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ASK BENJI TO EXPAND STATEWIDE TO BOOST FAFSA COMPLETION RATES

PHOENIX (May 11, 2021) – Today, the Arizona Department of Education announced that Project Benjamin, also known as Ask Benji, will receive \$1.5 million from ESSER II discretionary funding to expand the tool to serve students statewide.

Ask Benji is an artificial intelligence-powered chatbot that assists students in completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Benji delivers timely, personalized nudges, prompts and information via text messages to students across Arizona, including next steps for FAFSA completion, invitations to college readiness events by school, district or region, and general college-going information. Research indicates that text-based outreach increased timely enrollment for non-FAFSA completers by a statistically significant margin of 20 percentage points.

“On behalf of the partners, we are thrilled to be able to expand Ask Benji statewide,” said Richard Daniel, executive vice president and chief operating officer for College Success Arizona, Expect More Arizona and Achieve60AZ. “The expansion of Ask Benji comes at an important time when we’ve seen drops in FAFSA completion and college going due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This funding will enable our partnership to serve an additional 40,000 students over the next two years, with the goal of expanding access to postsecondary education through FAFSA completion.”



The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on FAFSA completion in Arizona: last year before the pandemic Arizona had a 46% FAFSA completion rate, which has fallen to 38% this year. For the class of 2020, seniors who were receiving messages and nudges from Ask Benji completed FAFSA at a rate of 60%, fourteen percentage points higher than the state average.

“Ask Benji is an innovative tool that has demonstrated promise to ensure that Arizona’s high school graduates have access to a postsecondary education and that COVID is not a barrier to entry,” said Edmundo Hidalgo, vice president, educational outreach partnerships at Arizona State University (ASU). “The expansion of Ask Benji will not only ensure greater access to higher education but will also help Arizona meet its ambitious goal of reaching 60% postsecondary attainment by 2030.”

The funding will be used to expand Ask Benji’s services statewide, enhance the chatbot to include new service features such as career interest and college application assistance, and provide support for community activities.

Ask Benji was launched in October 2019 as a partnership of ASU, College Success Arizona, Achieve60AZ, the Arizona Commission for Postsecondary Education, the Arizona College Access Network (AzCAN), Helios Education Foundation, Mesa Public Schools, Maricopa Community Colleges and Be a Leader Foundation.

About Achieve60AZ, College Success Arizona & Expect More Arizona

As of Feb. 1, 2021, Achieve60AZ, College Success Arizona and Expect More Arizona have pooled their resources and teams to become one organization. The enhanced organization will be renamed and rebranded later this year. We are working to advance a cohesive education agenda to reach the goals outlined in the Arizona Education Progress Meter and support the success of all Arizona children and adults along the education continuum, from early learning through postsecondary attainment. [Learn more.](#)

About Arizona State University

Arizona State University has developed a new model for the American Research University, creating an institution that is committed to access, excellence and impact. ASU measures itself by those it includes, not by those it excludes. As the prototype for a New American University, ASU pursues research that contributes to the public good, and ASU assumes major responsibility for the economic, social and cultural vitality of the communities that surround it.

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