Community Partnerships Spotlight
The Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce

The Landscape
Region: Central Texas
Partner districts: Austin, Hutto, Leander, Pflugerville, Round Rock

The Work
Coordinate 40+ financial aid events each fall
Recruit 200+ volunteers annually
Host 10+ financial aid training sessions each year
Meet 70% FAFSA completion rates for partnering districts (on average)

Background
The Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce (the Chamber) has been supporting regional financial aid efforts for over a decade. They recognize that financial aid and education have a strong connection to workforce needs.

Over the years, the Chamber has supported Central Texas school districts. They do this by improving data collecting and monitoring procedures. They also organize financial aid training for school staff and volunteers, coordinate mass completion events for partner school districts, and encourage local businesses to offer financial support.

The Need and Solution
The Chamber's financial aid support began in the early 2000s. Companies in the region were looking to establish or expand operations. To do so, they would need to hire employees with certain skillsets.

Gilbert Zavala is the vice president of education and talent at the Chamber. He notes, “In Austin, our job numbers looked good on paper, but there was a strong need for building our local talent pool. A lot of our workforce talent was imported.”

A third-party consultant confirmed that the Austin metro area was not on track to meet future workforce demands. This was especially clear in the percentage of students transitioning from K–12 to higher education each year.

One potential barrier was the rising cost of college. “Over 50% of our population is low socioeconomic status (SES),” Zavala explains. “How do you improve postsecondary attainment when cost is a barrier?” Financial aid seemed like a potential answer.

The Chamber found ways to support their partner districts with financial aid completion:
• Improve access to financial aid data and data monitoring systems
• Provide financial aid training and coordinate events
• Offer incentives to local businesses for financial support of partner school districts

Turning Ideas into Actions
We know that community partners serve unique functions and offer different strengths. Consider how your organization can bring the Chamber’s support practices into your own work.

Data Access and Monitoring
One of the Chamber’s first steps was to ensure that their partners could access and monitor student-level financial aid data. “You can't improve what you don't measure,” Zavala explains. They started a small pilot with the Austin Independent School District (AISD). Fewer than 30% of students were filing a FAFSA each year. That number was lower for certain minority groups.

The Chamber worked with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to add FAFSA monitoring to the ApplyTexas Counselor Suite. This helped schools see the need for improvement. Today, AISD’s FAFSA completion rate is close to 70% each year. And now all school counselors in Texas can benefit from this monitoring tool.
To combat “summer melt,” the Chamber also worked with a local startup software company, OneLogos. They developed a data and text messaging portal that lets schools access student-level data. They can send personalized, timely reminders to students and their families about college enrollment tasks.

### Your Action Items
- Find out where your K–12 school partners get their student-level financial aid data. Schools and partners can work with their regions’ Educational Service Centers (ESC) and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to get data through ApplyTexas. Schools can also enter into an agreement with the US Department of Education.

### Financial Aid Completion Events
Every year, the Chamber hosts around 40 financial aid completion events throughout the region. These events are held at local high schools and staffed by volunteers that the Chamber helps recruit. The Chamber also supports schools in raising awareness for upcoming events and building capacity.

The Chamber works with Trellis Company to host FAFSA training events for school staff and other event volunteers.

### Your Action Items
- Learn where your school partners get financial aid training. If they don’t have access to training, direct them to the Texas OnCourse Academy, which has self-paced modules on both the FAFSA and the TASFA.
- Depending on your role, consider how you can train your staff or provide training for other volunteers in the area.

### Expanded Marketing
The Chamber gets local businesses to sponsor financial aid marketing materials for partnering school districts. Materials are available in two languages to meet regional needs. “When we started supporting our schools in creating outreach materials, we realized that often, the students are fine. They get this information from their high school campuses. But there is a real need to help mom and dad understand the process. Families may also need a little encouragement to get involved and give students the financial information they need to complete their application.”

### Your Action Items
- Identify the language needs in your area. Look for other partners in the area who can offer translated marketing materials into Spanish, Vietnamese, and other languages spoken widely in your community.
- Support the communities you work with by finding or developing resources to help explain the importance of financial aid and help motivate students and their families to apply for it. If you work with a specific population, that can make you well-positioned to reach them.

### Incentives
The Chamber found that incentives are a great way to encourage financial aid event attendance. The best incentives tap into community events and local businesses that shine. For example, the Chamber has partnered with C3 Presents and Austin City Limits Music Festival (ACL) to host giveaways on social media. Students could win ACL fest tickets by signing up for a financial aid event. The Chamber has also raffled movie tickets. One year, they even sponsored a DJ for a school’s senior prom.

### Your Action Items
- K–12 schools benefit from many types of incentives. For partners without significant capital, you can try to secure in-kind donations from local businesses for your school. These can be used as motivation to push students through different phases of the application process.

### Financial Aid Events: Lessons Learned
With over a decade of experience in supporting financial aid completion initiatives, the Chamber has learned a few important lessons.

#### Pushing Attendance
The Chamber helps their partner districts market upcoming financial aid events. But they’ve seen the biggest success when schools put effort into boosting sign-up and attendance rates. “Communication drives registration, which drives attendance,” says Zavala. “There are very few high schools that can carry out a strong financial aid event without having an equally strong push to register students and families.”

#### Emerging Leadership
Superintendents’ buy-in is crucial for any district hoping to boost financial aid completion rates. When financial aid is a priority at the district level, it’s more likely to be a priority at the campus level too.

#### Filing by the Priority Deadline
The Chamber was curious if the timing of FAFSA filing correlated with postsecondary enrollment rates. Studies they conducted show that students received an average of $2,000 more in grant aid when they filed by the priority deadline (currently January 15). This deadline now drives the Chamber’s support efforts. They focus on providing support in the fall so that students are more likely to meet the January 15 priority deadline.