

An abstract graphic featuring three blue circles of varying sizes and two thin blue lines. One large circle is at the top center, a smaller one is below it, and another large circle is at the bottom right. Two thin blue lines intersect to form a V-shape, with the top circle and the smaller circle positioned within the upper part of the 'V'.

The Buffalo FAFSA Completion Project

Final Report 2016-17

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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. Project staff collaborate with school counselors to help students and families complete the financial aid application process. In 2013, 40 volunteers helped BPS counselors over the course of two months increase its FAFSA completion rates by 61.7% in Buffalo Public Schools (BPS) in a single year.

During the 2016-17 filing season, the project evolved in several important ways. First, the US Department of Education and Federal Student Aid changed the start date for FAFSA from January 1 to October 1 – three months earlier. Second, and perhaps more important, the federal government is now allowing students and families to use their prior-prior year (PPY) taxes, meaning students could submit their FAFSA in October, 2016 with their tax information from 2015. In the past, families could use their prior taxes but only to estimate their awards; they were still responsible for updating their most current tax information. This change was crucial as it moved the timeline of our program up, but also allowed students to submit their FAFSA early and receive their admissions and financial aid decisions at one time. This change will be permanent and moving forward the filing date will be October 1. Overall, this is a positive development for students and families, but it complicates the college application process timeline for counselors in schools.

This year, we did not shift the entire project from the spring to the fall but we made two important changes. First, we created a call center on UB's South Campus. Interns were available from the end of October through the end of May during evening hours Monday through Friday, 5-8pm. Over that time, we received nearly 100 phone calls and met with more than 30 families to complete their financial aid applications. We found that most of the traffic in the center came from City Honors, which is consistent with what we found previously at the scholarship fair and many of the Say Yes sponsored workshops.

Our training evolved to be a blended online and classroom experience. Our staff of 15 interns and 14 college success center staff completed a 20 hour, self-paced on-line course and debriefed with a Saturday in person training on school culture, expectations and technical FAFSA training. We ran these trainings in the Fall and Spring semester because we recruited new staff each semester.

The highlights for this year show that 1115 BPS students and 323 charter school students submitted applications, and 91% of those applications were accepted by the Department of Education by May 2017. These numbers are the highest on record for the FAFSA completion project, and reflect an increase in applications for the first time since the project was launched in 2013. TAP

applications continue to lag behind FAFSA applications, with about 2 of every 3 students who complete their FAFSA also completing their TAP applications. The proportion of students served by the project dropped slightly this year from about 2/3 of students to just under 50%. The reduction is a consequence of the early application timeline and the decisions of a number of schools to avoid the classroom sessions where students complete the FSA ID and the first half of the form. We expect these numbers to increase this year as we shift our implementation timeline forward into October.

Introduction

The FAFSA Completion Project has just completed its fifth year of operation in the city of Buffalo and in partnership with Buffalo Public Schools, the public charter high schools, and Say Yes to Education Buffalo. In that time, more than 200 volunteers and interns from UB, Buffalo State College, and the local community have provided more than 15,000 hours of service to the local community and helped nearly 3,000 students and families with the financial aid application process. We have discussed the history and evolution of the project in prior reports but it is important to reiterate that the project has changed dramatically over the course of five years. Some of those changes are simply a refinement of a process as we brought a single pilot project to scale to over 20 high schools. For example, our training program is much more comprehensive in 2017 than it was when we began in 2012. Many more of those changes are the result of changing federal and state application processes. Since the inception of the program, Federal Student Aid (FSA) has shifted from the Personal Identification Number (PIN) to the FSA ID as the electronic signature to the application, the US Department of Education has partnered with the Internal Revenue Service to launch the tax retrieval tool, and beginning this past year, the application was opened October 1 for 2017-18 prospective college applicants and they were allowed to use prior-prior year (PPY) tax information to calculate the expected family contribution (EFC).

During that time, the US Department of Education launched a pilot study to assess whether giving school counselors access to FAFSA completion data for students would increase FAFSA completion rates. Their findings were modest, but they empowered states to make these data available to schools – a process that is now overseen by the Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC) in New York State. The Say Yes registration process has also changed over this time as new systems have been utilized. The project has had to adapt to each of these changes and, in our estimation, the program is stronger as a result.

For the 2017-18 academic year, New York State has added an additional wrinkle to the financial aid application process. Governor Andrew Cuomo announced the creation of the Excelsior Scholarship program and the corresponding Enhanced Tuition Assistance program for private colleges for students beginning college in the fall of 2017 or who meet eligibility criteria as upper-class students. Excelsior is intended to serve as a last dollar tuition guarantee for students whose families earn less than \$100,000 annually – a threshold that will increase to \$125,000 in 3 years. Excelsior will operate in concert with TAP, meaning the program will provide greater benefits to middle and upper-middle income families. Interns and volunteers will be trained to assist families with this additional application.

In this report, we summarize our findings from the 2016-17 academic year. It was the first year that we offered full year-round service and a call center to serve the needs of Buffalo parents. We begin by describing the project and the work that was conducted this past year. Next, we examine

the outcomes of the project, utilizing data from Federal Student Aid and HESC. We conclude by discussing what we have learned and how we expect the project to change for the 2017-18 academic year.

FAFSA Completion Project, 2016-17

Each year, the program evolved to address the 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, 2016-17

Activity	Frequency	Interns & Volunteers	Total Volunteer Hours
Phase I Site Visits	21 schools	2	42 hours
Volunteer Training	On-line, one Saturday	20	450 hours
Phase II - Classroom Visits	16 schools	4	384 hours
Phase III – Call Center	Weekly	20	1,440 hours
Phase IV - FAFSA/TAP Completion	21 schools	30	2,520 hours
Data Collection & Reporting	weekly	2	96 hours
Total		23 schools	4,932 hours

We estimate that over the course of seven months (October through April), FAFSA Completion Project interns, volunteers, and staff provided more than 4,900 hours of service in BPS and public charter high schools. In addition to the work done by project staff, we estimate that as many as 15 events were held at Buffalo Public Schools and in the parent centers. 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, and call center office hours were sometimes quiet, 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.

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 provided each with their student record data of FAFSA and TAP completions so they know which of their students need support. We also found that many of the students using the call center were from either Hutch Tech or City Honors. We will continue to examine whether an additional level of service will be necessary at either school but it will depend on the school's interest.

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 continue to conduct site visits because we believe no single plan can or will appropriately fit all schools. 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.

This year we partnered with GEAR UP Buffalo, which has seven college success centers in BPS high schools. The centers were primary responsible for FAFSA completion activities in the building and were located in Lafayette High School, East High School, Bennett High School, MST High School, Burgard High School, South Park High School and International Preparatory High School. The GEAR UP staff and the FAFSA interns were trained together so that the services were seamless across the city.

Phase II – FAFSA Completion Week

During the second phase of the project, we visited classrooms in 9 of 17 BPS high schools and 2 of 5 charter high schools – a decrease from last year, but explainable by the pressure felt by counselors to start everything earlier this year. We found that several high schools launched their own initiatives to complete FSA ID's because they thought institutions would require earlier submissions of financial aid applications. In most cases, colleges and universities had not significantly changed their processes, but there is some indication that this may change in the future. During those sessions, we helped students complete the FSA ID and the first half of the FAFSA and provided information on our nighttime office hours. We will address this challenge in the concluding section of the report.

Phase III – Call Center Support

This year we introduced call center evening support to the services offered by our project. We started the call center in response to the shift from the PIN to the FSA ID. FSA made the change to make the FAFSA application process more secure and we believe they have been successful in doing so. However, it created two challenges for the project. First, the FSA ID takes nearly twice as long to complete as the PIN and the system would time out if students took too long to complete the form. First, many students required additional time creating a username and password that were required to meet certain criteria. We estimate that the PIN took students about 10 minutes on average where the FSA ID would take 20-30 minutes, depending on the school. Second, we found this to be an even greater barrier for parents. More students were reporting that their parents would not create their usernames and passwords, which meant that a significant number of dependent students were not able to complete their FAFSA's. We created the call center to provide support to these parents outside of the school day.

The call center hours were Monday-Friday 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. (EST). Our hope with this offering was that it would offer a way for parents that work during the school day to have access to our support without taking time away from work. Because prior to the call center we only offered support during the day, we were hopeful that we would serve the needs of families during the after school hours. From October 2016 through April of 2017, we served more than 3 dozen families in the call center. We anticipated more interest in the call center option and we believe interest will continue to grow, but we will adapt our staffing strategy to more efficiently utilize interns, staff, and volunteers. What the call center did allow however, was follow up calls with seniors to remind them of the importance of filing their FAFSA and TAP. This piece of Phase III will be continued into next year's program, and we are considering offering one night a week, but locating it in one of the community schools for easier access for families.

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. Beginning in February, an intern was placed on-site at each high school. That high school was their assigned school for the semester and allowed them to establish some continuity for students and a relationship for counselors to rely upon. We provide this service in partnership with school counselors in each of the participating high schools. Our experience over five years underscores the important role school counselor's play in the success of the project – in fact, the project only works when school counselors connect students with the project staff.

For the second year, we were able to use information from HESC on FAFSA and TAP completion to create weekly reports for each school. These reports detailed student status on completing both forms and if they had any errors associated with their completion. Each week counselors and

interns were sent a report on individual student progress and this allowed for intentional follow-up—something our program had not yet integrated into the process. The new way of collecting and reporting data was something counselors appreciated as it allowed them to pin-point students for appointments as opposed to relying on self-reporting from students. It also allowed our team to focus call center attention on students who had errors in their FAFSA/TAP and focus follow up in intentional ways. We plan to continue this process for next year and continue to make improvements on our data collection and reporting. Table 2 provides a quick summary of the services provided to each partner school.

Table 2. FAFSA Completion Services by High School

	Site Visits	FSA ID Classroom	School Support	Data Support
<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	●	○	●	●
<i>Buffalo Public Charter Schools</i>				
CSAT	●	○	●	●
Health Sciences	●	○	●	●
Oracle	●	●	●	●
Tapestry	●	○	○	●
Maritime	●	●	●	●

● = service was provided

○ = service was not provided

Each year we continue to conduct site visits with each partner school to determine their needs and to discuss plans for the coming year. We were able to conduct site visits at all of our partner

schools except City Honors and Hutch Tech, though the scheduling of visits were spread over a longer period of time with the early application timeline. We began site visits the first week of October and conducted the final visit at the beginning of January. The new timeline created some unexpected challenges. Some schools chose to do their own FAFSA sessions early in the semester because they were nervous about the new timeline. Others chose to wait until January so they had sufficient time to complete college applications. In both cases, we found less interest in having the FAFSA team complete the classroom work with the seniors at certain schools.

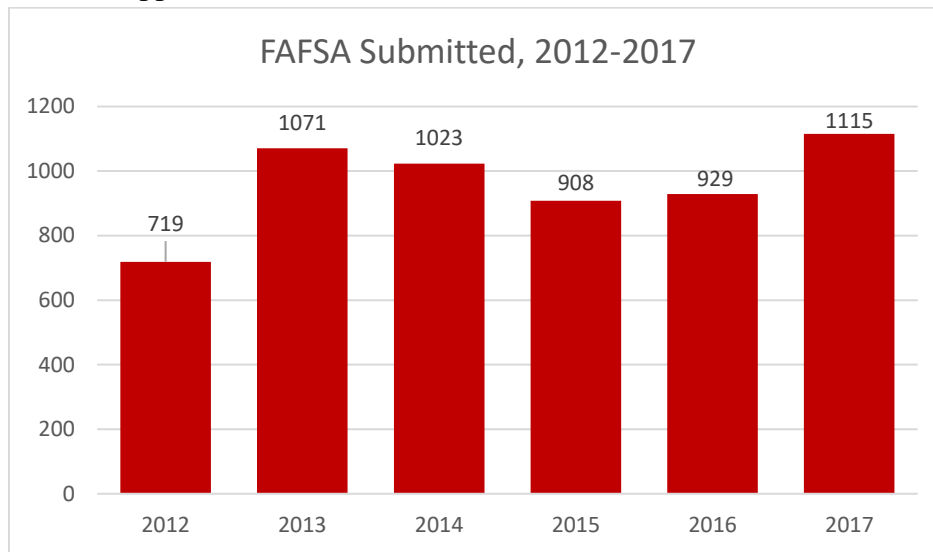
FAFSA Completion Outcomes, 2016-17

In this section, we report our findings from the fifth 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, the FAFSA opened on October 1, and some counselors began FAFSA completion before our team was in the schools for phase III on a consistent basis. Second, our data evolved this year to be much more user friendly and reliable for the counselors, a tool we have not offered in years past that made follow up much more concentrated. This year, we saw a significant increase in the total number of FAFSA applications submitted in BPS high schools – in fact, more students submitted in 2017 (1115) than had done so the first year of the project (1071) by the middle of May – approximately two weeks after we complete our work in the schools (see Figure 1). This was the first increase we have seen since the very successful first year of the project, where we reported a year to year increase of 61%.

Finally, we do not 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 2017. In our reports to schools, we provide them with a percentage of their seniors who complete the FAFSA but this is an imperfect measure of success. 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 timeframe. 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. With those caveats in mind, the data available during the 2016-17 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.

Figure 1.

FAFSA Applications Submitted in BPS, 2012-2017



The increase of 186 FAFSA's completed from 2016 to 2017 represents an increase of more than 20%, which is the first significant increase we have experienced since the first year of the project. Perhaps more important, we saw a 4% increase in submitted applications compared to our highest previous total in 2013. We expect that much of the improvement is the result of changes implemented this year to the FAFSA application process – notably the opening of the 2017-18 application on October 1 and the shift to using prior-prior year taxes. We also expect that the addition of the call center contributed to the increase.

Figure 2.

FAFSA Applications Submitted in Charter High Schools, 2012-17

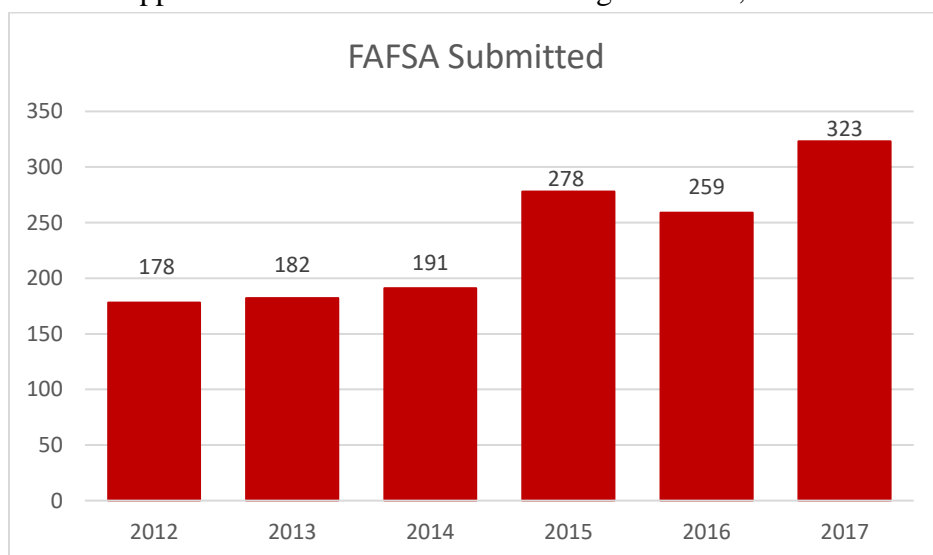


Table 3 provides a comprehensive summary of FAFSA and TAP applications completed as part of the project. We utilize data from two separate sources – the aggregated school level data provided by Federal Student Aid (FSA) and the individual record data for FAFSA and TAP submissions provided by the Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC). The FSA numbers allow for comparisons from the beginning of the project through 2017, which can be helpful when considering whether changes in the project have improved student outcomes over time. The more accurate source of data for the current class of graduating students is what we report as the HESC data in the fourth column. The HESC data are linked to school rosters so that we are only capturing FAFSA applications from currently enrolled students.

Table 3.

FAFSA and TAP Applications Completed by School and Data Source, 2016-17

<i>Buffalo Public Schools</i>	FSA (5/19)			FAFSA Estimates		TAP
	Submit	Complete	HESC (5/09)	Lower	Upper	
Bennett	27	20	14	14	27	7
BAVPA	107	101	84	84	101	65
Burgard	34	27	20	20	27	8
City Honors	119	118	114	114	118	84
East	21	19	14	14	19	7
Emerson	53	50	42	14	50	28
Frederick Olmsted	66	61	56	42	61	41
Hutch Tech	165	156	148	148	156	80
Int'l. Prep	42	40	42	40	42	28
Lafayette	70	62	55	55	62	40
Leonardo DaVinci	58	56	45	45	56	23
MST	60	50	47	47	50	26
McKinley	127	109	89	89	109	63
Middle Early	42	37	27	27	37	21
Riverside	37	34	28	28	34	22
South Park	87	80	71	71	80	40
BPS Sub-totals	1115	1020	896	852	1029	583
<i>Buffalo Public Charter Schools</i>						
BASCS	42	38	-	-	-	-
CSAT	91	79	55	55	79	26
Health Sciences	56	50	-	-	-	-
Oracle	27	25	16	16	25	13
Tapestry	65	60	-	-	-	-
Maritime	42	34	-	-	-	-
Charter Totals	323	303	71	71	104	39
Project Totals	1438	1323	967	967	1323	609

* Classroom visits were completed in January at these schools

The first important statistic is the total number of FAFSA's submitted in BPS by the end of the project. As we highlighted in the figure earlier, 1115 submitted FAFSA's is nearly 5% higher than the 61% increase in 2013. Column 3 is a more conservative estimate because it only includes the applications that were accepted by the federal government. The remaining applications include errors or missing signatures. To put that number into perspective for BPS, the 1020 completed in 2017 is nearly as high as the total numbers submitted in 2013 (1031). The HESC estimate is consistently lower for two reasons. First, as we discussed, by matching on first and last name, there is likely to be more under-reporting, despite our work to clean the data. It would be preferable to match on a unique number like an ID number, but the state does not include those numbers in their file. The second potential limitation is that the HESC system has a lag from the time an application is submitted to the time it shows in the data.

We report two different sources of data to estimate the total number of FAFSA applications submitted across BPS and the charter schools. In 2017, only two of five participating Charter schools had signed data sharing agreements with HESC and the FAFSA project so there are missing data in the table for Health Sciences, Tapestry and Maritime for the HESC data. In columns five and six we report a range of total number of FAFSA applications submitted. The FSA estimate identifies all students who graduated from the high school, are 19 years or younger, and that identify this as the first year they are attending college. Any older graduates are not included and it may overestimate for the group of students who are 19 but graduated one year earlier. The HESC data filters students by high school and whether or not this is their first year attending college. The initial data file included 40% more students than are currently enrolled in BPS schools because any student who has ever graduated from BPS high schools who is attending college for the first time are reported. In order to report only on the current BPS students, we match the HESC data with school rosters. This is the most accurate in terms of what we share with school counselors, but there are two potential sources of error, early graduates and incorrectly spelled names. We were able to correct for early graduates by adding the junior rosters to the data and we have cleaned the data on students names to match both files. As a result, our best estimates for total numbers of students who completed the FAFSA this year in BPS are between 923 and 1133.

Overall, more than 1400 students submitted FAFSA's, according to FSA – which is almost 250 more submitted applications than the year prior – and the number of completed applications were nearly 300 higher than the previous year. Our primary concern this year is the discrepancy between the number of FAFSA applications reported by HESC and the number of TAP applications – at one point in the project, only 45% of students who completed FAFSA also completed TAP. By May, closer to 2/3 of students had done both. In other words, nearly 300 students who filed their FAFSA did not apply for TAP in NYS, which affects a student's eligibility for Say Yes. We will work to improve this in future years.

Conclusions

In the five years since the FAFSA completion project began, we have worked with more than 175 interns and volunteers to serve nearly 3500 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 2016-17 was the change in opening date from January 1 to October 1. While this gave us additional time to work with families, it also meant that some counselors were rushing to complete the applications ahead of time and made errors or used tax information that was not correct. Second, and perhaps more important, the IRS tax retrieval tool went down in mid-February as a result of identity theft issues and was not reestablished for the remainder of the program. This impacted our students because it became more cumbersome to input each line from the taxes and because our student population does not always have tax information from a year ago handy. Because of this, several students were using 2016 taxes and then needed to submit amendments. We also added time into our process because as a result of the IRS tool being down, we anticipated that students would need copies of their tax transcripts for their respective financial aid offices and as a result added in ordering those for students as a final task after FAFSA and TAP were completed. We anticipate the IRS tax retrieval tool will be back in operation as the 2017-2018 filing year begins.

As we plan for the 2017-18 academic year, we recognize several challenges that we must address in order to increase FAFSA participation. As in past years, we are working to improve parental involvement on the FAFSA application. Because of the change from PIN to FSA ID, it is required for students to have their parents involved in the very beginning of the process, and with the IRS tax retrieval tool going down mid-way through the project it became more apparent to our staff how important the involvement of parents in this process is. We hope to increase involvement and understanding among the families we serve. The early application timeline created a challenge partnering with school counselors. The first part of the school year is a hectic time for counselors, and adding in the FAFSA completion to the fall creates more work for them. Most of the counselors we serve are still completing senior reviews, preparing students to register for SAT, and helping students with college application in October and they are apprehensive about carving out additional time for financial aid that early in the process. As it is always our goal to alleviate some of the stressors counselors face, we are planning to begin in school help on a regular bases in October, a 3-month change from when we usually begin, to try and capture students filing early and eliminate the stress and sometimes errors that occur when a timeline shifts drastically.

The final challenge we continue to 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. This year we had staff members who could translate in four different languages, and in the coming year we hope to begin printing our materials in the big eight languages in the district to become more accessible for our refugee and immigrant families.

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.

The FAFSA Call Center

As discussed before, we created a call center operating out of our office on UB's South Campus that was open to students and their families from 5-8 p.m. M-F. Our hope with this offering was that it would offer a way for parents that work during the school day to have access to our support without taking time away from work. Because prior to the call center we only offered support during the day, we were hopeful that we would capture families who needed after school hours support. Over the year the amount of families using the call center was smaller than we expected (fewer than 50), and it took away from the hours our staff were in the school, because we had so many nights fully staffed (with at least 2 staff members) and those hours came out of their overall commitment. We have decided that it might not be the best use of time to have every night available, and are creating a plan for the coming year to offer one night a week as afterhours support, but still provide a call line for families to use and return calls during that weekly shift.

Data Management Applications

Our data management and reporting system improved substantially this year. We were able to use several sources of data to create weekly reports for counselors and interns. These reports detailed student status on completing both forms and if they had any errors associated with their completion. Each week counselors and interns were sent a report on individual student progress and this allowed for intentional follow-up. The new way of collecting and reporting data was something counselors appreciated as it allowed them to pin-point students for appointments as opposed to relying on self-reporting from students. It also allowed our team to focus call center attention on students who had errors in their FAFSA/TAP and focus follow up in intentional ways. We plan to continue this process for next year and continue to make improvements on our data collection and reporting.

One of our persistent challenges is collecting more robust log data in the schools. We have relied on paper logs each year to collect the reports from interns and volunteers on the students they serve, but we have found that not all staff maintain thorough records and the details of the service were not always included. Our plan for next year is to do so electronically rather than taking the additional step of logging participation on paper and then entering it into a database or spreadsheet.

Finally, this year we created a website for the College Success Centers that includes a page on FAFSA Completion. This provided information on all of our interns, office hours and allowed

families to schedule appointments online. Our plan moving into next year is to publicize our website more and encourage students to submit questions and schedule appointments through our portal.

Changes for the Future

The 2016-17 FAFSA filing season introduced important new changes to the filing process that require us to adapt the project even further for the 2017-18 school year. In addition to the October 1 application start date and the prior-prior year taxes, the IRS tax retrieval tool did not work for much of the filing season. We expect the retrieval tool to be operational in 2017-18, but we recognize the need to adjust our planning and procedures if problems arise again. Below we discuss some of the changes we expect to make based upon what we learned from our work in the schools this year.

Grow the Volunteer Pool

Begin the Recruitment Process Earlier. Overall, we expect to recruit fewer interns over the course of the project. We now have seven college success centers and the staff are all cross-trained to support students and families through the financial aid process. The centers cover a third of the schools we have previously served. 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. Prior to the October 1 application release, we would hire 15-18 interns for a one-semester experience in the spring – this model is no longer feasible, given that the filing season has grown by three months.

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 Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) program at Buffalo State College 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. Canisius College offers both a higher education and a school counseling degree and we will consider recruiting students from those programs. We are also reaching out to Medaille College, though for a different reason. Medaille admits the third highest number of Say Yes Scholars and many of those students would love to

give back to their local community. Medaille has just recently been funded to offer an Upward Bound program and this may serve as the appropriate partner for FAFSA completion.

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. In 2017-18, we plan to make two changes. First, we will consider hiring additional workstudy students to work in the schools and to assist with the administration of the program. We have recruited workstudy students from UB for several years and many of them have excelled in the school setting. We have been in conversation with Erie Community College (ECC) to consider a similar strategy, which may include providing FAFSA completion support for continuing ECC students as well. Second, we plan to refine our training model and change the scheduling of hours in the schools. Training is a critical component of the project and we have been able to put most of the content on-line to increase access to the training materials.

Adapt the Hours in the Schools

We plan to adjust our hours because we find that we need fewer hours per week in each school now that we are offering the program for the full year. Last year we offered too many hours after January 1 in the schools but not enough between October 1 and December 31. We are going to shift our staffing strategy so that interns and volunteers provide fewer hours per week but over the course of seven months rather than four. We plan to offer evening hours as well, but we will scale back from the M-F, 5-8pm schedule – probably to one or two evening shifts per week. We may also partner with other programs to do some of this work the college success centers and parent centers located at the community schools.

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 many ways, we have been on the forefront in terms of using data to assess the impact of the project and to adjust the project over time. Given the changes to the FAFSA project, the evolution of the Federal data project and the state data sharing agreements through HESC, we know that our use of data will evolve. 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.

Collaborate with Charter Schools to Provide FAFSA/TAP data

For the past two years, we have partnered with BPS under a data sharing agreement with HESC to collect and report FAFSA and TAP application data to school counselors and district leaders throughout the FAFSA filing season. We report much of that data above. This year, we were able to develop a reporting template for schools. We generate student-level report rosters that tell counselors whether their students have completed the FAFSA, TAP, and Say Yes applications and we will add Excelsior status indicators once they are available. Those reports give counselors information about whether or not their students have filed and if they are missing signatures or have other errors preventing the completion of their applications – all of this allows counselors to follow up with their students more efficiently. We have found the data reporting tool effective even for schools like City Honors and Hutch Tech who do not typically use all of our services.

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 for all charter schools. Currently, we have data agreements in place with Oracle Charter and the Charter School for Applied Technology (CSAT). We share the aggregated school level data with all of our partner schools but the HESC data are only available when the state data sharing agreements are in place. 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.

Prepare for Excelsior

No one is entirely clear how Excelsior of the Enhanced Tuition Assistance (ETA) programs will affect the financial aid application processes for students, but we know that our processes will need to change as we work with students and families. In our initial experience with the Excelsior application, there are relatively few questions but the wording may not always be clear to the student or parent. We estimate that, without some guidance, a number of students will be ineligible for Excelsior because they answered questions incorrectly. We know, from our initial conversations with HESC, that status indicators for the Excelsior application will not be available this year, but they are likely to be included in the data sharing agreements in subsequent years. We do not expect Excelsior alone to add much time to the application process, but we also recognize that several changes have extended the amount of time the financial aid application process takes for students to complete. The change from the PIN to the FSA ID doubled the time of secure verification from 10 to 20 minutes; the new Say Yes registration has taken students 10-15 minutes longer to complete; and the problems with the tax retrieval tool have made the filing process more time consuming. All of this means we have to spend our time differently with students and families and Excelsior and the ETA will just add another element to the service.

Appendix A: Data Cleaning Methodology

The data analyzed in this study was derived from 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 individual log data from each institution. The only materials used for this study were a computer with access to Microsoft excel and the databases mentioned above. In order to compare our progress against our goal of 100% FAFSA completion rate, we utilized and compared previous year's results to better understand the rate at which students completed their FAFSA. The FSA raw data projected an approximate 2,257 students across the buffalo public schools that submitted their FAFSA. According to our data only 957 students did. One possible reason for this discrepancy in the data is that the FSA raw data accounts for all students despite their age. For our purposes, the cut off age for this study is 21 years old. 21 years old is the cut off because that is reflective of the current pool of students that are enrolled in the Buffalo Public schools. Once you remove the students that are 22 years old and older there are 2065 students left. Once you remove all of the names that are duplicated that number of 2065 students goes down to 2016 students.

Table 3. Types of Errors by School

School	Total# of Errors	Type of Error					
		Misspelling (8)	Dash (-)(8)	Apostrophe (')(5)	Suffixes (10)	Middle Names (18)	Duplicates (49)
Bennett	3				2	1	
BAVPA	5		1	1	1		2
Olmstead	2		1			1	
City Honors	2					2	
MST	1			1			
Iprep	8	1		1	1	3	2
Lafayette	7		1			5	1
Riverside	3	1			1	1	
Southpark	35				1		34
Davinci	2					1	1
Burgard	4	1			1		2
Emerson	2		2				
Hutch Tech	7	2	1		2	2	1
McKinley	8	2	2	1		1	2
East	1				1		
MECHS	2	1					1
CSAT	4					1	3
Oracle	1			1			

The constraints faced when analyzing the data across the two databases, the FSA data and the HESC data, were the inconsistencies that appeared with names that were on one list and not the other. In order to properly account for those errors, a variety of methods were used. First, the students were organized by age. Any student that was 23 years old or older were disregarded. Any names that remained were then organized by last name. The next step was to compare the FAFSA database to the individual rosters from each high school. In order to account for mistakes, one

additional column was added to the excel sheet. Numbers one (1) and two (2) were utilized. If one name appeared on both lists, which was ideal, they would receive the number 2. If one name appeared on only one list, that name would receive a 1. Any names that were misspelled were corrected and accounted for. By the same token, any name that appeared twice was highlighted, accounted for and then the duplication would later be deleted. The chart below reflects the nature of the errors.

The majority of the errors were due to duplication as you can see in the chart. The second largest errors were name related in that a middle or additional last name was either missing or unneeded. This information is important because it helps administrators better understand the degree to which schools are accurately representing their students. It is important to see what the type of errors that are being found within each school. Knowing the nature of the error can help us better serve students in the future and see how we can better support students when filling out paperwork.