

RESEARCH BRIEF

Views from Research: Exploring Challenges to Postsecondary Access

September 2022

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Education and training after high school is critical for individual development and career advancement in Washington's innovative and evolving labor market. However, college enrollment and completion rates lag behind state goals. More than 50% of adults have either not participated in higher education (30%) or left higher education without acquiring a credential (23%).ⁱ Among the high school class of 2018, only 60% enrolled in postsecondary education within a year of graduation. This figure is both below the national average (69% in 2018)ⁱⁱ and little changed over the preceding decade (average 62% over the past 10 years).ⁱⁱⁱ Washington has some of the most generous state financial aid opportunities in the country to help low- and middle-income families afford the cost of postsecondary education. Yet many students do not apply for aid: The state's Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion rate is in the bottom five nationwide.^{iv} Identifying barriers to enrollment and demystifying financial aid opportunities can increase college enrollment and, in turn, improve postsecondary educational attainment among Washingtonians. This research brief chronicles key lessons and opportunities for action in pursuit of improving postsecondary access.

Insights from Recent Studies

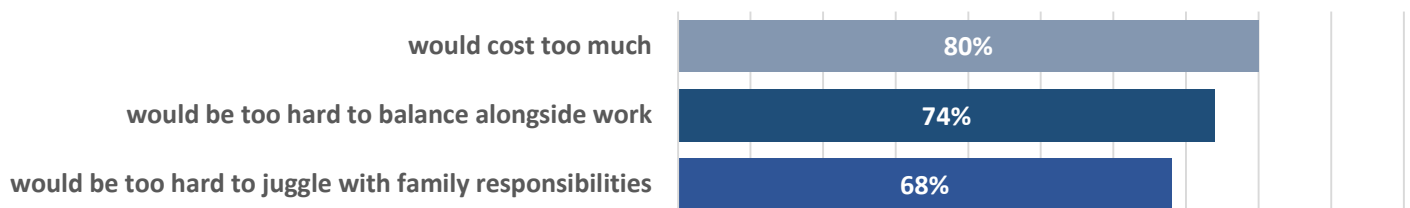
Recent studies led by the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) engaged high school graduates and their families, adult learners, and educators to learn about challenges in postsecondary access along three dimensions: college-going culture among potential adult students, messaging about financial aid opportunities and the application process, and challenges encountered during the application process.^v Findings from these studies demonstrate that reducing barriers to affordable and accessible postsecondary access in Washington is best accomplished when students' and families' perceptions and experiences inform the design of financial aid policies and programs.



Concerns about cost and time commitment impede adult learners' pursuit of higher education.

Most study respondents reported a generally positive view of higher education and the state's community and technical colleges, and many indicated that they could see themselves returning to school to pursue a postsecondary credential within "the next few years." However, respondents also identified significant barriers that might stand in their way.

Going back to school . . .



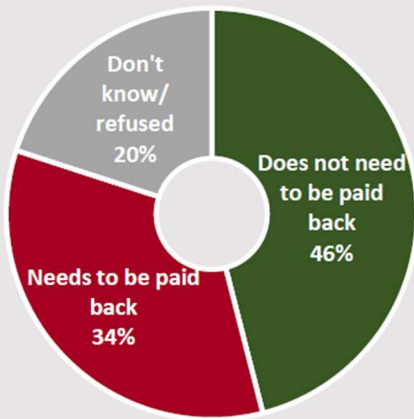


Many students and adult learners lack reliable information about eligibility for financial aid and whether it requires repayment.

Recent high school graduates and adult learners reported confusion about financial aid opportunities: the types of aid available, their potential eligibility, and whether grant aid must be repaid. Fewer than *half* of respondents aged 24 to 44 accurately perceived that state grant aid does not need to be repaid. These documented points of confusion and misperceptions point to the need for deliberate and well-designed messaging strategies that highlight how financial aid is available to everyone, in a wide range of different types of education and training programs, and it is not always tied to grades.

Figure 2. Knowledge Gaps About Financial Aid for Adults (age 24 to 44) in Washington

Perception of Washington Financial Aid







Reality of Washington Financial Aid



Perceptions about the FAFSA or WASFA application process are a meaningful barrier to recent high school graduates' decision to apply for aid

Recent high school graduates and their parents shared concerns that applying for aid using the FAFSA or WASFA was difficult and time-consuming. Among the students and parents participating in the study, the top reasons they reported for not completing financial aid applications were:

-  Confusion about who can and should complete FAFSA or Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WASFA) forms.
-  Perceptions that the FAFSA/WASFA process is challenging and time-consuming.
-  Parental distrust of sharing personal financial information.
-  Lack of necessary documents to complete the form in a timely manner

Listening sessions with Hispanic/Latine students revealed that, for these students, key barriers to completing financial aid applications include a lack of (a) financial aid workshops for parents and guardians that are conducted in Spanish and facilitated by trusted community service providers and (b) outreach strategies that are designed to resonate with their experiences and backgrounds.



What would it take to improve to improve postsecondary participation rates in Washington?

The following broad recommendations draw from the experiences shared by students and stakeholders in each of the three studies. These solutions emphasize practical, feasible short- and long-term actions that policymakers and education leaders in the state can pursue.

- Ensure clear and widely disseminated information about state and federal financial aid opportunities, including through collaborative efforts between the state and trusted community partners.
- Provide diverse forms of resources and support to students and families to apply for financial aid.
- Leverage community-based organizations and other non-profits as trusted messengers of financial aid and postsecondary education information to students and families.
- Develop school and community partnerships with college advising organizations to expand advising knowledge and capacity.
- Localize and contextualize outreach strategies and information for specific underserved communities across the state. This includes the transcreation of resources in languages spoken among Washingtonians, in particular Amharic, Somali, Spanish, and Vietnamese
- Focus efforts on low-income communities throughout the state.
- Ensure that all policy and programmatic solutions incorporate both direct assistance interventions and information-focused interventions.

The above strategies have the greatest potential for improving financial aid applications and subsequent enrollment when their implementation is careful to center the needs, experiences, and expectations of the students being served.



Conclusion

In each of the studies, college costs and financial aid access—be it the potential costs of returning to education, or the aid application itself—are barriers to postsecondary enrollment. Moreover, among both adult learners and recent high school graduates, there is a need to provide supports that are responsive to students' cultural context and individual needs. Adult learners see college as the path to increased earnings but at odds with work and family; recent high school graduates and their families have apprehensions about sharing personal financial information and are unsure of whether they would be eligible for aid. Students in both groups expressed confusion about whether grant aid requires repayment.

Whether the student is a recent high school graduate or coming to postsecondary education after time away, key during the financial aid application process is support from trusted community members and clear, culturally responsive messaging about the benefits of applying for financial aid. Targeting information and support to those communities that are furthest from educational equity can reduce opportunity gaps and lead to a more inclusive future for the state.

ⁱ Washington Student Achievement Council. (2021, June). Washington State Encyclopedia of Education Data. <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/WSAC-Education-Data-Encyclopedia.pdf>

ⁱⁱ National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). Immediate College Enrollment Rate. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cpa>.

Kwakye, I., Kibort-Crocker, E., & Lundgren, M. (2021). *Understanding Postsecondary Enrollment Trends in Washington and How the COVID-19 Crisis Continues to Impact Students' Postsecondary Opportunities*. Washington Student Achievement Council. <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2021-08-04-Postsecondary-Enrollment-Trends.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Washington State Education Research and Data Center (ERDC). (2022) High School Graduate Outcomes Dashboard. <https://erdc.wa.gov/data-dashboards/high-school-graduate-outcomes>.

^{iv} FAFSA Tracker – National (2022) Current FAFSA Completion Rates by State, 06/24/2022, Retrieved 9/26-2022 from https://national.fafsaTracker.com/currentRates?selectedSchoolSelectModel=47&sortBy=current_comp_rate&. Note: students must complete the FAFSA or the Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WASFA) to apply for state financial aid.

^v Washington Student Achievement Council. (2022) Exploring Challenges in Postsecondary Access: A Qualitative Look at Postsecondary Enrollment and FAFSA Completion in Washington State. https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2022_ExploringChallengesPostsecondaryAccess.pdf.