



UTAH SYSTEM OF
HIGHER EDUCATION

MEMORANDUM

TAB C

October 21, 2022

Utah College Application Week (UCAW) and Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Completion Events

UCAW and FAFSA completion events are statewide initiatives that support access and affordability to higher education for high school seniors. UCAW provides every high school senior at our partner schools the opportunity to complete at least one college or university application during the school day with the support of an adult knowledgeable in the process. The FAFSA is the gateway to various college financial aid opportunities, such as Pell Grants, scholarships, federal work-study opportunities, and subsidized and unsubsidized federal student loans. UCAW and FAFSA completion events focus on helping high school seniors, especially students who would be the first in their families to attend college, low-income students, or students who may not have otherwise considered post-secondary education. Lastly, UCAW and FAFSA events are a fundamental function of the Utah College Advising Corps program and directly align with the Access and Affordability pillars of the [Board's Strategic Plan](#).

Utah currently ranks [50th \(38.6%\)](#) in FAFSA completion compared to the rest of the country (57.2%) during 2021-2022. However, in alignment with the [Board's Strategic Plan](#), the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (OCHE) has established a set of tactics to address FAFSA completion in Utah. For example, the strategic merge of FAFSA completion efforts and UCAW events has already yielded a tremendous increase in FAFSA events to support parents and students. This year, Utah has had the most USHE-sponsored events ever scheduled in the state.

Utah College Application Week (UCAW)

Purpose and Overview

The purpose of UCAW is to provide every high school senior the opportunity to apply to college with the help of a knowledgeable volunteer, educator, or adviser. UCAW is part of the American College Application Campaign (ACAC), a national effort to increase the number of first-generation college students and students from low-income families pursuing college.

Program Growth

Utah started with eight partner high schools in 2013 and has grown yearly. **UCAW grew from 134 high schools for the 2021-2021 academic year to 147 high schools participating in the 2022-2023**

school year, the largest reach ever.UCAW’s focus is the high school senior; however, younger grade participation grows organically with elementary and junior high engagement in activities to create and increase college awareness. In essence, the success of UCAW stems from school counselors and access advisers who serve as leaders in implementing a college application event at each high school. The support of volunteers from USHE and partner institutions and regional college access partners provides students first-hand access to a knowledgeable adult on institutional-specific admissions and financial aid process and procedures.

Program Future

Every year, school leaders engage in training from the Commissioner’s office related to FAFSA, state scholarships, concurrent enrollment and technical education in high school, higher education pathways, and Keys to Success. Although this list is not exhaustive, the goal of the training is to provide updates on statewide programming and follow up with resources (i.e., the Utah College Application and Financial Aid Resources [webpage](#)) for school leaders to use during Planning for College and Career Readiness (PCCR) meetings and activities with students and their families. In addition, the Commissioner’s office has worked with Keys to Success to develop the College Application Checklist, which interactively walks users through the steps necessary to prepare for college. Inspired by the [Utah College Guide](#) publication, the checklist provides a step-by-step list of the college application process and is available all year to help a student keep track of each step to apply.

FAFSA Completion Events

Purpose and Overview

The purpose of FAFSA completion events in Utah is to assist students in filling out the FAFSA with the support of volunteers and experts. To aid in the FAFSA efforts within Utah, USHE coordinates with high schools to host FAFSA completion events to give high school seniors and their families a place to get help while completing the FAFSA application. In addition, it is encouraged for all schools to continue FAFSA completion efforts throughout the school year.

Program Growth

FAFSA Night events were established in 2008 and have been a major focus for increasing Utah’s FAFSA completion rates. In 2021, the Commissioner’s office merged the FAFSA night and UCAW programs to help students understand that applying for the FAFSA is a crucial piece in applying for college. This merger has initiated an increase in FAFSA event participation with the high schools in the state. **During the 2021-2022 school year, there were 139 USHE FAFSA events statewide. This 2022-2023 school year has 156 USHE FAFSA events scheduled, with over 180 trained volunteers participating. About 138 of those events will happen in October.** Because of the merger of these two programs, school counselors report that events are better attended, and the process is streamlined. From August to September of 2022, the Commissioner’s office has trained approximately 300 professionals—including access advisers, school counselors, USHE institutional staff, and access program partners such as United Way, GEARUP, TRIO, etc.)—to assist students and families with the FAFSA this

school year. In addition, OCHE has developed resources for FAFSA completion professionals, including the sharable [FAFSA Walkthrough Video](#), ongoing webinars, publications, and best practices.

Program Future

As previously stated, Utah ranks 50th in FAFSA completion, averaging 35% in high school FAFSA completion rates during the school year. USHE is on the right track to address FAFSA completion to increase college enrollment because there is a correlation between FAFSA completion and increased enrollment in postsecondary education. The National College Attainment Network ([NCAN](#)) reports that of those who completed the FAFSA, 91.8% enrolled in postsecondary education. In contrast, for students who did not complete the FAFSA, only 51.1% enrolled in postsecondary education. The increase in events and training efficiency looks promising, particularly with the alignment to the UCAC program, as they continue to be the structure to reach students. The upcoming FAFSA Completion Equity Dashboard, which is in collaboration with USBE, supports FAFSA completion by providing live disaggregated data to high school professionals to strategically support students equitably. Lastly, OCHE serves as the FAFSA expert to inform FAFSA professionals regarding the upcoming FAFSA Simplification Act, which will directly impact students filing next school year.

Commissioner's Recommendation

This is an information item only; no action is required.

Attachment