

Discussion & Council Action: 2025 Legislative Proposals

The following are seven proposals for the 2025 legislative session.

Make 65% MFI and Bridge Grants permanent features of the WA Grant

The WA Grant's current annual income threshold to receive a maximum award is 65% of the state's median family income (MFI), or \$78,500 for a family of four. This will revert to 55% MFI following the 2024–25 academic year (AY). Without action to prevent this, more than 7,000 students receiving maximum WA Grant awards will lose up to 40% of their award. During the 2023–24 AY, approximately 80% of students receiving a WA Grant award were below 65% MFI.

Bridge Grants—\$500 stipends for all students who receive the maximum WA Grant award but are not enrolled in College Bound—will also expire following the 2024–25 AY. More than 50,000 students have received nearly \$25 million in Bridge Grants during each of the past two AYs to assist with higher education expenses beyond tuition and fees.

This proposal would permanently make 65% MFI the annual income threshold to receive a maximum WA Grant award and guarantee Bridge Grants to all students who are below 65% MFI but not enrolled in College Bound. The state has fully funded 65% MFI and Bridge Grants throughout the 2023-25 biennium at approximately \$54 million and \$55 million, respectively.

Proposal cost: Subject to caseload forecast

Fully fund Passport and guarantee WA Grant for former foster and unaccompanied homeless youth

The Passport program helps former foster youth (FY) and unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY) prepare for and succeed in college, apprenticeships, or pre-apprenticeship programs by providing support services and an annual scholarship of up to \$5,000. The number of students in the program has grown significantly since 2019, with more than 1,450 students receiving an average award of \$4,266 across all sectors during the 2023–24 AY. State appropriations have not kept up with program demand, forcing WSAC to cut students' awards in half. This proposal will enable WSAC to award each student a maximum award of \$5,000 and allow us to serve an additional 500 students.

This proposal would also automatically qualify all Passport-eligible students for the maximum WA Grant award and make Passport an entitlement program, ensuring that awards and support services for former FY and UHY are fully funded. More than 98% of Passport participants also receive a WA Grant award.

Proposal cost: \$9.6 million

Bolster capacity for current and future Regional Challenge Grant partnerships

The Regional Challenge Grant began in 2022 and has since committed more than \$11 million in funding to place-based partnerships working to increase postsecondary enrollment and attainment and close equity gaps. With 13 partnerships up and running throughout the state, WSAC is committed to sustaining existing investments and supporting growth. With increased demand, an increase in funding would allow WSAC to scale effective strategies and respond to that demand to support additional partnerships in regions that are not currently involved.

Proposal cost: \$4 million

Continue text-based outreach via OtterBot for financial aid and postsecondary pathway navigation

OtterBot is an AI-enabled chatbot that provides College Bound students and parents with timely text messages about financial aid and postsecondary pathways. All high school students in WA can sign up to ask the chatbot questions and receive proactive reminders and tips. It currently supports a diverse population, with more than 50% of recipients identifying as Hispanic/Latinx. Recent analysis of OtterBot outcomes has shown that for students who engage with the chatbot:

- Financial aid completion was 7 percentage points higher than the rate for all College Bound students.
- College enrollment was 5 percentage points higher than the rate for all College Bound students.

In the 2024 Legislative session, WSAC received one-time funding to expand this critical work. Currently, with this one-time funding, OtterBot reaches nearly 30,000 College Bound high school students and 95,000 parents/guardians. With the passage of SB 6053 (2024), WSAC anticipates the available number of student and parent/guardian contact information to grow substantially. This proposal will enable WSAC to continue the existing work and reach all College Bound high school students— more than 100,000—and parents/guardians with available contact information via data sharing with the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). It would also enable WSAC to invest in various chatbot improvements, such as regionalized messaging and customization, to ensure that students and parents know about resources in their local communities.

Proposal cost: \$1.5 million

Foster partnerships between employers and institutions to increase the awarding of academic credit for prior learning (ACPL)

Nearly half of adults in Washington State do not have a postsecondary credential and yet many have work experience or other prior learning that could contribute towards a credential. During the 2022-23 academic year, Washington public and independent four-year institutions and community and technical colleges awarded 47,507 ACPL credits that applied toward certificates or degrees. More than 2,300 students earned credits for prior learning.

This proposal is in response to institution, student, and employer interest to increase the awarding of academic credit for prior learning. Funding will help establish partnerships between employers and higher education institutions for one or more of the following: reduce the financial burden on students receiving ACPL credits, test out tools to streamline the awarding process, or develop communication strategies to raise awareness of ACPL among students. This proposal would reach an additional 2,300 students.

Proposal cost: \$750,000

Include tribal college and fund affordable housing planning in Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness

The Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness (SSEH) program began in 2019 to address the 3 out of 10 college students who have reported housing insecurity across the State. The program currently excludes Washington's Tribal College and existing funding does not allow for institutions to address the lack of affordable housing for students.

This proposal would add the Northwest Indian College as a participating institution in the SSEH program and would add funding to enable up to four local/ regional partnerships to design a local solution to provide affordable housing for students in their region.

Proposal cost: \$700,000

Evaluate low-cost meal plan pilot and assess student access to affordable childcare

In 2023, a pilot program was established to provide free and low-cost meal plans or food vouchers to eligible low-income students at six community and technical colleges and public four-year institutions of higher education. This proposal would allow for an evaluation of that program to determine the impact on postsecondary students' access to food and their overall successful path towards earning a credential. The proposal also includes funding to conduct a study on postsecondary students' access to affordable childcare and the challenges faced by student parents in pursuit of a credential.

Proposal cost: \$500,000