

The how-to book on organizing and hosting



Want to organize and host a **Reach Higher Montana College Goal** event in your community? Nonprofit **Reach Higher Montana** can help.

Please use this how-to manual to get you on the right track to helping students complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

For more information:
call us at (877)COLG4ME
visit us at ReachHigherMontana.org

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Overview

The goal of **Reach Higher Montana College Goal** is to provide an opportunity for all Montana students to complete their FAFSA accurately and in time to meet early application dates for financial aid.

All too often, students and families opt out of completing this essential financial aid form. They assume they won't qualify for aid because they "make too much money." The truth is, EVERYONE who wants to go to college should complete the FAFSA because it is used to determine federal, state, and some institutional aid.

Student Assistance Foundation (SAF) began coordinating **Reach Higher Montana College Goal**, formerly College Goal Montana, at physical sites across the state 12 years ago to ensure students had the help they needed to complete this important task. Thanks to overwhelming community support, SAF was able to help thousands of students and families complete the FAFSA.

In 2016, SAF rebranded its public benefit activities as **Reach Higher Montana**. In turn, we changed the name of many of our programs to reflect our new brand. As a result, College Goal Montana is now **Reach Higher Montana College Goal**. It has a new name, but our goal of FAFSA awareness is the same.

In an effort to meet the needs of our increasingly digital society, **Reach Higher Montana** offers FAFSA completion assistance that students and families can access from our website, ReachHigherMontana.org. In addition, we developed this how-to booklet to assist groups that want to organize their own **Reach Higher Montana College Goal** events.

The FAFSA has been streamlined over the last few years and is not as difficult to complete as it used to be. In order to be successful completing the FAFSA, students and parents should have the following information available:

- FSA ID – to get an FSA ID, log on to fsaid.ed.gov
- Social Security numbers (students and parents)
- 2015 federal tax returns
- W-2s, tribal income, other aid information (TANF, child support, other benefits)
- Additional asset information (money market funds, stocks, other investments)
- Untaxed income information

If you need help at any time, please feel free to contact Rhonda Safford at (406) 495-7750 or rsafford@reachhighermontana.org.



Timeline/Checklist

Where do I begin?

Your **Reach Higher Montana College Goal** event can be as big as your imagination will allow. With proper planning, event promotion, and creative thinking, your **Reach Higher Montana College Goal** event will inspire students to prepare for life after high school. It's time to get the right people involved and start moving forward.

Use this helpful timeline to keep you on track and remind you of tasks you need to complete as you prepare for your event.

August

- Reserve computer labs/rooms.
- Set up a **Reach Higher Montana College Goal** task force at your site (financial aid, admissions, high school counselors, TRiO staff, etc.) and assign duties.
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September

- Advertise your **Reach Higher Montana College Goal** event.
- Remind students and parents to obtain their FSA ID.
- Print posters available in this how-to book.
- Print out the **Reach Higher Montana College Goal marketing materials** and event day materials located on ReachHigherMontana.org.
- You may choose to have your **Reach Higher Montana College Goal** event in October or November.
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October/November

- Advertise **Reach Higher Montana College Goal**.
- Post promotional flyers in your area (community centers, grocery stores, churches, etc.) a few weeks prior to the event.
- Visit with students (especially high school seniors) about **Reach Higher Montana College Goal**. Talk about the purpose of the event and why they should attend.
- Remind students what to bring.



Timeline/Checklist

October/November *(continued)*

- Send your completed press release (from the downloadable sample) to your local newspapers, tv, and/or radio stations.
- Email students to remind them of your event and what to bring.
- Thank your community sponsors.
- Measure your results. Visit the U.S. Department of Education's website to see how many students from your school have completed the FAFSA. <http://studentaid.ed.gov/about/data-center/student/application-volume/fafsa-completion-high-school>.
- Use GEMS FAFSA completion reports to see your students' completion rates.
- Have students complete the survey provided by **Reach Higher Montana College Goal**.
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Volunteers

Who can I ask to help?

Students

Recruit students to help organize and get the word out about **Reach Higher Montana College Goal**. They might have some great ideas about how to get their peers to the event. In addition, student helpers can assist on event day and post and distribute materials.

Teachers/Counselors

Teachers and high school counselors are your greatest allies in motivating students to complete their FAFSA and pursue higher education. It's not only their job; it's their passion. We recommend enlisting their help to make your community's **Reach Higher Montana College Goal** event a huge success. Share the timeline with them and ask for their help in brainstorming ways to grab the attention of seniors who need to attend.

Ask teachers to incorporate FAFSA completion instruction into their class time, if possible. With teacher support, students could complete most of the form in class prior to the event. At the event, parents can complete their portion.

Encourage teachers to hang flyers in their classrooms.



Volunteers *(continued)*

School Staff and Support Personnel

Successful **Reach Higher Montana College Goal** sites often get the whole school community involved. Encourage your school staff, including custodians, cooks, administrative assistants, and the bus drivers to post signs and information about **Reach Higher Montana College Goal** and to encourage students to attend.

Volunteers and Community Representatives

Volunteer/community involvement is crucial to the success of your event. Identify contacts in your community who may be interested in helping with your **Reach Higher Montana College Goal** event by donating time and/or resources. Community members can serve as volunteers, provide prizes, or simply post information at their businesses or organizations. The presence of community members in your school can lend weight and excitement to the initiative and showcase your community's dedication to promoting student success. Groups to consider include:

- School alumni
- Students' families, the PTA/O, the school council
- Retired educators
- Community service, senior citizen or church groups
- Business, community and political leaders
- Youth programs (e.g. YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, 4-H, Girl and Boy Scouts of America)



Volunteers *(continued)*

Training

Having knowledgeable volunteers staffing your event is crucial to its success. Follow these tips to make sure you are sharing the most accurate information possible with students and parents.

- Recruit the financial aid director at the postsecondary institution in your community to be your subject matter expert and provide good advice to your volunteers.
- Visit the “Filling out the FAFSA” section of the U.S. Department of Education’s Federal Student Aid website to get help with the commonly asked questions. <http://studentaid.ed.gov/fafsa/filling-out>
- Introduce volunteers to FAFSA on the Web – Live Help located at <http://www.fafsa.ed.gov/help.htm>, or make sure they have the phone number for the live call-in line: (800) 4-FED-AID.

Event Planning

How do I get the word out?

Getting the word out about your **Reach Higher Montana College Goal** event is essential. Here are a few methods you can use to raise awareness about FAFSA completion and how parents and students can benefit from your event.

At school:

- Daily announcements reminding students about the event, and who should complete the FAFSA (seniors).
- Articles in newsletters and school newspapers.
- Send letters, postcards, and/or email reminders to parents, students, and school staff (Use samples on ReachHigherMontana.org).
- Put up posters in the counselors’ offices, the cafeteria, hallways, etc. (Use samples on ReachHigherMontana.org).



Event Planning *(continued)*

How do I get the word out? *(continued)*

In the community:

- Put up posters in local libraries, stores, etc.
- Drop press releases at your local news outlets. (Use press release found on ReachHigherMontana.org.)
- Contact local radio and tv stations about participating in local community news programs to promote your event.
- Post information about your event on community calendars.
- Ask businesses to put your event information on their reader board signs.
- The more information you can share through a variety of sources, the better!

Event day: What do I do?

One hour prior to event:

- Preparation of site and volunteers. Inquire about cleanup after the event.
- Make sure volunteers understand the logistics of the event.
- Assign duties for each volunteer.
- Discuss plans for latecomers and overflow crowd.

Session:

- Greet families and hand out materials.
- Point out or introduce the volunteers.
- Explain the flow of the event.
- Have students and parents log on to FAFSA.gov to complete the FAFSA. Ask families to raise hands if they have questions. Remind them their information is confidential.
- When parents and students leave, make sure they take the “Next Steps” newsletter and the IRS data retrieval instruction sheet. (Use samples on ReachHigherMontana.org).



Event Planning *(continued)*

Event day: What do I do? *(continued)*

End of session:

- Ask volunteers to begin gathering up materials and returning the site to the original status. Clean up any mess.
- Depart from the site. Thank volunteers and site hosts.
- Later that evening – put your feet up – pat yourself on the back! Enjoy!

After the event:

- It's a good idea to gather your volunteers together to talk about what worked, what didn't work, and what could be improved next year.
- Cover topics including publicity, organization on event day, etc.
- Extend your thanks to everyone who helped with the event, or made other types of contributions (food, scholarship funds, etc).
- Thank-you notes to volunteers, donors
- Letter to the Editor of your local newspaper.
- Start planning for your next event!

How to make it better

Suggestions:

- Visit the site. Ensure necessary equipment and supplies are available: computer labs, tables, and chairs. Check the facility for restrooms, handicap access, and any other logistical challenges.
- Appoint volunteers to greet families, organize the welcome area, count attendees, and perform any other duties needed.
- Ask a volunteer to be the media contact if a tv crew shows up at your site. (Use talking points on ReachHigherMontana.org)
- Establish an express table – for families who have one or two questions. People seem to appreciate having the choice between “express” service and regular FAFSA completion service. Use a senior volunteer/expert volunteer to staff the express table.
- Refreshments are optional.
- Signs to recognize and thank any sponsor(s) can be displayed at the event.
- Provide activities for younger brothers and sisters who attend (such as a movie, coloring books).

Materials

The following **Reach Higher Montana College Goal** sample materials (word documents) can be found on ReachHigherMontana.org

- Student/family letter
- Email
- Press release
- Talking points
- Postcard template
- Next steps newsletter (two-sided)
- IRS data retrieval system handout
- **Reach Higher Montana** Advisor office location

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