

Discussion & Council Action: 2024 Legislative Proposals

The following are proposals for the 2024 legislative session:

Increase access to telehealth mental and behavioral health care access

Contract with a telehealth provider to address increasing mental and behavioral health care needs among students at up to four higher education institutions. The proposal includes an external evaluation of students' equitable access and satisfaction of telehealth services at participating pilot institutions.

A few Washington institutions currently augment care with contracted telehealth services, and many more institutions have expressed strong interest, but the cost is prohibitive. This proposal would reduce costs through a multi-institution contract and provide research insights to inform future policy decisions and investments to ensure students' mental healthcare access.

Proposal cost: \$2.2 million

Align Washington College Grant with the Federal Pell Grant eligibility time frame

Currently, students receiving WA Grant can receive aid for up to 125 percent of a 4-year degree (up to 15 quarters of full-time eligibility or its equivalent). This differs from the Federal Pell Grant eligibility time frame, which allows students to receive aid for 150 percent of a four-year degree (up to 18 quarters of full-time eligibility or its equivalent).

This proposal also seeks to align the College Bound Scholarship (CBS) Program and the Passport Program to the federal time frame. CBS currently allows students to receive aid for up to 12 quarters of full-time eligibility, meaning students must earn a credential within four years or lose support. The Passport Program currently requires students to finish their postsecondary education within five years or age 26.

Access to financial aid has been shown to support students' persistence, completion rates, and intergenerational economic mobility.¹ In the 2020-21 school year, about 2,400 students receiving WA Grant aid were within three terms (one academic year) of exceeding the time frame. Just one year later, in 2021-22, that number more than doubled to over 5,900, even as overall enrollment fell and the number of students receiving WA Grant decreased.

The time it takes students to complete a credential may vary depending on their academic or career interests, as well as personal life circumstances such as unforeseen disruptive events. Increasing the eligibility time frame allows students in these situations greater flexibility as they persist toward completion.

Proposal cost: TBD

¹ <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2022.InterGenEconMobilityFinAid.Snapshot.pdf>

Provide college and career mentorship to students in high school

Expand the State Work Study (SWS) program to support public and nonprofit employers who manage a near-peer mentorship program. The requirement of an employer match will be waived for qualified employers. SWS college students would be hired by school districts, high schools, or community-based organizations to support K-12 students in accessing postsecondary and career pathways. Research has shown that near-peer mentors positively affect postsecondary enrollment, especially for students of color.

Proposal cost: \$1.5 million

Message students about financial aid and postsecondary pathways before 11th grade

Expand OtterBot texting services to reach students and families (around 120,000 College Bound students and 120,000 parents) earlier, starting in middle school. OtterBot is an AI-enabled chatbot that provides College Bound students and parents with timely text messages about financial aid and postsecondary pathways. OtterBot currently supports a diverse student body. For example, over 50 percent of recipients are Hispanic/Latinx. Recent analysis of OtterBot shows that for students who engaged with Otterbot:

- Financial aid completion was 7 percent higher than the rate for all CBS students.
- College enrollment was 5 percent higher than the rate for all CBS students.

Proposal cost: \$1.25 million

Align WA Grant with SNAP and other public benefits programs that meet income eligibility

Allow individuals who are enrolled in SNAP or other public benefit programs that are income-based to automatically meet WA Grant income eligibility.

Proposal cost: None

Streamline contact information for College Bound students

Last session, SB 5593 passed, requiring OSPI to collect student and parent contact information for data sharing with higher education institutions. WSAC proposes amending the allowable use of this contact information to include sharing information with WSAC to communicate and reach students about state financial aid.

Proposal cost: None