



Welcome to the first edition of the LEAP Tampa Bay Quarterly Newsletter! Whether you are a parent, guardian, educator, student, or business professional, you are a vital part of our community and our shared mission to enhance educational and workforce opportunities in the Tampa Bay area.

#### **Our Mission:**

LEAP Tampa Bay transforms lives by leveraging the power of community collaboration to accelerate personal, workforce, and community prosperity through education. This is more than a mission statement—it's a call to action that invites each of us to contribute to a thriving, educated community.

#### **Our Goal:**

We have set an ambitious target: By 2025, we aim for 60% of working-age adults in Tampa Bay to hold a degree, certificate, or high-quality credential. Achieving this will strengthen our workforce, enrich our community, and create opportunities for personal growth and success. **What's Inside:**

This issue is dedicated to the new, simplified federal financial aid process (FAFSA).

The changes may create questions and we want to help answer those for our students/families. This quarterly newsletter will be your go-to source for everything LEAP Tampa Bay. Expect to find updates on our key initiatives, stories of community impact, educational resources, and various ways for you to get involved and make a difference. We'll also spotlight the incredible work being done by community members like you. So whether you're looking to advance your own education, guide someone else on their educational journey, or simply stay informed about the incredible work happening in our community, this newsletter is for you.

# Our Founding Partners



## Meet The Leap Team



Chuck Tiernan, Director.



Jerrica Peets, Program Manager



Matt Smith, Completion Coach



Alaya Tyler, Program Specialist

## New Simplified FAFSA

Use this  
link for  
FAFSA Info

Did you know??



In the State of Florida, there was around **300 million** unclaimed Pell grant dollars!  
That's free money to attend college...see below for some tips on filling out your  
application.





### What is the FAFSA Simplification Act?

The FAFSA Simplification Act represents a significant overhaul of the processes and systems used to award federal student aid starting with the 2024–25 award year. This includes the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) form, need analysis, and many policies and procedures for schools that participate in federal student aid programs.





## What you need to know! FASFA Updates!



1. The FAFSA is getting easier and with the current Pell Grant offering up to \$7,400 of support, it is worth trying!

2. A new simplified FAFSA encourages more students to apply and they've cut application questions [down from 108 to 46!](#)
3. The application opens by [December 31st](#) this year (instead of Oct. 1), but it's a one-time change.
4. In the meantime, you and your parents could get your [FSA ID](#) set up – you all need an FSA ID to complete the FAFSA.
5. On the new FAFSA, the [Student Aid Index \(SAI\)](#) replaces the old Estimated Family Contribution (EFC), making aid decisions clearer.

## **LEAP's Tampa Bay Completion Coach Makes Headlines: Paving New Paths in Education**



## Local &amp; State

# 3M Floridians started college but didn't finish. Some need a push.

BY IAN HODGSON  
Times Staff Writer

Every few months for the past five years, Matt Smith would send another email to Tansheka Riggins: "Just checking in..." or "Hope your week is going well so far!"

Sometimes he was more direct: "Are you having trouble figuring out how to juggle school, work and family life?"

Most months, Riggins would send the email to her trash folder. She'd first enrolled at St. Petersburg College in 2003 with the dream of becoming a nurse, but two decades later she still didn't have a degree. She didn't like to be reminded of her 33 failed or withdrawn courses or her \$69,000 in student debt still unpaid.

"Doesn't he get that I can't do this?" she'd think before going back to one of her two jobs or cooking for her three children or caring for her elderly father.

Riggins, 39, is one of roughly 3 million Floridians who have attended some college but never earned a degree or certificate. Often referred to as "noncompleters," they make up roughly 18% of the state's population age 25 and over, according to the U.S. Census.

That might change soon. Riggins is just one final away from an associate degree and one step closer to qualifying as a practical registered nurse. She said she'd have given up long ago without Smith, her "completion coach."

## "One of the biggest problems"

Smith is the lead, and currently lone, coach at Complete Tampa Bay, a program designed to help the region's 350,000 noncompleters back to school and into the workforce with a job-ready degree. It was launched in 2021 with support from LEAP Tampa Bay, a nonprofit focused on education access.

To Smith, Riggins' story is common among those who've stumbled before finishing a degree. Most have some combination of financial hardship, work or family obligations that keep them from going back to school, according to a 2019 Florida Department of



MARTHA ASENCIO-RHINE | Times

**St. Petersburg College student Tansheka Riggins, left, meets with her completion coach, Matt Smith, for the first time in person on Monday in Clearwater. Riggins is a mother of three who has been trying to finish her associate degree for two decades and is one exam away from graduating.**

### Education survey.

Roughly two-thirds of Florida community college students fail to graduate within eight years, according to federal data, and non-graduates don't get as far without a diploma.

Recent research on Minnesota and Texas students suggests that noncompleters earn little more than those with just a high school diploma.

Without higher earnings to pay off loans, 18% of noncompleters who attended one of Florida's public colleges defaulted on their student debt within four years of leaving school — triple the rate of graduates from the same schools, according to a Tampa Bay Times analysis of National Center for Education Statistics data.

People who leave college without a degree or certificate are more likely to face financial hardship, according to a recent study from Federal Reserve economist Douglas Webber. Using national data on 36,000 individuals surveyed from 2017 to 2019, Webber found that noncompleters were twice as likely as those with a degree to say they

couldn't afford a \$400 expense, and four times as likely to be on food assistance.

"It's one of the biggest problems that need fixing and one area that gets the least light," Smith said. Most of the colleges he deals with dedicate dozens of staff to admissions and recruitment but typically assign only a few to student retention, he said.

Complete Tampa Bay is the only program in the state solely dedicated to helping students return to college, but that wasn't always the case. The Complete Florida Plus Program provided scholarships and coaching statewide until Gov. Ron DeSantis struck the \$30 million initiative from the budget in 2020.

Parts of the program reopened at the University of West Florida. But Complete Florida's \$3 million program that helped former college students finish their degrees was shuttered. From 2014-19, that program helped 3,600 students enroll in college and 1,754 graduate, according to a 2019 report.

### A personal approach

Intensive one-on-one coaching

can be a difficult sell to policymakers. Results can be hard to measure and the money required adds up quickly.

Of the roughly 1,300 people who have responded to Smith's emails, 140 confirmed that they reenrolled in college and 20 finished their degrees, he said. The numbers are self-reported, he added, something he hopes to change soon with help from school administrators.

Many no longer have access to federal or school-based financial aid, so must rely on scholarships or loans to pay for school. Most need roughly 40 class credits before they can graduate, Smith estimated. That means roughly \$6,000 in tuition aid alone from LEAP Tampa Bay or other aid organizations to reach a degree.

Personalized interventions like dedicated completion coaches are the best way to encourage long-run behavioral changes many noncompleters need to finish their degree, said University of Toronto economist Philip Oreopoulos. His research indicates that while "low-touch" approaches like email and

text campaigns can sometimes nudge people toward one-time decisions like filling out an enrollment form, they do little to impact student success.

Personalized emails get more responses, Smith said. And it makes asking for help easier when they've seen the same name in their inbox a dozen times.

Riggins had gotten close to graduating a few times. She would "steal time" to do homework by waking up early or staying up late, but eventually something would pull the rug from under her and she'd miss class, stop turning in homework, fail an exam and another "F" would appear on her transcript.

Today, as she draws closer to a degree, she struggles to call herself a success and is quick to credit others.

Smith demurs at the suggestion he's responsible for Riggins' impending achievement. "She'd probably have a Ph.D. by now if not for all the barriers she's faced," he said.

On a warm November afternoon, he was eyeing the parking lot at St. Petersburg College's Clearwater campus. Despite the years of emails, texts and phone calls, he'd never met Riggins in person.

"You must be Matt," a familiar voice called out as Riggins quick-stepped up the campus walk. "I just cannot thank you enough," she said, wrapping her arms around the burly Alabamian's waist.

Hugs and hellos out of the way, Riggins turned to business. Once she had her associate diploma in hand, she'd need to start working toward her registered nursing degree.

There was a lot of ground to cover, and she wanted Matt's advice.

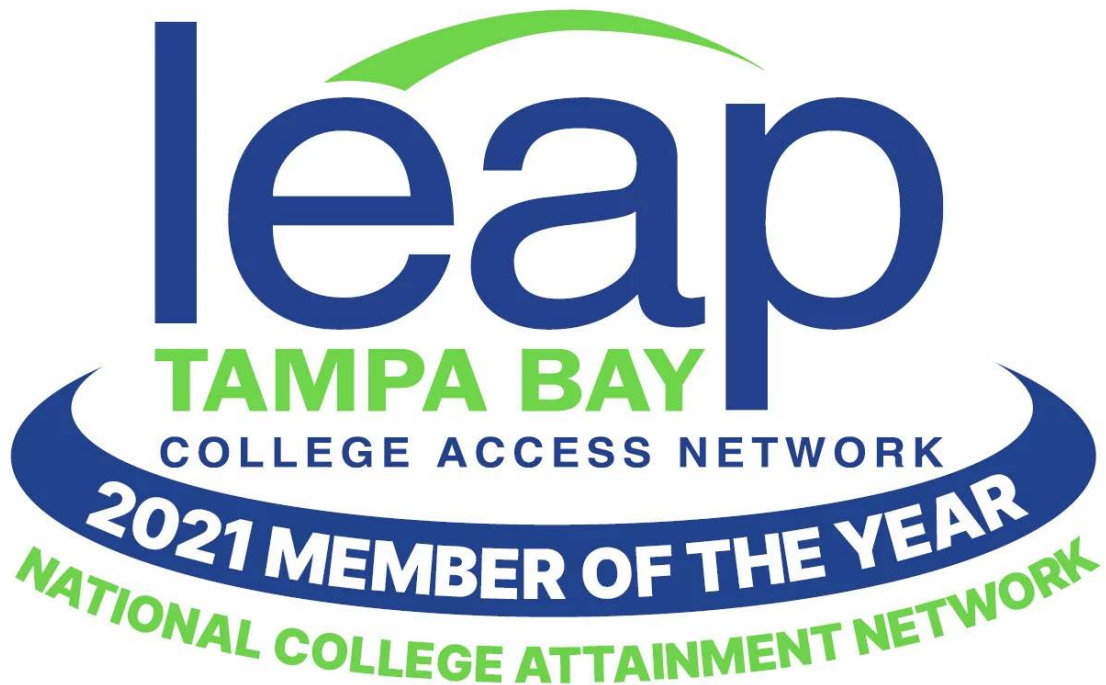
*Ian Hodgson is an education data reporter for the Tampa Bay Times, working in partnership with Open Campus.*

Contact Ian Hodgson at [ihodgson@tampabay.com](mailto:ihodgson@tampabay.com). Follow @IanHodgson.

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## FAFSA Opening Countdown



Days

Hours

Minutes

Seconds

### LEAP Tampa Bay

4300 West Cypress Street ste 700, Tampa, FL 33607

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