

Generous \$1.5 million Capital One Foundation grant will fund research to support postsecondary opportunities for low-income students in the state.

The Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) is excited to share a new research project to improve postsecondary opportunities for low-income Washington students, supported by a \$1.5 million grant from the Capital One Foundation. The project will help WSAC gain an increased understanding of student usage and engagement with WSAC's interactive chatbot, Otterbot, and its effects on key outcomes such as FAFSA completion and college matriculation. Otterbot is currently geared towards students in the state's College Bound Scholarship program, designed for students who are low-income as determined by their eligibility for Free and Reduced Priced Meals. The research will shed light on student needs, reactions to communications, and barriers to postsecondary enrollment and test new approaches for improving Otterbot engagement.

The project is a collaborative effort between WSAC, nonprofit research organization MDRC, and the Capital One Foundation. Phase one of the project will include engagement with low-income students and families to better understand their needs and reactions to existing chatbot messaging. Phase two of the project will use rapid cycle A/B testing to quickly assess strategies for improving Otterbot based on behavioral science principles and insights from phase one.

This project is part of WSAC's strategy to build credible evidence to address complex challenges in the state's education system. The strategic approach will provide critical expertise and capacity to find new solutions to create a more equitable education system and increase higher educational attainment for low-income students.

"As college enrollment continues to decline nationally, we see an opportunity to ensure students and families fully understand their options, especially with regards to affordability," said Kerone Vatel, Head of Community Impact and Investment at Capital One. "While we continue to learn more about how technology, and AI specifically, can improve postsecondary advising, we know how important it is to fund the research that can inform and advance that technology with the stakeholder in mind."

Capital One's support of education and workforce development comes through its [Impact Initiative](#), an initial \$200 million, multi-year commitment to support growth in underserved communities and advance socioeconomic mobility by closing gaps in equity and opportunity. By partnering with organizations and programs across its footprint, Capital One is providing opportunities for a broad range of individuals who face barriers to education and employment to unleash their potential and thrive in a rapidly changing employment market.

"This kind of public-private partnership will yield learnings for all the states leveraging this technology to support the higher education goals of their constituents, which we know can have exponential social and economic impact," Vatel said. "We are proud to join WSAC and MDRC in this truly collaborative initiative, and look forward to sharing out insights from this work."

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