



UTAH SYSTEM OF
HIGHER EDUCATION

MEMORANDUM

October 4, 2024

FAFSA Completion Updates

Access to higher education is linked to financial support, and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) plays a pivotal role in this process. Completion of the FAFSA enables access to essential funding sources, including scholarships, grants, loans, and work-study programs. Despite promises of simplification, the new FAFSA introduced glitches and challenges that affected various stakeholders across the nation in areas related to applying, submitting, and data accuracy. To address Utah FAFSA completion, two primary approaches were launched by the Utah System of Higher Education in 2024: 1) utilization of student success endowment funding; and 2) initiation of a summer FAFSA completion campaign.

Student Success Endowment

During its meeting on June 6, 2024, the Board approved a FY 2025 spending policy for the Higher Education Student Success Endowment and directed the Commissioner's office to allocate available funds to the USHE institutions. The Board directed the Commissioner's office to use these funds to provide financial aid to students who were unable to complete a FAFSA due to the limitations of the revised 2024-25 federal form and who otherwise would have qualified for federal aid. Board members unanimously supported the immediate deployment of the FY 2025 endowment funding to serve as a one-year "contingency bridge" before adopting a permanent endowment spending policy for FY 2026 and beyond.

As of September 24, 2024, USHE institutions had made 287 awards to students who were unable to complete a 2024-25 FAFSA, demonstrated financial need through completion of the Federal Aid Estimator, and who otherwise would have qualified for federal financial aid. USHE institutions disbursed over \$300,000 in endowment funds to assist these students during the fall 2024 semester, with an estimated \$650,000 to be awarded to students by the end of FY 2025.

The Board approved the use of excess endowment funds to supplement four other established state aid programs after institutions had addressed the financial needs of students who could not complete a FAFSA due to the ongoing issues with the new form. These existing state aid programs are intended to provide financial assistance to students who demonstrate financial need, are pursuing approved degrees that lead to high-wage and high-demand jobs, or engage in community service.

FAFSA Completion Strategy

In July 2024, the Commissioner's office was awarded \$300,000 from [Educational Credit Management Corporation \(ECMC\)](#), a nonprofit providing services in support of higher education finance, to support its [FAFSA Help Initiative](#), which aims to help Utah families and students complete the FAFSA for the 2024-25 academic year. Funds were utilized to develop primarily self-guided assistance webpages, create and deploy social media advertisements, contract with social media content creators to share FAFSA help resources, begin the development of chatbot resources, translate marketing resources to Spanish, and direct students to other help resources.

Chatbot

The Office of the Commissioner's Access team met with multiple states that have implemented chatbot resources to guide prospective students on affordability and FAFSA completion. The Commissioner's office will be working with the company Mainstay to launch a chatbot resource this fall to aid students, families, and access partners with affordability and access content.

FAFSA Help Initiative

The Office of the Commissioner's Access and Communication teams partnered to develop and implement the FAFSA Help Initiative to support the completion of FAFSA applications through outreach efforts.

As a result of challenges with the 2024-25 FAFSA application, the state of Utah was down 6.9% (-3,297 applications) in FAFSA completions at the start of these efforts compared to last school year. Since May 2024, 5,339 Utah students have completed the FAFSA, an increase of 1,796 FAFSA completions compared to last year over the same period. Although completion numbers are still lower than the year before, at the end of August, the gap was closed to -3.6% (-1,501 applications).

FAFSA Increase Per Month	Summer Starting Completion Numbers	May % of Increase	June % of Increase	July % of Increase	August % of Increase	End of August Completion Numbers
2024	13,772	3.4%	2.1%	2.4%	2.5%	19,111
2023	16,756	1.7%	1.8%	1.6%	2.2%	20,612

As part of our efforts toward increasing FAFSA completions over the summer to ensure that students had the information they needed to start or complete the FAFSA, we reached students through the following channels:

- **Websites** ([USHE.edu/FAFSA](#)) and ([USHE.edu/FAFSA-es](#))

Webpages in English and Spanish were created for students and parents to self-guide users in starting or completing the FAFSA. A direct line to the Access team was also available if individuals viewing the page needed personalized assistance.

- ***Social Ads***

Six English student and parent ads and six Spanish student and parent ads were developed and shared over Instagram and Facebook to advertise the help resources available at ushe.edu, reaching 478,175 individuals and gaining more than 1.7M impressions. The USHE resource websites received a combined 11,984 clicks from the ads. The ads predominantly reached students aged 18-23 and parents aged 35-60 in both urban and rural areas across Utah.

- ***Social Media***

Another key component of the social outreach included partnering with Utah content creators to share their personal FAFSA success stories and to guide their followers through the process of applying for federal financial aid. These content creators reached a collective audience of over 670,000 individuals and produced a variety of content about the FAFSA, including Instagram Reels, Stories, and posts on both Instagram and Facebook. Content creator outreach generated strong engagement, with, collectively, nearly 6,000 likes and 200 positive comments, while the Reels alone gathered close to 200,000 views.

- ***Earned Media***

FAFSA completion stories were covered on three major Utah media outlets, further spreading the message for students and parents to fill out the FAFSA and that resources and help were available:

- [Financial aid delays leave many Utah college students in limbo as classes start](#)
- [Time to complete the FAFSA is dwindling, but Utah students can still take advantage](#)
- [Utah colleges and universities receive funding to help families with delayed FAFSA applications](#)
- [Utah Board of Higher Education allocates \\$8.5M for students impacted by FAFSA delays](#)

Continued Outreach

The Access team remains committed to scaling effective activities to assist in FAFSA completion efforts for 2024-25. Highlighted initiatives include: partnership with AdmitUtah initiative resources and marketing; further collaboration with institutions and the Utah State Board of Education; and implementing enhancements of the chatbot.

Commissioner's Recommendation

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