The onset of spring has brought with it a considerable drop in the number of positive Coronavirus cases in the Lynn community. The same trend appears to be the case on a state and national level. Be it due to the expansion of access to the vaccine or to stricter adherence to safety protocols, the downward trajectory has signaled a loosening of restrictions and a return to in-person activities, the most important of which is a return to in-person learning in schools. While much of the discussion at various levels has been on a return to in-person learning, I want to use the space of this report to share about another student-related factor and our effort to intervene.

Since the beginning of this calendar year, there has been mention, albeit surface level, of the challenges seniors face in applying for college in the midst of a global pandemic. Parts of the college admissions process have been easier as colleges shift toward more authentic evaluation of applications and away from SAT and ACT test scores as a means to establish so called cutoffs and limit access. This is a good thing. Nonetheless, the challenge appears to be in the realm of Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion rates. FAFSA completion rates in the winter months were down by approximately 20% in the state of Massachusetts compared to period of time during the 2019-20 school year. This mirrors a national trend. The reasons for the decline is broad and varied. In general, the disruptive nature of the pandemic and the diversion of attention to other immediate needs seem to be the biggest factors.

Completion of the FAFSA is important. Not only is it the anchor for financial support for college bound students, approximately 90% of high school seniors who complete the FAFSA go on to college immediately after graduation. 55% of seniors who fail to complete the FAFSA do not move on to institutions of higher learning (newyorkejdbc trustee.org). Accordingly, we have been tracking our FAFSA completion rates monthly since the announcement of the issue in December. The data graphic below depicts FAFSA completion rates by March 1st in each of the past for school years. The red bar indicates the total number of seniors in a class and the green bar indicates the total number of students who have completed the FAFSA by March 1st. The date indicates first year of college completion. You can see clearly that there is a decline in FAFSA completion at Classical and English. Meanwhile, Lynn Tech has seen completion rates by March 1st higher this year than in the three previous.
Note that some seniors will not pursue higher education beyond high school and others are ineligible due to citizenship status.

With FAFSA rates declining across the state in relationship to the pandemic and noted decline in two of our high schools, LPS is committed to supporting our students in this process. Toward that end, we sought and were awarded a state-sponsored FAFSA completion grant in the amount of $28,150. LPS staff, including school counselors and early college coordinators, will team with staff from both North Shore Community College and Salem State University to offer FAFSA support sessions. Sessions will be held outside of school hours to meet the needs of students and families. Planning is already underway and support sessions will begin in early April.

The pandemic continues to force organizations to reflect on process ease and approaches and innovate to successfully meet goals and objectives. I don’t recall ever establishing a goal related to the FAFSA completion, but it would seem to me that, given its connection to matriculation to college, that as many students who are eligible and need support with completing the FAFSA receive it. The plan for support is coming together quickly, but substantively. I think the resources and support we will to provide families will be well received. We will continue to track FAFSA completion right through the end of the school year. More importantly perhaps, I believe this will be yet another support and resource that remains beyond the end of the pandemic.

Respectfully Submitted,

Patrick Tutwiler, PhD