

Framing Questions for WSAC Council Meeting The “Fund My Future” Campaign

October 16, 2019

How can WSAC and partners use the first year of the new Washington College Grant program to:

- *Expand student and community awareness of affordable education pathways?*
- *Increase utilization of financial aid?*
- *Increase enrollment in postsecondary programs?*
- *Close equity gaps at every step along the pathway to educational attainment?*

Background

Washington has a low rate of college-going and utilization of financial aid. Only 62% of Washington high school seniors continue their education within a year of graduation—compared to the national average of 70%. Only 47% of high school seniors filed the federal application for financial aid, or FAFSA, which is the common access point to financial aid across state, federal, and institutional programs—ranking the state 47th nationally. Washington also offers financial aid to undocumented students through our [WASFA application](#), which is not included in the national rankings.

We don't fully understand the complex set of factors that shape our state's “college-going” culture. State averages for FAFSA completion mask a wide range of variation across school districts. Some large, diverse districts such as Everett and Federal Way are 10+ points above the state average, and some small, rural districts such as Zillah and Nine Mile Falls range from two-thirds to 100% completion. [WSAC published a report in February 2019](#) sharing success stories from three school districts, along with an analysis estimating that up to \$50 million in federal Pell grant dollars were left on the table in 2018 when 13,000 eligible seniors did not apply.

High school counselors are the foundational support for college planning and financial aid access. High student-to-counselor ratios lead many to conclude that schools lack sufficient resources to serve all students.

Other organizations directly help students and/or provide technical assistance to schools and community-based youth-serving groups. [College Success Foundation](#) and [College Possible Washington](#) (formerly College Access Now) provide direct service in some schools. WSAC's [12th Year Campaign](#) provides technical assistance to schools and community-based organizations (e.g., Kitsap Regional Library, Boys & Girls Clubs). WSAC and several colleges and universities manage federally funded [GEAR UP](#) programs that help students in college and career readiness. [Puget Sound ESD's College and Career Network](#) and [CCER Road Map Project](#) work with schools within their region to support these pathways.

Washington's nationally recognized [Workforce Education Investment Act](#) expands support for postsecondary education and state financial aid in 2020. The [Washington College Grant](#)

(formerly State Need Grant) will now be guaranteed to all eligible applicants, expand to serve middle-class families, and include apprenticeship and other career-connected programs.

This historic investment has sparked continuing media coverage and other signs that it has captured public attention. WSAC and its partners agree that we should harness this emerging public interest to help increase use of financial aid and college enrollment. The high school senior class of 2020 will graduate into the fully implemented program in July 2020.

Adults are also eligible for the Washington College Grant, but could seek to enroll early in 2020 before the program goes into full effect. Both WSAC and its partners will roll out initiatives targeting adult residents shortly after the start of 2020.

The next 6-8 months offer a special opportunity to promote a message grounded in something new and exciting. If we can expand our collective efforts to increase utilization of financial aid, we could deliver measurable results and send a powerful “thank you” to the elected officials who made this possible.

WSAC Role

This work fits within [WSAC’s recently adopted Strategic Framework](#). Our “Affordability” strategic cluster identifies the 12th grade FAFSA completion rate as a key indicator and the launch of a statewide initiative to increase FAFSA and WASFA applications as priority work. Our “Enrollment K-12” strategic cluster identifies direct enrollment from high school as a key indicator and the sharing of best practices of high-performing high schools as priority work.

WSAC will partner with the [College Promise Coalition](#), higher education sectors, and others to facilitate this work. WSAC can carry out some elements of this ambitious campaign, such as direct communications with [College Bound Scholarship](#) students and providing technical assistance. But most of the work will be carried out by partners working across all aspects of the initiative.

Communications

Communications strategy will focus on students and closely connected influencers such as parents and other caregivers, teachers, school counselors, and youth development groups. Community attitudes are also very important in shaping the state’s college-going culture over time, so leaders from local philanthropy, nonprofit organizations, and state and local elected officials will be an important audience.

WSAC has the contact information for 28,000 high school seniors who signed up for the College Bound Scholarship (CBS) in 7th and 8th grades. WSAC can prepare communications toolkits, as it has done in the past, that enable school districts to generate the same letter for all students that it distributes to CBS seniors.

The signatories for these print or digital communications will come from our partners. The kickoff letter in October will be signed by the Governor. Campus presidents have agreed to send letters to K-12 school leaders. WSAC and College Promise Coalition met with state and local

leaders of the Washington Education Association to discuss outreach to classroom teachers and school counselors. A full cycle of communications is in the planning stage.

Direct Supports

Colleges, WSAC, and other partners provide support services directly to students and high schools to increase access to financial aid and enrollment in postsecondary programs. There is far more demand for help in filling out the FAFSA and WASFA applications than is currently available in schools or community-based locations.

Working within the College Promise Coalition, we will try to increase the level of support for school and community-based financial aid counseling, explore new partnerships between institutions and school districts, and better understand how we can support the needs of students, parents, and schools. WSAC can support “train the trainer” models to extend the number of people statewide who can work with parents and students to complete a financial aid application. WSAC will maintain a statewide roster of regional and local activities to use in communications and to determine the level of work underway.

WSAC received state funding for digital tools to support students in applying for financial aid and enrollment in postsecondary programs. We recently signed a contract with [AdmitHub](#) for a chatbot serving College Bound Scholarship seniors. Several universities around the country have used the tool [to support high school seniors in their college enrollment path](#). A collaboration of nonprofit groups will launch the same tool across Arizona this year.

Non-traditional partners

The college-going culture in Washington may be shaped by factors that are outside of the formal school setting. We want to involve many non-traditional partners, such as local philanthropy, employers, youth service organizations, and other community-based organizations in promoting direct enrollment and financial aid for high school seniors.

Many of these groups are already involved on a local basis. Some of these sectors, such as youth service organizations, may provide direct services to young people, while others, such as employers, may best serve as a communications channel to parents and students. This work is at an early stage of development.

Progress Reports

WSAC is the state’s authorized point of access for the federal database that tracks FAFSA applications. For a number of years, schools have been able to use [a web portal to see application status](#) on an individual student basis. The database is updated weekly during the peak season from mid-October to June. School districts must sign a data-sharing agreement to have access to this information.

This data can be used to create dashboards and/or other reports on an aggregate basis to show the volume of applications on a school or district basis.

Questions

- Do you have any clarifying or technical questions about this backgrounder?
- Do you understand WSAC's role in this work?
- What communication audiences are we missing? What other partners might we find to help deliver or strengthen our communications strategies?
- Are there partners in other sectors who could extend FAFSA/WASFA application completion support in a "train the trainer" model?
- How do we broaden the base of non-traditional partners?
- How should we share progress reports across school districts and communities to tap into positive community pride?