



2023-2024 AWARD WINNERS

# Case Studies

# Introduction

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Completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) remains a critical step in affording postsecondary education. For the Class of 2024, a major overhaul of the FAFSA brought significant changes to the form for the first time in 40 years with the goal of streamlining and improving the application process. However, these changes were hindered by technical glitches and unfortunate delays that made the FAFSA an even greater challenge for many educators and their students. As seniors worked to resolve problems with the form, further delaying their college decision process, educators rallied to advocate for the Class of 2024. Despite having a much shorter timeline to complete the task, school counselors and career coaches expedited their supportive activities and called on partners to provide hands-on assistance.

In honor of the effort that educators put into supporting key graduation tasks like the FAFSA, the Alabama Goes to College Campaign annually recognizes high schools with the highest completion rates and the greatest improvement rates. However, due to a challenging FAFSA cycle that did not see much improvement for individual schools or the state as a whole, end-of-year awards were given to the top two schools with the highest completion rates in each of the five size categories<sup>1</sup>. While the award-winning schools represent different regions of the state, they share a commitment to overcoming challenges related to financial aid and postsecondary access. Their persistence and dedication resulted in maintaining high rates of participation for this particular postsecondary task despite new obstacles to navigate and troubleshoot. The following profiles outline each school's most successful strategies for FAFSA completion.

<sup>1</sup> The school size categories were based on senior enrollment and defined as follows:

- Extra Small: 1-72
- Small: 73-144
- Medium: 145-285
- Large: 286-378
- Extra Large: 379+

# Key Strategies

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In a year of significant changes to the financial aid form, many award-winning educators focused on **building awareness with families**. Not only were families informed of the significance of completing the FAFSA, but they were also educated on each step they would need to take to finish the task. This strategy emphasized communicating with students and their parents in a way that engaged everyone in the process.

Click [here](#) to access awareness and outreach communications in the Educators Toolkit.



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Given the unusual nature of this FAFSA cycle, families had to navigate several technical issues that meant **accessing hands-on support** was critical. This often took the form of one-on-one appointments where students and their families could get step-by-step guidance from a financial aid expert. With this level of support from school staff and community partners, seniors could advance through the form more confidently.

Click [here](#) to request support from Alabama Goes to College.



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With a shortened timeline to work on the FAFSA, educators were closely **monitoring student progress** to ensure this task was completed before graduation. Educators then intentionally followed up with students, tailoring their outreach and support to the specific stage of the process where students had stopped or encountered difficulty. Many educators used this outreach as an opportunity to counsel students and families and connect them to useful resources to complete the task.

Click [here](#) to access the Alabama Commission on Higher Education's FAFSA Completion Portal.



# Geneva County High School

*Geneva County Schools*



## Summary:

Located in the southeastern part of the state, Geneva County High School is an extra small school in Hartford, Alabama. The Class of 2024 consisted of 46 graduating seniors, described by Counselor Casey Watters as a highly motivated cohort. As the middle school and high school counselor, Watters has many responsibilities to manage, but she rallies together internal and external partners who support seniors in crafting their plans and preparing for next steps. With many of their seniors choosing to start at a two-year college or enter the workforce, Watters leverages the local community college and the regional career tech center to ensure seniors graduate feeling prepared. Having won a Cash for College Award in a previous year, Geneva County High School continues to prove the efficacy of the strategies they employ with their students.

## Successful Strategies:

- **Building early awareness:** Starting as early as middle school, Geneva County students receive extra counseling through involvement with the Educational Talent Search (ETS) program at the nearby community college. This program exposes students to their academic, career, and financial options and explains the steps they will need to take to pursue postsecondary pathways. Elementary and middle school students are incorporated into events that celebrate graduating seniors so they see what is possible for their futures.
- **Maintaining effective external partnerships:** Representatives from Enterprise State Community College support FAFSA events hosted during the school day and into the evening so that a financial aid expert is always available to answer questions and help navigate the form. This assistance was particularly important during this FAFSA cycle when there were so many problems to troubleshoot as Federal Student Aid was working to resolve technical issues. Additionally, Geneva Regional Career Tech Center, as well as local banks and businesses, supported a life skills day that included hands-on activities for students to experience many real-world scenarios of adulthood. FAFSA completion was one component of this event.
- **Promoting enticing incentives:** While this cohort was already highly motivated to complete college-going tasks, the counselor utilized incentives to encourage seniors to complete tasks efficiently. Seniors were educated on the many benefits of completing a FAFSA, including banking extra funds from opportunities like the CollegeCounts Scholarship awarded by the Alabama Treasury. With the FAFSA complete, students not only determined their eligibility for federal, state, and institutional aid but also earned a Community Learning Day, where they could take a day off from classes to go on a college tour, write scholarship essays, volunteer, or work on other tasks of their choice.

# Loveless Academic Magnet Program High School

*Montgomery County Schools*



## **Summary:**

Loveless Academic Magnet Program (LAMP) High School serves students across the Montgomery Public Schools. With around 95% of seniors intending to go to a four-year college or university, LAMP fosters an academically-motivated, college-going culture. In her first year as Professional School Counselor at LAMP, Mary Kelley focused on building relationships with students and maintaining the expectations that were set for them when they started the program. Kelley utilized her 13 years of experience in the field to provide an extra layer of encouragement to seniors who were already eager to prepare for their next steps.

## **Successful Strategies:**

- **Setting Expectations:** When students start at LAMP, they are introduced to a college-going culture through an orientation called “LAMP Camp.” Starting in 9th grade, students are required to participate in preparatory activities such as taking a Research, Speech, and Debate course; beginning an Advanced Placement scope and sequence; and becoming familiar with standardized testing. This early exposure continues with college visits and opportunities to meet with recruiters during the school day. The Class of 2024 received an overview of the FAFSA early in the year and were given realistic expectations about the process for when the form opened later in the year. Students also received a worksheet to know what to expect and could review additional information through a Google site managed by the counselor.
- **Building Relationships:** In her first year as counselor at LAMP, Kelley focused on building relationships with seniors by having an open-door policy. Students were able to bring financial aid questions as they arose. She also coordinated with content teachers to visit classrooms, ensuring her presence was prominent among graduating seniors. Kelley focused on connecting students to important relationships at their institutions of choice by bringing many college recruiters to campus to answer admissions questions. Financial aid experts from nearby colleges also came to discuss the process of applying for aid and affording college. These interactions gave students ample opportunity to connect with educators and mentors who could guide them into their postsecondary pursuits.

# Ramsay High School

*Birmingham City Schools*



## **Summary:**

Ramsay High School is a magnet program within Birmingham City Schools. Serving as the Lead Counselor for 11th and 12th grade, Dr. Steven Tarver hosts several hands-on activities and events to ensure seniors are actively preparing for their next steps after graduation. Knowing that senior year is especially busy, Ramsay staff create intentional opportunities for students to complete important tasks while on campus and during school hours. This approach simplifies the process and ensures seniors have the support they need to navigate an often-complicated process.

## **Successful Strategies:**

- **Keeping families informed:** Key to Ramsay's success is involving families in the college-going process. Parents and guardians are contacted via multiple channels about upcoming events and recommended timelines for completing tasks. With parents being a critical component in the financial aid application, this strategy ensures they are updated so that seniors get the assistance they need.
- **Leveraging local partners:** Ramsay recruited local partners to support an annual FAFSA mixer, where students and parents could attend different stations to learn about postsecondary options and to understand the steps required to get there. At this event, community organizations like College Prep U and College Choice Foundation were available to chat with families and answer questions. Although usually held earlier in the academic year, this event took place in January due to the FAFSA's delayed opening.
- **Offering hands-on support:** A weekly FAFSA Blitz offered seniors a dedicated time to work on their financial aid application with support from local partners who came to campus during electives. Depending on the week, students could receive one-on-one or group support. This regular offering ensured no senior got left behind and even provided students with an opportunity to work on additional scholarship applications.

## LARGE SCHOOL MVP

# Chelsea High School

*Shelby County Schools*



### **Summary:**

Chelsea High School is a large school within Shelby County Schools located in Central Alabama. Counselor Farrah Fowler and Career Coach Anna Jones worked to inform over 300 students of the advantages of completing the FAFSA. In a population that might not have as great of a financial need, educators emphasized the FAFSA as a gateway to all kinds of aid to ease the cost of postsecondary pursuits. With a college-going mindset as part of the school culture, students were motivated to complete their financial aid form when it opened. Educators were there to support them in the process and to meet families where they were by providing one-on-one assistance. Progress was closely monitored and any family who had not completed the task was contacted individually to ensure that any barrier hindering the process was removed.

### **Successful Strategies:**

- **Promoting benefits:** Working with a population of students coming from middle- and upper-income families, the staff at Chelsea had to contend with a few misconceptions related to the financial aid application and why it is part of students' graduation checklist. With many students concerned about accumulating debt, counselors focused on educating students that completing the FAFSA is not just to determine eligibility for federal loans but also grants and scholarships that never have to be paid back. Educators also emphasized that many organizational and institutional scholarships require a FAFSA. Seniors learn that the FAFSA is for all students and that taking advantage of the opportunity can open many doors they might not have considered.
- **Monitoring progress:** While the Class of 2024 was motivated to complete college-going tasks, the staff at Chelsea followed up with students regularly to ensure they did not have any outstanding assignments. Students could attend two different sessions where they could work on their FAFSA in a computer lab. For students who had not submitted their FAFSA towards the latter half of the academic year, the Career Coach was available to work with them one-on-one. Parents were also contacted individually so that students' progress was not hindered.

# Vestavia Hills High School

*Vestavia Hills City Schools*



## **Summary:**

Located in Jefferson County, Vestavia Hills High School serves over 500 seniors who are supported by two dedicated college counselors. Early in the school year, counselors provided an overview of the financial aid process, including how to complete the FAFSA and apply to scholarships. As students begin taking practical steps such as creating their FSA IDs, one-on-one appointments with counselors are available as needed. Throughout the year, communications are consistent, so that families know what tasks are left to do and how to receive direct support. Vestavia Hills educators pay special attention to certain student populations, including those who might need additional support and are likely to receive Pell Grant aid, so that all students feel more confident about their next steps after graduation.

## **Successful Strategies:**

- **Maintaining consistent communications:** With the FAFSA opening later in the year and the timeline to complete it being shorter, the counselor employed regular communications with students and parents. By utilizing the Remind platform with students and sending a parent newsletter every few weeks, families were kept informed on the importance of this task. These reminders prompted families to call and email counselors for direct support. Educators focused on providing accurate information and building trust with parents who were most hesitant to share their information.
- **Utilizing targeted outreach:** With a student population largely planning on attending four-year colleges and universities, the educators at Vestavia Hills focused their energy on reaching students from lower-income households, students who would be the first in their family to go to college, and students who were experiencing homelessness. The goal of this targeted approach was to invest in students with greater needs for support and resources. This support even extended beyond the school year, with assistance available to students during the summer when access to resources and mentorship becomes relatively scarce.



# Runners Up

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## EXTRA SMALL SCHOOL RUNNER UP

### Lamar County High Intermediate

*Lamar County Schools*



#### **Most Successful Strategy:**

- **Promoting hands-on activities that engage parents:** Lamar County students have an additional incentive to complete the FAFSA since they are eligible for the Bovay Scholarship, a last dollar scholarship that covers tuition, fees, and books at Beville State Community College. Counselor Tara Fields at Lamar County High School invested in several opportunities for students and their families to learn about paying for college and complete the financial aid application together. From Senior Meeting at the beginning of the school year to FAFSA Nights hosted with assistance from the local community college, families were invited to participate in the college-going process with ample support. With intentional communication, Counselor Fields ensured families were aware of the opportunities available to them.

## SMALL SCHOOL RUNNER UP

### Guntersville High School

*Guntersville City Schools*



#### **Most Successful Strategy:**

- **Providing step-by-step guidance:** Like many educators, Career Coach Sherry Brown understands that families at Guntersville High School sometimes felt uncomfortable with the complexity of the FAFSA. To combat that feeling, she created a step-by-step presentation of the FAFSA using screenshots of the form. Presenting this to students during their Economics class, she dispelled some of the uncertainty that students had about the process. With schedules so busy after school, finding time during the school day to complete these tasks seemed most successful rather than trying to coordinate after-school events that would not be well attended. When parents expressed hesitance with the form, they were invited into the office to work on it one-on-one to ensure that they had assistance in a comfortable environment.

## MEDIUM SCHOOL RUNNER UP

### Hartselle High School

*Hartselle City Schools*



#### Most Successful Strategy:

- **Offering dedicated time slots to receive support:** While Career Coach Cory Wilbanks found that the improvements to the FAFSA had made completion of the form somewhat more streamlined for Hartselle High School seniors, she still focused on providing intentional support through FAFSA days in the library during school hours. Families could sign up for assistance through a Google form. This process was well-received with many families registering for the first opportunity available. FAFSA completion was supported by Calhoun Community College, which served as a close partner in the college-going process.

## LARGE SCHOOL RUNNER UP

### Fairhope High School

*Baldwin County Public Schools*



#### Most Successful Strategy:

- **Monitoring completion status closely and following up intentionally:** While Fairhope High School's Class of 2024 was motivated to surpass the FAFSA completion rate of their high-achieving predecessors, these seniors had to contend with a form experiencing many technical issues. Despite these problems, families were eager to take advantage of financial aid workshops supported by Coastal Alabama Community College. Counselor Treavie Ainsworth then closely monitored completion status by regularly checking the Alabama Commission on Higher Education's portal. Ainsworth sent notices to students whose FAFSA was in progress and worked with students who had submitted the form but had errors. She also used the portal to facilitate planning conversations with students who had not even started the form.

## EXTRA LARGE SCHOOL RUNNER UP

### Auburn High School

*Auburn City Schools*



#### **Most Successful Strategy:**

- **Building awareness with families:** With many seniors to reach, Counselor Isalie Corneil focused on disseminating educational information and sending regular reminders about the importance of the FAFSA to families at Auburn High School. Educators made sure to supplement financial aid information that was shared during academic sessions at the beginning of the school year with educational handouts that gave families the practical tools needed to understand and complete the form. The weekly schoolwide newsletter also frequently underscored why the FAFSA was a critical piece of the graduation checklist.