



State-Level Enrollment Trends and Policy Responses

RESEARCH BRIEF

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Introduction

Achieving Washington's state attainment goal of 70% of residents aged 25-44 earning a credential requires not just maintaining but increasing college enrollment among high school graduates and adult learners. Increasing enrollment and reaching the attainment goal among Washingtonians from populations historically excluded from higher education requires deliberate emphasis on racial equity in the state policies pursued.

For students, earning a college credential unlocks higher earnings in the short term and over a lifetime, opens new doors for career opportunities, and lowers the likelihood of unemployment.

Yet, college enrollment rates are stagnant in Washington state—overall and among Black, Latinx, and Indigenous student populations. Enrollment declines began before the pandemic,¹ but the pandemic-era declines are unprecedented, and recovery is uncertain. High inflation could leave students unwilling to incur the costs of college or the looming recession could return students to the classroom, as occurred during the Great Recession.

This policy brief chronicles college enrollment trends in Washington and nationwide and identifies state-level efforts to slow or reverse the college enrollment trend line. We complement this scan of state strategies with a distillation of the initiatives that existing evidence suggest can increase statewide college enrollment.

College Enrollment Trends in Washington

College enrollment in Washington remains below pre-pandemic levels, with community colleges experiencing the most pronounced declines—75,000 fewer students between 2019-20 AY and 2021-22 AY.² Even as enrollment among some student populations partially recovered in 2021-22 (Basic Education for Adult students), losses continue to accumulate in other areas (Running Start and professional/technical students). American Indian and Latinx students at the state's two-year colleges experienced the most pronounced enrollment declines.³

The state's four-year colleges experienced an estimated net loss of 7% enrollments in this same frame,⁴ though colleges and student populations have endured the losses unevenly. Latinx and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander student enrollment increased slightly between 2019-20 and 2020-21 (1.8% and 5.5% increases, respectively),⁵ though these increases are not enough to reverse lower college enrollment rates among these same populations. Among 2018 graduates,

only 52% of Latinx graduates and 47% of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander graduates enrolled in college immediately after high school graduation.⁶

Additional trends worth watching:

- More than half of students who complete an academic transfer degree at a Washington community college **do not transfer**.⁷ At Washington State University Pullman, transfer student enrollment declined by 20% from Fall 2021 to Fall 2022.⁸
- The percentage of high school graduates who enroll in an **out-of-state** college is increasing incrementally, from 10% in 2005 to 12.4% in 2019.⁹
- The University of Washington – Seattle is **more reliant on out-of-state** students than it was 20 years ago—from 18.5% out of state in 2002 to 38% in 2018.¹⁰ Unless the institution expands its total undergraduate enrollment, this shift toward out-of-state students at the flagship campus could divert Washington residents to out-of-state colleges.

We identify 6 strategy areas that states or state systems are using to increase college enrollment:

- Making FAFSA completion a requirement of high school graduation
- Investing in state aid programs
- Removing barriers to admission and enrollment
- Committing funds to institutions for academic and non-academic supports
- Re-engaging adult learners and individuals without credentials
- Moving away from enrollment-based funding for public institutions

What we know about increasing postsecondary enrollment:

- Financial aid application assistance can remove barriers to enrollment for price-sensitive students
- Aid promises change students' college expectations and increase college access
- Overhauling traditional curricular structures helps students progress to credential completion
- Academic and non-academic supports improve persistence

National and Key State Trends

As in Washington, losses nationwide are concentrated in community colleges; public four-year colleges in some regions have experienced slight *increases* in first-time enrollments.¹¹ Among undergraduate students, Black student enrollment declined by 6.9% between Fall 2020 and Fall 2022;¹² this decrease is in addition to declines in Black high school graduates' immediate college

enrollment between 2009 and 2019.¹³ Latinx student enrollment decreased by 2.2% between Fall 2020 and Fall 2022¹⁴—the lowest observed decline by race/ethnicity and in keeping with the more than doubling of Latinx student enrollment between 2000 and 2020.¹⁵ The number of Pell Grant recipients declined by 9% between 2019-2020 and 2020-21, suggestive of low-income student enrollment losses resulting from the pandemic.¹⁶ FAFSA filing rates among high school seniors dipped during the pandemic, but have since nearly recovered (52.1% for the high school class of 2022, as compared to 54% for the class of 2018).¹⁷ For unhoused and foster youth, filing rates decreased by 10% between 2019-20 and 2020-21.¹⁸

- In **California** and **Texas**, among other states, community college enrollment declined by double digit percentages between Fall 2019 and Fall 2021.¹⁹
- In **Oregon**, community college enrollment losses appear to have leveled off in 2021, but FTE enrollment at community colleges and universities decreased due to smaller average course loads.²⁰ **Virginia's** preliminary Fall 2022 figures suggest that enrollment losses have leveled out at public two- and four-year colleges.²¹
- **Colorado** and **Tennessee**, among other states, experienced declines in the percentage of high school graduates who enroll in college.²² In Colorado's rural communities, the decline was more pronounced.
- In **Texas** and **Washington**, dual enrollment decreased during the pandemic.²³ **Maryland** colleges experienced increased summer enrollment followed by decreased fall enrollment, whereas **Minnesota** experienced decreases in summer enrollment.²⁴

How are States Responding?

State responses to declines in postsecondary enrollment range from institutional funds to expansions of scholarship programs and changes in state funding models. This section highlights gubernatorial, legislative, or higher education agency initiatives that seek to reverse state-level losses in undergraduate enrollment.

Ground Clearing: Identify the Problem and Seek Input from Local Stakeholders

The **Tennessee** Higher Education Commission (THEC) announced “the launch of a momentum-building year to renew and articulate the value of education in Tennessee and to increase enrollment in education and training beyond high school.”²⁵ THEC will engage with and learn from local education agencies, college leaders, community-based organizations, and business leaders—stakeholders who have direct insight into the types of strategies that resonate with students in their communities.

Strategy Area I: Make FAFSA Completion a Requirement of High School Graduation

Several states, including **Alabama**, **Illinois**, **Louisiana** and **New Hampshire**, have in recent years made FAFSA completion a requirement of high school graduation.²⁶ **Louisiana**, the first state to do so, now has the country's highest FAFSA filing rate, and preliminary findings suggest that the

requirement modestly increases college enrollment (approximately 1 percentage point [pp] when the high school-level filing rate increases by 10pp).²⁷

In **Colorado**, FAFSA completion is not a state-wide graduation requirement, but school districts that adopt the requirement receive additional grant funds.²⁸

In **California**, Local Education Agencies (LEAs) are required to confirm students' completion of the FAFSA application, but not doing so does not negatively affect students' graduation.²⁹

WASHINGTON CONTEXT

FAFSA or WASFA completion is not an explicit high school graduation requirement. However, a required component in a student's High School & Beyond Plan is that they provide evidence of having received information on federal and state financial aid programs.³⁰

Strategy Area II: Invest in State Aid Programs

Statewide promise programs and large-scale need-based aid programs continue to percolate:

- **Kansas'** Promise Scholarship Act, passed in 2021, is a means-tested last dollar award that can only be used in certain programs at the state's community and technical colleges.³¹
- **Louisiana's** M.J. Foster Promise Program provides first-come, first served last-dollar scholarship funds to state residents over 21 years old who seek enrollment in an eligible associate degree or short-term credential program at a public two-year college.³²
- **Delaware** expanded eligibility for its Student Excellence Equals Degree (SEED) program, which provides residents with free tuition at the state's technical and community colleges or in the University of Delaware's AA programs.³³ Now, individuals with non-violent felony convictions and individuals who are more than 25 years old can receive the scholarship for as many as ten semesters. Students also now maintain eligibility for up to a year after stopping out of college.³⁴
- **Michigan** created the Michigan Achievement Scholarship, which is a hybrid first/last dollar need-based scholarship for state high school graduates who enroll at any Michigan college.³⁵ The program builds on the recently launched Michigan Reconnect, which provides free in-district community college tuition for adult learners.³⁶

WASHINGTON CONTEXT

Washington expanded its state need-based grant aid with the passage of the Washington College Grant in 2019. The program is now one of the most generous student aid programs in the country.³⁷

Strategy Area IV: Remove Barriers to Admission and Enrollment

An estimated 48 out of 55 public university systems were temporarily test optional during the COVID 19 pandemic with at least 18 of these having announced a permanent change.³⁸ A 2021 **New York** bill proposed the prohibition of public colleges' use of admission tests in

undergraduate decisions; however the legislation did not leave committee.³⁹ The stated goal of these admission policies is to increase enrollment by removing a barrier that disproportionately affects students of color and low-income students.

In **Idaho**, the Direct Admissions program guarantees admission at a subset of the state’s colleges to high school seniors that satisfy certain academic criteria. Preliminary evidence finds that the program increased overall high school graduates’ college enrollment by 4-8%, primarily in the two-year sector, but had no effect on Pell students’ college enrollment.⁴⁰

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Five of the state’s public four-year institutions launched the **Guaranteed Admissions Program** in October 2022, which builds on the 2021-22 pilot program. Students who meet eligibility criteria will be automatically admitted to all five institutions.⁴¹

Rhode Island now requires the state’s higher education institutions to accept for credit any AP subject test where the student scores a 3 or higher.⁴² Requiring institutions to accept AP credit could help more students achieve sophomore standing more quickly. However, there is unequal access to AP/IB coursework both across and within high schools nationwide,⁴³ and students who want access to the college credit must pay the testing fee unless covered through state-level tuition waivers. Wielding exam-based dual credit as a mechanism for expanding college enrollment requires attentiveness to its multiple dimensions of influence: access to the courses, financial capacity to pay for the tests, and whether/how the credits are accepted by colleges and universities. In the absence of policies that address each of these component parts, state policies that require colleges give credit for AP tests could further entrench existing disparities in college access and completion by race/ethnicity and family income.

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Students can receive **AP test fee waivers** if they are considered low-income using any one of five approaches for determining eligibility.⁴⁴ Administrators at public institutions collaboratively maintain a master list of AP test college course equivalencies.⁴⁵

Strategy Area V: Commit Funds for Academic and Non-Academic Supports

State legislatures, governors, and university systems have committed funds to institutions to use in pursuit of enrollment and/or re-enrollment efforts, especially for students from historically oppressed populations.

- **California** and **Illinois** have allocated over \$300 million (community colleges only) and \$3 million, respectively, for institutions to use at their discretion in support of targeted initiatives to increase enrollment and retention.⁴⁶ In both states, there is an explicit emphasis on targeting students who are historically underserved by higher education—first generation students, low-income students, and racially minoritized students. In California, the two

university systems received funds in the 2022-23 budget cycle to support reductions in out-of-state or international student enrollment and increases in in-state student enrollment.⁴⁷

- **Oregon** invested \$5 million for colleges to hire Benefits Navigators who will provide direct support to students eligible for social services.⁴⁸ This model has been employed elsewhere, and early evidence suggests that accessing these services increases retention for students of color and adult students (see What We Know below).
- **Maryland** launched a grant program to eradicate food insecurity on college campuses.⁴⁹ Campuses that provide matching funds and that demonstrate actionable commitment to addressing food insecurity, including with designated staff, are eligible for up to \$150,000 in FY 2023.⁵⁰ In support of this grant program, a recent survey by the Community College Center for Student Engagement (CCCSE) found that nearly a third of students—including 43% of Black students, 36% of Latinx students, and 41% of American Indian/Alaska Native students—reported running out of food and not being able to purchase more.⁵¹

WASHINGTON CONTEXT

Tacoma Community College partners with the Tacoma Housing Authority to support students experiencing housing insecurity.⁵²

Seattle Promise Scholars receive an unlimited public transit pass.⁵³

Strategy Area VI: Reengage Adult Learners without Credentials, Including through Dedicated Aid Programs

Many adult learners in Washington remain desirous of a return to postsecondary education but are waylaid by the lack of financial support in their families, familial obligations, or existing employment that increases the opportunity costs of enrolling in college.⁵⁴ The benefits of postsecondary education remain for many of these adult learners—some of whom have some college but no credential—and several states are pursuing strategies to attract adult learners back into the classroom.

- **Kentucky** is launching a marketing and information campaign targeted at adult learners,⁵⁵ however evidence from a large-scale experiment suggests that adult learners' enrollment decisions are not responsive to information-based behavioral nudges.⁵⁶
- **Tennessee's** Reconnect scholarship offers free tuition at eligible institutions for adult learners; nearly 20,000 residents received the scholarship in its first year,⁵⁷ with a suggestive positive effect on overall enrollment among the adult learner population.⁵⁸
- **Utah's** Adult Learners Grant Program provides financial aid to individuals at least 26 years old who have financial need and are pursuing an online credential in a high-demand field, with priority given to "students from rural areas, minority students, low-income students and first-generation college students."⁵⁹

- **Texas** established the Reskilling Support Fund Grant Program using \$47 million in GEER funds. The fund provides money to colleges for disbursement to displaced workers and students with some college but no credential. Early data found few recipients; college administrators pointed to restrictive disbursement protocols and eligibility criteria as the cause.⁶⁰
- **California** legislation now requires CSU colleges and requests that UC colleges allow students to re-enroll, so long as the student was in good academic standing at the time of stop out.⁶¹

Unlike the narrow criteria in the Texas grant program or the academic standing requirement in California’s re-enrollment legislation, Indiana’s *You Can. Go Back.* initiative deliberately loosened the satisfactory academic progress requirement so that more students would be eligible and could re-enroll without barriers to financial aid access. More than 9,000 students enrolled in the first year,⁶² suggestive of potential benefits when eligibility criteria align with policy goals.

Strategy Area VI: Move Away from Enrollment-Based Funding for Public Institutions

In at least two states, **Texas** and **North Carolina**, conversations about how to fund public institutions center on institutional revenue losses stemming from enrollment declines. Although the Texas commission report references additional funds for low-income students, there are few available details about or references to the potential racial equity implications in either state.⁶³

In Texas, the Commission on Community College Finance, established by the legislature to evaluate the state’s current approach to college funding, recommended that community colleges no longer receive state funds using a formula that, according to college administrators, results in inter-college competition.⁶⁴ The commission recommends an outcomes-based approach, with additional funds available to colleges that serve “students who need additional supports (low-income, academically underprepared, adults who want to reskill/upskill.” Additional recommendations include expansions of the Texas Educational Opportunity Grant program to provide more low-income students with state aid, and one-time grant aid to institutions establishing new programs in high-demand fields.

The University of North Carolina System Board of Governors initially approved a performance-based model in April.⁶⁵ Now, the Board is sorting out details of the model, which will likely consider in-state students’ on-time graduation rates and student debt levels. Embedded in the change is an increase in the historically low cap on out-of-state enrollment at most of the system’s colleges; if the new policy is adopted as discussed at the October meeting, all but five of the system’s 16 colleges could exceed the historical 18% cap (UNC-CH, the flagship, remains under the original cap). This change enables a subset of the state’s colleges to expand enrollment through the strategic admission of out-of-state students.

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SBCTC's Student Achievement Initiative 3.0 (SAI 3.0) is a performance funding system that, in part, allocates points to colleges based on students' achievement of academic milestones. In recognition of the need for equity-based policies, SAI 3.0 allocates additional points when students of color, low-income students, and Basic Skills students reach certain milestones.⁶⁶

What We Know

Pursuing a state-based strategy for increasing enrollment could advance Washington's college attainment goals. The range of strategies highlighted above point to the important work that stakeholders must embark upon to identify and implement policies that can increase college enrollment overall and for students historically excluded from higher education. In this section, we outline what we know about strategies for increasing college enrollment, drawing out promising paths forward based on existing evidence.

Financial aid application assistance can remove barriers to enrollment for price-sensitive students

Washington high school students and adult learners identify the FAFSA/WASFA application process as a sticking point in their college-going decision, with students expressing concern that the forms are time-consuming, difficult, and confusing.⁶⁷ Personalized assistance that dovetails FAFSA completion with tax filing has been shown to increase college enrollment rates for high school seniors and recent high school graduates by 8pp, with positive but less pronounced effects on college enrollment for Black students with independent status and no prior college experience.⁶⁸

On the Horizon

An overhauled FAFSA form is due in the coming months, with its first cycle of use scheduled for next fall to allocate aid for the 2024-2025 academic year. The goal of the redesign is to simplify the application process, winnowing down the 108 questions to 36 and guaranteeing aid based on income relative to the federal poverty level.⁶⁹ Despite the overarching goal of simplification, there will be transitional hiccups. Higher education and financial aid experts caution that without sufficient communication and lead time, students and their families—not to mention the various organizations that provide support for the application process—may struggle to navigate the new form.⁷⁰

Aid promises change students' college expectations and increase college access

Knowing that aid is available is powerful for students considering college enrollment. Either through scholarship guarantees, universal free programs, or programs that offer funds alongside concrete tasks, evidence points to a powerful effect on enrollment.

- Free college programs and early aid commitments increase students' expectations for attending college and completing a credential, especially among low-income and racially minoritized students.⁷¹

- The University of Michigan’s HAIL Scholarship, now the Go Blue Guarantee, provides eligible high school seniors with a commitment of free tuition if they apply and are accepted. The commitment more than doubled application and enrollment rates for high-achieving, low-income students,⁷² though student surveys point to institutional challenges related to fostering a sense of belonging among recipients.⁷³
- The introduction of the Tennessee Promise program, which provides free tuition at the state’s community colleges, increased college enrollment overall and among Black and Latinx student populations. The state’s four-year colleges experienced modest short-run declines in enrollment resulting from the state policy change.⁷⁴

What about test optional admission policies?

Although press coverage focuses on the potential positive effect of test optional admission policies on college-level socioeconomic and racial diversity, most evaluations of these policies focus on early adopter high selectivity institutions and find limited enrollment increases among Pell Grant recipients or Black, Latinx, or Indigenous students. A more recent study of the effects at a set of colleges with a range of admission rates found that the policies led to increased enrollment in these same student populations—even at institutions with lower selectivity.⁷⁵ What remains to be seen is whether system-level changes in policy will lead to new enrollments overall and among students of color and low-income students, or if these policies will be implemented in a way that further stratifies access to higher education by race and class.

Overhauling curricular structures helps students progress to degree completion

Developmental education (DE) remains a barrier to college persistence, especially for Black and Latinx students who are disproportionately placed in DE coursework. In the past decade, Florida, Georgia, and California have overhauled their DE requirements—either making the courses optional, shifting to co-requisite models,⁷⁶ or forcing colleges to demonstrate students’ need for DE coursework. Relatedly, community colleges across the country have implemented the Guided Pathways framework to better support students as they “explore, choose, plan, and complete—in a reasonable time and affordability”⁷⁷ transfer- or career-ready programs. DE and Guided Pathways reforms can increase enrollment by getting students into and through credit-bearing courses more quickly.

Florida’s SB 1720, implemented in 2014, recategorized DE coursework as optional for most students. After this change, Black and Latinx students enrolled in gateway math and English coursework at higher rates.⁷⁸ Furthermore, passage rates in DE courses increased after the law, likely due to changes in existing DE course structures designed to accelerate progress (as required by the law).⁷⁹

Preliminary findings suggest similarly positive effects in Georgia and California. In **Georgia**, across all racial/ethnic groups, as well as among low-income students and adult learners, students in the co-requisite model have passage rates in college-level math and English that are approximately twice as high as rates for students in non-co-requisite DE courses.⁸⁰ Transfer-level

placement and course completion rates in **California** increased for students from every racial/ethnic group after the passage of AB 705. However, Black and Latinx students disproportionately enroll at community colleges with persistently higher rates of DE placement, suggesting uneven implementation.⁸¹ AB 1705, passed in 2022, seeks to remedy these campus-level inequities.⁸²

As of April 2021, there are sixteen states with statewide Guided Pathways initiatives—including the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.⁸³ Colleges that implement Guided Pathways will often rely on evidence-based strategies in their implementation (e.g., academic coaching). Evidence on Guided Pathways implementation specifically is limited to observational assessments of increased credit accrual in the first year: Across Tennessee’s community colleges, the percentage of Black and Latinx students earning at least 12 credits in their first year increased by 10pp and 15pp, respectively, over a six-year period during which the colleges were implementing interventions aligned with the Guided Pathways framework.⁸⁴ Causal evidence of the reform’s effects on STEM student enrollment, academic progress, and persistence—in Washington, Tennessee, and Ohio—is due to be released in late 2022.⁸⁵

Academic and non-academic supports improve persistence

A range of support services can provide students with the necessary safety net to remain enrolled even as academic or non-academic challenges arise. Targeted academic coaching can increase first-year GPAs and decrease stop-out by as much as 8.5pp for first-year students on academic probation, especially for lower-income students.⁸⁶ Wrap-around services, such as those provided to CUNY ASAP participants, can increase graduation rates, and cohort-based learning can lead to increased persistence among students of color, as evidenced in the Meyerhoff Scholars Program at the University of Maryland Baltimore County.⁸⁷

Non-academic supports matter, too. When Rio Hondo College in LA County offered students free bus passes, the number of credits that students earned increased, as did persistence rates.⁸⁸ An evaluation of the Single Stop USA Community College Initiative identified a modest increase in credit accrual among students who used their services, with much of this effect concentrated among nonwhite, older, or financially independent students.⁸⁹

Funds for Summer Coursework

Colleges nationwide are using state, system, or campus funds to provide free or discounted summer courses to enrolled students.

- The California State University system offers campuses funds through the Graduation Initiative 2025 to increase summer course availability and help more students, especially those from populations historically excluded by higher education, graduate on time.
- Howard Payne University, a private Hispanic-Serving Institution in Texas, offered 50% off tuition for summer courses in 2022.
- Northwest Indian College, a Tribal College here in Washington, made all summer courses free in 2022.

For more, see Inside Higher Ed’s “Filling Up on Free Classes.”⁹⁰

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