



FAFSA Filing in Iowa: 2023

To qualify for most college financial aid, students must file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid or FAFSA. This report examines trends and gaps in Iowa's FAFSA filing rates during the last six FAFSA cycles.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a critical step in the college-going process. One of the Iowa College Student Aid Commission's (Iowa College Aid) goals is increasing the FAFSA filing rate, especially for minority and low-income students. To that end, we annually detail filing rates and trends for public high school seniors, overall and broken down by student characteristics. This report examines FAFSAs filed before June 1 in the 2018-19 through 2023-24 FAFSA cycles.

We find that Iowa's FAFSA rate was slightly lower compared to the national FAFSA rate at the end of May. However, Iowa outpaces the nation early, potentially increasing

Iowans' chances of receiving need-based financial aid.

We find a relationship between student characteristics and FAFSA filing rates. While FAFSA rates by race/ethnicity either remained the same or increased, gaps among racial/ethnic groups persisted. The gap between males and females has remained steady, at approximately 14 percentage points higher for females. The overall number of undergraduate FAFSAs filed dropped 10% during the past six cycles but is on an upward trajectory. All these data points demonstrate the importance of addressing overall FAFSA completion and filing gaps.

INTRODUCTION

The FAFSA opens the door to postsecondary education because it is required for all federal student aid, including Pell grants and student loans, and most state and institutional aid. In Iowa, the FAFSA serves as the application for the Iowa Tuition Grant and the Future Ready Iowa Last-Dollar Scholarship, two programs that account for more than 75% of Iowa student state-funded financial aid (State of Iowa Budget Appropriation, 2023). Iowa college-intending high school students who file a FAFSA are 37 percentage points less likely to “melt” or fail to follow through on immediate college plans than their counterparts who do not (Oster, 2021).

Because filing the FAFSA is critical to the college-going process, this report examines Iowa's FAFSA filing rates

using data from the last six years. Specifically, we analyze FAFSAs filed from October 1 through May 31. We pay particular attention to filing gaps between specific subgroups to illustrate that student populations file the FAFSA at different rates. See the appendix for more information about how we constructed the data for these analyses.

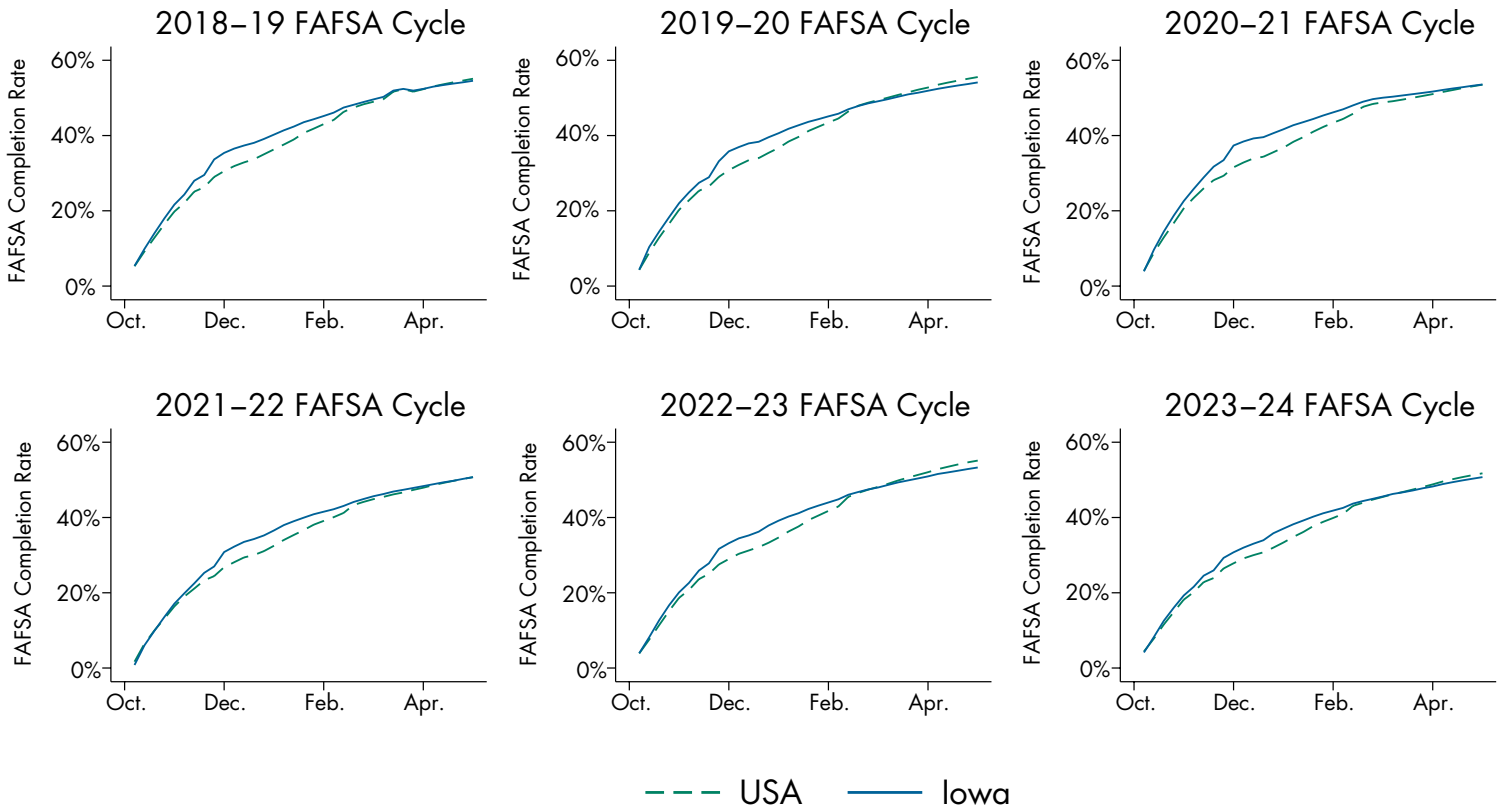
A note about FAFSA cycles: FAFSA cycles are named for the academic year in which aid is distributed. For example, 2022-23 high school seniors filed FAFSAs for the 2023-24 academic year, so their applications are captured in the 2023-24 FAFSA cycle. Throughout this report, we refer to the “FAFSA cycle” for a given year that describes when the financial aid is distributed to students.

FAFSA FILING RATES OVER TIME: IOWA VERSUS NATION

We begin our analysis by comparing the Iowa FAFSA filing rate for high school seniors (public and private schools) to the national FAFSA filing rate for high school seniors. Figure 1 illustrates the rates for Iowa and the nation from the 2018-19 FAFSA cycle to the 2023-24 cycle, ending the last week in May (Federal Student Aid, 2023). Each year, Iowa’s rate

exceeds the national rate until about March. After March, the national and Iowa rates are approximately the same, or the national rate is higher. Similar to last year, this year’s national rate was higher than Iowa’s rate at the end of May, likely due to multiple states mandating the FAFSA for high school seniors.

Figure 1. Iowa and National High School FAFSA Filing Rates by Cycle: 2018-19 through 2023-24



FAFSA FILING RATES FOR PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

This section pays special attention to FAFSA filing rates for public high school seniors in Iowa. Iowa College Aid and other organizations have developed programs and services to increase the FAFSA completion rate among high school seniors. Figure 2 depicts the rate for public high school seniors in Iowa from October 1 through May 31 in each cycle. Since the 2018-19 FAFSA cycle, the FAFSA filing rate for public high school seniors has been lower at the end of

May. However, the filing rate for this FAFSA cycle (2023-24) was higher than the previous two years, suggesting that the FAFSA rate may be rebounding from the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 3 demonstrates that the number of seniors filing a FAFSA is on the rise. Compared to the 2021-22 FAFSA cycle, approximately 500 additional seniors filed a FAFSA in the 2023-24 cycle.

Figure 2. Iowa Public High School Filing Rate by Cycle: 2018-19 through 2023-24

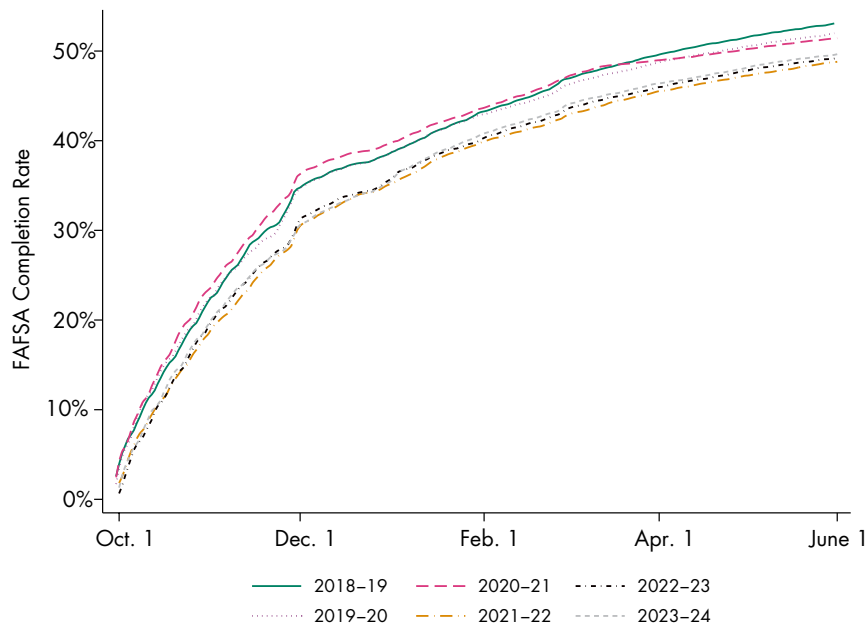
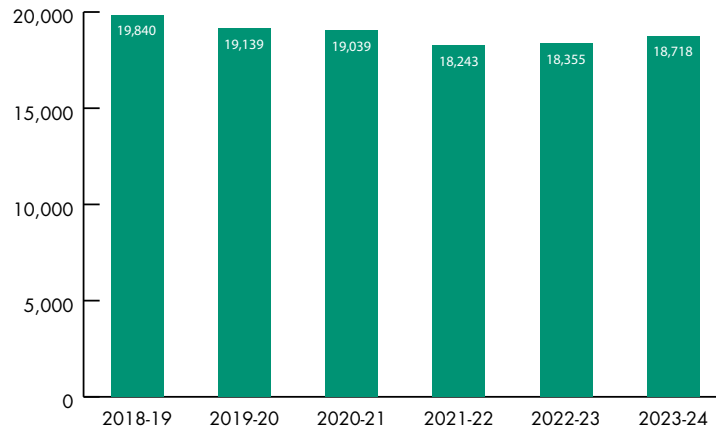


Figure 3. Number of FAFSAs Completed by Public High School Seniors by Cycle: 2018-19 through 2023-24



FAFSA FILING RATES BY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Figures 4 through 7 on this page and the next page display Iowa’s FAFSA filing rates by subgroups of public high school seniors. Figure 4 depicts the percentage of males and females who filed a FAFSA by May 31 in each cycle. The percentage of females filing the FAFSA has stabilized over the last

three years at 57%, while the percentage of males filing the FAFSA has increased two percentage points from 41% to 43%. Even though the proportion of males filing the FAFSA has increased, it is still 14 percentage points below the rate of females.

Figure 4. FAFSA Filing Rate by Gender: 2018-19 through 2023-24

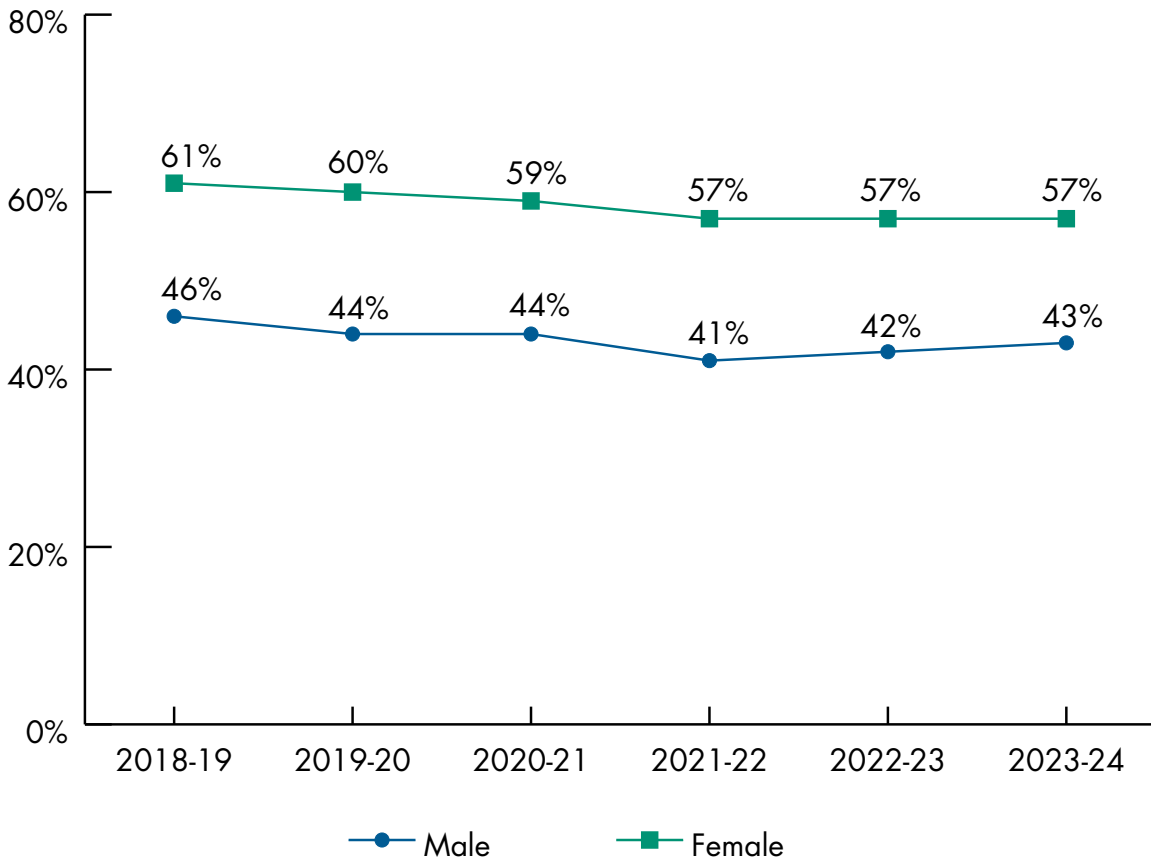


Figure 5 provides the FAFSA filing rate for students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) during their senior year. Overall, students who did not qualify for FRPL were at least 25 percentage points more likely to file a FAFSA

for all cycles. Whereas over half of non-FRPL students file a FAFSA, about one-third of FRPL seniors do. The gap between these two groups has been consistent over the last six years.

Figure 5. FAFSA Filing Rate by Free or Reduced Priced Lunch Status: 2018-19 through 2023-24

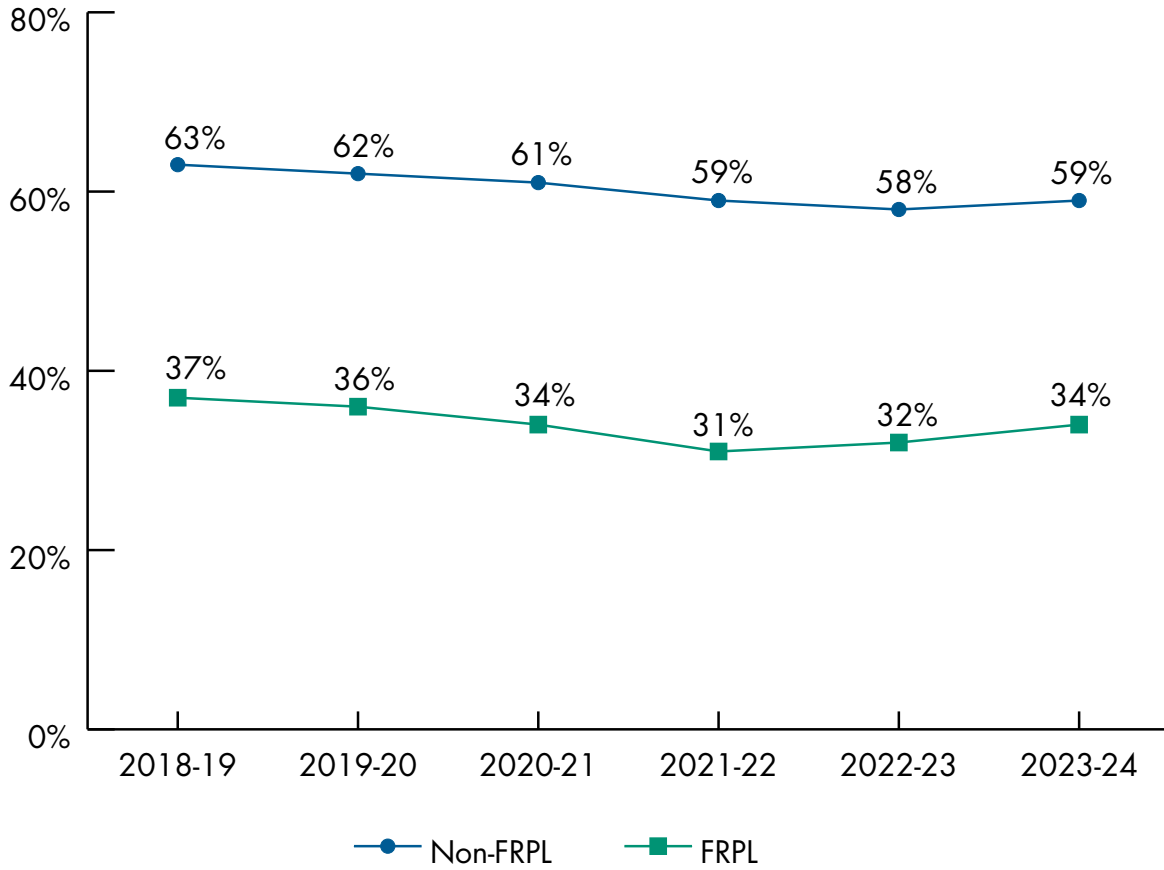


Figure 6 illustrates the FAFSA filing rate by race/ethnicity from 2018-19 through 2023-24. During the last three years, Asian students have had the highest FAFSA filing rate relative to other races/ethnicities. Black students, Hispanic students, and students identifying as more than one

race/ethnicity were particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with their FAFSA filing rates dropping roughly six percentage points from 2020-21 to 2021-22. Over the last two years, FAFSA filing rates for those groups have increased slightly.

Figure 6. FAFSA Filing Rate by Race/Ethnicity: 2018-19 through 2023-24

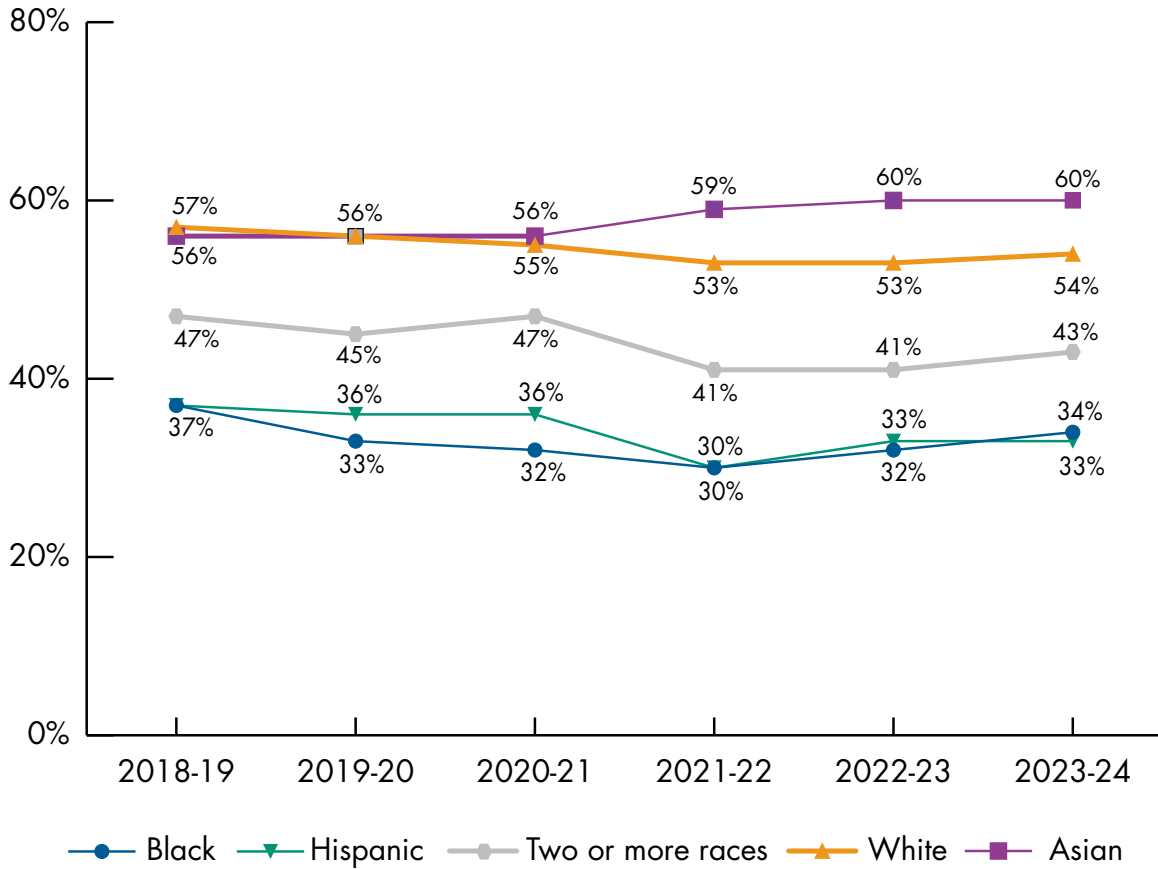
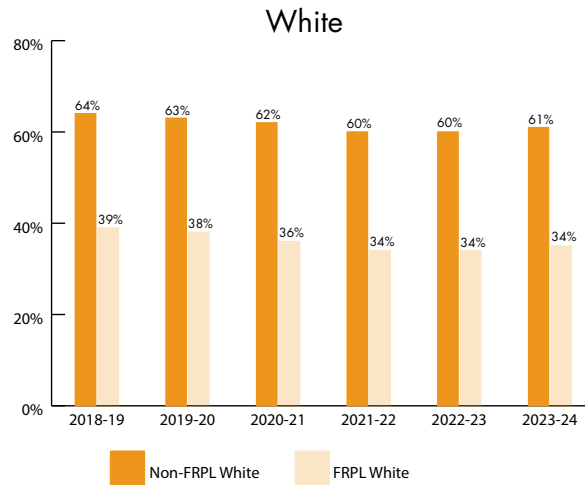
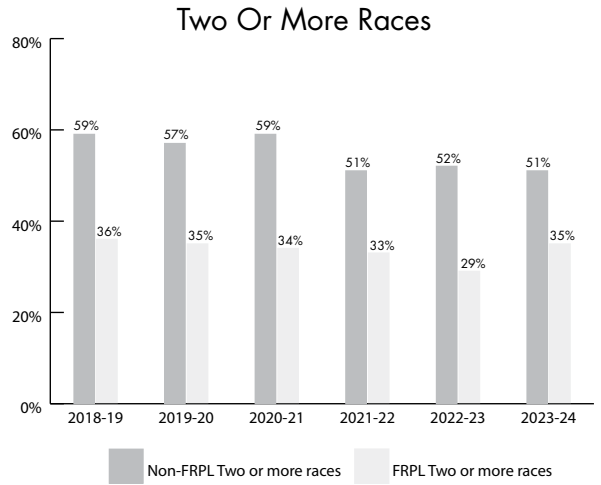
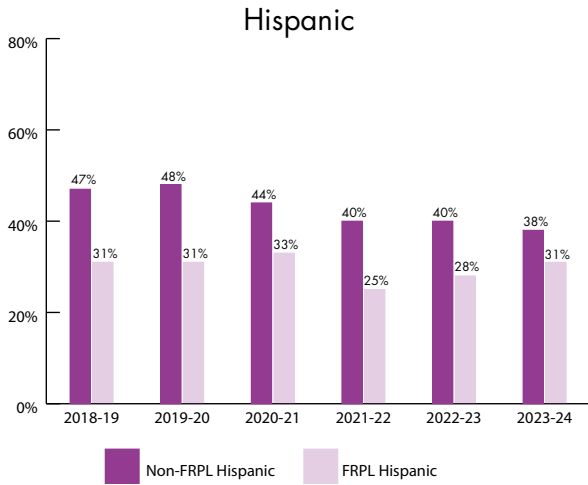
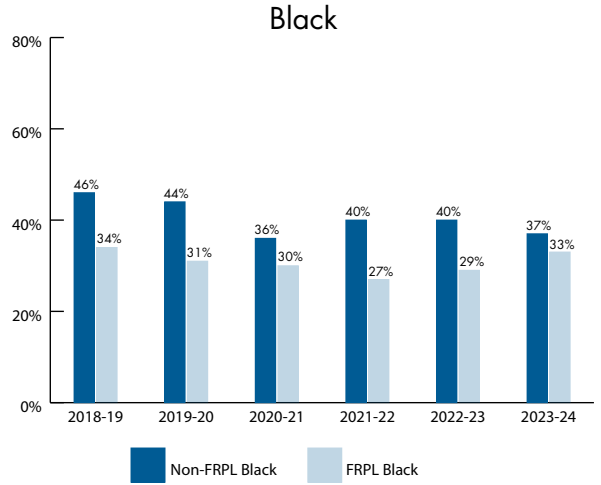
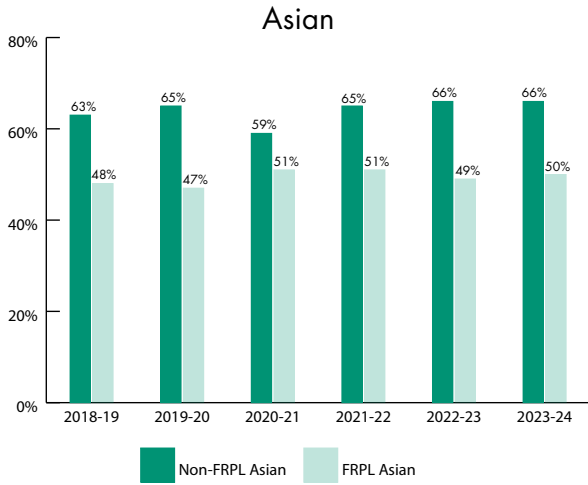


Figure 7 provides FAFSA filing rates by race/ethnicity and FRPL status. Regardless of race, students who qualify for FRPL always have lower FAFSA rates than those

who did not qualify for FRPL. Among FRPL students, Black, Hispanic, and white students had the lowest FAFSA completion rates.

Figure 7. FAFSA Filing Rate by Race/Ethnicity and FRPL: 2018-19 through 2023-24

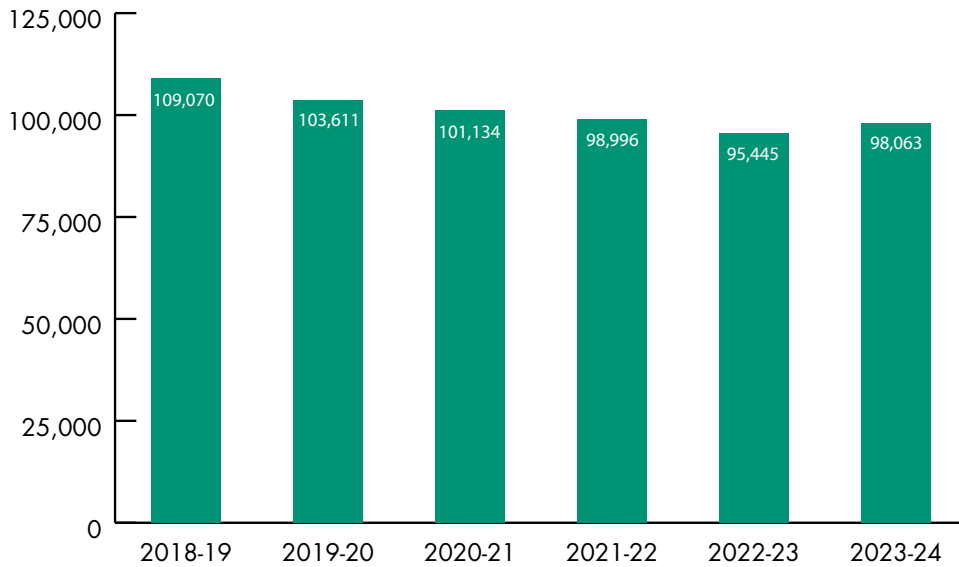


ALL FAFSAs

Figure 8 displays the total number of FAFSAs completed by May 31 each year. From the FAFSA cycle 2018-19 through 2023-24, approximately 11,000 fewer FAFSAs were filed, a

10% decline in FAFSAs. Although this is a decline from the 2018-19 cycle, approximately 3,000 more FAFSAs were filed by May 31 than last year.

Figure 8. All FAFSAs filed by May 31: 2018-19 through 2023-24



CONCLUSION

FAFSA filing rates improved during the last FAFSA cycle, suggesting that the FAFSA filing rate for high school seniors is rebounding after four cycles of declining rates.

Differences in filing rates between gender, race, and income have been substantial and stable over the last six years.

Males, FRPL students, Black, Hispanic, and multiracial students are less likely to file than their counterparts.

Regardless of race/ethnicity, FRPL students are less likely to file a FAFSA than non-FRPL students. Policymakers, practitioners, and administrators should develop policies

and strategies that directly address these gaps in filing. Whether it is a 15-credit hour certificate or a doctorate of medicine, meeting Iowa’s Future Ready Iowa goal requires more high school students to attain postsecondary education. A strong relationship exists between filing the FAFSA and enrolling in postsecondary education for college-intending students (Oster, 2021). Closing these gaps to ensure that more under-resourced students file the FAFSA and enroll in postsecondary education is necessary to meet Iowa’s workforce needs.

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- Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. (2020). Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates through 2037. Retrieved from <https://knocking.wiche.edu>.

APPENDIX

Data for Iowa Versus Nation Analysis

For the first section of this report, we compare Iowa FAFSA filing rates with national FAFSA filing rates. To complete this analysis, we use publicly available data from the U.S. Department of Education (Federal Student Aid, 2023). These weekly files contain the number of completed FAFSAs at each public and private high school in the country up to the previous Friday. Starting in February 2020, Iowa College Aid staff downloaded and processed the weekly files. Before that, we received data from Nicholas Hillman and Ellie Bruecker from the University of Wisconsin as they downloaded the files before February 2020.

To calculate a national rate, we summed the number of FAFSA filers in all 50 states. Then, we divided them by the projected 12th-grade enrollment in public and private schools in the country provided by Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (2020). To calculate the Iowa rate, we summed the number of FAFSA filers in Iowa. Then, we divided that by the 12th-grade enrollment in public and private high schools provided by Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (2020). We completed this process for each year displayed.

Data for School and Student Characteristics

High school senior enrollment data: Our analysis of FAFSA filing rates within Iowa begins with high school senior enrollment data from the Iowa Department of Education. These files contain all seniors in Iowa who enrolled at a public high school from academic years 2017-18 through 2022-23. The high school senior enrollment files provide demographic characteristics of the students, including the school where they enrolled during their senior year. Within this dataset, a student can be included in multiple academic years if they did not graduate on time.

FAFSA data: We match the senior enrollment files to our FAFSA records for a given year. For this analysis, we create

a single, combined FAFSA file for each year up to May 31 of that year (FAFSA cycles 2018-19 through 2023-24). We use data elements from the demographic, entry, Institutional Student Information Record (ISIR), student, and parent tables. The entry table lists the student's last transaction, which we use to identify their most recent FAFSA. The ISIR table contains information about Pell eligibility, expected family contribution (EFC), and rejection codes. The student table contains tax information for the student, such as adjusted gross income. The parent table provides parent tax information. The vendor table provides information on which institutions received the student's FAFSA. All tables contain the student's Social Security Number, transition number, and name ID. Therefore, these tables are matched using Social Security Number, transaction number, and name ID. For this analysis, we use the last transition in our files as of May 31. A student is considered to have a completed FAFSA if they have a calculated EFC.

Matched FAFSA and high school enrollment file: To create a file that indicates whether a high school senior filed a FAFSA in a given academic year, the public high school senior enrollment file is matched to the FAFSA data described above. To complete this match, we begin with the high school senior enrollment file and then match it to the FAFSA files on first name, last name, and date of birth. Before completing the match on first and last names, we standardize the names by capitalizing all letters and removing hyphens and punctuation. We use the soundex phonetic filing system and the Proc SQL sounds-like function while operating a Statistical Analysis System (SAS) module. The sounds-like function is based on an algorithm for identifying words and names that sound alike. The technique has been used for years to track genealogical data and is useful when fuzzy matching of character values is needed to account for variations in spelling. Because students can be enrolled multiple times as a senior within our high school enrollment file, we individually match each senior class to the corresponding FAFSA cycle (e.g., class of 2017-18 is matched to the 2018-19 FAFSA cycle). Once matched, we exclude

any FAFSA records that do not match a high school senior record. High school seniors who match to the FAFSA file and have an accepted FAFSA record are considered to have filed a FAFSA in that given year. High school seniors who do not match to the FAFSA file or whose last FAFSA record is a rejected record are considered to have not filed the FAFSA.

For the analysis that examines all FAFSAs, we start with the single, combined FAFSA file for each year up to May 31 of that year (FAFSA cycles 2018-19 through 2023-24) that is described above. We then limit that file to undergraduate students by excluding students who indicate their year in college is graduate or professional.

Table 1. Number of Observations by File Type and FAFSA Cycle: 2018-19 through 2023-24

Dataset		FAFSA Cycle					
		2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
1	All FAFSAs filed through May 31	109,070	103,611	101,134	98,996	95,445	98,063
2	Public high school senior enrollment file	37,375	36,814	37,018	37,376	37,271	37,688
3	Number of matches between all FAFSAs (row 1) and high school senior enrollment file (row 2)	19,840	19,139	19,039	18,243	18,355	18,718
4	FAFSA filing rate (row 3 as a percentage of row 2)	53%	52%	51%	49%	49%	50%



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