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Arizona FAFSA Coalition Receives Grant Funding to Reverse COVID's Effect on College Enrollment

PHOENIX (May 7, 2021) – The Arizona FAFSA Coalition, a group of 13 partners dedicated to improving access to postsecondary options, has been awarded a \$50,000 grant as part of the National College Attainment Network (NCAN)'s effort to ensure the COVID-19 pandemic doesn't stop the high school classes of 2020 and 2021 from completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and pursuing their higher education goals.

Amid the economic, health and other impacts caused by the pandemic, students of color and students from low-income backgrounds are experiencing the largest declines in FAFSA completion and postsecondary enrollment. To address these historic and inequitable disruptions, NCAN made funding available to amplify state-level FAFSA completion initiatives and enhance local postsecondary advising and matriculation support in select metropolitan areas.

"Navigating the postsecondary process was not easy for most students and families before the pandemic, and it is especially difficult for those coming from first generation low-income backgrounds," said Roxanne Dewyer-Murphy, director of statewide initiatives and the Arizona College Access Network, a program of College Success Arizona. "College affordability is a key indicator of whether a student decides to further his or her education, making the FAFSA a critical step toward college attainment."

With this grant, the Arizona FAFSA Coalition will be able to streamline, elevate and intensify the current tiered, systems approach to FAFSA completion as well as consistently leverage student-level FAFSA completion data to inform statewide support efforts. The funding will enhance three major strategies: raising awareness statewide, expanding the Ask Benji chatbot with specific intervention measures, and one-on-one assistance for students and families using data-informed outreach efforts.

"We know that FAFSA completion has a direct and significant correlation to increased postsecondary enrollment," said Kaitlin Harrier, education policy advisor to Arizona Governor Doug Ducey. "The purpose of our collective efforts is to continue to bring awareness and focus to this simple, but important fact - resulting in more Arizona high school students pursuing a postsecondary pathway that will lead them into the career of the choice and the quality of life they so richly deserve."

The overarching goal of the grant is to raise FAFSA completion rates among high school seniors for the graduating classes of 2021 and 2020. Specifically, Arizona aims to increase the current FAFSA completion rate to 45 percent by September 2021 with the help of this grant funding.

“Each year, students leave millions of dollars of free money on the table because they did not complete the FAFSA,” said Julie Sainz, project director for the Arizona FAFSA Challenge. “We want all students and families to know that the FAFSA is a resource that can assist them to pay for a postsecondary education, which includes a four-year university, community college, vocational school or even a certificate program.”

Arizona is among the states with the lowest FAFSA completion rate in the nation. It currently ranks 49th with a little over 34 percent of high school seniors completing the FAFSA this school year.

“As students gain higher education, the probability for employment rises. Students and adults with a degree or industry training after high school increase our economic growth with their earnings, their buying power and their ability to give back in a philanthropic way,” added Andrea Glenn, postsecondary coordinator at the Arizona Department of Education.

To enhance statewide FAFSA completion efforts, the group launched a new, streamlined support form for the Class of 2020 and Class of 2021, which can be found here: azfafsa.org. Students and families can [sign-up for 1:1 appointments](#) with an expert to get help completing their FAFSA. The webpage also houses collective resources available to assist students and families from across the state complete their FAFSA.

About the Arizona FAFSA Coalition

The Arizona FAFSA Coalition has worked collaboratively since 2016 to increase FAFSA completion among high school seniors and is comprised of the Arizona College Access Network (AzCAN), Arizona Commission for Postsecondary Education, Arizona FAFSA Challenge, Arizona Department of Education, Access ASU, Achieve60AZ, Ask Benji, Helios Education Foundation, Be A Leader Foundation, Northern Arizona College Resource Center, Metropolitan Education Commission, Arizona Governor’s Office on Education, and Valley Leadership’s Impact Maker Education Team. This group meets regularly to share best practices for increasing FAFSA completion around the state; engage with high school, district, county and statewide data; and brainstorm solutions to FAFSA challenges. It pilots and implements innovative practices to best support high school seniors, families and educators who need resources to successfully complete a FAFSA application.

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