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Promoting Higher Education

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Author Note

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Abstract

Learning For Life Charter School is an alternative school that serves at-risk students. Due to challenges these students face, it is difficult for them to graduate and pursue higher education. Higher education can provide students with many opportunities. Financial issues, low motivation, and even lack of awareness of the multiple college opportunities available contribute to students failing to attempt or complete higher education. This leads to consequences including less opportunities in the future, lower lifetime earnings, and long-term health effects. In order to support and encourage the Learning For Life Charter School students to pursue higher education, educational workshops were created. The workshops provided students with useful information on topics such as FAFSA, college, career readiness, and goals. Feedback was received through worksheets and surveys students completed. Unfortunately, not many students participated in the workshops or provided feedback. Most of the students that did participate, found the workshops to be helpful and showed interest in higher education. Although there was little participation, these educational workshops seemed to encourage students to think about their future. In the future, requiring students to participate in the workshops could be helpful to obtain more feedback and a more accurate representation of the student population.

Keywords: At-risk, higher education, students, postsecondary education, alternative school

Agency & Communities Served

Learning For Life Charter School (LFLCS) is an independent learning environment for middle and high school students. Founded in 2001, their mission is to, "enable students grades 7-12 who had dropped out or were at risk of dropping out of traditional schools to become motivated again to learn, to develop a desire to complete their education, and earn a high school diploma" (LFLCS Board of Directors, 2014). With 52% of their population being juniors and seniors, as of 2019, the school attempts to ensure that the students graduate. However, it is a challenge for these "at-risk" students to graduate as they are disadvantaged due to mental health problems, low income, history of dropping out, and low motivation, among other issues. Due to these issues, students are also less likely to continue to higher education.

LFLCS provides immense support to all its students that assists them in becoming successful. This support includes academic assistance, technological support, and psychological services, among other forms of aid. The academic support includes individualized support from teachers and tutors, as LFLCS understands that everyone works at a different pace and learns in different ways. All students are provided with laptops and wi-fi along with an online software called Edgenuity that allows them to work on assignments, get instructions, and work on quizzes. The school has an on-site psychologist that the students get to meet along with a counselor and staff members who attend multiple trauma informed training sessions to help staff members better understand their population. Other services provided are bus passes, food, housing assistance, and much more.

Problem Description

Unfortunately, very few students at LFLCS are completing or even attempting post-secondary education. DePaoli, et al. (2018) mentioned that graduating from high school is an important milestone but it is not the final destination. Many students stop their education after obtaining their high school degree. Students such as those in alternative schools like LFLCS are less likely to attempt or complete post-secondary education as they are, "those who have been identified as "at risk" of school failure in their previous traditional schools" (Smiley, 2018, p. 47). As students struggle to even complete high school, it is a bigger challenge for them to attempt and complete postsecondary education.

Contributing Factors

A contributing factor to the problem that very few students are completing or even attending post-secondary education is that students are unaware of all the college opportunities that are offered. Many students are stuck with the idea that college is too expensive and unattainable. Coker (2017) states that low income students in particular may lack understanding of how financial aid works or believe that they cannot meet the full costs of higher education. They are unaware of FAFSA, grants, scholarships, student support programs, and the various opportunities available for students to be successful in college.

Students not ready to transition is another factor to the problem. Lack of opportunity at a high school level, as DePaoli (2018) mentions, comes from a failure of states to appropriately give aid that is relevant for postsecondary attainment. Those at alternative schools seem to have even less opportunity and resources. Additionally, it is even more difficult for alternative high school students to meet academic requirements as mentioned by Smiley (2018). Her study

explains why alternative high schools tend to lack preparation for students to be ready for higher education as she states alternate high schools are caring spaces where students who struggle emotionally or socially can be successful, however this social-emotional support doesn't really prepare them for the demands of post-secondary school. They are focused on dealing with other issues students at alternative schools may have, such as dealing with mental issues or behavioral problems. Dealing with such issues first are important in order for students to be able to focus and learn in the first place, but unfortunately don't always prepare them for higher education. Smiley (2018) claims that for that reason "the transition rates of alternative school students to higher education are significantly lower than those of their traditional school peers" (p. 156). Yet another impediment to academic achievement that Smiley (2018) mentions, might be the "shortages in instructional materials, sub-standard facilities, and often inappropriately or underqualified teachers, all of which are commonly reported in studies of alternative high schools" (p. 2). Not having the adequate full support of a school is a barrier for students to attend post-secondary education.

Financial issues are also factors that impede students to attend college. Smiley (2018) shares a finding which is "alternative high school students frequently come from economically disadvantaged homes which suggest a financial barrier to future participation in postsecondary education" (p. 2). As some students are financially underprivileged, some students at LFLCS are even homeless and believe post-secondary education is unattainable. Coker (2017) mentions that students from the bottom socioeconomic quartile (7.4%) are eight times less likely to earn a bachelor's degree than students from the top socioeconomic quartile (60%). Most LFLCS students fall into the bottom socioeconomic quartile and are at risk in not attending

post-secondary education. According to the Learning for Life Charter School Self-Study Report (2019), 66.9% of students in the 2017-2018 school year were considered socioeconomically disadvantaged and 76.1% were considered at risk. Coker (2017) states, "once in college, low-income students are more likely to leave without obtaining a degree" (p. 6) meaning getting into college isn't the only of their worries. Low-income students go against many odds as they fight financial issues that may be impeding them to attempt or complete post-secondary education.

Consequences

When students are deciding not to receive post-secondary education, they are most likely to have less opportunities for their future. "Recent data affirm that postsecondary education is increasingly essential, whether it comes in the form of a two-year or four-year degree, trade school, or a high-quality career and technical certificate" (DePaoli, 2018, p. 37). DePaoli's (2018) statement is followed by a study done by the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce which states, "99 percent of the jobs created during the Great Recession's recovery went to workers with at least some postsecondary education" (p. 37) which supports the fact that postsecondary education is essential.

"Those with postsecondary degrees also tend to have higher levels of employment and wages, as well as more access to health care and retirement plans, and greater levels of community and civic engagement" (DePaoli, et al., 2018, p. 37). It is proven that those who have higher degrees obtain higher income. Osborn (2016) state "a recent study from Georgetown University found that, on average, college graduates earn $1 million more in earnings over their lifetime" (para. 18) and "another recent study by the Pew Research Center found that the median

yearly income gap between high school and college graduates is around $17,500" (para. 18). Yet another suggestion made by The National Bureau of Economics Research (2020) proposes that "a year of education raises earnings by about 10 percent, or perhaps $80,000 in present value over the course of a lifetime" (para. 4). So, by not attending or completing higher education, people are more likely to have lower lifetime earnings.

Long-term, health effects are also consequences to this issue. "Low education has been shown to be a risk factor of multiple disease outcomes and can be construed as a source of health inequalities" (Gidron, 2013). Aside from not obtaining as many opportunities as with higher education, low education is shown to be associated with more health risks. The National Bureau of Economics Research (2020) mentions that data from the National Longitudinal Mortality Study (NLMS) found that "one more year of education increases life expectancy by 0.18 years" (para. 4). By providing students at LFLCS the tools and encouragement to pursue higher education, there is an opportunity to create long-term, positive health effects. Not only will they have more career and job opportunities, but statistically will have better health.

Problem Model

Contributing Factors	**Problem**	**Consequences**
Unaware of college opportunities	Very few students at LFLCS are attempting/completing post-secondary education.	Less opportunities for the future (job opportunities, etc.)
Low motivation to attend college		Lower lifetime earnings
Financial issues		Long-term health effects

Capstone Project Description and Justification

Capstone Project & Project Purpose

The purpose of this capstone project is to engage students in workshops and activities to assist them in being successful after graduating high school. With the goal to encourage them to pursue higher education, workshops on FAFSA information and college information will be held. However, understanding that college is not for everyone, career and SMART goal workshops will be implemented as well. This project will address the problem that few students are attending college by raising awareness of college opportunities and financial support that may be available to them. The main purpose of this project is to "plant a seed" in students to inform them that college is an option. With the goal of increasing awareness of college opportunities, students will have a higher chance of attending post-secondary education.

Project Justification

As mentioned before, low income students are most likely unaware of how financial aid works, or believe they are unable to afford college. First generation students most likely need assistance in applying for financial aid or even applying for college in the first place as college applications can be difficult to complete. Many students at LFLCS fall under "low income" as well as "first generation", therefore need guidance, assistance, and motivation. Through workshops, students will receive support and encouragement in order to complete important applications that will facilitate their first steps towards post-secondary education. Engle and Tinto (2008), provide information on how low income and first-generation students can be supported through their college journey, including improving academic prep for college and

easing the transition to college. Beginning by showing high school students the opportunities and assistance available can help engage them and prepare them to a successful college career.

Project Implementation

This project started with ideas of multiple workshops that would engage students and motivate them to look into higher education. The ideas were then discussed with staff members of LFLCS for feedback and approval. A total of four workshops were developed and put into action, two in person and two virtually (due to COVID-19). The workshops were first held on campus at LFLCS, but then transitioned to online through videos and emails. The workshops' process typically included coming up with ideas, designing flyers and email templates, developing presentations or videos, creating worksheets, and making surveys.

Project implementation included workshops in which there were presentations, worksheets, surveys, and even a virtual guest speaker in which students were engaged. Students of all grade levels (middle to high school) were encouraged to participate. Workshops were then accessed by asking students about the effectiveness of the workshops. Through handwritten surveys and Google Form surveys, students were able to give feedback to provide data and recommendations to improve workshops.

As lack of participation was an issue since the start; incentives such as food and gift cards were implemented in the project to increase participation. Budgets for food provided where created and approved by the administrator assistant and the school's director. As the project had to move to remote work, it was even harder to get students to participate in virtual workshops. Raffles for gift cards served as an incentive, unfortunately not many students ended up participating.

Other materials used were software such as Google Slides, Google Docs, email, Canva, and other online resources. Flyers, such as the one seen in Appendix B and Appendix C, were created and printed free of charge at the school site to promote the in-person workshops. Worksheets were also made and printed for students to fill out. As the project moved forward, email was the primary source to send out information and collect feedback.

A lot of work was put in by the interns, mentor, and other staff members in order to implement all aspects of the project. The involvement of staff members was encouraged to provide as much support for students. The participation of students was essential as they were the target population and the group that would benefit from the project.

A detailed implementation plan and timeline can be seen in the Scope of Work in Appendix A. Flyers, posters and other designs used in the project are shown in Appendix B, C, and D.

Assessment Plan

This project was measured by feedback from students on the effectiveness of the workshops. With a mandatory worksheet for students who participated in workshops, they stated whether or not the workshops and information were useful. Feedback from students helped improve following workshops, but it also ensured that students participated and were informed of higher education opportunities.

After completing workshop number one, “FAFSA”, written feedback from students was accessed and the conclusion reached was that the questions needed to be improved. Questions such as “Was this workshop helpful?” and “Would you attend future workshops?” needed to be improved to receive more helpful data. Adding more opened ended questions to future surveys

would result in receiving better feedback other than “yes” or “no”. This workshop addressed the concern of students not being informed about college opportunities; it informed students about FAFSA and its opportunities.

For workshop number two, “Getting Things Done”, students were asked to answer a questionnaire from an online career inventory they took and although open ended questions were asked, not much feedback was obtained to record as data. This questionnaire was to get to know students better and receive information about their interests, such as what results they obtained from the career inventory and what programs they would be interested in studying. Although this workshop was helpful in getting to know students, it failed to provide quantitative data.

Workshop number three, “Virtual Scope of College”, was fully online and the workshop required students to watch a video and answer a Google Form. The video was created with the intent to inform students about California State University Monterey Bay and the opportunities it offers. The Google Form asked two Likert scale questions, “How useful was this workshop?” and “How likely are you to attend college?” in order to obtain quantitative data. The results were useful to measure the usefulness of the workshop and to continue accessing the college interest students had.

The fourth workshop was a worksheet of “SMART Goals”. SMART goals stand for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely. The worksheet was emailed to all students containing an explanation and example of a SMART goal. A survey that allowed students to complete their own SMART goal was also sent in that email. The survey served to measure participation as well as to get students thinking about goals and how they can achieve

them. This workshop did not provide quantitative data, but it engaged students and gave them a tool to successfully achieve goals.

Expected Outcomes

The expected outcomes for this project are to encourage students to pursue higher education. Engaging in workshops and worksheets, students will become more familiar with college opportunities and will receive help in order to achieve the goal to attend college or a postsecondary institution. By getting to know students and their interests, it is expected to better assist students in their needs.

As a major goal was to have students assess the workshops, a concern was having students show up and participate in the workshops. With that being said, the goal of having students participate is also something to work towards.

The goal for the workshops was to have at least a 75% effectiveness by having students that participated note that the workshop was useful. This was measured by having students fill out if the workshop was helpful. Having at least 75% of the students write “yes” and “very useful” to questions asked about the usefulness of the workshops would demonstrate success. Feedback from students was encouraged in order to improve future workshops, but it was expected to have positive feedback.

Project Results

The purpose of this project was to get students thinking about their future and realizing that college is a viable option. This was achieved to a certain extent as some students showed interest in higher education. It was challenging to get students to participate in workshops, but

for those that did, interest was shown, and help was offered through the workshops and interns' support.

In the first workshop, "FAFSA", 10 out of the 11 students that attended stated they were interested in attending a community college or four-year university. Nine of the 11 students answered "yes" to the question, "Was the workshop helpful?" and two did not respond. Essentially, about 81% of the students thought that the workshop was helpful. No useful recommendations were made to improve the workshop.

The results obtained through the questionnaire of workshop two were mainly about student's interests. Eleven students participated in the workshop and ten believed that college was an option for them.

It was more difficult to have students participate in the virtual workshops. The first virtual workshop, workshop three, was a "Virtual Scope of College." Although a video and Google Form was sent to all LFLCS student emails, not everyone reads or even opens their email and not everyone was able to open the video due to poor internet access or other technical difficulties. A total of five students participated in the workshop as those five students answered the Google Form. The results obtained through the Google Form were that 80% of the students responded "very useful" to the workshop. Also, 80% of students indicated that they were interested in receiving more presentations. Surprisingly only 20% prefer in-person presentations and 80% prefer virtual ones. Through a Likert scale of 1 being "Not Likely" and 3 being "Very Likely," 20% answered 1, 20% answered 2, and 60% answered 3 on the question, "How likely are you to apply to college?" Students also showed interest in learning about more colleges and universities and career options for future workshops.

Workshop four, which was also virtual, was an email that contained a worksheet about SMART goals and Google Form for students to create a SMART goal of their own. A total of eight students participated. All students came up with goals related to school, showing interest in bettering their education.

As results were obtained, more participation would have been better. About 11.5% of the total student population attended and provided feedback on the workshops. However, the results from the feedback of the students who actually participated was mainly positive. The goal of having more than 75% of students indicate that the workshops were helpful was achieved.

Conclusion & Recommendations

At-risk students, such as those at LFLCS, face multiple challenges that impede them from pursuing higher education. Unaware of college opportunities, low motivation to attend college, and financial issues are a couple of the contributing factors that keep students from seeing college as an achievable option. This project addressed such factors by providing workshops that would inform and encourage students about higher education. The results from this project indicated high interest in education from students. However, a major concern was the lack of participation in students, especially when transitioning to remote work. It is recommended that workshops like these be mandatory for students in the future in order to target and assist more students. Continuing to talk and engage students of higher education will benefit and encourage them to pursue it despite their socioeconomic backgrounds. All students deserve the chance to see higher education as an option for their future.

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Appendix A

Scope of Work

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline	Staff
"FAFSA Step-by-step" poster	● Poster ● Invitation to students	10/30/2019	Sandra, Sarah (counselor), Sergio (mentor)
Contact seniors	● Get list of seniors ● Contact them via phone/email ● Google doc on information obtained	11/15/2019	Sandra, Tamara (intern), Sarah, Sergio, Ken (director)
Workshop #1 "FAFSA"	● Flyer ● PowerPoint ● Survey ● Kahoot	02/04/2020	Sandra, Tamara, Sergio
Workshop #2 "Getting things done"	● Flyer ● Worksheet ● Computers	03/03/2020	Sandra, Tamara, Sergio, Sarah, Basel (IT)
Workshop #3 "Virtual Scope of College"	● PowerPoint ● Record presentation ● Google Form	10/16/2020	Sandra, Tamara, Sergio, staff/teachers
Workshop #4 "Goal Setting"	● Flier ● Questionnaire /worksheet ● Google Form	11/02/2020	Sandra, Tamara, Sergio

Appendix B

FAFSA Workshop Flyer

Appendix C

"FAFSA: Step By Step" Poster

FAFSA: STEP BY STEP

CONTACT LFLCS COUNSELOR SARAH PENNINGTON (SARAHP@LFLCS.ORG) AND LFLCS HIGHER EDUCATION INTERN SANDRA ESTRADA (SANDRAE@LFLCS.ORG) FOR HELP OR MORE INFORMATION

WHAT WILL I NEED TO FILL OUT THE FAFSA

-Your Social Security Number
-Your Alien Registration Number (If you are not a U.S. citizen)
-Your federal income tax returns, W-2s, and other records of money earned. (Note: You may be able to transfer your federal tax return information into your FAFSA using the IRS Data Retrieval Tool.
-Bank statements and records of investments (if applicable)
-Records of untaxed income (if applicable)
-An FSA to sign electronically

WHAT TO DO AFTER

-Review Student Aid Report (SAR)
-Make corrections if needed
-Double check with your schools
-Be prepared for verification
-Order tax transcript

OTHER INFORMATION

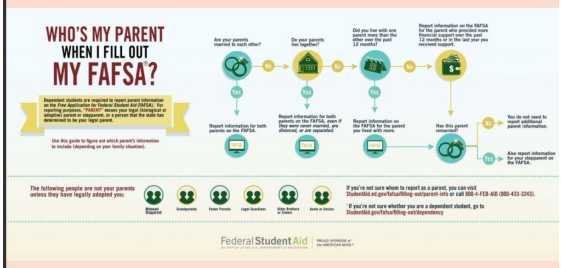
-FAFSA opens Oct 1 through March 2, 2020 (for 2020-2021 school year)
-You can also file through a mobile app called myStudentAid
-If applying to the Dream Act visit dream.csac.ca.gov

STEPS

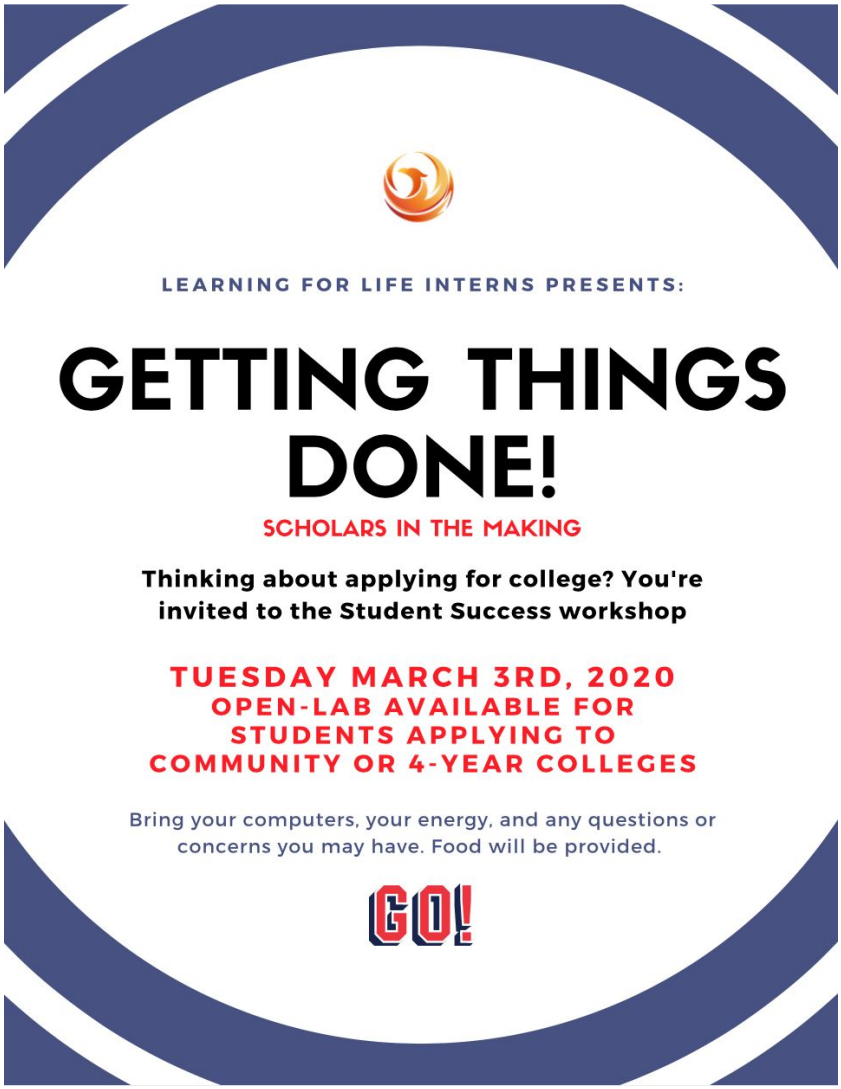
1. Check to see what application you need to file: FAFSA (citizens or legal permanent residents) OR Dream Act (undocumented individuals and those under DACA).
2. Create an account FSA ID at fsaid.ed.gov if applying for FAFSA. [Student: You will create a username and password and will need to have an email (write it down somewhere safe because you will need it each year!)] [Parent: A parent is required to create a separate username and password as well (parents cannot use the same email as student)]
3. Log in to fafsa.ed.org and select student or parent (whoever is filling out the FAFSA) then select year (2020-2021, if attending college between July 1, 2020 and June 30, 2021). If you are taking summer classes you must complete FAFSA for 2019-2020 with tax returns. If you already filled out one year select renewal. Be sure to create a safe key (allows you to return once saved).

STEPS CONTINUED

4. Fill out student demographic sectionName (as it appears in social security card), date of birth, social security, etc. (Make sure you know your ss and type it in carefully)*Make sure all your information is the same in all documents*
5. Fill out school selectionList the schools you want your FAFSA sent (Add any possible schools: The one you want to attend, the ones you applied to, back up ones, community colleges too!)
6. Fill out dependency status
7. Fill out parent demographic (See 'Who's my parent when I fill out my FAFSA' on other page)
8. Fill out parent financials (simple if you use the IRS Data Retrieval Tool)-Make sure you have taxes on hand
9. Fill out student financials
10. Submit and sign -Student and parent (if dependent) must sign with FSA ID
11. Confirm *Make sure to print a copy*



(https://blog.ed.gov/2017/09/8-steps-to-filling-out-the-fafsa-form/)

Appendix D

“Getting Things Done” Flyer