

## Discussion & Council Action: 2023 Legislative Proposals

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Submitted for the Council's approval are three proposals for the 2023 legislative session:

### ***Budget Decision Packages***

- **Regional Challenge Grants**

WSAC proposes to seek increased funding for Regional Challenge Grants at the level originally proposed by the Governor. The program will award grants to regional partnerships between community organizations, higher education institutions, and K-12 to increase direct postsecondary enrollment and close equity gaps. Regional Challenge Grants support innovative solutions that leverage the expertise of cross-sector partnerships to target the populations they know best.

*Proposal Cost: \$16.5 million annually*

- **Telehealth mental and behavioral health care access**

WSAC proposes to contract with a telehealth provider to address increasing mental and behavioral health care needs among students at up to four higher education institutions. The proposal includes an external evaluation of the impacts of telehealth care on students' academic and health outcomes.

*Proposal Cost: \$2 million*

### ***Agency Request Legislation***

- **Student Financial Aid pilot programs**

WSAC requests a change in statute to permit financial aid pilot programs. Similar efforts at the federal level allow the U.S. Department of Education to pilot small-scale programs and program adjustments and experiment with new ways to deliver aid before committing time and resources to make permanent changes to larger programs.

*Proposal Cost: N/A – statutory change with no associated budget request*

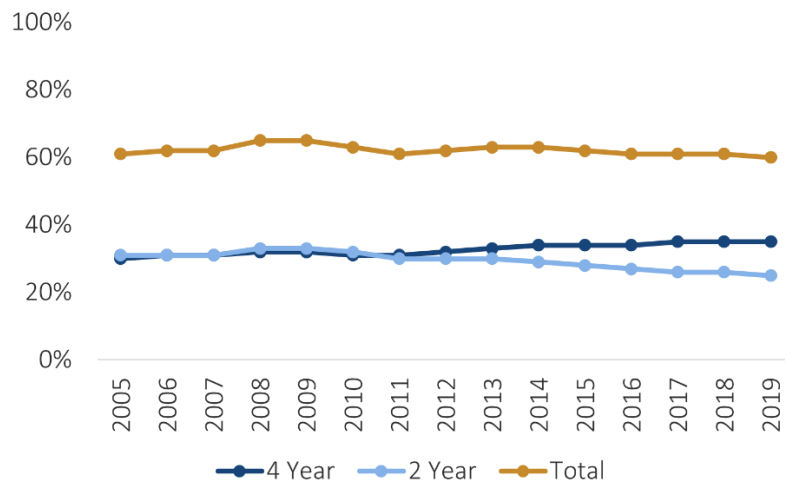
## The Challenge: Washington faces an enrollment crisis

Washington needs continued, increased investments in the Regional Challenge Grant to reach the State’s postsecondary attainment goal of 70%:

- Enrollment across all sectors is declining, especially among students of color.<sup>1</sup> These declines are unprecedented due to the COVID-19 pandemic, adversely impacting students furthest from educational justice.<sup>2</sup>
- Washington has one of the highest demands for employees who have continued beyond high school, yet Washington’s direct postsecondary enrollment rate is below the national average.<sup>3</sup>

*Direct Postsecondary Enrollment Rate from High School*

Direct postsecondary enrollment has been stagnant for the past ten years and is in decline, exacerbated by the devastating effects of COVID-19.



Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC), Washington postsecondary enrollment during first year after graduation, 2005-2019 graduates, by sector.

## Regional partnerships know their populations best and can provide the most effective solutions

Regional Challenge Grants provide partnerships the resources they need by:

- Leveraging the expertise of cross-sector partnerships, including but not limited to community-based organizations, K-12, institutions of higher education, and workforce partners.
- Enabling regional partnerships to scale proven methods while encouraging new and innovative approaches.

The program will achieve this by awarding two types of grants:

- Partnership Formation: awarded to build new partnerships grounded in regional leadership.
- Implementation: for existing partnerships ready to test or expand new strategies that will have a direct impact on students.

Over the past year, WSAC has seen tremendous interest in the Regional Challenge Grant:

- In the span of two RCG outreach sessions, nearly 200 leaders have attended across K-12, higher education, community-based organizations, industry, labor, and other sectors.
- Current funding levels would only support about 30% of applicants for the grant, leaving a majority of applicants without the resources they would need to make an impact.

Continuing to invest in the Regional Challenge Grant will ultimately:

- Ensure that the state is closer to its postsecondary attainment goal of 70% while closing opportunity gaps for students pursuing college and career pathways.
- Fulfill a need that has been voiced by regional cross-sector partnerships across the state.
- Build strong cross-sector partnerships who collaborate with institutions, students, and their communities.

### **Regional Challenge Grants proposal cost**

This proposal requests \$16.5 million annually to increase funding for Regional Challenge Grants to the level proposed by the Governor.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2021-03-30-COVID-Learning-Disruption-Report.pdf>

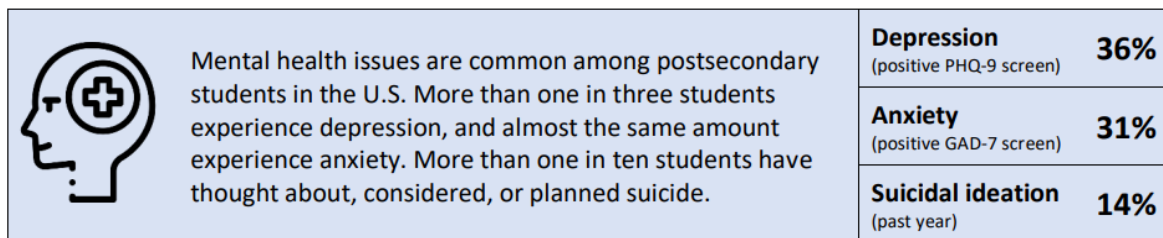
<sup>2</sup> <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2021-01-12-Fall-Enrollment-Report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2019-20.WASkilledEducatedWorkforce.pdf>

## The Challenge: All students should have access to mental health care

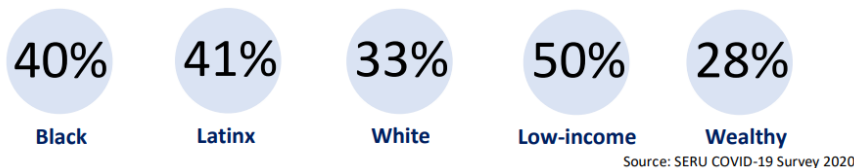
Mental and behavioral health care needs are rising among postsecondary students, often outpacing the capacity of campus and community providers.

- Depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide among college students have been exacerbated by COVID.<sup>1</sup>
- Students of color and low-income students experience higher care needs, yet can face increased challenges accessing care that meets their needs.<sup>2</sup>
- Many Washington colleges report gaps in campus or community care to meet the scope of student needs. Provider shortages are particularly challenging in rural areas.



Source: National Healthy Minds Survey Fall 2019

Depression has been more prevalent among some groups of students during the pandemic:



Without support, students' mental and behavioral health issues can negatively impact academic performance, persistence, and credential completion.<sup>3</sup>

## Increase students' care through telehealth

Telehealth augments existing care from college and community providers, providing flexible, postsecondary-focused mental and behavioral health care access.

- Students perceive tele-mental health care as accessible and helpful, with lower stigma in seeking help.<sup>4</sup>
- Telehealth clinics can offer a wide range of providers with a focus on diversity, and flexible hours for working students. They coordinate care with existing campus care providers.
- While a few postsecondary institutions have individually contracted with telehealth clinics, individual contract costs have been prohibitively high.

WSAC will partner with up to four institutions to achieve cost savings through a collective contract with a telehealth provider. WSAC will contract an external evaluation of telehealth impacts on students' health and persistence and completion outcomes.

A telehealth state partnership with colleges will:

- Increase students' care access where students' needs are not met by existing services.
- Evaluate the impacts of telehealth care on students' outcomes in health, academic persistence, and credential attainment.

### **Telehealth proposal cost**

The request is \$2 million to provide telehealth mental and behavioral care access for students at up to four institutions and an external evaluation.

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<sup>1</sup> For a summary of postsecondary mental health research, see [2020-12-17-Mental-Health.pdf \(wa.gov\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> Volpe, V. V. (n.d.). What We Know About the Mental Health of Students of Color During College: A Review and Call to Action. The Steve Fund and The Healthy Minds Study: 2019 Fall Data Report. (2019). [https://healthymindsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/f2019\\_HMS\\_national\\_final.pdf](https://healthymindsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/f2019_HMS_national_final.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Eisenberg, Daniel, Ezra Golberstein, and Justin B. Hunt. 2009. "Mental Health and Academic Success in College." *The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy* 9 (1): Article 40.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7785477/>

## **The Challenge: Financial aid should work for everyone**

Washington benefits from a generous, flexible system of financial aid and a wide variety of options for postsecondary training. Need-based aid lowers barriers to participate in higher education, and for many it's the key to earning a degree. But there are many programs at our institutions that aren't eligible for state financial aid, and there are innovative, industry-created, on-the-job training programs that aren't eligible either. Ideally, our system would be flexible enough to provide access to all programs that deliver needed credentials and improve earning power, while also safeguarding public resources and ensuring that the programs actually work for students.

## **Pilot and evaluate new approaches to state financial aid**

When facing the same challenge, the U.S Department of Education created an innovative solution: pilot small-scale programs that don't fit under the current restrictions of the federal aid program. The pilots would provide flexibility from certain rules, allowing colleges or others to experiment with new ways to deliver aid. Each pilot would be evaluated so the Department could understand what worked before making permanent changes to the larger program. It's time to try that approach in Washington.

Below are just two examples of programs that could benefit from piloting new, more flexible ways to make state aid work for all students:

- Logistics and supply-chain issues brought the need for Commercial Drivers' Licenses (CDL) to the fore last year, and there are CDL programs at our community and technical colleges right now. But due to the length of such programs, they are not eligible for state aid.
- A large healthcare system operates on-the-job training for many entry-level health care positions in Eastern Washington from which graduates move directly to a new job. The programs are approved for veterans' benefits and licensed by the Department of Health, but they're not eligible for aid, meaning costs are a barrier for many participants.

This proposal would authorize WSAC to approve experimental pilot sites to test the use of the Washington College Grant for education and training programs that would not meet statutory eligibility requirements. This does not affect the income eligibility standards set by RCW. WSAC could allow up to five sites to test a particular experimental model for a maximum of five years at a specified limit on participants by year. Each pilot would include an evaluation and a report to the Governor and Legislature.

## **SFA pilot proposal cost**

This proposal requests a change in statute to permit financial aid experimental pilot programs. There is no associated budget request.