

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 intersect to form a triangular shape that frames the circles.

# The Buffalo FAFSA Completion Project

*Final Report 2013-14*

**6/1/2014**

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*Final Report 2014-15*

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# Executive Summary

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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 Academy School and worked in a limited capacity with Hutch Tech High School. Second, we added the Charter School for Applied Sciences to the list of schools served. Third, we expanded the training to discuss the college application process and to prepare volunteers for what to expect when they go into the high schools. In addition to the planned changes, there were also some differences that we did not expect. First, we were not able to complete the classroom presentations in all of the high schools because we lacked the volunteer support in January and we had scheduling conflicts with testing in computer labs. Second, we saw a decline in participation at the Scholarship Fair which may have been a consequence of shifting locations from Bennett to Burgard or it may be the result of more success with the FAFSA project in the schools.

The data for 2015 suggest that between 909 and 1096 BPS students and 209 charter school students completed their FAFSA applications during the 2015 project period. The number of FAFSA completions for BPS was similar to last year, though slightly lower for the second straight year; the charter schools saw significant increases – some of which is attributable to the project, but the largest increase is due to the fact that the Charter School for Applied Sciences (CSAT) was part of the project this year. Overall, the project team assisted 807 students and families with their FAFSA forms and 564 New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) applications. To put those numbers into context, volunteers helped between two thirds and three quarters 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 two years, BPS is up 27% over the year prior to the project and the charter participation continues to grow.

# Introduction

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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, UB team developed a three part strategy drawing on the experience at South Park: (1) the existing College Goal Sunday<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 applications 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.

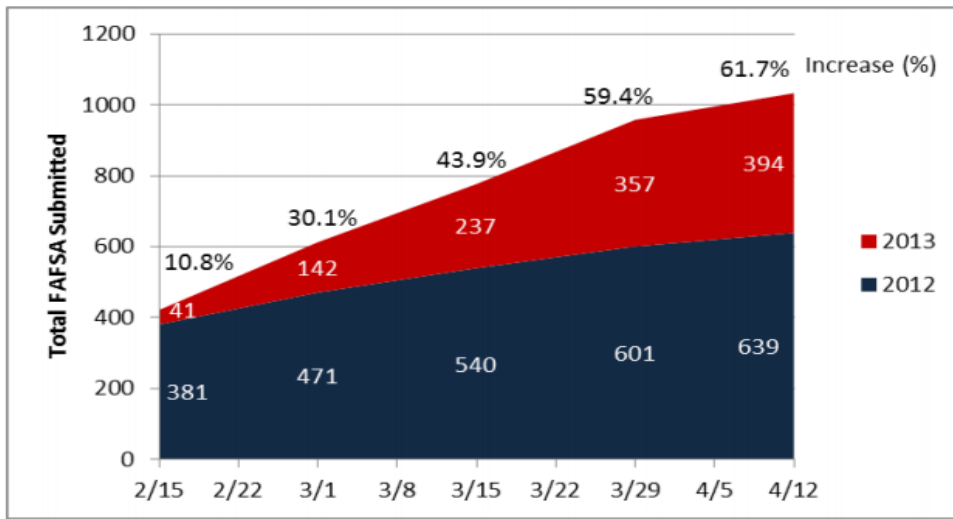
We recognize that the substantial increases in the number of FAFSA's completed in the district were a function of both the announcement of the Say Yes tuition guarantee and the direct assistance with the financial aid process, but it is difficult to know how much of that difference to attribute to the program. We know after the second year that the numbers dropped slightly in BPS schools from the previous year (approximately 5% fewer FAFSA's completed) – and that has been true during the 2014-15 campaign as well.

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

Figure 1.  
FAFSA Completion Totals for BPS by Year, 2012-2013



# FAFSA Completion Project, 2014-15

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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. In year 3 we added the Academy School (alternative high school) and the Charter School for Applied Technology (CSAT). 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 we served all but two public or charter high schools in the city of Buffalo – Buffalo Academy of Science Charter School and City Honors.<sup>4</sup> 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. This year, we were fortunate to partner with an array of professionals, para-professionals, graduate and undergraduate students.

Table 1. Volunteer Hours by Project Phase, 2014-15

Activity	Frequency	Interns & Volunteers	Total Volunteer Hours
Phase I Site Visits	21 schools	2	42 hours
Volunteer Training	1 training	45	360 hours
Phase II - Classroom Visits	7 schools	4	168 hours
Phase III - Scholarship Fair	1 event	19	114 hours
Phase IV - FAFSA/TAP Completion	21 schools	30	2520 hours
<b>Total</b>		<b>21 schools</b>	<b>3204 hours</b>

We estimate that over the course of five months (December through April), FAFSA Completion Project volunteers and staff provided more than 3,200 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. Some of these hours were spent helping students and families interpret financial aid award letters to make informed decisions about whether or where to attend college and how best to afford it. We estimate that volunteer service hours were up approximately 600 hours (20%) from the prior year, largely because of our increasing emphasis on the use of interns. Last year, we employed

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<sup>4</sup> A number of City Honors students were served at the Buffalo Scholarship Fair and the three evening FAFSA events held at the Say Yes to Education offices, but the project did not conduct classroom presentations or provide weekly volunteer support in the building.

10 interns to oversee services in 19 high schools and this year we employed 18 interns, each of which were responsible for providing approximately 120-150 hours of service. We made this change in response to counselors' requests for greater consistency and continuity among the volunteers.

### **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) 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 from a building adjacent to ECC to an unused high school building several blocks away on Clinton St. and that change altered the times students would be available to work with volunteers. Next year, Middle Early College High School will be co-located with Bennett High School and will require a different plan to serve its students. These differences underscore the importance of developing and refining the model for each school building.

### **Phase II – FAFSA Completion Week**

During the second phase of the project, we visit classrooms in each of the participating schools to inform students about the FAFSA completion process and to help them complete the first half of the form, complete their personal identification number (PIN)<sup>5</sup>, and submit their electronic Say Yes registration. This year we ran into some challenges during phase II of the project. In 2014, we utilized pre-service school counseling students from UB and Opportunity Corps volunteers from the Service Collaborative of Western New York to complete the classroom visits where students would complete the first half of the FAFSA. The year prior, we completed this phase in February after the college semesters had begun but feedback from counselors suggested we needed to provide that service earlier. We moved the classroom portion to the second week of January and it was very well-received in the schools. Unfortunately, for reasons beyond our control, those two groups of volunteers were unavailable and we were only able to conduct the

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<sup>5</sup> In May of 2015, the US Department of Education made a significant change to the process. Students and parents will no longer create a PIN number. Instead, they will create a username and password. These changes occurred after the project had completed its work in the schools but it will affect the project next year.



classroom visits in six BPS high schools. The Opportunity Corps program had not received funding to continue and the supervisors of the school counselor volunteer service program was out for the semester. In a number of schools where we had volunteers scheduled visit classrooms, we were unable to schedule because of acuity testing in the computer labs. Ultimately, phase II was only completed in six of the participating high schools. This is an area we will discuss improving for the 2015-16 school year.

### **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. For the first time in 3 years, the event was moved from Bennett High School to Burgard High School. We estimate about 60 FAFSAs were completed in 2015, compared to about 95 the previous year. This event occurred at the beginning of February and all seniors were encouraged to complete their FAFSA with their families and representatives of the financial aid offices across Buffalo. The event was staffed by 20 volunteers including UB volunteers and interns, and financial aid counselors from the University at Buffalo. One feature added to the program three 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 25 families during the fair, many of whom also completed their FAFSA and TAP applications.

### **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 counselors 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 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.

In 2014, we divided this portion of the project into two separate sections – the first to deal with FAFSA and TAP applications and the second to help students interpret 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. 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) very few of the students we serve attend institutions outside of SUNY where letters are far less standard.

One of the important additions to the project last year was our participation in the Federal FAFSA Completion Pilot Study. As part of the study, we were able to access individual student record data for every student in the district to see whether they had filed their FAFSA and if it had been accepted by the US Department of Education. That data could be used to identify students with errors on their applications or to identify students who had not yet completed the process. For 2014-15, the federal government cancelled the pilot project and granted states the ability to give districts access to the same FAFSA data as well as TAP data. Unfortunately, this year, access to the data took several months and it was not used until the end of April when the project was coming to a close. We are optimistic that these data will be very useful in future years, but they did not substantially enhance the project this year.

Throughout 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 first time in three years, we have 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.

# FAFSA Completion Outcomes, 2014-15

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In this section we report our findings from the third 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. Last year, we expanded the project to include the public charter high schools and even that has changed now that the Charter School for Applied Technologies (CSAT) is participating in the project. Second, we were excited to have access to more robust data at the state level than was available from the federal government, but that data access was too late to influence the results of the project this year. Third, we added services at Hutch Tech and the Academy School that were not provided previously. Finally, we added three evening sessions at the Say Yes offices at the end of April and beginning of May to reach students and families who could not otherwise come during the day or were at schools where access to the service was either limited in scope (Hutch Tech) or not available at all (City Honors).

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 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). With those caveats in mind, the data available during the 2014-15 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. We begin by Phase III and we report our findings separately for BPS and the charter schools. Our numbers during phase II were modest for the reasons discussed above. We estimate that approximately 400 students participated in Phase II in six BPS schools and that is about 50% of the total from the previous year.

## **Phase III – Scholarship Fair**

The 2014-15 academic year was the seventh consecutive year for the BPS Scholarship Fair. The event is orchestrated 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 three years, we have assumed responsibility for coordinating the FAFSA completion work during the event. In total, nearly 600 people were in attendance at the event and approximately 60 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-five families completed their taxes with the UWBEC VITA program – similar to the numbers served in 2014. 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.

### **Phases IV and V – School-based Follow-up Support**

Last year, we divided the school based work into two phases – the first to complete the FAFSA and the second to work with students on financial literacy – but we found that distinction was not necessary and we combined them into a single phase. The vast 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. Most notable is the fact that the 2014-15 completion numbers fell below those from the prior year by 93 applications – about 10% lower. That is a considerable drop but it is important to put that change into context. When compared to 2011-12 (the year prior to the project), the 908 completed FAFSA's in 2014-15 reflects an increase of 27%, which would represent a substantial increase under other circumstances. We discuss this in greater detail in the conclusion to the report but we suspect that a number of factors have contributed to the decline, from the problems during phase II to the changes occurring throughout the district, to fading enthusiasm around for the tuition guarantee among students, parents, and school staff.

Figure 2.

FAFSA Completion Bi-Weekly by Year for Buffalo Public Schools, 2012-2015

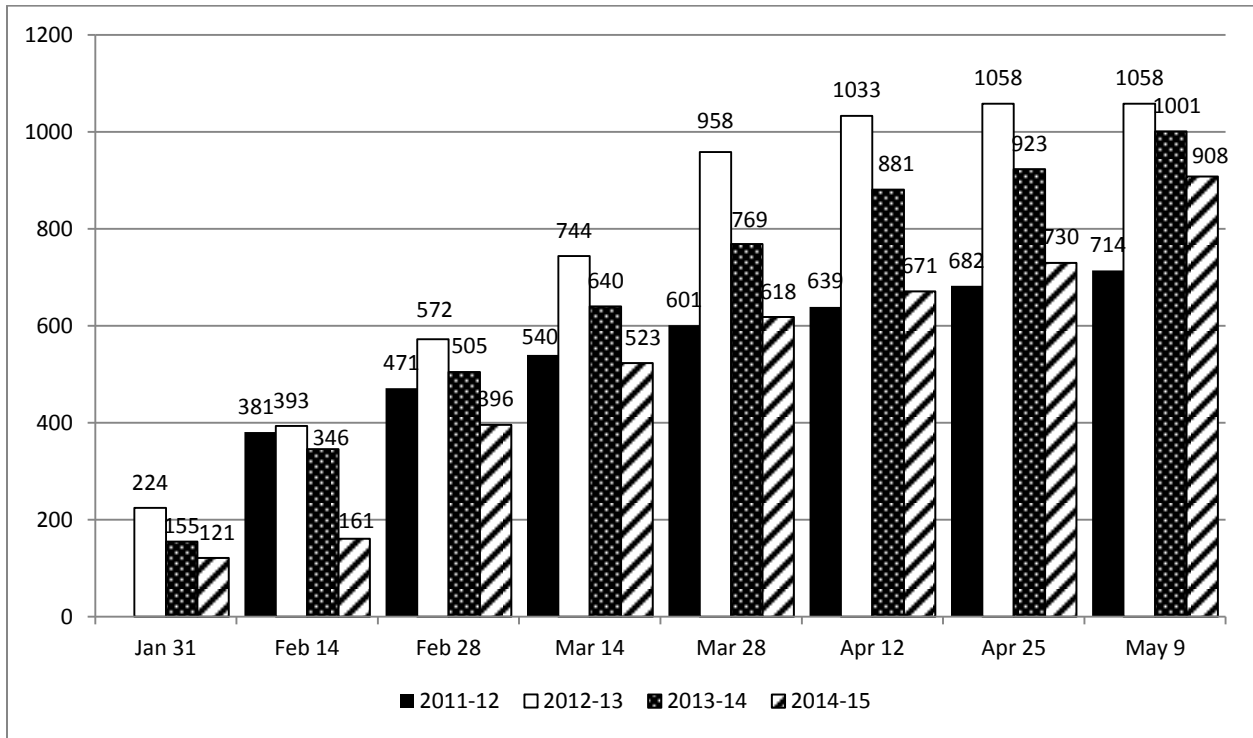
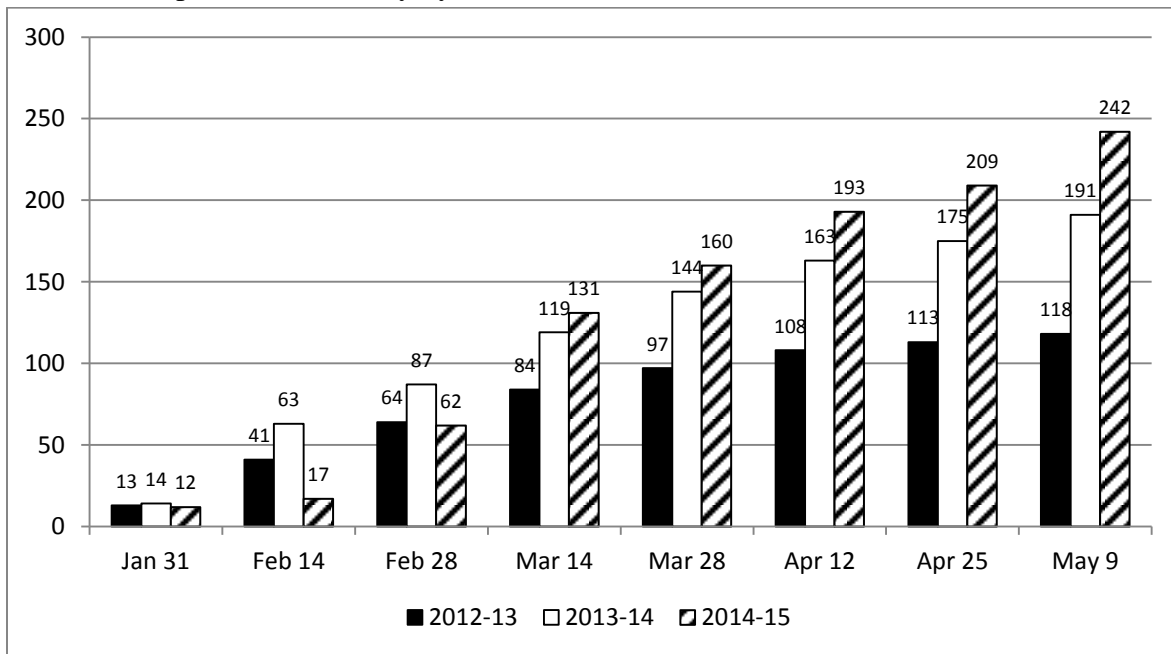


Figure 3 shows the same bi-weekly trend for the charter high schools and the number of applications completed grew by 26.7%. The overall trend for charter schools is misleading for several reasons. First, we added CSAT as a partner for the first time this year and their completion numbers account for much of the increase. Second, participation across the charter schools was uneven. The numbers of students served by the project at Oracle and Health Sciences was very strong whereas only two students at Tapestry utilized the project support. At CSAT, 65 students completed their FAFSA by May 9 and of those, 41% were completed with FAFSA Completion Project interns and volunteers.

Figure 3.

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



Note: The Charter School for Applied Technology was added for the first time in 2014-15, which accounts for some of the increase pictured above. The increase the previous year was partly the result of the first class graduating from Health Science Charter School.

The comparisons from year to year suggest that a similar number of total students have been served, with some variation between BPS and the charter schools. One possible explanation for the declines in total FAFSA completers is a decline in the cohort size, but our estimates suggest a decline of fewer than 50 students in the senior class, meaning cohort size differences are modest. The year to year comparisons also continue to show that FAFSA completion rates are considerably higher in 2014 than they were in 2012. A 27% increase above 2012 is still a considerable improvement but more needs to be done to understand the overall decline.

Table 2 provides a comprehensive summary of FAFSA, TAP, and Say Yes registration work 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, TAP, and Say Yes Completion by School and by Data Source, 2013-14

	FSA (5/09)		HESC (5/09)	Logs (5/05)	FAFSA Estimates		TAP
	Submit	Complete			Lower	Upper	
<i>Buffalo Public Schools</i>							
Bennett*	54	50	55	31	31	55	28
BAVPA	71	67	67	11	11	67	40
Burgard*	47	41	45	61	45	61	36
City Honors	93	92	100	3	3	100	68
East	34	30	29	30	29	34	17
Emerson	29	27	32	19	19	32	20
Frederick Olmsted	36	34	36	52	36	52	26
Hutch Tech	185	174	180	24	24	185	120
Int'l. Prep*	19	18	18	32	19	32	12
Lafayette*	17	15	17	45	17	45	10
Leonardo DaVinci*	74	71	71	48	48	71	45
MST	31	27	32	39	31	39	22
McKinley*	80	72	78	150	80	150	48
Middle Early	37	36	N/A	10	10	37	N/A
Riverside	46	40	47	71	47	71	33
South Park	55	49	60	42	42	60	38
School #44	1	1	1	5	1	5	1
BPS Sub-totals	909	844	868	673	493	1096	564
<i>Buffalo Public Charter Schools</i>							
CSAT	65	58	N/A	27	27	65	N/A
Health Sciences	48	44	N/A	41	41	48	N/A
Oracle	30	28	N/A	54	30	54	N/A
Tapestry	45	42	N/A	2	2	45	N/A
Maritime	21	18	N/A	10	10	21	N/A
Charter Totals	209	190	N/A	134	110	233	0
Project Totals	1118	1034	N/A	807	603	1329	564

\* 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

couple of weeks 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.

Based upon volunteer logs, we estimate that the project accounted for more than 74% of all FAFSA's completed in BPS and 64% at the charter schools – a higher proportion of students served in both BPS and the charter schools compared to 2013-14. In prior work, we estimate that each FAFSA takes an average of 90 minutes per student, with considerable variation depending upon each individual circumstance, meaning that 1000 hours of volunteer time was spent on FAFSA completion in BPS and another 200 hours in the charter schools. We also estimate approximately 10 minutes per TAP application and 10 minutes per Say Yes registration completed with each student, which accounts for an additional 94 hours spent on TAP applications and a similar amount spent on Say Yes registrations. In simple terms, we suggest that the project may have freed up slightly under 1500 hours of counselors' time. We know, in reality that counselors still spent a fair amount of time on this work because they scheduled students to complete their FAFSA's and, in some cases, were still completing FAFSA's, TAP, and Say Yes with students. The point of calculating the approximate number of hours spent is to underscore the real cost of time associated with assisting families through the financial aid process. The total number of hours estimated here is the equivalent of a full time salary for a school counselor.



# Conclusions

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After three years we have been partnering with BPS, Say Yes and the charter schools in the city of Buffalo, we remain convinced that the additional support of the volunteers and interns from the FAFSA Completion Project makes a significant difference in the lives of students and families. We also believe the project offers meaningful assistance to counselors who are frequently asked to assume responsibility for an unrealistically large caseload of students and provide support for aspects of the college choice process, like the FAFSA, for which they were not trained. We are also careful to point out that there is no substitute for a strong team of full-time counselors. In fact, we are clear that this project can only succeed to the extent that counselors embrace the support and are able to connect students and families to the volunteer resources brought into the schools. Without their effort and support, the project would simply not work. With that in mind, it is important to consider the factors that may have affected participation in the project this year. Even though the data are not perfectly comparable from year to year, it is clear that participation rates in BPS have declined and are up modestly among the charter schools. We suggest there are several factors that may be affecting these trends.

There are at least two aspects of the project that account for some of the decline. First, we recognize that the classroom visits are an important part of the project and it is likely that providing that portion of the project in only six BPS schools had an impact. Schools like Bennett and Burgard, where we provided the classroom sessions, experienced increases in FAFSA completion this year, when we would have expected just the opposite.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, McKinley experienced a substantial decline in completion rates even though we were able to complete phase II in January. Second, individual unit record data was valuable in 2013-14 because we were able to share student FAFSA filing statuses with school counselors. This year we were not able to provide that data until the very end of the project meaning it was not as beneficial as it could have been. We suspect the large increase we saw from the end of April to the beginning of May was at least partly the result of being able to provide that data. Those are factors we can improve upon for next year and we are already developing those plans, which we describe in a moment. But we also recognize that several other factors were at play as well.

We know from our conversations with students that some of the enthusiasm around the tuition guarantee has faded for at least two reasons. First, there was a great deal of publicity in the schools and across the city for the guarantee when it was first announced. There is much less focus on the tuition guarantee in the schools today. Second, the guarantee is complicated for students and families to understand. Now that two cohorts of Say Yes eligible students have

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<sup>6</sup> Bennett was slated for closure and this past year was the first year that no freshmen were admitted to Bennett. Burgard experienced administrative staff turnover at the beginning of the school year and again in the second half of the year.

attended postsecondary education, students understand that the Say Yes contribution to their scholarship totals is modest and that all combined sources of federal, state, and local aid may not cover the full cost of attendance in many situations.

Finally, the district is undergoing a tremendous amount of transition at the moment. In this past year alone, three schools were either slated for closure or turn around – Bennett, Lafayette, and East – and several schools have experienced significant changes in their programs. Burgard has a new collaboration with Alfred State around advanced manufacturing and Middle Early moved from its location in close proximity to Erie Community College (ECC) city campus to the former site of Performing Arts on Clinton Street. At the same time, there have been substantial changes at the district and board level with the expectation of more changes to come as the Board appoints another interim Superintendent and the search for a permanent superintendent begins. All of these factors are likely to affect the time and attention paid by students, families, and school staff to the FAFSA completion project specifically, and the college choice process more broadly.

# Changes for the Future

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The FAFSA Completion Project has just completed its third year and at the end of each filing season, we take some time to reflect on the design and implementation of the project and identify strategies to improve our ability to assist students and families with the financial aid application process. In this final section, we discuss several changes we expect to make in an effort to better support our high school partners and the students and families they serve each year.

## Grow the Volunteer Pool

*Begin the Recruitment Process Earlier.* In many ways, expanding our use of interns accomplished exactly what we had hoped – more reliable and consistent hours on site in schools and greater reliability in terms of regular communication between interns and school counselors. Even with those improvements, we recognize it is necessary to begin the recruitment and selection process earlier for two reasons. First, while there were noticeable improvements across BPS and the public charter schools, there continues to be some variation in the quality of the interns provided to schools. Second – and related – in order to grow the pool of prospective interns and volunteers, we have to reach them earlier in the fall semester when they are making plans for the spring. Most of our interns were students enrolled in the Higher Education Administration program at UB or the Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) program at Buffalo State. Students in those programs are typically identifying spring opportunities in October and we did not begin active recruitment until late November. We believe accelerating the timeline will grow our pool of prospective interns and make the position more selective in the process. We also have found that on average, graduate students are more reliable and dependable in these positions because they are focused on their career path and their schedule is flexible during the school day because their courses are typically in the evenings.

*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). 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.

## **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. Next year, we plan to develop a one-credit training course that will be offered during the January term at the University at Buffalo. The three week course will be taught as a hybrid meaning the first two weeks of content will be delivered on-line and the final week will be 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*

For the past two years we have set as an expectation that interns would complete 150 hours of service to the project – an expectation that is consistent with other internship programs on college campuses. Interns have been given the option to complete the experience for academic credit (3 Cr.) toward their degree program or for a modest stipend. In both years, it was difficult to provide interns with a sufficient number of hours in the schools to complete 150 hours. This year, we plan to limit the service portion of the internship to 100 hours and students can register

for two credit hours for the internship. The combination of the two experiences will give students a full 150 hour experience and/or a 3 credit equivalent course.

We also plan to change the hours in the schools slightly. For the past three years, counselors have said that Friday's are not good days to schedule the service because student attendance is generally lower. We have maintained Friday's largely because many students have that time available in their schedules but it tends not to be the most productive use of the volunteers time in the schools. This year, we plan to go to a four day week (Monday through Thursday) with hours scheduled in the schools and Friday will be reserved for regular supervision, professional development, and data analysis and reporting. In our experience, once the project begins, it is very difficult to assemble the entire team of interns and volunteers because the time has not been set aside in their schedules. Interns will be required to set aside a block of time on Fridays to meet with the Assistant Director of the project and to meet as a large group to discuss the successes and challenges they are facing in the 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 this section, we propose two changes from this year that will allow us to use data more effectively in the FAFSA Completion Project.

*Make Data Available Earlier.* We had intended to make FAFSA and TAP completion status data available to interns, volunteers, and school counselors by the beginning of February. However, the transition from accessing this data at the federal level to the state level took longer than expected. The Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC) was the state agency charged with making this data available to schools and it took more than 8 months for them to develop a data sharing process and to finalize the legal process by which they would make the data available to schools. We received access to the data in late April, but by that point it was difficult to use the data to serve more students. We expect that next year will be much simpler. HESC has a process in place and we should have access to data from the very beginning of the project.

### *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. 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.