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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As of fall 2016, current and prospective postsecondary students are able to submit their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) as early as Oct. 1 by using income tax information from two years prior. In light of these two much-anticipated changes in applying for federal financial aid, questions remain regarding their effect, if any, on students filing for and considering financial aid packages; institutional processes for awarding aid; and the information, timeline, and services that high school college counselors and college admission professionals provide to students about the college admission process and financial aid. To learn more about the first year of implementation, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) conducted informational interviews with 12 college counseling and admission professionals in the summer leading up to the changes in 2016 and a second time, after the fall admission cycle, in spring 2017. This project was funded through a subgrant received from the National College Access Network (NCAN).

HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS

Changes:
Communications with students and families, financial aid presentations, discussions, and workshops began in the fall, two to three months earlier than in years past, overlapping with the college application process. Initially anticipated as a significant challenge in August, by May, counselor interviewees felt that this went much smoother than expected.

Concerns:
Although very few colleges changed any of their deadlines, counselors continue to worry about changes in the future and the potential impact on students. In addition, counselors reflected that long-standing challenges related to inadequate resources and engaging students most in need, remain the same.

Benefits:
High school counselors reflected on several potential benefits, such as the ability to have conversations about the cost of college with students earlier in the college search process compared to years past. The added convenience of utilizing the IRS Data Retrieval Tool, before it went down, was also seen as a major benefit to students and families across the board. In addition, counselors noted anecdotally that some students who were ready to apply to college were able to get the process out of the way earlier, students who weren't convinced they could afford college were encouraged by seeing their financial aid packages earlier, and students who received financial aid packages earlier had more time to consider their options leading up to May 1.

COLLEGE ADMISSION PROFESSIONALS

Changes:
Changes at the college level varied by institutional characteristics. Private colleges and universities were able to set cost of attendance earlier in order to start awarding financial aid packages earlier than in years past. Some added an earlier scholarship competition date or established a priority deadline for FAFSA submission. For public two-year and four-year colleges and universities, no major changes beyond earlier outreach to students and communications about the changes were reported.

Concerns:
Similar to NACAC’s interviews with high school counselors, in August, college admission officers expressed a lot of uncertainty around the unknown and in anticipation of what would change as a result of early FAFSA. In May, however, interviewees described the rollout as much smoother than originally anticipated, with the caveat that it may take a few more years to see the full impact, as well as any additional changes.

Benefits:
College interviewees saw benefits in the opportunity to have better internal coordination across admission and financial aid offices; better alignment of the college search, application, and selection process for students; and the ability to communicate with students earlier, over a longer time period, about financial aid.
INTRODUCTION
As of fall 2016, current and prospective postsecondary students are able to submit their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) as early as Oct. 1 by using income tax information from two years prior. In light of these two much-anticipated changes in applying for federal financial aid, questions remain regarding their effect, if any, on students filing for and considering financial aid packages; institutional processes for awarding aid; and the information, timeline, and services that high school college counselors and college admission professionals provide to students about the college admission process and financial aid. To learn more about the first year of implementation, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) conducted informational interviews with 12 college counseling and admission professionals in the summer leading up to the changes in 2016 and a second time, after the fall admission cycle, in spring 2017. This project was funded through a subgrant received from the National College Access Network (NCAN).

METHODOLOGY
NACAC recruited interview participants by posting an interview request to its membership listserv. Twenty-two NACAC members volunteered to participate. Of these, NACAC selected a purposive sample of 12 participants based on population served (high school vs. college), institutional type and control, size, and region. Of the 12 interview respondents, five were high school counselors, one was a college success professional at the school district level, and six were admission or enrollment management staff or administrators at postsecondary institutions. Among the high school counselors, NACAC chose to include a greater number of participants from public schools given the replicability of practices for schools with similar levels of resources. Additional information about institution type can be found below and in Table 1. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews that each lasted an average of 30 minutes. The first round of interviews took place over the course of August 2016 leading up to the start of the school year. Follow-up interviews were conducted with the same participants in May 2017 toward the end of the school year. NACAC developed separate interview protocols for high school counselors and postsecondary representatives (see Appendix B).

This study has a number of limitations related to generalizability and external validity, including first and foremost, the small sample size which is not representative of the entire professional population. Another limitation is a result of selection bias due to the selection process among NACAC members who were already aware of the FAFSA changes. Nevertheless, the interviews offer a more in-depth look at implementation of the FAFSA changes through the lens of high school counselors and college admission officers at a variety of schools and institutions across the US.
PARTICIPANTS
As shown in Table 1, respondents represented 12 schools (six high schools and six colleges) in 10 states.

The majority of high school interviewees were from public high schools that ranged in size from 600 to more than 2,000. One interviewee represented a public-school district that included 40 high schools. Only one counselor interviewee was from a private high school.

College interviewees were split in representing public and private institutions. The majority of interviewees were from four-year colleges and universities, with one from a community college. College selectivity ranged from not competitive to most competitive. Although the majority of institutions were large, two were small in size, enrolling 2,500 or fewer undergraduates.

A breakdown of additional demographic characteristics can be found in Appendix A.

SELECTED FINDINGS—HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS
Due to a number of factors such as large student caseloads, limited resources and staff, and myriad responsibilities, the amount of time high school counselors spend on college counseling can vary significantly across schools. While the majority of counselors do college counseling on top of a number of other school responsibilities, some high schools have one counselor dedicated to college counseling, others may have a team, and some have none at all. Still others share counselors across other schools in the district.

In 2014, public school counselors reported spending 22 percent of their time on postsecondary counseling, compared to 55 percent for their private school counterparts (NACAC’s 2015 State of College Admission Report). For the purpose of this report, it’s important to keep in mind that counseling students on the financial aid application process is just one of the many activities counselors perform as part of the role they play related to college counseling. An example of one counselor’s response when asked to describe their role in the financial aid application process, follows.
“I am the college counselor for a school of 2,800 students. I am a direct counselor for only a small part of the alphabet—about 120 students. I do all presentations for college, which relates to financial aid, getting into college. I do these for freshmen through seniors. We have a separate career counselor who does the career aspect. I work with other counselors. There are 11 of us total, so there’s one career counselor, myself, and then nine generalists. I help students migrate the whole system of being college-ready. So I do presentations at night, meet with parents, and bring other people in to talk to as well.”—Counselor 1, large public high school in Illinois

Changes to Practice
All counselor interviewees made changes in their work with students in the first application cycle with implementation of early FAFSA and prior-prior year tax information. The following themes emerged:

• Counselors and schools began communicating about the earlier FAFSA availability and the ability to use prior-prior year tax information with students and families at events such as college cost and financial aid information nights, FAFSA workshops, and one-on-one meetings with students and parents. In addition, they used several methods, including text messages, phone calls, emails, newsletters, school websites, and postcards, to reach students and parents throughout the school year.

• All schools moved their timeline for talking to senior students and families about financial aid to earlier in the school year. For most, this meant starting financial aid workshops and presentations two to three months earlier, in September and October, instead of January. Therefore, the timeline of financial aid conversations overlapped more with the college application process in the fall.

Preparedness
In August and again in May, counselors were asked, “on a scale of 1 to 10, how prepared do you feel to talk with students/families about the FAFSA changes?” The majority of interviewees said they felt very prepared, with very little change among responses at the beginning and end of the school year.

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Benefits & Challenges
In August, counselors by and large predicted the most significant challenge during this first cycle would be fitting advising around financial aid in at the same time as advising around college applications and deadlines in the fall. When asked how this went again in May, five out of six counselors said despite the added workload for staff, it went much smoother for students and families than expected. Examples of two counselors’ comments in anticipation of the changes and then again after implementation are included below.

Counselor 1, large public high school in Illinois

August:
“Just the timeline probably. Making sure parents are aware they have to get it in. This is my 33rd year. And for me being resonant with Oct. 1 and not Jan. 1 is a challenge, but that’s just with any change. You have to make sure you’re on top of it. For me, I’m interested to see if the deadlines will change for schools. Some states have different scholarships based on their timelines. I’m interested to see how it pans out; the first year will be tough. I’m hoping the kids and myself both stay on top of things.”

May:
“I think it worked out very smoothly because even though it was an earlier submission date, I think the parents were prepared because the income information was from the earlier tax year. I think they were pretty attuned to how to input all the information to make it work. So it really did go smoothly. I think the parents continued to hear us say how important it is to get all the information in early. So I think there was angst going into the fall, but now I think it went very smoothly.”
What always amazes me about this role is what about the schools that don’t have a college person or someone there to continue to give support—it’s such a critical factor in how you get this information. I think there’s lots of schools that don’t have this.”

Counselor 2, small private high school in Minnesota

August:

“I think Oct. 1 is going to be more challenging. I say that to everyone who asks me this question. To me Jan. 1… I’m old school because I’ve been around for so long, this is my 25th year as a professional. I worked 16 years in college admissions and I am beginning my ninth year as a college counselor. The reason that Jan. 1 was always ideal is because it gives kids time to get through the application process and visit schools/bear from them. In January, things have slowed down. You’re in a waiting period to hear from colleges or you’re full on scholarship searching then you start your FAFSA… My concern is this is frustrating because it is pushing and the frenzy is harder earlier. At the end of the day I’m most concerned about the kids that are in schools without adequate resources, not enough school counselors and per usual the first-generation kids and underrepresented kids are going to be behind the ball. It is a problem for those who have the least amount of resources to manage this process on their own. We’ll make it work, but I think Oct. 1 is too early.”

May:

“I was surprised. I think I was more apprehensive about it than I should have been. I don’t think families even blinked. Parents were doing the FAFSA while the kids were doing the applications. They were getting stuff in. I was surprised by how many parents were calling me in October. I had parents showing up that first week with questions. I think as counselors, I try to be really open to change. This year felt like there was so much change and it felt like too much at one time, but I’ll admit I don’t think the families felt this way and I think they managed it beautifully. I think the families really appreciated having financial aid awards sooner.”

Beyond concerns around workload and stress in anticipation of early FAFSA, counselors expressed concern about several long-standing challenges to college access that remain unchanged. These include inadequate resources, student access to counselors, and efforts to engage students most in need of support. Counselors also voiced concern over colleges that changed or will change their deadlines in the future, to the detriment of students.

“My team is small compared to the scale of students. How do we prepare to work with students who need it the most? It’s not just help with processes and technical help, it’s about mindset and building that culture in schools… We can’t just jump right in on Oct. 1 and say, hey, we’re going to do the FAFSA, if they’re not already convinced that college is right for them in the first place.”—Counselor 4, administrator, large public school district in Texas

In May, counselors were asked to reflect on any benefits the FAFSA changes may have had for students. The following themes emerged:

• The ability to have conversations about the cost of college with students earlier in the process.
• Better alignment of the admission and financial aid application process.
• Students ready to apply to college were able to get the entire process out of the way earlier.
• Some students who weren’t convinced they could afford college were encouraged by seeing financial aid packages earlier.
• Students who received financial aid packages earlier had more time to make college decisions leading up to May 1.
The added convenience of utilizing the IRS Data Retrieval Tool (DRT) to submit prior-prior year tax information. (Note: The IRS and Office of Federal Student Aid suspended use of the DRT in March 2017 out of concern the tool could be misused by identity thieves. It will become available to FAFSA filers again on Oct. 1, 2017.)

Data
Since 2012, the US Department of Education has made available an online tool where counselors and school officials can track the number of FAFSA submissions and completions at high schools across the US. The resource, updated biweekly, can be used to determine basic school-wide completion metrics by comparing the number provided to the number of seniors at each high school. Several states have created state-specific resources that go a step further and provide FAFSA completion data on an individual student-level basis to school counselors and officials.

Notably, only one high school interviewee, the district administrator, reported tracking FAFSA completions on the individual student level. While another counselor said they use the Department of Education’s FAFSA Completion website in an observational way, two-thirds of counselors did not track FAFSA completion at the school or student level due to lack of time and resources and uncertainty of where to find available data and how to use it in the best way. There is great potential for working with counselors and others on how to find and use available data to better target interventions and support for aid-eligible students.

“We have not done this in the past. There is a resource. I want to say it’s through Minnesota Office of Higher Education where we can track how many students have started a FAFSA. It’s not something that we have ever made time to use. I would say at least 60 percent of our families have been applying for financial aid. I’m curious... we have never tracked that... Regarding plans to track earlier—we will have a conversation about this but I’m not sure how I could legitimately track it. If I couldn’t find time in January, I won’t...
NACAC MEMBERS DISCUSS IMPLEMENTATION OF EARLY FAFSA

find time in October. Right now we have no plans but every time we are in front of senior parents/students we are saying you need to complete… Every chance we get in front of the whole class we are encouraging that process and with the parents it’s the same thing.”—Counselor 2, small private high school in Minnesota

SELECTED FINDINGS—COLLEGE ADMISSION OFFICERS

Interviewees from the six colleges represented in this survey represented various positions within the admission field. The extent to which college admission and enrollment management professionals are involved in the financial aid application process can vary significantly across colleges and universities, as well as by role. At some schools, admission and financial aid staff work closely together, whereas at other schools these offices can operate as separate, even siloed, departments. This variation was seen when we asked interviewees to describe their role in the financial aid application process.

• “My role is minimal. The financial aid office is an area I oversee. We also have an integrated Enrollment Services delivery model which combines the bursar, financial aid, registrar and admissions all in one. It’s kind of like a one-stop shop. My staff who are front-line enrollment services advisers are working front line with students on their financial aid applications, questions, challenges, concerns. We also have within the financial aid office itself our financial aid experts. These are financial aid advisers and [they] are doing the packaging. They do have student contact but the model is designed so the Integrated Services advisers are the first line of defense. They handle 80 percent of financial aid issues. If the situation is more complicated or requires more hand-holding, they refer them to a financial aid adviser for an individual appointment. My role is to oversee the whole process and system, ensure it is smoothly running, monitor our data to see about how the FAFSA completion process is coming along, see how many are selected for verification, and how many are moving forward. Not that I don’t have any direct student contact, though. I’m where they submit their complaints if they email me. For the most part I am not the provider of financial aid service.”—Interviewee 7, vice president of enrollment management at a large public community college

• “I am related in a communications role. I oversee communications for the admissions office. I also help counsel students on how to fill out the FAFSA, what the requirements for our university are, completing by our deadlines, etc. So really counseling and communications.”—Interviewee 8, associate director of admissions at a large public four-year college

• “I establish policy and practice for admissions and financial aid operations. I am involved in the day-to-day process of establishing our workflows as well as practice and policy related to a range of financial aid issues.”—Interviewee 9, executive vice president of enrollment at a small private four-year college

• “Our division is admissions and financial aid. Both departments are part of this same division so we work very closely together. I am very involved in the policies for financial aid. I don’t train any staff or do anything like that—that is done by associate and assistant directors. But, I am involved in terms of financial aid policy timeline and deadlines.”—Interviewee 10, associate vice chancellor and director of admission at a medium private college
• “I have two jobs right now. I am the interim associate vice chancellor for admissions and enrollment. I am also the director of admissions. My interim role is actually to be the supervisor of the director of financial aid, admissions, and the registrar. So in the last few weeks in the interim position, financial aid has become more in my portfolio. My other job as the director of admissions is making sure my staff here are well-versed so when they go out on the road, they are prepared to speak to people who may not have been asking financial aid deadline questions last year but who are this year.”—Interviewee 11, assistant vice chancellor and director of admission at a large public four-year college

• “I supervise the financial aid director and help set policy and provide guidance to our processes.”—Interviewee 12, vice president of enrollment management at a small private four-year college

Changes to Practice

All colleges and universities made changes to and started their communications with prospective students and families earlier, through one or more of the following: direct mail, email, websites, student and parent portals and newsletters, financial aid presentations with partner high schools, social media, and vendor platforms.

The type and amount of changes schools did or didn't make this first application cycle, not surprisingly, varied by institutional characteristics. Representatives interviewed from the three private colleges and universities reported changing their timeline for setting cost of attendance earlier and were subsequently able to start awarding financial aid packages earlier than in previous years. In addition, two added an earlier scholarship competition start date and two established a priority deadline for FAFSA submission. Both public four-year colleges and the community college on the other hand, largely kept things the same beyond training staff, coordinating across offices, and starting communications with students earlier. One interviewee from a public college said their school didn't have the ability, at the institutional level, to change deadlines or the timeline for setting tuition. In addition, the community college interviewee noted the majority of their students don't usually engage with them until later on in the process. Because they don't leverage aid or discount, they didn't consider major changes beyond communications with students about the changes. None of the schools we interviewed changed their admission deadlines.

Coordination

Due to anticipation around student questions regarding financial aid happening earlier in the admission process, in August college interviewees were asked how admission and financial aid would coordinate throughout the transition and beyond. The following responses were recorded.

• “Coordination will mostly be the same. We are just moving it to an earlier timeline. I can see some of the differences coming up in the requests from students. Typically, within the cycle if we are getting questions about scholarships they are handled through the admissions office and they come out in March or April. I could see those coming out earlier and working throughout the process earlier. There are certain things that are still happening earlier but there might be differences. It provides a great opportunity for us to have better discussions about true cost of attendance options and things like that.”—Interviewee 8, associate director of admission at a large public four-year college

• “Coordination is the same, mostly because we have been working closely with them the whole time anyway.”—Interviewee 10, associate vice chancellor and director of admission at a medium private college
• “It will stay the same. I don’t think that this year it’s going to be any different. We also are implementing a new software system, so there’s a lot of other things that are requiring a high level of coordination, but this is not one of those things that’s high on that list for needing more coordination if it’s going to succeed. We feel confident that the current process with extra communication with a new deadline will get us through just fine.”—Interviewee 11, assistant vice chancellor and director of admission at a large public four-year college

• “I don’t think the coordination is frankly any different than what it has been. Financial aid has run reports against admitted students and matched that against received to see who is ready for awarding. So they will continue to award on a rolling basis as they always have been.”—Interviewee 12, vice president of enrollment management at a small private four-year college

Benefits & Challenges
Similar to NACAC’s interviews with high school counselors, in August 2016, admission officers expressed a lot of uncertainty around the unknown and in anticipation of what would change as a result of early FAFSA. Interviewees wondered whether more students would apply for financial aid, if students would apply for aid earlier, take advantage of new financial aid priority deadlines, make college decisions earlier, and negotiate aid packages more. In May, most interviewees were still gathering data on the impact of early FAFSA. From early indications, though, they described the roll-out through a positive lens, with the caveat that it may take a few more years to get a sense of the full impact. Examples are provided below.

August:
“One challenge is just the unknown. We don’t know what this will do to the entire college selection process—whether students will apply for admission or aid earlier or not, will they decide earlier, will there be more aid negotiation previously because they have a longer time to compare aid awards. That is one of the biggest challenges. The other big challenge is how the state and federal government adapt to the new changed law with their grant programs. Will the feds be ready with new the Pell table in time? Will the state of Iowa change the state grant program to tell us not in March or April, as has been in the past, but will they be able to move that up earlier or not?”—Interviewee 12, vice president of enrollment management at a small private four-year college

May:
“I think the challenge is what does the volume mean—is submission of the FAFSA a meaningful indicator of interest any longer and we’re not really going to be able to sort all of that out until this cycle is finished. Will we be able to learn something about enrollment and persistence trends based on the date which the FAFSA is submitted? I’m really curious to know about non-applied FAFSA submissions. We’ll probably run that group through the National Student Clearinghouse in October/November to try and figure out why we were included on the list of places to which a student submitted a FAFSA and then they didn’t apply. So we’ve got more questions right now then we have answers about some of the things with early FAFSA. I think it’s worked. I’m still trying to figure out if this has made any difference in decision-making patterns. I don’t have a level of understanding yet. There was a sense that this would accelerate decision-making processes for prospective and deciding students. I look at our available students, those that haven’t made a deposit or declined, there’s huge volume. We’re running ahead of where we’ve been in previous years, but we’re not done. I don’t have a sense that there’s been a huge acceleration of decision-making processes, but I could be proven wrong.”—Interviewee 9, executive vice president of enrollment at a small private four-year college
Interviewees in May, mentioned several benefits, both for students and institutional processes: additional time to make college decisions; better alignment of the college search, application, and selection process; greater communications with and outreach efforts to students about filing for financial aid; added convenience with the IRS DRT (before it went down); and an easier, more-efficient, and seamless process. Examples of college interviewee responses are below.

- “Only that everybody is really in favor of this change, we don't see a downside. Now if the Data Retrieval Tool was working properly it would really be smooth sailing because so many of our students would be able to use that. Hopefully next year will be much smoother. About 50 percent of our students that apply for financial aid are selected for verification so that's a high number.”—Interviewee 7, vice president of enrollment management at a large public community college
- “Overall, I'd say lots of positive things. In my interactions with families, they appreciated it being easier. With the timeline working internally with our own financial aid office, I felt like we partnered more on things—we had more data, better communication. It felt like we had the timing to plan for communications to certain groups of students.”—Interviewee 8, associate director of admissions at a large public four-year college
- “We feel like the communication and the process that we established has worked pretty well. I’m saying that on April 28 rather then on May 10, so we’re not sure of the final results. We feel like the process benefitted, not only the students, but also benefitted our operation. We were really concerned about early volume and workload on our financial aid staff, but what we've seen is the work has been spread out over the course of six months, rather than condensed into 8-10 weeks. That's been a great benefit. We like what we saw this year. We are going to tweak just gently one of our internal practices and that is the date by which we promise aid to our early action applicants. This year for early action applicants we promised that they would have a final aid award by Jan. 15. We found that that timelines is probably a little tighter then we would've liked so we'll probably back that up to Feb. 1 to give us a little more time. And part of that was a volume difference—we had about 700 more early action applicants this year than in previous cycles and I think that created some pressure, but that's the only modest change we're contemplating at this point… I think this created a lot less chaos then I had originally anticipated it would. I will continue to see how those places who didn't make changes this year, will react, next year. I think they're going to see the benefits that so many of us saw this year.”—Interviewee 9, executive vice president of enrollment at a small private four-year college
“One of the benefits of PPY—I thought the previous timeline was a real challenge especially for first-gen students and those students that don’t have access to good counseling. Jan. 1—lots of families didn’t have things ready, they didn’t know they were supposed to apply for financial aid, so a lot of students didn’t apply until March/April, so a lot of times it was only a few days before May 1 when we could package them. So what was beautiful about this timeline and our data backs this up, it gave our staff more time to communicate with students. We did change our communications. So previously, let’s say for juniors in high school approaching the end of junior year, we would maybe start to send out some reminder emails, just some messages generally, think about visiting this summer, in August we’ll invite you to apply. This year, we also included some messages in those communications, hey and remember, you’re going to be able to apply for financial aid beginning on Oct. 1. Bottom line it’s available. In late summer when we invited people to apply for admission, we included a sentence or two on that email reminding them and inviting them to apply for financial aid if they wanted to—it was never required, but we encouraged them to do it simultaneously. And what that enabled us to do is, when we would hit some of these deadlines, when we would see a student who had checked “yes” for going to apply for financial aid, but who hadn’t yet done it, we could send them emails, texts, we could call them. We would follow up and remind them. And no doubt about it, we got more first-generation students, more students of color, more low SES students, students with high need to go through the process compared to the year before. The longer timeline, giving our team, and giving everyone else who works for students, it gave all of us more time to work with more students, as opposed to three-to-four week window to get people through the pipeline. And I just think because there was something new this year, everyone was communicating about it. That’s something we shouldn’t lose because year one is over. We should still find a way for NACAC and other organizations to continue to promote and encourage students to apply for financial aid. I’m worried we’re going to lose some of that energy because it’s not new anymore and no one will be talking about it. Let’s not lose that energy and additional communication. The more people you get involved repeating that message, the better.”—Interviewee 10, associate vice chancellor and director of admission at a medium private college

Data

Because our spring interviews took place right before or after May 1, most college interviewees were able to share some preliminary data when asked if their institution tracked whether more students filed the FAFSA, filed it earlier, or made admission decisions earlier. Although the full impact remains to be seen as things continue to shift over the next few application cycles, and varies widely by school, the responses below give a snapshot into some early findings at the schools we interviewed.

“I don’t have most of that data readily accessible. We had 200 students decide prior to March 1 compared to 190 last year. 511 deposited prior to April 1 compared to 483 last year.”—Interviewee 8, associate director of admissions at a large public four-year college

“Award letters we sent, year-to-year analysis: 3,535 original award letters in comparison to 2,651 this time last year and 2,574 the year before. The overall filer rate was also substantially higher than it was at this time last year.”—Interviewee 9, executive vice president of enrollment at a small private four-year college
• “By the end of March 2017, we sent 5,211 financial aid packages. On that same date last year we had sent out 3,861. And our admit pool and applicant pool was essentially the same. At the end of the day we admitted about 700 more students because of the landscape I was talking about earlier, but truthfully a lot of the extra students we admitted were not aid applicants. So we generally had more students going through the process—1,350 more who got packaged. Whether students made admission decisions/deposited earlier? All of winter, early spring leading up to May, we were running up in deposits. Students who submitted a FAFSA (as of May 3): This year we had 6,695. Last year, 5,569 on the same date. Among that group, we had 1,423 students this year who are first-generation and last year we had 1,102—more than 300 more. High-need students, with an EFC less than $5,000: 1,549 this year; last year, 1,229—320 more students.”—Interviewee 10, associate vice chancellor and director of admission at a medium private college

• “Yeah I think they did [make admission decisions earlier]. Here’s my hypothesis. I think historically we had kids applying, being admitted, we weren’t their No. 1 choice and by the time January/February rolled around they had written us off and thus by the time they completed the FAFSA, we weren’t included on it. With this earlier submission allowance, they were able to apply as they always did and get their aid information in almost real time. We weren’t their first choice and once they got their aid information that their No. 1 choice was affordable to them, all right that was always my No. 1 and away we go. According to my numbers today, I’m 41 deposits ahead of where I was a year ago, which is 45 percent up. Do I think that will hold? I don’t know. My cancel/accept numbers are probably the same percentage where they were a year ago too.”—Interviewee 12, vice president of enrollment management at a small private four-year college

CONCLUSION

Taken in combination with interview and survey data from other associations, such as National College Access Network (NCAN) and the National Association of Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA), the themes presented in this report offer an initial glimpse into implementation of early FAFSA over the course of 2016-2017. Although promising that many concerns within the professional community don’t appear to have borne fruit, substantial challenges remain in engaging students most in need throughout the college application, financial aid, and selection process. Increased support and resources for professionals and early and ongoing communications with students are critical to achieve the intended potential benefits to students that early FAFSA aims to achieve.
## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEWEES

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<th>Interviewee ID</th>
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<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
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<th>State</th>
<th>Public/Private?</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Selectivity</th>
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APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

HIGH SCHOOL—FAFSA INTERVIEW PROTOCOL—AUGUST 2016

• What is your role in the financial aid application process?
• How is your school preparing for the changes to the FAFSA this fall?
• What will you do differently as a result of the changes?
• How do you plan to communicate the changes to students/parents?
• How will the timing/content of any programming about applying to college/financial aid change as a result?
• What resources do/will you use with students/families about the changes?
• On a scale of 1 to 10, how prepared do you feel to talk with students/families about the FAFSA changes?
• Are there some aspects about the change that you feel will be more challenging than others?
• Does your school currently keep track of whether or not students file the FAFSA? If so, how?
• Is there anything colleges could do—specifically around the FAFSAA changes—that would be helpful in your work with students/families?
• Who are the key players at your school throughout this transition? What are their roles?
• Have you received any questions from students/parents about the change? If so, what are the most common?
• Have you/your school created any new materials that you would be willing to share with other professionals in the field?

HIGH SCHOOL—FAFSA INTERVIEW PROTOCOL—MAY/JUNE 2017

• In your last interview, you had mentioned your school was preparing for the changes to the FAFSA by ______. How did everything go?
• In planning for this coming Fall, will you add/delete any programming or communication to/from this list based off what you learned this first cycle?
• A lot of counselors we spoke with mentioned they were apprehensive about fitting the FAFSA process into an already tight timeline with application deadlines in the Fall. Did you experience challenges related to this at your school or did it work out smoother than expected?
• Do you know if any of your students received financial aid awards earlier this year and if so, did they make college decisions earlier?
• To what extent did colleges communicate with you about any changes to their financial aid deadlines or timing of sending financial aid packages?
• How do you think your low-income and first-generation families specifically were impacted, if at all, by the earlier availability of the FAFSA? Were they able to take advantage of the earlier timeline or did you get the sense that they were at a disadvantage for being late to certain financial aid opportunities?
• FAFSA completion data?
• On a scale of 1 to 10, how prepared do you feel to talk with students/families about the FAFSA changes?
• Did you want to add any other challenges or advantages that you saw through this first cycle with the FAFSA changes?
COLLEGE—FAFSA INTERVIEW PROTOCOL—AUGUST 2016

• What is your role in the financial aid application process?
• How is your institution preparing for the changes to the FAFSA this fall?
• Who are the key players at your school throughout this transition? What are their roles?
• Is your office collaborating with other departments across campus?
• What does that collaboration look like?
• What are the major changes, if any, within your institution/your department to adapt to this change? How does your institution plan to communicate with students about the changes?
• Is your institution changing its marketing and communication efforts to reach students about these changes? If so, how?
• Does your institution plan to change its process for awarding financial aid for this fall’s applicants? For future applicants? If so, please describe the new process/schedule.
• Is your institution planning to offer training for admission professionals about the financial aid changes and implications?

COLLEGE—FAFSA INTERVIEW PROTOCOL—MAY/JUNE 2017

• In your last interview, you mentioned your school was preparing for the changes to the FAFSA by ______. How did everything go?
• Looking ahead to this coming Fall, will your institution change any programming, coordination, and/or communications based off what you learned this first cycle?
• Several of the folks we talked to in the Fall, mentioned uncertainty around a number of things such as timelines with the state grant program, institutional budget timelines, Pell tables, vendor updates, etc. as potential challenges this first cycle with the Oct. 1 FAFSA. Did you encounter any of these challenges and if so, how did you work through them?
• What about any advantages from an admission perspective/students or institutional?
• Did your institution track data on whether more students filed the FAFSA, filed it earlier, or made admission decisions earlier?
• How do you think your low-income and first-generation families specifically were impacted, if at all, by the earlier availability of the FAFSA? Were they able to take advantage of the earlier timeline and scholarship/application deadlines or did you get a sense that they were at a disadvantage for being late to certain financial aid opportunities?
• Is there any other information you would like to share?