

Lessons on Recovery: The Value and Potential of Higher Education in Response to the COVID-19 Crisis

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Introduction

Spring 2020 marked the onset of one of the most tumultuous eras in recent memory. The rapid spread of COVID-19 wreaked havoc on communities across the globe, and in the U.S., the epicenter of the outbreak was right here in Washington State. Beyond the immediate concerns around personal health and safety, COVID-19 produced a host of other issues that caused significant disruption in all areas of life. States shut down their economies to curb the spread of the disease, booting millions of Americans from the labor force and onto unemployment insurance. This abrupt and comprehensive shutdown differed from any event in recent history, leaving many unknowns as we look towards recovery.

The immense chaos caused by the COVID-19 crisis has been compounded by other issues in the U.S., leading to a renewed social justice movement. The disproportionate health and economic impacts of the pandemic on people of color have intensified existing inequities, shedding light on racial and social justice issues that have persisted over time. On college campuses, students of color have experienced twofold adversity. They are grappling with the uneven burden of the pandemic alongside ongoing inequities in higher education, a system closely tied to economic and individual wellbeing. Barriers to access and timely completion, along with underrepresentation in high-demand fields of study and high-paying degree programs, have long impacted communities of color, limiting opportunities for advancement and economic mobility. Addressing inequities in higher education is not only a social justice imperative but also a prerequisite for sustaining our labor market.

The labor market is dependent upon people with skills and knowledge that are applicable in today's economy. Higher education systems equip individuals with the tools they need to succeed in the labor market with higher-paying jobs that lead to improved living standards and more secure and fulfilling lives. Those with higher education are rewarded with more than increased earnings and employment opportunities. They also experience better health for themselves and their families, higher civic engagement levels, and more trust in others (Schleicher, 2014). Particularly during times of crisis, these benefits improve individual wellbeing. They also contribute to our ability to heal and recover as a society. Without a sufficiently skilled adult population, it will be challenging to pursue innovative strategies and technologies to grow our collective potential for recovery and prosperity. Emphasizing the labor market relevance of postsecondary education is fundamental to our economic recovery, alongside boosting higher education access for disadvantaged populations. Postsecondary programs that respond to new demands and prepare graduates with the skills to take advantage of emerging opportunities will be essential to our recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

The current moment presents an opportune time for higher education to lead the way—not only in aiding our economic recovery, but also fulfilling its promise as the “great equalizer” by opening opportunities for all people in Washington to have brighter futures. The preservation of an equitable, inclusive, and effective higher education system, particularly as we endure the COVID-19 crisis and recovery period, is paramount to our society's wellbeing and resilience.

How well we respond to this crisis hinges on our ability to anticipate the impact, mitigate the negative consequences, and bolster areas that will aid in recovery. One way to do that is to learn from history. Using a prior significant economic downturn, the Great Recession, as an example, we will examine the effects of the great recession on higher education and the labor market, drawing lessons about resilience and recovery. We will use that insight and observations of what we already know about the COVID-19 crisis to develop Washington State's response to the COVID-19 crisis proactively.

This report will begin by examining the effects of the 2008 Great Recession on higher education and the labor market and the ensuing economic recovery. We will then present observations from the growing body of evidence around student and workers' experiences during the current crisis, highlighting COVID-

19's disproportionate impact on marginalized populations. Finally, we will discuss priority areas for addressing educational inequities and economic challenges exacerbated by the pandemic. Ultimately, we hope this report serves as a guide to policymakers and leaders in higher education in determining strategic priorities and paths towards recovery during these unprecedented times.

What We Know About the Great Recession

Starting early in December 2007 and lasting through June 2009, the Great Recession was the most prolonged recession since World War II, with effects felt well beyond its official end (NBER, 2010). The financial crisis was caused by an array of factors, including subprime mortgage lending and a lack of regulatory oversight for banks. The impact on individuals and families was severe as the unemployment rate soared and housing prices plummeted. New realities in the labor market drove major transformation in higher education, affecting students and campuses for years.

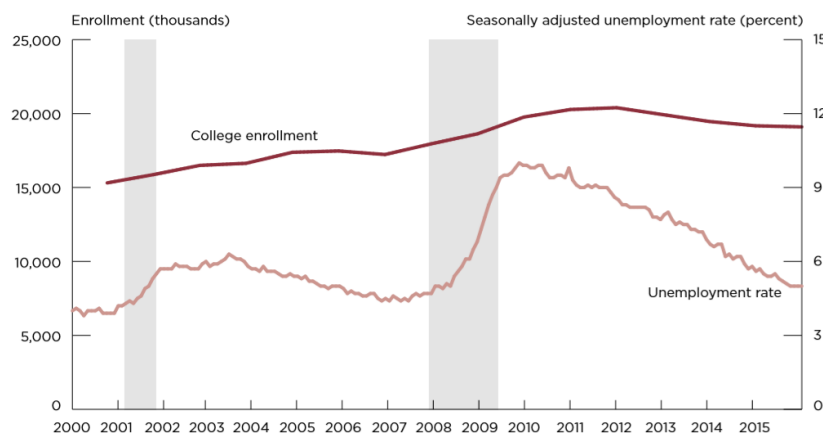
Understanding How the Great Recession Impacted Higher Education

The 2008 Great Recession had a profound impact on higher education. As economic conditions worsened and job opportunities waned following the stock market crash, newly unemployed workers looked to the classroom to upskill and re-skill, hoping to improve their employment prospects in the labor market. Examining postsecondary enrollment trends during the Great Recession paints a clear picture of the inextricable link between higher education and the labor market, as well as the ideal conditions for recovery.

Higher Education Enrollment Increased Substantially During the Great Recession

The conventional theory around higher education is that poor economic conditions bring about surges in enrollment. Indeed, overall postsecondary enrollment in the U.S. increased from 17.2 million students in 2006 to 20.4 million in 2011 in the wake of the Great Recession and the resulting rise in unemployment (Figure 1) (Schmidt, 2018).

Figure 1. College Enrollment and Unemployment Rate in the U.S.



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October 2000–2015; Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, Seasonally Adjusted Unemployment Rate, January 2000–December 2015; and National Bureau of Economic Research, U.S. Business Cycle Expansions and Contractions.

Note: Shaded area represents recession, as determined by the National Bureau of Economic Research

Students who were not enrolled in school the previous year made up a substantial portion of the enrollment growth during the recession, suggesting that individuals sought educational opportunities in place of work when the economy was suffering. A bulk of the enrollment growth surrounding the Great Recession took place at 2-year institutions that tend to offer shorter-term, less expensive programs (Figure 2) (Schmidt, 2018). These programs are also generally open access, providing a path to new employment opportunities or a launching point for transfer to 4-year programs, both of which can improve people’s prospects for the new economy.

Figure 2. Undergraduate Enrollment in 2-Year and 4-Year Colleges in the U.S.

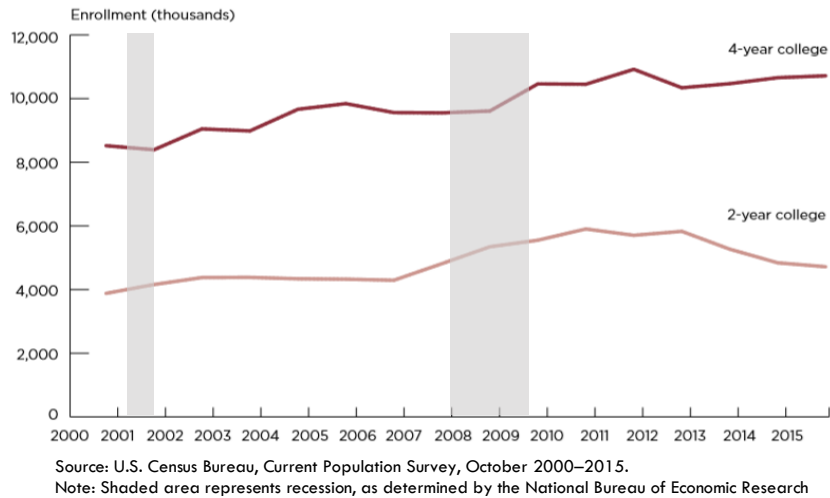
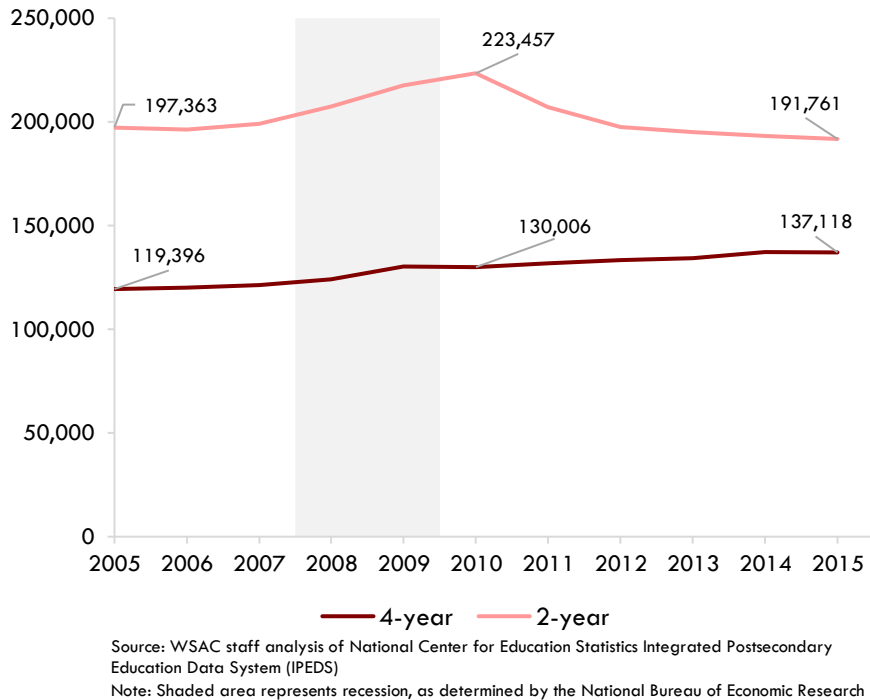


Figure 3. 2-Year and 4-Year College Enrollment in Washington



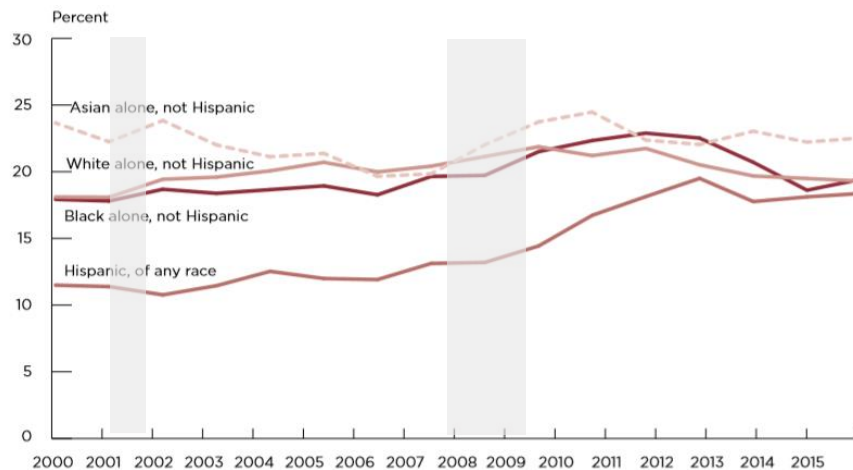
Historically, Washington has had a more significant number of students enrolled in 2-year institutions than 4-year institutions (Figure 3). But the enrollment trends during the Great Recession mirrored what happened across the country. An increase in postsecondary enrollment was driven primarily by the growth of 2-year programs, which reached peak enrollment around 2010.

Postsecondary enrollment growth during the Great Recession was widespread but had a particularly notable impact on the proportion of minority youth enrollment in college. The information presented in Box 1 captures this trend in more detail.

Box 1. Enrollment Growth During the Great Recession Differed by Race/Ethnicity

The Great Recession accelerated enrollment growth among minority youth (Figure 4). The Hispanic population enrolled in postsecondary education rose dramatically during and immediately following the Great Recession. In 2006, the proportion of the Hispanic population aged 15 to 34 enrolled in college lagged behind their white peers by eight percentage points. By 2015, that gap had effectively disappeared. Likewise, the percentage of the Black population aged 15 to 34 enrolled in postsecondary education grew markedly during the recession years before ultimately reaching parity with white students. In 2015, the percentages of Hispanic, Black, and white young people enrolled in college were more or less comparable (Schmidt, 2018). However, the gains made in postsecondary enrollment during the high-unemployment years of the Great Recession were not sustained among all groups. The proportion of Black young people enrolled in college declined more rapidly in the post-recession years than for other groups. These patterns suggest that college enrollment patterns among racial minorities, and particularly college-aged Black people, may be more susceptible to fluctuations in the labor market.

Figure 4. Percentage of People Ages 15 to 34 Enrolled in College by Race/Ethnicity in the U.S.



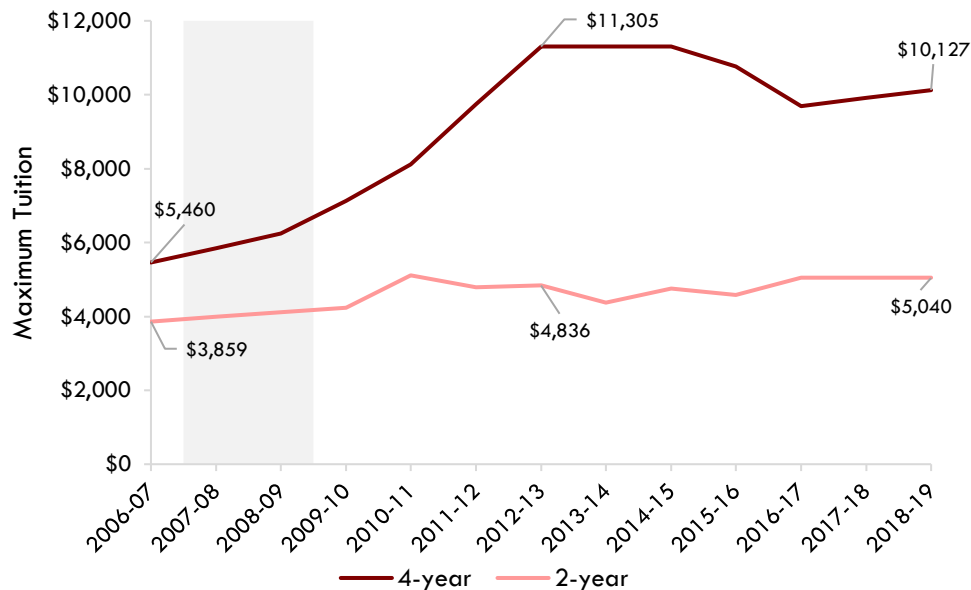
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October 2000–2015. Note: Denominators for percentage enrolled in undergraduate college do not include age group members enrolled below the college level.
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Tuition Prices Rose Dramatically in the Wake of the Great Recession

In the years following the Great Recession, the cost for students to attend higher education grew immensely. As states reckoned with budget shortfalls, spending on higher education was slashed, causing widespread tuition hikes. Nationally, average tuition prices saw an increase of 27 percent for public 4-year institutions and 24 percent for public 2-year institutions (Long, 2013). Affordability remains a staunch barrier to postsecondary access and success for students across the country, as funding plays a major role in quality of instruction and completion outcomes.

In Washington, tuition rates at public institutions grew substantially from 2009 to 2013—increasing by up to 85 percent at 4-year institutions and 50 percent at community and technical colleges (Figure 5) (WSAC, 2019). During the same period, the state’s median household income remained lower than pre-recession levels (OFM, 2020). This reality meant that the cost to attend college was a huge burden for many students and families, especially those on the lower end of the income distribution.

Figure 5. Maximum Undergraduate Tuition Rates at Public Institutions for Washington Residents



Source: WSAC staff analysis of National Center for Education Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)
 Note: Shaded area represents recession, as determined by the National Bureau of Economic Research

Fortunately, financial aid options help students who might not otherwise be able to afford higher education. In Washington, in the years following the Great Recession, the number of students eligible for state aid grew dramatically. This growth in needing support is likely due to the increase in tuition prices, and a dip in median income¹. In 2010, the number of students eligible for state financial aid increased by 17 percent, and that number grew by another 17 percent in 2011².

The growing need for financial aid was met with an increase in expenditures. In 2012, Washington State increased financial aid expenditures by 34 percent (WSAC, 2020). At the federal level, Pell Grant expenditures doubled from \$15.9 billion to \$31.5 billion³ (Long, 2013). Despite a historic investment, financial aid alone was not sufficient for many students to pay their way through college.

¹ Washington's Median Household Income was \$57,858 in 2008 and dipped to \$55,458 in 2009. Median Household Income remained below pre-recession levels until 2014 when it reached \$60,153 (OFM, 2020)

² WSAC staff analysis of Unit Record Report

³ Between 2008 and 2010

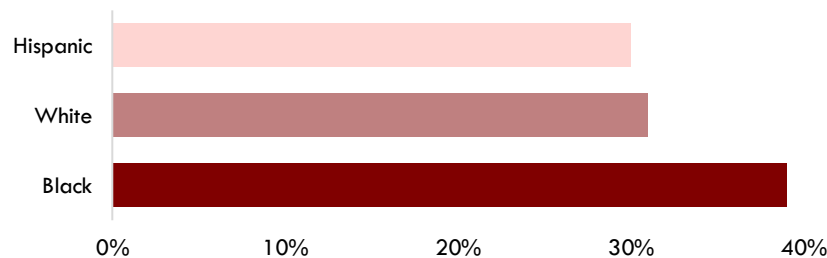
Policies in the early 2000s made loans more accessible to students through the direct loan program, lowered fees, and elevated borrowing limits (Chan et al., 2020). While this meant that more students now had access to postsecondary opportunities, the amount of student debt grew wildly, now exceeding \$1.6 trillion (*Federal Reserve, 2020*). Unsurprisingly, lower-income students are more likely to borrow money to finance their education than their higher-income peers and are then stuck with a higher debt burden later in life (Chan et al., 2020). Student loan debt also varies by students' race, as presented in Box 2.

In Washington, the proportion of postsecondary students receiving federal student loans grew by six percentage points between 2008 and 2011 (from 26 percent to 32 percent), with the average amount hovering around \$7,000 per academic year. After the recession, that number declined. By 2018, around one in four students in Washington received federal student loans, substantially lower than the national rate of 34 percent⁴.

Box 2. Student Loan Debt Varies by Race/Ethnicity

Student borrowing has been an increasingly common reality for all students since the Great Recession, but debt burdens vary by race and ethnicity. According to data from the 2014 Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking, 39 percent of Black Americans ages 25 to 55 have education debt, either for themselves or their dependents, compared to 31 percent of white Americans and 30 percent of Hispanic Americans in the same age group. Additionally, Black Americans have a higher average debt amount (\$43,725) than other racial groups (Braga, 2016). Inequities in student debt contribute to the large income and wealth disparities by race and ethnicity in the U.S.

25-55 Year Olds With Student Debt in the U.S. by Race



Source: Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking (Braga, 2016)

It is reasonable to suggest that the availability of financial aid, both federally and at the state level, mitigated some of the negative impacts of increased tuition costs for students and families around the Great Recession. However, affordability has remained a major issue in higher education. The proportion of students who rely at least in part on loans to finance their education has grown in the last decade. Students have reacted to affordability concerns not by forgoing college altogether but by taking on more debt. Ultimately, this has led to an array of consequences for young people in particular, including lowered rates of homeownership and decreased capacity to accumulate wealth (Bleemer et al., 2017).

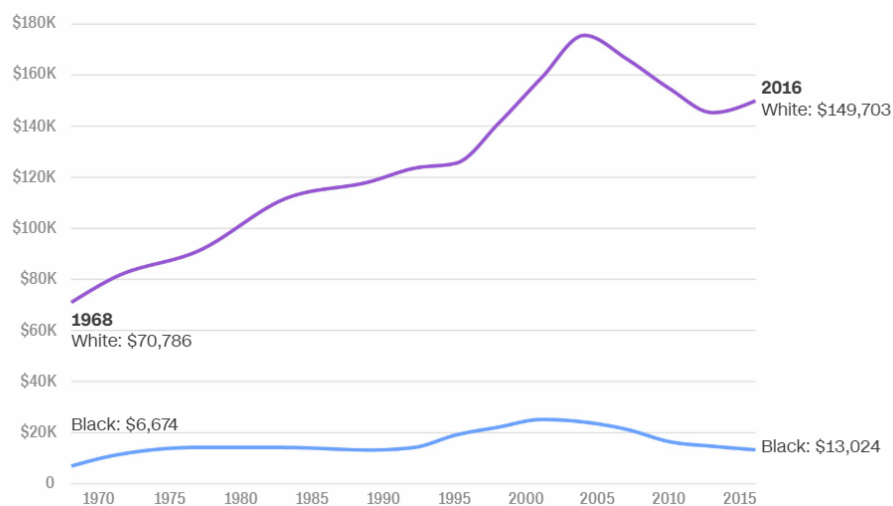
⁴ WSAC staff analysis of NCES IPEDS

Student debt burdens have also added to the immense racial wealth gap between Black and white families in the United States. Further elaboration is presented in Box 3.

Box 3. The Wealth Gap Between Black and White Families has Persisted Over Time

There is an inextricable link between debt and wealth. Those with less wealth are more likely to acquire more debt, and those with more debt are less likely to accumulate wealth. In 2016, a typical Black household had a net worth less than one-tenth of a typical white household in the United States. The same was true in 1968 (see Figure 6) (Luhby, 2020). As Black families have had consistently lower wealth than white families, they have had to borrow more, including student loans for higher education. The wealth inequities mean that Black people are unable to accumulate wealth and narrow the racial wealth gap. The persistent racial wealth gap contributes to and is made worse by inequities in educational attainment. Addressing these parallel inequities is foundational to addressing racial injustices in our society.

Figure 6. Net Worth of Typical Black and White Families in the U.S.



Source: University of Bonn Professor Moritz Kuhn's analysis of Federal Reserve Survey of Consumer Finances
Graphic: Christopher Hickey, CNN

Post-Recession Higher Education Landscape

As the unemployment rate fell in the years following the recession, college enrollment leveled off and eventually declined (Figure 1). Volatility around enrollment was particularly pronounced at 2-year institutions, which made up a bulk of the recession enrollment growth and the majority of the post-recession decline (Figure 2) (Schmidt, 2018). Many of the students who enrolled in postsecondary programs in reaction to the economic downturn, particularly at 2-year institutions, were able to re-enter the workforce as the economy recovered. In Washington, enrollment continued to grow for 4-year institutions after the Great Recession but decreased markedly at 2-year institutions (Figure 3). Considering that a large portion of attendees at 2-year institutions are low-income students, students of color, and adult students, the decline in enrollment was particularly prominent for these student groups.

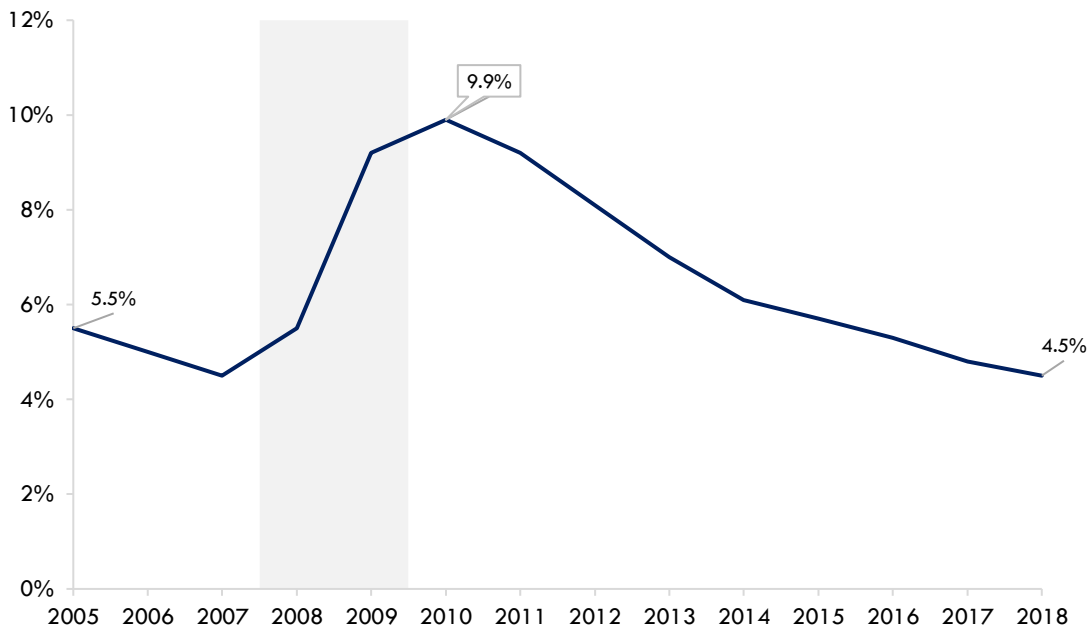
Understanding How the Great Recession Impacted the Labor Market

The financial crisis in 2008 caused immense hardship for families across the country. Many lost their jobs and sense of financial security. At the same time, the labor market was in a period of flux. A shifting world economy and the development of technology and automation meant that there was less demand for low-skilled workers, and more for jobs that required a higher level of education. The tie between higher education and the labor market was cinched tighter, signifying that the future of work would unquestionably depend on a more educated workforce.

Unemployment in Washington State Doubled

The Great Recession took a significant toll on the labor market in Washington. In 2010, the state's unemployment rate reached ten percent, more than double the pre-recession rate of 4.5 percent in 2007 (Figure 7). As was true across the country, the Great Recession had a significant impact on families across the state as they struggled to make ends meet in the face of adversity.

Figure 7. Unemployment Rate in Washington (Seasonally Adjusted)

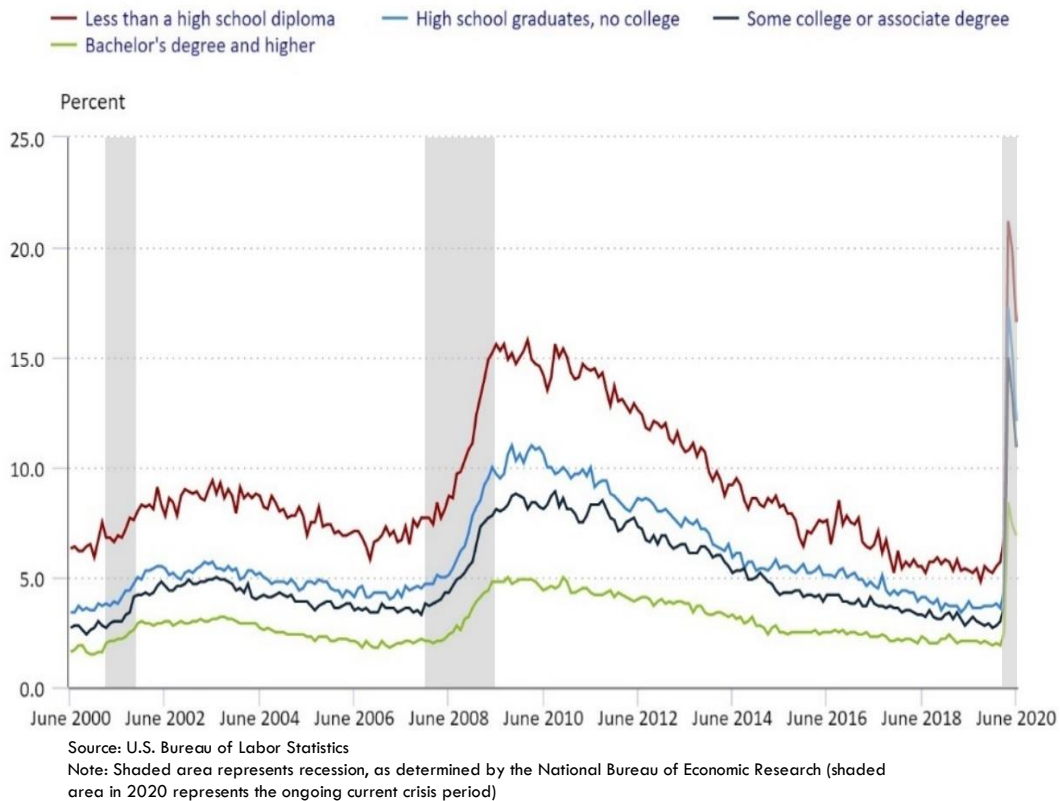


Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
Note: Shaded area represents recession, as determined by the National Bureau of Economic Research

Unemployment Rates Increased Disproportionately for Some

The Great Recession spurred a substantial increase in the unemployment rate, but the effects were not felt uniformly by all workers. During the height of the recession, the national unemployment rate for workers with only a high school diploma reached 10 percent, more than double the rate of unemployment for those with at least a bachelor's degree, 4.8 percent⁵. Workers with an associate degree or some college had an unemployment rate of eight percent (Figure 8) (BLS, 2020). Postsecondary education provides a critical benefit for individuals during recessions. Individuals with more education tend to have lower rates of unemployment, and therefore more financial stability than those with only a high school diploma.

Figure 8. U.S. Unemployment Rates by Education Level for Workers Over 25 Years Old (Seasonally Adjusted)



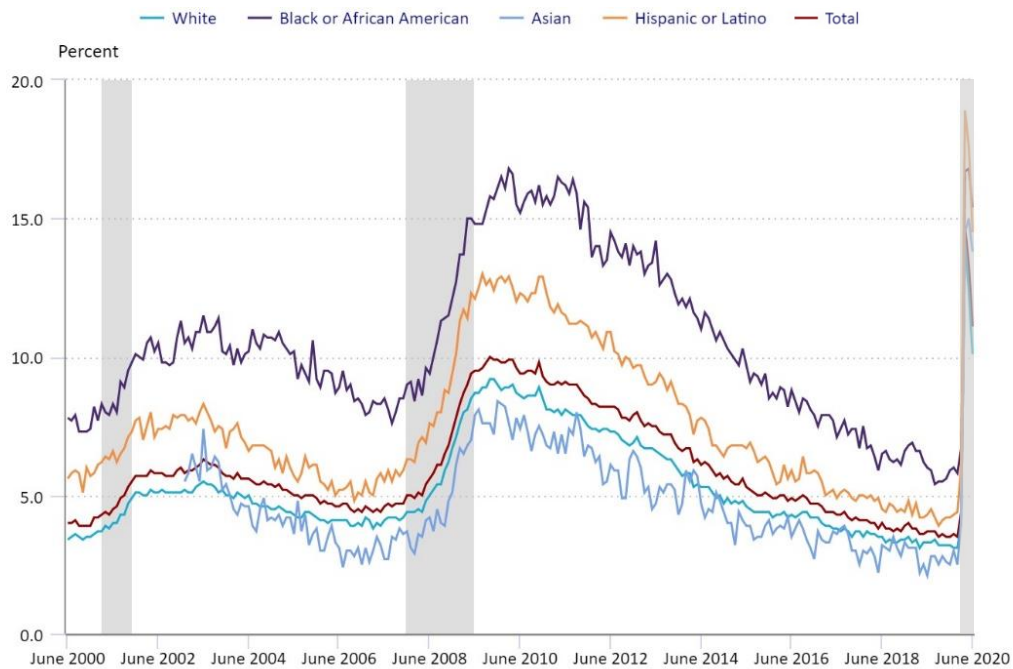
Sorting unemployment rates by race reveal that people of color also tend to experience higher unemployment levels, as seen in Box 4.

⁵ Unemployment rates for workers aged 25 and older in May 2009, seasonally adjusted (BLS, 2020)

Box 4. Racial Minorities Experienced Higher Levels of Unemployment During the Great Recession

While unemployment rose for all workers during the Great Recession, rates for Black and Hispanic Americans exceeded the rates for white and Asian Americans significantly (Figure 9). In May 2009, the national unemployment rate was 15 percent for Black Americans and 12.3 percent for Hispanic Americans, compared to 8.5 percent for white Americans and 7 percent for Asian Americans. Following the recession, unemployment fell for all racial groups, but the percentage of Black and Hispanic Americans unemployed has remained above the national average.

Figure 9. U.S. Unemployment Rate by Race/Ethnicity (Seasonally Adjusted)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Note: Shaded area represents recession, as determined by the National Bureau of Economic Research (shaded area in 2020 represents the ongoing current crisis period)

Post-Recession Labor Market Recovery Was Uneven

The economic recovery that followed the Great Recession did not favor all workers equally. Workers with only a high school education or less held an estimated four out of five jobs lost during the recession (Carnevale et al., 2014). In contrast, 2 million new jobs for college-educated workers were created in the years following the recession. Although they comprised only a third of the workforce, more than half of the jobs created during the recovery from the recession went to those with at least a bachelor's degree (Carnevale et al., 2014). Not only is having a postsecondary credential a protective factor against losing one's job during a recession, but the bulk of new jobs created during the recovery, especially high-paying ones, have required higher education. A robust supply of college-educated workers is crucial to economic recovery. Post-recession, we should continue to highlight the long-term returns of relevant postsecondary credentials so that individuals are well informed when they assess the costs and benefits of enrollment.

How COVID-19 Differs from the Great Recession

The Great Recession provides a recent precedent to gain insight around higher education and the labor market during times of crisis. Both the Great Recession and the current COVID-19 crisis have had profound socioeconomic effects and prompted significant federal government intervention to aid states, businesses, and individuals as they face challenging circumstances. However, some fundamental differences are worth mentioning. The Great Recession was caused by a financial crisis, whereas the current crisis stems from a pandemic that led to an intentional shutting down of economies to stop the spread of COVID-19. To that end, the impact on higher education and the labor market may diverge from trends observed in previous recessions.

Unlike the Great Recession, which only impacted the higher education sector financially, the COVID-19 crisis has significantly altered the operations of campuses across the country. In March, many colleges shifted all courses online—an unprecedented move in higher education. The continued spread of COVID-19 has led many institutions to alter their instructional delivery mode into the coming academic year, which may affect student enrollment. Fears around health and safety due to COVID-19 have the potential to alter student behavior, deterring them from returning to campus in the fall. This may result in a drop in retention and completion rates, particularly for students of color who come from communities that are facing disproportionate challenges due to pandemic.

The labor market consequences of the crises have appeared differently as well. While the number of employed Americans decreased steadily throughout the Great Recession between December 2007 and June 2009, the COVID-19 crisis elicited a sudden and monumental drop in employment. Between February and April, employment dropped by a substantial 15 percent, compared to five percent from peak to trough of the Great Recession (Figure 10) (BLS, 2020).

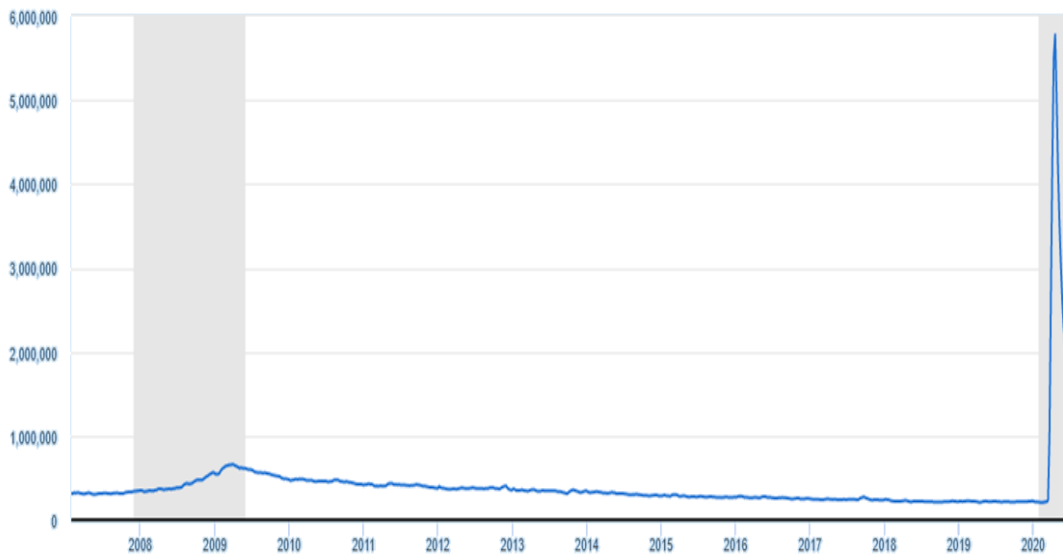
Figure 10. Employment in the United States (Seasonally Adjusted)



Changes in workers' hours have differed during the crises. For example, during the first three months of the Great Recession, average working hours fell by less than two percent. In the first three months of the COVID-19 crisis, average working hours fell by 15 percent (OECD, 2020). The significant change in working hours during the COVID-19 crisis may also be caused by health factors and economic ones, as people try to avoid exposure and infection.

One of the most striking labor market consequences of the COVID-19 crisis has been a massive spike in unemployment. The number of unemployment insurance claims filed during the COVID-19 crisis dwarfs the numbers in the previous downturn. At the height of the Great Recession, the number of unemployment claims filed nationally reached approximately 660,000 per week⁶. At the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, that number reached almost six million per week (Figure 11) (FRED, 2020). Similar to the profound dip in average working hours, the staggering trend in unemployment may be traced to compounding economic and health factors impacting many workers' jobs.

Figure 11. 4-Week Moving Average of Initial Unemployment Claims in the United States



Source: U.S. Employment and Training Administration

Note: Shaded area represents recession, as determined by the National Bureau of Economic Research (shaded area in 2020 represents the ongoing current crisis period)

While economic downturn and the accompanying consequences caused by COVID-19 may lead to a postsecondary enrollment surge, many campuses are concerned this won't be the case and are preparing for a hit to their class sizes in the fall. It remains unclear what will happen to jobs in industries that have been shut down temporarily, such as tourism and the service sector, as states shift their policies to respond to the pandemic. However, if history is any indication, those with higher educational attainment will fare better during this crisis and the recovery. As the situation around COVID-19 continues to develop, reducing barriers to access and completion in higher education is bound to play a pivotal role in our society's recovery.

What We Know about the COVID-19 Crisis

The COVID-19 crisis is still unfolding, and the total extent of the toll on American lives, livelihoods, and wellbeing is unknown. While comprehensive data on the impact of the crisis is limited, early indications from recent qualitative research and findings help paint a picture of the crisis to date, including the consequences for higher education and the labor market. Preliminary insight reveals immense challenges in the higher education sector, including impediments to affordability, enrollment, completion, and student supports. Nevertheless, thoughtful, proactive higher education policies and programs can counter these barriers and aid in the state's recovery.

⁶ 4-week moving average of initial unemployment claims (FRED, 2020).

How COVID-19 is Impacting Higher Education

On March 6, 2020, the University of Washington was the first major university in the U.S. to cease in-person classes and shift to an online format. Not long after, the escalation of the COVID-19 crisis forced college campuses across the country to follow suit. By the end of March, over 1,100 campuses had canceled all in-person activities, many of them for the remainder of the academic year (Smalley, 2020). While data around this unprecedented move is still evolving, qualitative evidence reveals many levels of challenges to institutions and students.

The Crisis is Impacting Students Academically

Preliminary data shows that there was not an unusually large number of students who changed their enrollment intensity⁷ in the spring of 2020 (*National Student Clearinghouse, 2020*). But the COVID-19 crisis has profoundly impacted students' academic behaviors and beliefs about their futures. Ninety percent of students surveyed in May 2020⁸ reported concern over shifting to online learning last spring. Another student survey revealed further insight into the consequences of the pandemic⁹. Over half of the students in the sample reported reducing their time spent studying since the onset of the pandemic. More than one in ten have already or expect to delay their graduation due to the ongoing crisis (Aucejo et al., 2020). This evidence suggests that the COVID-19 crisis may have long-term effects on student success, with a real risk of sliding persistence and graduation rates. These consequences may be particularly dire for underrepresented student populations, as seen in Box 5.

Box 5. COVID-19 Disrupted Academic Progress for Underrepresented Student Populations

COVID-19 has caused disruption for all students, but the severity of the disruption has varied across subgroups. In the spring of 2020, lower-income students and first-generation students, many of whom are students of color, were over 50 percent more likely to expect to have to delay their graduation as a result of COVID-19 than their more advantaged peers. Students of color were also 70 percent more likely to change majors due to the pandemic than their white peers (Aucejo et al., 2020). Although the survey did not inquire about intentions around changing majors, it is possible that the COVID-19 crisis is affecting students' decisions around programs—causing them to transfer to shorter-term programs or more labor market oriented ones. These trends suggest that the COVID-19 crisis has caused considerable disruption to students of color's academic plans.

Students of color are...

 **50% more likely** to delay graduation

 **70% more likely** to change majors

due to disruption caused by the COVID-19 crisis

Source: Aucejo et al., 2020

⁷ Including increasing/decreasing course load or withdrawing

⁸ Survey conducted by the California Student Aid Commission, the sample includes 76,000 students

⁹ Survey conducted at Arizona State University in April 2020, the sample includes 1,500 students

College Students are Struggling Financially During the COVID-19 Crisis

Survey responses from May 2020¹⁰ highlight the severity of the strain on students' financial situations during the COVID-19 crisis. More than 70 percent of students responded that they lost some or all of their sources of income due to COVID-19, and a third of respondents felt they needed to work more to make up for lost income for themselves and their families. Additionally, students reported increased concern over their ability to pay for tuition and living expenses (CSAC, 2020).

Students Have Lost Access to Supports They Need

The closure of college campuses in the spring meant that many students lost access to supports for their learning. From academic services to the social supports of classmates, advising, and basic living necessities, the disruption to students' learning and routines was all-encompassing. For example, the closure of dorms led to a lack of permanent housing. Those who relied on campus dining halls and other food access services like food pantries had to find other options. And the many students who depend on campus jobs for employment lost their sources of income.

Students rely on campus services for housing, food, and income, but the COVID-19 crisis upended many of those supports. A survey of students found that during the spring of 2020, almost three in five college students experienced some form of basic needs insecurity, including housing insecurity, food insecurity, or homelessness¹¹ (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). The sudden closure of campuses also posed additional financial challenges for students who needed to leave campus on short notice (Smalley, 2020). The academic, social, and financial supports students receive on their campus may make or break their ability to reach graduation, but the pandemic has compromised many resources.

Uncertainty Around Enrollment Looms

The COVID-19 crisis has caused chaos for pre-college students as well. In addition to closures of high schools across the country, spring ACT and SAT tests were postponed and later canceled altogether, and many AP exams were moved to an online format for students to take from home (ACT, 2020). As the end of the spring semester neared, colleges shifted discussions from the reactive emergency response in the spring to planning for the fall. As of July 2020, just 55 percent of campuses say they are planning for an in-person semester. Thirty percent of campuses intend to use a hybrid model, and ten percent say they will conduct courses entirely online. The remaining five percent have yet to announce their plans¹² (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2020).

As uncertainty around the 2020-21 school year grew, students and families reassessed their college plans, likely in response to changing financial circumstances, concern over health and safety, and campus plans for the fall. In Washington State, more than one in three parents with a child in high school reported that their postsecondary plans had changed since the onset of the pandemic. Of those students whose plans had changed, around two-thirds said they were choosing to defer or postpone, and over a quarter said they planned to switch to an option that was closer to home (CIVIS, 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis has posed heightened challenges for students of color in higher education, as discussed in Box 6. The disproportionately severe impact of the COVID-19 crisis on people of color—on both health outcomes and educational access—can significantly widen existing inequities in our society. Addressing existing and burgeoning inequities must play a central role in our strategy for recovery.

¹⁰ Survey conducted by the California Student Aid Commission

¹¹ Survey conducted by the Hope Foundation April 20-May 15, the sample includes 38,602 students

¹² Includes responses from 1,200 institutions reported to *The Chronicle of Higher Education* by July 17, 2020

Box 6. Increased Enrollment Barriers for Students of Color

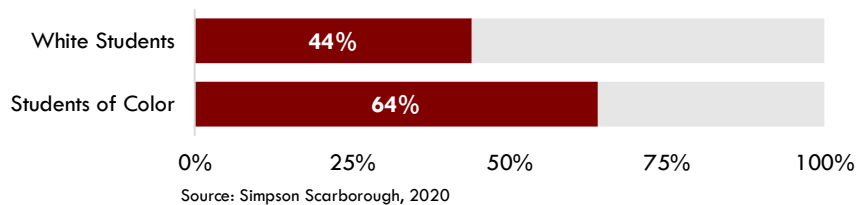
COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on how students of color and their families feel about their plans for the fall. Among high school seniors surveyed at the end of March, 41 percent of minority students said they would not go to college in the fall, or it was "too soon to say," compared to 24 percent of their white classmates¹³ (*Simpson Scarborough, 2020*).

Current college students' responses followed a similar trend. One in three minority college students said it was not likely that they would return to their college in the fall, or it was too soon to say, compared to approximately one in five of their white classmates (*Simpson Scarborough, 2020*). A vast 64 percent of college students of color say their plans were being affected by COVID-19, compared to 44 percent of white students.

Preliminary data on spring 2020 enrollment also revealed that Black and Hispanic students were six times more likely to take leaves of absence this spring compared to last year, rates that were much higher than the trend for students overall (*National Student Clearinghouse, 2020*).

These emerging patterns may stem from the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color. Federal data show that Black and Hispanic Americans have been three times as likely as white Americans to contract COVID-19, and twice as likely to die from it (Oppel et al., 2020). This alarming fact can exacerbate equity gaps in higher education access and attainment if mitigating policy and programs are not implemented.

College Plans Affected by COVID-19



Source: Simpson Scarborough, 2020

Enrollment Concerns are Evident in Washington State

Early indications from student perceptions, as discussed above, suggest that COVID-19 will have an impact on student enrollment, retention, and completion. As institutional data from the current crisis period becomes available, we will be able to see the full extent of COVID-19's impact on higher education in Washington. In the interim, examining data from Spring 2020 can help provide insight on the effects of the crisis. Recent analysis of student headcounts at public institutions in Washington during Spring 2020 reveals a marginal decrease in enrollment at 4-year institutions compared to the prior year, but there was a substantial dip in spring enrollment at 2-year institutions. Looking at the trend over time, spring enrollment at public 4-year institutions has been relatively stable. At public 2-year institutions, however, spring enrollment has decreased steadily over time, but the drop in Spring 2020 was very significant. These emerging patterns suggest a risk to retention and completion rates. Appendix A provides further analysis on spring enrollment patterns in Washington.

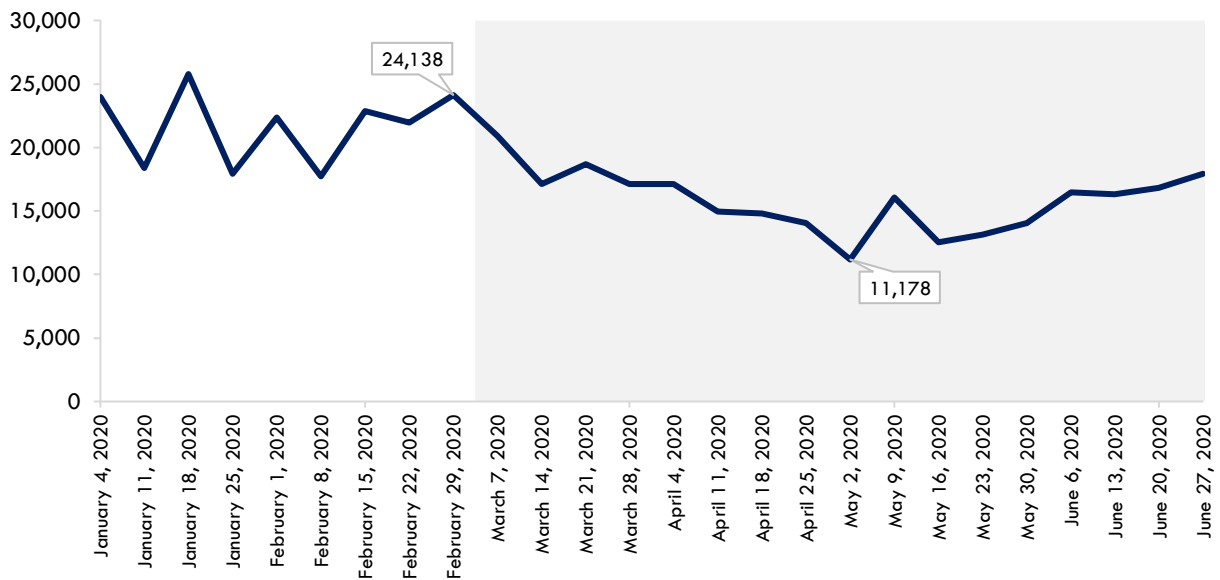
¹³ Survey conducted by Simpson Scarborough, March 26-30, 2020. The sample includes 573 high school seniors who planned to attend a 4-year college and 513 current college students.

How COVID-19 is Impacting the Labor Market

The COVID-19 crisis has upended industries and institutions across the globe, causing many workplaces to suspend in-person operations or shut down altogether. The total unemployment rate in the U.S. grew from 3.5 percent in February, to 14.7 percent in April (BLS, 2020). All industries took a hit nationwide, but some of the most significant shocks were felt in the leisure and hospitality industry, where almost one in three workers were unemployed in June 2020. Workers in the service, retail, and transportation industries experienced relatively higher unemployment rates (BLS, 2020).

In Washington, the unemployment rate reached over 16 percent in April (BLS, 2020). Another indicator of the struggling labor market, job openings, illustrates the economic concerns that have resulted from the pandemic. While job postings tend to fluctuate by week, there was a clear downward trend coinciding with the escalating COVID-19 crisis and recession in the state (Figure 12). During the first week of January, there were roughly 24,000 new job postings in Washington. Starting the last week of February, the number of job postings dropped steadily, before reaching a low of approximately 11,000 new listings the first week of May (Burning Glass Technologies, 2020). While there has been some resurgence in new job postings since May, the number of unemployed workers remains high.

Figure 12. New Job Postings in Washington State, Weekly Totals in 2020



Source: Labor Insights, Burning Glass Technologies
Shaded area represents recession, as determined by the National Bureau of Economic Research (shaded area beginning in March 2020 represents the ongoing current crisis period)

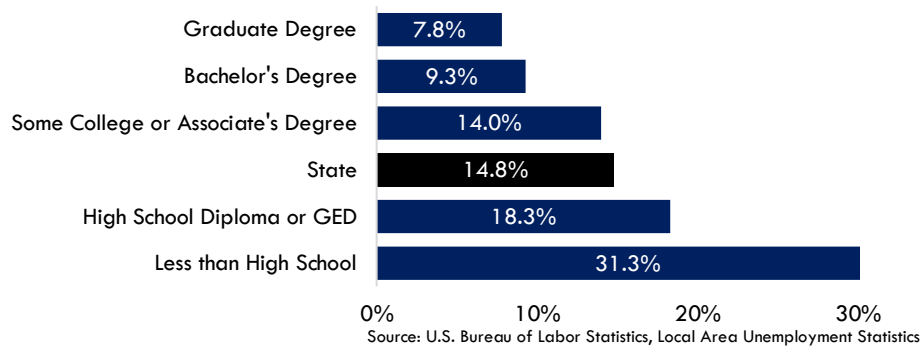
There have also been disproportionate labor market impacts on specific populations more than others. Those with lower educational attainment, young people, women, and Black and Hispanic workers have been affected the most.

Those with Less Education are Experiencing Higher Rates of Unemployment

As was the case during the Great Recession, unemployment rates for those without a postsecondary credential far surpassed those of college-educated workers. In April 2020, the unemployment rate for workers with only a high school diploma was more than double that of workers with a bachelor's degree or higher, 17.3 percent compared to 8.4 percent (BLS, 2020). Although unemployment for all groups shot up during the spring of 2020, there has been considerably more instability for workers with less education.

In Washington, educational attainment has been closely tied with employment stability, and those with less education have seen higher rates of unemployment during the COVID-19 crisis (Figure 13). For instance, those without a high school diploma were twice as likely to be unemployed in May than the total state population. Those with less education have been overrepresented among the unemployed as well. Almost half (46 percent) of unemployed Washingtonians in May 2020 had a high school diploma or less, despite making up just 32 percent of the overall state population¹⁴ (BLS, 2020).

Figure 13. Unemployment Rate in Washington by Educational Attainment (May 2020)



A study on remote work during the COVID-19 crisis found that working from home was more common in industries with more educated workers. Among industries in the top quartile of most educated workers, 64 percent of firms had at least some employees switch to remote work. Among the lowest quartile looking at industries by educational attainment, just 36 percent of firms had employees switch to remote work. This finding suggests that those with more education have more flexibility in their working arrangement, allowing them to stay employed while avoiding the health risks of working outside of their home during the pandemic (Bartik et al., 2020).

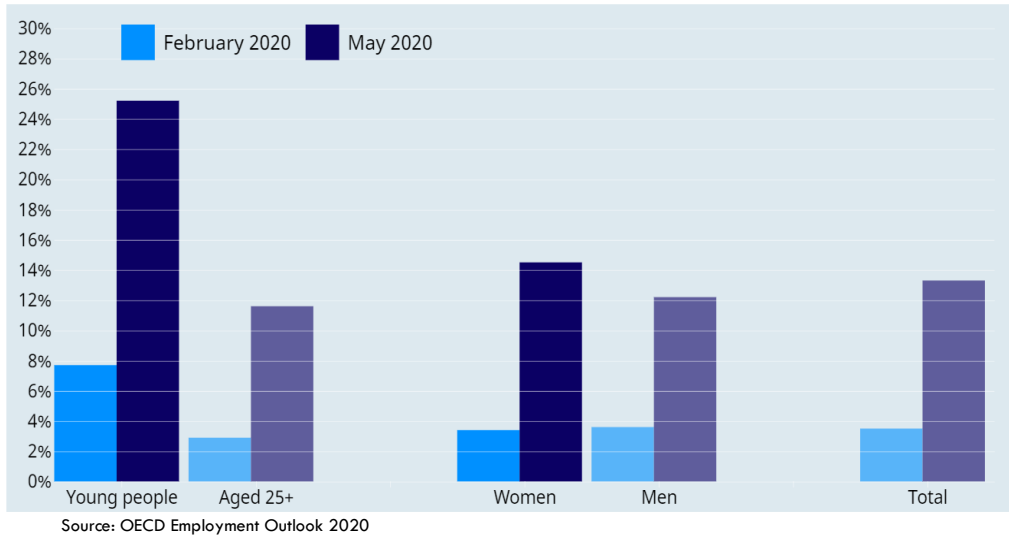
Younger Workers Have Higher Rates of Unemployment

The COVID-19 crisis has had a particularly drastic impact on the jobs of young people. More than one in four young workers in the U.S. was unemployed by May 2020, compared to 12 percent of workers ages 25 and older (Figure 14) (OECD, 2020). In Washington, the unemployment rate for workers under 25 years old is even higher —31 percent in May 2020. This rate is more than twice as high as the unemployment rate for the state overall.

Unemployment in and of itself is an unfortunate result of any economic downturn. But the consequences for young workers are particularly grim, as the negative effects of being unemployed have been associated with depressed earnings across a person's entire career. A young person who experiences an extended bout of unemployment can expect to earn \$22,000 less over the next decade than if they had not been unemployed. This finding is predicated on the fact that unemployment limits young workers' opportunities to gain new skills, experiences, and connections that lead to higher wages (Ayres, 2013).

¹⁴ In Washington, nine percent of adults over 25 years old have less than a high school diploma, and 23 percent have a high school diploma or equivalent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014-2018 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates)

Figure 14. Unemployment Rate by Age and Gender in the United States



Women are More Likely to Be Unemployed Than Men

Nationally, women have experienced higher unemployment levels during the COVID-19 crisis, with unemployment rates more than two percentage points higher than men in May 2020 (Figure 14) (OECD, 2020). This disparity may stem from the nature of the jobs forced to shut down—including those in tourism and restaurants—that are disproportionately held by women and young people.

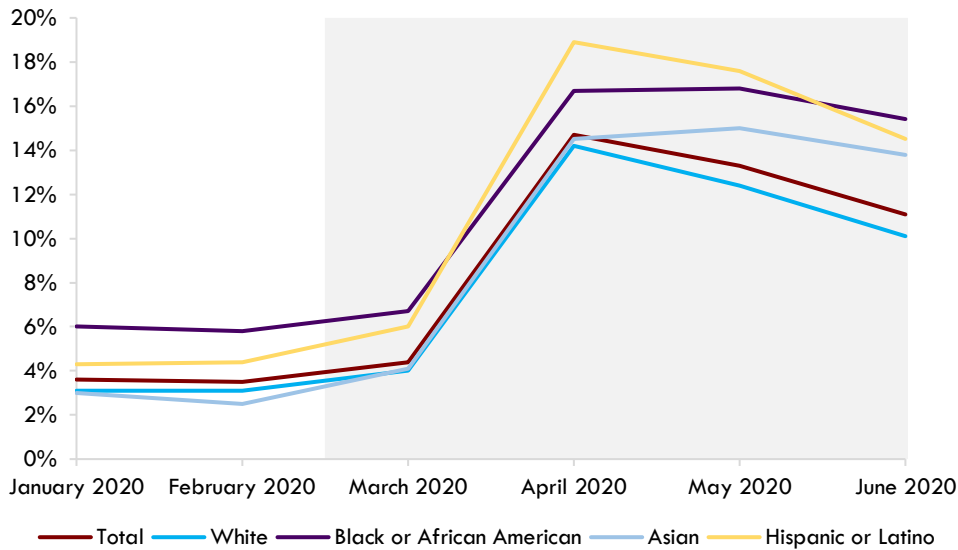
In contrast, the unemployment rate for women (14.4 percent) was slightly lower than that of men (15.2 percent) in Washington State in May 2020 (BLS, 2020). However, these total numbers conceal the higher rates of unemployment experienced by women of color. In May, Asian, Black, Hispanic, and multi-racial women experienced higher levels of unemployment in Washington than males of the same racial group. Among Hispanic people, who are the second-largest racial/ethnic group in Washington State, unemployment rates for women were three percentage points higher than for men (BLS, 2020).

Overall, people of color have experienced higher unemployment rates than white Americans during the COVID-19 crisis. The evidence in Box 7 provides more insight into the racial inequity in unemployment, both nationally and in Washington.

Box 7. Unemployment During the COVID-19 Crisis has Disproportionately Impacted People of Color

Escalation of the COVID-19 crisis in the spring of 2020 sent unemployment rates skyrocketing for all groups but hit racial and ethnic minorities particularly hard (Figure 15). In April, unemployment reached 18.9 percent for Hispanic and 16.7 percent for Black Americans—both significantly higher than the national average. By June, unemployment rates had dropped slightly for all racial groups but remained higher for Black and Hispanic Americans than white and Asian Americans (BLS, 2020).

Figure 15. Monthly U.S. Unemployment Rate by Race/Ethnicity, Seasonally Adjusted

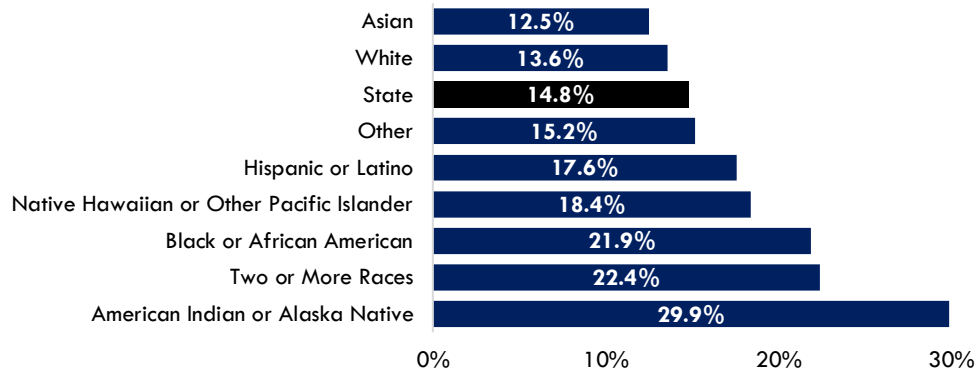


Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
 Shaded area represents recession, as determined by the National Bureau of Economic Research (shaded area beginning in March 2020 represents the ongoing current crisis period)

Washington’s unemployment patterns were mostly consistent with the national trends (Figure 16). Both nationally and in Washington, white people experienced lower than average levels of unemployment, while racial/ethnic minority groups, besides Asian Americans, tended to have higher rates than the average. In Washington, the group with the lowest unemployment rate in May was Asians, almost three percentage points lower than the unemployment rate for Asian Americans nationally. The group with the highest unemployment rate, American Indian or Alaska Native, makes up just one percent of the state’s population, and an even smaller proportion of U.S. Nevertheless, an unemployment rate of almost one in three is incredibly troubling, regardless of population size. Among the five percent of the state’s population identified as two or more races, 22.4 percent were unemployed in May. Black Washingtonians had unemployment rates that were almost five percentage points above the rate for Black Americans nationwide. And Hispanic people in Washington, the state’s second-largest racial/ethnic group, were unemployed at rates comparable to the national level, exceeding the overall average. These numbers depict the ongoing racial inequities in the labor market experienced nationally and in our state. Policies that increase educational attainment of underrepresented minority groups may also help address racial disparities in unemployment by improving employment prospects and job security, contributing to a more robust economy.

Box 7. (continued)

Figure 16. Unemployment Rate in Washington by Race (May 2020)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics

Strategic Priorities for Recovery from the COVID-19 Crisis in Washington State

History has shown us that higher education must play a pivotal role in recovering from the COVID-19 crisis. Evolving labor market needs, especially within hard-hit industries, will require many workers to upskill or re-skill to fill the demand and stake their claim in the workforce of the future. Postsecondary education will play an important role alongside employers in paving the way towards recovery. But higher education is also placed in a difficult position—it is both integral to our economic recovery, and heavily impacted by the crisis. State budget shortfalls, uncertainty around enrollment and tuition revenue, and ongoing disruptions to campus operations may hinder institutions’ ability to serve students effectively. Moreover, a host of barriers may prevent individuals from accessing the gains offered by increased educational attainment. This is especially true in communities of color, who have experienced disproportionate rates of unemployment caused by the crisis. We must prioritize effective strategies in higher education, adapting proven programs and policies that promote equitable student access, retention, and completion to fit the current need and provide opportunities for all Washingtonians to have a better future.

Strengthen postsecondary enrollment. Increasing postsecondary enrollment, especially for Washington residents who don’t already have a credential after high school, can improve individuals’ circumstances and our state’s ability to recover. We must also address our state’s equity gaps in educational attainment, as described in Box 8.

In normal times, those with higher education levels also tend to have higher wages and lower rates of unemployment. As the COVID-19 crisis has ravaged on, those with higher education levels have experienced more job security and the flexibility to work from home. Those with higher levels of education will continue to fare better into the recovery period. Increasing educational attainment will make Washington stronger as we continue to weather this crisis and more resilient as we prepare for the future.

Ensuring postsecondary enrollment requires that we address the uncertainties that students report feeling around the upcoming academic year. Addressing the uncertainties may include increasing communication and transparency with returning students and reaching out to prospective students directly. Plans for health

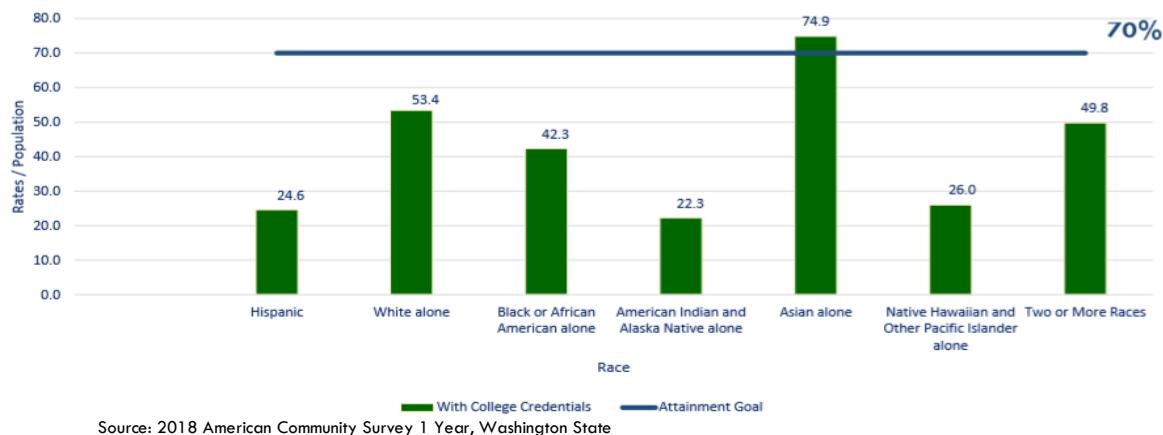
and safety should be at the forefront, including compliance with Washington’s Higher Education Re-opening Work Group’s [Campus Reopening Guide](#)¹⁵.

Beyond communication around health and safety, postsecondary institutions can simplify admissions processes to reduce entry barriers. Increasing communication around college enrollment through targeted messaging and reminders has been proven effective in helping students continue along their educational trajectory. It can be particularly useful to clarify information around enrollment requirements and deadlines that may have shifted due to the COVID-19 crisis (Mann, 2020). Adapting communication campaigns to target prospective adult students, especially those without a postsecondary credential, may also be an effective way to increase enrollment and educational attainment in Washington State. In addition, streamlining the process to transfer coursework between institutions can help ensure that students do not lose credits for courses they have completed and can progress through a degree program in a timely manner. Especially during the COVID-19 crisis, many students may patch academic programs together, increasing their risk of credit loss. Community college students may be particularly vulnerable. Policies that standardize course numbering systems¹⁶ across the state, exemplified by Florida, can reduce barriers to enrollment and help students continue their academic progress without losing transfer credits. Promoting awareness of postsecondary opportunities and minimizing barriers to entry and transfer will be critical to arresting enrollment slides.

Box 8. Equity Gaps in Educational Attainment Persist in Washington

Pursuing Washington’s attainment goal and closing equity gaps is more important than ever as we respond to the COVID-19 crisis. Currently, there are substantial gaps in educational attainment by race in our state (Figure 17). If we allow these gaps to worsen, the effects of the crisis will be significant and prolong our ability to recover. We must take deliberate steps to ensure that underrepresented minority students are being reached in enrollment strategies, especially as the COVID-19 crisis has had a disproportionate impact on communities of color. Strategies to harness higher education as a tool for economic recovery must also address educational inequities head-on.

Figure 17. Percent of Washington Residents Age 25-44 with Postsecondary Credentials by Race/Ethnicity



¹⁵ Campus Reopening Guide: <https://www.governor.wa.gov/issues/issues/covid-19-resources/covid-19-reopening-guidance-businesses-and-workers>

¹⁶ Washington has an effective Direct Transfer Agreement for certain major related programs but does not have a complete statewide course numbering system for seamless credit transfer (ECS, 2020). The Washington 45 agreement provides a list of courses that students can take at 2-year institutions to satisfy general education requirements at 4-year institutions (SBCTC, 2019).

Proven Programs and Policies: Evidence¹⁷ on Enrollment

Providing application assistance for students to complete the FAFSA has been shown to improve college access and student success. Navigating the college application process is a struggle that can be particularly challenging for students who are the first in their family to go to college. A study on financial aid assistance found that students and families who received support filling out FAFSA and information about financial aid were eight percentage points more likely to enroll in college than those who didn't receive support. Also, students who received application support were eight percentage points more likely to remain in college for at least two years (Bettinger et al., 2012). Reducing administrative barriers by assisting prospective and incoming college students with their application process is a promising strategy for increasing enrollment. It can easily be adapted to a virtual delivery model to fit our current needs.

Increasing the number of high school counselors in schools has also been shown to impact high school student enrollment in college. A study of high school counselors found that hiring an additional counselor is predicted to cause a ten percentage point increase in 4-year college enrollment among students (Hurwitz & Howell, 2013). Counselors can help students explore their options and understand the application processes. They can also provide user-friendly information and advice about in-demand jobs and skills and offer guidance around the types of postsecondary programs that can help them acquire relevant knowledge and skills for the labor market. The support and assistance that counselors provide to high school students is incredibly valuable and will continue to be an important aid for college enrollment as we navigate these uncertain times.

Participating in college access and advising programs for high school students, specifically those aimed at historically underrepresented student populations, can further increase college enrollment for these groups. Providing personalized assistance to students in applying for college, understanding financial aid options, and developing a college-going mindset can reduce barriers for students. A study of one pre-college program showed a particularly positive impact on students of color (Bettinger, 2019). During the pandemic, successful college access programs can be adapted to operate remotely and provide students with the support they need to enroll in college.

Keep college affordable. Ensuring affordability by maintaining the Washington College Grant and other financial aid options will help students access higher education during the economic downturn. Affordability is among the main obstacles that students face in postsecondary access and persistence and is especially influential for students of color (as discussed in Box 9) and low-income students. During the Great Recession, Washington's median household income dipped, while tuition prices soared, making affordability a significant issue. Likely, affordability will also be a concern throughout the current crisis.

Providing financial assistance to students to access and persist in higher education during the current crisis will help mitigate the financial burdens families are currently facing and reduce students' reliance on loans to pay for their education. Committing to continued measures to ensure affordability, including fully funding the Washington College Grant, the College Bound Scholarship, and other initiatives meant to support affordability, will pay off in the long run by enabling access to higher education for more Washingtonians. Preserving state funding for higher education, to the fullest extent possible, is key to maintaining affordability and quality instruction.

Beyond supporting students with tuition costs, assistance with living expenses, and basic needs are vital to keeping students in school. Ensuring access to services that address these needs can ease students' financial burdens, allowing them to remain in school through graduation.

¹⁷ Based on research using rigorous, empirical evaluation methods

Box 9. Addressing Affordability for Students of Color

National data has shown that Black and Hispanic Americans have been hit hardest by the pandemic in terms of health outcomes and unemployment. As families of color may be experiencing an excessive strain on their financial situations, their ability to support students in paying for higher education and living expenses may be even more limited. Paradoxically, the racial disparity in unemployment is likely to persist without reducing the gaps in educational attainment. Ensuring ample financial supports for students of color is key to securing access to higher education and reducing inequities in our state.

Proven Programs and Policies: Evidence on Affordability

An analysis of Washington State's former financial aid program, the State Need Grant, found evidence that the award is associated with increased enrollment, persistence, and graduation for students who attend public colleges and universities in Washington (WSIPP, 2014). The program was especially impactful for students with the lowest family incomes¹⁸. The recent expansion of our state's financial aid program, now known as the **Washington College Grant**, is a boon for students and families as we endure the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. Continuing our state's grant aid will help improve affordability so that all students in Washington can enroll and persist in higher education.

Providing students with grant aid has been extensively proven to improve outcomes in higher education. A study of student financial assistance found that an offer of \$1,000 in grant aid increases the chances for a student to enroll in college by almost four percentage points (Dynarski, 2003). Not only does grant aid increase student enrollment, but it has also been shown to improve persistence and degree attainment¹⁹. Ensuring financial assistance to students may be particularly important now, as many families are experiencing increased financial instability due to the COVID-19 crisis.

Streamlining emergency aid procedures so that students can receive assistance promptly can help them stay on track. Relatively small just-in-time grants have been shown to increase retention and graduation rates for students who face sudden financial hardships (Great Lakes, 2016). This form of assistance may be particularly important during the COVID-19 crisis as students face rapidly changing financial circumstances and challenges that may hinder their ability to continue their education.

Invest in high-quality digital learning. Online learning has the potential to affect retention and completion rates. Supporting the development of effective and innovative digital learning opportunities in postsecondary education will lead to better experiences for students who are continuing their learning remotely. Almost half of institutions are planning some level of remote learning for the coming academic year in response to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, whether through a hybrid model or a fully online system²⁰. However, students and faculty reported mixed reviews of their experiences working remotely this spring (Lederman, 2020). The disruption caused by the move to remote learning was particularly challenging for students of color, discussed in Box 10. Continued student engagement and high-quality digital learning are vital for improving student retention and completion rates during the COVID-19 crisis.

¹⁸ The analysis revealed that a 25 percent change in the award amount was associated with a 2 to 4 percentage point difference in student persistence, and a 4 to 8 percentage point difference in completion rates

¹⁹ Evidence from a meta-analysis of 43 studies estimates the causal effects of grant aid on student persistence, and graduation, such that an additional \$1,000 of grant aid improves persistence and attainment by approximately 2 percentage points (Nguyen et al., 2019).

²⁰ Out of 1,200 institutions reporting to the Chronicle of Higher Education, as of July 17, 2020

Adapting to the current circumstances means embracing proven techniques for successful remote learning. A national survey of college students who experienced a shift from in-person to online coursework as a result of COVID-19 revealed that 40 percent of students were either somewhat or very dissatisfied with their course after it moved online, compared to only 12 percent dissatisfaction before the shift. However, students whose instructors utilized a higher number of proven practices for online learning, such as live Q&A and breakout groups during class, experienced higher levels of satisfaction with their experience (*Digital Promise, 2020*)²¹. Professional development of faculty and staff to support quality online instruction should be encouraged and incentivized to improve the experiences of students learning remotely (Mann, 2020).

As the possibility of continued remote learning becomes more and more likely into the foreseeable future, institutions should collaborate with others to maximize student learning. While institutional resources may be limited by budget constraints, partnering with other entities may be a viable option for expanding digital capacity. Companies who have advancing technology and have performed well in the current remote environment could be a good resource for collaboration to improve digital learning at postsecondary institutions. This collaborative work can enhance digital learning platforms while maintaining the same quality of instruction as in-person classes.

Box 10. Challenges of Remote Learning for Students of Color

Students had different experiences with remote learning in the spring, with students of color reporting greater disruption to their education. A survey of student perceptions of challenges associated with the move to online courses showed a greater burden on Black and Hispanic students than their white classmates (*Digital Promise, 2020*). For example, finding time for coursework while managing home and family responsibilities was a significant problem for 27 percent of Hispanic students and 18 percent of Black students, compared to 12 percent of white students (*Digital Promise, 2020*). Finding a quiet place to attend a course online was also more of a challenge for Hispanic (27 percent) and Black students (19 percent) compared to their white peers (16 percent).

Students of color were disproportionately affected by the lack of adequate access to technology. Almost a quarter of Hispanic students and nearly a fifth of Black students reported internet connectivity issues that interfered with their online coursework, compared to 12 percent of white students (*Digital Promise, 2020*).

The unique challenges of the widespread shift to remote learning have had disproportionately negative effects on students of color. Ignoring these disparities could further exacerbate existing inequities. We must develop culturally responsive teaching methods and ensure that new online classroom procedures are accessible and effective for all students.

²¹ Digital Promise lists eight “recommended practices” backed by pedagogical research for online learning: live sessions for asking questions/participating in discussions, real-world examples, frequent quizzes, personal messages from the instructor, assignments having you express what you had learned, breaking course activities up into shorter pieces, group projects, and breakout groups during a live class. Thirty-five percent of students who participated in 6 to 8 recommended practices expressed high satisfaction with their course, compared to just eight percent of students who participated in 0 to 2 practices.

Proven Programs and Policies: Evidence on Digital Learning

Using technology effectively can diminish the challenges students face in a remote learning environment. Specific online teaching practices have been proven successful in improving student performance. For example, a study of online learning methods found that college students who participated in an interactive online learning environment²² learned more than those who simply watched a video (Delen et al., 2014). Leveraging technology to engage students in an online setting can help ensure continued learning and academic progress. As many campuses have already committed to online instruction into the coming academic year, adopting proven methods for online instruction will be fundamental to student success.

Fostering virtual collaboration and communication among students has also been shown to improve academic achievement. The informal learning and connections formed outside of the classroom can be challenging to replicate in a remote learning environment. However, encouraging peer-to-peer communication and learning beyond class time is vital to keep students engaged. A study of social media use in college courses found that students in courses that incorporated educationally relevant use of social media had improved academic performance and reported higher engagement (Junco et al., 2012). Using social media and other virtual communication tools can add depth to in-class learning and replicate the informal learning that students benefit from outside of class time in a virtual campus environment.

Emerging evidence on remote learning during the COVID-19 crisis this spring revealed student preferences within online courses. Students were most satisfied in courses where **instructors sent personal messages** to students to check in and give feedback. Also, students were most satisfied if instructors used **real-world examples** to illustrate course content, and had assignments requiring **students to reflect on what they had learned** (*Digital Promise*, 2020). Institutions can continue to gather evidence on best practices for digital learning to adapt to students' needs during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

Provide students with holistic supports. Offering comprehensive supports can increase students' confidence to enroll in higher education, persist through a program, and reach graduation. Providing students with a combination of supports, including proactive and data-informed advising and coaching, financial assistance, and resources for basic needs assistance, has been proven effective for improving student outcomes (O'Donoghue and Ratledge, 2020). While many programs have historically included in-person activities and student engagement, successful strategies should be adapted to fit the current circumstances.

Beyond moving student services online, institutions should also pursue ways of increasing communication between faculty—and other support staff like tutors—and students. Fostering these relationships, even virtually, is an effective way of supporting students personally and academically (O'Donoghue and Ratledge, 2020).

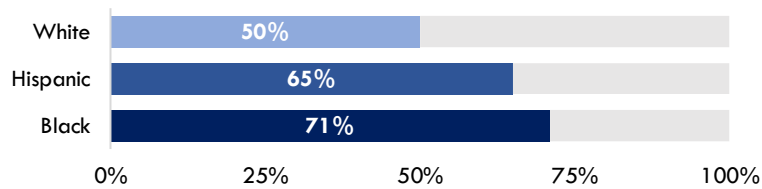
Providing students with access to other services can also ease the burdens of attendance. Beyond financial aid to cover tuition, some students may require assistance with housing, food, childcare, and other services while in school. This need for support may be particularly true for students of color, as discussed in Box 11. Especially as many are facing increased challenges and uncertainty due to the COVID-19 crisis, helping students access the resources they need to be successful on campus, and in life, may lead to better, more equitable student outcomes.

²² Interactive activities included generative notetaking, seeking of supplemental resources to learn more, and self-evaluation through practice questions embedded throughout (Delen et al., 2014)

Box 11. Basic Needs Insecurity Among Students Varies by Race

While more students than usual experienced basic needs insecurity overall in the spring of 2020 because of the COVID-19 crisis, the proportion was even higher for students of color. More than 70 percent of Black students and 65 percent of Hispanic students faced food or housing insecurity in the spring, compared to 50 percent of white students (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). These numbers are unacceptable for all students but are especially troubling for students of color. Support services may be particularly necessary during the COVID-19 crisis to mitigate barriers to postsecondary access and success.

Basic Needs Insecurity by Race



Source: The Hope Center

Proven Programs and Policies: Evidence on Student Supports

Combining frequent advising with comprehensive wraparound student supports, including financial aid, first-year seminars, and assistance with textbook costs has been proven to aid student retention and boost graduation rates. For example, participants in the CUNY ASAP program, mostly low-income students of color, were twice as likely to graduate with an associate degree as their peers who did not participate in the program (Scrivener et al., 2015).

Adapting successful existing programs to an online format is a promising emerging strategy. SUCCESS, a program that provides comprehensive supports to low-income students and students of color, quickly transitioned their program delivery model to continue assisting students when they needed it most. Coaching sessions shifted from in-person to online, group check-ins were held to foster a sense of community, and discussions incorporated an array of COVID-related issues (Beal et al., 2020). Although not originally intended for a virtual learning environment, successful programs like CUNY ASAP and SUCCESS can be modified to fit the current circumstances.

Connecting students to public benefit programs and other social services, beyond those offered at the institution, has also been proven to aid in student outcomes. A study of the Single Stop USA initiative that provides students with support for housing, food, taxes, childcare, legal services, and other essential resources, found that participants experienced an increase in college persistence of at least three percentage points (Daugherty et al., 2020). The initiative's effects were particularly positive for adult students (over age 25), independent students, and students of color. Helping college students access existing social services—particularly during this challenging time—will reduce their personal and financial strain and improve their odds at reaching graduation.

Conclusion

As we continue to endure the COVID-19 crisis, we must prepare for a future with improved circumstances for all Washingtonians. Although the conditions differ from the Great Recession, many of the consequences of economic downturn and the principles of recovery are likely to apply to the COVID-19 crisis. Learning on lessons from the Great Recession can help us respond to the current crisis appropriately and proactively.

Beyond the devastating health consequences of the pandemic, the current economic downturn has already left a mark on the financial stability of individuals and families across the country, a reality that is likely to last well into the future. The national unemployment rate in April 2020 was the highest recorded since the Great Depression. But despite spikes in unemployment for all workers, those with higher levels of education have had more job security and more flexibility in their work arrangements and will likely fare better during the recovery phase of the crisis.

Job recovery following the Great Recession favored those with higher levels of education, and it is almost certain that a similar pattern will emerge in the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. As we prepare for recovery, protecting and strengthening our higher education system to work for all students should be a top priority. The evidence-based programs and policies presented in this report can help lay the foundation to boost enrollment, maintain affordability, support high-quality digital learning experiences, and ensure ongoing holistic support may reduce educational attainment barriers during this challenging time. Helping more Washingtonians to gain a postsecondary credential will improve individuals' opportunities and financial security for the future and contribute to the resilience and recovery of our state as a whole.

The higher education sector demands swift and innovative strategies in response to the COVID-19 crisis. However, new strategies should be adopted and implemented as thoughtfully as possible. Higher education leaders must consider contextual factors, including an assessment of required resources, establishment of partnerships, and a clear understanding of the health and safety implications of any proposed strategy. Implementation of proven strategies should reflect the context and include feedback and evaluation loops to assess efficacy and make changes where needed as the crisis evolves. Ultimately, programs and policies should be informed by the drive to alleviate the interruptions caused by COVID-19 and ensure all people in Washington can access and be successful in their pursuit of higher education.

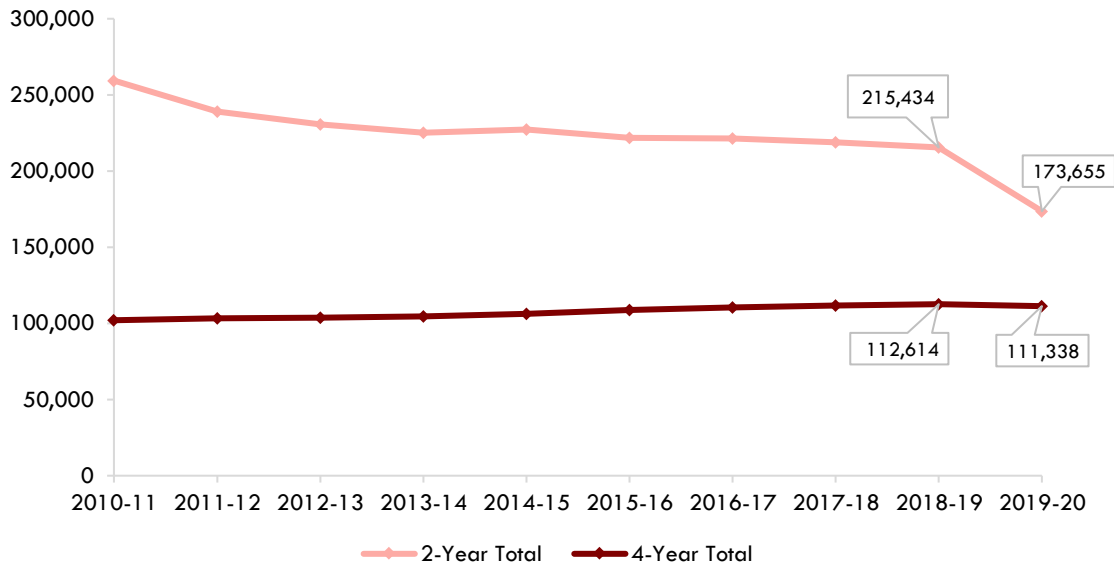
Priorities for fortifying higher education in Washington should consider and target underrepresented students specifically, including students of color, low-income, and first-generation students. Many of these populations are experiencing disproportionately adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing inequities in educational attainment. Closing equity gaps should remain a top priority for policymakers and higher education leaders in Washington.

The full damage of the COVID-19 crisis has yet to be known. But as we continue to bear the COVID-19 crisis, we must also prepare for the future. History has shown us the inextricable link between higher education and the labor market. Strengthening and adapting our higher education system to serve more students more effectively amidst the current conditions will ensure a robust and complete recovery from the crisis.

Appendix A.

Examination of spring headcounts in Washington over time illuminates the early effects of the COVID-19 crisis on enrollment. Headcounts at public 4-year institutions remained stable through the spring of 2020 (shown in figure A1). Although spring enrollment has decreased steadily over time, the drop in Spring 2020 was very significant, coinciding with the COVID-19 crisis.

Figure A1. Spring Enrollment Headcount at 2-Year and 4-Year Public Institutions in Washington



Source: WSAC analysis of Education Research and Data Center and State Board of Community and Technical Colleges spring enrollment data (2020)

The year-over-year change in spring enrollment reveals a substantial 19.4 percent dip in enrollment between spring 2019 and spring 2020 at public 2-year institutions (Table A1). Meanwhile, spring enrollment at public 4-year institutions only fell by 1.1 percent (Table A2). Evidently, the COVID-19 crisis had a much bigger impact on enrollment at 2-year institutions in the spring of 2020 than 4-year institutions.

Table A1. Spring Enrollment Headcount at 2-Year Public Institutions in Washington

Academic Year	2-Year Total	% Change
2010-11	259,412	N/A
2011-12	239,217	-7.8%
2012-13	230,807	-3.5%
2013-14	225,016	-2.5%
2014-15	227,235	1.0%
2015-16	221,826	-2.4%
2016-17	221,435	-0.2%
2017-18	218,732	-1.2%
2018-19	215,434	-1.5%
2019-20	173,655	-19.4%

Source: WSAC analysis of State Board of Community and Technical Colleges spring enrollment data (2020)

Table A2. Spring Enrollment Headcount at 4-Year Public Institutions in Washington

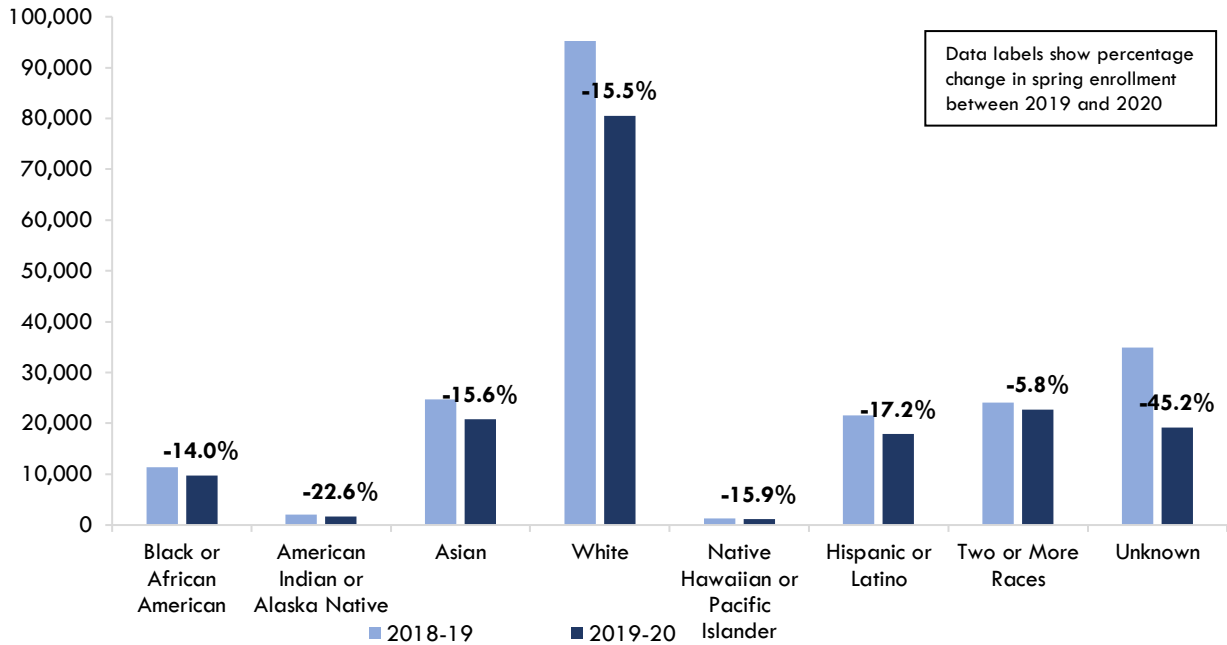
Academic Year	4-Year Total	% Change
2010-11	102,074	N/A
2011-12	103,190	1.1%
2012-13	103,698	0.5%
2013-14	104,681	0.9%
2014-15	106,476	1.7%
2015-16	108,833	2.2%
2016-17	110,607	1.6%
2017-18	111,601	0.9%
2018-19	112,614	0.9%
2019-20	111,338	-1.1%

Source: WSAC analysis of Education Research and Data Center spring enrollment data (2020)

Higher Education and the Labor Market

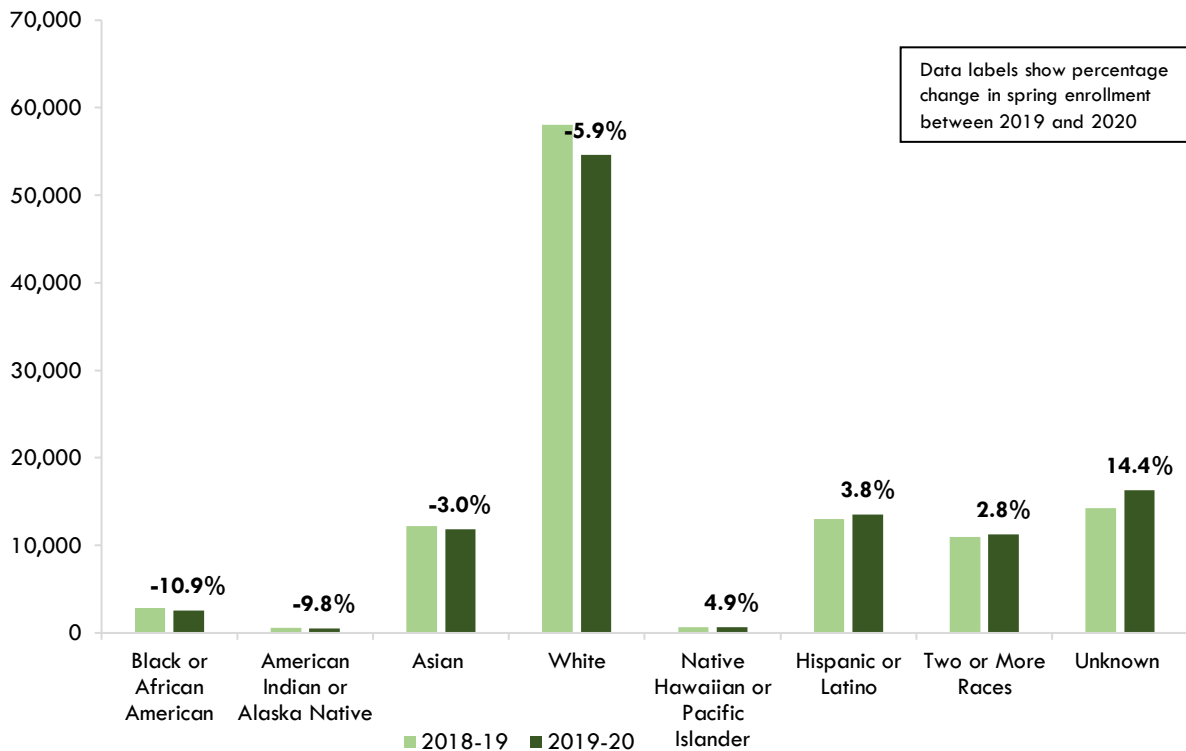
A comparison of enrollment headcounts in the spring of 2019 and spring of 2020 demonstrates the uneven effects of COVID-19 on different racial groups (Figures A2 and A3).

Figure A2. Spring Enrollment Headcount Trends at 2-Year Public Institutions in Washington by Race/Ethnicity



Source: WSAC analysis of State Board of Community and Technical Colleges spring enrollment data (2020)

Figure A3. Spring Enrollment Headcount Trends at 4-Year Public Institutions in Washington by Race/Ethnicity



Source: WSAC analysis of Education Research and Data Center spring enrollment data (2020)

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Compared to spring enrollment in 2019, headcounts for all student groups at public 2-year institutions fell in the spring of 2020 (Table A3). Among students who reported their race/ethnicity, American Indian or Alaska Native students saw the steepest decline, with enrollment in the spring of 2020 more than 20 percent lower than in the spring of 2019. The second largest drop was for Hispanic students. While spring enrollment at 4-year public institutions was fairly steady, Black students and American Indian or Alaska Native students saw enrollment decreases of around ten percent compared to the prior year (Table A4).

Table A3. Spring Enrollment Headcount at 2-Year Public Institutions in Washington by Race/Ethnicity

	2018-19	2019-20	% Change
Black or African American	11,322	9,739	-14.0%
American Indian or Alaska Native	2,114	1,637	-22.6%
Asian	24,687	20,839	-15.6%
White	95,292	80,550	-15.5%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1,330	1,118	-15.9%
Hispanic or Latino	21,611	17,900	-17.2%
Two or More Races	24,097	22,709	-5.8%
Unknown	34,981	19,163	-45.2%

Source: WSAC analysis of State Board of Community and Technical Colleges spring enrollment data (2020)

Table A4. Spring Enrollment Headcount at 4-Year Public Institutions in Washington by Race/Ethnicity

	2018-19	2019-20	% Change
Black or African American	2,871	2,559	-10.9%
American Indian or Alaska Native	559	504	-9.8%
Asian	12,222	11,851	-3.0%
White	58,049	54,613	-5.9%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	658	690	4.9%
Hispanic or Latino	13,039	13,534	3.8%
Two or More Races	10,934	11,244	2.8%
Unknown	14,282	16,343	14.4%

Source: WSAC analysis of Education Research and Data Center spring enrollment data (2020)

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The Washington Student Achievement Council is committed to increasing educational opportunities and attainment in Washington. The Council has three main functions:

- Lead statewide strategic planning to increase educational attainment.
- Administer programs that help people access and pay for college.
- Advocate for the economic, social, and civic benefits of higher education.

The Council has nine members. Four members represent each of Washington's major education sectors: four-year public baccalaureates, four-year private colleges, public community and technical colleges, and K-12 public schools. Five are citizen members, including one current student.

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