



Utah College Application & Awareness Month sees record growth

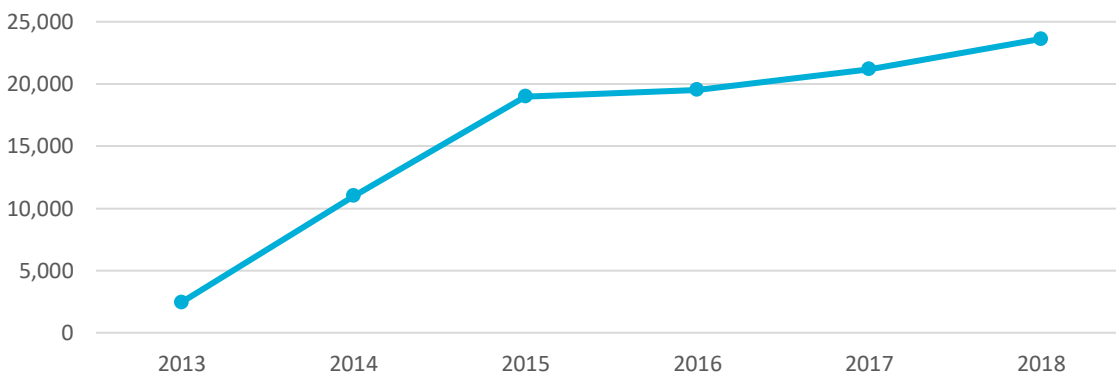
Utah College Application Week: From eight schools to 165 in six years

In 2013, Utah joined the national American College Application Campaign¹, overseen by ACT's Center for Equity in Learning², to create Utah College Application Week (UCAW). The goal of UCAW is to provide every high school senior at partner schools the opportunity to complete at least one college or university application during the school day with hands-on assistance from volunteers. The program relies heavily on the participation of parents, community members, and institutional admissions offices that supply application fee waiver codes and/or college representatives to assist during these events.

The initiative started with eight schools in the Salt Lake, Ogden, and Granite school districts. Now in its seventh year, in 2019 UCAW has expanded to 129 high schools, 19 middle/junior highs, and 17 elementary schools that span 35 school districts across the state.

Student participation in UCAW has grown steadily since its inception. Approximately 2,000 seniors participated in 2013, and over 23,000 students participated in 2018, completing more than 24,000 college applications.

UCAW Student Participation 2013-2018



Why does Utah need UCAW? Utah's college participation rates lag the nation

In Utah, only 49% of high school graduates attend a postsecondary institution the year following high school graduation³. When measured five years after high school graduation, the college participation rate

¹ <https://equityinlearning.act.org/acac/>

² <https://equityinlearning.act.org/>

³ https://ushe.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/reports/2019_college_participation_completion_report.pdf

increases to 69%. However, when data for first-year college participation is compared to that of five years following high school completion, equity disparities persist in postsecondary enrollment and participation. Students of color and low-income students are accessing postsecondary education at disproportionately lower rates than their white, middle- to high-income counterparts⁴. UCAW aims to address this disparity by helping all seniors with the first step: filling out college applications.

Making UCAW meaningful: Exploring different models and reaching into lower grades

The Utah System of Higher Education serves as the state coordinator for UCAW. In this role, USHE provides resources, training, support and data collection for the state. USHE also provides buttons for school counselors, educators, and others to wear which read, “Ask Me About College,” as well as “I Applied” stickers for students who completed the application. The program allows schools the flexibility to implement the program on the ground as they see fit.

This year, high school counselors and access professionals have begun engaging student leadership at their schools in order to design and implement more robust UCAW experiences and further promote a college readiness culture at their school.

“This year, we wanted to try to make UCAW a more school-wide event. It is hard to promote something without the help of students, so we chose to partner with our Latinos In Action (LIA) class to make UCAW something more than just students filling out college applications. It was honestly amazing to see these student leaders rise to this occasion and go above and beyond helping us plan and promote activities for UCAW.”

—Leslie Swenson, Counselor at Spanish Fork High School

USHE is taking additional steps this year to better understand the students it aims to serve by talking to first-generation college students and providing more meaningful resources in return. Along with the “Ask Me About College” buttons that have been a staple in the state’s campaign for educators and volunteers during UCAW, new stickers were supplied to identify educators who were the first in their families to attend college. The stickers resulted from feedback from a first-generation student who, when asked what the state could be doing to better help first-generation students access and attend college, responded with:

“If they would have showed me ‘oh yea, this person is a first-generation student and they got through it,’ so you see them and you think, I can do it too.”

—Misael Maldonado, Senior at Snow College in Ephraim

Also new this year, UCAW events have expanded to include younger grades as part of Utah College Application and Awareness Month, endorsed and championed by Governor Gary R. Herbert.⁵ This effort included shipping ‘*Monte Goes to College*’ children’s books to 132 elementary schools across the state as well as a manual with ideas for postsecondary college awareness activities and lesson plans for teachers K-8. Moving forward, UCAW plans to continue expanding its reach with younger grades.

“This activity increases students’ understanding of their roles and identity, including their goals and aspirations.”

—Jasmine Guzman Palmero, Extended Learning Specialist at East Midvale Elementary

⁴ https://ushe.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/reports/2019_college_participation_completion_report.pdf

⁵ https://ushe.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/misc/UCAW_declaration_vert..pdf

Next Steps

Moving forward, UCAW plans to better align college application week events with the state’s FAFSA Nights, sponsored by the Utah Higher Education Assistance Authority. Additionally, UCAW will expand “Decision Days” in early May—a program implemented by former First Lady Michelle Obama in her *Reach Higher* national campaign.⁶ This ongoing coordination of college preparedness events will provide the state and its students with a seamless approach for students to be ready for college that expands the program to include affordability and takes into account the need for more navigational support for students.

Lastly, with 91% of Utah high school graduates staying in the state to attend one of Utah’s public and non-profit, private colleges and universities, there is a need to better coordinate among Utah’s postsecondary institutions to increase enrollments. The goal will be to turn the 24,000+ college applications that were completed during College Application Month into college enrollments. This will be a priority of this initiative moving forward.

⁶ <https://www.reachhigher.org/>