FreeApp Program
Program Evaluation Report
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Executive Summary

The Big Ten Academic Alliance FreeApp Program aims to increase educational access for students that are underrepresented in graduate education. Each year, the FreeApp Program processes thousands of graduate application fee waiver requests and submits them to Big Ten Academic Alliance universities for review. This FreeApp program evaluation was conducted in spring 2021, in accordance with the Big Ten Academic Alliance's schedule of programmatic reviews.

The purpose and scope of this evaluation is to assess the process involved with collecting the FreeApp waiver requests and to survey the FreeApp Coordinators' priorities and goals for their campus waivers. It also provides an opportunity to reflect on what is working well and what improvements could be made based on feedback from the FreeApp Coordinators.

The evaluation process revealed a high level of satisfaction of the tools and the overall management of the FreeApp program, specifically regarding the dissemination of request data to universities. There were a few key areas identified for improving program outcomes, strengthening program impact, and enhancing data security:

- ❒ **Refine the FreeApp request form.** The existing webform collects minimal information, which does not offer a full representation of underrepresented populations in graduate school. The questions will be updated and expanded to ensure the FreeApp Coordinators have comprehensive data to assist in identifying underrepresented populations to receive application fee waivers.

- ❒ **Invest in a new FreeApp request form.** In its current state, the web form is outdated and based on antiquated technology. While it records the minimum information from applicants, it uses a programming language that is no longer in use due to limited features and some security "holes" that are well publicized and cannot be eliminated.

- ❒ **Enhance the request data dissemination process.** FreeApp Coordinators have expressed an appreciation for the current process used to share waiver request data. However, updating this manual process to an automated process will improve consistency and reliability with little change to the workflow at the campus-level.

Program Overview

History of FreeApp

In 1996, the FreeApp program was launched by the Big Ten Academic Alliance (Alliance) Graduate Deans and their Panel on Increased Access for Minorities to Graduate Study (ACCESS Panel). It enabled prospective minority students to request application material and an application fee waiver for Ph.D. or Master of Fine Arts graduate programs at up to three Big Ten Academic Alliance universities.

At the onset of the program, FreeApp was centrally administered by the Alliance. The Champaign office was responsible for disseminating the FreeApp request form to prospective applicants. Requests were collected through a paper form that was mailed or faxed to the Alliance headquarters in Champaign. Then the completed request forms were shared with the CIC[1] Predoctoral Clearinghouse hosted at Indiana University. This office processed the requests and distributed the data to the ACCESS Panel members who collectively approved fee waivers.

In 2003, the Alliance sourced a custom-built webform to collect FreeApp waiver requests. Over time, the approvals for fee waivers shifted to decisions being made by the universities based on their own institution's criteria. The FreeApp program continues to use the webform that was developed in 2003 to process the waiver requests, and there have been minimal updates to the form since this time.

FreeApp quickly showed its value by adding to the national visibility of Alliance graduate programs and creating interest among potential graduate students from underrepresented minority backgrounds. FreeApp continues to serve as a gateway to graduate education, and to-date, the FreeApp program has received over 97,000 requests. At the time of this evaluation, all fourteen Alliance member universities and the University of Chicago participate in the FreeApp program.

Program Goals

The aims of the FreeApp Program are two-fold:
1. increase access to graduate education for students who possess qualities and experiences that enhance the diversity of the intellectual, cultural, and social environments at member universities; and
2. help reduce the financial barriers often associated with applying to graduate school.

Target Population

FreeApp is open to all qualified candidates and waivers are granted according to local campus priorities and policies. Those who have been traditionally underrepresented in graduate education, including racial and ethnic minorities, women in STEM, first-generation college students, and individuals who have faced adversity, such as societal, economic or academic disadvantages, are strongly encouraged to submit a waiver request.

To be eligible to submit a FreeApp waiver request, prospective applicants must meet the following criteria:
- Have completed a bachelor's degree by the August preceding enrollment in the graduate program
- Apply for admission to a Ph.D. program or Master of Fine Arts program
- Be a citizen or a permanent resident of the U.S.
- Have a cumulative undergraduate GPA of 3.0 or higher (4.0 scale)
- Intend to pursue an academic and/or research career

FreeApp is one of many pipeline programs within the Alliance, and it serves as a recruitment tool by providing participating universities with a diverse pool of prospective applicants. SROP alumni represent a high priority group for approval as SROP goals align with that of the FreeApp Program. FreeApp can be used to strengthen the transition from SROP participation to graduate enrollment. FreeApp also targets students who attend

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[1] The Big Ten Academic Alliance was known as the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) until 2016.

Alliance collaborative recruitment events such as campus visits and Alliance booth blocks at national conference recruitment fairs.

Program Structure and Process

The Alliance maintains the website and request form, troubleshoots questions from prospective applicants, manages the waiver request data, distributes waiver request data to the FreeApp Coordinators, and provides general administrative support.

Access to the FreeApp request form data is managed by Alliance staff in conversation with FreeApp Coordinators. Request data is manually exported out of the custom webform system and imported to the FreeApp Coordinators' shared collaborative space. FreeApp Coordinators export the shared request data to vet prospects according to their individual university's eligibility criteria.

FreeApp Coordinators at participating university agree to:
1. Download the prospect request data from the Alliance for students who select their university.
2. Contact approved prospects within 10 business days with instructions for applying with fee waiver.
3. Contact prospects who are denied a fee waiver with instructions for applying.
4. Execute required processing to secure fee waiver according to local rules.
6. Notify Alliance headquarters of updates to campus Coordinator contact information.

Alliance headquarter staff are responsible for the following:
1. Maintain the web-based program interface, including program information page and prospect registration site.
2. Provide marketing materials, including an electronic flyer that member universities can incorporate in their outreach activities.
3. Distribute FreeApp prospect data to FreeApp Coordinators. Each Monday, a list of new requests is posted to the shared collaborative site. A notice is sent to the email listserv when the new list is available. During seasons with a high volume of requests, data distribution also occurs on each Wednesday.
5. Maintain the shared collaborative site and listserv tools, including security accounts for managing access.

Request Form

The original application developed for FreeApp in 2003 is the same basic app used today. While it records the minimum information from applicants, it uses a programming language that is no longer in use due to limited features and some security "holes" that are well publicized and cannot be eliminated. The database that stores the information is based on 2003 technology, limiting what can be done with the data. Even minor changes to the web forms of FreeApp are difficult and often risk a "break" in the database structure. This has limited the updates that can be made. A modern programming language and database would allow for a much better experience for students using the application and for staff to gather and analyze the data recorded. They also offer improved security of student data. One recommendation of this evaluation is that the webform application be replaced.

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation process for FreeApp began in spring 2021. The program evaluation was coordinated by Sharon Lee, Project Coordinator and Charity Farber, Associate Director. The key program constituents include the FreeApp Coordinators. Methods used to gather feedback for the evaluation included stakeholder surveys and a focus group call.

A focus group call was conducted with the FreeApp Coordinators during the spring of 2021. This call sought answers to the following questions:

1. What works well in the FreeApp process? Please share your process.
2. What recruitment processes do you use the request data for?
3. Do you have any requirements in addition to the minimum eligibility criteria?
4. Do you have a set cycle or priority deadlines?
5. Is there any expiration date for granted waiver requests?

The FreeApp Coordinators also completed a survey that asked the following questions:

1. Please rate your level of satisfaction with the following:
   FreeApp form
   Process for sharing waiver request data
2. Are there any data fields on the Excel spreadsheet that you do not use at all? If yes, please list these data fields.
3. Are there any questions and/or response fields you would update on the FreeApp form? If so, please list these.
4. Are there any questions you would add the FreeApp form? If so, please list these.
5. Does your university have a supplemental form that must be completed to award a fee waiver? If yes, what is the purpose of the supplemental form?
6. Are there any populations or groups that automatically receive a fee waiver (e.g., SROP alumni, recruitment fair attendees)? If yes, please share these groups.
7. Does your university have any additional requirements for an applicant to receive a fee waiver? If yes, please share the requirements.
8. Does your university have a limit on the number of waivers awarded? If yes, please specify.
9. How is the fee waiver funded at your university?
10. Please share the value the FreeApp program brings to your university.
11. Please share your recommendations to improve the FreeApp program.

Responses to the focus group call and surveys with the FreeApp Coordinators are reflected in the recommendations contained in this document.

Data Analysis and Summaries

FreeApp Coordinators Perspective
The FreeApp Coordinators were asked to complete a survey to assess the utility of the request form and process for sharing the request data along with suggestions for improvements. Fourteen of the 15 universities participated in either the survey or focus group interview. A copy survey is found in Appendix A. The following is a summary of the responses.

Overall, there is a high satisfaction with the using the simple webform to collect requests from prospective applicants. Seventy-five percent (75%) of FreeApp Coordinator respondents expressed that they are either very satisfied or satisfied with the FreeApp waiver request form. Twenty-five percent (25%) respondents indicated that they have a neutral satisfaction level with the form. There is higher satisfaction with the way the data is disseminated to universities, with 85% of respondents being either very satisfied or satisfied with the process. Fifteen percent (15%) of respondents are neutral with respect to the process.

Some Coordinators raised concerns with the questions on the existing request form. Respondents noted that the intent of this program is to provide financial support to underrepresented prospective applicants, but the current request form does not ask for broad dimensions of identity that would aid universities in providing assistance to other historically underrepresented populations such as first-generation, women in STEM, etc. The inclusion of other identity groups would facilitate the goals of providing waivers to a broader range of graduate student populations. This can assist our universities in tracking these identity groups and assessing the effectiveness of their diversity recruitment efforts.
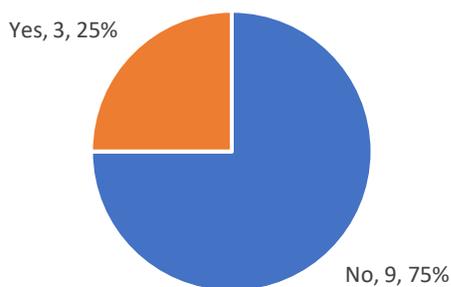
The FreeApp Coordinators provided recommendation on how the request form could be enhanced**:**
- Add additional demographic questions (e.g., first-generation student, veteran)
- Update and expand answer fields for question (e.g., race, gender)
- Provide an opt-in clause to join university email recruitment listservs
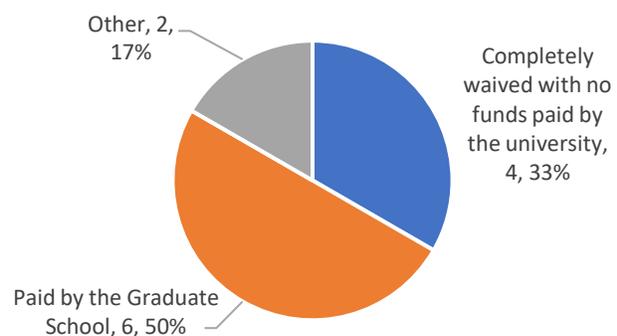
The following groups were identified as receiving priority for waivers:
- SROP alumni
- Recruitment fair/professional development attendees
- McNair Scholar, GEM, and AmeriCorp participants
- Pell recipients

Limits on Awarded Waivers

Yes, 3, 25%
No, 9, 75%

Fee Waiver Funding

Other, 2, 17%
Completely waived with no funds paid by the university, 4, 33%
Paid by the Graduate School, 6, 50%

When asked to share the value the FreeApp programs brings to their university, responses varied across the universities. There is some overlap, including:

- Increase diversity
- Helps identify prospective applicants from underrepresented groups
- Recruitment opportunities

Below are a sample of comments from the FreeApp Coordinators about the value the program brings to their university:

"I think the program brings a lot of value to our university. We have 1250 BTAA FreeApp requests for the current year. That is a lot of potential applicants that might not have been able to pay for an application without this program."

"The program helps us identify prospective students, in general and from underrepresented and marginalized groups, who may be interested in one of our graduate programs."

"We see it as a way to facilitate underrepresented populations being able to apply to our programs, by eliminating the cost barrier. Additionally, we market our programs to the list we receive."

"It's a great fee waiver program!"

"It allows applicants a fee waiver and the opportunity to apply when otherwise they might not."

Summary

All evaluation data indicate that FreeApp program is a valuable collaborative effort. The program helps identify prospective applicants from underrepresented groups, increase diversity, and provides recruitment opportunities. The goals of the program remain the same and the overall structure of the program is appropriate. Valuable insight has been gained on how to enhance the FreeApp waiver request form; specifically, focusing on updating the software program. There is a need to update and expand the questions on the form to be more inclusive.

Recommendations

This evaluation resulted in the following recommendations to enhance the quality of the program:

❐ Update the FreeApp request form with appropriate and relevant questions and response fields that will help FreeApp Coordinators identify eligible prospects.

❐ Transfer the FreeApp request form to more easily supportable technology. The current webform does not allow for updates to be made.

❐ Continue sharing the request data in the current excel document export format. However, the program should look to enhance the current support process with available automation technology.

FreeApp Program Evaluation Survey

Thank you for taking the time to fill out the survey. Before starting the survey, please <u>CLICK HERE</u> to access helpful references including a copy of the current FreeApp Waiver Request Form.

* 1. Name:

* 2. University:

* 3. Please rate your level of satisfaction with the following:

	Very Unsatisfied	Unsatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
BTAA FreeApp form	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Process for sharing waiver request data	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

* 4. Are there any data fields on the Excel spreadsheet that you do not use at all?

◯ Yes

◯ No

If yes, please list these data fields.

5. Are there any questions and/or response fields you would update on the BTAA FreeApp form? If so, please list these.

6. Are there any questions you would add the BTAA FreeApp form? If so, please list these.

[ ]

* 7. Does your university have a supplemental form that must be completed to award a fee waiver?

( ) Yes

( ) No

If yes, what is the purpose of the supplemental form?

[ ]

* 8. Are there any populations or groups that automatically receive a fee waiver (e.g., SROP alumni, recruitment fair attendees)?

( ) Yes

( ) No

If yes, please share these groups.

[ ]

* 9. Does your university have any additional requirements for an applicant to receive a fee waiver?

( ) Yes

( ) No

If yes, please share the requirements.

[ ]

* 10. Does your university have a limit on the number of waivers awarded?

( ) Yes

( ) No

If yes, please specify.

[ ]

* 11. How is the fee waiver funded at your university?

( ) Paid by the Graduate School

( ) Completely waived with no funds paid by the university

( ) Other (please specify)

[ ]

12. Please share the value the FreeApp program brings to your university.

13. Please share your recommendations to improve the FreeApp program.

FreeApp Program Evaluation Survey

Thank you!

Thank you for completing the survey. Please direct any additional comments to Sharon Lee, sharon.lee@btaa.org.