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## Show-Me FAFSA Challenge

Coordinating Board for Higher Education  
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### BACKGROUND

The Missouri Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development (DHEWD) identified increasing FAFSA filing as a priority for 2020 with its placemat initiative: “Benchmark best practices to increase FAFSA filing and begin implementation.” To accomplish that initiative, DHEWD developed and launched a statewide FAFSA completion competition called the Show-Me FAFSA Challenge. All public high schools in Missouri were automatically entered and eligible to compete. The goal of the challenge was to increase FAFSA filing by high school seniors in Missouri during the 2020-2021 academic year. The Show-Me FAFSA Challenge was developed with the assistance of a FAFSA Completion Advisory Group that met virtually during May and June 2020. The competition structure was based on best practices identified in 16 other states with FAFSA completion competitions.

The Show-Me FAFSA Challenge became active October 1, 2020, when the 2021-2022 FAFSA opened, and remained active until April 1, the Access Missouri deadline. During the competition period, FAFSA completion numbers were updated and monitored on the DHEWD website. Winning schools are being awarded in four categories that are significant to FAFSA completion: 1) highest completion percentage, 2) greatest percentage increase in completion, 3) greatest percentage of low-income students who filed a FAFSA, and 4) most innovative FAFSA outreach strategy. Schools were divided into three groups, and a prize for each category is being awarded in each group for a total of 12 prizes. Several schools reached or exceeded 60% FAFSA completion and were entered into a drawing for an additional prize.

The Missouri Scholarship and Loan Foundation and the Missouri College Access Network have each allocated \$5,000 to fund the prizes for the Show-Me FAFSA Challenge. Prizes are being awarded in the form of scholarships. Winning schools were notified of their award on May 6. A public announcement of the outcomes from the Show-Me FAFSA Challenge was made May 14 in a press release and video via social media.

### Outcomes

The goal of the Show-Me FAFSA Challenge was to incentivize schools in a unique way to encourage and help more students file the FAFSA in order to reach a state filing goal of 60% for the class of 2021.

National FAFSA filing data is tracked by Form Your Future at <https://formyourfuture.org/fafsa-tracker/>, which is the primary resource for state percentages and ranking. Form Your Future updates its tracker weekly. On April 2, 2021, the first date after the competition ended, Form Your Future reported the following FAFSA data.

**National:** Through April 2, 2021, 46.0% of the high school class of 2021 had completed a FAFSA. There had been 1,736,708 completions nationally, a -7.0% change compared to last academic year.

**Missouri:** Through April 2, 2021, 42.8% of the high school class of 2021 had completed a FAFSA. Missouri is 32nd in national filing rankings. There had been 30,511 completions in the state, a -9.0% change (-3,028 completions) compared to last academic year. Missouri was ranked 36th in percent change for completion.

FAFSA filing rates are down nationally, including in Missouri. The difference from last year has been improving incrementally, but has not yet leveled out to equal. We did not meet our goal, but given the national trends, it is likely not a direct result of the competition. At the time that the competition concept was proposed, a 60% filing goal seemed reasonable based on historical FAFSA filing trends in Missouri. At that time, the long-term impacts of COVID-19 were unknown.

## Successes

- The competition was well-received on each occasion it was presented. The branding is clean and appealing, and messaging was clear.
- The Show-Me FAFSA Challenge Tracker is a robust tool. The MDHEWD data team created a visually appealing Tableau dashboard for displaying and organizing the state's FAFSA data.
- Every public school in Missouri was automatically eligible for entry without any additional steps, so participation was easy.
- Nine schools were able to reach or exceed the 60% FAFSA filing goal despite the pandemic.

## Challenges

- The Show-Me FAFSA Challenge Tracker was delayed in its release due to the nature of the data and its complexity. Visualizations are effective, but limited. There is an opportunity for improvement and expansion in the next iteration of the challenge.
- Counselor capacity for promoting FAFSA completion was seriously impacted by the pandemic.
- There was only one submission for the “Most Innovative Strategy” category. This particular category was the only one to require a submission from the school.

## Recommendations

Another year of the competition would ideally give a better indication of its ability to motivate schools to increase their FAFSA filing numbers.

To increase the likelihood of success and to overcome challenges, the following is recommended:

- Communicate and market the competition more frequently. Some suggestions would be to increase social media posts, increase frequency of communication with DESE contacts, counselor groups, Journey to College participants, and FAFSA Completion Project participants.
- Work with the MDHEWD data team to improve the challenge tracker to increase ease of use and visual appeal now that there is a framework in place.
- Offering more or larger scholarships could add to the appeal for schools, if sponsor funding allows.
- Set a realistic FAFSA filing goal with recovery in mind; 50% would be a good balance of optimism for improvement from this year and realistic considering the challenges counselors may still face in working on FAFSA filing with students.

## Competition Winners

There were ties in several categories that required random drawing. There was a lack of submissions for the “Most Innovative Strategy” award, and no panel of judges was convened.

### Highest Overall Completion:

- *1-500 students*: South Holt High (South Holt Co. R-I) 73.7%
- *501-1200 students*: Bayless Senior High (Bayless) 66.3%
- *1201+ students*: Rockwood Summit Sr High (Rockwood R-VI) 57.7%

### **Most Improved Completion:**

- *1-500 students:* Collegiate School of Med/Bio (St. Louis City) +37.1%
- *501-1200 students:* Chillicothe High (Chillicothe R-II) +33.4%
- *1201+ students:* Marquette Sr High (Rockwood R-VI) +44.2%

### **Greatest Number of Lowest Income Students Filed:**

*1-500 students: Tied at 100%!*

- Vashon High (St. Louis City)
- Transportation and Law (St. Louis City)
- Sumner High (St. Louis City)
- Osceola Jr-Sr High (Osceola)
- Milan High (Milan C-2)
- Hogan Preparatory Academy (Hogan Preparatory Academy)
- Greenville High (Greenville R-II)
- Frontier School of Excellence (Frontier Schools)
- Confluence Preparatory Academy (Confluence Academies)
- Cleveland NJROTC Academy (St. Louis City)
- Alton High (Alton R-IV) – DRAWING WINNER

*501-1200 students: Tied at 100%!*

- Northeast High (Kansas City 33) – DRAWING WINNER
- Normandy High (Normandy Schools Collaborative)

*1201+ students:* McCluer High (Ferguson-Florissant R-II) 89.3%

### **Most Innovative Strategy:**

*1-500 students:* Charleston High (Charleston R-I)

*501-1200 students:* No submissions

*1201+ students:* No submissions

### **Statewide Drawing:**

*Nine schools reached or exceeded the 60% filing goal to qualify for the statewide drawing:*

- South Holt High (South Hold Co. R-I) 73.7%
- Collegiate School of Med/Bio (St. Louis City) 72.1%
- Santa Fe High (Santa Fe R-X) 69.0%
- Bayless Senior High (Bayless) 66.3%
- Metro High (St. Louis City) 63.0%
- Salisbury High (Salisbury R-IV) 60.6%
- Jefferson High (Jefferson C-123) 60.0%
- Hume High (Hume R-VIII) 60.0%
- Chadwick High (Chadwick R-I) 60.0% - DRAWING WINNER

## **CURRENT STATUS**

MDHEWD has announced the winners of the Show-Me FAFSA Challenge and is in the process of awarding the scholarship dollars. Next steps are plan for the 2021-22 academic year competition.

**RECOMMENDATION**

This is an information item only.

**NO ATTACHMENTS**