

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 2017-18

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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 made a shift in our staffing model, shifted our focus from a call center model to appointment only, and set up a table at the Say Yes Kick-Off. The first change, shifting our staffing model, was a result of intern feedback that in the schools with College Success Centers and NYGEAR UP staff, students preferred to work with a familiar face or were utilizing the Center staff for their financial aid help when the intern was not present. The intern feedback led us to decide to shift to us the NYGEAR UP staff as the financial aid staff in the 7 NYGEAR UP buildings. Those buildings had two graduate assistants and devoted a few hours each week to helping the seniors complete financial aid forms. The second change was scaling back our nighttime call center hours. This change came as a result of low participation in our call hours last year, and a low rate of appointments. To provide nighttime and phone support the Project Coordinator offered nighttime appointments to students and families on Wednesday nights, and answered questions over the phone through voicemail notifications and call backs. Using this model provided the nighttime service we wanted, but was still underutilized, as we only saw about 20 students during the year. Most of the calls received were from students and families confusing our line for the technical help side of the applications, and most of the calls were to direct families to the FAFSA call center. The last change was an end of year push in partnership with Say Yes, to

use the student roster of registered attendees and our data reports to do targeted follow up with students attending the kick-off. The coordinator and director took on the responsibility of staffing a table during the kick-off and worked with 40 students to complete, edit, or go through their financial aid applications.

Overall this year, we saw a modest increase in the total number of FAFSA applications submitted in BPS high schools – 1131 v. 1115 last year. We saw a similar increase among the charter schools as well. Figures 1 and 2 below under “outcomes” illustrate how those patterns have evolved over time.

Looking ahead to the 2018-2019 year, some changes will remain and others will again adapt. Using only NYGEAR UP staff to service the financial aid needs of the center did not work as well as we hoped. Our NYGEAR UP staff are pulled in many directions in the buildings and due to grant guidelines give most of their time to our cohort of students (10th grade for this year, 11th for next). We anticipate the needs of our 11th grade students to be much greater in the coming school year and thus require much more attention from our NYGEAR UP staff. As such, we have decided to reinstate interns in every school building we work with.

We will continue to offer nighttime support to students and families on a needs basis, but are also looking to utilize other community partners to take on some of the nighttime programming.

Due to the large success of this year, we will have a table at the Say Yes Kick-Off next year and hope to improve the way we work with students and the pre-outreach we do leading up to the week of the kick-off.

Introduction

The FAFSA Completion Project has just completed its sixth 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 230 interns, graduate assistants and volunteers from UB, Buffalo State College, and the local community have provided more than 17,500 hours of service to the local community and helped more than 3,600 students and families with the financial aid application process. 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 \$125,000 annually. While Excelsior has the potential to have a significant impact on middle-income families across the state, it did not materially affect the work we do with the City of Buffalo. The Say Yes tuition guarantee supersedes Excelsior for last dollar so only those students who are not eligible for Say Yes benefit from Excelsior. The application also opens after the project staff and volunteers have completed their work in the schools.

In this report, we summarize our findings from the 2017-18 academic year. Our findings are fairly consistent with last year. We had fewer volunteers but more regular hours provided by GEAR UP staff and FAFSA interns. There were no seniors at Bennett High School but we saw increases at other high schools in the district. We also note that this will be the last year we report data for Oracle Charter High School, which announced its closure this past spring. We continue to find that TAP submissions are substantially lower than FAFSA completion numbers and we are continuing to search for ways to close that gap. We conclude this report with potential changes for the 2018-19 academic year. Each year we engage in a process of formative evaluation and we use what we learn to refine the model and think differently about how we partner with schools and counselors to serve the needs of Buffalo families.

FAFSA Completion Project, 2017-18

One of the unique features of the FAFSA Completion Project is that we have utilized undergraduate and graduate student interns and volunteers to work with students and parents on the financial aid application process. We find that students are well suited to provide this type of support because many of them went through the same process recently. We also do our best to hire students who share a common set of experiences. We have set as a goal to hire more Say Yes scholars from Buffalo schools to work on the project, but we have not been very successful to this

point. We anticipate that will change in the 2018-19 cycle, but only about 10% of our interns and volunteers have come from Buffalo schools to this point. We made a concerted effort to recruit first generation college students, students of color, and Pell eligible students who understand the financial challenges of attending college. This year, more than 2/3 of our interns and staff were students of color and many came from families with modest means. The majority hail from the New York City Burroughs though we have also attracted students from Rochester, Syracuse, and the Albany metro area. Table 1 provides a summary of the intern and volunteer hours that are provided through the project.

Table 1. Volunteer Hours by Project Phase, 2017-18

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		12 schools	4	192 hours
Phase III - FAFSA/TAP Completion		18 schools	20	1500 hours
Ongoing	Data Reporting	21 schools	2	250 hours
Total		21 schools	45	2344 hours

This year we provided fewer hours of service than in years past. For example, last year we opened an evening call center four days per week with two interns per shift. We found that very few students or families took advantage of that feature during the 2016-17 academic year, so we shifted to an on-call system with our coordinator this past year. As a result, we utilized far fewer intern hours but we were able to continue meeting the need. To put those hours into context, 2300 hours is more than the equivalent of a full time school counselor. Assuming an average salary of \$65,000 plus benefits, the economic contribution of the project is nearly \$100,000 and it operates on a budget of less than a third of that total.

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.

For the past two years, we have partnered with NYGEAR 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 NYGEAR UP staff and the FAFSA interns were trained together so that the services were seamless across the city. We have found that model to be challenging because of the nature of the funding provided through NYGEAR UP so we will return to identifying FAFSA interns for each of the NYGEAR UP schools.

Phase II – FAFSA Completion Week

During phase two, we spend a day in each school working with seniors in college prep, English 12 or social studies classes to complete the FSA ID username and password and the first half of the FAFSA through dependency status. When the US Department of Education and Federal Student Aid made the FAFSA application available beginning October 1, our participation rates in the second phase of our work declined though we improved slightly this year. In 2016-17 nine schools participated in phase II with the FAFSA completion project. In two cases, counselors took this responsibility upon themselves and offered classroom sessions to begin the application process. The challenge is a matter of timing. Most BPS counselors, in particular, spend the month of October completing senior credit reviews and starting college applications. They have not had time to begin the financial aid application process, which they view as following naturally from the college application process.

This year, we will find new ways to adapt our service to the changing realities of schools. We may find, for example, that batch processing of students is less efficient for counselors than targeted individual appointments, which may complement the credit review process more effectively. Our goal in this area will be to increase the number of students we reach earlier in the process, but it may not include increasing the numbers of schools who offer the classroom batch processing of student applications.

Phase III – Call Center Support

In 2017-18, we offered a more modest version of the call center service and the results were modest. Approximately 20 families made appointments and worked with our coordinator in evening hours to complete any portion of the financial aid application process. It was much more efficient for the coordinator to provide this service, but it created unrealistic demands on her time, given the other responsibilities of this person. We believe there are opportunities to partner with others to deliver a comparable service and we will consider working with the community schools and parent centers to meet that need.

Phase IV - School-Based Follow up Support

The vast majority of the work completed through the project occurs during this phase. In November, we placed interns in many of the BPS and charter high schools and the GEAR UP staff began working with school counselors on the FAFSA completion process. Interns and volunteers

are assigned 4-8 hours per week to work with students and families in the high schools during the school day. They work closely with counselors to identify students who need support and they typically operate in a computer lab, library, or counselor office suite.

For the third straight 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.

We recognize that while the data were helpful to many, challenges arose as well. Each week counselors would receive a full roster of their seniors with status indicators for whether they had completed the FAFSA and TAP applications. In some cases, students who should have been on the initial roster were not included because they transferred schools. In other cases, students who had completed their FAFSA and/or TAP applications did not show up in the data provided by New York State. After some work with our data team, we found there are two sources of error that limit the accuracy of the data we report. First, if a student types the name of the school they attended manually into the application without verifying the school from the list of BPS schools, their application was not linked to the district and as such, not reported to the project. Second, we find that students names that include special characters or additional spaces are unlikely to match the rosters provided by the district. New York State cannot identify students by unique school ID numbers so we have to match data on the spelling of names. We have found as many as 70 or more names in previous years of the project that did not match correctly and had to be revised. The latter set of errors can be corrected by the data team but the first source of error can only be corrected by the student when they complete the first half of the FAFSA.

Table 2 reports the array of services provided to each school during the 2017-18 school year. You will notice that no services were provided to Bennett High School. Recall that Bennett began a closure more than 4 years ago and they no longer enrolled students. They remain on the list because there are several school entities that remain in the building and that will graduate seniors in two years. We continue to find that each school prefers to adapt the program to the school context and the result is a slightly different mix of services at each. The one constant is the provision of data. No matter the school, we report all available FAFSA and TAP completion data to each school. We have had less data available for charter schools that do not identify us as their data partners, but we continue to grow those numbers.

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

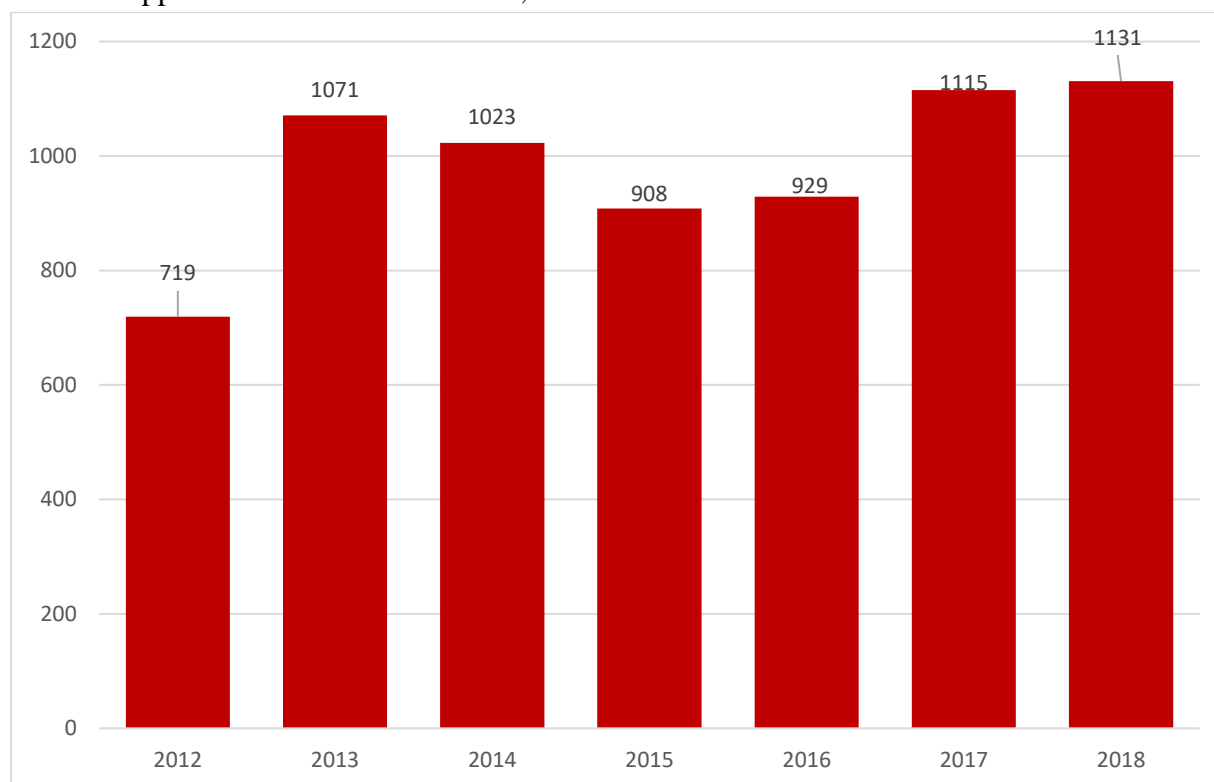
FAFSA Completion Outcomes, 2017-18

In this section, we report our findings from the sixth 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. For the past two years, the FAFSA opened on October 1, and some counselors began FAFSA completion before our team was in the schools for phase III. 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 modest increase in the total number

of FAFSA applications submitted in BPS high schools – 1131 v. 1115 last year. We saw a similar increase among the charter schools as well. Figures 1 and 2 below illustrate how those patterns have evolved over time.

We recognize that raw numbers tell an incomplete picture because the pool of eligible students may vary from year to year. If, for example, the graduating class was substantially larger this year, then we might find that 1131 represents a smaller percentage of students completing FAFSA than in years past. We have avoided reporting percentages for two reasons. First, choosing a denominator is incredibly difficult. We could use the total number of seniors on the class roster for a school as the denominator, but as counselors routinely point out, Buffalo students change schools at higher rates than in other districts and a number of students who are listed as seniors have not completed a sufficient number of credits to graduate within the academic year. Second, the sources of error present in the data would provide misleading estimates. All of this matters because our tendency is to use data of this sort for accountability purposes and our goal is not to assess or compare schools or counselors. Rather, we share the data so that counselors know which of their students have completed the process and which may need additional support.

Figure 1.
FAFSA Applications Submitted in BPS, 2012-2018



The increase of 16 students this year compared to last, is negligible but it is a positive sign suggesting that last year's increases were not an anomaly. For the three years following the inaugural year of the project, we saw consistent declines in total FAFSA submissions among BPS

students. The 2017 numbers were promising, and we suggested the likely result of making the application available in October and allowing families to use prior-year taxes, but we understood that it might simply be a random occurrence and the numbers could return to the previous pattern. These data suggest that the 2017 increases were not an isolated occurrence and they may suggest that recent changes are having an effect. It is possible that the FAFSA completion project contributed to that increase, but the service has remained relatively the same over the past several years. As we noted last year, our work became more challenging when FSA shifted away from the PIN number to sign the FAFSA to the FSA ID username and password because parents had more work they had to do on their own.

Figure 2 illustrates that a similar trend exists among the charter schools. They did not experience the same declines after the initial year of services, but they have seen modest gains over the past two years. One possible explanation for the increases over the past two years is the implementation of the Excelsior scholarship. It is possible that a number of families who would not have applied for financial aid in the past – assuming they would not be eligible – applied because their income was below the \$125,000 threshold. The numbers at City Honors were not different from the prior year, but we saw larger numbers applying from Hutch Tech.

Figure 2.

FAFSA Applications Submitted in Charter High Schools, 2012-18

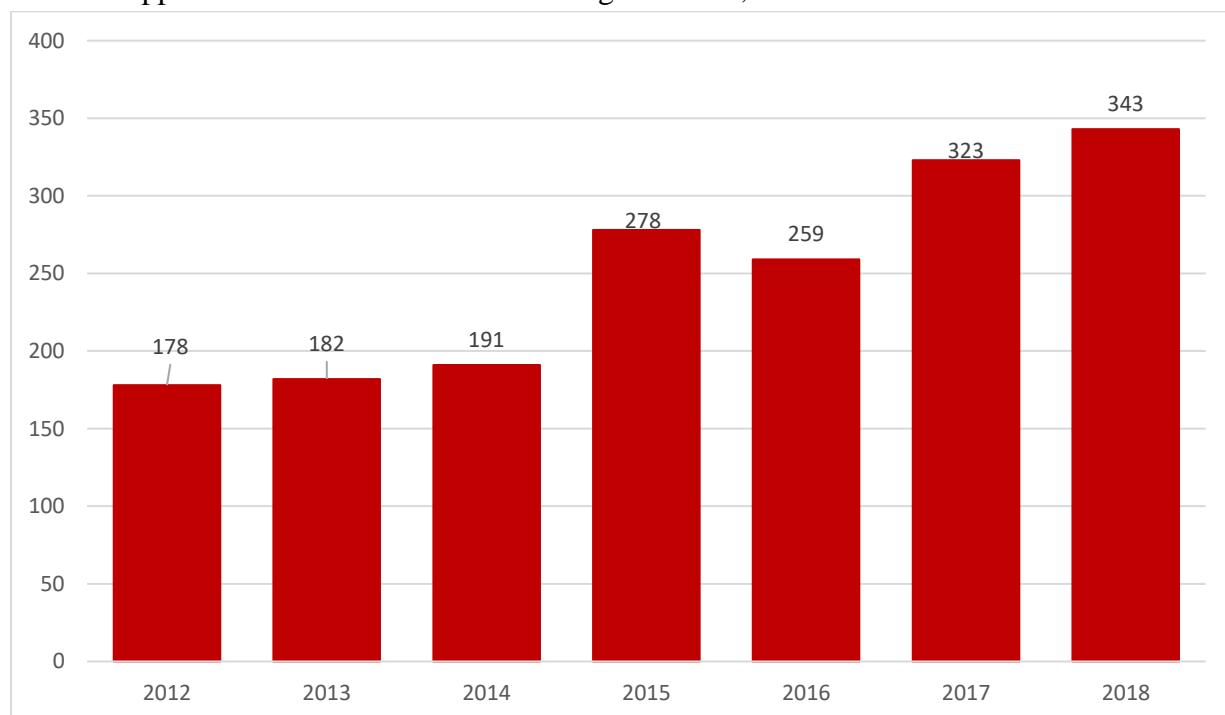


Table 3 provides a comprehensive summary of FAFSA and TAP applications completed as part of the project. We utilize data from two separate sources – the aggregated school level data provided by Federal Student Aid (FSA) and the individual record data for FAFSA and TAP

submissions provided by the Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC). The FSA numbers allow for comparisons from the beginning of the project through 2018, which can be helpful when considering whether changes in the project have improved student outcomes over time. The more conservative 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, 2017-18

<i>Buffalo Public Schools</i>	FSA (5/19)			FAFSA Estimates		TAP
	Submit	Complete	HESC (5/09)	Lower	Upper	
Bennett	--	--	--	--	--	--
BAVPA	73	70	53	53	70	32
Burgard	36	28	24	24	28	17
City Honors	121	118	114	114	118	72
East	29	24	19	19	24	18
Emerson	54	43	34	34	43	25
Frederick Olmsted	71	68	54	54	68	39
Hutch Tech	185	173	146	146	173	85
Int'l. Prep	71	66	48	48	66	35
Lafayette	58	58	45	45	58	34
Leonardo DaVinci	79	77	61	61	77	50
MST	64	58	46	46	58	22
McKinley	102	77	54	54	77	22
Middle Early	51	51	44	44	51	40
Riverside	31	30	13	13	30	13
South Park	73	61	53	53	61	36
BPS Sub-totals	1131	1002	808	808	1002	540
<i>Buffalo Public Charter Schools</i>						
BASCS	52	47	--	--	--	--
CSAT	95	87	42	42	87	24
Health Sciences	57	48	--	--	--	--
Oracle	35	30	23	23	30	13
Tapestry	60	50	--	--	--	--
Maritime	44	40	--	--	--	--
Charter Totals	343	302	65	65	117	37
Project Totals	1474	1304	873	873	1323	577

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, 1131 submitted FAFSA's is nearly 6% higher than the total in 2013 – the first year of the project. 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 1002 completed in 2018 is nearly as high as the total numbers submitted in 2013 (1031). The HESC estimate is consistently lower (808 for BPS this year) 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 2018, 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 808 and 1131. We know that only 1002 were completed by the end of May, but we suspect that many of the applications with errors will be completed before the 2018-19 academic year begins.

Our primary concern this year – and the past two years – 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 60% of students had done both. In other words, more than 250 students who filed their FAFSA did not apply for TAP in NYS, which affects a student's eligibility for Say Yes. We will continue to develop strategies to address this problem.

Conclusions

In the six years since the FAFSA completion project began, we have worked with nearly 200 interns and volunteers to serve more than 3600 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 over the past two years 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 has been inconsistent. Last year the tool was inoperable in February during peak filing season; this year, the tool was available through April. When the IRS retrieval tool is not working, we see a tendency for families to use current year taxes to complete the FAFSA rather than prior-year taxes. This problem does not exist in the retrieval tool because it automatically pulls the correct year of data.

As we have discussed in prior years, 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 basis 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.

Our overall numbers suggest that we are making progress in terms of FAFSA completion but we have not yet closed the gap on TAP applications. We know there are several reasons why students do not complete the TAP. In many cases, they miss the link at the end of the FAFSA to the NY State application and they are not aware that they need to file another form. In other cases, particularly for students who file the FAFSA as independent, students find it difficult to document

their independent status for New York State. We heard from many of our interns that there were times when the TAP application would simply not work when the students tried to follow the link and submit their TAP at the end of the FAFSA.

We are most excited about the staffing of the project moving forward. We have consistently hired as many as 18 interns and more students are seeking this type of experience. We plan to hire as many as 30 interns for the 2018-19 academic year and we have already had more than 50 inquiries and applications for the positions. And we are partnering with Say Yes and the office of financial aid to make these paid experiences – either as federal work study or through Say Yes sponsored stipends. The work study program is the most viable for long term sustainability. Colleges and universities that participate in federal work study must commit 7% of their resources to community service and many struggle to meet that target. This year we hope to employ as many as 15 interns on work study, at a value of nearly \$50,000 and we have begun conversations with other local colleges to place their work study students in schools to assist with the financial aid application process.