

Closing the FAFSA Gap

FAFSA Completion Rates Among New England's Low-Income Students

Introduction

When I was a high school student, I solely relied on my school counselors and teachers for college-readiness information because this was my only option as a daughter of Mexican immigrants who were unfamiliar with American higher education. “FAFSA season” during my senior year, however, led me to believe that I may have to give up on my dream of going to college. Despite multiple pleas, my father was initially unwilling to share his tax forms with me so that I could file my Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). He did not understand how financial aid worked and why he had to disclose such personal information. Eventually, my father shared the necessary tax documents, but his concession did not come easily. After recently receiving my Ed.M. in Education Policy and Management from Harvard, I realize that I was able to navigate the higher education system because I am an outlier. Even though I attended Hawthorne High School in California—an underperforming high school that constantly made headlines for anything but college-readiness—I managed to stay on track for college because I was projected to be the high school salutatorian. As a top-performing student, I had more access to college readiness and FAFSA information from counselors and teachers because it was assumed that I would be a strong candidate for college admissions. Too many low-income students, however, fall through the cracks and do not enroll in college immediately after high school because they miss out on important college readiness information and fail to file a FAFSA application.

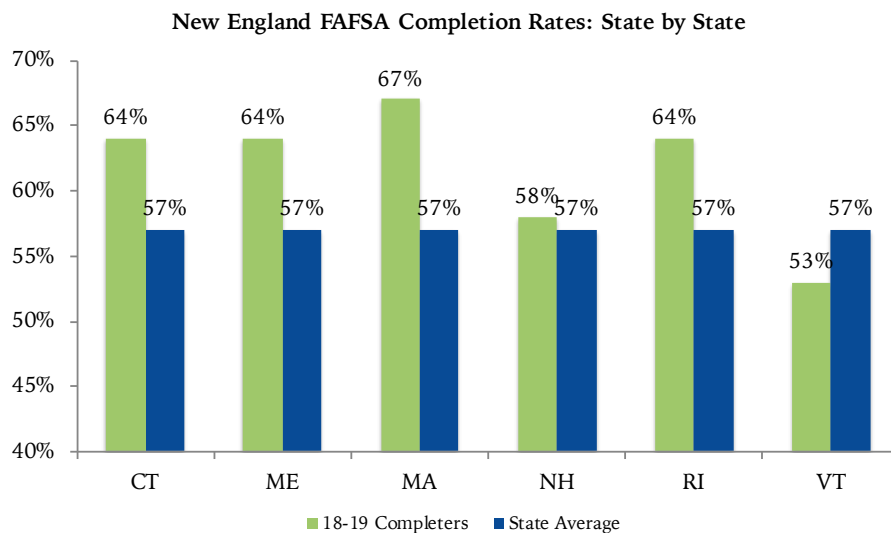
The situation is becoming progressively bleaker for low-income students and higher education institutions (HEIs) across the country and in New England.

HEIs in New England are facing enrollment challenges, and, in some cases, [campus closures](#) due to demographic changes in the region. Lower birth rates in New England have precipitated a decline in the number of high school graduates and, therefore, a decline in the number of individuals who can enroll in colleges and universities directly from high school. At the same time, the population of underrepresented students in New England has grown. Underrepresented students, including those who are low-income, continuously face barriers to college access. In order to increase the college-going rates of this population, it is imperative to understand the complications associated with one of their greatest barriers to entry: FAFSA completion.

Financial aid application completion is a [predictive indicator](#) of college readiness and likelihood of enrollment immediately after high school. Nationally, students from the lowest socioeconomic status who file a FAFSA application are [127%](#) more likely to enroll in college immediately after high school than their counterparts who do not file one. In New England, increased FAFSA completion rates of low-income students will help sustain HEIs current and future enrollment and strengthen the higher education pipeline.

FAFSA Completion Rates (2018-19): By State

Through June 29 of the 2018-19 FAFSA cycle, New England states had an average FAFSA completion rate of 62%—five percentage points higher than the national average. Massachusetts has the region’s highest FAFSA completion rate (67%). This figure is 13 percentage points higher than the national average, placing Massachusetts fifth in the nation for FAFSA completion. Massachusetts’ FAFSA completion policies and practices, such as the use of individual student-level FAFSA completion reports, could be adapted to fit the specific needs of other states seeking to increase their completion rates. While statewide FAFSA completion rates provide only a general sense of completion rates, it is critical to understand how each New England state is addressing the FAFSA completion agenda for low-income students by analyzing their completion rates based on district poverty levels and urban city household income data.



Source: NEBHE analysis of NEBHE analysis of [#FormYourFuture FAFSA Tracker](#)

FAFSA Completion and the Relationship to District-level Poverty Rates

FAFSA completion data disaggregated by race or income are not readily available, making it challenging for New England states to support students with the greatest need. The current [limitations](#) of the completion data prevent states from determining how the FAFSA completion rates for students living in poverty compare to the statewide average. Without accurate metrics of subgroup performance on FAFSA completions, states and districts face undue challenges when they seek to fully tailor their initiatives to low-income populations. Despite this limitation, the relationship between FAFSA completion rates and school district poverty levels can clarify how New England students living in poverty perform with respect to FAFSA completions.

The estimated [relationship](#) between poverty levels and FAFSA completion rates reveal that a ten percentage point increase in district poverty levels affects state FAFSA completion levels in the following ways: a 5% decline in Connecticut, a 0.3% decline in Maine, a 0.4% decline in Massachusetts, a 1.1% decline in New Hampshire, a 0.8% increase in Rhode Island, and a 0.9% decline in Vermont.

Examining this relationship enables New England states to better understand how poverty levels in their respective school districts affect completion rates. States with a higher inverse relationship between FAFSA completions and poverty levels should further concentrate completion efforts on low-income students. Such efforts would help close the FAFSA completion gap and help increase the college enrollment rates of HEIs in New England.

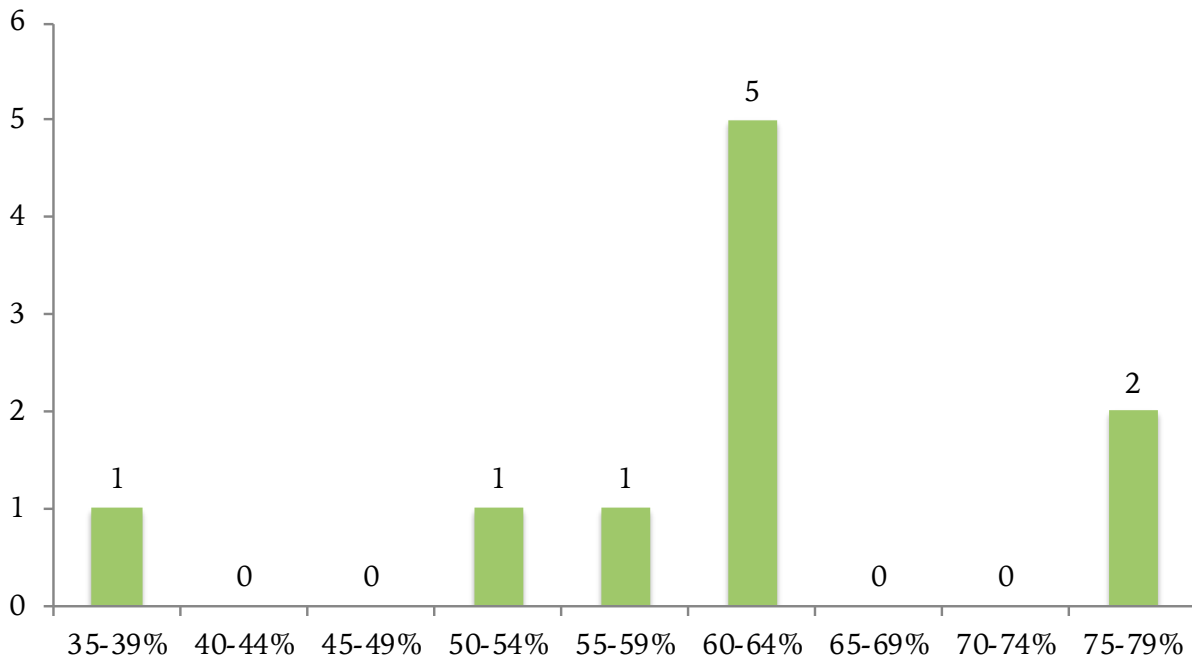
Of the reasons why students living in poverty might not complete a FAFSA application, the biggest reason is a lack of access to financial aid awareness and [application assistance](#). Rhode Island, the only state in New England with a positive relationship between FAFSA completion rates and poverty levels, serves as a model for other states seeking to increase the FAFSA completion rates of low-income students. Initiatives such as the [Rhode Island Promise](#), which provides tuition-free courses to full-time students further incentivizes low-income students to complete the FAFSA application in order to be eligible for the program. State leaders can continue to support these populations through targeted outreach efforts that focus on financial aid awareness and individual application assistance for students and families.

FAFSA Completion Rates Among Students Living in Poverty in Urban School Districts

Connecticut

Seven of the 12 cities in Connecticut with a population of 50,000 or more are home to 15% or more families with children under age 18 living below the [poverty level](#). New Britain, which has a [median household income](#) of \$43,611 and where 30% of families with children under age 18 live below the poverty line, had the lowest district [FAFSA completion range](#) (35%-39%) in June 2018. Milford, which has the state's highest median household income at \$86,496 and lowest poverty rate (7%) of the 12 cities in Connecticut, had a 75%-79% district FAFSA completion range. Of the state's five urban districts with a FAFSA completion rate of 60%-64%, New Haven had the highest city poverty rate (29%). New Haven is an outlier regarding the general inverse relationship between poverty and FAFSA completions within the 60%-64% completion range.

Connecticut Urban District FAFSA 2018 Completions: by Frequency



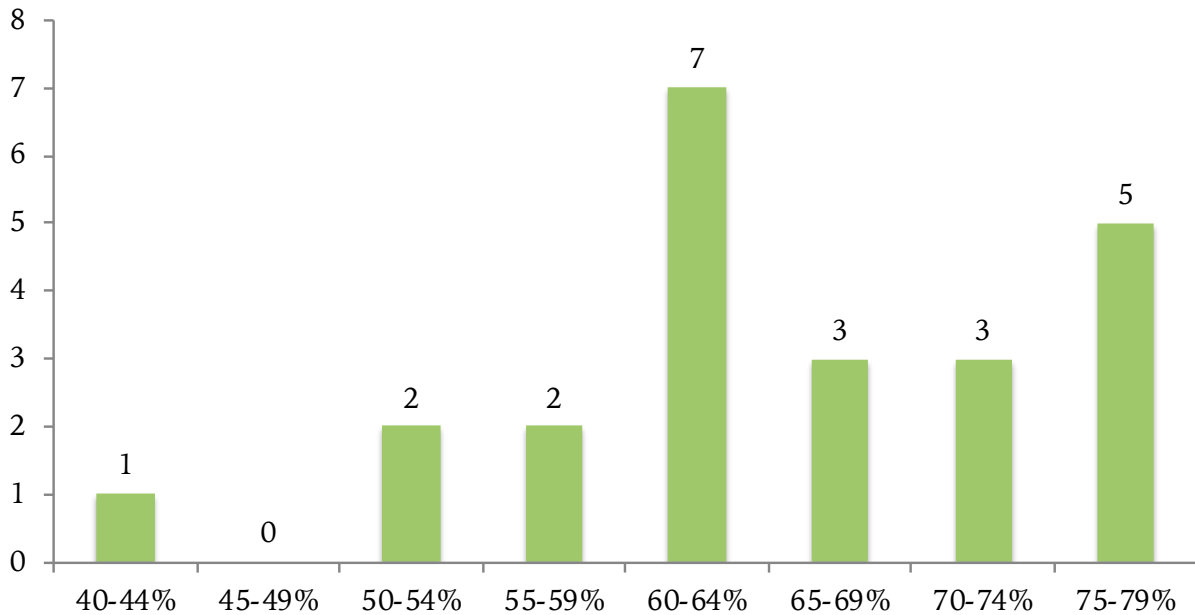
Maine

Portland, Maine’s only city with a population of 50,000 or more, has a median household income of \$51,430 and 21% of families with children under age 18 live in poverty. Portland had an average district FAFSA completion rate of 80% or greater in June 2018, the highest among all New England cities. With such a high FAFSA completion rate and poverty level, Portland is an outlier regarding the general inverse relationship between poverty and FAFSA completions.

Massachusetts

Fifteen out of the 23 cities in Massachusetts with a population of 50,000 or more have 15% of families with children under age 18 living in poverty. New Bedford, which has a median household income of \$40,626 and 29% poverty level for families with children under age 18, had the lowest district FAFSA completion range (40%-44%) in June 2018. Cambridge, with a median household income of \$89,145 and a 12% poverty level, had a 75%-79% district FAFSA completion range. Within the seven urban districts that had a FAFSA completion rate of 60%-64%, Springfield had the highest city poverty level at 38%. Springfield is an outlier in the inverse relationship between poverty and FAFSA completions within the 60%-64% completion range.

Massachusetts Urban District FAFSA 2018 Completions: by Frequency



New Hampshire

Two cities with a population of 50,000 or more in New Hampshire—Manchester and Nashua—have median household incomes of \$56,647 and \$70,316, respectively, and 18% and 13% poverty levels for families with children under age 18, respectively. Both Manchester and Nashua had a 50%-54% district FAFSA completion range in June 2018. With a lower than expected FAFSA completion range, Nashua is an outlier in the inverse relationship between poverty and FAFSA completions.

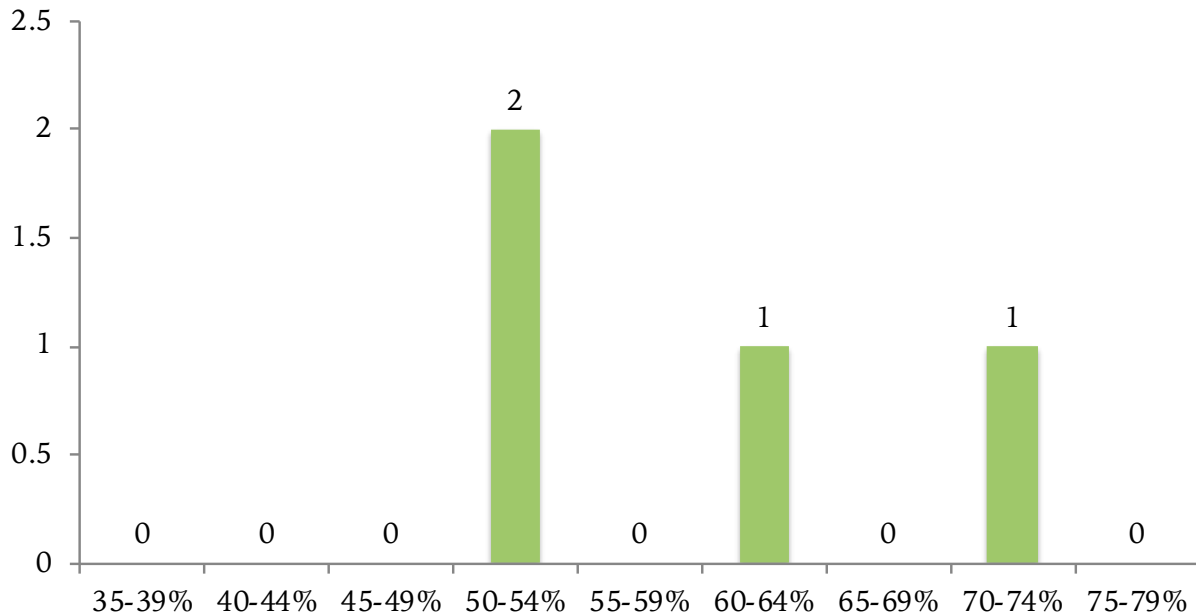
Rhode Island

Two of the four cities in Rhode Island with a population of 50,000 or more have 18% of families with children under age 18 living in poverty. The two urban districts with a FAFSA completion range of 50%-54% in June 2018—Providence and Pawtucket—have the lowest median household incomes and highest poverty levels at \$40,366 and \$44,909, respectively, and 31% and 25% poverty levels for families with children under age 18, respectively. Providence and Pawtucket illustrate the inverse relationship between poverty and FAFSA completions.

Vermont

There are no cities with a population of 50,000 or more in Vermont.

Rhode Island Urban District FAFSA 2018 Completions: by Frequency



With a few exceptions, cities in New England illustrate a negative relationship between poverty and FAFSA completions. On average, students who attended a school in an urban district with lower median household incomes and higher poverty levels are less likely to complete the FAFSA. This has negative implications for New England HEIs that continue to struggle with college enrollment. To help mitigate the threat of campus closures in New England, state policy leaders should focus on FAFSA completion efforts in urban districts with lower median household incomes generally, and particularly in districts with low FAFSA completion rates.

The following cities in New England are outliers to the inverse relationship between poverty and FAFSA completion rates.

City	Median Household Income	District FAFSA 2018 Completion Rate
Lawrence, MA	\$39,627	75%-79%
Providence, RI	\$40,366	70%-74%
Waterbury, CT	\$40,879	75%-79%
Portland, ME	\$51,430	80%+

Conversely, the following cities in New England with higher median household incomes underperformed the cities listed above.

City	Median Household Income	District FAFSA 2018 Completion Rate
Newton, MA	\$133,853	60%-64%
Stamford, CT	\$84,893	55%-59%
Waltham, CT	\$83,249	60%-64%
Weymouth, MA	\$75,892	50%-54%
Methuen, MA	\$73,492	60%-64%
Warwick, RI	\$71,191	50%-54%
Nashua, NH	\$70,316	50%-54%

Outlier cities with lower median household incomes and higher-than-expected FAFSA completion rates can serve as a potential model for best practices. States seeking to increase the FAFSA completion rates of hard-to-reach populations can learn about the initiatives in these cities and adapt them to the needs of their specific populations.

Urban districts with higher median household incomes that are also outliers may be a consequence of the common belief among more affluent families that they do not qualify for financial aid. Wealthier families who assume this tend not to file a FAFSA application. Students who reside in both low- and high-income urban districts can benefit from having a greater awareness of the importance of filing a FAFSA application. Increasing the FAFSA completion rates among low-income students requires greater awareness and individual follow-up efforts to file a FAFSA. Higher-income students who may qualify for federal financial aid can benefit from similar types of outreach to counter any preconceived notions about financial aid. Improving FAFSA completion rates is a collaborative effort that can only take place when best practices are shared.

Closing the FAFSA Completion Gap: New England FAFSA Completion Initiatives

In a 2017 report, the National College Access Network ([NCAN](#)) outlined nine recommendations to help increase the FAFSA completion rates of low-income students. NCAN also highlighted four states, including New Hampshire, for their promising FAFSA-completion initiatives. The following New England states are employing policies or practices that align with most of NCAN’s recommendations:

NCAN Recommendation	Policy	Practice
Make low-income students the center of initiatives	RI	NH
Foster as many partnerships as possible		All states
Collect data on FAFSA completion to raise accountability for initiatives	ME, MA, RI,VT	ME, MA, RI,VT
Design FAFSA-completion initiatives according to the needs of the target population	MA	CT, ME, NH, RI, VT
Be consistent about FAFSA-completion outreach and messaging		ME, NH
Ensure the state education agency is invested in FAFSA completion		ME, MA, CT, RI,VT

FAFSA Completion Initiative Highlights¹

State and Federal Policies

Rhode Island’s [Promise Program](#) at the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) offers tuition-free courses to recent high school graduates who study full-time and achieve a 2.5 GPA. It also incentivizes high school students to complete the FAFSA to meet program eligibility requirements and, as a result, has contributed to the state’s increased FAFSA completion.

Connecticut and **Vermont** participate in the Second Chance Pell Program, which awards Pell Grants to incarcerated individuals to obtain postsecondary training and credentials once they are released. To access Pell Grants, incarcerated individuals must file a FAFSA application.

Massachusetts [H.420](#) has been filed to reduce the student-to-counselor ratio in a pilot program that would theoretically disencumber counselors so they have more time to allocate toward FAFSA completions.

The federal Higher Education Act (HEA) 483(a)(10), which governs FAFSA data-sharing laws, allows states with state student financial aid programs to access individual student FAFSA-completion reports. **Maine**, **Massachusetts**, **Rhode Island** and **Vermont** are currently using this resource. Implementation of this resource in **Connecticut** is currently pending.

¹ State and federal policies include legislation(s) that influence(s) FAFSA completions, while state practices include behaviors that influence FAFSA completions.

Best Practices

New Hampshire's Center for College Planning (CCP) coordinates financial aid nights at 100% of New Hampshire public high schools. New Hampshire is the only state in New England that coordinates financial aid nights at every public high school.

Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Vermont provide participating districts and high school counselors with individual student data on FAFSA completions.²

The **Rhode Island** Office of Postsecondary Commission (RIOPC) launched a FAFSA Completion [Dashboard](#) in 2018, which enables school and district leaders, policymakers, and families to assess progress made toward meeting the state's FAFSA-completion goal of 85%.

Maine and **New Hampshire** provide targeted professional development on student aid for high school counselors and college access professionals. **Vermont** hosts "FAFSA Fridays" at the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC) resource center, in addition to drop-in and appointment services. **New Hampshire** and **Vermont** host FAFSA assistance toll-free hotlines for state residents. **Vermont** offers individual, FAFSA-completion support to adult learners through counselors who meet them in person.

Because school [counselors](#) are the main source of college-readiness information for first-generation students, all New England states should promote greater FAFSA portal usage to best support the FAFSA completion of students who are at higher risk of not completing the application. Quantitative data disaggregated by race and income can provide a lens as to how low-income students might fare with FAFSA completions, but it will not suffice. Qualitative data that capture the challenges low-income students face in completing the FAFSA application are also critical. Data that explain how and why some students are less likely to file a FAFSA application are imperative to improve outcomes for all students. Our nation cannot afford to lose more students to higher education simply because they are unfamiliar with the financial aid application process.

FAFSA completion is usually a joint effort among students, high school guidance counselors, and families. During my senior year in high school, my father eventually conceded to giving me his tax forms for my FAFSA application—but only after I warned him that, if I did not file the application, we would need to somehow come up with \$26,000 on our own to pay for tuition, fees, and housing at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). My father's perception of the FAFSA has changed since then. What he previously believed was merely an "arbitrary" online financial aid application, ultimately awarded me a full-ride at UCLA through a combination of state and federal grants, work-study, and scholarships. School counselors and teachers were integral in supporting my persistence to file my FAFSA application, despite my parents' reluctance. Granting school counselors access to FAFSA portals allows them to best support all students who, like me, start a FAFSA application but face challenges in actually completing it.

² **Maine** uses the Finance Authority of Maine's (FAME) FAFSA portals which allows participating counselors to track individual students' FAFSA submission and verification status. **Massachusetts** provides two reports to districts and high schools: FAFSA Completion Report Summary and FAFSA Completion Report Detail, which provide counselors, educators and administrators individual student FAFSA completion data. The **RIOPC** has implemented a FAFSA portal that provides participating high school guidance counselors with student-level FAFSA completion information. **Vermont** makes FAFSA portals available to participating schools and high school counselors to track if and when students complete the FAFSA application.