

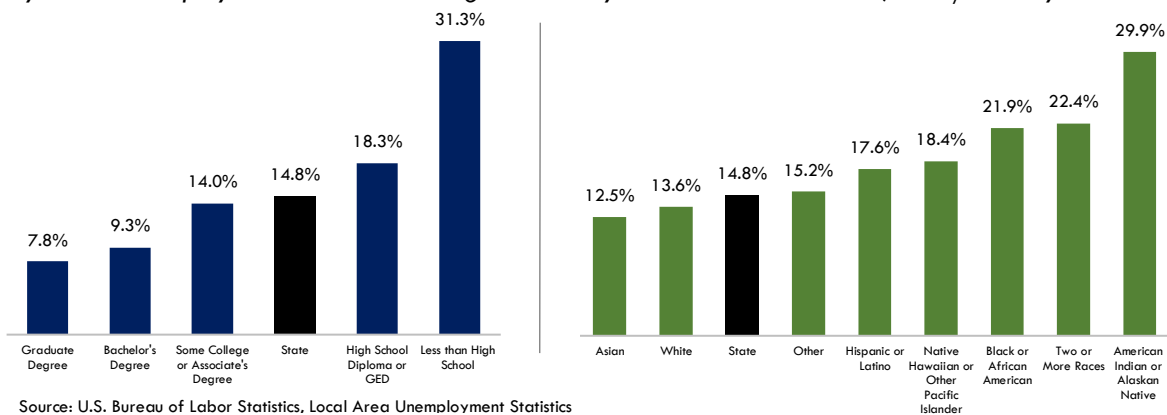
Lessons on Recovery: The Value and Potential of Higher Education in Response to the COVID-19 Crisis

COVID-19's Effects on Higher Education and the Labor Market

The COVID-19 crisis has upended life in the United States, extending well beyond health and safety concerns. Millions of Americans have faced financial instability as states have shut down their economies to curb the spread of the virus. As the COVID-19 crisis continues to unfold, drawing lessons from history on resilience and recovery can inform a proactive response that improves our economic future and the wellbeing of all people in Washington State. While this crisis is not the first we've encountered, the nature and magnitude differ from our most recent precedent, the 2008 Great Recession. The full report by Kwakye and Kibort-Crocker (2020) explores the effects of both crises on higher education and the labor market in more detail.

At the onset of the pandemic, between February and April, the national unemployment rate more than tripled. Average weekly unemployment claims were filed at ten times the rate than during the height of the Great Recession. In Washington, the state unemployment rate in May was five percentage points higher than it was in 2010. The COVID-19 crisis has also shed light on persistent inequities in health, financial stability, and education. And as we've seen during other recessions, those with lower educational attainment levels, young people, and people of color have been impacted more profoundly, experiencing increased vulnerability in the labor market.

May 2020 Unemployment Rate in Washington State by Educational Attainment, Race/Ethnicity



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics

In previous recessions, the economy's downturn led to surges in higher education enrollment as people looked to improve their prospects for the future. But the COVID-19 crisis is different from past recessions. The massive shift to online learning in the spring left many students dissatisfied, and uncertainty around campus operations for the coming academic year may deter students from continuing their education. Many families are facing immense financial strain that may limit their ability to afford college. The pandemic also has the potential to exacerbate inequities in higher education enrollment, persistence, and completion, as students of color endure disproportionate health, financial, and academic hardships caused by COVID-19.

As the COVID-19 crisis continues, addressing barriers in higher education will be critical to our response. Many workers will need to upskill or re-skill to improve their employment prospects and adapt to the changing labor market. Postsecondary programs that respond to new demands and prepare graduates with the skills to take advantage of emerging opportunities will be integral to our recovery. The current moment presents an opportune time for higher education to lead the way—not only in aiding our economic recovery, but also fulfilling its promise as the “great equalizer” by opening opportunities for all people in Washington to have brighter futures.

Strategic Priorities for Recovery

Strengthening the higher education system and ensuring accessibility and effectiveness for all Washington residents is key to a strong recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. This executive summary presents a brief overview of priorities and promising practices, described in further detail in the full report (Kwakye and Kibort-Crocker, 2020).

Strengthen postsecondary enrollment

History has shown us that enrollment in postsecondary programs tends to increase during economic downturns. During the Great Recession, there was a significant surge in enrollment, leading to a more ample supply of educated workers to help the economy recover. Notably, the proportion of young Black and Hispanic people enrolled in higher education grew markedly, for a time reaching parity with their white counterparts. Emerging evidence suggests that the COVID-19 crisis is changing enrollment plans, and an initial analysis of Washington State data shows a downward trend for Spring 2020 enrollment at 2-year institutions. Prioritizing enrollment during the COVID-19 crisis can help prepare our state for a strong recovery, increase access for underrepresented students, and help all people in Washington improve their future circumstances. Adopting evidence-based programs and policies that have been shown to increase college enrollment is an excellent place to start.

Proven Programs and Policies

Provide application assistance	Delivering information and direct support to help students and families fill out and submit FAFSA has been shown to increase the likelihood of college enrollment.
Increase the number of high school counselors	Hiring additional counselors has been shown to help students navigate administrative barriers and transition from high school to postsecondary programs.
Encourage participation in college access programs	Participating in programs that offer advising and support has been shown to strengthen students' college-going mindsets and confidence to enroll in college.

Keep college affordable

Maintaining affordability is essential to ensuring access to higher education for all people in Washington. Extensive evidence demonstrates that financial aid increases college enrollment and persistence. In fact, \$1,000 of grant aid has been shown to increase college enrollment by four percentage points and college persistence by two percentage points. Particularly as families face financial instability due to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, helping students shoulder the costs of college is integral. Beyond tuition, students may also need assistance with basic needs and living expenses. Washington has robust state financial aid programs, including the Washington College Grant, and should uphold this commitment to affordability during this uncertain time.

Proven Programs and Policies

Invest in state financial aid programs	Maintaining the Washington College Grant and other financial support for college students has been shown to improve access and affordability.
Provide students with grant aid	Helping students pay tuition, fees, and other expenses has been shown to increase enrollment, persistence, and graduation.
Streamline emergency aid procedures	Providing just-in-time grants to students who experience sudden financial hardship has been shown to help them continue their education.

Invest in high-quality digital learning

The hasty shift to online learning this spring led to dissatisfaction and perceptions of learning loss among college students. Underrepresented students, including low-income, first-generation, and students of color reported even higher levels of disruption caused by the shift than their more advantaged peers, and higher levels of uncertainty about the upcoming school year. Improving the quality of online learning is fundamental to higher education's ability to adapt to the current crisis. As the situation around COVID-19 continues to evolve, many campuses are planning to continue remote operations into the upcoming academic year. Leveraging proven practices in digital learning environments can minimize disruption to learning and ensure students' continued academic progress during these challenging times.

Proven Programs and Policies	
Use technology effectively	Implementing interactive activities in online classes has been proven effective in enhancing engagement and learning.
Foster virtual connections	Encouraging virtual communication outside of class time has been shown to improve academic performance and can replicate the informal learning that students benefit from on campus.
Incorporate best practices	Sending personal messages to students, using real-world examples in class, and encouraging reflection on learning led to higher levels of student satisfaction in online courses during Spring 2020.

Provide students with holistic supports

Comprehensive supports can help students overcome adversity and succeed in higher education. But student surveys from the spring of 2020 reveal immense academic, financial, and psychological challenges in the wake of the pandemic that are sure to hinder their ability to persist and reach graduation. Many students expressed concern over the switch to remote learning, reported lost income for themselves or their families, and felt uncertain about their future plans. One survey found that almost three in five college students experience food or housing insecurity this fall. As students continue to navigate the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis, providing them with services that have been proven effective can increase their chances of making it to the finish line.

Proven Programs and Policies	
Offer comprehensive wraparound supports	Combining frequent advising with financial aid and academic supports has been shown to aid student retention and boost graduation rates.
Adapt successful programs to an online format	Offering effective services like coaching sessions and group check-ins in a modified format can ensure continued supports for students.
Connect students to social services	Helping students access public benefits and other social services can reduce their personal and financial strain and has been shown to improve their ability to succeed in school.

Job recovery following the Great Recession favored those with higher levels of education, and it is likely that a similar pattern will emerge in the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. The evidence-based strategies presented in this report can help lay the foundation for boosting enrollment, maintaining affordability, supporting high-quality digital learning experiences, and ensuring ongoing holistic student support that will reduce educational attainment barriers during this challenging time. Helping more Washingtonians gain a postsecondary credential will improve individuals' opportunities and financial security for the future and contribute to the resilience and recovery of our state.