

Policy considerations for increasing enrollment in Washington State

Significance of the first-year minimum admissions policy

Current context:

- Through the State Board of Education, Washington State has embarked on the process of revising high school graduation requirements. Greater alignment of high school graduation requirements and admissions will smooth the transition from high school to college for students.
- The Washington Guaranteed Admissions Program (WAGAP) guarantees high school students a spot in a participating public university if students have a 3.0 high school GPA and complete CADRs. Institutions are further piloting variations of the guaranteed admissions program. Students and families will benefit from clear communication on minimum admissions and the various guaranteed admissions requirements.

What is the Minimum Admissions Standards policy?

Washington's [Admissions Standards policy](#) includes minimum admissions requirements for first-year, transfer, graduate, and professional students into public four-year institutions. For first-year students, there are two admissions policy options - standard and alternate.

Students enrolling through the first-year student admissions policy must meet at a minimum:

- A 2.0 high school GPA, and
- Complete [College Academic Distribution Requirements](#) (CADRs). CADRs consist of 17 credits distributed across 6 subject areas, including English, Math, Science, Social Studies, World Language, and Art.

Students enrolling through the alternate first-year admissions policy must have:

- A 2.0 high school GPA or equivalent, and
- Up to 3 CADR credits can be waived.

Note: Eligibility for WAGAP includes CADRs and a higher GPA of 3.0. Students receive inconsistent communications on WAGAP, minimum admissions standards, and high school graduation requirements, which all overlap but have significant differences.

Limited state-level data

Exploration of the two components of the current admissions requirement:

1. What is the significance of course taking in high school, on college enrollment?
 - Our understanding is that institutions did not track CADR completion for admitted students until last year. However, some institutions estimated a high percentage of students admitted with incomplete CADRs. At an aggregate level, the Council of Presidents recently estimated that 10 percent of WA college applicants had incomplete CADR at the time of admission.
2. What is the significance of high school GPA on college enrollment?
 - One institutional-level analysis across three first-year student cohorts found high school GPA to be the strongest predictor of first-year retention. The predictive power of high school GPA was significantly higher than that of math or English course credits.
 - Another institution looked at four cohorts of first-year students. They found that first-year retention rates ranged from about 60 percent for students with a high school GPA of 2.5 to nearly 90 percent for those with a high school GPA close to 4.0.
 - ERDC's high school graduate outcomes [dashboard](#) reports 67 percent persistence and 54 percent retention rates for students at four-year colleges who had a high school GPA *below* 3.0. For students with a GPA *above* 3.0, persistence is 90 percent, and retention is 83 percent.

In conclusion, there is limited existing research and no uniform practice of collecting individual or aggregate student-level data on CADR compliance. When it comes to high school GPA, there is a little more consistency, indicating a positive correlation. However, there is no consistent analysis of the impact of these indicators, either compared with each other or taken together on college enrollment or retention.

Inconclusive national research

1. What is the significance of course taking in high school on college enrollment?

Some studies point to a positive correlation:

- A national study conducted by AIR found that both the quality (dual credit, level of advancement) and quantity (credits earned) matter.¹ Students who take advanced courses are likely to have better postsecondary outcomes. Advanced courses like Algebra 2, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, English Language Arts 1, and English Language Arts 2.
- An ACT core curriculum study² found that students who take the recommended core curriculum enroll and have higher retention rates in college than those who don't, regardless of gender, family income, and racial or ethnic background. ACT's core curriculum consists of four years of English, and three years each of mathematics, science, and social studies.

Some studies point to a negative correlation:

- Brookings' research³ shares that an exhaustive review of research on college preparation by IES found "low evidence" that academic preparation for college in high school was effective at

improving college classroom outcomes. In fact, academic preparation was the weakest category. They also share other published studies, where, when comparing students of similar race, gender, socioeconomic background, and standardized test scores, high school course-taking makes no more than a two percent difference in the final college grade, even when high school courses include Advanced Placement (AP).

- In a 2018 study⁴ of the Chicago mandatory college preparatory curriculum and Algebra for All, student success results were mixed. While some students benefitted, in other cases, failure rates increased, grades dropped slightly, and students were no more likely to attend college. In Arkansas and Texas, taking Algebra 2 did not help students become college and career ready by the end of high school. Similar results were found in an analysis done in California. *This led to mixed responses from state agencies: Virginia and Arizona increased graduation requirements while Texas and Florida reduced them by removing Algebra 2.*

2. What is the significance of high school GPA on college enrollment?

Some studies point to a positive correlation:

- In a University of Chicago study,⁵ high school GPA was found to be five times stronger than test scores at predicting college graduation.
- In an Education Northwest study,⁶ high school GPA was a better predictor of college performance among recent high school graduates from both urban and rural areas than standardized test scores.

Some studies point to the limitations that need to be considered:

- While most studies indicate a clear positive correlation between high school GPA and first-year college GPA, some studies have found that there may be variance among high schools. The same GPA may result in different outcomes for students from different high schools.⁷ Another consideration is that high school GPA alone accounts for around 30 percent of the variance, and it may be beneficial to consider other factors.⁸

Key questions

1. Do the current minimum admissions standards requirements improve outcomes for students in college?
2. How should Washington make informed decisions on minimum admissions requirements?

Sources:

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