

Sponsor for Education Opportunity

TRAINING & TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Sponsor for Education Opportunity's (SEO) eight-year academic program educates and mentors underserved public high school students to and through college. The organization delivers programs across the globe through its affiliates and SEO's New York team serves more than 2,000 students each year.



Sarah Ross

College Persistence Manager,
New York City

SEO expanded its programming in 2021 and with this growth came a new cohort of persistence counselors, primarily social workers with minimal background in financial aid. As college persistence manager, Sarah Ross is responsible for getting new staff up to speed on the financial aid process.

“The process is designed for middle-class families with two parents at home,” says Sarah. “Many of our student families don’t fit that mold, requiring us to have a deeper understanding of the process.” Sarah sought out uAspire to hold several trainings with her staff.

Advocating for Students

"I have learned that knowledge is truly power," says Sarah. "If we are going to advocate for our students with financial aid administrators, we need to understand the process and its nuances so that we can speak the language and negotiate the best outcomes for our students." The uAspire training provided this knowledge, delivering concise information about the process and addressing how to guide families through special circumstances.

The training also introduced Sarah's team to uAspire's Partner Portal, a rich online database of information to support advisors on the frontline. "The Portal has been such an incredible resource," says Sarah, "especially as we often encounter unusual situations, like a dependency override because the mom is living in another country."

"We can just pose a question on the Portal and get an answer from a uAspire expert in 24 to 48 business hours."

Building Trust

Sarah also believes that the knowledge she and others obtained in the trainings has helped build trust with SEO's students. "When a student sees you get on the phone with a financial aid administrator and successfully advocate on their behalf, it means a lot," says Sarah.

"Our students, like most students, don't know how to interpret the financial aid forms or how to speak the language. They have to have confidence in us."

"We want them to trust us, because for many students, these negotiations around financial aid will determine whether or not they stay in school," says Sarah.

Deepening Expertise

Because the training was engaging, informative, and fun, Sarah knows that her team learned a lot.

"The trainer went through various scenarios so that our team could understand how to address unique family circumstances."

“The quizzes were great, ensuring that staff really understood the material and prompting questions if they didn’t. And, they introduced a number of tools, including the Portal, FormSwift, and instructional videos, that we all continue to use,” says Sarah.

“The information was presented in a seamless way; it was fluid and easy to follow. I have attended many financial aid trainings, and I can tell you that this is not often the case.”

Getting it Right

Sarah believes that uAspire’s training is having a significant impact on persistence by helping counselors eliminate issues in the early stages of the process that could compromise students’ financial aid.

“It is much easier to get things right on the front end than to fix them on the back end,” says Sarah. “For example, we have a lot of parents who file as head of household when they are married, which is not right. If we don’t catch this early, then the student’s application is selected for verification and the process is a lot more complicated.”

Since the training, Sarah has noted a significant reduction in the number of financial aid questions that she gets from her team due to their increased understanding of the process and ongoing use of uAspire’s tools.

“uAspire is truly the gold standard of financial aid education and has been a tremendous resource for me and my team.”

Ready for a student-centered approach to financial aid training for your team?
Contact Michelle Murphy at michellem@uaspire.org