A decorative graphic on the right side of the page features three blue circles of varying sizes and two thin blue lines. One large circle is at the top, a smaller one is in the middle, and another large one is at the bottom right. The lines connect the top-left and top-right corners to the middle circle, and the top-right and bottom-right corners to the bottom circle.

The Buffalo FAFSA Completion Project

Final Report 2015-16

6/10/2016

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Executive Summary

In 2013, researchers and volunteers from the University at Buffalo partnered with the Buffalo Public Schools (BPS) and Say Yes to Education Buffalo to create an intervention designed to assist students and families with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Say Yes to Education had just announced its tuition guarantee for graduates of BPS and the public charter high schools. To be eligible, students were required to complete their federal and state financial aid applications by April 1. The project was designed to partner with school counselors who, in many schools, were spending a significant time helping students complete their forms. In 2013, 40 volunteers helped BPS over the course of two months increase its FAFSA completion rates by 61.7% in a single year.

In 2015, the project evolved in several important ways. First, we added the FSA ID component to phase II, in place of the creation of a Personal Identification Number (PIN). Second, we partnered with D'Youville College and the Upward Bound program to offer evening and additional weekend programs. Third, we expanded the training from a two-day, in person session to a 25 hour, self-paced on-line course coupled with an additional 25 hours of on-site training in the schools assisting students with the FSA ID and the first half of the FAFSA. We saw an increase in our classroom work with students on the first half of the form; we worked with 15 of 17 BPS high schools and 2 of 5 charter high schools on this portion of the project, serving approximately 800 students during that phase.

The data for 2016 suggest that between 864 and 945 BPS students and 224 charter school students completed their FAFSA applications during the 2016 project period. Overall, the project team assisted 800 students and families with their FAFSA forms and 537 New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) applications. To put those numbers into context, volunteers helped with approximately two thirds of all FAFSA filers and as many as half of the TAP applications completed in BPS. Even with the decline in participation over the past three years, BPS is up 27% over the year prior to the project and the charter participation continues to grow.

Introduction

For the past three years, researchers, interns, and volunteers from the University at Buffalo have partnered with Buffalo Public Schools and Say Yes to Education Buffalo to provide support to students and families as they navigated the financial aid process. Specifically, interns and volunteers have been working in 21 public and charter high schools to help families for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and the New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP). In many cases, volunteers also provided assistance with the Say Yes to Education on-line registration process. The program began as a small pilot in a single high school and has grown to serve the entire public school population in the city of Buffalo.

In 2011, researchers at the University at Buffalo partnered with the United Way of Buffalo and Erie County (UWBEC) and South Park High School to provide two complementary services – free tax preparation and FAFSA completion – to students and families preparing for the transition to college. Based upon the findings of a 2007 experiment conducted by H&R Block to tie FAFSA completion to tax preparation, we created a small pilot program to bring both services into a high school setting.¹ The H&R Block experiment demonstrated impressive outcomes in terms of increasing college participation and FAFSA completion, but much of their work was done with independent students. We surmised that it may be possible to reach more dependent students by integrating Free Tax Preparation with FAFSA Completion services in the high school buildings. In the spring of 2012, volunteers from a service learning class at UB provided regular support within the school to help students complete the FAFSA and on two occasions, UWBEC brought in Voluntary Income Tax Assistance (VITA) volunteers to assist families with their taxes. It was a modest experiment with four volunteers over three months and two separate programs through UWBEC but the results were promising. The tax preparation program reached 10-12 families during the first session offered during the school day but only four community members unaffiliated with the school during their evening offering. The FAFSA completion volunteers worked with 33 students – a modest proportion of the 150 students in the senior class, but the effort accounted for two thirds of all the FAFSA's completed at the school that year.

Within a year of the pilot project, Say Yes to Education Buffalo announced their newly formed partnership with Buffalo Public Schools (BPS) and the city of Buffalo to increase college participation. One of their signature initiatives was a tuition guarantee for every student who completed high school in BPS or the public charter schools in the city. It is a last dollar scholarship, meaning that students must apply for federal and state aid and the guarantee only covers any tuition that is unmet by those sources. Access to the tuition guarantee is predicated on a student's completion of the federal and state financial aid forms. BPS established as a goal

¹ Bettinger, E. P., Terry Long, B., Oreopoulous, P., & Sanbonmatsu, L. (2009). *The role of information and simplification in college decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA experiment*. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

for 2012-13 to have 100% of graduating seniors complete their financial aid forms by April 1. In the previous year, approximately 55% of graduating seniors filed their FAFSA but less than a third had done so by April 1. With the district goal in mind, the UB team developed a three part strategy drawing on the experience at South Park: (1) the existing College Goal Sunday² initiative, (2) classroom visits in all schools to reach eligible students, and (3) six weeks of school-based volunteer support to finalize the FAFSA, TAP, and Say Yes applications. Over the course of two months, 40 volunteers visited classrooms to complete the first half of the FAFSA with as many students as possible, provided FAFSA support through the College Goal Sunday program in February, and established regular weekly hours in 14 of 16 Buffalo High Schools to complete the remaining portions of the FAFSA. The VITA program has become a partner of the Buffalo Scholarship Fair/College Goal Sunday event and free tax preparation support has been provided on site during that day but free tax preparation has not been integrated into the full FAFSA completion project.

The first year of the project resulted in substantial gains in terms of FAFSA completion. Figure 1 compares FAFSA completion trends in Buffalo Public Schools (BPS) for the 2011-12 and the 2012-13 filing years. The results demonstrated that FAFSA completion rates increased by 61% through the district.³ In simple raw numbers, BPS FAFSA completers increased from 639 in 2012 to 1033 in 2013 – nearly the total of all students who submitted the FAFSA by December of 2012. These numbers compare favorably to overall state trends (approximately 10% improvement in NY) and trends in the Buffalo Charter Schools (net increase of approximately 20%). We also found that a greater proportion of FAFSA applications from BPS schools were being accepted by the US Department of Education (92% v. 87%) and that local college TRIO programs were reporting fewer missing FAFSA applications for its program applicants. While we did not achieve 100%, we believe this was a substantial increase for one year.

We recognize that the substantial increases in the number of FAFSA's completed in the district were a function of both the announcement of the Say Yes tuition guarantee and the direct assistance with the financial aid process, but it is difficult to know how much of that difference to attribute to the program. We know after the second year that the numbers dropped slightly in BPS schools for the two years subsequent to the launch of the program. In 2015-16, we have seen a modest increase, which keeps FAFSA completion rates in Buffalo about 25% higher than before the project began.

² College Goal Sunday is a national initiative sponsored by the Lumina Foundation for Education. It operates in 24 states and serves approximately 40,000 students per year. The program brings financial aid professionals into schools to assist families with the FAFSA.

³ The data available for this evaluation is made available by Federal Student Aid, a branch of the U.S. Department of Education. In order to estimate the total number of FAFSA completers in the graduating class, they report only those students who are 18 years old or younger. The numbers are aggregated at the high school to provide school level estimates. We aggregate data for the sixteen BPS high schools likely to attend college. It does not include PS 44 which is an alternative school in Buffalo. This year only one of nine students filed a FAFSA.

FAFSA Completion Project, 2015-16

Each year, the program has been modified to address the evolving needs of the district and charter high schools. During the second year of the project, we expanded from serving 14 BPS high schools to providing support for five charter schools and a modest service for Hutch Tech High School. It should be noted that during the first year of the intervention, the FAFSA Completion Project only worked with the Buffalo Public Schools over the course of two months. In 2013-14, the project was expanded to serve both the BPS high schools and the public charter high schools and in 2014-15 and we added both the Academy School (alternative high school) and the Charter School for Applied Technology (CSAT). Additionally, in response to counselor feedback, the project began a month earlier and extended through the end of April, providing nearly four months of support to 20 high schools. Table 1 provides a summary of the number of volunteer hours provided during the course of the project. These numbers do not include the amount of time spent by school counselors in each of the 20 partnering high schools, which we expect would nearly equal an additional 50% of the 2520 hours of service provided by the project, as indicated during phase IV (Table 1) below.

Table 1. Volunteer Hours by Project Phase, 2015-16

Activity	Frequency	Interns & Volunteers	Total Volunteer Hours
Phase I Site Visits	21 schools	2	42 hours
Volunteer Training	On-line	30	450 hours
Phase II - Classroom Visits	16 schools	4	384 hours
Phase III - Scholarship Fair	1 event	26	156 hours
Phase IV - FAFSA/TAP Completion	21 schools	30	2520 hours
Data Collection & Reporting	weekly	2	96 hours
Total		23 schools	3648 hours

We estimate that over the course of five months (December through April), FAFSA Completion Project volunteers and staff provided nearly 3,700 hours of service in BPS and public charter high schools to work with students and their families on FAFSA Completion, the New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) application, the on-line Say Yes to Education registration form, and in some cases college applications and other college related forms. During that time we also established a partnership with D'Youville College and their Upward Bound Program to provide evening and weekend FAFSA completion events and workshops. During the FAFSA filing season as many as 15 events were held at Buffalo Public Schools, local churches, community centers, and college campuses. Conservatively, we expect that as many as 100 additional service hours were provided during these sessions. We found that while service hours were up again this year, there were times when volunteers and interns were not well utilized, suggesting a different staffing strategy – something we will discuss later as we develop our responses to the changes to the FAFSA application being implemented this year.

As we adapt the program we identify needs unique to each school and, where possible, we develop solutions to provide them the assistance they need. Throughout the report, we describe how the project has evolved and Table 2 summarizes the services provided to each BPS and charter high school.

Table 2. FAFSA Completion Services by High School, 2015-16

	Site Visits	FSA ID Classroom	Scholarship Fair*	School Support	Data Support	Workshops
<i>Buffalo Public Schools</i>						
Bennett	●	●	●	●	●	○
BAVPA	●	●	●	●	●	○
Burgard	●	●	●	●	●	○
City Honors	○	○	●	○	●	●
East	●	○	●	●	●	○
Emerson	●	●	●	●	●	○
Frederick Olmsted	●	●	●	●	●	○
Hutch Tech	●	○	●	○	●	●
Int'l. Prep	●	●	●	●	●	●
Lafayette	●	●	●	●	●	○
Leonardo DaVinci	●	●	●	●	●	○
MST	●	●	●	●	●	○
McKinley	●	●	●	●	●	○
Middle Early	●	●	●	●	●	○
Riverside	●	●	●	●	●	○
South Park	●	●	●	●	●	○
Newcomers Academy	●	○	●	●	●	○
School #44	●	●	●	●	●	○
<i>Buffalo Public Charter Schools</i>						
CSAT	●	●	○	●	○	○
Health Sciences	●	○	○	●	○	○
Oracle	●	●	○	●	○	○
Tapestry	●	○	○	○	○	●
Maritime	●	●	○	●	○	○

● = service was provided

○ = service was not provided

*Scholarship was open to all students in the city and representatives from each were in attendance, though fewer used the FAFSA support.

The quick summary shows that, while not every school receives all services, we have now successfully worked with every school in the city, except the Buffalo Academy of Science Charter School (BASCS). Neither City Honors or Hutch Tech have requested the full level of support we provide in other schools, but this year we are providing each with their student record

data of FAFSA and TAP completions so they know which of their students need support. Additionally, Hutch Tech saw the need to provide some additional supplemental support so they partnered with the team from D'Youville College to provide some support after school. The financial aid office from the University at Buffalo provided similar after school support on a different date as well. This year, we scaled back our service to Tapestry High School, in consultation with the school staff. Our experience suggests they have a fairly robust completion rate and the service was never well utilized the previous three years. They also partnered with D-Youville to provide some after school support for FAFSA and TAP completion. Finally, we note that two additional services are not utilized by the charter schools. First, while the scholarship fair is open to anyone, few charter students attend the event. Second, we will explore providing data support to the charter schools in the future, but the data are provided through HESC and separate contracts must be completed for each separate school/district entity. We hope to offer that option to our charter partners in the future.

Phase I – School Site Visits

Each year, we begin the process with individual site visits to all participating high schools. In 2012-13, the site visit was a critical component of the project because we did not have a clear sense for what might work best within a given context. Since then we have a clearer sense of what the school need, but we have found that the site visit is equally important in terms of establishing relationships between the coordinators and the school counselors to ensure the project is sustainable over the 3-4 month period. We maintain the annual site visits because we believe no single plan can or will appropriately fit all schools and, as such, the model must be adapted to fit each school – and in some cases, those plans need to change within a school from one year to the next because either conditions have changed or the school counselors are new to the building. For example, Middle Early College High School students take Erie Community College (ECC) or Buffalo State College courses during their senior year so there was no single course that would allow the team to reach all students during phase II. This year, MECHS moved in the Bennett High School building and similar scheduling challenges made it difficult to set regular FAFSA completion times each week.

In 2016-17, we expect the site visits to be even more important. First, we will be partnering with GEAR UP Buffalo, which will be starting seven college success centers in BPS high schools. The centers will assume primary responsibility for FAFSA completion activities in the building. Three of those buildings have approved turn-around plans, meaning the previous school will close and a new school entity beginning with 9th graders will open in the same building. We will have to assess how the centers situated in the new schools will be able to serve the seniors in the closing schools – as will be the case at East, Bennett, and Lafayette. The site visits will allow us to assess how best to meet the needs of these schools.

Phase II – FAFSA Completion Week

During the second phase of the project (January 18-22), we visited classrooms in 14 of 17 BPS high schools and 2 of 5 charter high schools – a significant improvement over the previous year when we were only able to complete half the number of schools. During those sessions, we helped students complete the FSA ID and the first half of the FAFSA. FSA ID was introduced at the end of the last filing season so this was the first full FAFSA completion project where we worked with students to create usernames and passwords rather than personal identification numbers (PIN). The US Department of Education made this change to enhance security of the system and to integrate FAFSA completion with other services provided to college students to manage loans. We found that the FSA ID posed significant challenges specifically during this phase working with students but it also created additional challenges assisting with the parent portions of the FAFSA. Our estimates suggest that the FSA ID process takes twice as long to complete as the PIN (20 minutes versus 10). The most time intensive changes are the addition of five security questions and a verification process that requires access to a cell phone to receive a text from the US Department of Education. If the process took longer than 15 minutes, the system would time out and the student would be required to start over. We estimate that we were able to work with about 800 students across the 16 schools on the FSA ID and the first half of the FAFSA application.

In 2016-17, the timeline for the FAFSA application will change and we expect this phase will change significantly as a result. We will discuss the changes in greater detail later, but the US Department of Education will open the FAFSA application for the 2017-18 school year October 1, 2016. They will also allow families to use prior-prior year taxes to calculate Expected Family Contribution (EFC).

Phase III – The Buffalo Scholarship Fair

The Buffalo Scholarship Fair is a comprehensive program that is part of the larger College Goal New York initiative. It was the first citywide FAFSA intervention launched by BPS and it has become a cornerstone of the broader FAFSA Completion Project. Currently, the scholarship fair accounts for approximately 5% of the FAFSA's completed by BPS students - an additional 200-300 students and families participate in a series of workshops and a college and career fair at the event. We have found, however, that participation in the fair has declined steadily as the FAFSA completion project has grown in the schools. In 2016, the event was staffed by 26 volunteers including UB volunteers and interns, and financial aid counselors from the University at Buffalo and D'Youville College, but the numbers of families served declined from 60 in 2015 to 45 in 2016. One feature added to the program four years ago was the voluntary income tax assistance (VITA) program sponsored by the United Way of Buffalo and Erie County (UWBEC). As discussed earlier, there has been some concern that tax filing is an important barrier to FAFSA completion and the scholarship fair has become a one-stop shop for some families. The United

Way served approximately 22 families during the fair, many of whom also completed their FAFSA and TAP applications.

We have begun discussing the feasibility of the Scholarship Fair as we consider whether to continue the event, change it substantially, or eliminate it altogether. There are benefits of this sort of event for younger high school students, but the weekend schedule makes it more difficult for many to attend. FAFSA completions at the event have declined each year since the creation of the citywide FAFSA completion project. We will explore different ways to make this type of service available to parents at times that work for them.

Phase IV - School-Based Follow up Support

The key feature of the FAFSA Completion Project is the concentrated time spent by volunteers in schools working with students and parents on completing the second half of their FAFSA, as well as their TAP application and the Say Yes to Education online registration. Each week, several volunteers and a project intern scheduled between 3-6 hours to work with students and parents on-site at each high school. Specific interns were assigned to each school to establish some continuity for students and a relationship for counselors to rely upon. This service was made available in collaboration with school counselors over a 12-week period from early February through the end of April. Our experience over three years underscores the important role school counselor's play in the success of the project. Counselors typically scheduled students for appointments to meet with the FAFSA completion team. When students did not have all of the information they needed to complete their federal and state forms, either they completed the Say Yes registration form with the interns and returned to class or they called their parents to gather the appropriate information. Counselors are critical partners in the process – without their assistance and support, we would not have access to students and, as such, would not be able to provide the service we do.

For two years, we trained interns and volunteers to assist families with both completion of the forms and interpretation of financial aid award letters. Our experience in 2014-15 suggested that very few students actually used volunteers for to interpret award letters for one of two reasons – either they were attending community colleges with relatively simple awards or they submitted their applications late in the process. In most cases, volunteers continued to work with new students completing their FAFSA and TAP applications or helped student's correct errors on their applications through the end of April. We believe two factors limited the amount of support students needed interpreting financial aid award letters – (1) SUNY has shifted to using a shopping sheet for all 64 campuses in the system, which has simplified the award letter for students and families and (2) relatively few of the students we served planned to attend institutions outside of SUNY where letters are far less standard. In our conversations with counselors, we found that many students will still come to them to discuss financial aid award letters, particularly when interns were not scheduled.

For the past three years, we have been able to access data from Federal Student Aid (FSA) to determine which students had completed their FAFSA's and TAP applications and whether there were errors to correct. Last year, access to that data shifted to the state but it was not available until early April, after much of the project had been completed. In 2016, we were able to access FAFSA and TAP application data by the end of January, which allowed us to share that information with school counselors so they could follow up with the appropriate students. This was an important development because, for the last two years, we have not provided direct support to either City Honors or Hutch Tech. This year, we were able to make student status for FAFSA and TAP available to the counselors so they could follow up with their respective students.

Each year of the project, we focus on three key outcomes. First and foremost, the project was designed to increase the proportion of students who file their FAFSA. We report FAFSA completion numbers in several ways to provide the most comprehensive picture possible. No single source of data at our disposal is completely accurate so we attempt to provide our best estimate and establish a range within which the actual FAFSA completion rates are likely to fall. Second, we report the number of New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) applications completed with volunteers. For the past two years, we have had reliable data for the total number of TAP applications completed in BPS schools, but we did not have that data for charter schools because separate agreements would have been necessary between each charter school and the Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC) – this is something we could consider in the future. Third, we report the number of students with whom volunteers worked to complete the Say Yes to Education online registration. These final numbers overstate the impact of the program because a number of students with whom we work do not ultimately complete their FAFSA or TAP applications. Taken together, these data elements help us determine the effects of the program on students in BPS.

FAFSA Completion Outcomes, 2015-16

In this section we report our findings from the fourth year of the FAFSA Completion Project. Before we do, it is important to recognize that it is difficult to compare results from one year to the next because the project evolves each year. First, the intervention changes each year. This year, Federal Student Aid shifted away from the use of the PIN to the FSA ID – a change that required significantly more time on the front end, but that could simplify the tax portions of the form because it powers the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) tax retrieval tool. Second, the available data changes each year. Last year, we could access TAP application data for the first time from HESC, but it was not available until well into the project. This year we could use data as part of the intervention because it was available as early as the end of January.

Finally, we have made no attempt to scale our estimates according to the size of the senior class or the proportion of students that will complete high school in time to attend college in the fall of 2014. In this report, we summarize the total number of students that complete a FAFSA, not the percentage of eligible students who complete it. The challenge of calculating completion rates is largely a function of the fluid nature of the senior class. In any given year, some proportion of students will clearly graduate from high school but there will also be a large proportion that will not finish under any circumstances and a group in the middle that may or may not graduate in the expected four-year time frame. It is impossible for us to know how many of those students will graduate until the end of the summer, so it is difficult to determine the appropriate denominator. Raw numbers, of course, can be misleading if cohort sizes fluctuate or graduation rates are fluid – both are real concerns in BPS and as such, the numbers must be understood in relation to those trends. District estimates suggest the senior cohorts of 2014 and 2015 were similar in size (within 40 students out of more than 2000 possible seniors). We believe the same was largely true for the graduating cohort this year as well. With those caveats in mind, the data available during the 2015-16 filing season is similar to what was available during the prior year and it will allow us to develop a fuller picture of the work done with students and families on all aspects of the financial aid process. As we discussed earlier, approximately 800 BPS and charter seniors participated the classroom portion of the project to complete the FSA ID and the first half of the FAFSA.

Phase III – Scholarship Fair

The 2015-16 academic year was the eighth consecutive year for the BPS Scholarship Fair. The event is orchestrated each year as part of the statewide College Goal Sunday initiative, which is sponsored by College Goal New York and the New York State Financial Aid Administrators Association (NYSFAAA). For the past four years, the FAFSA completion project has partnered with the district to coordinate the event and has assumed responsibility for providing the FAFSA completion support. In total, nearly 450 people were in attendance at the event and

approximately 45 students and their families were able to complete the financial aid process. FAFSA completion numbers at the Scholarship Fair have dropped consistently for the past three years, but we suspect those differences are, at least in part, a result of the more comprehensive project available in the schools. The highest attendance rates among FAFSA filers at the scholarship fair were from Hutch Tech, City Honors, and Burgard (the host school for the event).

While the FAFSA completion numbers were down, all other indicators of success remained steady. Twenty-two families completed their taxes with the UWBECA VITA program – similar to the numbers served in 2015. At the same time, we estimate there were as many as 50 volunteers between FAFSA completion, registration, scholarship applications, tax preparation and workshops, in addition to more than fifty partners at tables in the college and career fair. As participation in the FAFSA completion portion of the fair declines, we expect that the fair will evolve in ways that emphasize workshops for younger students and the more families will utilize the school-based services.

Phase IV – School-based Follow-up Support

The majority of the FAFSA completion work was conducted during this final phase of the project – which extended from the scholarship fair at the beginning of February through the end of April and the first week of May. Figure 2 provides an illustration of bi-weekly trends of FAFSA completion in BPS for the past three years. This year, we are pleased to report a modest increase in FAFSA applications completed in BPS from the previous year (from 908 to 929) by the beginning of May when the project has come to a conclusion. The total of 929 FAFSA's completed in 2016 is 24% higher than the rate of completion the year prior to the start of the project. The data clearly demonstrate that the high water mark for the project was the first year and that we had experienced small but steady declines in the two years following. This year suggests that we may be at a point where we can identify new strategies to improve completion rates. The modest increase is a notable success, given the challenges posed by the implementation of the FSA ID. We recognize this will be the most significant challenge next year, but the early application date and the use of FSA ID to integrate with the IRS tax retrieval tool should allow us to improve upon this year's numbers.

Figure 2.

FAFSA Completion Bi-Weekly by Year for Buffalo Public Schools, 2012-2016

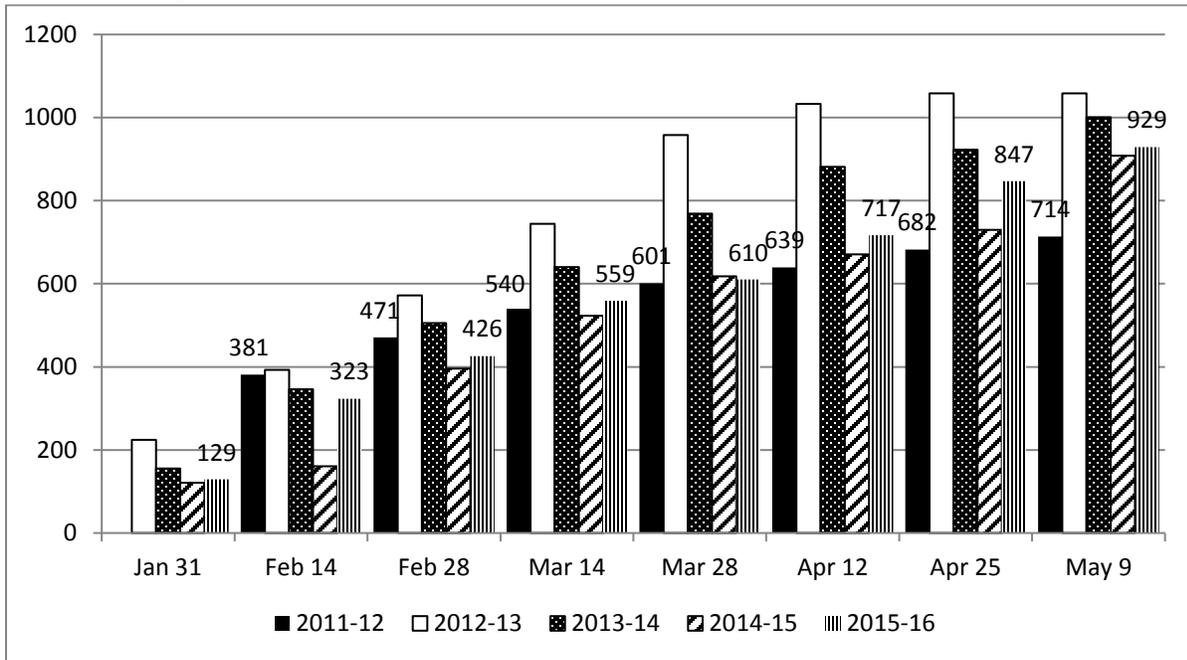


Figure 3 shows a similar pattern as BPS schools. The overall numbers are down slightly (10% from the previous year), but they remain well above the FAFSA completion numbers prior to the project. The 2016 completion totals of 218 across the five charter high schools is 85% higher than the 2012 completion numbers.

Figure 3.

FAFSA Completion Bi-Weekly by Year for Buffalo Charter Schools, 2013-2015

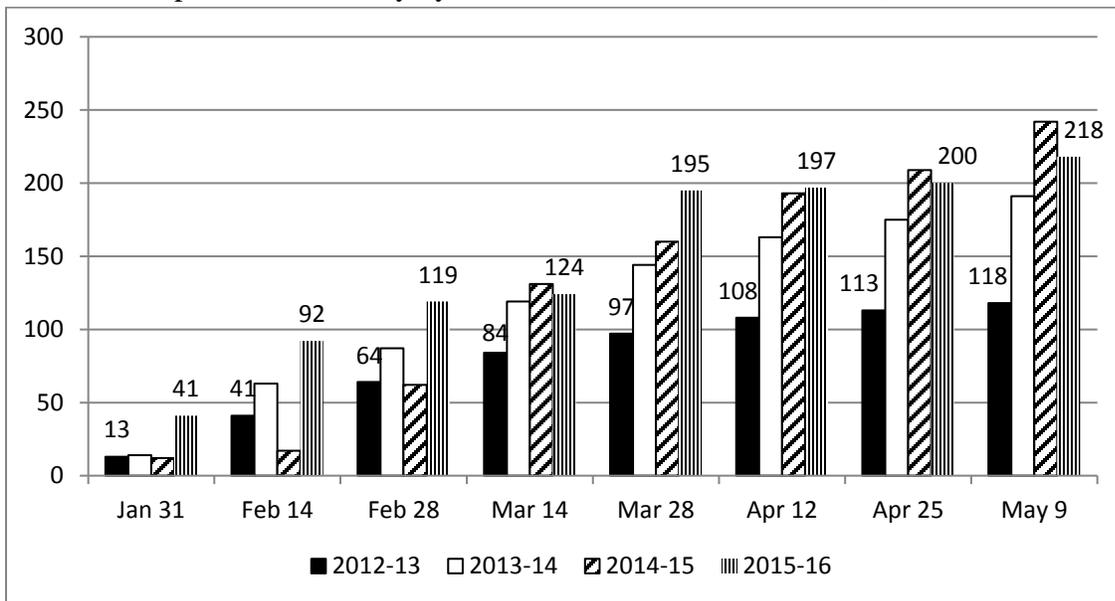


Table 2 provides a comprehensive summary of FAFSA and TAP applications completed as part of the project. We utilize data from three separate sources – the aggregated school level data provided by Federal Student Aid (FSA), the individual record data for FAFSA and TAP submissions provided by the Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC), and the program logs, where we account for the work done by volunteers on the FAFSA, TAP, and Say Yes registration forms.

Table 2.

FAFSA and TAP Applications Completed by School and Data Source, 2015-16

	FSA (5/27)		HESC (5/09)	TAP
	Submit	Complete		
<i>Buffalo Public Schools</i>				
Bennett	39	30	35	12
BAVPA	79	74	74	53
Burgard	29	26	29	18
City Honors	113	111	113	77
East	24	23	21	19
Emerson	62	49	51	25
Frederick Olmsted	47	46	40	27
Hutch Tech	174	160	169	107
Int'l. Prep	30	28	27	23
Lafayette	24	21	31	14
Leonardo DaVinci	63	61	61	32
MST	28	24	21	9
McKinley	85	74	69	37
Middle Early	42	38	26	22
Riverside	42	39	33	19
South Park	63	54	57	39
Newcomers Academy	N/A	N/A	6	3
School #44	1	1	1	1
BPS Sub-totals	945	859	864	537
<i>Buffalo Public Charter Schools</i>				
CSAT	69	62	N/A	N/A
Health Sciences	41	36	N/A	N/A
Oracle	34	28	N/A	N/A
Tapestry	51	47	N/A	N/A
Maritime	29	28	N/A	N/A
Charter Totals	224	201	N/A	N/A
Project Totals	1169	1065	N/A	537

* Classroom visits were completed in January at these schools

The school by school comparisons are useful in terms of understanding the degree to which the project provided support in each context, but we do not focus our attention on these differences. In each case, the needs and circumstances are unique. It should be clear that the total number of students served by the project may exceed the total number of applications submitted for several reasons. First, log numbers include every student we served during phases II, II, and IV, even if they did not complete their form. Second, the aggregated data from the federal government underreports numbers for two reasons – (1) their reports lag submissions dates by as much as a week meaning that students who filed near May 9 may not show up in the report and (2) the estimates are based upon the number of students from the school that are below the age of 19 and many of the seniors we serve are 19 or older. That is an important data limitation that results in lower than expected estimates, particularly in schools that enroll a high percentage of students that either fail to complete high school or that take longer than 4 years. HESC data captures those students who are 19 or above if they are first-time filers, but their data overstates completions because they include any graduate of the high school that is filing their FAFSA for the first time, even if they graduated high school several years prior. The most conservative estimate is the aggregated bi-weekly school data provided by Federal Student Aid (FSA). In prior years, we found that they under-report at schools with a high percentage of immigrant and refugee families. The key barrier on this metric is whether the students identify the appropriate high school. If they type in the name manually, they will not match the listed alternative and will not show up in the numbers.

In 2015-16, approximately 800 students completed the FSA ID and the first half of the FAFSA with project interns and volunteers during phase II of the project, 45 students completed their FAFSA and TAP applications at the scholarship fair, 320 students completed their FAFSA/TAP applications in the schools, during the daytime intern hours, and an additional 115 students completed their FAFSA applications at evening and weekend events coordinated by D'Youville College. Approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of all students completed at least a portion of their FAFSA applications with the completion project and a third finished the process with project interns and volunteers.

Conclusions

In the four years since the FAFSA completion project began, we have worked with more than 150 interns and volunteers to serve nearly 2500 students and families as they completed the financial aid application process for college. Each year, the program has evolved and changed, largely in response to feedback from counselors but also in response to changes to the federal process. As we have described, our single biggest challenge in 2015-16 was the adoption of the FSA ID to replace the PIN. The FSA ID takes twice as long to complete as the PIN with students in the high school and we have found it to be far more challenging to get parents to complete on their own. We need to develop a new set of strategies to help parents with this process earlier for two reasons. First, beginning for the 2017-18 academic year, the FAFSA application will open October 1, 2016, which gives us additional time to serve families. Second, and perhaps more important, now that the IRS tax retrieval tool has been in operation for several years and the Department of Education is willing to accept prior-prior year's tax information to estimate expected family contribution, greater emphasis is being placed on using the tool to automatically import tax data to the FAFSA. Failure to use the tool will increasingly result in the need to provide independent verification of the tax transcript.

As we plan for the 2016-17 academic year, we recognize several challenges that we must address in order to increase FAFSA participation. First is the adoption of the FSA ID. The U.S. Department of Education adopted the alternative electronic signature to increase the security of the system. In the process, the FSA ID process has increased the amount of time it takes to complete the FAFSA and it has made it more difficult for community based organizations and other pre-college outreach programs to provide assistance to students when their parents were not available. Estimates vary on the amount of time it takes to complete the FAFSA, but over four years in the city of Buffalo, we found that it would take approximately 2 school periods (80 minutes). This year, the FSA ID has taken approximately 10 minutes longer, on average, for the student and it requires that students not only have a valid email address but that they can check it during school to verify their username and password. The system will also time out if a student takes too long and many students exceed the time limit for two reasons – the rules dictating the make-up of the username and password and the five security questions. These frustrations are less problematic for students who fill out these forms at home and with their parents, but BPS students rely heavily on the school counseling staff and time is at a premium in schools today.

In the past, a majority of our students would bring their parents taxes with them to school and the interns and volunteers would help the student create a PIN for the parent and log it to take home for the parents' records. In about 10-15% of cases, parents would come to the school to work on the FAFSA with the staff and in another 10% of cases, interns could talk through the PIN and IRS tax retrieval tool by phone. The FSA ID has, by design, made it more difficult to provide this level of assistance remotely and as such, we must find new ways to help low income families complete the FAFSA process. The second related challenge we anticipate will be the reliance on the tax retrieval tool. In our experience, 80% of all students will benefit from the tax retrieval tool because it simplifies the most complicated part of the process for families. However, the remaining 20% are disproportionately represented in urban districts where poverty is high and

many families do not file taxes because they do not earn W-2 based forms of income. In those cases, the tax retrieval tool does nothing to simplify their process. We will continue to be able to enter other forms of income, but it must be done manually and that will require additional contact with families.

The final challenge we face is that Buffalo is a refugee resettlement community with a growing percentage of students in the schools who are English language learners and whose parents do not speak English at all. In our experience, those were the families most likely to send their tax information with their students into the schools precisely because they do not speak the language and have a difficult time navigating services. This group of students is highly motivated to attend college but their immigration status complicates their FAFSA and the FSA ID creates an additional barrier for these parents, many of whom do not have valid emails. We have a plan to build upon our existing FAFSA completion strategy for the city of Buffalo in ways that will allow us to overcome these barriers and in time, we expect that our model will be replicable for other Say Yes communities. We start with the existing project as a foundation, but we plan to refine that strategy to adjust to the addition of the FSA ID and to the changes beginning this year.

Proposed Strategy for Buffalo

Our goal from the first year of the FAFSA completion project was to help 100% of seniors in Buffalo complete their federal and state financial aid applications. The year prior to the implementation of the full project, approximately 640 of 2000 seniors completed their FAFSA. The following year, the numbers grew to 1058 – a sizable improvement but still only 50% of all seniors. We know there is room for growth and the next 5-10% increase will be much more difficult to attain than the first 20%. To address the three barriers we identified in the introduction, we have identified four new strategies: (1) creation of a call center that both receives calls and follows up on leads in the schools, (2) a data management system that simplifies collection of log information in the schools and shares it in real time with the call center to follow up with parents, (3) a password management application for students to manage the array of information they must save for each year they apply for aid, and (4) partnership with the language line to provide translation services for immigrant and refugee parents. We believe that adding these four features to our existing comprehensive school based model will allow us to expand FAFSA completion in the city of Buffalo.

Creating a Call Center

For the past two years, we have partnered with the financial aid office at the University at Buffalo to set up an informal call system for volunteers working with students in the schools. In our experience, well trained volunteers (15-20 hours this past year) can assist students successfully about 80% of the time. The remaining 20% have more complicated situations that require some additional professional judgement. The on-call system allowed volunteers to call a financial aid counselor directly so that they could respond in real time rather than following up at a future date. This has been an important feature of the project because it gives both the school counselors and the interns/volunteers greater confidence in case a difficult question arises. We plan to purchase a subscription to a virtual call center system that will allow us to provide this connection more seamlessly during the day with the financial aid office.

In addition to the daytime support, we plan to establish an evening call center that will follow up with parents who have been identified during the day as needing additional support to complete some portion

of the FAFSA. We will talk about how to share that data in a moment, but the information will be shared from the interns at the school through a data log system indicating the need to follow up with the parent on the FSA ID, their tax information, legal guardianship, immigration status/information, or estimates for non-standard forms of income. We expect that the majority of our calls will be to work with parents on the FSA ID and we have created a worksheet to give students for their parents to complete. In order to maintain data security, we instruct the parents to use it as a worksheet and, in the call center, we can walk them through the creation of the FSA ID username and password. We can also walk them through the process of creating an email account when necessary.

Finally, we can give the call center number and hours to families so they can call in with their questions. In the past, we have not been able to give out the financial aid office direct line because they could not handle the additional call volume with existing staff. The virtual system will allow us to point the calls to the financial aid office during the day and activate another number during the evening. The call center staff will receive additional training above and beyond the current 15-20 hours to address call center protocols, data security and management, and customer service. The call center will also be able to schedule appointments for families either in their high schools during the regularly scheduled hours or at evening events that are provided by partner organizations in community spaces across the city.

Data Management Applications

We expect to develop or utilize two separate tools for data management – a password management system for students and parents and a virtual data sharing database that is easy to use in the schools and can share information seamlessly with the remote call center. We count no fewer than 14 unique data elements that students and parents will create through the FSA ID, FAFSA, New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), and the Say Yes registration. When you add College Board, ACT, and the myriad college application systems, the number of passwords to manage is overwhelming to students and lost usernames and passwords add a tremendous amount of time to the process for many of our students. Students and parents need a tool to help them manage all of these usernames and passwords. There are apps available but our initial review has found that free applications have not been very strong and pay alternatives may be cost prohibitive for low-income students and families.

The second application is part of a much more comprehensive data collection and management strategy. Currently, we manage four separate sources of individual student record data – the district rosters for each high school, the log data from our interns and volunteers in the field, Say Yes eligibility rosters, and the FAFSA and TAP filing status indicators from the Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC). All four provide important insights about financial aid application behavior and we have been working to integrate the four sources over the past two years. Now we recognize the need to collect more robust log data in the schools and to do so electronically rather than taking the additional step of logging participation on paper and then entering it into a database or spreadsheet. One of the key pieces of information is parent contact information. We have found the district managed lists of phone numbers is frequently inaccurate and that students are really the best source of the most up to date contact information. Our process will be to work with a student in the school, give them a copy of the FSA ID form and a description of the services we provide. We will also give them the number to the call center, ask if we can call the parents and if so, what the best number is to call. We can use the calls to follow up on FSA ID and the tax retrieval process primarily but we can also address the other issues identified above.

We plan to start modestly with the data management system. We are looking at Google Forms and other existing free or low cost form based services. We can create a user-friendly interface for the volunteers to access via a tablet in the schools and then we can create a process for access the back end spreadsheet to follow up with families. Once we have a sense of the feasibility of the work flow, we will look to develop of identify a more robust data management tool for this process. The other priority for our data management system is to share student FAFSA and TAP status information with counselors so they can follow up appropriately with students that have either not completed the applications or have errors to be corrected.

Language Line

Buffalo Public Schools already has an established partnership to receive instant translation support when working with families who do not speak English. There are more than 50 languages spoken in the district and they routinely translate materials into seven major languages. The district partners with a local non-profit agency for translation services and they have established a language line to provide real time support. We will work with the district and the language line to serve the financial aid needs of immigrant and refugee families through the call center. They have specific protocols and training for 3-way calls and this service will allow us to extend our reach into our high schools with high percentages of English language learners – where FAFSA completion and college application rates are lower than across the district.

It will take some time to set up the call center, but we will start the FSA ID process in October, which means we will hire interns earlier in the academic year and we will need fewer of them at any one time. Our expectation is that we will need between 6-9 interns (compared to 18 previously) and their time will be spent working with students on the FSA ID in school computer labs and staffing the call center. We are also planning to work closely with the college success centers that will be opening across the district. Two centers are already established at Bennett and International Prep and five more will open in the fall of 2016. Staff in the centers will assist with the FAFSA completion project. We are also expanding our efforts hiring workstudy students from UB (and potentially ECC) to assist students in the college success centers. Last year we had 10 workstudy students working as college access advocates in the college success centers and we plan to double that number at UB alone. We are optimistic that, with some initial start-up costs associated with technology and furniture, we should be able to provide the more robust program at a similar staffing cost.

Finally, we have a team working on developing a more comprehensive web presence for the FAFSA completion project and one of the central features will be to provide access for counselors to the FAFSA training materials we make available to our interns and volunteer. In our experience, counselors continue to provide a good deal of support to students completing their FAFSA, particularly on days when volunteers and interns are not scheduled at the schools. In the final section, we discuss some of the specific changes we plan to implement this year. Many of them follow upon recommendations from previous years' projects.

Changes for the Future

As we have just described, the 2016-17 filing season (for the 2017-18) academic year will introduce important changes to the FAFSA completion project, which requires us to think differently about how to accomplish our goals for this coming year. The following are strategies we will employ to ensure we are prepared for the fifth year of the project in BPS and the charter schools in Buffalo.

Grow the Volunteer Pool

Begin the Recruitment Process Earlier. The good news is that we project needing fewer interns for the project overall. The challenge is that we need interns during both the fall and the spring semesters. With the start of the FAFSA application October 1, we will need to have a team of 4-6 interns in place to assist schools and students with the first half of the FAFSA form. We have already begun the intern recruitment process and we have our coordinator in place with several months before the project begins. We have developed strong pipelines for interns at UB and Buffalo State College and we are excited to grow the workstudy positions as well.

Extend the Number of Higher Education Partners. For the first two years of the project, we relied on volunteers and interns from the University at Buffalo. In 2013-14, all ten interns came from the University at Buffalo. In 2014-15, we collaborated with the HESA program at Buffalo State College and were able to recruit nearly one half of our interns (8 of 18) and the numbers were similar in 2015-16 (9 of 18). Many students enrolled in the Buffalo State program are interested in efforts to increase college access for low- income, first generation, and under-represented minority students and the intern gave them practical experience in pursuit of those interests. We plan to continue and grow the relationship with Buffalo State College and expand our reach to other postsecondary institutions. We will begin with Canisius College because they enroll students in both a school counseling program and a higher education administration program. Students in these programs will find the FAFSA Completion project both interesting and practically relevant for the work they plan to do. We have also begun a conversation with the Upward Bound program and the financial aid director at D'Youville College to extend the capacity of the citywide project through separately funded FAFSA completion work. Finally, we have discussed the possibility of providing workstudy opportunities to ECC students interested in giving back to the community

Refine the Paraprofessional Role

One of the real advantages of using undergraduate and graduate students as interns and volunteers is that they are experts in the college choice process. They have searched for colleges, completed their SAT's, applied to and chosen colleges to attend, completed their own

financial aid applications (in many cases), and figured out how to be successful in college. They are also younger, on average, and find it easier to relate to the high school students we serve. The challenge with any paraprofessional staffing model is that turnover is very high and students pursue these experiences for a variety of different reasons. If we hope to attract a strong pool of interns and volunteers, we must attend to the quality of the experience they receive. For this coming year, we plan to refine our training model and change the scheduling of hours in the schools.

Formalize the Training Program

Each year we have sought ways to better prepare interns and volunteers for their role in the schools. This past year, we added two sessions – the first was facilitated by a Buffalo school counselor to help students understand the high school context and the second session was a primer on the SUNY college application provided by the admissions staff at UB. This year, we offered the training as the equivalent of a one-credit training course in the January term at the University at Buffalo. The three week course was taught as a hybrid course, meaning the first two weeks of content were delivered on-line and the final week was spent in the schools conducting classroom visits and completing the first half of the financial aid process. This change accomplishes two goals. First, it provides volunteers and interns with more comprehensive training than in years past. Students will be able to move at their own pace and they will be able to complete a more rigorous training on topics ranging from the FAFSA, TAP, Say Yes, and Community Foundation scholarship applications to financial literacy, cultural diversity and awareness and the college application process. The third week gives interns and volunteers an opportunity to apply their knowledge by working with students in classrooms during phase II. It also ensures that we have a sufficient staff of interns and volunteers to complete phase II in the schools during January.

Adapt the Hours in the Schools

We have found it difficult to provide the full number of hours interns need through the project, in the context of the work done in schools. We have also found that the existing staffing pattern did not adapt well to the changes in a given school. We plan to have the interns work primarily out of the call center, particularly in the fall, so they can answer calls and have workstudy and volunteers out in the field. When volunteers call in or are unavailable, an intern can cover the needs in the schools. This will also take some of the stress off the school counselors who need to cancel services from time to time. When school is cancelled there is always a place for the interns to work.

Grow the Use of Data

Finally, we recognize the importance of data in all of the work that we do and the potential data has to improve the project in the schools. In this section, we propose two changes from this year

that will allow us to use data more effectively in the FAFSA Completion Project. We will have at least one data intern during the fall and we expect to have another for the spring term.

Make Data Available Earlier. We made progress on making data available earlier to schools this year. The first year of data from HESC developed slowly and was not accessible until April. This year we had access by the end of January. We also made these data available to schools that have previously not sought our help at City Honors and Hutch Tech.

Collaborate with Charter Schools to Provide FAFSA/TAP data

Now that HESC has a process in place, we will offer similar data support to the charter schools. We had hoped to do so this year, but we were not able to initiate the HESC authorization process in time. In order to access this data, each school will need to enter into a contract with HESC and identify the FAFSA completion project as their data analysis coordinators. It is also possible that the schools access and manage this data on their own. In either case, it will give them access to individual student filing status for FAFSA and TAP applications.