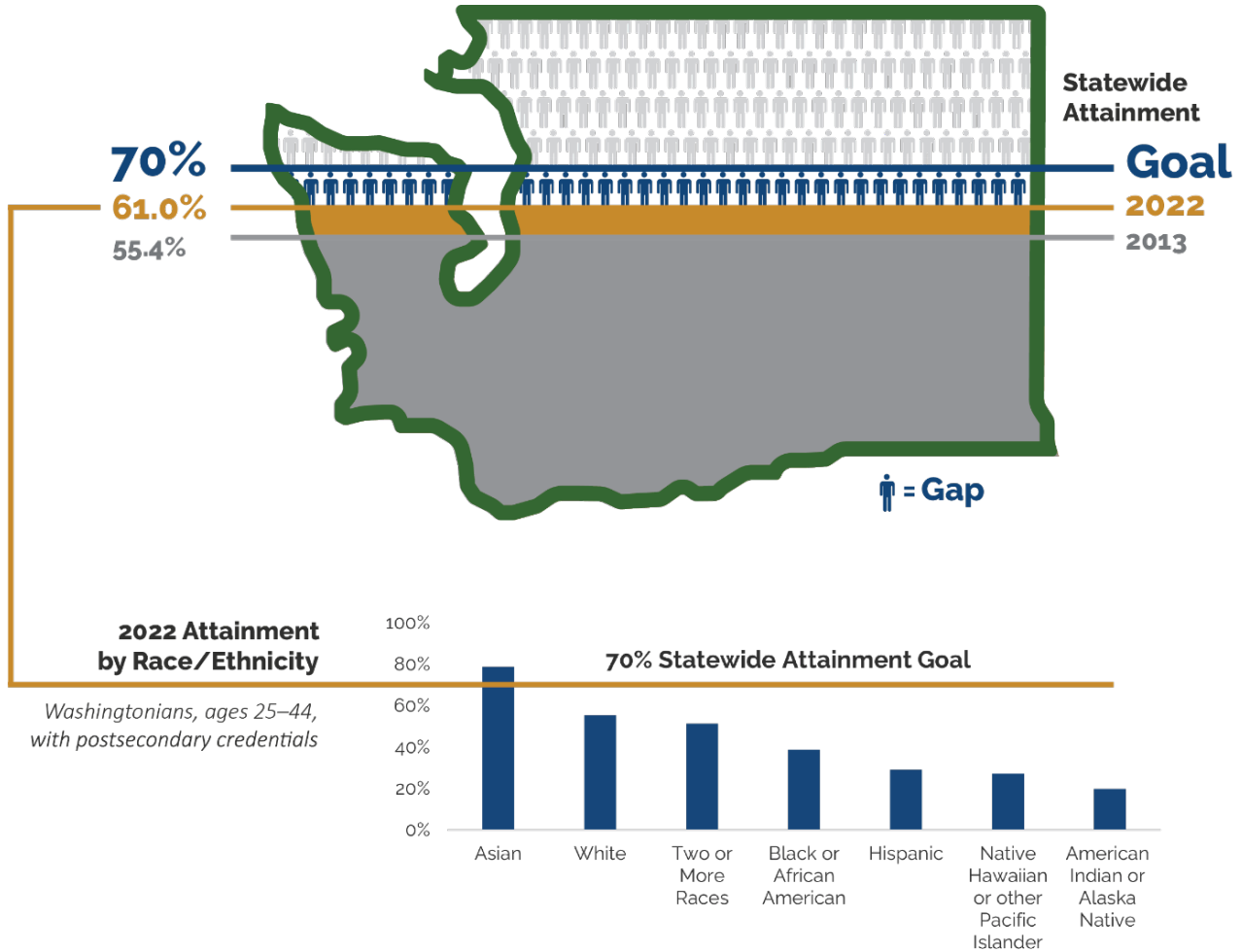


**DRAFT: 2025 Strategic Action Plan**  
 Increasing Postsecondary Educational Attainment and Equity in Washington

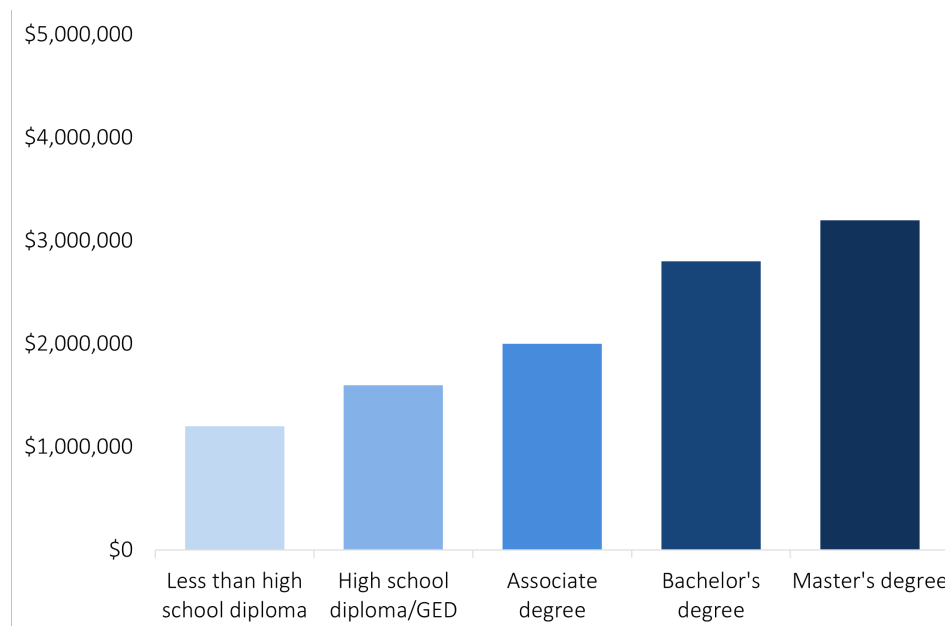


**Introduction**

**Washington’s State Goal for Educational Attainment**

An education or training credential beyond a high school diploma is essential to earn a living wage and achieve economic mobility. These credentials include traditional college degrees, certificates, apprenticeship, and other career-based programs provided by public and private four-year colleges and universities, community and technical colleges, tribal colleges, and training programs by employers.

Figure 1. Median Lifetime Earnings by Educational Attainment in the U.S.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of the US Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), 2009–2019

The individual benefits and broad economic benefit of continued learning and training provides a strong rationale to increase statewide educational attainment. In 2013, the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) proposed as our state goal that 70 percent of the state’s 25- to 44-year-olds (i.e., our early and mid-career residents) should have a credential beyond high school. The Legislature approved the goal, and it was signed into law by Governor Jay Inslee.

The 70 percent goal was based on analysis of the skill demands in the state job market—but more importantly, it is an aspirational vision. Our attainment level has grown by nearly five percentage points over the last decade. At that rate, it will take us another decade to achieve our goal. Unfortunately, the job market demands higher skill levels every year. By the time we reach 70 percent, a much higher goal will be long past due. Washington needs an aggressive change agenda and financial investment to maximize opportunities for all state residents.

### Higher Education Policy in Washington State

State and federal higher education policy focused for many years on the supply and affordability of postsecondary education. Capital budgets for new facilities, appropriations to subsidize the cost of education, tuition policy, and funding for financial aid programs dominated the policy landscape.

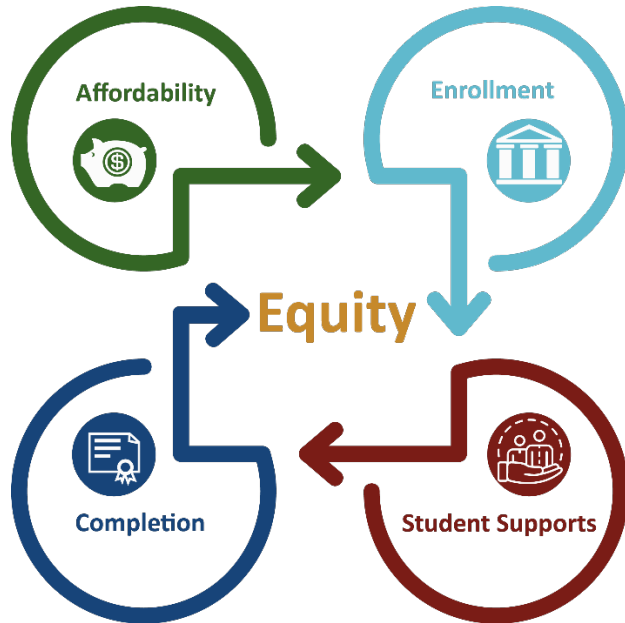
During the past fifteen years, government policy became more focused on educational attainment. This gave rise to new issues of access and success, with an increasing awareness of opportunity and student success gaps by gender, race, and ethnicity.

WSAC’s Strategic Action Plan (SAP) provides a framework to organize the policy and practice innovation needed to achieve our goal. The SAP strives to speak for all partners and stakeholders who share this goal and who are essential to its success. It is not about the work of a single state agency or limited to institutions, nor is it only about state legislation and budgets. All sectors of society have a role to play at the state and community level.

The work is framed by four strategic clusters:

- » Affordability
- » Enrollment
- » Student Supports
- » Completion

Figure 2. WSAC Strategic Cluster Areas



*If we build an **affordable** and **supportive** educational environment, more Washingtonians will **enroll** in programs and **complete** credentials.*

The framework is based on our belief that if we build an affordable and supportive educational environment, more Washingtonians will enroll in programs and complete credentials. Ensuring equitable access and success for all students is central to the strategic framework.

The Council also adopted six values to guide our work:

- » Equity
- » Student-centered
- » Regional and community leadership
- » Partnerships to build collaboration at all levels
- » Aligned with all public investments to support students
- » Innovation

## The WSAC Strategic Action Plan

The SAP discusses our attainment goal, our strategic clusters and values, a snapshot of current state policy by cluster, and our work plan for the year.

### A Snapshot of Washington’s Existing Higher Education Policy

Discussion of public policy and legislation often focuses on new ideas and can be narrowly focused on a particular program. Policy and legislation have increasingly focused on supporting existing foundation areas to increase postsecondary attainment. The following sections are the Council’s effort to capture that broader policy landscape as a baseline to inform our change agenda and to enable community leaders to see the state’s approach in full.

We define “state higher education policy” broadly to include statutes, budget investments, and agency rules, as well as more informal, recurring state practices or actions that can define a meaningful commitment to a policy approach.

## Equity

The Council has committed to equity as the defining priority for our work in developing state higher education policy. Equity is an outcome in which justice is realized within our society through a continuous, intentional process of identifying and abolishing racism and all forms of oppression designed to marginalize students, communities, and families who are Black, Indigenous, Latino, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, regardless of immigration status, and all groups who experience oppression.

Figure 3. Racial distribution at public high schools and public postsecondary institutions in Washington, 2022-23

Race or Ethnicity	High School	Public 2-Year	Public 4-year
White	50%	41%	49%
Hispanic or Latino	26%	11%	14%
Two or More Races	8%	13%	8%
Asian	8%	10%	15%
Black or African American	5%	6%	4%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1%	1%	1%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1%	1%	1%
Not Reported	N/A	17%	8%

Source: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Data Portal: Report Card Enrollment 2022-23 School Year, Grades 9-12.; State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), Enrollment Data Dashboard: Demographics, Annual Headcount by Race/Ethnicity, Academic Year 2022-23; Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) staff: Annual Enrollment, Undergraduate Headcount by Race/Ethnicity, Academic Year 2022-23.

The racial demographic makeup of public high schools in Washington is different than public postsecondary institutions in the state (Figure 3). For instance, Hispanic or Latino students make up over a quarter of the public high school population but account for 10 to 14 percent of the public higher education population. Ensuring racial equity in our state requires that our higher education system reflects the diversity of our population.

The Council recognizes the historic and current institutional and structural racism in Washington State and in our country and acknowledges our complicity in maintaining this reality by upholding policies, processes, and practices that have created barriers on the path to this goal for Black students, Indigenous students, Latino students, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students, regardless of immigration status, and their families and communities. We hold ourselves accountable as Council members and as individual leaders to eliminate these barriers by:

- » Building authentic, long-term relationships with Black students, Indigenous students, Latino students, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students, regardless of immigration status, in service of co-creating new and equitable policies, practices, and processes informed by those who have been most impacted.
- » Strongly advocating for funding and clearly prioritizing resources for systems change in support of Black students, Indigenous students, Latino students, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students.
- » Collecting and sharing racially disaggregated data and bringing awareness of the opportunity gaps and progress made with organizational partners to invoke advocacy and action.
- » Ensuring the Council and WSAC executive leadership reflect the racial diversity of the students and communities they serve.
- » Engaging in continuous and long-term assessment of target intervention programs and the Council's progress against its postsecondary attainment goal and the associated Strategic Action Plans.

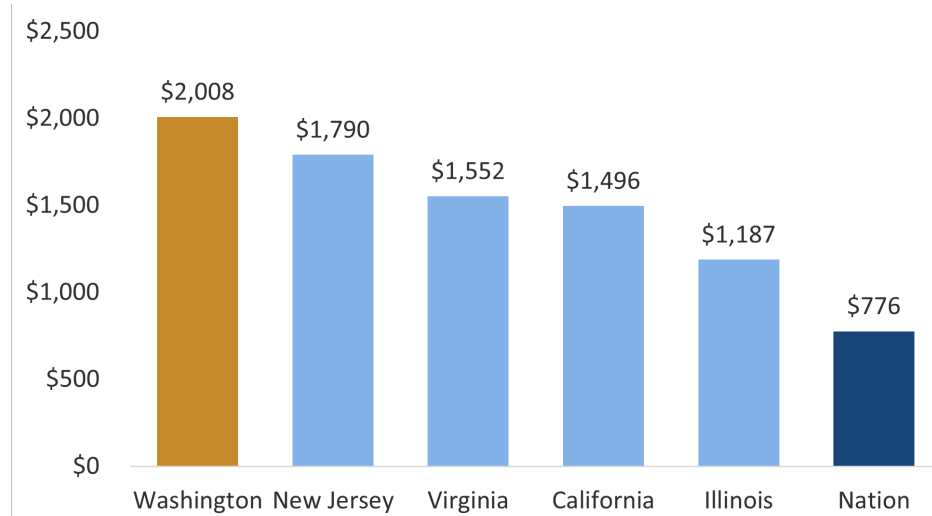
Centering equity calls the Council to consider and seek to understand the critical resources needed to reach and support all students. While guided through the lens of race, understanding students' intersectional and layered identities (e.g., age, gender) and assessing their experiences (e.g., adult learners, geographic proximity to institutions, English language learners, immigration) ensures that learners in Washington can access, pursue, and complete credentials.

## Affordability

Affordability is the most-cited barrier to enrolling and continuing in education beyond high school. The financial barriers go beyond the cost of the education itself, expressed as tuition and fees. Many students must support, or contribute to the support of, their household. Because these other costs are so significant—and often overlooked—the Council addresses those barriers as a separate cluster entitled Student Supports.

The Affordability cluster focuses on addressing Washingtonians' concerns about the costs associated with postsecondary education via tuition and fees, as well as a consideration of the lifetime earnings, debt, and employability that contributes to the overall value of a postsecondary credential. Washington has one of the most comprehensive and equitable state policies on affordability in the nation. For instance, Washington awards the highest amount of need-based grant aid per undergraduate full-time equivalent student in the country (Figure 4), and the total of state grants exceeds the total of federal Pell grants to Washington residents attending in-state institutions.

Figure 4. Need-Based Grant Aid per Undergraduate Full-Time Equivalent Enrollment, by State, 2021-22



Source: National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs (NASSGAP) Survey, 2021-22, pg. 21. [https://www.nassgapsurvey.com/survey\\_reports/2021-2022-53rd.pdf](https://www.nassgapsurvey.com/survey_reports/2021-2022-53rd.pdf)

Financial aid programs are designed to make postsecondary education affordable for students who face financial barriers. Many students in Washington are [eligible for state aid](#) to help cover the costs of college, in addition to the federal Pell grant (Figure 5). As expected, most students who receive state financial aid have incomes below 65 percent of the state median level. The same is true for students receiving federal aid.

Figure 5. Washington Financial Aid Recipients by Median Family Income

*[Note, the tables below will be updated for 2022-23 prior to May 14 Council meeting]*

**State Financial Aid Recipients**

MFI Category	Percent	Number
0-55%	67.7%	69,959
56-75%	16.3%	16,808
76-100%	10.9%	11,253
Over 100	1.4%	1,406
Unknown	3.7%	3,868

**Federal Pell Grant Recipients**

MFI Category	Percent	Number
0-55%	88.1%	71,091
56-75%	10.4%	8,414
76-100%	1.4%	1,102
Over 100	0.1%	70

Source: WSAC Unit Record Report, Washington state financial aid and Pell grant recipients by state median family income (MFI), academic year 2021-22.

Washington's affordability policy is based on the logic that an affordable higher education system will allow more students to enroll and complete postsecondary programs, leading to an increased count of credentials toward the state attainment goal. Research shows that Washington's investment in need-based aid offers a path toward a postsecondary credential and economic mobility for Washingtonians.

**Higher education should be affordable for all Washingtonians.**

- » Higher education should be affordable [without imposing limits by age](#), to include adults, recent graduates from high school, and students earning credits, degrees, and credentials while in high school.
- » Higher education should be affordable to state residents, regardless of [citizenship status](#).
- » Washington's effort to ensure affordability for students should encompass [all forms of postsecondary programs](#), including traditional degrees; career-technical education certificates; registered apprenticeships; and credits, degrees, and credentials earned while in high school.
- » Policies to ensure affordability should also enable student options across all types of institutions, both public and private.
- » Students need support with financial literacy and planning to maximize the affordability of higher education.

**Washington makes higher education affordable through four major policies.**

- » State subsidy and tuition policy for public institutions.
- » State financial aid programs based on income eligibility (need-based).
- » State investment programs to help families save.
- » Credits earned while in high school.

**State financial aid programs offer flexibility and reach beyond the lowest-income households.**

- » All Washington residents who meet the [income eligibility standards](#) are guaranteed financial aid.
- » State aid pays tuition and fees for students from families making up to 65% of median family income (MFI)—currently \$78,500 for a household of four. Those at 0-55% MFI are eligible per statute, while those at 56-65% are funded through biennial budget language.
- » The state contributes part of tuition and fees for students from households above 65% MFI and up to the statewide median—currently \$120,500 for a household of four.
- » Income-eligible students who receive federal grants can keep and combine state and federal grants to help cover costs beyond tuition and fees.
- » Students can use state financial aid regardless of consecutive or full-time enrollment.

**The state subsidizes public colleges and universities for all students.**

- » Amount of state subsidy directly affects the level of tuition and fees, as recognized by the state's statutory commitment to backfill on an ongoing basis the net revenue lost to tuition reductions, as adjusted for inflation.
- » State law ensures that resident undergraduate tuition increases do not exceed the rate of inflation.

- » Consistent state investment combined with tuition funding meets the cost of delivery of education for students.
- » State support helps colleges and universities provide higher-quality academic and student support programs that otherwise might not be affordable within campus budgets alone.
- » State policy directs all Washington public postsecondary institutions to commit a portion of their tuition revenue to prioritize financial aid for students from low-income families.
- » Portions of state funds for K-12 cover costs associated with earning college credit while in high school by investing in postsecondary institutions.

**Some state financial aid programs are designed to increase college and career readiness and are intended to support specific populations.**

- » [An early vision for college](#): Students from our lowest-income households see in middle school that there is a path to an affordable higher education for them.
- » [High demand STEM and technical jobs](#): Financial aid is tied to increased access to high demand education pathways for lower-income students.
- » *Specific populations*: Some financial aid programs support populations beyond income eligibility to include [foster youth](#), [homeless youth](#), [Native American students](#), etc.
- » *Work-based learning*: Financial aid supports work-based learning by partnering with employers to fund jobs for students, **with additional incentives for employers who do college-access work.**
- » *Public needs in the job market*: Financial aid programs can be used to attract Washington residents to jobs with high public need, such as teaching, healthcare in underserved communities, etc.
- » *Multiple pathways*: Apprentices in approved programs can receive financial aid to continue their path toward credit and credential.

**Washington mostly relies on the federal model for students to apply for and receive financial aid.**

- » State financial aid is awarded and distributed by the college or university that the student attends and is sector neutral.
- » All colleges and universities must meet certain state eligibility requirements and standards in order to participate in state financial aid programs.
- » The federal application form (FAFSA) is used for most students to [apply for and receive state financial aid](#), which prevents students from having to fill out two separate applications.
- » The state offers the ability for some students to receive state financial aid through alternative means, such as verifying participation in other public benefits programs, including SNAP.
- » Washington offers financial aid to students who are ineligible for federal aid because of their citizenship status through the [WASFA \(Washington Application for State Financial Aid\)](#).
- » Costs of attending college beyond tuition and fees are considered using the federal definition of “total cost of attendance.”
- » Students must maintain and demonstrate academic progress toward their postsecondary credential.
- » The state offers financial aid in the form of a *bridge grant* to students with the lowest incomes to help cover non-tuition costs.



**The state has provided some programs to address student debt.**

- » The office of the [student loan advocate](#) provides information to Washington residents about student loans and offers resources to help current borrowers manage existing student loan debt.
- » The student loan advocate provides outreach and support for borrowers who work in public service jobs on how to take advantage of public service loan forgiveness.
- » The state has created some [loan programs and loan repayment programs](#) that are targeted to meet workforce needs.

**Washington helps families save for college.**

- » The state offers a guarantee to account owners in a prepaid tuition plan ([GET](#)), that their investment will keep pace with tuition increases at the state’s highest-priced public university.
- » State legislation directed and supported the launch of a traditional college savings plan ([DreamAhead](#)).

**Guiding Questions: Affordability**

- How can we better understand the differing impacts of affordability barriers on families of varying income levels?
- How can we better align outreach regarding financial aid eligibility with public benefits receipt? And how could we measure the potential impact of that alignment on enrollment and retention?
- What do we know about the effectiveness of the Washington College Grant in improving postsecondary educational outcomes for Washington students?

**Enrollment**

Postsecondary education is a proven pathway for upward mobility and can support Washingtonians’ life goals. Yet state enrollment trends across postsecondary pathways (certifications, apprenticeships, colleges, and universities) have been low compared to other states and declined during the pandemic.

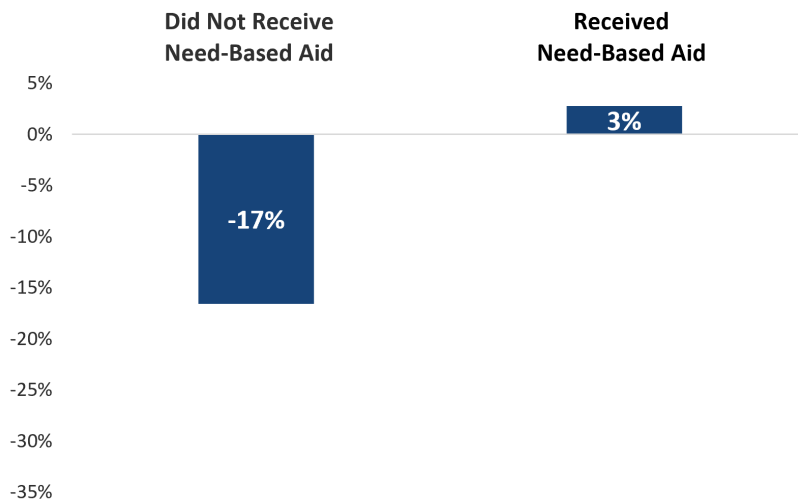
**Washington needs more residents to enroll in a wide range of postsecondary education and training programs.** Washington has invested in high-demand and diverse programs for high school students and adults. While some of these critical elements are in place, the state must continue to work towards a more equitable and comprehensive enrollment policy that will support all Washington residents.

**Current Landscape**

Between 2019 and 2022, Washington’s fall enrollment at our public four-year institutions increased by three percent for students who received need-based aid and decreased by 17 percent for those who did not. Over the same time period at our public two-year institutions, fall enrollment decreased by 11 percent for students who received need-based aid and 32 percent for students who did not (Figure 6).

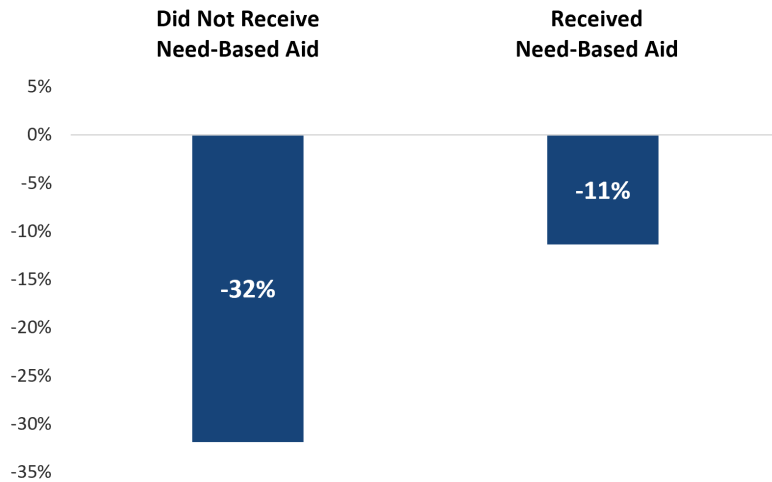
**Pandemic enrollment declines were tempered for students who received need-based financial aid.**

**Figure 6a. Fall Enrollment Change from Pandemic Year (2019 to 2022) for Public Four-Year Institutions**



Source: WSAC staff analysis of ERDC fall term, final enrollment data.

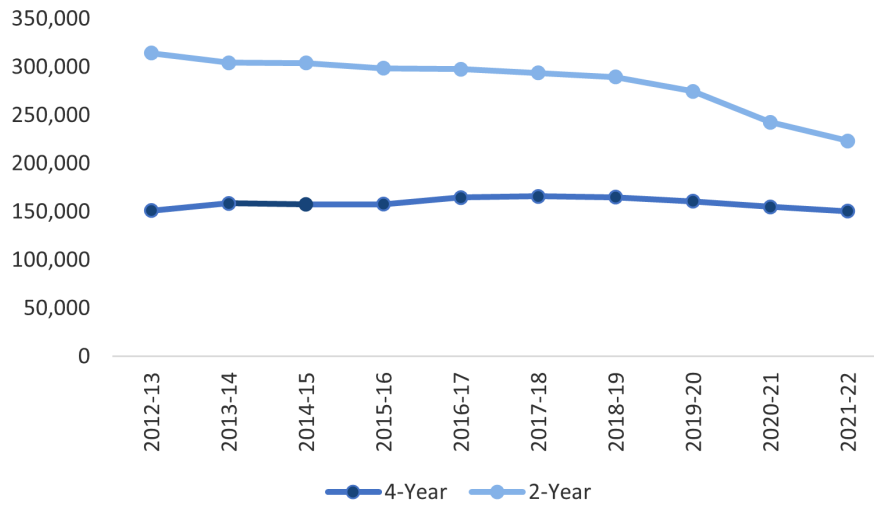
**Figure 6b. Fall Enrollment Change from Pandemic Year (2019 to 2022) for Public Two-Year Institutions**



Source: WSAC staff analysis of ERDC fall term, final enrollment data.

Washington’s undergraduate enrollment has followed the national pattern of flat enrollment for two decades, with continuing declines since the pandemic. Our four-year institutions saw a three percent decline and two-year institutions saw an eight percent decline from 2020-21 to 2021-22 (Figure 7).

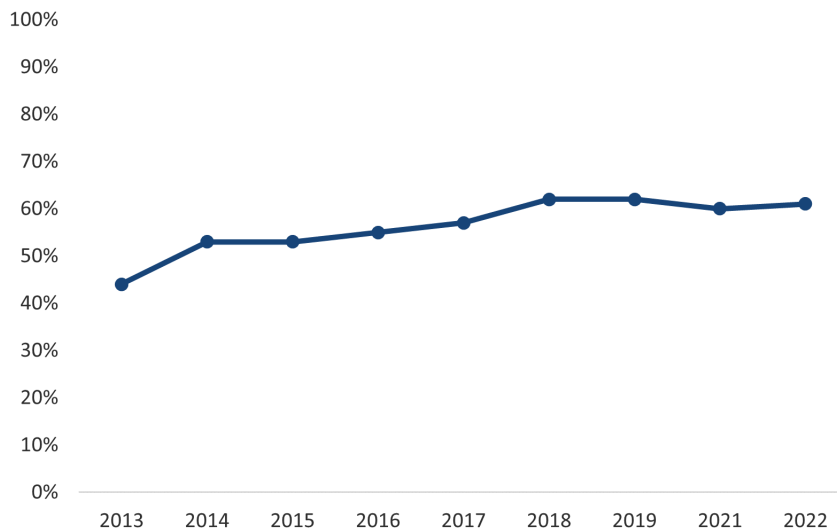
Figure 7. Undergraduate Enrollment at Washington Postsecondary Institutions by Institution Level<sup>1</sup>



Source: WSAC staff analysis of National Center for Education Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 12-Month Enrollment survey, component EFFY (unduplicated headcount), 2012 to 2022.

Washington’s proportion of adults (25-44) with a postsecondary credential increased from 60 percent in 2021 to 61 percent in 2022.

Figure 8. Proportion of Adults (25-44) in Washington with a Postsecondary Credential



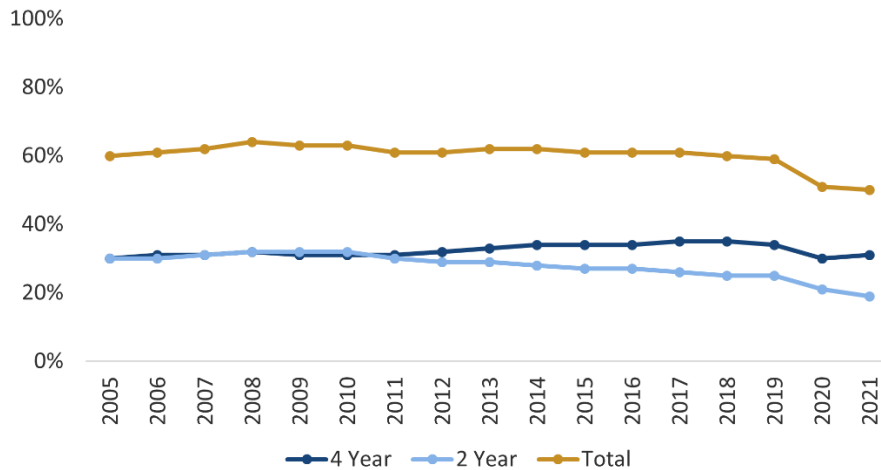
Source: WSAC staff analysis of American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year PUMS data and Lumina Foundation’s A Stronger Nation Report, Washington, short term credentials, ages 25-64. Note: Census year 2020 data is not used as per ACS guidelines.

Washington’s enrollment for high school graduates was at 50 percent in 2021, a sharp decline from 59 percent right before the pandemic (in 2019).

<sup>1</sup> In IPEDS data, institution level (two-year/four-year) is determined by the highest degree level offered. This means that IPEDS classifies most of Washington State’s career and technical colleges, Northwest Indian College, and others as four-year institutions because they offer four-year degrees. However, WSAC has reclassified these as two-year institutions because the overwhelming majority of credentials they confer are associate degrees and certificates.

Figure 9. Direct Postsecondary Enrollment Rate from High School

[Note, 2022 data will be added when available; anticipated prior to May 14 Council meeting]



Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) High School Graduate Outcomes Dashboard.

Enrollment is more a matter of practice than formal policy. While colleges and universities recruit students to their programs, societal attitudes shape college going broadly. Potential students interact with these attitudes in the communities where they live, study, and work. This environment is shaped by peers, family members, teachers, school counselors, neighbors, co-workers, and what some might call “conventional wisdom.”

Community attitudes can support or impede the likelihood that students will see college as a valuable, welcoming, affordable, and supportive opportunity. Washington must support communities directly with investments in regional partnerships and build a supportive infrastructure of accessible and affordable capacity, technical assistance to support schools and community groups, communication tools, and outreach. While some of these critical elements are falling into place, the state must continue to work toward a more equitable and comprehensive enrollment policy that will support both high school students and adults.

**The Council has adopted the following five key performance indicators:**

- 1. Undergraduate enrollment (headcount) - Lead Indicator**  
Number of undergraduates enrolled in Washington postsecondary institutions at any time during an academic year.
- 2. Direct enrollment from high school (rate)**  
Percentage of high school seniors who enroll in postsecondary education within one year of graduation.
- 3. High school graduation (rate)**  
Percentage of 9th-grade students who graduate from high school within five years.
- 4. Adults without an initial credential (proportion)**  
Estimated proportion of Washington adults, ages 25–44, who have not earned a postsecondary credential as a percentage of all Washington adults, ages 25–44.
- 5. Enrollment of adults without an initial credential (rate)**  
Estimated percentage of Washington adults, ages 25–44, without an initial credential who were enrolled in Washington public postsecondary institutions in an academic year.

**All Washington residents should have a clear and accessible path to enroll in postsecondary education.**

- » All Washington residents should be aware of the benefits of continuing their education past high school, including the economic, social, and health returns of earning a credential.
- » Washington must increase postsecondary enrollment for both traditional K-12 students and working-age adults.
- » Washington's effort to increase enrollment should encompass all forms of postsecondary programs, including traditional degrees, career-technical education certificates, apprenticeships, noncredit pathways, and more.
- » Washington's effort to increase enrollment should be particularly focused on supporting students of color, especially Black, Indigenous, and Latino students, who have been historically and institutionally marginalized from accessing higher education.
- » Policies to ensure ease of enrollment should also enable student choice across all types of institutions, including private colleges.

**The state's K-12 system provides some funding, infrastructure, and programming to motivate and get students ready for postsecondary pathways.**

- » A range of [dual credit programs](#) enable students to receive college credit in high school by completing a college course, passing a standardized exam, or participating in technical programs that have articulation agreements, and high school students are required to be notified of these programs.
- » The state continues to cover costs for high school students to enroll in and receive postsecondary credits, expanding to include more generous coverage of College in the High School and Summer Running Start.
- » Washington's K-12 system has worked to integrate college and career readiness through the [High School and Beyond Plan](#). With some investment from the Legislature and in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders, the K-12 system will consider a statewide online platform that will engage students and help them better navigate the transition from high school to higher education.
- » Students can graduate high school by demonstrating readiness through [multiple graduation pathways](#), including course-based, test-based, and performance-based pathways.
- » The state requires data sharing between K-12 and public institutions of higher education to inform high school students of postsecondary educational opportunities in the state and to track student enrollment and outcomes.

**The state provides some additional infrastructure outside of the K-12 system to support Washington K-12 students' pathways to postsecondary education.**

- » Beginning in the 2025-26 academic year, students in 10th, 11th, and 12th grades who qualify for the Basic Food program or Food Assistance program will automatically qualify as income-eligible for the Washington College Grant when enrolling directly after high school.
- » The state funds WSAC's [Regional Challenge Grants](#) to support community partnerships among K-12, colleges, workforce/industry, and community-based organizations to expand innovative interventions to increase college enrollment and completion with a focus on eliminating opportunity gaps for marginalized populations.

- » Most public and private nonprofit universities offer a guaranteed admissions program based on GPA and course distribution, with tests optional.
- » The state invests in college-going programs, including WSAC's [12th Year Campaign](#) and other programs provided by [nonprofit groups](#) that provide resources, navigation supports, and information to students and families about how to navigate financial aid and to enroll in college.
- » WSAC supports many low-income high school students enrolled in [College Bound](#) with [OtterBot](#), which shares outbound messages on financial aid and college and career pathways and can answer questions 24/7.
- » [Career Connect Washington](#) is increasing options for students to participate in work-based learning programs that provide college and career readiness, while earning college credit and wages.
- » Washington has a network of federal programs, including [GEAR UP](#). WSAC administers the GEAR UP state grant, and some institutions in the state administer GEAR UP partnership grants. Other campus programs that support low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented students in their preparation for postsecondary education, like TRiO and Upward Bound, are administered as well.
- » The state subsidy to postsecondary institutions may also provide support for campus operations, including admissions, outreach, and enrollment activities.

**Washington provides some resources to support working-age adults' ability to pay for and access college and career programs.**

- » Workforce conditional scholarships and loan programs are available to increase postsecondary enrollment for eligible students in specific high-need industries.
- » State agencies offer web-based information and digital tools to support working-age adults in navigating college enrollment, various programs, and basic needs resources.
- » Federal funds support education and training through the Washington Jobs Initiative and Workforce Development Councils' work to increase the number of adults in education and training programs.
- » Some state programs administered by the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges support incumbent and dislocated worker training, including the Job Skills Program, Customized Training Program, and Worker Retraining Program.

**Guiding Questions: Enrollment**

- What would it look like to build an aligned and supportive environment for Washington residents to access postsecondary pathways?
- Enrollment into postsecondary education involves uncertainties around affordability and preparedness. What are ways to systemically reduce uncertainty in the enrollment process?
- How can we build diverse pathways across education and training allowing Washington residents to seamlessly move through them?

## Student Supports

Lack of access to affordable housing, food, healthcare, childcare, and other needs—commonly known as basic needs insecurity—are critical barriers that can undermine persistence and completion rates for Washington postsecondary students. These challenges were highlighted during the recent pandemic, but they have been long-term and persistent challenges for many students.

**Access to basic needs should not be a barrier for Washington residents seeking a postsecondary degree.** Washington is one of the few states to expressly identify support for students' basic needs as a core strategy toward our state's postsecondary attainment goal. Understanding the underlying challenges and the prevalence of needs, as well as learning through pilots and stakeholder engagement, have been important factors in growing our understanding of the barriers and gaps in support for postsecondary students' basic needs.

### Background

Students face many different types of costs beyond tuition and fees. Costs for basic needs—such as housing, food, healthcare, childcare, and others—represent over two-thirds of the actual cost of attendance at both four-year and two-year institutions (Figures 10a and 10b). Earnings loss due to class and study time exacerbates the challenge students face in covering basic needs.

**The majority of attendance costs are not tuition.**

Figure 10a. Four-year public research university costs, living on campus

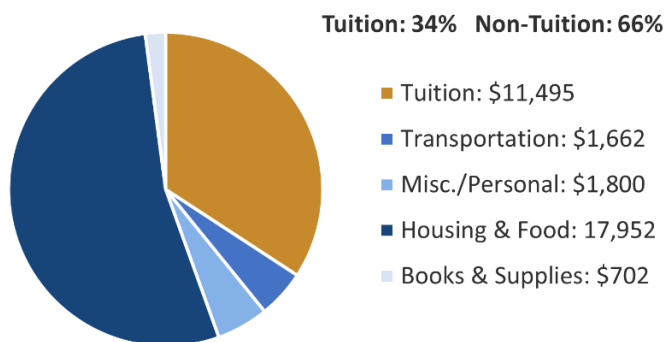
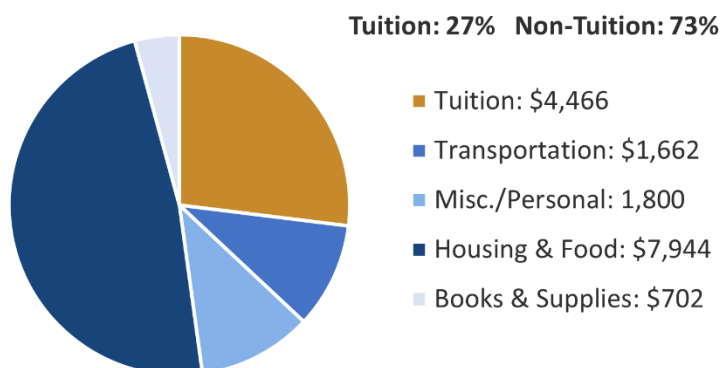


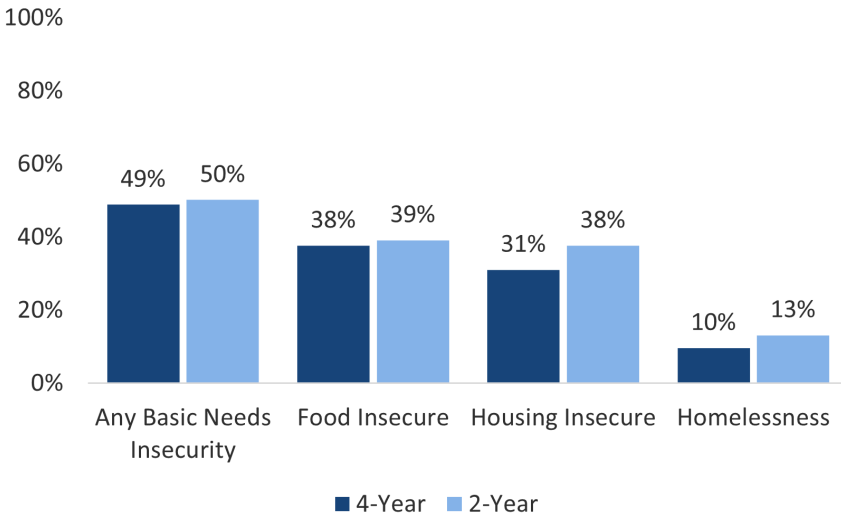
Figure 10b. Community or technical college costs, living with parents



Source: <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/COA%20Gap%20Myth%20of%20Full%20Ride%20Financial%20Aid%202803.20.23%29.pdf>

Despite a strong financial aid grant program in Washington, there is commonly a gap for students with low incomes between the amount of aid they receive and the costs of their basic needs, particularly with rising inflation and skyrocketing rental expenses. These financial burdens can derail students even when financial aid covers their full tuition and fees, causing them to drop out of their postsecondary programs or turn away completely from their postsecondary goals.

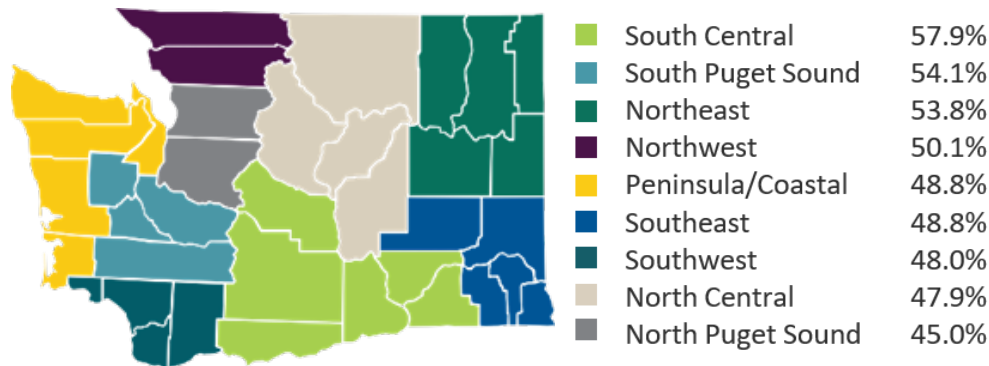
Figure 11. Students at two-year and four-year colleges reported similar basic needs insecurity rates



Source: Washington Student Experience Survey 2022 Findings Report: <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2023.BasicNeedsReport.pdf>

The gaps in covering these critical non-tuition costs such as housing and food are pervasive among Washington postsecondary students in both two-year and four-year institutions (Figure 11) and across all regions of the state (Figure 12), according to 2022 Washington survey data. Struggles with housing and food stability were common among respondents: four in ten experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days; in the prior year, three in ten experienced housing insecurity, and one in ten experienced homelessness.

Figure 12. High percentages of students reported basic needs insecurity in all regions



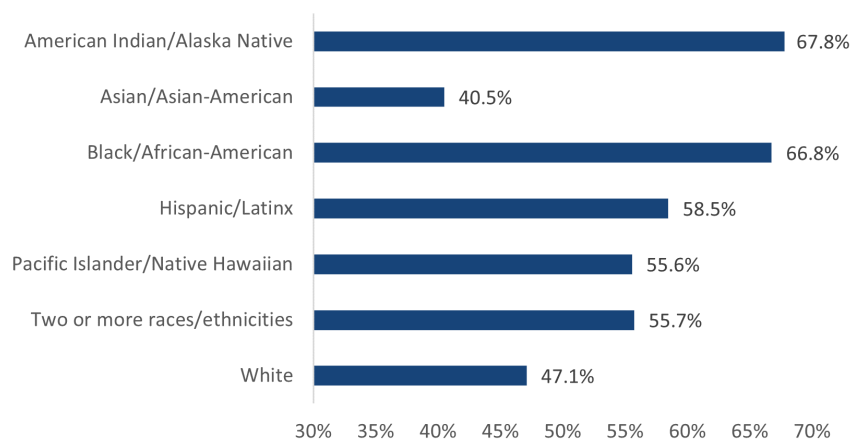
Source: Washington Student Experience Survey 2022 Findings Report: <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2023.BasicNeedsReport.pdf>

Basic needs insecurity impacts some Washington student populations more than others. Insecurity rates were disproportionately high among some race and ethnicity groups (Figure 13), students with low incomes, first-generation students, parenting students, students living with a disability, and students who reported belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. Students who had experienced foster care reported the highest level of basic needs insecurity among all subgroups.



Washington students also reported significant gaps in childcare access, with two out of three students unable to afford needed care. Access to needed healthcare was also low, with only half of respondents indicating that they had reliable access to needed care, and only one-third of students reporting that they had access to needed mental/behavioral healthcare. A critical survey insight is that only half of students who have experienced basic needs insecurity have used campus or community support resources (49 percent). This points to significant opportunities to better connect students with existing resources, to remove restrictions for students to access resources, and to identify and fill gaps where resources are non-existent or insufficient.

Figure 13. Basic needs insecurity is disproportionately high among some race and ethnicity groups



Source: Washington Student Experience Survey 2022 Findings Report: <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2023.BasicNeedsReport.pdf>

## Policy landscape

Access to basic needs can be provided through a variety of sources: financial aid programs, existing federal or state public benefits, local resources such as community-based organizations (e.g., food banks, utility assistance funds, shelters), and postsecondary institutions' resources.

### Washington's financial aid programs may cover costs beyond tuition and fees.

- » Costs of attending college beyond tuition and fees are considered using the federal definition of "total cost of attendance." If a student receives more total aid across all sources than the cost of tuition, these additional funds help support the cost of housing, food, and other needs.
- » If a student has received aid at the level of their "total cost of attendance," an institution may be limited in providing additional aid.

### Some Washington postsecondary students may be eligible for federal or state public assistance programs to address food, housing, childcare, and other needs.

- » The state administers and builds off federal programs to provide programming and support to some income-eligible postsecondary students to help with housing, food, and other emergency funds.
- » State childcare subsidies have become increasingly more accessible for full-time students in two-year institutions and apprenticeship programs, regardless of immigration status. However, students in bachelor or graduate programs are limited in accessing childcare subsidies.
- » The state has encouraged partnerships with community providers to expand access to food for postsecondary students.

**Building on limited investments in prior years to address these barriers, the first statewide policies to increase support for postsecondary basic needs were enacted in 2023.**

- » **Access to resources:** Public and tribal institutions now provide a campus navigator to support students' access to basic needs resources and increase coordination of community and campus support.
- » **Housing:** Policy and investment made permanent the [Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness grant](#) for all public community and technical colleges and baccalaureates to provide wrap-around services to address the needs of students experiencing homelessness or who aged out of foster care. A 2024 proviso also funds a study of housing opportunities for students with low incomes attending two-year colleges.
- » **Planning and assessment:** Institutions are required to develop and report on basic needs-focused strategic plans, and to collaborate with WSAC on surveying students to better understand the prevalence of basic needs insecurity and students' access to resources.

**Washington continues to support pilot learning and sector-based strategies:**

- » **Food security:** A small free/reduced-price food security pilot is testing preventative approaches in two public baccalaureates and four community and technical colleges.
- » **Emergency assistance:** The [Student Emergency Assistance Grant program](#) distributes funding to community and technical colleges to help students cover emergency expenses. The grant program does not include baccalaureate institutions.
- » **Healthcare:** A two-year study of student health care and insurance access, as well as a two-year pilot for health insurance navigation, will be completed this year. The state has also supported a [pilot grant program to address mental healthcare access](#) at four community and technical colleges.

**In addition to state-level action, most public and private institutions provide some form of access to basic needs for students, such as the following:**

- » Emergency grants to cover one-time needs like rental assistance.
- » On-campus food pantries or partnerships with local food banks.
- » Innovative partnerships between local housing authorities or private property businesses and institutions.
- » Case management and integrated teams providing navigation and wrap-around supports for basic needs and mental/behavioral health.
- » Childcare centers on some campuses provide early education and childcare for enrolled postsecondary students.
- » Health and mental/behavioral care services may be available in various levels and capacities.

**Guiding Questions: Student Supports**

- How can we ensure that all postsecondary students have access to **emergency support** to address urgent basic needs that emerge for students?
- How might Washington create **proactive systems** to prevent basic needs insecurity for postsecondary students?

- Considering the gaps in funding for non-academic costs of postsecondary, how might proactive and flexible funding support increased persistence and completion for vulnerable student populations?
- How can equitable access to needed mental healthcare be ensured for all students?
- How can Washington support state and regional partnerships to increase affordable housing for students?
- What opportunities exist to develop preventative and sustainable systems to address high levels of postsecondary food insecurity?
- How can available and affordable childcare be ensured for parenting students?

## Completion

Reaching our goal of dramatically expanding the postsecondary education level of Washington residents requires higher enrollment and completion. While not the only measure, successful completion of a postsecondary program is a widely accepted indicator of student success. Completing a program is necessary to earn a credential that can help students achieve their life and career goals.

Currently, Washington's overall completion rate is 68 percent at public four-year institutions and 36 percent at public two-years. For a bachelor's degree, this is measured over a six-year period beginning at first enrollment. For an associate degree, the period is three years from enrollment.

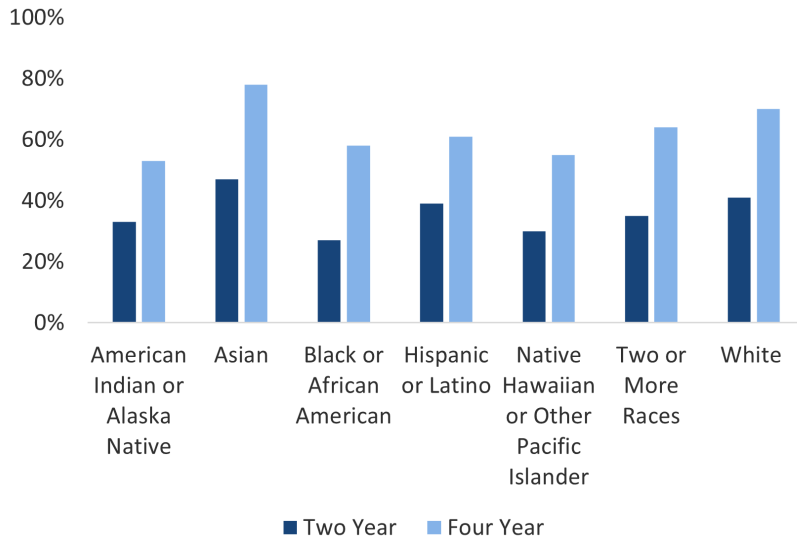
In order for all students to achieve success in their college and career endeavors, we must advocate for the necessary resources to support and understand student experiences (e.g., adult learners, English language learners, geographic proximity to institutions) and their identities (e.g., race, age, gender). Focusing on specific populations of learners furthest from education attainment is necessary to ensure all of Washington's diverse postsecondary learners are supported toward completion.

### **Postsecondary students should persist and earn a credential.**

- » Higher education should guide and support student academic pathways through postsecondary education into the workforce no matter where or when a student enters a pathway.
- » Credential completion is not always linear. Noncredit coursework is a critical component for some students and can be a critical building block toward a credential.
- » If Washington provides the necessary resources and establishes a supportive learning environment, then all students who want to, can and should be able to succeed at earning a postsecondary credential.
- » The time it takes students to complete a credential may vary depending on students' academic or career interests (short-term workforce credential vs. doctoral degree), and enrollment (part-time or full-time).

Inequities exist in graduation rates in our state, especially by race and ethnicity (Figure 14).

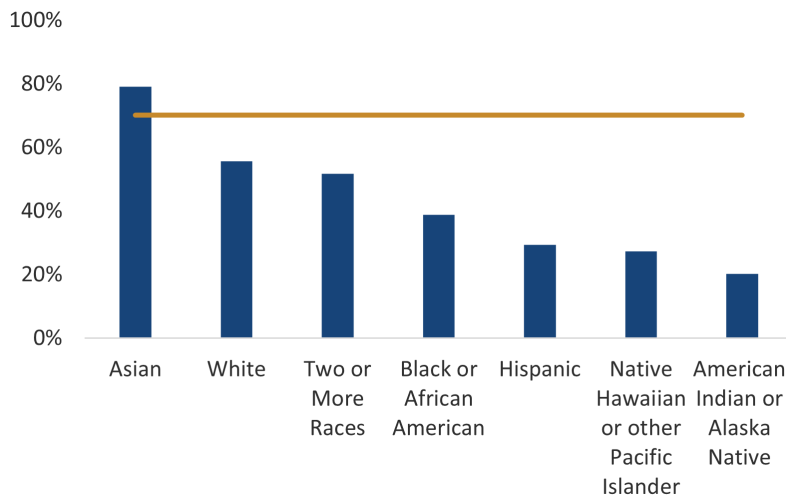
Figure 14. Washington Graduation Rates within 150 percent of Normal Time, by Race/Ethnicity and Institution Level



Source: WSAC staff analysis of IPEDS Graduation Rates survey, 150% of normal time, 2021-22.

The percentage of Washington residents with postsecondary credentials show distinct gaps across racial groups and in relation to our state’s 70% attainment goal (Figure 15). Washington’s effort to increase completion rates should be particularly focused on supporting students of color, especially Black, Indigenous, and Latino students, who have been historically and institutionally marginalized within education.

Figure 15. Proportion of Washington Residents Ages 25–44 with Postsecondary Credentials by Race/Ethnicity



Source: WSAC staff analysis of ACS 1-Year PUMS Data, 2022.

**Washington is committed to improving outcomes for students from historically marginalized communities through diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.**

- » State law directs public higher education institutions to provide professional development for faculty and staff with the purpose of eliminating structural racism against all races and promoting DEI; requires campus climate assessments including listening and feedback sessions; and provides programs on DEI and antiracism for students.

**Washington has made significant investments to support the implementation of Guided Pathways at community and technical colleges.**

- » [Guided Pathways](#) can be an effective approach to increasing persistence and completion for students from low-income families.
- » Washington's implementation of the Guided Pathways model includes an intentional focus on closing racial equity gaps.
- » Colleges receive technical and leadership support to clarify pathways for students, help students' access and pursue that pathway, help students stay on course, and ensure students successfully learn and complete pathway.

**Washington students are mobile and move among institutions while pursuing a postsecondary credential.**

- » Colleges have statewide agreements that give students flexibility to transfer between sectors, reinforced through longstanding partnership across sectors (SBCTC, COP and ICW) with respect to statewide transfer and articulation policies.
- » Students can earn a transfer associate degree aligned to a four-year degree program at universities.
- » Washington regulates institutional transcript withholding practices, protecting student access to transcripts. Institutions must release transcripts for students transferring to another higher education institution, job applications, financial aid, military opportunities or other postsecondary opportunities.

**Washington has opportunities to recognize and validate learning from workplaces, colleges, and more.**

- » Institutions of higher education have policies to determine how students may receive academic credit for prior learning (ACPL). Students can request that institutions consider their prior learning from the military, industry training, or other training areas.

**The state investment in public colleges and universities supports student persistence and completion.**

- » The amount of state subsidy directly affects the degree to which advising and academic support is available to students.
- » Colleges and universities provide a wide range of programs and initiatives to support students in completing their programs and earning credentials.
- » [Career Launch grants](#) help two- and four-year public institutions build credit-bearing programs that provide students with real-work experience related to their classroom studies.

**Washington’s funding model for the community and technical colleges has some connection to student completion.**

- » The state has an allocation formula that includes a factor measuring student performance at two-year institutions.
- » The [funding model](#) acknowledges the achievement gaps of historically underserved students and provides a focus on these populations.

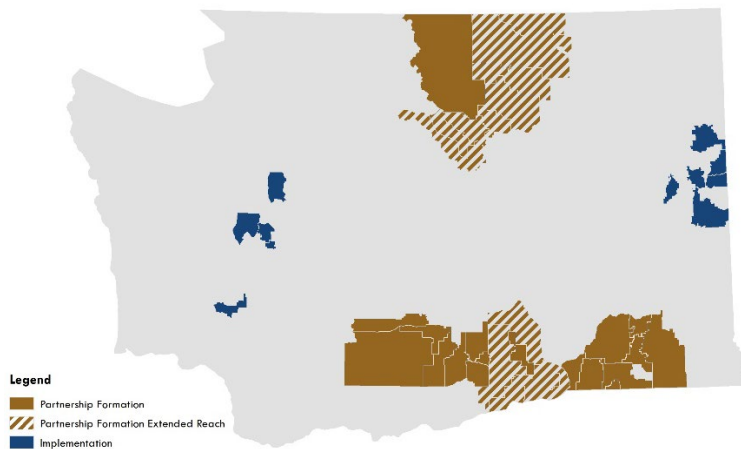
**Guiding Questions: Completion**

- How can the state support the needs of increasingly mobile students regarding credit mobility, inclusive of credits earned not only in high school and at postsecondary institutions but also through workforce learning?
- What is the role of noncredit learning and credits for prior learning in adult credential attainment? What lessons can be learned from other states that are further along in the noncredit space?
- How do we better understand indicators of success that contribute to credential completion and success in the workforce?

**Regional Partnerships**

Community and regional environments shape the decisions that most Washington residents make when they consider starting and continuing a college or career pathway. Washington State recognizes that local leaders are the experts in their communities’ assets and needs. WSAC supports regional partnerships in shaping innovative approaches that are place-based, follow best practices, leverage local and state investments, align with research, and scale around the state.

**Figure 17. Regional Challenge Grant Program Partnerships throughout Washington**



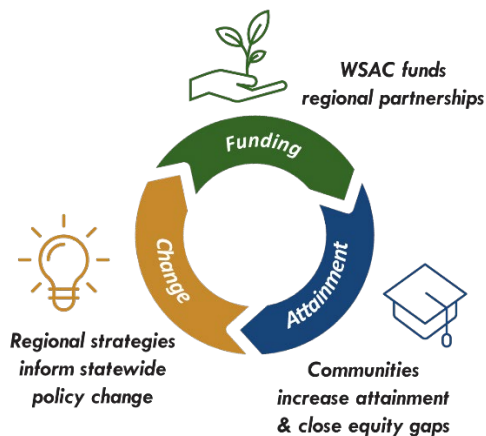
Data Sources: Washington State and Public School Districts shape files from Washington Geospatial Open Data (<https://geo.wa.gov/>).  
Note: Hatched lines indicate the larger regions in which select partnerships are working to identify opportunities available to students and families in their primary service region. These regions are excluded from the calculations of RCG investments’ population coverage.

## Emerging Work

WSAC continues to develop a Regional Partnership strategy to include all our policy and programmatic work in our relationships with communities. Successful policy change must come from communities in a co-designed manner.

The [Regional Challenge Grant](#) (RCG) awards competitive grants to new and existing community-based career and college pathways partnerships to increase postsecondary enrollment and completion rates and close opportunity gaps. Senate Bill 5789 provides direct financial support for cross-sector, regionally-based partnerships whose work contributes to achieving the state’s postsecondary attainment goal, especially for learners furthest from educational justice.

Figure 18. Regional Partnerships “Theory of Change”



Source: <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/Regional%20Challenge%20Grants%20Framework.pdf>

In 2023, eight partnerships were awarded \$4.85 million dollars to begin this work across the state. Each partnership is growing innovative strategies informed by their region to increase postsecondary attainment and close equity gaps. In January 2024, a second request for Letters of Interest elicited 38 additional applications and WSAC plans to recommend up to six additional partnerships for funding beginning in July 2024. For more information on the first year of implementation, please see the [Legislative Report: Establishing the Regional Challenge Grant](#) and the accompanying [Program Framework](#).

## Work Plan

We aim to learn alongside partnerships about how RCG investments will lead to regional change. This year, the regional partnerships team will:

- » Support the funding of new partnerships from the [2024 Request for Letters of Interest](#), with an emphasis on funding regional partnerships in alignment with the investment strategy funding vision.
- » Continue developing grantmaking procedures including aligning awards with the start of each fiscal year, exploring a single platform for application and document submission, and supporting grantees with technical assistance, among other elements.
- » Create additional shared learning opportunities for the growing number of regional partnerships, building on the first in-person convening held in the fall of 2023.

- » Continue to collaborate and seek input from advisors, our Council, and other stakeholders throughout our ongoing implementation of RCG and our Regional Partnership strategy.
- » Further build opportunities to center regional partnership voices in the WSAC policy development process in alignment with the theory of change.
- » Learn from partnerships about successes and challenges and continue to share the story of Regional Partnerships in legislative reports.

## For Discussion: 2024-25 WSAC Priorities

### Equity

#### Policy Development

- » Engage state, community, and regional BIPOC leaders in Council meetings and agency work.
- » Embed equity lens across all clusters and strategic planning efforts including policy, knowledge development, and practice work.

#### Knowledge Development

- » Explore key metrics on a regional level, including the definition of a region and how we support regional leaders to use regional data to work on shared goals.
- » Conduct a thorough analysis of disparities in access and success within higher education. Identify existing programs and initiatives that address discriminatory practices and promote equitable outcomes, in alignment with the directives of Executive Order 22-02.

### Affordability

#### Policy Development

- » Explore the ability to define a standard(s) for affordability based on total cost of attendance across household income levels that recognizes the effects of state subsidy, tuition policy, and financial aid.

#### Knowledge Development

- » Evaluate the effectiveness of the Washington College Grant in improving postsecondary educational outcomes for Washington students.
- » Develop a web-based tool that allows stakeholders to visualize affordability of postsecondary education based on family income.

### Enrollment

#### Policy Development

- » Continue to identify state strategies to increase postsecondary enrollment, career development, and advancement opportunities:
  - Improve readiness to continue in education and training, including:
    - Maximizing access to and the benefit of dual enrollment programs.
    - Making pathways more accessible for students and families.



- Understand the gaps in access to information on pathways across various stakeholders—students, families, staff—and explore strategies to fill those gaps by connecting with stakeholders earlier.
- » Work with employer associations to support adult enrollment that can help meet their hiring and upskilling needs and increase adult enrollment rates.

### Knowledge Development

- » Continue to iterate and implement research-backed enhancements to improve OtterBot messaging to parents and younger students that incorporates behavioral science-informed advancements.
- » Evaluate the Passport program that supports college and career pathways for foster and homeless youth.
- » Monitor and report fall enrollment trends in the wake of the pandemic-induced enrollment decline at public institutions in the state.

### Related Practice Work with Partners and Stakeholders

- » Develop engagement strategies for SNAP/WCG eligibility and early notification of guaranteed financial aid with pilot partnerships of institutions and high schools.
- » Implement co-created strategies related to helping students access postsecondary resources informed by design thinking work conducted with students and families around the state.
- » Understand the influence of stipends in adult enrollment specifically into the behavioral health apprenticeship program.
- » Build a framework for adult engagement and learning from the work of regional partnerships.

## Student Supports

### Policy Development

- » Explore policy strategies to better support the basic needs of students in workforce training programs.
- » Pursue policy and investments to ensure postsecondary access and support for foster youth and unaccompanied homeless youth.
- » Pursue policy to ensure that all postsecondary students have access to flexible resources to address basic needs insecurity emergencies.
- » Explore policy strategies supporting low-cost housing to address the needs of postsecondary students experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness.

### Knowledge Development

- » Develop a sustainable strategy for survey data on the statewide basic needs insecurity prevalence at institutional, regional, and state levels, including how WSAC will share data insights with partners and stakeholders.
- » Engage with national and state partners to develop a research plan for the Washington Postsecondary Free/Reduced Price Food pilot to understand the impact of proactive food security strategies on postsecondary persistence and attainment.

- » Develop a landscape study on Washington parenting students with low incomes, including access to childcare, to better understand persistence and completion.

#### **Related Practice Work with Partners and Stakeholders**

- » Develop a partnership with five or more institutions together with state agencies to provide targeted outreach and support for students who are likely eligible for public benefits.
- » Support regional partnership development for affordable housing for students experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness.
- » Develop a plan with partners to better understand and address the needs of parenting students, including access to basic needs such as affordable childcare across different regions.

## **Completion**

### **Policy Development**

- » Foster consensus on a comprehensive definition of student success that encompasses both academic and career pathways. This definition should consider the diverse needs and backgrounds of all learners.
- » Advocate for the necessary resources to support all students in achieving success in their college and career endeavors.
- » Evaluate the landscape of non-degree credentials, with a particular focus on those offered by colleges and universities. Determine how these credentials can contribute to student completion and career advancement.
- » Identify strategies for successfully completing adults with some or no prior postsecondary credits, including adults in need of a high school credential, English language learners, and re-entering justice-involved individuals.
- » In partnership with industry sectors, identify strategies to maximize the application of prior learning assessment towards a certificate, degree, or industry required credential for incumbent workers.

### **Knowledge Development**

- » Investigate differences in pathways young people take from high school to postsecondary education and work, with the aim of understanding the extent these pathways may explain inequities in postsecondary degree attainment and earnings.
- » Engage in nationwide endeavors focused on skills-based hiring to gain deeper insights into the most effective approaches for nurturing workforce talent to better expand and support the multiple routes and decisions learners make regarding high-quality credentials of value.

### **Related Practice Work with Partners and Stakeholders**

- » Collaborative Learning and Sharing:
  - Provide opportunities for institutions to actively engage in knowledge sharing and collaborative learning with one another. This exchange should focus on strategies that increase persistence, retention, and completion rates, while also narrowing equity gaps.

- Participate in Complete College Accelerator cohort. This collaboration will provide opportunities to learn from successful models implemented by other institutions, driving innovative practices and enhancing student outcomes.
  - Participate in the inaugural SHEEO | ASAP College Completion Coalition Learning Community. This collaboration will work to address racial equity gaps in attainment rates through strategic scaling of the ASAP (Accelerated Study in Associate Programs) model.
  - Facilitate a learning-centered Community of Practice centering adult learners with statewide partners.
- » Student Mobility Support:
- Develop strategies that facilitate the seamless transfer and mobility of students across different postsecondary institutions, postsecondary pathways, and learning experiences within Washington State. By removing barriers to student mobility, we can enhance completion rates and ensure students can pursue their educational goals effectively.
  - Participate in the Universal Transfer Explorer Project with ITHAKA S+R, a credit mobility initiative to encourage transparency for students and institutions regarding credit transfer.
  - Participate in the National Governors Association State Community of Practice focused on skills-based hiring in the public sector. This collaboration will provide opportunities to understand nationwide best practices to support incumbent public sector workers.
  - Facilitate collaboration across workgroups and partners involved in skills-based hiring to enable the transition from noncredit workforce credentials to credit-bearing pathways. Additionally, devise a strategy to utilize Learning and Employment Records (LERs) as a valuable resource in crafting a comprehensive statewide framework for ACPL.

## Council Focus Areas

- » Continue to develop and nurture Regional Challenge Grant participants to create innovative postsecondary programs in various regions of the state which could potentially yield new strategies in helping Washington State achieve its 70% postsecondary attainment goal.
- » Develop comprehensive policy proposals to increase enrollment in valuable student pathways and programs for both high school graduates and adult learners, and to support students in attaining these in-demand credentials.
- » Define and then track all postsecondary credential attainment across all public and private job sectors.
- » Create a comprehensive communication strategy regarding the future value of attaining a postsecondary credential in a rapidly changing job market and demystify the process in attaining those credentials.