

NEWS

Want free money for college? Stark County education groups helping students complete the FAFSA

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Planning to go to college within the next year?

Want free money to reduce your costs?

Then, fill out the FAFSA.

That's the message local education and community groups will be repeating throughout the next several months as they try to increase the number of students completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid.

More about the FAFSA: Tips for completing the FAFSA

More about the FAFSA: Checklist for completing the FAFSA

Recent figures show that fewer high school students in Stark County and beyond have completed the FAFSA during the coronavirus pandemic.

In Stark County, the number of high school seniors completing the FAFSA dropped by 8% in December 2020 compared to the year before. Statewide, the decrease was 11% and nationally applications dropped by 17%, according to statistics from the U.S. Department of Education.

As of April 9, more than 100 fewer Stark County high school students had filled out the FAFSA compared to one year ago. Roughly 2,700 FAFSA applications are completed in Stark County each year, the federal data show.

Educators and college admission advisers who follow the FAFSA completion rates call the declines notable and worry that the fewer applications will have a long-term impact on the education level of the county and the enrollment of local colleges and universities.

Historically, the FAFSA completion rate has been one of the best predictors of enrollment in colleges, universities and training centers. High school seniors who complete the FAFSA are 84% more likely to enroll in college, according to information from the state.

What is the FAFSA?

The FAFSA is the form that allows the U.S. Department of Education and postsecondary institutions – colleges and universities, career centers and adult training centers – to see whether you qualify for any financial aid, such as scholarships and grants.

It typically is the first indicator for most students and their families on whether a college will be affordable because it reveals how much they will need to pay, not the college's advertised tuition price.

More than half of the Ohio students who complete the FAFSA qualify for the federal Pell grant and receive an average of \$4,418, according to state higher education officials. The maximum Pell grant amount a student can receive is \$6,495 in the 2021-2022 academic year. The Pell grant typically does not have to be repaid.

You only need to complete the FAFSA once per year, which means the current 2021-22 FAFSA is valid for summer 2021, fall 2021 and spring 2022.

But the form can be intimidating, especially for those students who may be the first in their family to seek a college education.

The Stark Education Partnership, representing a coalition of local school districts, colleges, universities and community groups, has received a \$42,800 state grant to help local students understand and complete the FAFSA.

The award was part of a nearly \$3 million statewide effort, called FAFSA 21, to boost completion rates over the next year and a half.

Teresa Purses, president of the Stark Education Partnership, said figures indicate the decline in FAFSA applications is due to the coronavirus pandemic, the abrupt closing of high schools last year and the decision by some students to continue learning remotely at home. She said many students haven't been in their school buildings to be exposed to information regarding the FAFSA and may be unaware of its importance.

To reach those students, the Stark Education Partnership is working with a coalition that includes the Stark County Educational Service Center, local school district leaders, district CARE Teams, district family support specialists, Urban League Navigators, AmeriCorps Ohio College Guides, Stark State College and Kent State University at Stark. Their goal is to increase the number of FAFSA completions this year by 500.

Their efforts will include:

Training more people on how to mentor and support students and families through the application process. The coalition's goal is to have 50 FAFSA facilitators who each will connect with a minimum of 20 students and families.

Creating an educational video about the FAFSA that will be distributed to 5,000 families of high school seniors in the greater Stark County area and creating awareness about applications that have made filing easier, such as the My Student Aid cellphone app.

Contacting specific students who may need help with the application, such as students with limited access to the internet, who have disabilities, who don't speak English as their first language and those who are the first among their families to go to college.

Hosting FAFSA events and providing one-on-one appointments and other in-person and virtual opportunities to help students and families complete the application. Instead of the traditional events held at the school, the coalition is planning to host events at places such as the Urban League, local churches and community buildings.

While the efforts are geared toward high school seniors, Purses said, the facilitators will help anyone who wants to complete the FAFSA.

Stark State, which is providing the trainers to teach the coalition's FAFSA facilitators, separately received \$7,000 from the state's FAFSA 21 initiative to expand its awareness campaign.

Lucas Brewer, director of financial aid, scholarships and enrollment management at Stark State, said beyond its traditional outreach events, the college intends to add an enhanced social media campaign, a FAFSA awareness video and the mailing of postcards for those who do not have online access. He said they hope to reach 10,000 college-bound students with more than 6% of them choosing to complete the FAFSA.

Purses said those students who do not complete the FAFSA are missing important opportunities to lower the cost of their college education.

"Every day we are seeing colleges open opportunities for students. Stark State offered a free spring eight-week condensed class; a buy-one-get-one-free summer class; and now free tuition for one year to Stark County Class of 2021 students," Purses said. "All of these opportunities require filing a FAFSA."

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