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State Leaders Join Together to Make North Carolina First In the Nation in FAFSA Completions

Education, non-profit, business and government leaders across the state are encouraging students to take advantage of financial aid that can make college free or affordable

RALEIGH, NC - Education, non-profit, business and government leaders across the state are warning of dire consequences on the state's economy and students' futures if more North Carolina students don't take advantage of federal student aid to attend college. Because of the pandemic and related economic downturn, more families need additional financial support to make college a reality than ever before. In 2020, North Carolina students left an estimated \$107 million on the table by not filling out the FAFSA or [Free Application for Federal Student Aid](#).

That's why education non-profit myFutureNC, Carolina Demography, College Foundation of North Carolina, College Advising Corps, the Hunt Institute, and the John M. Belk Endowment, are launching the [NC First in FAFSA](#) initiative statewide to encourage all eligible students and their families to take the crucial first step toward free or affordable college by completing the FAFSA.

"We know that students who complete the FAFSA are far more likely to enroll in higher education. We also know that students with a two or four year degree are going to double and even triple their life-time earnings," said **North Carolina State Superintendent of Public Instruction Catherine Truitt**. "Because of this pandemic, the students in Class of 2020 and 2021 are facing challenges no other students have had to deal with before. But we want to

make sure they still have the opportunity to continue their education and accomplish their dreams. Completing the FAFSA is a pivotal first step in helping them do that.”

Only 38% of current North Carolina seniors, as of January 29, 2021, have completed the FAFSA, down nearly 9% compared to the same time last year. North Carolina currently ranks 20th in the nation for FAFSA completions. ([See all state rankings](#)). Most concerning, students from low-income schools, rural schools, and/or schools with 40% or more students of color are completing the FAFSA at even lower rates than their peers.

“The vast majority of the jobs of today and tomorrow require an education beyond a high school diploma,” said **Governor Roy Cooper**. “Every student deserves a path to a quality, affordable postsecondary education, and completing the FAFSA helps students access critical financial aid so they can complete their credential or degree.”

“We want our North Carolina students to know that they are not alone and a community of partners and their schools are here to support them in reaching their goals. Many resources are available to help them go to college affordably,” said **Cecilia Holden, CEO of myFutureNC**, “We know this is a very tough time, but the world may look very different this fall and we don’t want our students to miss the incredible opportunities that education after high school can offer them.”

NC First in FAFSA launched the inaugural [FAFSA Challenge](#) this semester to encourage high schools to earn the highest FAFSA completion rate and implement innovative strategies to support FAFSA completion locally. So far, 290 high schools or 44% of public high schools across the state have registered for the challenge.

Schools compete in the Challenge with schools of similar size and type, with winners earning a \$500 grant in each of the following categories:

- Highest percentage of completed FAFSAs
- Highest percent increase in FAFSA completion rate
- Best FAFSA completion strategy

School administrators or staff in participating high schools should click [here](#) to register for the Challenge by February 15th. The Challenge will conclude on June 30th, 2021 with winners announced by July 31st, 2021. Schools can keep track of their progress with the [NC First in FAFSA Tracker](#) to identify specific areas of need and create targeted efforts to increase attainment. Final FAFSA completion rates are calculated using FAFSA completion data from the U.S. Department of Education and final high school graduation counts from NC DPI.

“We are getting creative and thinking outside the box when it comes to reaching our students during these challenging times of remote and hybrid learning,” said **Tabari Wallace, Principal of West Craven High School and 2018 Wells Fargo Principal of the Year**. “I encourage all North Carolina high schools to join us in participating in this statewide effort to help our students succeed by completing the FAFSA.”

According to a 2020 [report by Education Strategy Group](#) (ESG), students who complete the FAFSA are far more likely to enroll in higher education. In fact, 90% of FAFSA completers attend college directly after high school, compared to just 55% of students who don't complete the FAFSA. FAFSA completers are also more likely to persist in their coursework and obtain a degree.

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ABOUT NC FIRST IN FAFSA:

NC [First in FAFSA](#) is a [myFutureNC](#) Collaborative that focuses on increasing the number of high school seniors who complete the FAFSA application. Increasing the [Free Application for Federal Student Aid](#), or FAFSA, completion rate is a fundamental step in North Carolina's efforts to meet our state's 2 million by 2030 postsecondary educational attainment goal. Students who complete the FAFSA are more likely to enroll in higher education, persist in their college coursework, and obtain a degree.

Partners include Carolina Demography, College Foundation of North Carolina, College Advising Corps, the Hunt Institute, and the John M. Belk Endowment.

For more information on NC First in FAFSA, visit myfuturenc.org/first-in-fafsa/.