

# Increasing FAFSA Renewal Rates

*Emails increases rate of FAFSA renewal early in the aid cycle*

**Agency Objective** Increase the rate of Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) renewal for continuing students.

**Background** The FAFSA is the entry point to many types of financial aid. Students must renew their FAFSA annually in order to maintain their financial aid, but 15 to 20 percent of freshman Pell Grant recipients in good academic standing do not successfully re-file their FAFSA.<sup>1</sup>

**Program Change** For the 2018 award year, the FAFSA application was available three months earlier – beginning October 1st, rather than January 1st – and required income information from two years prior, instead of the previous year. Federal Student Aid (FSA) emailed all students who filled out a FAFSA for the 2017 academic year to alert them to the changes and encourage them to renew their FAFSA for the 2018 academic year.

## Evaluation Methods

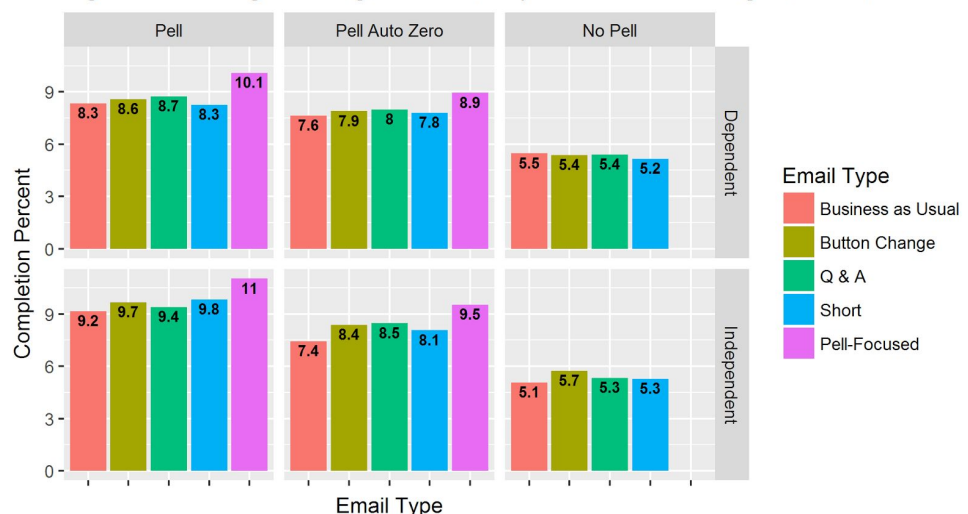
FSA sent emails to 14 million borrowers between October 4 and November 17, 2016. Students were separated into six groups. Students were first classified as either independent or dependent, then within each group were separated into automatic zero Pell eligible, other Pell eligible, and not Pell eligible students. Students within each group were randomly selected to be sent different, customized

versions of email messages.

In an early phase of the pilot, a business as usual email was tested against emails that (1) included a button directing the borrower to the FAFSA renewal webpage, (2) a message scripted as a series of questions and answers, (3) a shorter version of the message, and (4) for Pell recipients, a message that focused on Pell grants. Each group was sent 20,000 emails per message variation. Emails were sent between October 7 and October 8, 2016.<sup>2</sup>

In the final phase of the pilot, the most effective email was taken for each group and the sent to the

Figure 1: Message Testing FAFSA Completion Rates Through Oct. 24, 2016



remainder of borrowers. While all borrowers were sent an email, the large number of emails necessitated sending emails over a period of 21 days – a maximum of 750,000 borrowers were sent an email each day. Due to operational requirements and customer service considerations emails were sent Monday through Thursday. The day on which each borrower was sent an email essentially was selected at random, allowing for a comparison of FAFSA completion rates among the daily send groups. For example, the group selected

<sup>1</sup> Bird, K., & Castleman, B. L. (2016). Here today, gone tomorrow? Investigating rates and patterns of financial aid renewal among college freshmen. *Research in Higher Education*, 57(4), 395-422.

<sup>2</sup> The dependent, Pell eligible group was the only group sent emails on October 8th.

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to be sent emails on November 15th is equivalent to a randomly selected control group for the group selected to be sent emails on October 25th. The difference in FAFSA completion rates of the two groups as of November 14th (leaving the November 15th group “untreated”) is an unbiased estimator of the treatment effect of sending the email after 20 days.

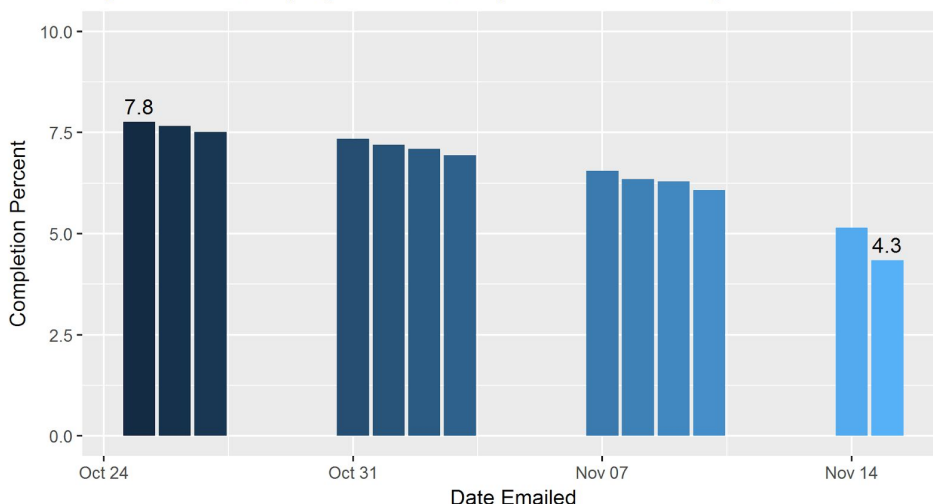
**Results** Figure 1 shows the results from the message testing. In general, the FAFSA renewal rates among Pell-eligible students were higher than among non-Pell-eligible students. The Pell-specific messages were most effective for all Pell-eligible groups, and the difference between the Pell-specific email and the next best email was statistically significant in all cases. Among non-Pell-eligible students, the different messages performed similarly (i.e., there were no statistically significant differences). The baseline message had the highest completion rate among dependent, non-Pell eligible students, and the message with a button linking to the FAFSA renewal site was most effective for independent, non-Pell eligible students.

Figure 2 displays the FAFSA completion rates as of November 14th for the groups of students selected for each day of emails. Those who were sent an email October 25th had 20 days to complete the FAFSA after being sent the email, whereas those selected to be sent the message on November 15th did not see the email until after the outcome was measured.

Sending an email increased FAFSA submission

rates 3.43 percentage points within 20 days (base rate=4.34%,  $p < 0.01$ , 95% CI [3.34, 3.51]). The shape of Figure 2 suggests that while the effects of an email may be largest right after it is sent – the rate increases are largest one day after being sent the email – they persist over time – there is a nearly linear increase in completion rates across the full 20 day time period. The estimated effect is restricted to 20 days. It is possible the email induced those who would have completed the FAFSA in the absence of the email to complete it sooner. Even if the emails only generate a pull-forward effect, they can still be valuable. Completing the FAFSA earlier may result in higher award offers given the limited availability and

Figure 2: Full Campaign FAFSA Completion Rates through Nov. 14, 2016



first-come-first- served nature of some financial aid.

**Conclusion** An email reminder can increase FAFSA renewal rates at the beginning of the open season. The campaign led to an increase of approximately 250,000 FAFSA submissions between October 25 and November 15, 2016. Messages focusing on the Pell Grant were particularly effective for those who were eligible for the grant the previous year.