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# **Current Local Support For FAFSA Filing in Chester and Lancaster Counties and Practices for Increasing FAFSA Completion**

Zoe M. Byrd, Summer DEIA Intern at the Arras Foundation & Student at USC Lancaster

Suzanne Penuel, Mentor and Associate Professor at USC Lancaster

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# **Abstract**

This research surveys current local support for FAFSA filing in the Chester County School District (CCSD)—comprising Chester, Great Falls, and Lewisville High Schools—and the Lancaster County School District (LCSD)—comprising Andrew Jackson, Buford, Indian Land, and Lancaster High Schools. Examining high schools’ websites has shown significant inconsistencies in the online FAFSA resources provided, which limits students’ abilities to help themselves. This research also outlines three practices for increasing FAFSA completion that should be further explored. Both school districts and the seven high schools can boost their own levels of FAFSA support and resources in order to better support students when filing the FAFSA and pursuing higher education.

# **Background and Significance**

Education has been described many times as “the great equalizer,” a way for anyone to achieve their dreams and become upwardly mobile. However, tuition and other expenses can be a barrier to acquiring a higher education, which is why filing the FAFSA is crucial. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) enables students to receive financial aid from the federal government, states, and higher education institutions. Education Strategy Group’s 2020 *Fast Track FAFSA Completion* report shows a strong association with FAFSA completion and immediate enrollment: “90 percent of students who complete the FAFSA enroll in college directly from high school, compared to just 55 percent of non-completers” (2). Even though a student may submit the FAFSA, it is not considered completed if any important information is missing. School districts, high schools, and college advisors play an important role in helping students correctly file the FAFSA and transition to higher education.

1. **Existing Local Support for High School Students**
2. *Furman University's College Advising Corps*

The National College Advising Corps (CAC) is a program designed to increase “college enrollment and completion among low-income, first-generation college, and underrepresented high school students” (“College Advising Corps”). Since 2017, Furman University’s College Advising Corps has placed college advisors in all seven high schools within Chester and Lancaster Counties’ school districts. Research shows that seniors who meet with an advisor are “27% more likely to submit the FAFSA” (Butler). These advisors continue to have an incredible impact when preparing students for higher education.

1. *High School Counseling*

In both CCSD and LCSD, online FAFSA resources are available through the web pages of each high school’s counseling or guidance department. A survey of all seven schools’ websites shows the following types of FAFSA resources available: direct links to the FAFSA application, instructional videos on filing the FAFSA, most commonly asked questions regarding the FAFSA, and step-by-step instructions for filing the FAFSA. See Table 1 for the current availability on each school’s website.

1. **Current Inconsistencies within Existing Local Support**

There are major differences in the availability, quality and accessibility of FAFSA resources available on each school’s website. The lack of online resources for students is even more worrisome considering so many students participated in remote learning during the 2020-2021 academic school year. According to Bridgett Plexico, former webmaster and teacher at the LCSD Career Center, the school’s webmaster is responsible for creating and linking web pages, but individual teachers and departments are responsible for maintaining the content of their web pages. If a conscious effort is made to maintain the counseling web pages, the online resources provided could greatly support the current impact of Furman College Advisors.

1. *Lack of Information Availability*

All seven high schools have varying levels of information about the FAFSA available on their counseling web pages, as shown in Table 1. If one high school determines these resources are important for its students, then those resources are also important and useful for students of other high schools.

|  | Chester County School District | | | Lancaster County School District | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| High Schools | Chester | Great Falls | Lewisville | Andrew Jackson | Buford | Indian Land | Lancaster |
| Direct Link to FAFSA website | Available | Not available | Not available | Available | Available | Available | Available |
| FAFSA- Related Videos | Not available | Not available | Not available | Not available | Available | Not available | Not available |
| Commonly Asked Questions | Not available | Not available | Not available | Available | Available | Not available | Available |
| Steps to File the FAFSA | Available | Not available | Not available | Not available | Available | Not available | Available |
| 2021-2022 FAFSA Info | Available | Not available | Not available | Not available | Available | Not available | Available |

*Table 1*: Current Available Online FAFSA Resources on the Seven High Schools’ Websites

1. *Lack of Up-to-Date Information*

Many of the counseling pages have not been updated with the most recent information for both college advisors and FAFSA information. For example, Lancaster High School’s counseling pages list former college advisors Chelsea Warr (2017-18) and Emma DeVenny (2018-19), which means the web pages have not been fully updated for about four academic school years (“Counselors & Staff”; “Emma DeVenny”). After finding DeVenny’s page, viewers can click “Visit my Webpage,” which links them to an updated web page for Ayanna Wigfall, the most recent advisor for Lancaster (“Meet Your College Advisor”). So, even if a student wishes to reach out to their advisor, they may not be able to without the correct contact information.

In addition, much of the FAFSA information is outdated. For example, Buford High School lists information about the 2020-2021 FAFSA as if it were the most recent, yet the 2021-2022 FAFSA has been available for overnine months as of July 2021 (“FAFSA Information”). This could be very confusing and discouraging for anyone trying to determine which tax return is necessary to fill out the FAFSA.

1. *Lack of Accessibility*

There is also a general lack of accessibility for what little information is available. For example, on the Lancaster High School website viewers must click through five hyperlinks to find any information about the FAFSA, and until the very last link, there is no apparent order to this path. In addition, searching the website for “FAFSA” yields no results. If a user searches for “college advisor,” it will only take them to the School Counseling page, so there are still several hyperlinks to click through. However, this is more likely an issue with the websites themselves, as the search tool is flawed for many schools. This keeps non-tech-savvy users from finding necessary information about the FAFSA.

None of the high schools’ websites offered any information in Spanish. While there is the option of using Google Translate, this only translates the text directly on the page, not the files and graphics that contain the majority of FAFSA information. While Hispanic students may speak English fluently, their parent(s)/guardian(s) may not. Regardless, FAFSA information should be available to everyone, and a language barrier should not prevent that.

# **Practices to Increase FAFSA Submissions**

1. **Create a centralized web page for FAFSA information on school district’s websites**

According to a 2017 article published in the *Journal of Student Financial Aid*, “reliable, centralized online resources” can ensure underrepresented students have access to necessary information to “complete the steps needed to receive financial aid,” such as filing the FAFSA (Eichelberger et al. 77). A college readiness page could be added to each school district’s website, including the following materials: the five FAFSA resources listed earlier, information about state scholarships, important deadlines, and more. In addition, a similar page for career readiness resources could be considered. By centralizing these resources at the school district level, college advisors and counseling staff at each high school could easily transfer the resources to their individual pages. This would also make it easier to provide Spanish versions of resources, which can be taken from the Federal Student Aid webpage dedicated to providing multimedia resources in both English and Spanish (“View). Making online FAFSA and college readiness resources a priority allows all students to help themselves and ensure they have reliable, up-to-date information.

1. **Hold frequent and regular virtual FAFSA nights**

Frequent and regularly scheduled FAFSA nights would enable more participants to receive live instruction and support when filing the FAFSA. In Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Broward County Public Schools have had great success with weekly virtual FAFSA nights, reaching hundreds of people each event (Carrell and DeBaun). These events could be held on online platforms such as Facebook and Zoom or in-person as it becomes safe to do so.

It is important to note that CCSD did host a live FAFSA workshop on its Facebook page, but the video itself was not available or linked on any of the three high school’s websites (“School Counselor”). This makes it inaccessible for those without a Facebook account or who cannot find the post on the CCSD Facebook page.

1. **Offer one-on-one appointments to students, parents, and guardians**

While group instruction is important, individualized assistance and support for FAFSA filing is equally so. Continuing to offer one-on-one appointments with students and their parent(s)/guardian(s) can further support increasing FAFSA completion. Anyone who has spent at least one season working in a South Carolina tax office can report that not every South Carolinian is familiar enough with their tax returns to file the FAFSA on their own. Individual appointments can also provide a safe, private space to advise students who have special situations. For example a student’s parent(s)/guardian(s) may not be willing to share their tax information, so the student may believe they cannot file the FAFSA without that information, which is not true. It is crucial to ensure students in situations like these are aware they can still receive financial aid and support necessary to pursue a higher education.

# **Conclusion**

Schools have the responsibility to motivate students to participate in a “college-going tradition,” which Furman’s College Advising Corps aims to establish. This begins with ensuring students have the necessary resources, support and information to file the FAFSA and make the transition to higher education. By making this a priority, schools communicate to students and their families that it is possible to pursue a higher education, whether at a technical college, a two-year program, or a four-year institution, and that there is value and worth in doing so.

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On this web page, viewers can access a “College and Career Planning Guide” created by the Buford Guidance Department. Within this document, updated information for the 2021-2022 FAFSA is available.

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As a former webmaster and teacher of the LCSD Career Center, Plexico describes the responsibilities of the webmaster, teacher and department when creating and maintaining web pages on the school’s website.

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