the FAFSA. The goal of the challenge is to increase the FAFSA completion rate each school year to ultimately achieve a target goal of 78% by the year 2030.

Like all good strategies, planning and executing are key in creating successful outcomes. Through a combination of awareness building, information sharing, timely reminders, and focused assistance for families and students regarding financial aid, stakeholders can see an improvement in postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and ultimately completion.

**Based on our review of state and business efforts and existing practices, we recommend that those seeking to engage and improve FAFSA completion rates incorporate the following FOUR steps into their work:**

### Commit to a Company-wide or Departmental Goal

Focus in on ONE thing and do it with mastery.

*Samples of goals may include, but are not limited to:*

- All employees with juniors or seniors in high school will be invited to a Financial Aid & FAFSA informational session/webinar – goal of 50% attendance
- Identify a local high school or a high school near one of your clients – set a goal to partner with that high school to support its FAFSA completion efforts
- Set a goal to have 20% of your workforce trained on how to complete a FAFSA
- Share with your clients/business partners a goal to jointly attend a FAFSA training and sponsor a local high school together with at least one client or business partner each year
- Interdepartmental competition for any of the above

### Plan Your Involvement

Identify one or more “best practices” that increases probability of goal attainment:

- Promote FAFSA Resources to Families
  - Various local organizations provide free resources for students and families with completing the FAFSA. Consider promoting these organizations through internal newsletters, intranet sites, and other forms of communication. Organizations include: [Arizona College Access Network](#), [Access ASU](#), [Be A Leader Foundation](#), and [College Depot](#).
- Sponsor a Local High School FAFSA Event
  - Promote and underwrite (fund) one or more virtual or in-person FAFSA workshops at a local high school, providing students and families an opportunity to learn and navigate the student financial aid process.
  - Provide employee volunteers and/or incentives to support participation in FAFSA completion events held during school hours, after school, in the evening, or on the weekend for high school seniors and their families.



- Volunteer
  - Encourage employees to volunteer virtually or at a local high school or community-based FAFSA events to assist students in filling out and completing FAFSA.
  - Below are a few examples of strategic partners who have volunteer opportunities:
    - The Arizona Commission for Postsecondary Education – [collegegoal.az.gov/campaign-volunteers](http://collegegoal.az.gov/campaign-volunteers)
    - Be A Leader Foundation – [bealeaderfoundation.org](http://bealeaderfoundation.org)
    - Valley of the Sun United Way – [volunteer.vsuw.org/need/](http://volunteer.vsuw.org/need/)
- Host a Company-wide FAFSA Event
  - Provide information and professional assistance to employees with high school students seeking college financial aid. Hold a FAFSA completion event (either in-person or virtual) during regular business hours or after hours for employees' families and their seniors. Connect with the following organizations for help planning the event:
    - The Arizona Commission for Postsecondary Education – [acpe@azhighered.gov](mailto:acpe@azhighered.gov)
    - Be A Leader Foundation – [info@bealeaderfoundation.org](mailto:info@bealeaderfoundation.org)
  - Identify employee resource groups (ERGs) that have an interest in getting trained and could serve as volunteers and/or partner with one of the organizations listed above.
- Offer incentives to employees, students, or families when students complete a FAFSA
 

*Samples of incentives could include, but are not limited to:*

  - Scholarships/tuition dollars
  - Free tickets to sporting events
  - Monetary gift card(s)
  - Training/learning and development credit
  - Health savings account credit
  - Payroll-funded 529 plan/gift of college gift card
  - Cap and gown vouchers
  - School supplies, care packages, or dorm room gift baskets/backpacks
  - Free prom or homecoming tickets
  - Laptops

## Track Your Progress

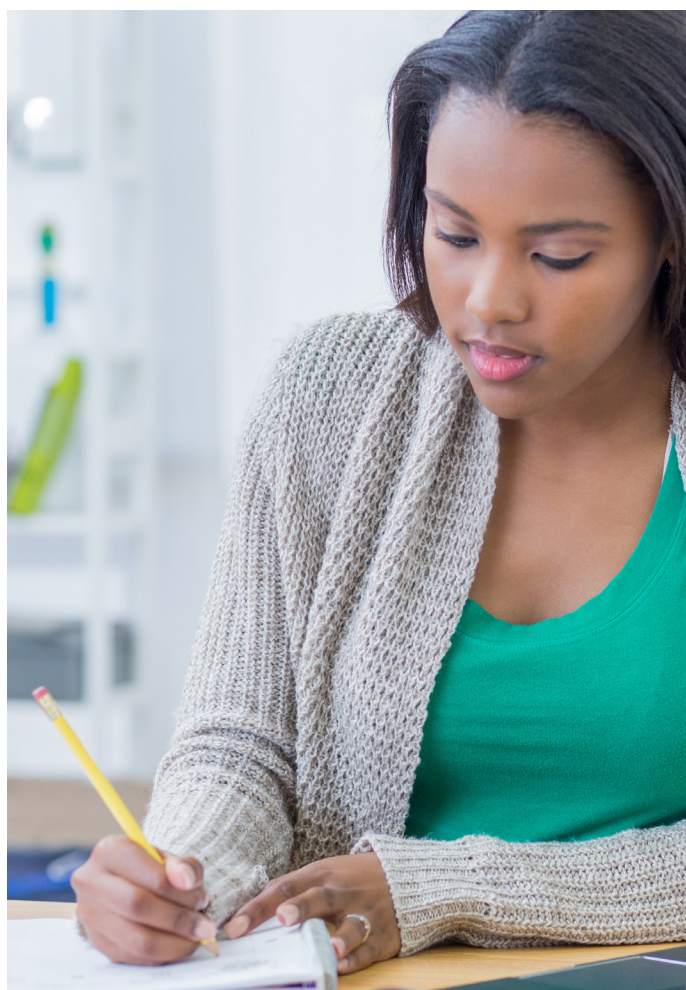
Assign an internal FAFSA Champion to support and manage your involvement. The Champion will motivate and engage participation and track progress of goal commitment. Seeing progress in real-time, just like in sports competitions, drives people's desire to win, and win together. Track the:

- Volunteer hours by employees or ERGs at FAFSA events
- Number of FAFSA events in which your organization has participated
- Number of employees whose students have completed the FAFSA

*Communicate results and celebrate progress. Game On!*

## Participate in a Professional FAFSA Training or Webinar

- The Arizona College Access Network (AzCAN) and the Arizona Commission for Postsecondary Education host free FAFSA training webinars for school counselors, teachers, and college access professionals during the fall and spring semesters. For more information visit: [fafsachallenge.az.gov](http://fafsachallenge.az.gov)
  - [Free FAFSA Training](#)



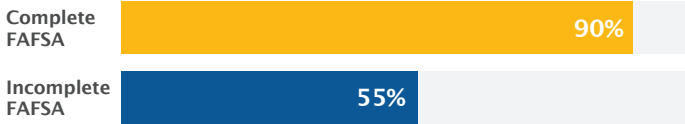
# ☰ Why Is FAFSA a Priority & What Is Its Impact?

## Priority

To remain competitive, businesses and community members must be able to develop and retain a talented workforce. To support this need, Arizona must continue to develop a workforce pool that produces employees who are agile and meet the qualifications of the 21st century economy. Students who obtain postsecondary educational degrees, certificates, or credentials can keep businesses on the cutting edge. In order to increase the number of students who receive credentials and advanced degrees, more students must enroll and, as mentioned, one mechanism that has a significant impact on enrollment is the completion of a FAFSA. Completing the FAFSA allows students to afford to attend school, resulting in a larger competitive and appropriately skilled workforce.

**There are benefits to employees as well.** Individuals who have a bachelor's degree are half as likely to be unemployed than individuals who have only a high school diploma. Additionally, people who have more education also have better health outcomes, access to health care, and are more civically engaged (CollegeBoard, 2005).

### Seniors Who Attend College Directly After High School

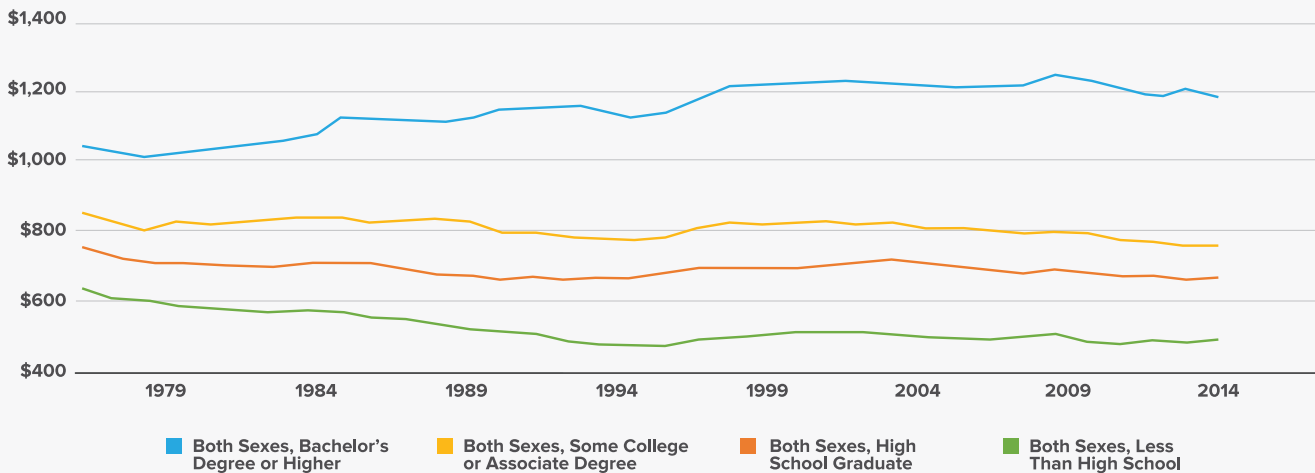


## Impact

We know that strategies focused on increasing FAFSA completion rates have a tremendous potential to increase postsecondary enrollment. Prior research out of the National Center for Education Statistics shows that **roughly 90% of high school seniors who complete the FAFSA attend college directly after high school**, compared with 55% of non-completers. Because of this strong association between FAFSA completion and college-going, many organizations and states have implemented FAFSA challenges or completion campaigns to increase the proportion of students going to college directly after high school. For example, the National College Access Network led a 2016–17 FAFSA completion challenge in 22 cities across the country. Overall, NCAN's grantees increased completion by 10% in two years (NCAN Why Invest in Increasing FAFSA).

In Arizona, enabling more graduates to attend and complete college has tremendous economic benefits for individuals and the state as a whole. In a recent report by College Success Arizona, Clive R. Belfield and Russell W. Rumbeger found that every additional bachelor's degree adds more than \$660,000 to the state's economy over an individual's lifetime. For the individual, this translates to higher wages and greater financial opportunities. According to the most recently reported data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, the median wages for a person in the United States with a high school diploma is \$712 a week. Comparatively, a person with an associate degree makes \$836 a week, while an individual with a bachelor's degree makes \$1,173 a week.

### Median Weekly Earnings in 2014 Dollars of People 25 Years and Older, by Educational Attainment and Gender, 1979–2014



## 🔍 Case Study on Best Practices

Join the growing list of organizations making a difference and helping increase FAFSA completion rates and postsecondary opportunities for students in Arizona! Employees across all these organizations have already taken the initiative to become trained FAFSA volunteers and have given of their time to a variety of schools and organizations.

Duncan Family Farms® (DFF) is a multi-regional certified organic farm with operations in Arizona, California, and Oregon. Owned and operated by fourth-generation Arizona farmers, DFF has committed to being a good neighbor and an integral part of the community. DFF also supports its 450 employees and their children — especially as it relates to pursuing higher education.

For the past six years, DFF has hosted an annual youth program that includes academic coaching, career assessments, one-on-one FAFSA assistance, scholarship applications, and more. They include this program as part of their HR benefits, informing applicants and new hires about how employees can sponsor their children, as well as any other children in their household. DFF highlights the program during its open enrollment season and at an annual virtual informational meeting each fall.

Since 2017, DFF has also awarded over \$6,000 in GAP scholarships — dollars that support students with unmet education financial need to cover fees, technology, leadership activities, and transportation costs. Since its inception, DFF youth scholars, including the class of 2020, have earned over \$90,000 in institutional and private scholarships — that's a combined total of \$100,000 to date!

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**\$6K**

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in total earned to date

**Join the growing number of companies who have already committed to increasing FAFSA completion!**



## About Impact Maker

Impact Maker is an initiative of Valley Leadership, launched in 2019 to provide a ready-to-go network of Arizonans to take on the most pressing issues facing our state, with the aim of creating short- and long-term change. Impact Teams are composed of members of the Valley Leadership network, community organizations with subject matter expertise and other key stakeholders who frame the issues, identify solutions, set goals and develop plans to take action and create change. There are currently five Impact Teams working in the areas of education, health, child well-being, jobs and the economy and the response to Covid-19. Learn more at [impactmakeraz.org](http://impactmakeraz.org).

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