



Building a College Going Culture and Celebrating Students' Financial Aid Application Efforts

HOW & WHERE IT'S HAPPENING

THE ISSUE

Students must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or California Dream Act Application (CADAA) to access federal and state financial aid for college. Unfortunately, in recent years, hundreds of thousands of California students each year do not complete applications, meaning that **many eligible students miss the opportunity to access financial support for college.**¹

AN APPROACH

College-going and career-readiness school cultures support students as they think through their postsecondary plans – whether those plans include attending college or pursuing a career-oriented opportunity. This promising practice action guide in our series looks at the ways schools and districts can build a school culture that publicly recognizes and celebrates college and financial aid application efforts, and highlights local efforts that have proved successful in raising application rates.



Building college-going cultures includes recognizing and celebrating students' accomplishments, which a number of districts and schools across California do through school-led activities and by participating in broader college-going efforts. **Santa Fe High School**, for example, participates in College Signing Day, a national campaign publicly recognizing students' efforts in pursuing postsecondary studies. In a gym filled with college pennants, signs proclaiming which colleges students will attend, and a constant stream of students taking celebratory photos, the school recognizes students during a lunch time event. Around the state, other districts and schools are encouraging financial aid applications by participating in the California Student Aid Commission "Race to Submit" campaign, an effort that shares weekly-updated, real-time data on the percentage of high school seniors who have completed applications.

In 2017, **Val Verde Unified School District** made completing a FAFSA or California Dream Act application a high school graduation requirement.² The requirement came as a response to the fact that low-income students who receive information about colleges and financial aid are more likely to enroll in selective universities than their more financially advantaged counterparts.³ Val Verde Unified found that most of their students qualified for financial aid, but were unlikely to apply because they did not know they qualified, did not know how to navigate the application, or lacked an incentive. The district couples the graduation requirement with a variety of actions to support families and students in this process, including their annual "Dialing for Dollars" event where counselors and administrators call families to offer support in completing financial aid applications.

As a result of the policy change, **Rancho Verde High School** now has one of the highest high school FAFSA completion rates in California and received a visit from actress and advocate Gabrielle Union to celebrate the launch of the "Race to Submit" campaign. Rancho Verde's most popular strategy is "**Ca\$hchella**," a celebration of FAFSA or California Dream Act application completion. Much like the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival, dubbed Coachella, Ca\$hchella requires wristbands and the celebration includes a DJ, glow sticks, face painting, and dancing. Ca\$hchella happens during the school day, adding to its appeal and accessibility and reinforcing the college-going culture Rancho Verde champions. The school has also invested in lawn signs with students' names, pictures, and the name of the college or university they're attending in the fall.

These efforts are a core component of how Dr. Charil D. Macaraeg, Rancho Verde’s principal, aims to build a community-wide college-going culture by helping families celebrate their students’ successes. Another part of Rancho Verde’s strategy is to encourage students to complete their applications early in the academic year so they can focus on other aspects of going to college such as housing, enrollment, and understanding and accepting financial aid packages. In an effort to alleviate summer melt, the school also asks senior students to take an exit survey providing actionable feedback on how Rancho Verde can better serve students on their post-secondary journey. This survey enables the school to provide strategic guidance during the spring semester, including grouping students together based on planned college attendance. By doing so, students begin to build community and can go to college knowing they have a support system.⁴

1 See <https://webutil.csac.ca.gov/dashboard/>

2 Students can request to waive this requirement, but few do.

3 Caroline Hoxby and Sarah Turner. (2013). *Expanding College Opportunities for High-Achieving Low-Income Students*. National Bureau of Economic Research. As found in The Campaign for College Opportunity. *The State of Higher Education In California*. (2015).

4 Patricia A. Pérez and Patricia M. McDonough, “Understanding Latina and Latino College Choice: A Social Capital and Chain Migration Analysis,” *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 7, no. 3 (May 2008): 249-265.

Guiding Questions for Advocacy

- 1** Does your district/school encourage students to complete the FAFSA/California Dream Act applications? If so, how?
- 2** What supports does your district/school offer students and their families in their efforts to complete the FAFSA/California Dream Act applications?
- 3** How does your district/school invite/partner with the local community to celebrate students’ post-secondary efforts?
- 4** Does your district/school survey high school seniors to learn about their experiences at their high school, including college and financial aid application efforts? If so, how does your district/school use data gathered from those surveys?



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