REL Appalachia Ask A REL Response

Family and Community Engagement, Postsecondary
October 2018

Question:

What practices or strategies help to increase FAFSA® reapplications among enrolled postsecondary students and their families?

Response:

Thank you for your request to our REL Reference Desk regarding evidence-based information about increasing Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) reapplications among enrolled postsecondary students. Ask A REL is a collaborative reference desk service provided by the 10 Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) that, by design, functions much in the same way as a technical reference library. Ask A REL provides references, referrals, and brief responses in the form of citations in response to questions about available education research.

Following an established REL Appalachia research protocol, we searched for peer-reviewed articles and other research reports on the challenge of enrolled students not submiting reapplications and ways to encourage them to reapply for federal student aid using the FAFSA®. We focused on identifying resources that specifically addressed practices and strategies to increase FAFSA® reapplications among students who are enrolled at postsecondary institutions. The sources included ERIC and other federally funded databases and organizations, research institutions, academic research databases, and general Internet search engines. For more details, please see the methods section at the end of this document.

The research team did not evaluate the quality of the resources provided in this response; we offer them only for your reference. Also, the search included the most commonly used research databases and search engines to produce the references presented here, but the references are not necessarily comprehensive, and other relevant references and resources may exist. References are listed in alphabetical order, not necessarily in order of relevance.

References

Bird, K., & Castleman, B. L. (2016). Here today, gone tomorrow? Investigating rates and patterns of financial aid renewal among college freshmen. *Research in Higher Education, 57*(4), 395–422. Abstract retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1097465; full text available at https://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/25_Bird_Financial_Aid_Renewal.pdf

From the abstract: "College affordability continues to be a top concern among prospective students, their families, and policy makers. Prior work has demonstrated that a significant share of prospective students forgo financial aid because they did not complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA); recent federal policy efforts have focused on supporting students and their families to successfully file the FAFSA. Despite the fact that students must refile the FAFSA every year to maintain their aid eligibility, there are many fewer efforts to help college students renew their financial aid each year. While prior research has documented the positive effect of financial aid on persistence, we are not aware of previous studies that have documented the rate at which freshman year financial aid recipients successfully refile the FAFSA, particularly students who are in good academic standing and appear well-poised to succeed in college. The goal of our paper is to address this gap in the literature by documenting the rates and patterns of FAFSA renewal. Using the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, we find that roughly 16% of freshmen Pell Grant recipients in good academic standing do not refile a FAFSA for their sophomore year. Even among Pell Grant recipients in good academic standing who return for sophomore year, nearly 10% do not refile a FAFSA. Consequently, we estimate that these non-refilers are forfeiting $3,550 in federal student aid that they would have received upon successful FAFSA refiling. Failure to refile a FAFSA is strongly associated with students dropping out later in college and not earning a degree within six years. These results suggest that interventions designed to increase FAFSA refiling may be an effective way to improve college persistence for low-income students."

Castleman, B. L. (2017). *Behavioral insights for federal higher education policy*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED578890

From the abstract: "The federal role in higher education has grown over the past two decades, and now a new administration has the opportunity to strengthen policies that support students and their colleges and universities. To help inform these decisions, the Urban Institute convened a bipartisan group of scholars and policy advisers to write a series of memos highlighting some of the most critical issues in higher education and recommending policy solutions. This memo draws on behavioral science to offer low-cost changes the federal government could make—including simplifying the application for student aid and leveraging existing digital touch points with students—to help ensure academically capable students make it to graduation."

Castleman, B. L., & Page, L. C. (2014). *Freshman year financial aid nudges: An experiment to increase FAFSA renewal and college persistence.* (EdPolicyWorks Working Paper Series No. 29). Charlottesville, VA: EdPolicyWorks. Retrieved from https://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/29_Freshman_Year_Financial_Aid_Nudges.pdf; What Works Clearinghouse study review available at https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED550649

From the abstract: "While educators and policy makers have invested substantial resources to support high school seniors and their families to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), considerably less attention has been devoted to helping

students re-file their FAFSA each year they are in college. Yet, students need to renew the FAFSA annually to maintain their financial aid; among freshmen Pell Grant recipients in good academic standing, a substantial share does not successfully re-file their FAFSA. In this paper we investigate, through a randomized controlled trial design, the impact of a low-touch intervention in which we sent college freshman a series of personalized text message reminders related to FAFSA re-filing. The messages (1) provided information about where to obtain help with financial aid; (2) reminded students about important aid-related deadlines and require- ments; and (3) offered assistance on financial-aid related processes. The intervention cost approximately $5 per student served. The intervention produced large and positive effects among freshmen at community colleges. Specifically, text recipients at community colleges were nearly 12 percentage points more likely to persist into the fall of their sophomore year of college compared to community college freshmen who did not receive this outreach, and were almost 14 percentage points more likely to remain continuously enrolled through the spring of sophomore year. By contrast, the intervention did not improve sophomore year persistence among freshmen at four-year institutions, among whom the rate of persistence was already high."

Linkow, T., Gamse, B., Unlu, F., Bumgarner, E., Didricksen, H., Furey, J.,…Nichols, A. (2017). *The power of coaching: Highlights from the interim report on the impact of Success Boston's transition coaching on college success.* Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED582090

From the abstract: "The Success Boston initiative was launched in 2008 to improve Boston public high school graduates' access to and success in college, particularly for members of underrepresented groups. This report summarizes results from the second of three reports examining the classes of 2013 and 2014 and examines whether and how coaching affects students' short-term college outcomes. The study employs the strongest design possible to support causal claims about the effects of Success Boston Coaching (SBC) on students. Key findings include: (1) SBC-coached students are 11% more likely than non-coached students to persist into the second year of college, and are 21% more likely to persist into the third year of college than non-coached students; (2) the college grade point averages of SBC-coached students is 8% higher than that for non-coached students, and SBC-coached students spend 10% more time in good academic standing; and (3) coached students are 9% more likely to renew their FAFSA than non-coached students."

Additional Ask A REL Responses to Consult

Ask A REL Appalachia at SRI International. (2018). *What practices or strategies can help to increase FAFSA completion among low-income students and families?* Retrieved from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/appalachia/askarel/aar34.asp

Additional Organizations to Consult

Federal Student Aid: An Office of the U.S. Department of Education: https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/

From the website: "You must apply for federal student aid for every school year that you attend. To reapply, you should submit a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). If you submitted a FAFSA last year, and you are eligible to complete a Renewal FAFSA, you may choose to have most of the questions pre-filled with the information you provided. Simply updating the information for the new school year on a Renewal FAFSA may be faster. However, the Renewal FAFSA is available solely for your convenience. If you prefer to start fresh with a new FAFSA, you are free to do so."

National College Access Network (NCAN): http://www.collegeaccess.org/

From the website: "Our mission is to build, strengthen, and empower communities committed to college access and success so that all students, especially those underrepresented in postsecondary education, can achieve their educational dreams through a two- or four-year degree or high-quality certificate program…NCAN pursues four specific strategies, described below:

- Enhance the capacity of the college access and success field with high-quality data, innovative ideas, and accessible tools.
- Bolster the skills and competencies of college access and success leaders and practitioners through professional development.
- Advocate for improved college completion rates by amplifying a range of policy solutions and increasing member engagement.
- Foster relationships within communities and across sectors that support college access and success for underrepresented students."

Methods

Keywords and Search Strings

The following keywords and search strings were used to search the reference databases and other sources:

- FAFSA AND (re-appl* OR reappl* OR renew*) AND (practice* OR strateg* OR interven*)
- FAFSA AND (re-appl* OR reappl* OR renew*) AND (post-secondary OR postsecondary OR "post secondary")

Databases and Resources

We searched ERIC, a free online library of more than 1.6 million citations of education research sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), for relevant resources. Additionally, we

searched the academic database ProQuest, Google Scholar, and the commercial search engine Google.

Reference Search and Selection Criteria

In reviewing resources, Reference Desk researchers consider—among other things—these four factors:

- Date of the publication: Searches cover information available within the last ten years, except in the case of nationally known seminal resources.
- Reference sources: IES, nationally funded, and certain other vetted sources known for strict attention to research protocols receive highest priority. Applicable resources must be publicly available online and in English.
- Methodology: The following methodological priorities/considerations guide the review and selection of the references: (a) study types—randomized controlled trials, quasi experiments, surveys, descriptive data analyses, literature reviews, policy briefs, etc., generally in this order; (b) target population, samples (representativeness of the target population, sample size, volunteered or randomly selected), study duration, etc.; (c) limitations, generalizability of the findings and conclusions, etc.
- Existing knowledge base: Vetted resources (e.g., peer-reviewed research journals) are the primary focus, but the research base is occasionally slim or nonexistent. In those cases, the best resources available may include, for example, reports, white papers, guides, reviews in non-peer-reviewed journals, newspaper articles, interviews with content specialists, and organization websites.

Resources included in this document were last accessed on November 6, 2018. URLs, descriptions, and content included here were current at that time.