



Alabama Addresses a Shortage of Skilled Workers and Provides Opportunities for Disadvantaged Students

Abstract

To address the State of Alabama's shortage of skilled workers, Governor Kay Ivey set a postsecondary education attainment goal of adding 500,000 degree holders to Alabama's workforce by 2025. Governor Ivey and the State of Alabama Board of Education made Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion a requirement for high school students effective with the May 2022 graduating class. If successful, this effort will bring the level of work-age Alabamians with post-high school training or degrees from approximately 43% in 2016 to 60% by 2025.



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The Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE) implemented Oracle Student Financial Planning (SFP) software to drive higher FAFSA completion by improving communications with Alabama high school students and their career coaches working for school districts. Sierra-Cedar assisted ACHE with implementing the Oracle SFP solution, including a dashboard enabling ACHE or the Alabama State Department of Education to contact local schools with low application rates to understand their particular challenges and offer additional help in getting students to fill out the FAFSA. The dashboard and its data are also accessible directly by school administrators and career coaches.

Introduction

The State of Alabama is open for business, and business is certainly booming. However, the state currently faces a shortage of skilled workers to fill roles to address the significant workforce development growth within various industries, most notably aerospace and automotive. Some of the top employers in Alabama include Mercedes-Benz, Hyundai, Airbus, Honda, Toyota, and Mazda. Mazda began production of its CX-50 crossover SUV in January 2022 at its new Huntsville location where 4,000 employees are located. Plans also continue to progress to relocate the U.S. Space Command from Colorado Springs to Huntsville, adding another 2,000 jobs to the state.

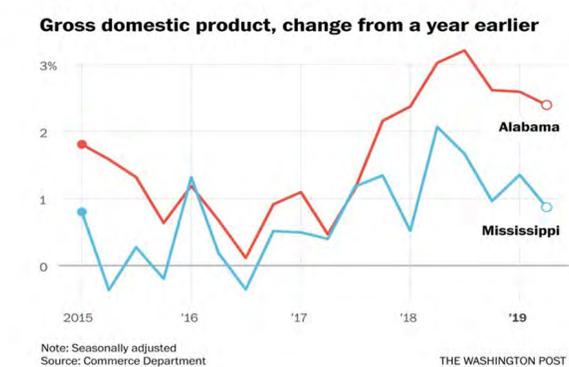
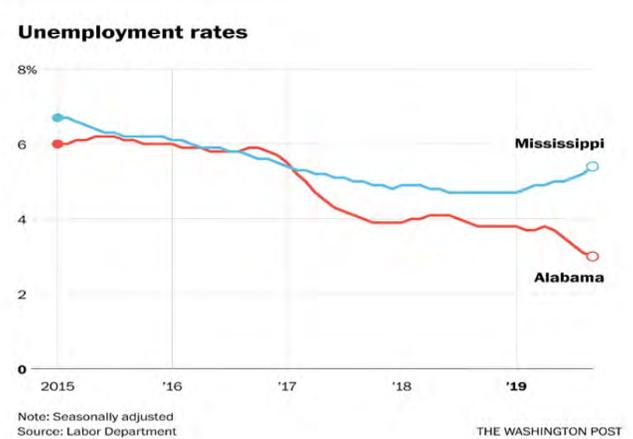


The Challenge

Alabama's current challenge is to ensure the supply of skilled workers required for these jobs is met. Governor Kay Ivey has set a postsecondary education attainment goal of adding 500,000 degree holders to Alabama's workforce by 2025. Two-thirds of these future employees sought will require a four-year university degree, while the other one-third will earn their two-year credentials at an Alabama community college.

The Vision: Strong Start, Strong Finish

In 2018, Governor Ivey launched *Strong Start, Strong Finish*, a strategic vision aligning Alabama's education and workforce program goals from pre-K through the workforce entry point. This would provide a seamless education-to-workforce continuum for all Alabamians. The results are paying dividends for the state, which has traditionally experienced similar economic issues as the neighboring state of Mississippi. Alabama has reduced unemployment from 6% in 2017 to the current rate of 3% today, while Mississippi has remained relatively constant over the same time frame.



When comparing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) since 2017, Alabama has again demonstrated significant growth compared with Mississippi. GDP is a monetary measure of the market value of all the final goods and services produced in a specific time period. It is used as a broad measure of economic progress. Alabama now ranks near the top nationally in its reliance on higher-paid, trade-sensitive manufacturing jobs serving the largest employers in the state.

Alabama's FAFSA Completion Mandate

Adding 500,000 degreed workers by 2025 will necessitate a significant increase in the number of Alabamians with postsecondary education. If successful, this effort will bring the level of work-age Alabamians with post-high school training or degrees from approximately 43% in 2016 to 60% by 2025.

In an effort to increase high school students' chances of applying to, and attending, institutions of higher education, the state has a mandate and mission to increase FAFSA completion by increasing high school students' awareness and understanding of Financial Aid. Governor Ivey and the State of Alabama Board of Education passed a resolution making completion of the FAFSA a requirement for high school May 2022 graduating seniors. Exceptions are made for students entering the military who may provide a signed waiver from a parent.



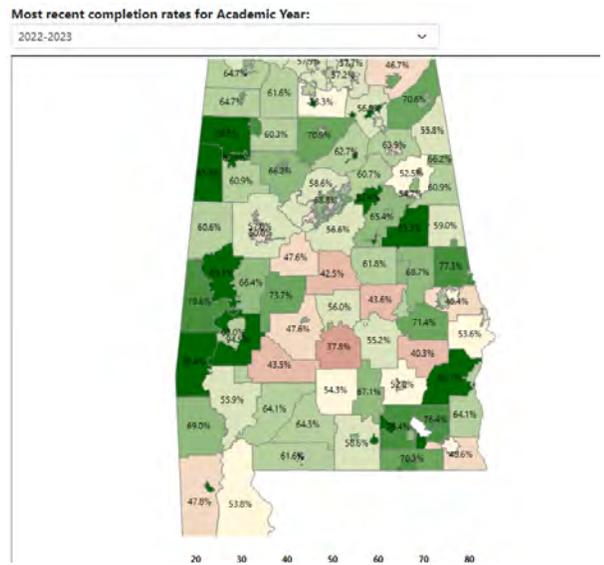
Achieving these goals required collaboration between the Governor’s Office, the State Board of Education, and the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE). As the state’s coordinating board for public higher education, ACHE is responsible for long-range, statewide postsecondary education planning. Priorities and goals are continuously reviewed, analyzed, and evaluated for their relevance and effectiveness. ACHE is the only entity in the state authorized to connect the federal FAFSA database with individual Alabama students’ data.

Completion of the FAFSA is the student’s gateway to over \$150 billion in federal aid, as well as many state and institutional aid programs. FAFSA completion and college enrollment are closely associated, as 92% of graduating seniors across the U.S. who completed the FAFSA enrolled in college by the following fall. Last year, Alabama students left roughly \$67.8 million in unclaimed Pell Grant money on the table. A college degree for first-generation higher education students provides social mobility. It is not uncommon for a first-generation student’s initial income after graduation to exceed the student’s family’s total income. Education can be linked not to only higher incomes, but also to better health and more civic engagement.

ACHE Deploys Oracle SFP to Drive Higher FAFSA Completion

Dr. Jim Purcell, Executive Director of ACHE, leveraged technology to facilitate productive change in Alabama’s FAFSA potential. ACHE utilized Oracle Student Financial Planning (SFP) software to improve communications with Alabama high school students and their respective school district career coaches to drive higher FAFSA completions.

Sierra-Cedar assisted ACHE with implementing the Oracle SFP solution. This includes a dashboard that allows ACHE or the Alabama State Department of Education to contact local schools with low application rates and determine if they are experiencing particular challenges or need additional help getting FAFSAs completed. The dashboard and its data are also accessible directly by school administrators and career coaches. Dr. Purcell described the effort as “a combination of technology and boots-on-the-ground leveraging our career coaches.”



School Top 10 Achievers

Modify your results

Student Count:

3A (210 - 285)

Academic Year:

2022-2023

Achievements:

Diamond

Gold

Silver

Bronze

State Average:

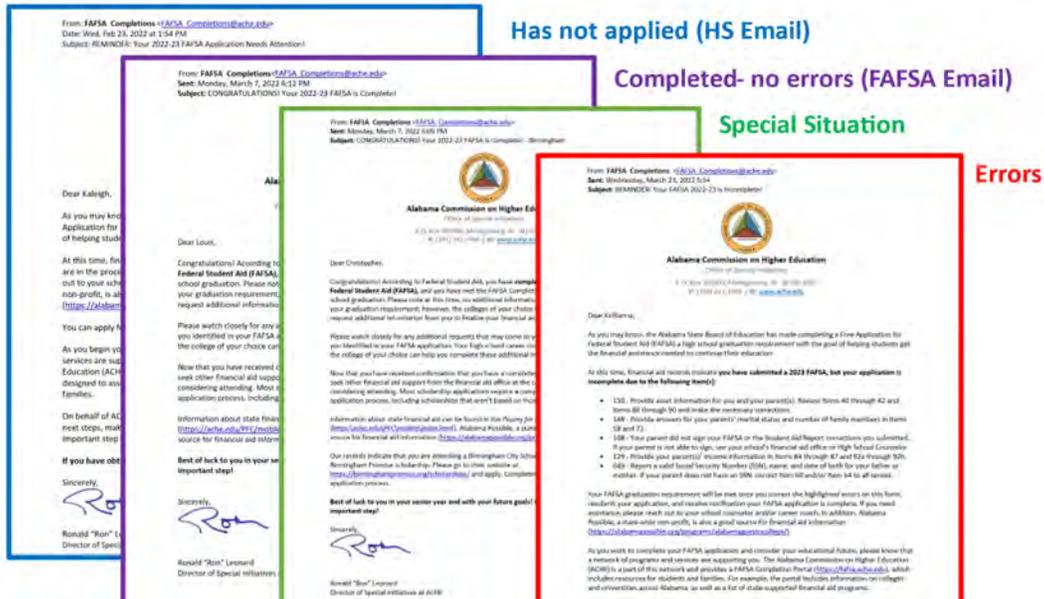
60%

Rank	School Name	Students	Completion Progress
1	Hartselle 1560040	251	87%
2	Saraland 1870635	257	83%
3	Pell City 1830100	238	82%
4	Huffman -Magnet 1140390	269	76%
5	Hillcrest 630100	282	71%
6	Shades Valley 370795	249	69%
7	Fort Payne 1430020	257	68%
8	Spanish Fort 20145	264	67%
9	Cullman 1250020	246	65%
10	Decatur 1270030	221	64%



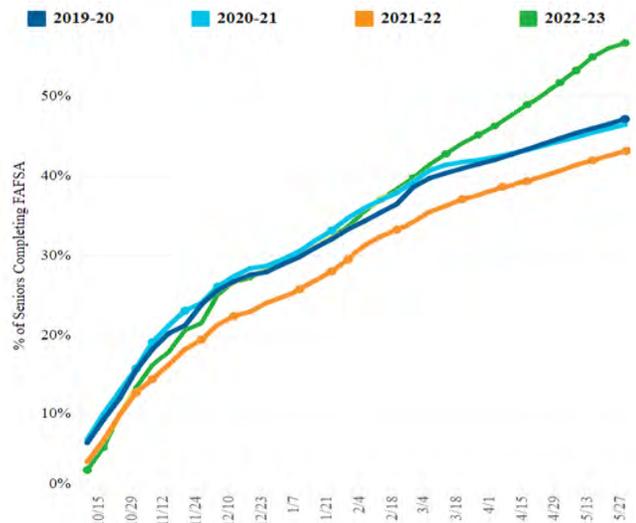
The ACHE FAFSA Portal/Dashboard

Oracle SFP facilitates uploading of data for all graduating seniors into the ACHE portal/dashboard. District counselors can use the data to determine which students still need to submit the FAFSA. When a student initiates a FAFSA, a federal electronic Institutional Student Information Record (ISIR) is generated. Counselors can view near-real-time (daily) reports of whether students have errors or missing documentation in their application, empowering them to offer individualized student assistance. Aggregate metrics are available to the public through the dashboard. The ability to view data about the top performing school districts in near-real-time has triggered some healthy competition and motivation to complete the FAFSA statewide.



Beginning in February 2022, ACHE leveraged the Oracle SFP solution to generate letters to students to make them aware of their status and recommend specific actions required to complete their FAFSA, thus meeting the high school graduation requirement. Some students and their families had begun, but not completed, the FAFSA. The letters provided specific instructions about missing data and resources available to help complete the submission. For example, missing data may include answers to parents' marital status, number of family members, parents' income, valid Social Security number(s), or an unsigned FAFSA submission.

The use of technology to provide outreach to students in February appears to be key to the rise in Alabama's FAFSA completions. Accurate, near-real-time data provided to career coaches and educators through ACHE's portal/dashboard played a major role in the initiative's success. The accompanying graph shows the historical completion rate by month.



Results

In the first year, ACHE was able to increase the proportion of graduating seniors who completed a FAFSA from 52% (as of May 2021) to 60% (as of May 2022). At the end of May 2022, the State of Alabama ranked first nationally in one-year improvement with a 30.4% increase in FAFSA completions. The state ranked seventh nationally in overall completions.

The FAFSA completion rate initiative in Alabama significantly increased completion rates for diverse groups of student populations that included low-income, minority, rural, and urban backgrounds.

“Our primary goal is to ensure all students can pursue postsecondary education by obtaining needed funding,” said Dr. Purcell. “Oracle Student Financial Planning has added an amazing level of tools which high school counselors and career coaches can use to keep students on track with this requirement. The increase in admission applications for higher education is evidence of its success.”

Institutions across the country have experienced declining enrollments since the pandemic. The positive effect of the first year of Alabama’s FAFSA Completion Project has aided the state’s institutions in recovering and ensuring overall continued economic growth. And while the State of Alabama reaps present and future benefits today, it also serves as an ideal model for other states, with limitless potential.

Additional Information

ACHE FAFSA Completion Dashboard: <https://fafsa.ache.edu/>

Why Sierra-Cedar

For more than 25 years, Sierra-Cedar has provided consulting and managed services related to Oracle Applications. Our industry-focused consultants average 13 years of higher education experience. We specialize in Higher Education and have worked with more than 370 colleges and universities to complete more than 1,500 projects dating back to 1998. Each project is focused on client satisfaction and excellence in delivery.

Sierra-Cedar: <https://www.sierra-cedar.com/higher-education>

