

Regional Challenge Grant

Council Discussion Guide

About the Regional Challenge Grant

The [Washington Career and College Pathways Innovation Challenge Program](#) (Regional Challenge Grant) provides competitive awards for local and regional partnerships that create cross-sector collaboration and advance postsecondary access and success. The program seeks to increase postsecondary enrollment and completion, and eliminate educational opportunity gaps for students of color, English language learners, students with disabilities, and foster and homeless youth. The program is supported by a dedicated fund with an appropriation of \$6 million in FY 2022-23. The budget forecast includes an additional \$8 million in appropriations in FY24 and FY25, for a total of \$22 million over three years.

The Regional Challenge Grant comes at a critical time in our state and marks a new approach for WSAC and our partners to advance system change through innovation by robust local partnerships to better serve Washington students. The Appendix provides additional context.

About this Discussion Guide

The Washington Student Achievement Council, with the support of staff and an extensive outreach process, will approve a process to award grants providing technical assistance. This guide supports the discussion with the Council and other stakeholders regarding key program design choices.

Timeline for Regional Challenge Grant Development

- May – WSAC Council provides guidance on key design questions at May 24 meeting.
- June – WSAC staff gather additional input from stakeholders, including Washington state Commissions and community partners.
- July – WSAC staff draft investment process.
- August – Program design and investment process approved by Council at August 31 meeting.

The foundational design decisions that will shape the Regional Challenge Grant investment process include:

- System Change Goal
- Priority Outcomes
- Priority Populations Served
- Defining Partnership
- Investment Portfolio
- Alignment with Existing Investments
- WSAC Partnership Role

The section below outlines key design questions for consideration. Ideas are expressed as **requirements** for partnership applicants, or elements that should be **encouraged**.

As you read the discussion guide, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Are these the right requirements for our Regional Challenge Grant investments? Are there elements we list as “to be encouraged” that you think should be “requirements,” or vice versa?
2. What feels unclear or requires more discussion?
3. What is missing and needs to be added?

Design Questions for Discussion

Regional Challenge Grant System Change Goal

Design Question: What is the systemic change the Regional Challenge Grant is trying to impact?

The Regional Challenge Grant seeks to advance statewide postsecondary educational attainment goals by expanding the number of local and regional partnerships that are intentionally focused on increasing postsecondary enrollment and credential completion for students of color and other low-income and underserved student groups. This systemic change will be demonstrated by:

- Investing in a diverse range of local partnerships throughout Washington state that are focused on advancing educational equity in their communities.
- New sectors and partners becoming involved in supporting improved college and career pathways.
- Increased involvement of community-based organizations with deep knowledge of target populations and how to support their success.
- Meaningful engagement of families and students in guiding the supports they receive.
- Smoother transitions for high school students and returning adults between systems (e.g., high school, postsecondary, employment).
- K-12 leaders working much more closely with their local community colleges and four-year colleges, and institutional leaders working much more closely with community-based student support providers and other civic leaders who share commitment to the goals.
- A shift in mindset and culture toward community accountability for postsecondary access and success outcomes—especially for priority student populations.

Priority Outcomes

Design Question: What are the core student outcomes the Regional Challenge Grant is trying to achieve?

Required:

Partnerships must be working to eliminate opportunity gaps for students of color, low-income students, English language learners, students with disabilities, and foster and homeless youth, as well as working to do one or both of the following:

- Increase direct enrollment of high school students
- Increase enrollment of adults returning to education

Encouraged:

The Regional Challenge Grant also encourages partnerships to focus on increasing student credential completion, including industry-recognized credentials, certificates, two-year degrees, four-year degrees, and apprenticeships. To achieve Washington’s statewide attainment goal of 70% postsecondary completion, improvements in enrollment need to be sustained with strong persistence supports for students.

Priority Populations Served

Design Question: What is the target population for Regional Challenge Grant investments?

Required:

The legislation requires that partnerships work to improve outcomes and eliminate opportunity gaps for students of color, English language learners, students with disabilities, and foster and homeless youth.

Encouraged:

In addition to the above populations, partnerships are encouraged to serve other students that are underrepresented in postsecondary or face increased barriers to credential attainment, including but not limited to:

- Low-income students
- Opportunity Youth, youth ages 16-24 who are disconnected from school or work
- Youth or adults that did not complete high school
- First-generation college students
- Incarcerated or formerly incarcerated youth and adults
- LGBTQIA+ students

Many Washington students experience intersectional identities that can create overlapping and compounding systems of disadvantage that impact their access to postsecondary. Local communities are the experts in understanding the needs of their communities and are encouraged to identify the student populations on which they should focus.

Defining Partnership

Design Question: What is the required composition of partnerships?

Required:

At a minimum, partnerships applying to the Regional Challenge Grant are required to have two partners working together: one education partner, such as a K-12 school district or postsecondary institution, and one partner from outside the education sector.

- If a partnership focuses on direct high school enrollment, they must include a school district or high school as a partner.
- If a partnership focuses on enrollment of adults returning to education, they must include an employer, labor union, or other workforce-related organization as a partner.

Each partnership will be required to:

- Demonstrate how they will engage students, families, and community leaders, and how their voices will be incorporated into their work on an ongoing basis.

- Share their plan for how they will work together, including how they will make decisions and report their collective grant progress.
- Identify a single fiscal agent for the grant funds. Any subcontracting will be done by the fiscal agent, not by WSAC.

Encouraged:

Partnerships can include a broad range of entities invested in student success:

- Higher education institutions (e.g., public/private colleges, CTCs, universities)
- Local education agencies (e.g., K-12 school districts)
- Community-based organizations, including those that serve historically underserved communities
- Nonprofit service providers, including college access providers and wraparound support providers
- Local foundations or civic organizations
- Employer, business, or workforce development groups, including industry associations, chambers of commerce, or trade unions
- Municipalities, counties, or other local government agencies
- Other local entities

This list is meant to be illustrative, not an exhaustive or limiting list. Communities may choose to have a large array of groups involved in their efforts. There is no expectation that the Regional Challenge Grant investments will fund all groups who participate in a particular community or regional project.

While only two partners are required, more competitive Regional Challenge Grant applicants will be local or regional collaborations that include partners with deep knowledge of the population(s) being served. Partnerships are encouraged to bring in new partners that haven't always been engaged in supporting student college and career pathways. This might include organizations focused on engaging or serving families of color, or employer associations and industry leaders that are invested in supporting and developing their local talent pipeline. Partnerships may also be contracting with service providers or vendors that provide a service or resource but are not engaged as project partners.

Partners should be geographically local to the populations being served, though flexibility will be considered in cases where remote services are needed to best reach or meet the needs of target students.

Investment Mix – A Portfolio Approach

Design Question: Are there going to be multiple types or tiers of investments? Should only established partnerships with a track record of success be funded, or new partnerships?

Recommendation:

The Regional Challenge Grant will take a portfolio approach and will invest in a mix of local or regional collaborations that represent a range of operating contexts, different types of partnerships, and differing levels of experience. Some investments will be made to established efforts so that they can scale their impacts and test new strategies. Other investments will be made to support start-up efforts

around the state. Taking this approach is key to achieving the system change goal. The Regional Challenge Grant will meet communities and regions where they are and help them advance their collaborative work toward the common goal and outcomes. The innovations developed through the Regional Challenge Grant create an opportunity to identify and disseminate promising practices from around the state so that WSAC and other state leaders can support their adoption and scaling.

The Regional Challenge Grant will invest in two types of partnerships:

1. Early Stage or Start-up Partnerships – to enable them to plan and get started.
2. Established Partnerships – to enable them to grow their impact through expansion or through the addition of new strategies/tactics.

Our intention is that selected partnerships represent a range of geographies and environments (urban, suburban, rural). In addition, the Regional Challenge Grant will be seeking to make investments in efforts that engage both two- and four-year postsecondary institutions, as well as partnerships that emphasize employer engagement and industry-recognized credentials.

Alignment with Existing Investments

Design Question: How will the Regional Challenge Grant increase alignment with existing investments?

Partnerships that receive Regional Challenge Grants can serve as catalysts in their communities to improve student outcomes in the long term through systems change. The siloed nature of the formal education systems, fragmented deployment of interventions, and the lack of intentional focus on postsecondary enrollment and success for target populations are all barriers to progress. Two key ways partnerships can address these barriers are: 1. better aligning existing system resources to their most impactful strategies and efforts, and 2. helping their communities better leverage existing local and state resources. Effective alignment and deployment of existing resources will be key to long-term sustainability and reaching scale.

Recommendation:

Strong Regional Challenge Grant applicants will demonstrate how their partners are committing existing funding and resources toward their work. For example, if colleges have staff and funding dedicated to enrollment, partnerships may decide to pursue strategies where these staff could be deployed in new ways that focus on their target students. This would be an example of realigning an existing resource. In addition, WSAC encourages partnerships to access and integrate state resources into their work, including: Otterbot, the Washington College Grant, Guided Pathways, and High School and Beyond Planning. Communities might identify how these resources could be improved to meet their needs or integrate them into their strategies.

WSAC Partnership Role

Design Question: How can WSAC serve as a strong partner to Regional Challenge Grant applicants and grantees?

WSAC sees the Regional Challenge Grant as an exciting opportunity to build relationships and support the work of local communities in new ways. WSAC will be an active, engaged partner as well as an investor in the local work. This is a very different role from traditional “hands off” government

grantmaking. Strong partnerships can enable WSAC to better learn from local communities and share the learnings with the goal of scaling efforts and directing resources toward stronger statewide impact.

Recommendation:

WSAC will organize its internal capacity in order to provide local partnerships:

- Research on innovative strategies and promising practices.
- Technical assistance with baseline data analysis and reporting.
- A learning community to connect with and learn from other regional partnerships.
- A commitment to improving state tools and resources (e.g., Otterbot, financial aid, data sharing) based on feedback from partnerships so that they can work better for local communities.
- Continued partnership and transparent communication throughout the Regional College Grant program.
- Assistance working with other state agencies to identify resources, best practices and to get help solving local implementation problems.
- Connections to potential additional public and private resources when possible.

Together, these robust supports can help accelerate the work of local and regional partnerships beyond the funding alone.

Looking Ahead

Once the key design elements outlined above are clarified, then work can proceed on other Regional Challenge Grant design and implementation considerations.

The next set of design choices include:

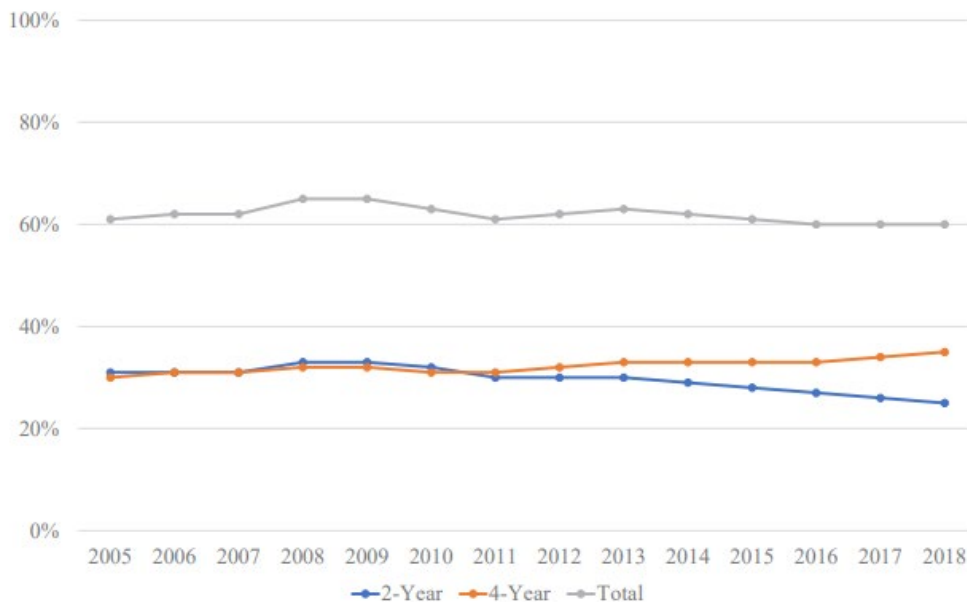
- Procurement process options and preferred investment approach.
- Investment ranges for the varying types of investments.
- Match opportunities.
- Duration of awards (the creation of a fund enables multi-year grant-making).
- Baseline data required of applicants and WSAC ability to assist with initial data.
- Form and structure of investments of varying types (e.g., upfront investment vs. cost reimbursable vs. milestone payment points, etc.).
- Eligible uses of funds.
- Reporting requirements, including metrics of success and data collection (quantitative and qualitative) and WSAC ability to assist.
- Mechanisms for sharing learning and supporting progress.

APPENDIX: Additional Regional Challenge Grant Background

Current Postsecondary Outcomes

Over the past 20 years, Washington has had a surprisingly low and stagnant rate of enrollment by high school seniors within a year of graduation (Figure 1). Our state average of 60 percent is around 9 percentage points below the national average and far behind states with similar competitive economies such as Massachusetts (75%) and Virginia (67%). Among the west coast states, Washington’s direct enrollment rate lags behind Oregon (62%) and California (64%) ([Link](#), p 8).

Figure 1: Direct Postsecondary Enrollment Rate from High School



Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC), Washington postsecondary enrollment during first year after graduation, 2005-2018 graduates, by sector.

Most recently, Washington’s colleges are experiencing steep and unprecedented enrollment declines during the COVID-19 pandemic ([Link](#)) as students face new barriers in their efforts to plan for and pursue post-high school credentials, or decide to forgo additional education or training to enter the workforce in a tight labor market. Between Fall 2019 and Fall 2021, roughly 60,000 fewer students enrolled in Washington’s public 2-year and 4-year colleges with greater enrollment declines for first-year students and Pell-eligible students ([Link](#)). Beyond the new challenges presented by COVID, deep inequities by race and ethnicity have persisted throughout Washington’s education system, particularly when it comes to postsecondary completion ([Link](#)).

Statewide Investments in College Access & Success

In recent years, Washington state has made significant investments expanding access to financial aid and now, with the Washington College Grant, has the most comprehensive state policy on affordability in the nation. The State has focused on improving FAFSA and WASFA filing rates and on improving access to Running Start and College in the High School. New investments have been made to bolster the funding for high school counselors. SBCTC policy has increasingly emphasized the importance of using

multiple measures for determining college course placement and the community college system has invested in Guided Pathways—both intended to improve rates of student success once enrolled. All of these efforts are important, helpful building blocks for postsecondary access and success. But thus far, taken together, they have not resulted in significant system improvement. Low rates of enrollment and completion persist, and racial, ethnic, and income-based gaps continue and have been further exacerbated during the pandemic.

Need for a Partnership-Based Approach

A notable exception to the frustrating lack of system progress can be seen in communities in Washington and nationally where there is intentional work focused on improving the rates of enrollment and completion for students of color and other low-income students. In these places, local leaders in K-12 and Higher Education along with college access nonprofits, community-based organizations, and leaders from other sectors are partnering and working to knit together an effective system of support for college going and college success. They are listening closely to their students and families as they design new models of collaboration and innovation. They are leveraging the existing programs and resources so that they function well as a coherent system. Local and regional partnerships, like the ones that the Council heard from in November ([Link](#)), bring tremendous value by galvanizing community behind shared ownership and action on postsecondary enrollment and completion outcomes. These successful partnerships center the needs and aspirations of students and families and ensure coordinated action, good use of resources, and implementation of best practices.

The Regional Challenge Grant is a powerful system change opportunity. Using the new Regional Challenge Grant investments, WSAC can support a major increase in the number of communities and regions who share the commitment to improve postsecondary enrollment and student success. These investments can also help existing partnerships grow their scale and impact. By working locally and regionally, WSAC will be able to scale up impact, move the needle and reach the statewide goals.