2024 Strategic Action Plan

Increasing Postsecondary Educational Attainment and Equity in Washington State

Statewide Attainment

70% — **Goal**

60.3% — **2021**

55.4% — 2013

♈ = Gap
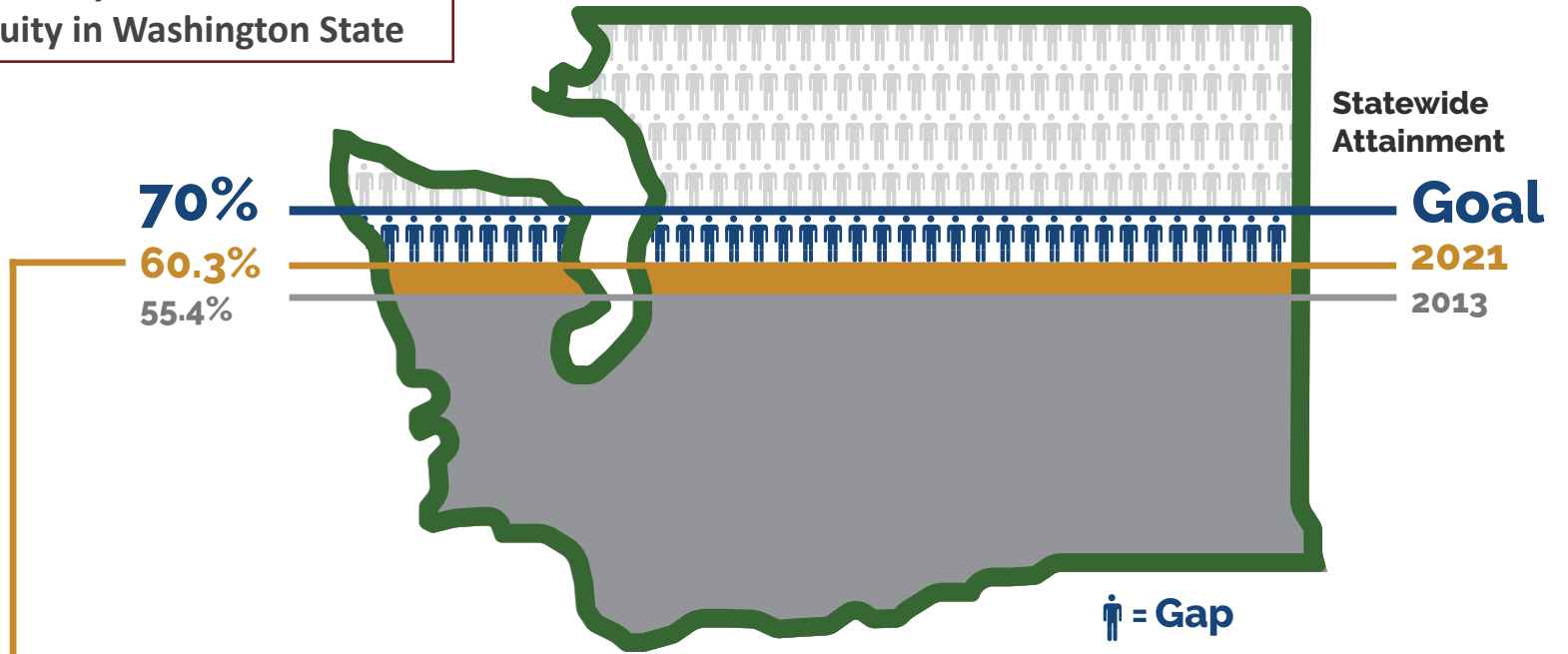
2021 Attainment by Race/Ethnicity

Washingtonians, ages 25–44, with postsecondary credentials

70% Statewide Attainment Goal

100%
80%
60%
40%
20%
0%

Asian | White | Two or More Races | Black or African American | Hispanic | Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander | American Indian or Alaska Native
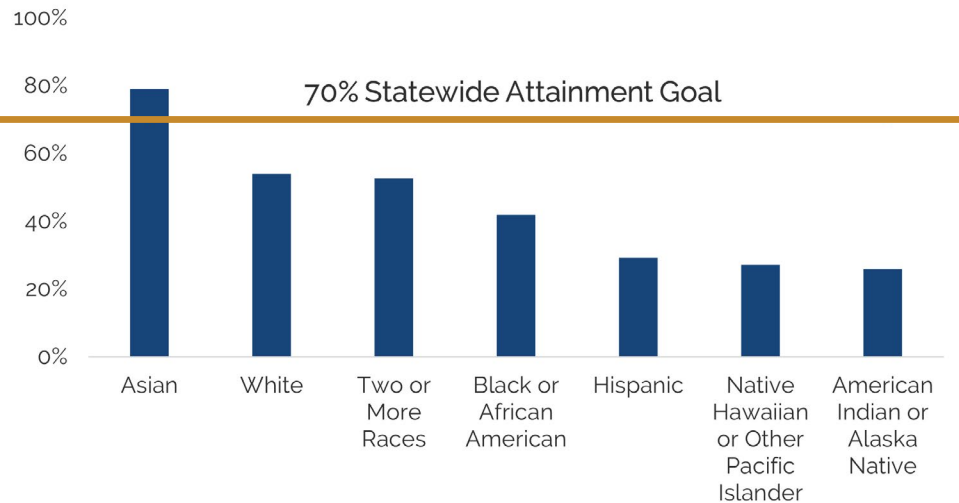
Strategic Action Plan 2024

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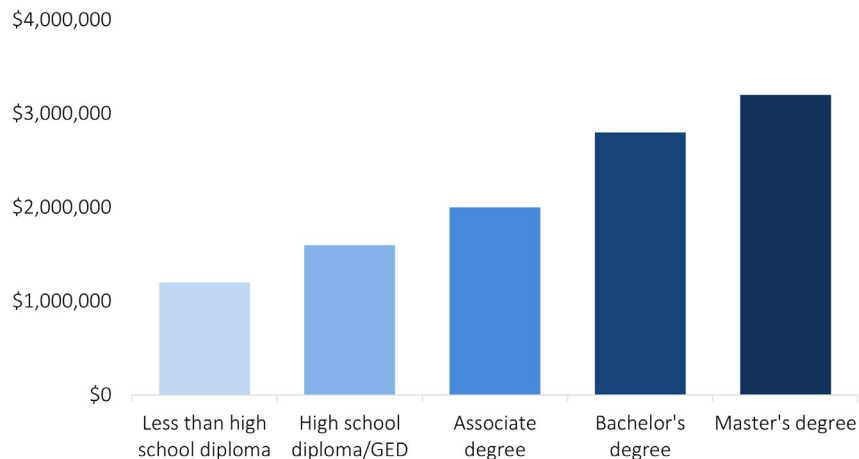
Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of the US Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), 2009–2019

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.

Education and training increase the knowledge and skills that enable all people to succeed in their life goals. The benefit of educational attainment for more residents takes our work beyond education policy. We seek to build a movement shaped by all voices that support stronger and more prosperous communities.

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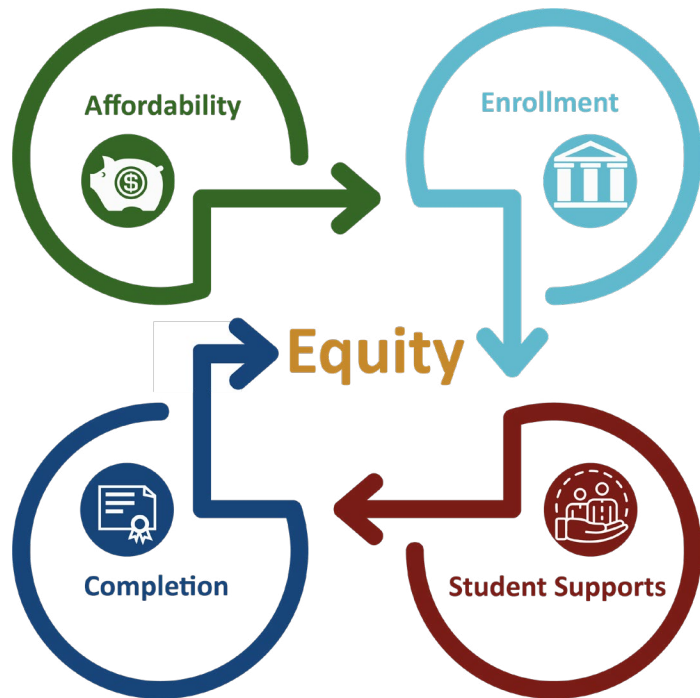
*If we build an **affordable** and **supportive** educational environment, more Washingtonians will **enroll** in programs and **complete** credentials.*

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 postsecondary institutions in Washington

Race	High School	Public 2-Year	Public 4-Year
White	51.3%	42.6%	48.7%
Hispanic or Latino	24.8%	10.7%	13.1%
Two or More Races	8.5%	13.2%	8.9%
Asian	8.3%	10.6%	14.6%
Black or African American	4.6%	6.3%	3.9%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1.3%	0.7%	0.5%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1.3%	0.9%	0.6%
Not Reported	N/A	15.0%	9.8%

Source: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Data Portal: Report Card Enrollment 2021-22 School Year, Grades 9-12.; State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), Enrollment Data Dashboard: Demographics, Annual Headcount by Race/Ethnicity, Academic Year 2021-22; Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) staff: Annual Enrollment, Undergraduate Headcount by Race/Ethnicity, Academic Year 2021-22.

The racial demographic makeup of public high schools in Washington is different than public postsecondary institutions in the state (Figure 3). For instance, Hispanic/Latino students make up almost a quarter of the public high school population, but only about one-tenth 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.
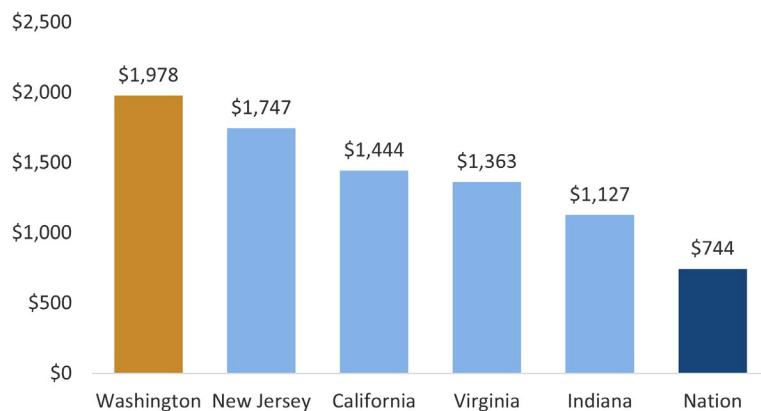
Affordability

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, 2020-21

Source: National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs (NASSGAP) Survey, 2020-2021. https://www.nassgapsurvey.com/survey_reports/2020-2021-52nd.pdf

Washington's higher education policy on affordability is among the most comprehensive in the nation

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 55 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

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 $73,000 for a household of four.

» The state contributes part of tuition and fees for students from households above 65% MFI and up to the statewide median—currently $112,500 for a household of four.

» Income-eligible students who receive federal grants can keep their combined state and federal grant that can help cover costs beyond tuition and fees.

» Students can use state financial aid regardless of consecutive or full-time enrollment.

All Washington residents who meet income eligibility are guaranteed financial aid for higher education.

The state subsidizes public colleges and universities for all students.

» Amount of state subsidy directly affects the level of tuition and fees.

» 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 increase 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.

» *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 apply for and receive state financial aid through alternative means, such as participation in other public benefits programs.

» 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 supports households with the ability to 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).

Enrollment

Washington's undergraduate enrollment has followed the national pattern of flat enrollment for two decades with a steep decline during the Covid pandemic (2018-19 to 2020-21). Our four-year institutions saw a 6% decline and two-year institutions saw a 16% decline in this period (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Undergraduate Enrollment at Washington Postsecondary Institutions by Institution Level [1]
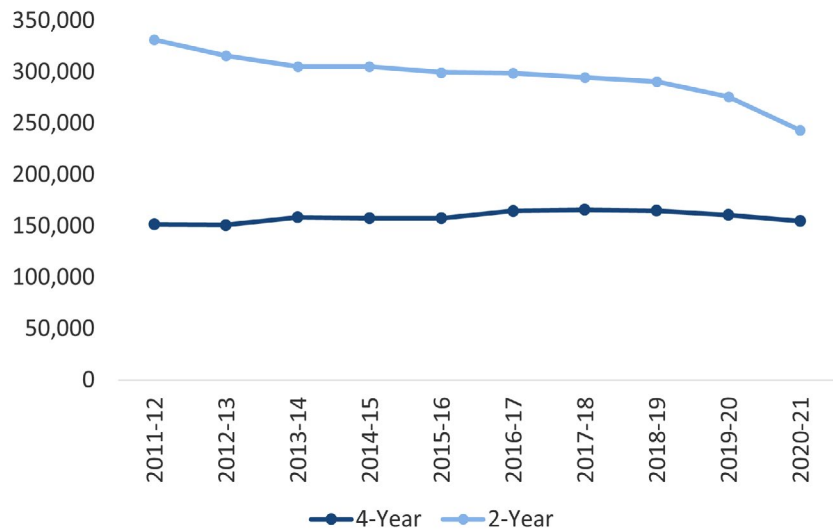
Source: WSAC staff analysis of National Center for Education Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 12-Month Enrollment survey, component EFFY (unduplicated headcount), 2012 to 2021.

However, Washington's enrollment pattern for recent high school graduates has remained below both the national average and important comparison states. Our 2020 state average of 51 percent is 12 percentage points below the national average, and far behind states with competitive economies, such as Massachusetts (68%) and Virginia (65%).[2,3,4] Among the West Coast states, Washington's rate is below that of Oregon (56%) and California (63%).[5,6]

Figure 7. Direct Postsecondary Enrollment Rate from High School
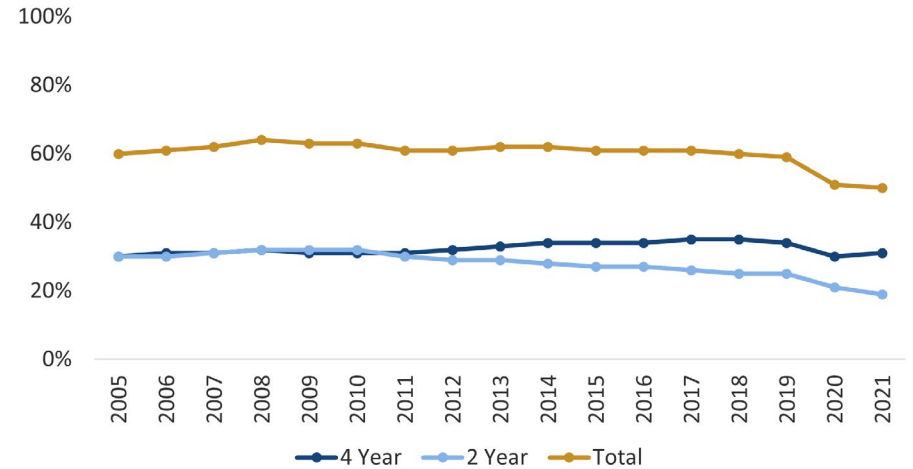
Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) High School Graduate Outcomes Dashboard.

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 towards 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.

Washington must aim to support enrollment among students of color in particular.

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, 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.

Washington must work to increase enrollment for K-12 students, as well as working-age adults.

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.

» The state continues to cover costs for high school students to enroll in and receive postsecondary credits, recently 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 and, in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders, 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 now 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

- » The state funds WSAC's Regional Challenge Grant 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 WSAC's state and other campus GEAR UP programs that support low-income, first generation, and underrepresented students in their preparation for postsecondary education.
- » The state subsidy to postsecondary institutions may also provide support for campus operations, including admissions, outreach, and enrollment activities.

Work-based and academic programs offered through Career Connect Washington prepare students for college and career while earning college credit or wages.

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

- » Financial aid programs are available to increase postsecondary attainment for non-traditional, income-eligible students.
- » 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 Good Jobs Challenge and Workforce Development Councils' work to increase the number of adults in education and training programs.
- » Some state programs, administered by the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, support incumbent and dislocated worker training, including the Job Skills Program, Customized Training Program, and Worker Retraining Program.

Student Supports

Students face many different types of costs beyond tuition and fees. Earnings loss due to class and study time comes on top of the costs of basic needs such as housing, food, healthcare, childcare, and other needs. Costs for basic needs represent over two thirds of the actual cost of attendance at both four year and two-year institutions (Figures 8a and 8b).

Majority of attendance costs are not tuition.

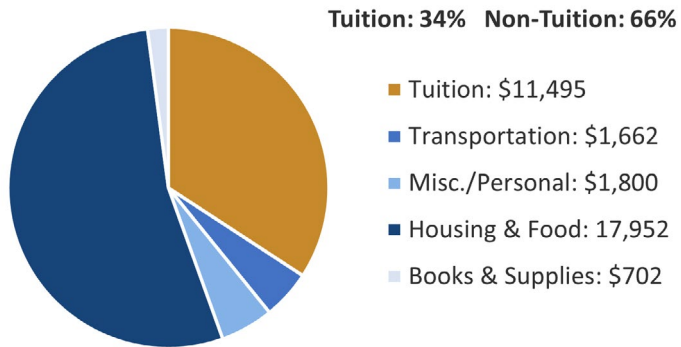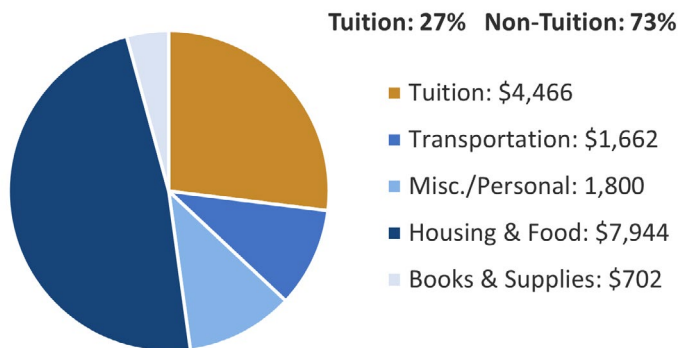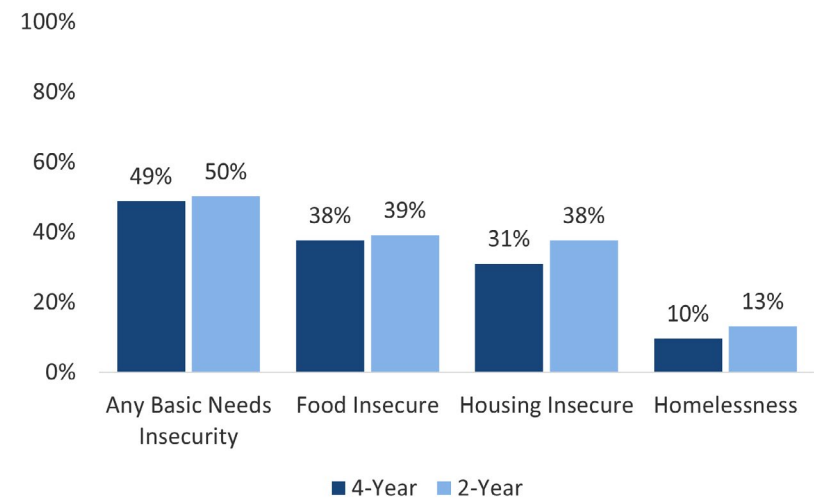*Figure 8a. Four-year research university costs, living on campus*

Tuition: 34%   Non-Tuition: 66%

- Tuition: $11,495
- Transportation: $1,662
- Misc./Personal: $1,800
- Housing & Food: 17,952
- Books & Supplies: $702

Figure 8b. Community or technical college costs, living with parents

Tuition: 27%   Non-Tuition: 73%

- Tuition: $4,466
- Transportation: $1,662
- Misc./Personal: 1,800
- Housing & Food: $7,944
- Books & Supplies: $702

Source: https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/COA%20Gap%20Myth%20of%20Full%20Ride%20Financial%20Aid%20%2803.20.23%29.pdf

Despite a strong financial aid grant program in Washington, there is commonly a gap for students with low incomes between aid amounts and their actual costs for 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 stop out of their postsecondary programs or turn away completely from their postsecondary goals.

Figure 9. Students at two-year and four-year colleges reported similar basic needs insecurity rates.
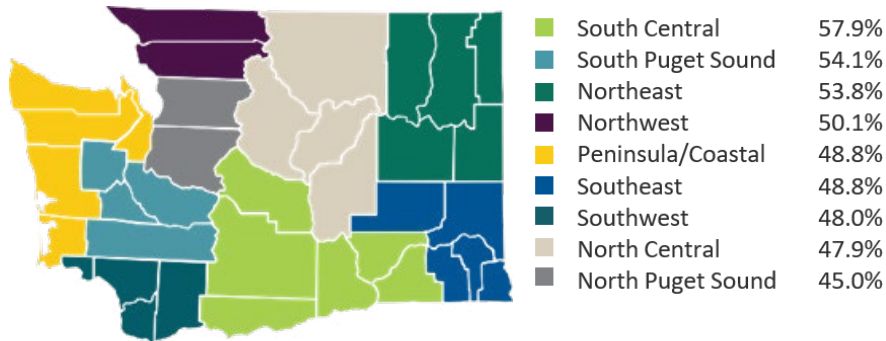

Source: Washington Student Experience Survey 2022 Findings Report: https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2023.BasicNeedsReport.pdf

The gaps in covering these critical non-tuition costs such as housing and food—known as basic needs insecurity—are pervasive among Washington postsecondary students in both two-year and four-year institutions (Figure 9) and across all regions of the state (Figure 10), according to 2022 Washington survey data.[7] Struggles with housing and food stability were common among respondents: 4 in 10 experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days, and in the prior year 3 in 10 experienced housing insecurity and 1 in 10 experienced homelessness.[8]

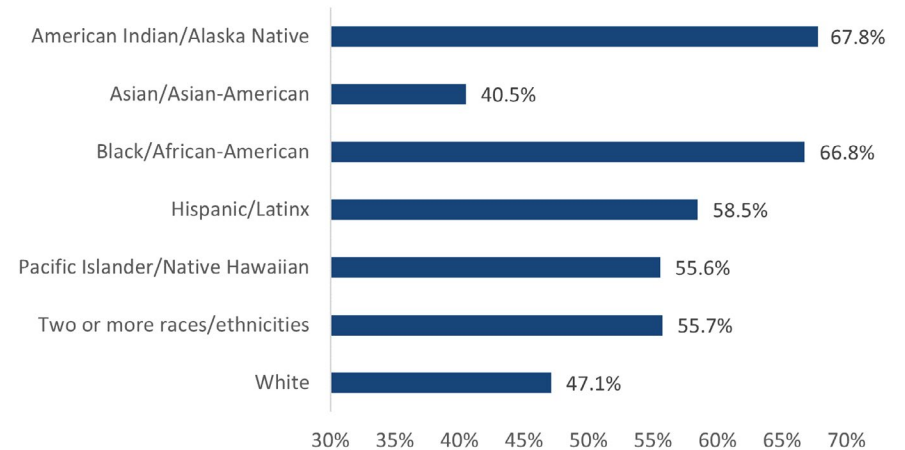Figure 10. High percentages of students reported basic needs insecurity in all regions.

South Central	57.9%
South Puget Sound	54.1%
Northeast	53.8%
Northwest	50.1%
Peninsula/Coastal	48.8%
Southeast	48.8%
Southwest	48.0%
North Central	47.9%
North Puget Sound	45.0%

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 11), students with low incomes, former foster youth, first generation students, parenting students, students living with a disability, and students who reported belonging to the LGBTQI+ community.

Financial burdens like housing, food, childcare, and transportation can derail students even when financial aid covers their tuition and fees.

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%). 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 11. 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

This is an emerging issue area at the state level, and Washington is one of the few states to expressly identify and begin work on these challenges. In addition to prevalence assessment, learning through pilots and stakeholder engagement have been an important part of growing understanding of the barriers and gaps in support for postsecondary students' basic needs.

Access to basic needs should not be a barrier for Washington residents seeking a postsecondary degree.

» Basic needs encompass access to affordable housing, sufficient food, quality childcare, mental healthcare, affordable transportation, and access to other fundamental needs.

» Access could be provided through higher education institutions, existing federal or state public benefits, and/or local resources such as community-based organizations with food banks, utility assistance funds, shelters, etc.

Some of 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 place some limits on the amount of any additional aid that can be received.

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

» 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 (2021) and apprenticeship programs, regardless of immigration status (2023). However, students in bachelor programs are limited in accessing childcare subsidies.

» The state has encouraged partnerships to expand access to food for postsecondary students.

The state has made modest, limited investments in the two-year and four-year public institutions to address postsecondary basic needs insecurity.

» *Access to resources:* 2023 legislation requires public and tribal institutions to hire a campus navigator to support students' access to basic needs resources and increase coordination of community and campus support.

» *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.

» *Food security:* 2023 legislation establishes a small free/reduced-price food pilot program for two public baccalaureates and four community and technical colleges.

» *Housing:* The state has supported the needs of college students experiencing homelessness and those who aged out of foster care in four-year public and two-year public institutions through a pilot grant program. Policy and investment in 2023 make the pilot a permanent grant for all public community and technical colleges and baccalaureates to continue focused wrap-around services to address the needs of students in these populations.

» *Healthcare:* The state has supported pilot programs to address suicide prevention and mental healthcare access at four community and technical colleges. A 2022 proviso has invested in a two-year study of student health care and insurance access, as well as a two-year pilot for health insurance navigation.

Most public and private institutions have some form of access to basic needs for students.

» Emergency grants to cover one-time needs like rental assistance.

» On-campus food pantry or partnership with local food bank.

» Innovative partnerships between local housing authorities or developers and institutions.

» Case management and integrated teams providing navigation and wrap-around supports for basic needs and mental/behavioral health.

» Childcare centers provide early education and childcare for enrolled postsecondary students.

» Institutions may engage in assessment of basic needs security prevalence and strategic planning to improve services through institutional systems. Legislation in 2023 requires institutions to regularly assess basic needs prevalence and create biennial strategic plans.
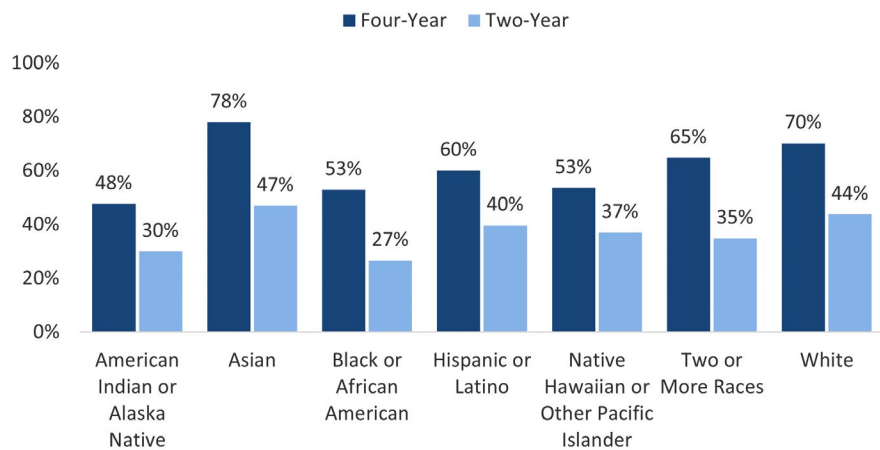
Completion

Reaching our goal of dramatically expanding the postsecondary education level of Washington residents requires higher enrollment and a greater rate of student success. While not the only measure, successful completion of a postsecondary program is now 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 at public four-year institutions is 68 percent, and 36 percent at public two-years. This is measured over periods that begin at first enrollment but continue for six years for a bachelor's degree and three years for an associate degree. There are also glaring racial inequities in graduation rates in our state (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Washington Graduation Rates within 150 percent of Normal Time, by Race/Ethnicity and Institution Level [9]

Source: WSAC staff analysis of National Center for Education Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Graduation Rates survey, component GR (150% of normal time to complete - cohort year 2015 (4-year) and cohort year 2018 (2-year) institutions), 2021.

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 13). 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 13. Proportion of Washington Residents Ages 25–44 with Postsecondary Credentials by Race/Ethnicity
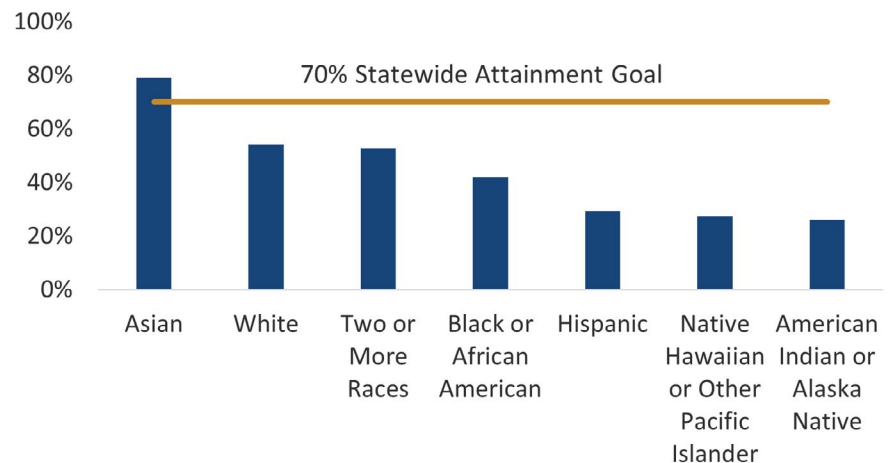
Source: WSAC staff analysis of 2021 American Community Survey PUMS 1-Year Data, Washington State.

Advocating for the necessary resources to support all students in achieving success in college and career endeavors occurs by supporting and understanding student experiences (e.g., adult learners, English language learners, geographic proximity to institutions) and their identities (e.g., race, age, gender). Supporting specific populations of learners furthest from education attainment is necessary to support Washington's diverse postsecondary learners in support of students' completion of credentials or degrees.

Completion

Higher education should guide and support student academic and career pathways through postsecondary education into the workforce.

Postsecondary students should persist and earn a credential.

- » Higher education should guide and support student academic and career pathways through postsecondary education into the workforce.
- » 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 or non-degree credential vs. doctoral degree), and enrollment (part-time or full-time).

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

- » Washington requires 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 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 has a 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.
- » Students can earn a transfer associates degree aligned to four-year degree program at universities.

Washington has opportunities to recognize and validate learning from workplaces, institutions of higher education, and more.

- » Institutions of higher education have policies to determine how students may receive credit for prior learning. 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.

- » The amount of state subsidy directly affects the degree to which advising and academic support is available to students.
- » 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.

Washington regulates institutional transcript withholding practices, protecting student access to transcripts.

- » Institutions must release transcripts for job applications, transferring to another higher education institution, financial aid, military opportunities, or other postsecondary opportunities.

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.

> *Community and regional environments shape the decisions that most Washington residents make when they consider starting and continuing a college or career pathway.*

Emerging Work

WSAC is developing a Regional Partnership strategy to include all our policy and programmatic work in our relationships with communities.

The Regional Challenge Grant (RCG) program funds partnerships that are testing innovative strategies to increase postsecondary enrollment and credential completion (inclusive of certificates and degrees) for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English language learners, students with disabilities, students in foster care, and youth experiencing homelessness.

Eight partnerships across the state were collectively awarded close to $4.85 million in grants spanning 1 to 1.5 years. These partnerships include the following communities and many of their surrounding areas: Chehalis, Seattle, Tacoma, Spokane, the Tri-Cities, the Methow Valley, the Yakima Valley, and Walla Walla. Each partnership is launching innovative strategies informed by their region to increase postsecondary attainment and close equity gaps.

Work Plan

As we continue to develop both programmatic and strategic elements of our Regional Partnership work, this year the policy team will:

» Design the investment strategy for future grantmaking, based on an assessment of regional and student demographic gaps in the current cohort, with close attention to the student groups named in statute.

» Continue to develop grantmaking procedure for RCG: aligning Implementation 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.

» Build a community of practice amongst the inaugural cohort of RCG recipients, with a first in-person convening in 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.

» Learn from partnerships about successes and challenges, and share the story of the first year of RCG funding with two legislative reports.

Equity

Policy Development

- » Engage state, community, and regional BIPOC leaders in Council meetings and agency work.
- » Embed equity lens across all four clusters 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 this resource to work on shared goals.
- » Determine equity indicators or benchmarks to measure progress for each cluster, and track using an agency dashboard.

Related Practice Work with Partners and Stakeholders

- » Explore student design teams to shape work.

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.

Related Practice Work with Partners and Stakeholders

- » Test the impact of SNAP/WCG eligibility to reduce perceived cost barriers and increase enrollment with pilot institutions.

Enrollment

Policy Development

- » Convene a wide range of stakeholders to develop a scope of work and identify state strategies to increase postsecondary enrollment and career development and advancement opportunities:
  - Improve readiness to continue in education and training, including:
    - – Making pathways understandable for students and families.
    - – Maximizing the benefit of dual enrollment programs.
  - Connect earlier in the K-12 pathways to students and families to support their understanding of opportunities and readiness for success.
  - Understand the gaps in access to information on pathways across various stakeholders—students, families, staff—and explore strategies to fill those gaps.
- » Work with employer associations to support adult enrollment that can help meet their hiring and upskilling needs and increase adult enrollment rates.

Knowledge Development

- » Build a framework for learning from the work of regional partnerships.
- » Conduct research to improve OtterBot messaging that incorporates behavioral science-informed improvements funded by Capital One Foundation.
- » Evaluate the Passport program that supports college and career pathways for foster and homeless youth.

Related Practice Work with Partners and Stakeholders

- » Explore a FAFSA requirement for high school graduation with a Tacoma partner.
- » Test how SNAP/WCG eligibility and early notification of "free college" could increase enrollment with pilot partnerships of institutions and high schools.
- » Complete the analysis of accepted high school seniors who chose not to pursue postsecondary education with Central Washington University.

Student Supports

Policy Development

» Explore policy strategies supporting low-cost housing to address the needs of postsecondary students experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness.

» Pursue policy to ensure that all postsecondary students have access to flexible resources to address basic needs insecurity emergencies.

» Develop a plan with partners to better understand and address the needs of parenting students, including access to affordable childcare across different regions.

Knowledge Development

» Explore with the Department of Social and Health Services the ability to develop a measure on the public benefits utilization of Washington College Grant recipients who are likely eligible through data sharing agreement.

» Develop a sustainable strategy for biennial survey data on the statewide basic needs insecurity prevalence at institutional, regional, and state levels, in partnership with ERDC and institutions.

» Engage with national and state partners to develop a research plan in relation to the Washington Postsecondary Free/Reduced Price Food pilot to understand the impact of food security strategies, including proactive approaches, on postsecondary persistence and attainment.

» Evaluate the effectiveness of the Passport to Careers program in supporting young adults who have experienced foster care and homelessness.

» Pursue funding with research partners to study the implementation and impact of telehealth use to address access to mental/behavioral healthcare for postsecondary students.

Related Practice Work with Partners and Stakeholders

» Facilitate partnerships with institutions and state agencies to provide targeted outreach and support for students who are likely eligible for public benefits.

» Explore coordination of public benefits access and other supports for both prospective and current students.

» Support regional partnership development for subsidized housing for students experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness.

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 adult and neotraditional 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 and propose mechanisms to capture and recognize non-credit and industry affirmed credentials within state data systems, how to adequately fund them, and how to integrate them into degree pathways. This will ensure that the learning achievements of K-12, adult, and neotraditional learners are accurately documented and acknowledged.

» 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.

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.

» Student Mobility Support:

- Develop strategies that facilitate the seamless transfer and mobility of students across different postsecondary institutions within Washington state. This includes both vertical mobility (between two- and four-year institutions) and horizontal mobility (between different institutions of the same level). By removing barriers to student mobility, we can enhance completion rates and ensure students can pursue their educational goals effectively.

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.

Endnotes

Endnotes

1 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.

2 National Center for Education Statistics (2022). Immediate College Enrollment Rate [Class of 2020]. Condition of Education. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved 5/17/2023, from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cpa.

3 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2023). Percentage of Graduates Attending Institutions of High Education [Class of 2020]. Retrieved 5/17/2023, from https://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/enroll_ihe/.

4 Virginia Department of Education (2022). Graduation, Dropout & Postsecondary Reports: Postsecondary Enrollment Report of Virginia Public School Graduates and Completers [Class of 2020]. Retrieved 5/17/2023, from https://www.doe.virginia.gov/data-policy-funding/data-reports/statistics-reports/graduation-completion-dropout-postsecondary-data.

5 Oregon Department of Education (2023). Post-Secondary Enrollment Public Report (2019-20 HS Graduates). Retrieved 5/17/2023, from https://www.oregon.gov/.

6 California Department of Education (2022). Post-Secondary Enrollment Data: College-Going Rate for CA High School Students [2019-20]. Retrieved 5/17/2023, from https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/cgr.asp.

7 Washington Student Experience Survey 2022 Findings Report, from https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2023.BasicNeedsReport.pdf

8 Food security was assessed using the items from the 6-item Household Food Security Survey Module from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Access to food, quality of food available, and frequency of experiencing hunger were assessed. Housing insecurity assessment included difficulty in covering housing costs, moving three or more times due to financial problems, etc. Homelessness included sheltered and unsheltered experiences of living in a vehicle, shelter, temporary motel, couch surfing, treatment center, places not meant for human habitation, etc. Survey instrument is in Appendix A of the Survey Summary Report, from https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2023.BasicNeedsReport.pdf

9 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.