Learn4Life
Metro Atlanta Regional Education Partnership

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What You Can Do:
Small Steps for Promoting
Post-Secondary Success

October 2019

Massive change can be overwhelming. But you can take small steps to make a big difference for students.

Learn4Life knows that it is critical to ensure students' access to post-secondary program options and financial aid information.

In this guide, we'll outline some of the **challenges** that prevent students from successfully transitioning from high school to college, along with **policy recommendations** to address these challenges at a systematic level.

Policy change can sometimes requires coordination, political advocacy, and financial and human capital. But any massive change requires a series of small changes. In other words, while you engage in collective efforts for policy change, **you can take small steps to help students and their families.**
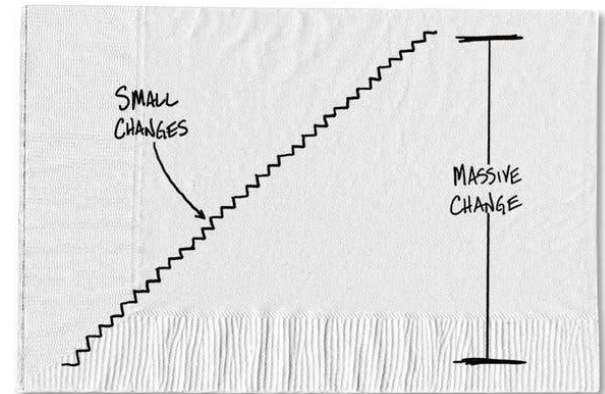
Image from The New York Times

The goals of this guide are:
- to present some **practical steps that families, educators, and community members can take** to address the challenges students face in getting to college
- to share **resources that can help you take the small steps** that might lead to long-term change

Learn4Life's Postsecondary Change Action Network (CAN) is organized around three "success factors" that impact postsecondary enrollment:
- Financial Aid
- Academic Preparation
- College-Going Culture

This guide is also organized around those three success factors.

CONTENTS

Summary: Small steps and resources to help you to take them

	Small Step	Resource
FAFSA Completion	Learn about the FAFSA completion and submission rates at your district or school	Metro Atlanta school data, including FAFSA completion and submission rates
	Learn about how much federal aid is distributed at colleges and universities	Federal Title IV reports
	Help demystify the process of paying for college	NASFAA's Best Practice Guide, Implementation Timeline, and Early FAFSA memes
Academic Prep	Advocate for Sufficient Counseling and Use Data to Support Student Goals	Educators for Social Responsibility's Increasing College Access through School-Based Models of Postsecondary Preparation, Planning, and Support
College-Going Culture	Help students prepare for the test	Free Online SAT Practice (Khan Academy) Free Online ACT Practice
	Read the research about the barriers that keep college-ready students from taking admissions tests	Journal Article: Missed Exams and Lost Opportunities: Who Could Gain From Expanded College Admission Testing?
	Learn about undermatching and strategies to address it	Policy Brief: Promoting College Match for Low-Income Students: Lessons for Practitioners
	Guide students and families to resources that help them make well informed decisions about their best match	College Results Online College Scorecard FAFSA4caster

Financial Aid Small Steps: Navigate Complexity & Address Myths about College Affordability

Our policy recommendations include changing the FAFSA and leveraging student-level data to target outreach

Challenge
- The FAFSA is a burden to complete.

Our Policy Recommendations
1. Take measures to reduce the complexity and length of the FAFSA.
2. Use student-level data to guide FAFSA outreach.

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You can help by learning more about the schools, districts, and universities in your community and leveraging free tools to support students

The FAFSA is the gateway to a significant portion of financial aid. Unfortunately, submission rates for the FAFSA have remained stubbornly low — the median completion rate Metro Atlanta is 49 percent, and students who don't submit the form leave up to $2.6 billion financial aid on the table.

Scholarship America has two tips for volunteers or families to help boost completion rates.

1. **Learn the landscape**. You can use the data that we've shared in our CAN meetings (accessible here) to learn about the FAFSA completion and submission rates at your district or school. You can also view Title IV reports from the U.S. Department of Education to learn about how much federal aid is distributed at colleges and universities, helping you get a picture of your students' likeliest paths to aid.

2. **Use and share available tools.** The federal government's Financial Aid Toolkit offers a wide range of resources for the general public, all geared toward demystifying the process of paying for college. The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators has resources for people who work in secondary and postsecondary schools, including a Best Practice Guide, Implementation Timeline, and Early FAFSA memes.
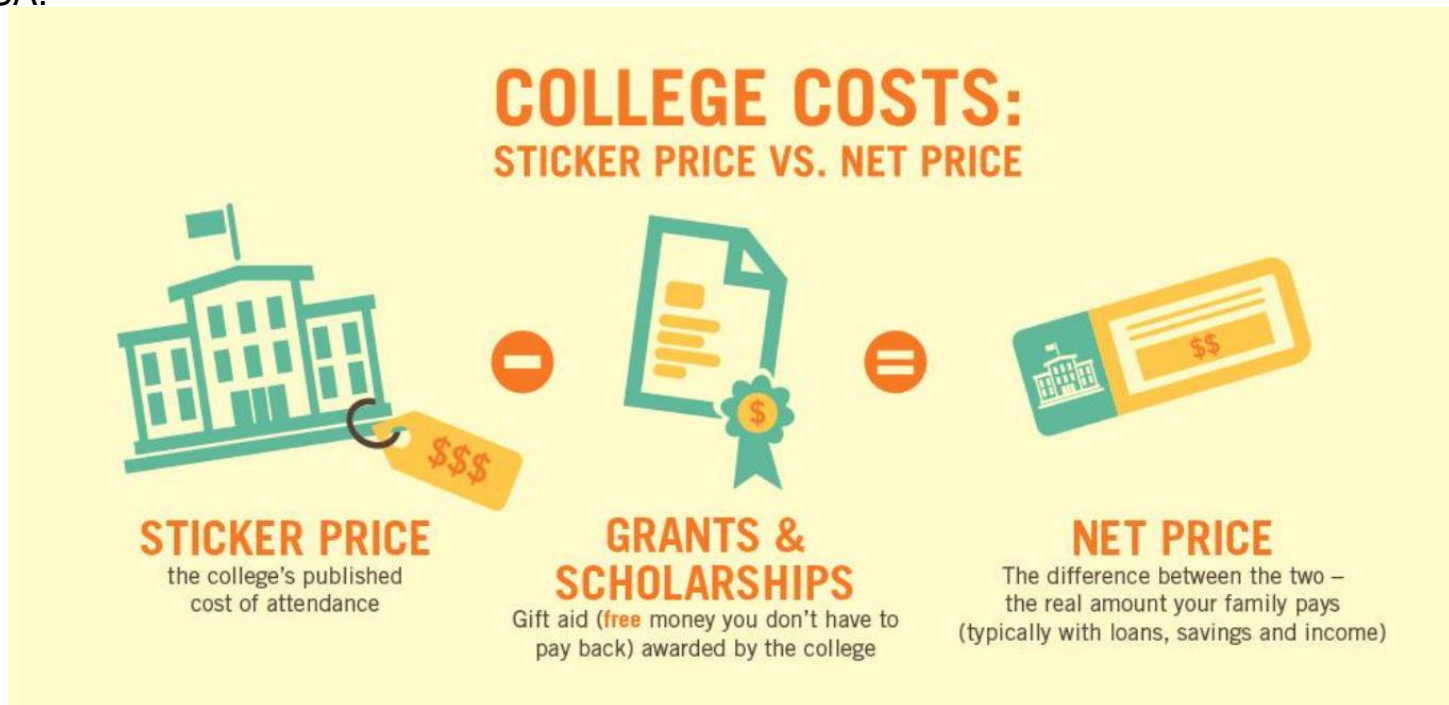

FAFSA IN OCTOBER? #NAILEDIT — NASFAA

Help families understand the difference between **"sticker price"** and **net price** of college, and how to offset costs

3. **Address assumptions about financial aid and college affordability directly**. Students and families sometimes have misperceptions about financial aid, the cost of college, and the value of higher education. College Scorecard provides access to a wide range of data about post-secondary options, including estimated cost based on family income. The FAFSA4caster allows students and their families to estimate their federal student aid eligibility before completing the FAFSA.

COLLEGE COSTS:
STICKER PRICE VS. NET PRICE

STICKER PRICE
the college's published cost of attendance

GRANTS & SCHOLARSHIPS
Gift aid (free money you don't have to pay back) awarded by the college

NET PRICE
The difference between the two – the real amount your family pays (typically with loans, savings and income)

Source: U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Federal Student Aid

Academic Prep Small Steps: Advocate for Sufficient Counseling and Use Data to Support Student Goals

Our policy recommendations include addressing high student-to-counselor ratios & using data to predict and ensure college success

Challenges:

- Student-to-school counselor ratios are too high for adequate student support throughout the postsecondary exploration and readiness process.
- There is a lack of alignment between educational systems to maximize student progression and success from pre-K through college.
- Schools and districts often do not have the capacity to collect, manage, or analyze the student factors that predict post-secondary success.

Our Policy Recommendations

1. Districts in Metro Atlanta should explore solutions that would ameliorate the effects of high student-to-counselor ratios and extend the reach of effective counselors.
2. Bright spots should use data from Georgia's College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) to understand where they might best contribute to efforts to bridge the gap between high school and college.
3. Stakeholders can explore ways to use student-level data to predict college success and to ensure that students who wish to access post-secondary programs meet the necessary prerequisites to do so.

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You can help by establishing long-term connections, ensuring students are accessing college-preparation curriculum, and providing structures for students to turn to peer groups for support

A 2009 report study titled *Increasing College Access through School-Based Models of Postsecondary Preparation, Planning, and Support* provides a number of recommendations, aligned to the following areas:

1. **Point of Contact.** Long-term investment in students that usually includes a key person who is attached to each student and monitors and guides them over many years through frequent, regular contact.
2. **College Readiness Skills.** Offer a rigorous college and career-ready curriculum aligned to USG admission criteria, and make sure students who wish to attend college know what coursework is expected and will help them succeed in college.
3. **Strong Peer Groups.** Provide structures for advisory groups or small counseling cohorts to support students' academic/college aspirations and provide social and emotional support
4. **College Advisement Curriculum.** Develop an articulated postsecondary preparation curriculum and sequence of activities and tasks that serves all students beginning in freshman year of high school. Again, this should be aligned to the USG admission criteria.

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College-Going Culture Small Steps: Spread the Word about College Entrance Exams & Promote College Match

Our policy recommendations include implementing universal testing and using data to more systematically analyzing college match

Challenges:
- Too few students take (and retake) college admissions exams.
- Low-income students are too often undermatched or do not attend college at all.
- Courses offered by college preparation programs not currently satisfy any unit of credit requirements for high school graduation in Georgia.

Our Policy Recommendations
1. Implement universal testing programs for the ACT or SAT during the school day.
2. Prompt low-income students to take the SAT or ACT early enough to retake the exam if necessary, and make it clear to eligible students how to access the fee waivers that are available.
3. Leverage the data capacity of the stakeholders invested in students' post-secondary outcomes to more systematically analyze and report match data to Metro Atlanta School districts.
4. Add college preparation credit-bearing classes to state's list of grade 9-12 courses so that it satisfies an elective credit for high school graduation requirements.

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You can help by spreading the word about early test-taking and fee waivers, and helping students prepare for the test

A June 2019 study titled *Missed Exams and Lost Opportunities* indicates there are a substantial number of students well-positioned to enroll in college who miss the key step of taking a college admission test. Advocates can focus on **early test-taking** and **free, low-cost test prep** resources to help address this challenge.

1. **Spread the word.** Encourage the high school students you know to take the test early, and remind eligible students that there are fee waivers. Students who take admissions tests early gain familiarity with these exams, and they have more time to retake the tests, if needed. Additionally, fee waivers can be obtained through a school counselor. These allow low-income students to take the and/or the SAT and ACT twice, but it's important to make it clear to eligible students that these waivers are available, and how to access them.

2. **Help students prepare for the test.** The College Board offers free SAT test prep for all students through Khan Academy. These resources are personalized and interactive. They were developed in coordination with the College Board and provide feedback to students about their progress. ACT also offers free personalized test practice.

You can help by promoting college match and sharing tools and resources

Low-income students are too often undermatched to postsecondary options or do not attend college at all. Considering college match, particularly for low-income students, is crucial to college enrollment and persistence efforts. When students are matched to the most academically demanding institution that will admit them, they are more likely to graduate college. MDRC, a non-profit education research organization, offers these strategies for promoting college match:

Screen grab from *The National College Match,* YouTube

1. **Make "match" the message** by embracing match as a fundamental part of the college search and selection process.

2. **Engage parents** early and often in discussions of their students' appropriate match and best-fit postsecondary options.

3. **Guide students and families to tools and resources**, like College Scorecard or College Results Online, that can help them make well informed decisions about their best match.

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