

Statewide FAFSA Completion Report

2020-21



September 2021

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Executive Summary

Improving the college/career readiness and postsecondary enrollment and graduation of Connecticut’s public school students has been a high priority of the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) for decades. Over the years, the CSDE has implemented several initiatives to further this work. These include adopting rigorous academic standards, implementing high-quality assessments aligned to those standards, notifying students about their potential for rigorous high school coursework, subsidizing the cost of Advanced Placement (AP) exams for students from low income families, valuing postsecondary readiness and enrollment indicators in the school accountability framework, and publicly reporting postsecondary enrollment, persistence, credit attainment, remediation rates, and graduation for individual high schools. More recently, the CSDE has also ramped up its efforts to educate students and families about the importance of filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) form. The grants, work-study, and loans that are offered as a direct result of filling out the FAFSA help make college more affordable, especially for historically underrepresented students, such as those from low-income, first-generation, and nonwhite families. All of these efforts aim to help students realize the many benefits of a postsecondary education, including higher lifetime earning potential and opportunities for personal and professional growth.

The CSDE’s first project to support districts’ FAFSA completion efforts involved providing student-level FAFSA completion data to authorized users in districts through EdSight Secure, the CSDE’s secure data portal. This information helped school counselors to closely monitor FAFSA completion and advance communication with their high school seniors about the benefits of postsecondary enrollment and the resources that are available.

In December 2020, Governor Ned Lamont announced [Connecticut’s first FAFSA Challenge](#). Modeled after the National College Attainment Network (NCAN) FAFSA Completion Challenge, the Connecticut FAFSA Challenge was designed to spark and support local creativity to increase FAFSA completion and postsecondary enrollment rates. Districts and schools developed plans to pilot new strategies to increase FAFSA completion during the 2020-21 school year.

In January 2021, Connecticut launched its first FAFSA Challenge, engaging 26 high schools across 16 school districts. Schools participating in the FAFSA Challenge increased FAFSA completion rates by an average of nearly four percentage points. By comparison, the statewide FAFSA completion rate increased by 0.3 percent and the country’s FAFSA completion rates declined by over four percent during the same period. Moreover, while the statewide FAFSA completion rate for some of our most vulnerable student groups changed little from 2020 to 2021, among Challenge schools, the FAFSA completion percentage for students with high needs

increased by nearly three percentage points, and the completion percentage for students eligible for free meals increased by nearly four percentage points. These early FAFSA Challenge results are promising and show that Connecticut's Challenge program is making a difference.

Introduction

The completion of the FAFSA is strongly associated with postsecondary enrollment. In fact, 90 percent of high school seniors who complete the FAFSA attend college directly from high school, compared to just 55 percent of FAFSA non-completers. Thousands of Connecticut students who are eligible for college aid fail to file the FAFSA each year; these students forego millions of dollars in financial aid that could support their postsecondary education.

The coronavirus pandemic disrupted many facets of our education system, and FAFSA completion was not spared. In Connecticut, FAFSA completions in October 2020 to December 2020 were down 16 percent compared to the same period in 2019. These declines were reflective of the challenging circumstances as students faced economic uncertainty, food and housing insecurity, and the stresses of fluid learning models. Still, Connecticut increased its efforts to improve the educational trajectory of its students and the economic futures of their families, communities, and the state of Connecticut overall.

In December 2020, Governor Lamont issued a challenge to all Connecticut school districts to increase by at least five percent their FAFSA completion rates among the Class of 2021. The statewide FAFSA Challenge aimed to strengthen postsecondary access and enrollment by raising FAFSA completion rates among high school seniors and advancing three overarching objectives:

1. **Improve Student Outcomes:** Support students in achieving their goals for college, career, and life success by addressing FAFSA completion as a core access milestone.
2. **Close Opportunity Gaps:** Promote access for all students by closing opportunity gaps for historically marginalized subgroups and school communities.
3. **Spark Innovation:** Support schools in pursuing creative ideas to promote FAFSA completion.

The partnership sought proposals for the FAFSA Completion Challenge from eligible Connecticut school districts based on their prior year's FAFSA completion rate, percentage of students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and grade 12 enrollment. This program was designed to help those districts in most need overcome the obstacles to completion while providing targeted support based on national best practices. In its first year, Connecticut's FAFSA Challenge provided additional support and resources to 26 high schools across 16 school districts.

Results

Connecticut's FAFSA completions for the first three months of the 2020-21 FAFSA cycle were down significantly compared to the same period in 2019-20. The introduction of the FAFSA Challenge put an increased focus on the importance of FAFSA completion, and the statewide completion rate rebounded by the end of the 2020-21 school year. Figure 1¹ shows a comparison between FAFSA completion percentages statewide and in FAFSA Challenge schools over the last two years. Statewide, the 2020-21 FAFSA completion percentage was 54.8 percent, a 0.3 percent increase over the previous year's completion rate. In Challenge schools, the 2020-21 FAFSA completion percentage was 44.9 percent, an increase of nearly four percentage points.

Figure 1: FAFSA Completion Percentages Statewide and in Challenge Schools

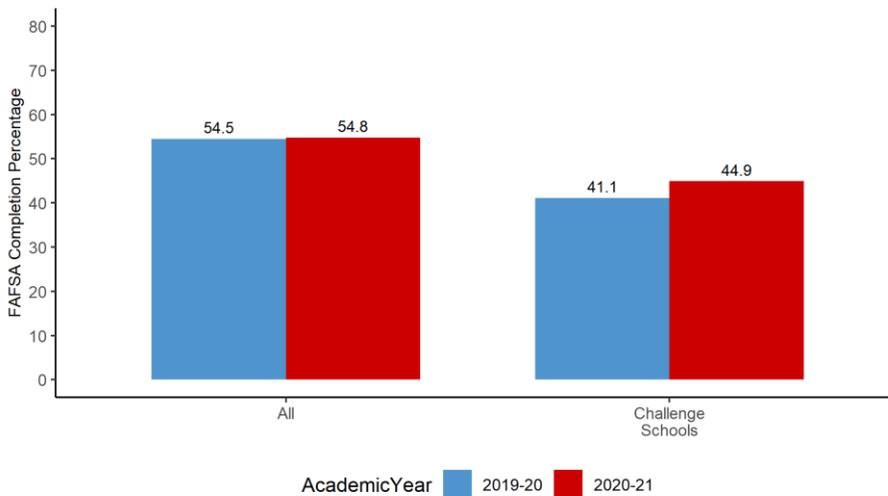


Figure 2 shows a two-year comparison of FAFSA completion percentages by high needs student groups. Generally, the completion percentages for students with high needs and the three categories that represent high needs (i.e., students with disabilities, students eligible for free or reduced-price meals, and English learners) showed little change from 2019-20 to 2020-21. Statewide, the 2020-21 FAFSA completion percentage for students with high needs was 39.9 percent, a slight decrease from the previous year's completion rate. The completion rate for students without high needs increased from 69.6 percent in 2019-20 to 70.9 percent in 2020-21.

¹ Figure 1 shows a comparison of the completion rates using the snapshot dates from the initial FAFSA Challenge: May 7, 2020 and June 8, 2021. The 2020-21 percentages in Figures 2 through 4 incorporate FAFSA submissions through June 30, 2021 and grade 12 enrollments as recorded in the June 2021 Public School Information System (PSIS) collection.

Figure 2: FAFSA Completion Percentages by High Needs Student Groups

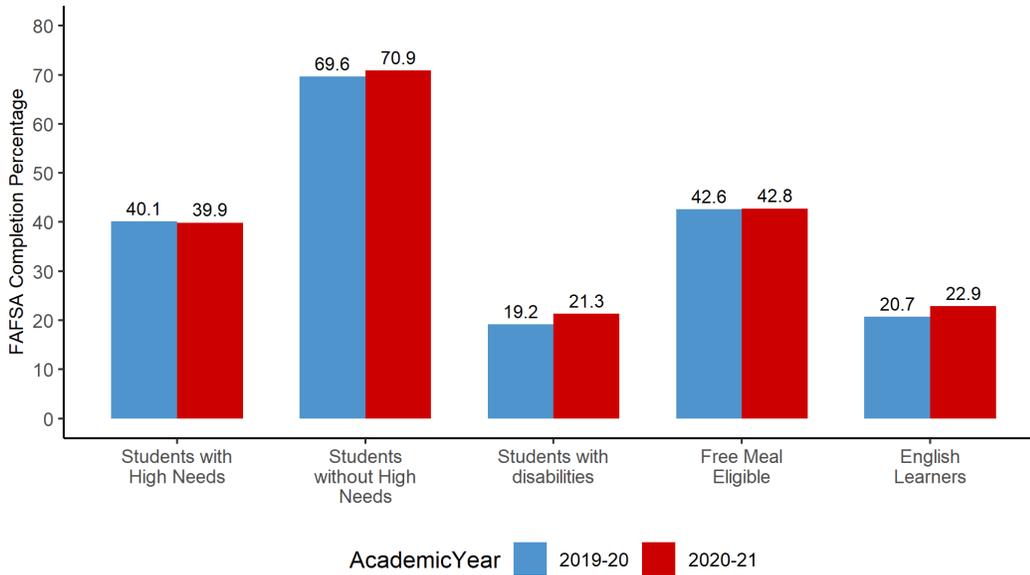
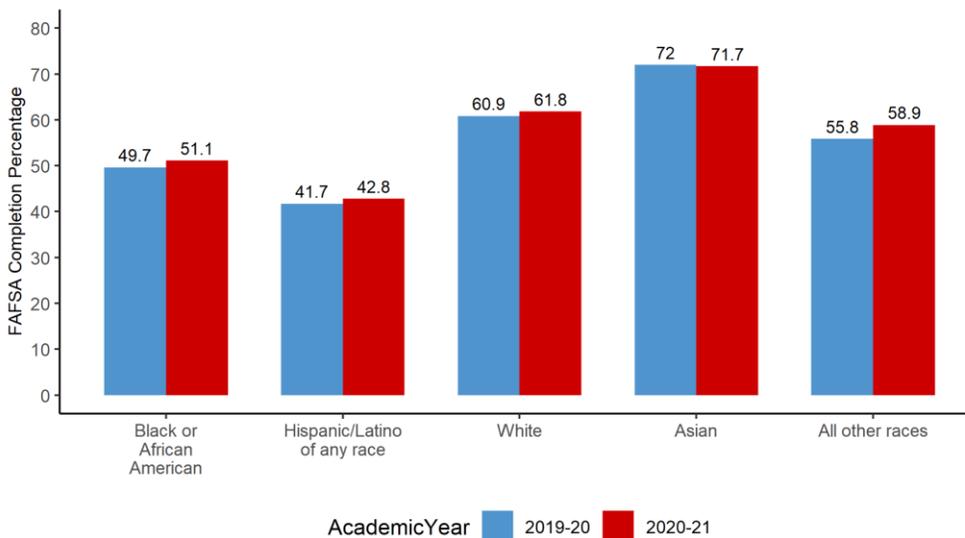


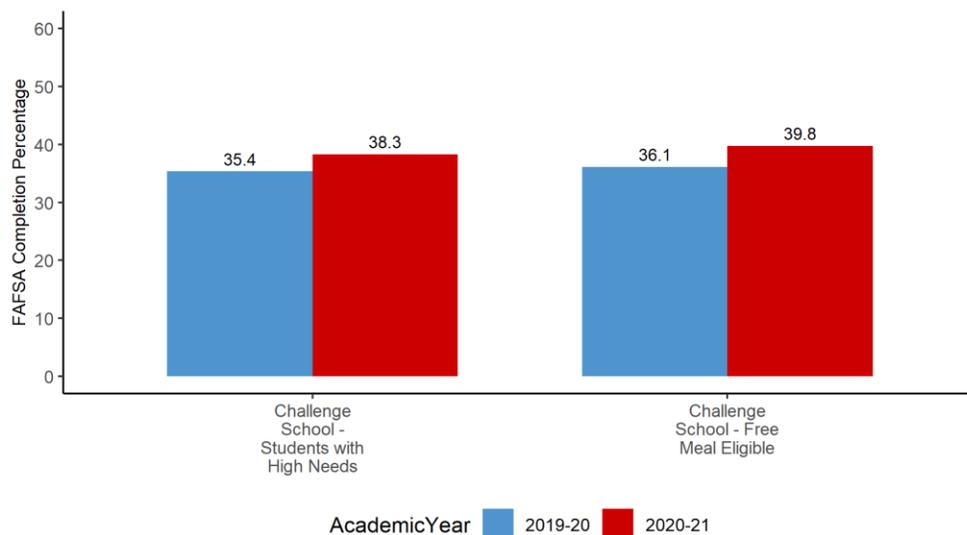
Figure 3 shows a two-year comparison of FAFSA completion percentages by student race/ethnicity. The completion percentages for different races/ethnicities showed little change from 2019-20 to 2020-21. In addition, the relative positions of the different races/ethnicities did not change with respect to FAFSA completion rate. Among race/ethnicity student groups, Asian students had the highest completion rate (71.7 percent in 2020-21), and Hispanic/Latino students had the lowest completion rate (42.8 percent in 2020-21).

Figure 3: FAFSA Completion Percentages by Race/Ethnicity



While Figure 2 presented a two-year comparison of statewide FAFSA completion percentages by high needs student groups, Figure 4 allows for a closer look at completion rates for high needs student groups in Challenge schools. Unlike statewide results, the FAFSA completion percentage for students with high needs in Challenge schools increased by nearly three percentage points, and the completion percentage for students eligible for free meals increased by nearly four percentage points. This is encouraging, since the statewide comparisons for these student groups did not show the increase that was realized in Challenge schools.

Figure 4: FAFSA Completion Percentages in Challenge Schools by High Needs Student Groups



In September 2021, Governor Lamont and Commissioner Russell-Tucker publicly recognized the following four Challenge schools for achieving the highest year-over-year improvements and the overall highest completion rates through the 2020-21 FAFSA Challenge:

1. Synergy Alternative Program in East Hartford
2. Orville H. Platt High School in Meriden
3. West Haven High School in West Haven
4. P-TECH Norwalk in Norwalk

Connecticut is recognizing [additional winners for 2020-21 among non-challenge schools](#). CSDE is also releasing a 2020-21 FAFSA Challenge [Promising Practices Brief](#) to highlight some of the successful strategies used by the winners of the FAFSA challenge.

Conclusion

Connecticut is committed to ensuring that our most vulnerable students have the same postsecondary opportunities as their peers. The Connecticut FAFSA Completion Challenge provides communities with an opportunity to galvanize partners and resources in order to demonstrate a shared commitment for postsecondary success. The 2020-21 FAFSA Challenge demonstrated that intentional adult action can truly make a difference in student outcomes.

The Connecticut Office of the Governor and the CSDE are continuing the FAFSA Challenge during the 2021-22 school year, beginning in September 2021 with a nine-month initiative where high schools across the state will be charged with boosting FAFSA completion rates for the class of 2022 relative to the class of 2021. The FAFSA Challenge will provide microgrants, trainings, and other resources to up to 53 eligible high schools serving students with high needs as a means of helping seniors access the financial aid they deserve to pursue a postsecondary education. The measures of success for the 2021-2022 FAFSA Challenge will be:

- A statewide FAFSA completion rate of 60 percent (or an increase of approximately 5 percentage points from 2020-21);
- Ninety percent of FAFSA Challenge Schools will increase their FAFSA completion rate by 5 percentage points or more; and
- All high school schools in the FAFSA Challenge will strengthen their partnerships with institutions of higher education and/or community-based organizations.

Connecticut is hoping that this challenge will continue to help districts develop coordinated plans to ensure students understand the importance of completing the FAFSA and follow through on this critical step of the college process. This is particularly important as we work to build Connecticut's workforce of tomorrow.