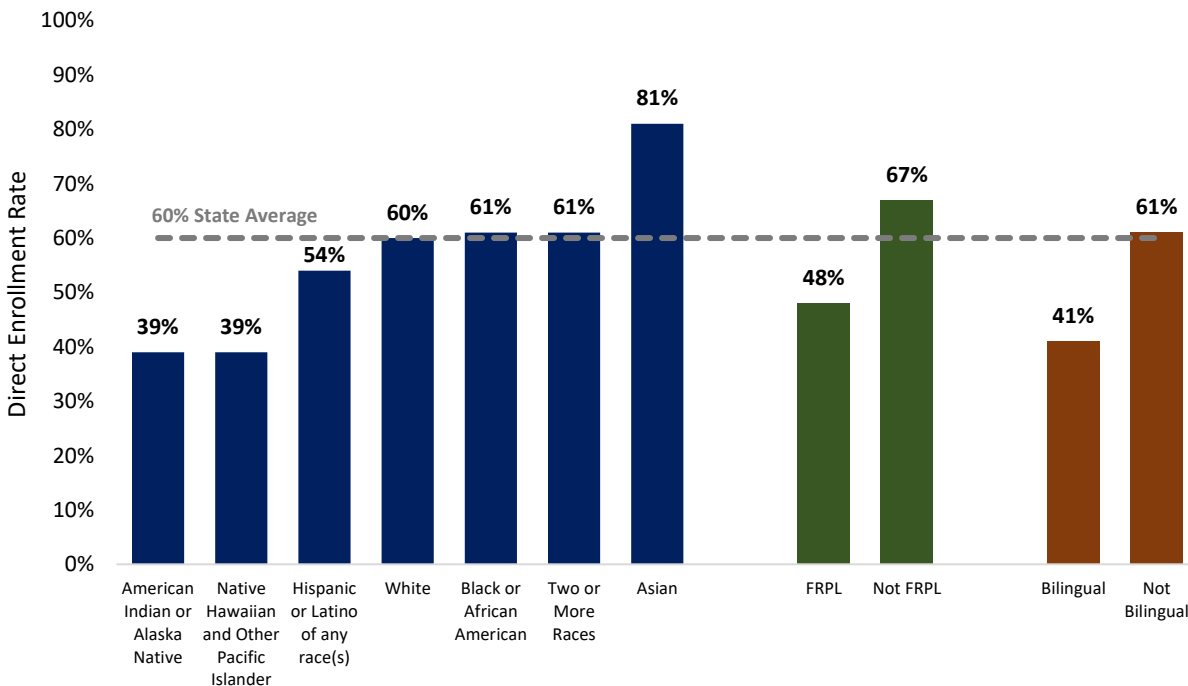# Improving Postsecondary Access: Washington Career and College Pathways Innovation Challenge Program

December 2021, By Isaac Kwakye and Daniel Oliver

Why does Washington need a new approach to postsecondary access?

The Student Achievement Council (WSAC) proposes to establish the Washington Career and College Pathways Innovation Challenge Program to provide competitive awards for community-based career and college collaborations. The aim of the program is to increase direct K-12 to postsecondary enrollment rates from 60% to the national average of 70% and to close equity gaps. Large equity gaps exist by race/ethnicity, economic background, and languages spoken (Figure 1). A theme that emerges across groups with low postsecondary enrollment is that they are often groups that are not reached with passive approaches. Rigorous research using randomized controlled trials has consistently demonstrated that careful targeting of outreach, personalization, and socially proximate interactions are crucial features in programs proven to increase postsecondary enrollment. Community-based collaborations have the greatest opportunity to implement these types of services effectively.

Figure 1. Proportion of students who enrolled in postsecondary programs within one year of high school graduation by student group (Class of 2019)

Source: Washington State Education Research and Data Center. https://erdc.wa.gov/data-dashboards/high-school-graduate-outcomes
Note: Free and Reduced Priced Lunch (FRPL) is used as a proxy for low-income status

What does the research say about effective postsecondary access programs?

We know from the large body of literature that partnership programs can affect students' college-going behaviors. Research suggests that there are at least five types of partnership programs that may increase postsecondary enrollment for graduating high school students. These programs include aid promises, post-graduation summer outreach, in-person advising and application assistance for students at high schools, FAFSA assistance for parents/guardians, and "early college" high schools. In this section, we provide recent examples of programs from each of these five categories. The programs that we discuss have all been evaluated using a randomized controlled trial.[a]

Financial Aid Promises

Promises of financial aid provide an important element of certainty that students need before applying and enrolling in a postsecondary program. The certainty of aid can come from concrete task incentives[b] or early scholarship guarantees (before applications).

Examples of effective programs:

One Million Degrees[1]
The One Million Degrees program in Chicago partners with local community colleges to provide a comprehensive set of services to help students graduate within three years. For recruitment and retention of students, the program offers an annual incentivized stipend of $1000. To receive the stipend, students must satisfy program participation requirements (such as attending workshops). The program has an overall effect of increasing any postsecondary enrollment by 7 percentage points directly from high school.

HAIL Scholarship[2]
To determine whether aid information is a college access barrier, University of Michigan (UM) reframed the delivery of financial aid news. Instead of mailing scholarship offers after admission, UM preemptively mailed scholarship guarantees (conditional on admittance) to prospective students that had yet to apply. The reframing had an effect of increasing enrollment at UM by 15 percentage points and 6 percentage points at any college. These findings are profound because the criteria used to determine scholarships were not changed. Under both scenarios, low-income students admitted to UM received the same scholarship package.

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[a] Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are widely considered the "gold standard" of evaluation design because of their ability to determine a robust and credible estimate of a program's effects. Because the groups are randomly assigned, both groups share the same traits besides whether they received the intervention. Therefore, differences in the two groups' outcomes provide a reliable measurement of the program's impact (See https://www.mdrc.org/using-rigorous-designs).
[b] For incentives to be effective, it is important that they are concrete tasks. For a discussion, see Gneezy, Uri, Stephan Meier, and Pedro Rey-Biel. "When and why incentives (don't) work to modify behavior." Journal of economic perspectives 25, no. 4 (2011): 191-210.
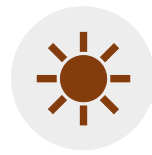
☀ Post-Graduation Summer Outreach

Around 10 to 40% of low-income high school seniors accepted to colleges fail to matriculate at any college in the fall semester. The transition may be difficult for students because they have little or no guidance during this period of uncertainty. Summer outreach can be a useful strategy to mitigate this summer melt.

Examples of effective programs:

> **Summer Outreach from High School Counselors (Big Picture Schools)[3]**
> To combat summer melt, counselors from a set of "innovative" urban high schools in Rhode Island actively reached out to students during the summer to provide college counseling. This intervention increased fall matriculation by 19 percentage points.

> **Summer Outreach from High School or College Counselors (Albuquerque Public Schools & University of New Mexico)[4]**
> The researchers found that summer outreach from college counselors may be more effective than high school counselors. This study documents a rare intervention that is effective on males at the postsecondary level. Outreach by counselors from UNM increased fall postsecondary matriculation for Hispanic males by 12 percentage points. For context, Hispanic males are underrepresented minorities at the university (a group that may feel like they do not belong). This study provides an example of an effective program that provides "a sense of belonging."

📄 Student Advising & Application Assistance (In-Person)

Students in the margin of attending college often need assistance with applications for colleges and financial aid. In-person advising, mentorship, and assistance provided at school facilities can be highly effective.

Examples of effective programs:

> **Life After High School: Incorporating Application Assistance into a High School Curriculum[5]**
> To improve college access, the program assisted high school seniors with college and financial aid applications. The program took place over three workshops within a high school curriculum. On average, the program increased application rates by 14 percentage points and college enrollment rates by 5 percentage points.

Bottom Line: Coordinated Advising During High School and College[6]

The Bottom Line (BL) program provides Access counseling and Success counseling. Access counselors provide individualized advising to students from the summer before senior year of high school until the completion of summer after graduation. The counselors focus on helping students with financial aid applications and evaluating postsecondary options. For students who enroll at one of the target institutions provided by the program, BL continues to provide individualized campus-based support (Success counseling) for up to 6 years after high school. BL increases college enrollment by 7 percentage points.

College Forward: Intensive Advising of Majority Hispanic Student Population from High School Through College[7]

The College Forward program is a comprehensive one-on-one advising program that starts at the junior year in high school and continues through college no matter where the students enroll. They provide advising on entrance exams, applications (aid & admission), and the summer transition from high school to college. The program led to a 7-percentage point increase in college enrollment (almost entirely driven by four-year universities). It also led to a 12-percentage point increase in likelihood of college persistence.

Matching High School Seniors with a College Mentor[8]

The researchers designed a mentoring program for high school seniors who expressed interest in college but had taken few or no steps to apply. Mentors (Dartmouth undergraduates) were matched with these seniors. The mentors visited the students at school each week until all steps in college applications were completed and filed. On college enrollment, the program had a 15-percentage point effect for women and a null effect for men. The effect was also much stronger on students that had not yet taken the SAT, while statistically insignificant for students that had already taken the SAT.

Parent/Guardian Assistance

Many students that are eligible for financial aid may not receive aid because they rely on complex financial information from their parents. Simplifying or eliminating the complexity may improve the distribution of aid to the students that need it the most.

Examples of effective programs:

> **Personalized FAFSA Assistance for Parents (H&R Block)[9]**
> To improve low take-up of FAFSA, H&R Block offered personalized assistance (approximately 10 minutes) to complete applications. By offering assistance during tax filings, the FAFSA application process was streamlined for parents. The program was highly effective and increased college enrollment rates for high school seniors and recent high school graduates by 8 percentage points.

Early College High Schools

Early college high schools (ECs) partner with colleges and universities to offer students an opportunity to earn an associate degree or up to two years of college credit toward a bachelor's degree during high school at no or low cost to the students. ECs provide a comprehensive small school setting and a college going culture for students (college-ready design). In addition to college course offerings, they provide counseling and support for college.

Examples of effective programs:

> **Early College High School (Multi-state study)[10]**
> The researchers study lottery admissions across 10 ECs in different states. They find that ECs increase postsecondary enrollment by 9 percentage points and increase postsecondary credentials by 20 percentage points. The study documents that course taking dramatically shifted from Advanced Placement to college courses.

> **Early College High School (North Carolina New Schools Partnership)[11]**
> The study includes 12 early colleges across all regions and urbanicities in North Carolina. The average school size is approximately 140 students, compared to 970 students at traditional schools in similar district schools. While ECs have no detectable effect on high school graduation rates, they increase postsecondary enrollment by 16 percentage points (with larger effects for first generation and FRPL eligible students.)

What patterns emerge from successful college access programs?

In the prior section, we provided select examples of programs with demonstrated effectiveness. Unfortunately, not all programs aimed at improving college access are effective. Below, we offer an overview of patterns that emerge from programs that increase postsecondary access. We highlight patterns by populations served and program attributes.

Which populations do effective programs serve?

It is crucial that programs serve student populations predicted to have low rates of postsecondary enrollment. We emphasize the term "serve" because the effectiveness of a program may diminish if there is slippage between the students that are targeted and the students that are served. Below we list characteristics of students and their households for which programs are more likely to be effective.

Student Characteristics

- Historically underrepresented race or ethnicity.
- Has indicated intent to go to college but has taken little or no prior action to go.
- Has lower grade point averages.

Household Characteristics

- No prior college education.
- Language other than English spoken at home.
- Moderate or low income.

What are the key attributes of effective programs?

Below, we provide a list of program attributes that have shown a pattern of effectiveness. The common themes involve personalization and added certainty.

Information

- Messages are targeted and personalized to individuals.
- Personalized guarantees of financial aid (as opposed to a look-up document).
- Timely and accurate updates for individuals.
- Information sent by an individual or entity known by the student.

Financial Certainty

- Personalized guarantees of financial aid.
- Financial incentives for actionable outcomes (i.e., submitting an application, enrolling in a postsecondary program, attending workshops, etc.).

Social Interactions (for advising and mentorship)

- Structured delivery of services with clear goals related to enrollment.
- Advisees are assigned to students in order to promote proactive outreach.
- The advisee is socially proximate in multiple dimensions (in person, age, gender, neighborhood raised, etc.).

Conclusion

The postsecondary enrollment rate for graduating high school seniors in Washington has remained persistently low, at a rate of about 60% for over 15 years. By providing an opportunity for innovative local partnerships, the State of Washington can better serve local workforces to leverage one of the nation's most generous financial aid programs. The latest research consistently shows that targeted, personalized, and socially proximate programs are the most effective approaches for increasing postsecondary enrollment. This evidence suggests that local know-how and stakeholders provide an untapped opportunity for substantive improvements in the training of our future workforce.

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