

Automating Access to Increase Enrollment

Emerging Strategies to Increase Postsecondary Enrollment for Washington Students



RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

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Postsecondary enrollment is in decline. We need new ways to address the issue.

Washington has a robust postsecondary education system with opportunities located across the state. The state also provides the most need-based financial aid per undergraduate student in the country through the Washington College Grant and other statewide programs that help make postsecondary education more affordable for low- and middle-income residents.¹ However, like many other states, Washington is experiencing significant, ongoing challenges to enrollment.

Postsecondary enrollment took a major hit during the COVID-19 pandemic and is far from recovered. Enrollment in Washington was down 20 percent at community and technical colleges in 2023, and more than 10 percent lower at public 4-year institutions compared to before the pandemic.² Fewer high school graduates in the state are directly enrolling in postsecondary education.³ Additionally, surveys show that public confidence in and perception of postsecondary education have faltered in recent years.^{4,5}

Regardless of these trends, evidence still suggests that getting a postsecondary credential is beneficial for society and for individuals. Higher education can help individuals earn more and have more job security and is a path to economic mobility.⁶ Having an adequate supply of skilled workers is also critical for our state's labor market and economic growth.⁷ These realities suggest an urgent need to address the enrollment slump in Washington.

In response to ongoing enrollment challenges, institutions and states are considering new practices to engage with prospective students. Adapting the traditional system to facilitate a smooth transition from high school to postsecondary education and training opportunities may help accommodate the needs of today's students and families. A common thread among many emerging strategies is that they aim to reduce the administrative burden on students and families and eliminate uncertainty about the admissions process.⁸

Administrative Burden Theory

Administrative burden theory posits that administrative processes create barriers that prevent intended populations from receiving publicly available benefits, such as financial aid. A number of administrative barriers complicate the transition to postsecondary education, particularly for students who are the first in their families to attend. These barriers include learning costs to understand eligibility and the application requirements, compliance costs to adhere to the rules to apply for and receive aid, and psychological costs from stress and frustration of bureaucratic processes. Understanding eligibility, how to apply for financial aid and admissions, and assessing aid and admissions offers all add steps to the matriculation process that may further deter students from enrolling in postsecondary programs. Simplifying or eliminating steps may help ease the transition.

Research shows that automating aspects of the enrollment process can help.

Declining postsecondary enrollment and deteriorating public perception of the value of higher education provide an opportunity for new ways of thinking about student-centered approaches to enrollment. It is becoming increasingly common for states and institutions to explore ways to reduce uncertainty and administrative burdens on students and families. Research suggests that these types of changes can increase enrollment and may also support more equitable outcomes for low-income, first-generation, and students of color.



Directly admitting eligible high school graduates to colleges can increase enrollment at the state level. Several states have begun to explore alternative admissions strategies, including eliminating the formal application process in favor of a more streamlined approach. Idaho was the first state to offer direct admission to public institutions for high school seniors who met eligibility criteria, and early evidence suggests that the strategy has been successful. Rather than waiting for students to apply to find out if they were admitted, public institutions in the state proactively informed eligible students of their guaranteed admission offer using data from the state's K-12 system. Students could then confirm their place at the institution of their choice by completing a short form. The direct admissions policy has increased enrollment by about 8 percent at public institutions in the state.⁹



Proactively notifying students of admission and waiving application fees can boost applications, particularly for low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized students. An experimental study with the Common App found positive effects on application submittals for students who received a direct admission offer and application fee waiver from one of six participating institutions. Direct admission was granted to a random sample of students who exceeded a specified high school grade point average threshold. Students received a personalized letter that shared information about the institution, financial aid, and the detailed steps needed to claim their place (e.g., submit a simplified application form). The study found that students who received the personalized offer were 12 percent more likely to submit the simplified application form, and results were even larger for low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized students.¹⁰



Guaranteeing financial aid can increase application and enrollment rates for low-income students. Affordability is a major consideration for students and families when making decisions about their postsecondary plans, and uncertainty about which colleges they can afford can deter them from applying at all. A large-scale intervention at a flagship public university intended to address this concern by notifying high-achieving, low-income students of financial aid that would cover the full cost of tuition. The intervention did not increase financial aid, rather it provided early notification to students regarding their eligibility for free tuition and fees. The study found that applications and enrollments at the institution among the target population more than doubled, indicating that an early promise of financial aid can make a significant difference in students' college-going choices. The framing of aid as free tuition may have also reduced uncertainty about the cost of attendance.¹¹

The evidence is clear: Proactive strategies that promote clarity and ease administrative processes can increase enrollment. These types of strategies require changes at the institutional and systemic levels, and Washington is a national leader in identifying how our educational systems can better support postsecondary learners.

Washington is leading the way with innovative statewide enrollment initiatives.

To combat ongoing enrollment decline and encourage more students to pursue postsecondary education, several initiatives have sprung up in the state that aim to reduce the administrative burdens for students and families. These initiatives complement Washington’s numerous postsecondary programs across the state and generous financial aid programs, like the Washington College Grant.

Washington Guaranteed Admission Program

The Washington Guaranteed Admissions Program (WAGAP), led by the state’s public four-year universities, aims to increase access and remove barriers to college admissions for Washington students.¹² Participating WAGAP universities engage with high school juniors to expose them to the college admissions process and support WAGAP-eligible high school seniors through the admissions process. WAGAP ensures that students who meet eligibility criteria will be guaranteed admission to participating institutions.

Washington Guaranteed Admissions Program Eligibility Criteria

- High school GPA of 3.0 or higher
- Complete the College Academic Distribution Requirements (CADRs)
- Attend a participating high school

Students who meet the requirements must complete an admissions application and any other additional institutional information needed to receive guaranteed admission. Students are also strongly encouraged to complete a financial aid application (FAFSA or WASFA) to be considered for state and federal aid.

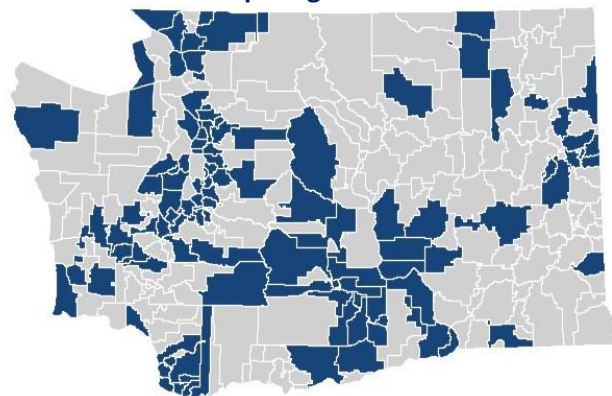
WAGAP participating institutions include:

- Central Washington University
- Eastern Washington University
- The Evergreen State College
- University of Washington Tacoma
- Washington State University
- Western Washington University

Over 130 school districts and schools participated in WAGAP in the 2023-2024 academic year. This represents a large proportion of districts in the state. School districts and schools are located across the state and cover a diverse range of geographies. (Note that individual schools and non-place bound districts are not represented on the map.)

In addition to geographic diversity, school districts that were part of WAGAP in the 2023-2024 academic year reflect the state’s

WAGAP Participating Districts in 2023-24



diversity. Half of students in participating districts are low-income, and more than half identify as students of color. The income and race distributions of participating districts are similar to the state overall. Additionally, roughly two-thirds of WAGAP participating districts have direct high school to college enrollment rates that are below the state average of 50%. This suggests that the current WAGAP partner districts provide an opportunity to engage with students that could benefit from the supportive program. School districts that are not currently participating in WAGAP are invited to participate for the upcoming school year.¹³

Going forward, examining postsecondary enrollment patterns for participating school districts can help identify how WAGAP influences student's postsecondary outcomes and ways in which the program could be refined to benefit more students. There may also be opportunities to combine WAGAP with other efforts to further ease the transition to postsecondary education and training opportunities for Washington students.

Automating state financial aid for families who receive public benefits

Washington is also at the cutting edge of automating state financial aid for eligible students. During the 2023-24 legislative session, the state passed legislation permitting beneficiaries of public assistance programs to automatically qualify for the Washington College Grant, which is determined based on financial need.¹⁴ A full Washington College Grant award can cover the cost of tuition at public institutions in the state. Students whose families receive specific public benefits—including food assistance like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—do not need to complete a financial aid application (i.e., FAFSA or WASFA) to demonstrate eligibility, although doing so could provide additional federal aid to help cover the full cost of attendance.

Furthermore, Washington high school students can find out as early as 10th grade that they are eligible for the Washington College Grant. Through a data sharing agreement with the Department of Social and Health Services, students will be sent a notice of eligibility for the Washington College Grant as early as 10th grade, without the need to complete a separate financial aid application. Students can be guaranteed up to three years of Washington College Grant funding based on their family's participation in public benefits programs. Students can also qualify for up to six years of state and federal aid by completing the FAFSA or WASFA.

This emerging strategy has the potential to reduce the administrative steps students need to take to receive aid that can help them pay for postsecondary education. Plus, the early guarantee of aid can influence their post-high school planning. Although these students were likely eligible for aid prior to the new legislation, reframing eligibility for tuition-free postsecondary education as a guarantee sends a clear signal of affordability to students and families. There are also possibilities to explore local implementation of this initiative. Further research will be needed to examine the implementation and outcomes for the new automatic financial aid policy.

Planning an integrated approach to automatic college access

At the beginning of 2024, the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) was awarded a \$150,000 planning grant to design messaging around guaranteed financial aid eligibility and proactive

admissions.¹⁵ This provides an opportunity to streamline emerging and existing initiatives, like WAGAP and automatic financial aid eligibility based on public benefits receipt. WSAC will use behavioral science informed strategies to enhance effective promotion and awareness campaigns. WSAC intends to engage students and families in co-designing and testing messaging that will ultimately be piloted with local partners across the state.

Research can help identify the most effective investments to boost enrollment.

As Washington continues to invest in a systems-level approach to improving our postsecondary education system, monitoring enrollment patterns and outcomes for different populations will help determine which strategies are effective and where there are opportunities for improvement. The Washington Student Achievement Council is committed to working with partners across the state to support innovative solutions that help provide equitable access to postsecondary education and training for students and families.

Endnotes

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¹² *Washington Guaranteed Admissions Program (WAGAP)*. (n.d.). Council of Presidents. <https://councilofpresidents.org/admissions/guaranteed-admissions-program-gap/>

¹³ School districts and schools can apply here: <https://councilofpresidents.org/admissions/guaranteed-admissions-program-gap/>

¹⁴ *Second Substitute House Bill 2214: Washington College Grant—Eligibility—Beneficiaries of Public Assistance Programs*. (2024). <https://lawfilesexternal.wa.gov/biennium/2023-24/Pdf/Bills/Session%20Laws/House/2214-S2.SL.pdf?q=20240429151739>

¹⁵ *Media Release: Great Admissions Redesign*. (2024, February 29). Washington Student Achievement Council. <https://wsac.wa.gov/media-2024-02-29-Great-Admissions-Redesign>