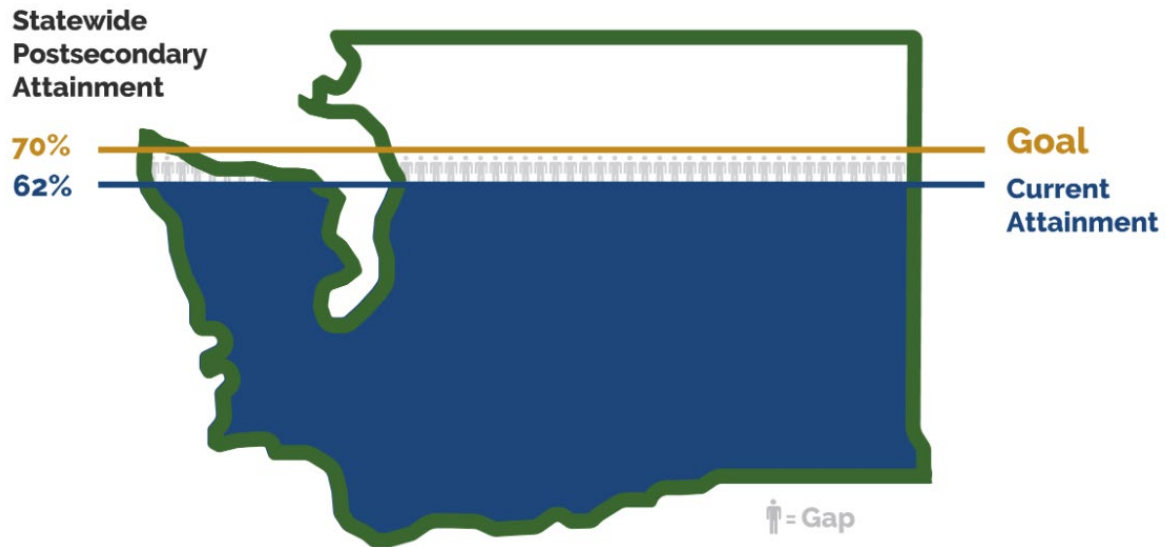


DRAFT: 2027 Strategic Action Plan

Increasing Postsecondary Educational Attainment and Equity in Washington



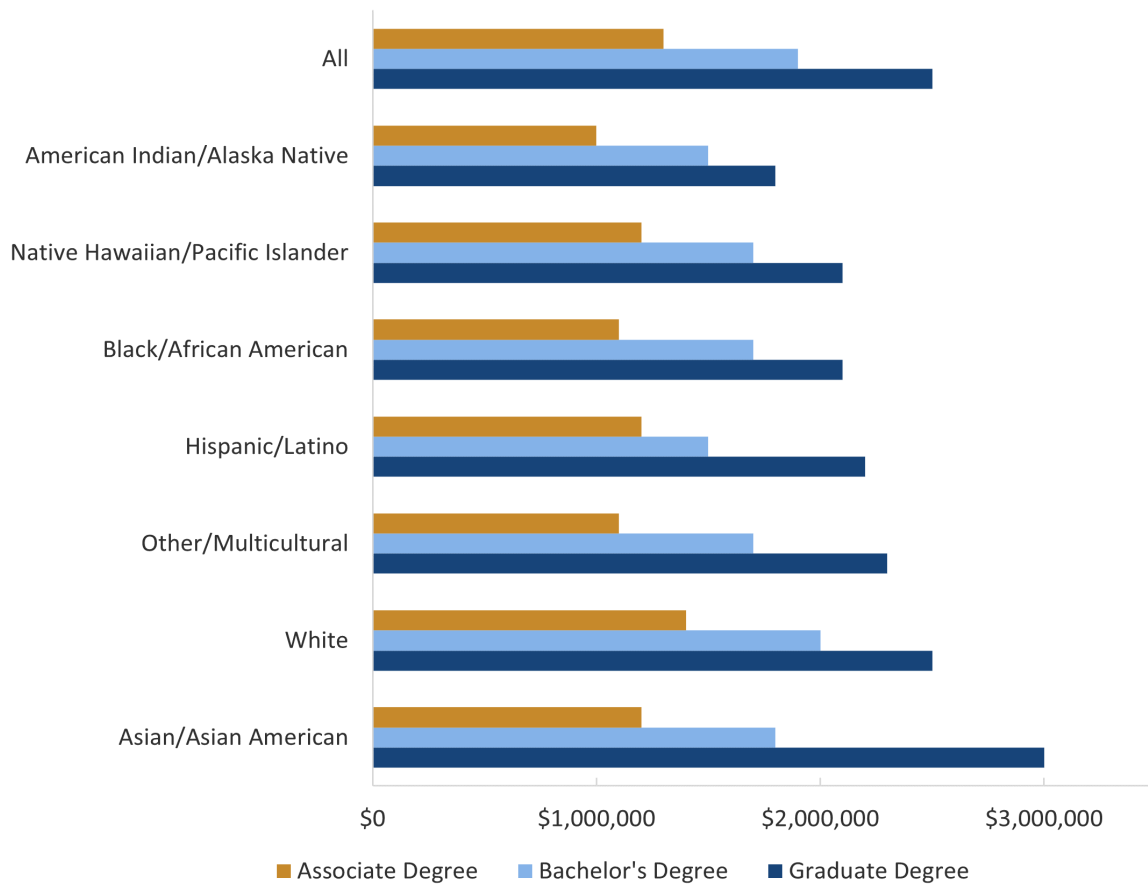
Introduction

Washington's State Goal for Educational Attainment

Washington has set a clear and ambitious goal: by 2030, 70 percent of adults ages 25–44 will have a credential beyond a high school diploma. This includes degrees, certificates, apprenticeships, and other forms of education and training that lead to economic opportunity.

This goal reflects the needs of both the state and individuals. For the state, increasing educational attainment is essential to meeting workforce demands, supporting economic growth, and strengthening communities. For individuals, postsecondary education is strongly linked to higher earnings, greater job stability, and expanded career options. In Washington, students from families in the lowest income quartile earn more than their parents by the third year after completing postsecondary education. Higher levels of education are also linked with greater lifetime earnings across all racial and ethnic groups (Fig. 1). Postsecondary pathways play a strong role in improving long-term economic outcomes.

Figure 1. Median Lifetime Earnings in the U.S. by Race/Ethnicity and Educational Attainment



Note: The median lifetime earnings for adults ages 25–64 have been adjusted for the costs of education (net tuition and fees and forgone earnings) and account for the likelihood of working.

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), 2009–11 (pooled), 2019–21 (pooled), 2009–21 (pooled); National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: 2016 (NPSAS: 2016) Undergraduate Students (UG) and Graduate Students (GR), 2016.

Washington has made meaningful progress toward this goal, with attainment growing by nearly seven percentage points over the last decade. Investments in financial aid, expansion of education and training pathways, and strong partnerships across sectors have improved access for many students. At the same time, progress has not been equal across all populations or regions. Significant equity gaps remain across income, race and ethnicity, and geography. Washington needs an aggressive change agenda and financial investment to maximize opportunities for all state residents.

Impacts of Federal and State-Level Higher Education Policy

For many years, state and federal higher education policies have focused on improving postsecondary access and affordability. Most policy discussions focused on funding for new buildings, support to lower education costs, tuition policy, and funding for financial aid programs. However, more recently, the higher education policy landscape has shifted significantly.

Federal changes are impacting funding, data systems, student loan support, and basic needs supports. Proposed or enacted cuts to the Department of Education and to programs such as Pell Grants, TRiO, GEAR UP, SNAP, and Medicaid severely limit the ability to effectively support learners, especially those with lower incomes. In addition, cuts to institutional research and data capacity at colleges make it harder to make informed decisions and maintain transparency. Together, they are negatively impacting student access and success in higher education. These shifts also put pressure on Washington's state budget, creating undue stress on investments in higher education and services that support students' basic needs and success.

Public institutions have lost more than \$50 million in state funding for the 2025 and 2026 budget cycles. This has significantly limited their resources and capacity. In addition, students across all sectors—public, private, and for-profit institutions—faced over \$80 million in cuts to financial aid in 2025. These came from lower award amounts for the Washington College Grant (WA Grant) and College Bound Scholarship (CBS), as well as cuts to other state financial aid programs.

Despite these challenges, Washington is committed to increasing postsecondary attainment for all residents. Education and training increase knowledge and skills for all.

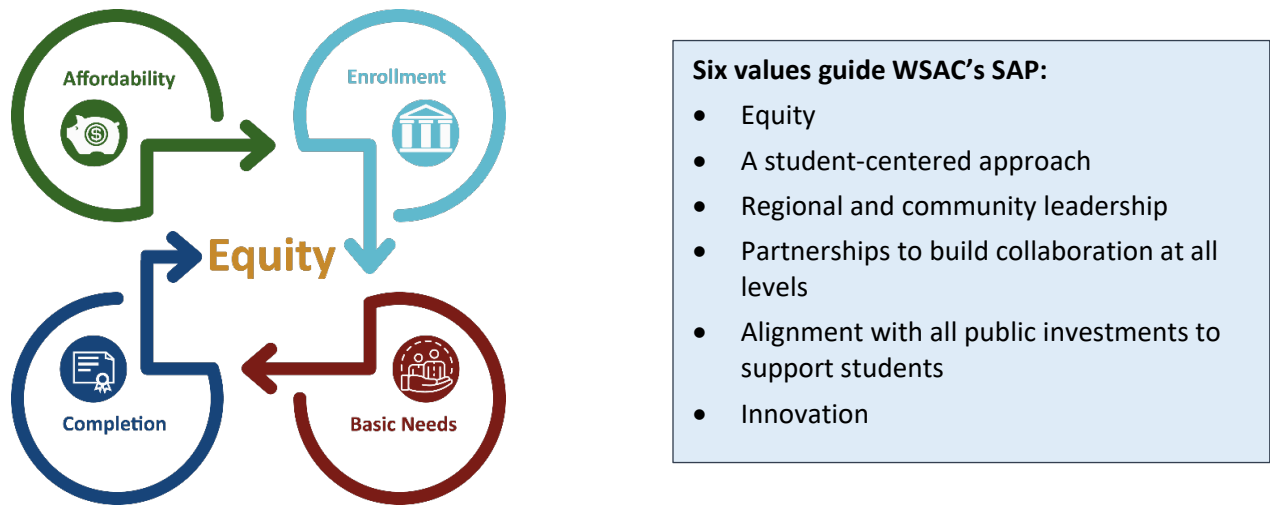
The WSAC Strategic Action Plan (SAP)

These gaps are not driven by a single issue. Instead, they reflect a set of interconnected challenges: whether students can afford education, whether they understand and can access available pathways, whether their basic needs are met while enrolled, and whether systems support them through to completion.

WSAC's Strategic Action Plan (SAP) provides a framework for organizing the policy and practice innovations needed to achieve the state's attainment goal. The plan strives to speak for all partners and stakeholders who share this goal and are essential to its success. It is not about the work of one state agency, nor is it only about state legislation and budgets. All sectors of society have a role to play at the state and community levels.

This SAP focuses on these interconnected areas—affordability, enrollment, basic needs, and completion—as the key drivers of progress toward the state's attainment goal. As always, equity sits at the center of this effort (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. WSAC Strategic Cluster Areas



This plan outlines the state’s attainment goal, the strategic clusters and values that guide the work, a snapshot of current policy across each cluster, and the Council’s key short-term priorities. While policy discussions often focus on new initiatives or individual programs, much of the state’s work centers on improving and aligning current efforts to increase attainment. For this reason, we define “state higher education policy” broadly to include statutes, budget investments, agency rules, and the ongoing practices that shape how these efforts are carried out.

The following sections outline the state’s current policy, offering a clear foundation for future changes and helping community leaders see how these efforts align.

We begin with an equity lens that serves as the foundation for this work, making sure that efforts to increase attainment are designed to improve access and success for all learners.

We work for a world in which every Washingtonian thrives in a higher education system that is affordable, ensures equitable access and smooth transitions, amply supports their basic needs and academic success, and delivers on the promise of completion of a credential or degree that leads to meaningful participation in our economy and communities.

Equity

Equity as a foundational lens

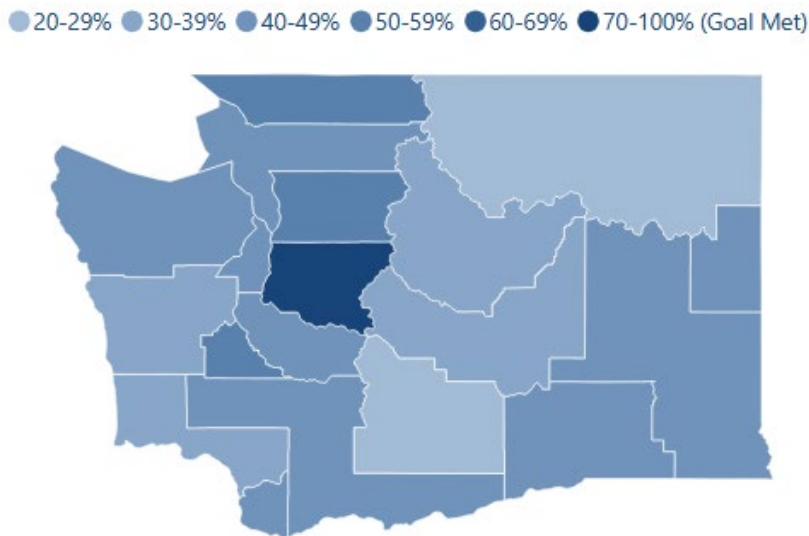
Equity is a foundational lens applied across all strategic areas in this plan. It is not a separate initiative, but a way of understanding where systems are working, and where they are not, for different learners and communities. It requires centering the experiences of those who have been historically marginalized to shape how policies, programs, and resources are designed and implemented.

In 2020, the Council committed to equity as the key principle for our work in state policy, acknowledging past and present racism and committing to removing barriers, including for students of color and their communities. Our goal is to close equity gaps for those furthest from our state’s attainment goal. This includes those who are Black, Indigenous, Latino, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, Asian, and multiracial, regardless of immigration status.

Washington has expanded access to postsecondary education over the past decade, but outcomes remain uneven, and statewide averages can mask large disparities. Noting this, in 2021, the Council committed to a revised goal that 70 percent of Washington adults ages 25–44 *in every racial and ethnic group and region* will earn a postsecondary credential.

Attainment varies widely by income, race and ethnicity, geography, and age, with some communities experiencing substantially lower access and outcomes than others.

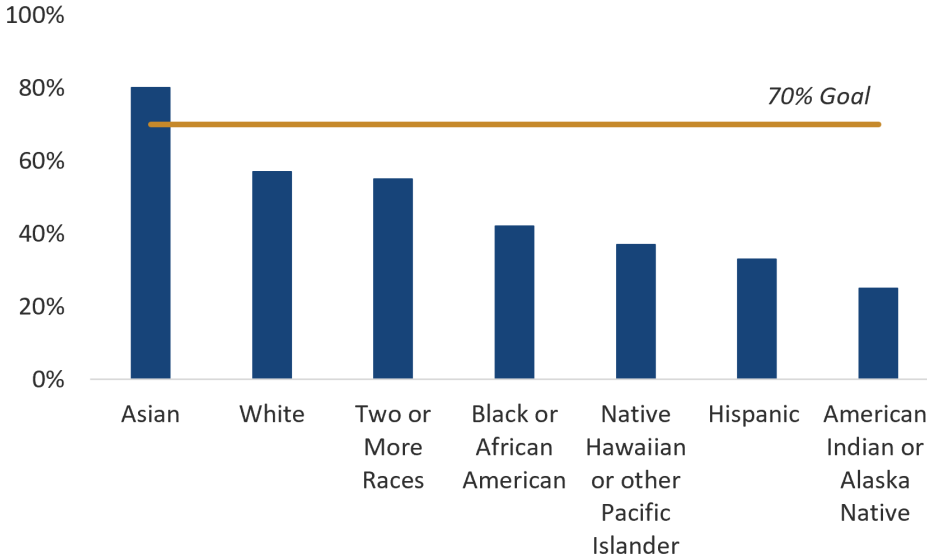
Figure 3: Postsecondary Attainment by Region in 2024



Note: this data excludes short-term credentials, and therefore is an under-estimation.
Source: WSAC Staff analysis of American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year PUMS data, 2024.

Large disparities also appear when we examine attainment rates by race and ethnicity. Washington’s efforts to increase attainment rates should focus on those who have been historically and institutionally marginalized in education. This has been especially true for Black, Indigenous, and Latino students.

Figure 4: Proportion of Washington Residents ages 25-44 with postsecondary credentials, associate or above, by race and ethnicity



Source: WSAC staff analysis of ACS 1-Year PUMS Data, 2024. Retrieved 3/16/2026

These gaps highlight where systems are not yet delivering on the promise of opportunity for all learners and communities.

These gaps matter because they have systemic effects on both people’s opportunities and the strength of communities across the state. Washington will only reach its attainment goal if progress is made in communities that face large resource gaps.

Equity also means understanding that challenges often happen at the same time. Students may face financial stress, limited transportation, systemic marginalization, language barriers, and other challenges at the same time. Addressing just one of these problems is not enough.

Improving outcomes requires coordinated efforts that address multiple barriers at once. It also means creating policies and programs that meet the needs of different groups, rather than assuming one path works for everyone.

Equity in action

Equity is reflected in how the Council works and makes decisions. As an agency, we are committed to using our role and resources to address systemic barriers and create opportunity, understanding that each policy, partnership, and investment can either address or increase these gaps.

In practice, this means working in close partnership with communities, using data to inform and adjust our approach, and prioritizing action where gaps are greatest. We engage learners and communities with lived experience as partners in shaping solutions, ensure that data is used transparently to highlight gaps and track progress, and continuously assess whether our strategies have a positive impact.

This approach shows up across the agency's work. We serve as a connector and convener, bringing together partners to align efforts and elevate community voices. We center learners who face the greatest barriers, including adult learners, rural learners, parenting students, and those impacted by their immigration status. We use data beyond traditional measures to better understand outcomes and inform action. And we target investments and partnerships, such as regional efforts, by working alongside our communities with the lowest attainment rates.

Together, these actions reflect a commitment to making equity visible not just in goals, but in how work is carried out and where resources are directed.

Guiding Questions on Equity:

- How can the state amplify the intersectional work of regional and community-based organizations already advancing equity, including supporting asset-based strategies that are both student-centered and community-driven?
- How are communities, government agencies, institutions, community partners, and organizations building and sustaining honest, ongoing relationships? How do those relationships inform shared solutions? What can be learned from states or organizations that have effectively strengthened or rebuilt trust?
- How can the state support authentic collaboration with communities and learners to improve policy, knowledge, and practice development?
- How can Washington cultivate a culture of ongoing learning and reflection that strengthens the state's collective ability to advance equitable outcomes for postsecondary education?

Affordability

Affordability is one of the most important factors influencing a student's decision on postsecondary education. While tuition is often the most visible cost, students make decisions based on the total cost of attendance, including housing, food, transportation, childcare, and other expenses. Even with financial aid, many students face gaps between available support and the full cost of attending, particularly when basic needs are taken into account. At the same time, students and families weigh those costs against the longer-term value of a credential, including potential wages, debt, and career opportunities.

Affordability must be considered across all learners and pathways, including recent high school graduates and adult learners, and across all programs and institutions, both public and private. In addition to financial support, students and families benefit from clear information and guidance to plan for and navigate the cost of education.

Current Landscape

Washington has made large investments in financial aid, making the state a national leader in affordability. The [Washington College Grant](#) (WA Grant), one of the most generous need-based financial aid programs in the country, provides eligible students with funding that can cover full tuition and, in some cases, additional costs. Together with the Federal Pell Grant and other aid programs, this funding

is designed to make postsecondary education more affordable for students facing financial barriers (Fig. 5). Most students who receive state financial aid have incomes below 65 percent of the state’s Median Family Income. The same is true for students receiving federal aid.

Figure 5. Washington Financial Aid Recipients by Median Family Income (MFI)

State Financial Aid Recipients

MFI Category	Number of Awards	Percent
0-55%	73,345	68.3%
56-65%*	9,509	8.9%
66-75%	7,110	6.6%
76-100%	10,930	10.2%
Over 100	1,603	1.5%
Unknown	4,937	4.6%

* Beginning of the 2025-26 academic year, students from households earning 61–65% MFI were impacted by lower maximum award levels and will receive a prorated Washington College Grant (WA Grant) instead of the full award.

Federal Pell Grant Recipients

MFI Category	Number of Awards	Percent
0-55%	73,251	88.0%
56-65%	5,894	7.1%
66-75%	2,754	3.3%
76-100%	1,244	1.5%
Over 100	58	0.1%

Source: WSAC Unit Record Report, Washington State financial aid and Pell Grant recipients by state Median Family Income (MFI), academic year 2024-25.

Washington’s affordability policy is based on the logic that a more affordable higher education system will support more students to enroll and complete postsecondary programs. Research shows that investments in need-based aid create paths to credentials and greater economic mobility for many Washingtonians. Yet while access has expanded, challenges persist. Gaps between financial aid and the total cost of attendance remain, particularly when basic needs are factored in.

Policy Landscape

Washington’s approach is designed to expand access across all types of pathways. This includes traditional degrees, career and technical education, registered apprenticeships, and opportunities to earn college credit in high school. These policies are intended to ensure that all students can pursue education and training aligned to their goals.

Washington uses four primary approaches: tuition policy, financial aid, targeted investments and savings, and student loan support. Together, these shape both the cost of education and students’ ability to pay. All while supporting access for all students, including recent high school graduates and adult learners, regardless of income or citizenship status.

Tuition policy and state subsidies

Tuition policy and state subsidies for public institutions play a central role in promoting affordability.

- » The amount of state subsidies directly affects the level of tuition and fees. The state has a statutory commitment to backfill revenue lost to tuition reductions, as adjusted for inflation.
- » State law ensures tuition increases are not greater than the rate of inflation.
- » State support helps colleges and universities provide higher-quality academic and basic needs programs that otherwise might not be affordable with campus budgets alone.
- » State policy directs all Washington public colleges and universities to commit part of their tuition revenue to prioritize financial aid for students from low-income families.
- » Portions of state funds for K-12 cover costs associated with earning college credits while in high school.

Financial aid programs and access

Washington's financial aid system is primarily need-based and designed to support a broad range of students.

- » All Washington residents who meet [eligibility standards](#) are guaranteed financial aid.
- » State aid pays tuition and some fees for students from families making up to 60 percent MFI—currently \$83,500 for a household of four.
- » State aid pays part of the tuition and fees for students from households above 60 percent MFI and up to the statewide median—currently \$139,500 for a household of four.
- » Income-eligible students who receive federal grants can keep both their state and federal grants to help cover costs beyond tuition and fees.
- » Students can use state financial aid regardless of consecutive or full-time enrollment.
- » State financial aid is awarded and distributed by the college or university that the student attends.
- » WSAC uses WGA funds to provide direct support to students, using tools such as prior learning assessments to assist paraeducators.
- » The federal application form (FAFSA) is used by most students to [apply for and receive state financial aid](#). This prevents students from having to fill out two separate applications.
- » The [Washington Application for State Financial Aid \(WASFA\)](#) provides access for students ineligible for federal aid or who choose not to file the FAFSA.
- » The state offers the ability for some students to receive state financial aid through alternative means, such as verifying participation in other public benefits programs, including SNAP.

» Students who meet eligibility requirements for the Passport to Careers program will automatically qualify for maximum WA Grant awards beginning in the 2026-27 academic year. This will help to streamline access to financial and educational support for students who have experienced foster care or unaccompanied homelessness.

» Costs of attending college beyond tuition and fees are included using the federal definition of “cost of attendance.”

» Students must maintain and demonstrate academic progress toward their postsecondary credential.

First state cuts in recent memory affecting college affordability

» Beginning in the 2025-26 academic year, students from households at 61–65% MFI will no longer receive the full Washington College Grant (WA Grant) award and will instead receive a prorated amount. The cuts to WA Grant and College Bound Scholarship are \$26.7 million.

» Students receiving College Bound Scholarships will experience cuts comparable to those affecting WA Grant recipients at private, nonprofit, and for-profit institutions beginning in the 2027-28 academic year. However, students will continue to receive \$500 for books and materials.

» Previously enacted cuts to WA Grant awards for students attending private four-year nonprofit institutions, apprenticeship programs, and Western Governors University will take effect beginning in the 2026-27 academic year.

» Previously enacted cuts to College Bound Scholarship (CBS) for students attending private four-year nonprofit institutions and Western Governors University will take effect beginning in the 2027-28 academic year.

» Starting in the 2026-27 academic year, students attending private for-profit schools will no longer receive WA Grant and CBS awards.

» Funding for the Running Start dual-enrollment program will be temporarily reduced from the 2026–27 through the 2028–29 academic years, with a \$7.0 million reduction to the Summer Running Start enrollment cap (SBCTC). This will limit access to dual-enrollment opportunities and reduce the number of college credits high school students can take through the program.

Targeted investments and pathway supports

Washington uses targeted programs to increase access for specific populations and align education with workforce needs.

» Financial aid programs support specific populations. These include [youth who experienced foster care or unaccompanied homelessness](#), and the [American Indian scholarship](#).

» Financial aid is used to support entry into [high-demand STEM and technical jobs](#) for lower-income students and those facing significant barriers.

» Financial aid programs can be used to attract and retain Washington residents to jobs with high public need, such as [teaching](#) and [healthcare](#) in underserved communities.

» [Apprentices in approved programs](#) can receive financial aid to continue their path toward credit or a credential.

» The College Bound Scholarship program helps establish [an early vision for college](#) for students from our lowest-income households, building a path to an affordable higher education beginning in middle school.

Savings and student loan supports

Washington provides programs and tools to help families plan and pay for postsecondary education and manage student debt.

» The state offers a guarantee to account owners in a prepaid tuition plan ([GET](#)). GET guarantees that owner investments will keep pace with tuition increases at the state's highest-priced public university.

» State legislation directed and supported the launch of a traditional college savings plan ([WA 529 Invest](#)).

» The Office of [Student Loan Advocacy](#) provides information to Washington residents about student loans and offers resources to help current borrowers manage existing student loan debt.

» The Office of Student Loan Advocacy provides outreach and support for borrowers who work in public service jobs on how to take advantage of Public Service Loan Forgiveness.

» WSAC analyzes and monitors laws and policies that impact student loan borrowers at the federal, state, and local levels, and makes recommendations.

» The state has created [loan programs and loan repayment programs](#) targeted to meet workforce needs.

Guiding Questions on Affordability:

- How do affordability barriers differ for families across income levels? How can we better understand the differing impacts?
- How can financial aid and public benefits be better aligned to reduce barriers for students with the greatest financial need?
- How effective is the Washington College Grant in improving educational outcomes for Washington students?

Affordability is a critical foundation, but it does not, on its own, ensure that students enroll. Students must also understand their options, see clear pathways forward, and receive support in navigating complex systems.

Enrollment

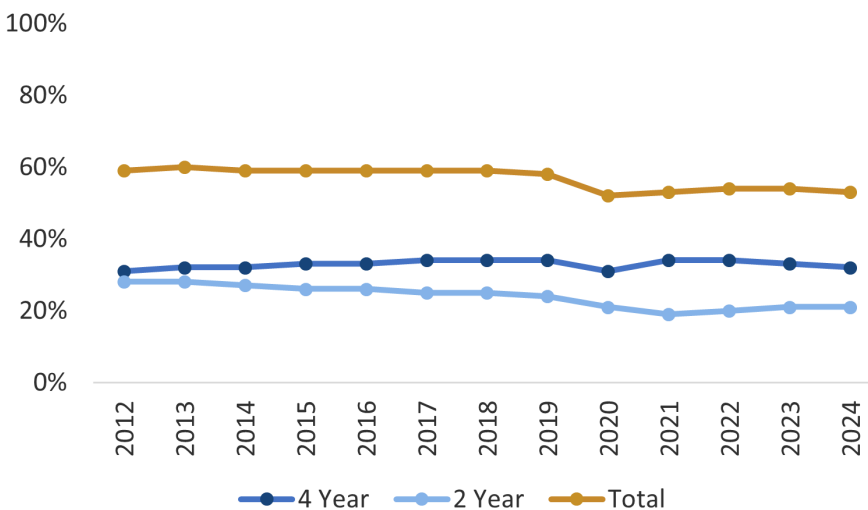
Postsecondary education is a proven pathway for upward mobility. Washington has invested in both high-demand and diverse programs for high school students and adults. Washington has a robust economy that demands a skilled and educated workforce. Hence, **Washington needs more residents to enroll in a wide range of education and training programs.** The state must continue to work towards a more equitable and comprehensive enrollment landscape to support all Washington residents.

Current Landscape

Enrollment patterns in Washington reflect both progress and ongoing challenges. Undergraduate enrollment at four-year and two-year institutions is beginning to recover from pandemic lows. However, equity gaps persist in direct enrollment rates and in overall enrollment.

In Washington, just over half of high school graduates enroll in a two-year or four-year institution within one year of graduation.

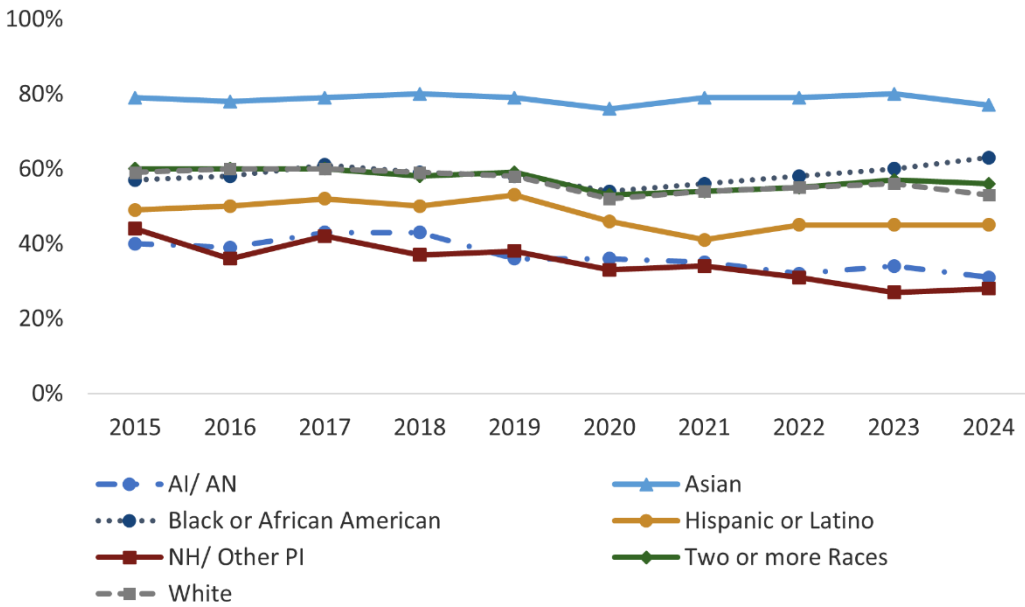
Figure 6. Direct Postsecondary Enrollment Rate from High School



Source: erdc.wa.gov/publications-and-reports/high-school-graduate-outcomes. Retrieved March 2026.

Direct enrollment rates, when disaggregated by race and ethnicity, show diverging trends over the last decade. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Hispanic or Latino students are consistently enrolling at much lower rates than their peers (Fig. 7).

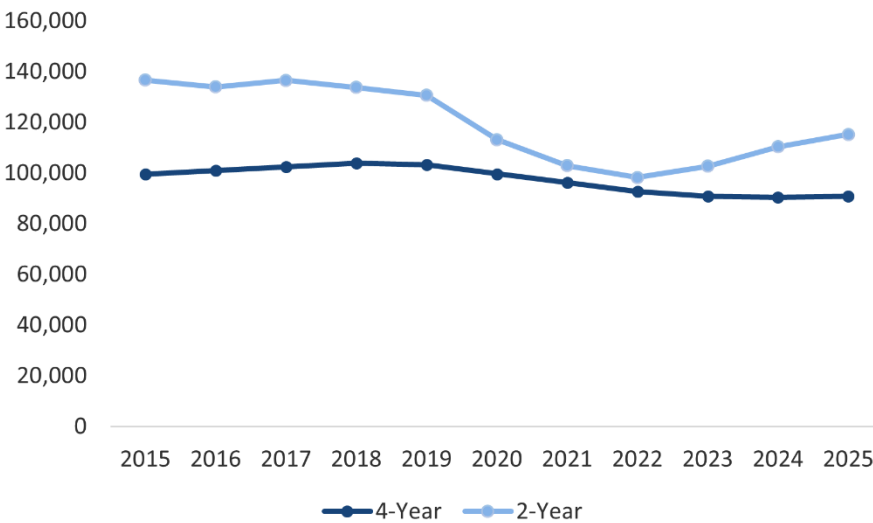
Figure 7. Direct Postsecondary Enrollment Rate from High School by Race and Ethnicity



Source: wsac.wa.gov/sap-dashboard. Retrieved March 2026.

Since the pandemic, two-year institutions have seen fall undergraduate rates improve while four-year institutions are yet to recover. Two-year institutions saw a 4.4 percent increase from fall 2024 to 2025. Four-year institutions saw less than half a percent increase (Fig. 8).

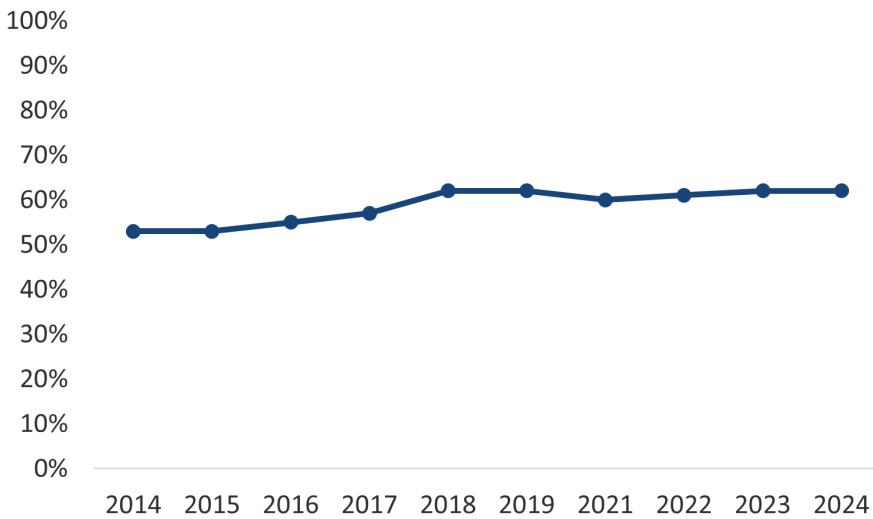
Figure 8. Fall Undergraduate Enrollment at Washington Public Postsecondary Institutions by Institution Level



Source: wsac.wa.gov/sap-dashboard. Retrieved April 2026.

Washington’s proportion of adults with a postsecondary credential remains at 62 percent in 2024 (Fig. 9). 38 percent of adults in Washington have the potential to reskill or upskill by enrolling in programs that lead to better economic outcomes.

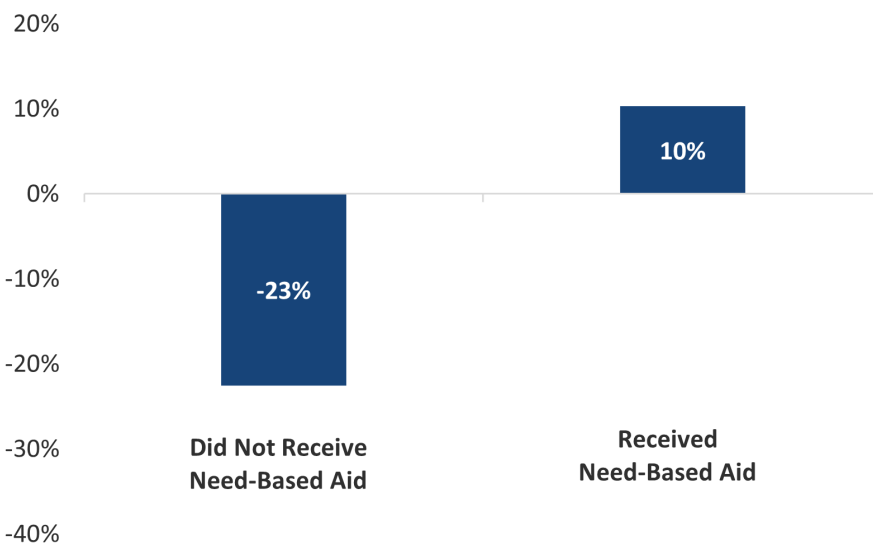
Figure 9. Proportion of Adults (25-44) in Washington with a Postsecondary Credential



Source: wsac.wa.gov/sap-dashboard. Retrieved March 2026.

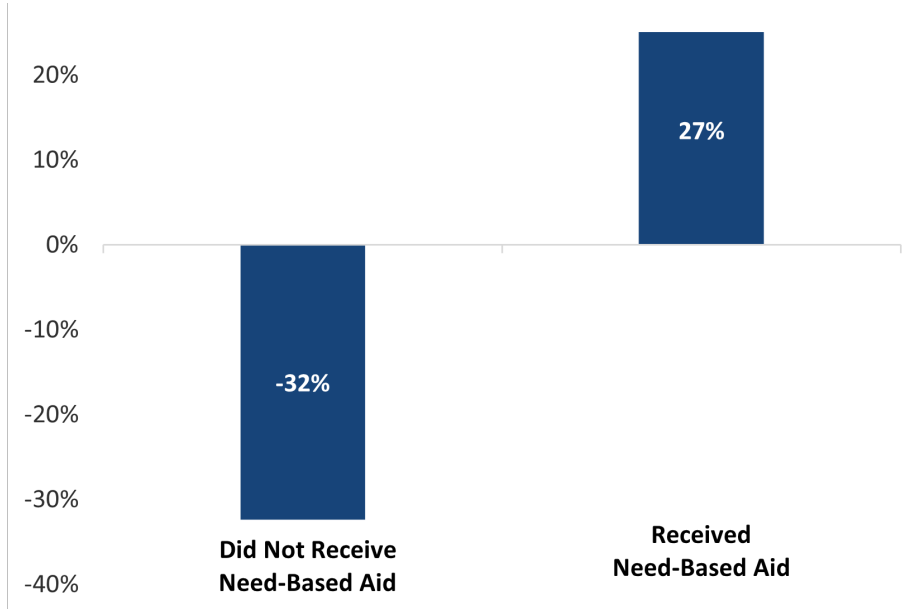
Need-based financial aid may have mitigated pandemic enrollment declines. Between 2019 and 2024, Washington’s fall enrollment at public four-year institutions increased by ten percent for students who received need-based aid. It decreased by 23 percent for those who did not. Over the same period at our public two-year institutions, fall enrollment increased by 27 percent for students who received need-based aid. It decreased by 32 percent for students who did not (Fig. 10a and 10b).

Figure 10a. Fall Enrollment Change by Financial Aid status, from 2019 to 2025 at Public Four-Year Institutions



Source: wsac.wa.gov/sap-dashboard. Retrieved April 2026.

Figure 10b. Fall Enrollment Change by Financial Aid status, from 2019 to 2025 at Public Two-Year Institutions



Source: wsac.wa.gov/sap-dashboard. Retrieved April 2026.

Council has adopted the following five key performance indicators:

1. Undergraduate enrollment (headcount) - Lead Indicator

Number of undergraduates enrolled in Washington postsecondary institutions at any time during an academic year.

2. Direct enrollment from high school (rate)

Percentage of high school seniors who enroll in postsecondary education within one year of graduation.

3. High school graduation (rate)

Percentage of 9th-grade students who graduate from high school within five years.

4. Adults without an initial credential (proportion)

Estimated proportion of Washington adults, ages 25–44, who have not earned a postsecondary credential as a percentage of all Washington adults, ages 25–44.

5. Enrollment of adults without an initial credential (rate)

Estimated percentage of Washington adults, ages 25–44, without an initial credential who were enrolled in Washington public postsecondary institutions in an academic year.

These are tracked on the [Strategic Action Plan Dashboard](#).

Students face several barriers to enrollment:

- Many are not aware of postsecondary options and the economic, social, and health benefits of earning a credential.
- There is confusion about the costs and complexity of financial aid applications and processes.
- Lack of flexible pathways, reengagement strategies, and supports to help students from different backgrounds and stages of life.
- Competing responsibilities, particularly for adult learners.
- Historical and institutional barriers to accessing higher education, particularly for low-income and Black, Indigenous, and Latino students.

Enrollment starts long before high school graduation for high school students. It is an ongoing outreach effort for adults. Enrollment decisions are shaped by motivation, academic readiness, skills to navigate the process, understanding costs, community support, and a sense of belonging in educational environments. These factors develop over time and help students see postsecondary education as something they can achieve. Students are more likely to enroll when they have early exposure to postsecondary options, clear information about costs, financial aid, and pathways, and support from trusted people.

Policy Landscape

Washington supports enrollment through a combination of policies and funding that focus on early exposure and readiness, increased access, navigation support, and engagement of adult learners.

Early exposure and readiness for postsecondary pathways

The state provides funding, programs, and structures within the K-12 system to motivate and prepare students for postsecondary pathways.

» A range of [dual credit programs](#) enable students to receive college credit in high school through college courses, standardized exams, or technical programs that have articulation agreements. Students must be notified of these programs.

» The state provides funding for high school students to enroll in and receive postsecondary credits, including support for College in the High School and Summer Running Start.

» [Career Connect Washington](#) expands access to career exploration, preparation, and launch opportunities, including paid work-based learning, dual credit, and apprenticeships. These programs allow learners to earn college credit, industry-recognized credentials, and wages while building skills and experience. Investments in this program have been reduced since 2025.

» Students can graduate high school by demonstrating readiness through [multiple graduation pathways](#). These include course-based, test-based, and performance-based pathways.

» Washington’s K-12 system has worked to integrate college and career readiness through the [High School and Beyond Plan](#). With investment from the Legislature and in collaboration with a wide range of

stakeholders, school districts are in the process of adopting a statewide online platform to support postsecondary planning.

Student navigation, advising, and access

Students' enrollment decisions are shaped by access to clear information, advising, and support. Washington invests in a range of supports to help students and families navigate postsecondary options and financial aid.

» The High School Beyond Plan platform will include information on financial aid and track financial aid completion at the student level, helping students and their parents or guardians better navigate the transition into higher education.

» The state requires data sharing between the Office of Superintendent of Instruction (OSPI), public institutions of higher education, and WSAC, to ensure high school students are informed about postsecondary opportunities, financial aid, and to track enrollment and outcomes.

» The state invests in college-going programs like the [12th Year Campaign](#) and supports programs provided by [nonprofit partners](#) that offer navigation, advising, and information to students and families about financial aid and enrollment in college and other pathways.

» Federal programs such as [GEAR UP](#) and TRiO, along with similar campus-based programs, support low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented students in preparing for and enrolling in postsecondary education.

» WSAC supports students and families with [OtterBot](#), a chatbot that provides multilingual, real-time information on financial aid and college and career pathways.

» Public and nonprofit employers can use the [State Work Study](#) (SWS) program to employ students in roles that support increasing postsecondary access. This program reimburses employers for more than 80 percent of total compensation and gives SWS students a work-based learning opportunity.

» WSAC leads the Governor's Washington Completes FAFSA campaign and Advisory Board, providing statewide coordination on efforts to increase FAFSA and WASFA completion for high schoolers. These efforts include school-based supports, partnerships with community-based organizations, and tools such as the [FAFSA Completion Dashboard](#) and portal.

Simplifying and automating admissions

Simplifying the transition from high school to postsecondary education is also a key strategy to increase access and support enrollment. These approaches reduce uncertainty and help make postsecondary options more accessible and predictable for students.

» Washington allows students in 10th, 11th, and 12th grades who qualify for the Basic Food Program to automatically qualify as income eligible for the Washington College Grant when enrolling directly after high school. WSAC has [launched a pilot](#) focused on 12th graders for the 2025-26 academic year, with a goal to expand in the coming years.

» Most public and private nonprofit universities offer a guaranteed admissions program based on GPA and course distribution, without requiring standardized tests.

» Community and technical colleges provide open-door access with streamlined enrollment processes.

Adult reengagement and access to opportunity

Washington provides resources and pathways to help working-age adults access postsecondary education and training.

» Workforce conditional scholarships and loan programs support enrollment for eligible students in specific high-need industries.

» Federal funds support education and training through the Washington Jobs Initiative and Workforce Development Councils' work to increase the number of adults and opportunity youth in education and training programs.

» State programs administered by the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges support incumbent and dislocated worker training. These include the Job Skills Program, Customized Training Program, and Worker Retraining Program.

» WSAC's OtterBot and other state agencies offer web-based information and digital tools to support working-age adults in navigating college enrollment, other career-related programs, and basic needs resources.

» Washington's colleges award [academic credits for prior learning](#) and continue to develop policies and practices to improve prior learning assessments. The goal is to increase the number and type of credits awarded.

Guiding Questions on Enrollment:

- What would it look like to build a more aligned and supportive system that enables all Washington residents to access postsecondary pathways?
- How can Washington continue to reduce uncertainty in the enrollment process, particularly related to affordability, preparedness, and navigating options?
- How can we expand and better connect diverse education and training pathways to support seamless movement for Washington residents?

Expanding enrollment is critical, but access alone is not enough. Many students face challenges that make it difficult to stay on track. Addressing students' basic needs is essential to supporting persistence and completion.

Basic Needs

Basic needs insecurity—lack of access to affordable housing, food, healthcare, childcare, and other needs—makes it hard for postsecondary students in Washington to stay in school and complete their degrees. And Washington students struggle with high rates of basic needs insecurity.

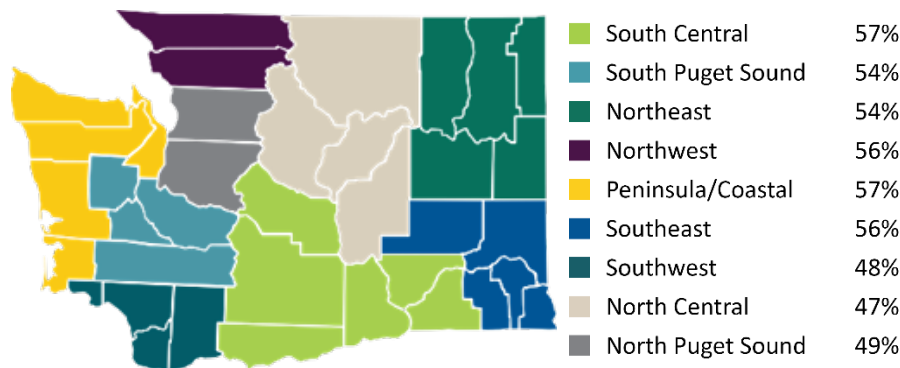
Our state recognizes supporting students’ basic needs as a core strategy. To better support students, we need to identify the challenges they face and address their needs. We must focus on policies and investments to close the gaps in support. We must also learn from and build on partnerships and pilots.

Current Landscape

Students face many costs beyond tuition and fees. Essential needs—such as housing, food, healthcare, childcare, and others—represent over two-thirds of the actual cost of attendance at both four-year and two-year institutions.¹ Time spent in class and studying limits students’ ability to work to cover those needs.

Many students in Washington struggle to pay for non-tuition costs, whether they are in two-year or four-year colleges. Although Washington has a solid financial aid program, students with low incomes often do not receive enough aid to cover their basic needs.² In addition, the cost of living in Washington has climbed faster than the national average, making these funding gaps deeper due to rising inflation.³

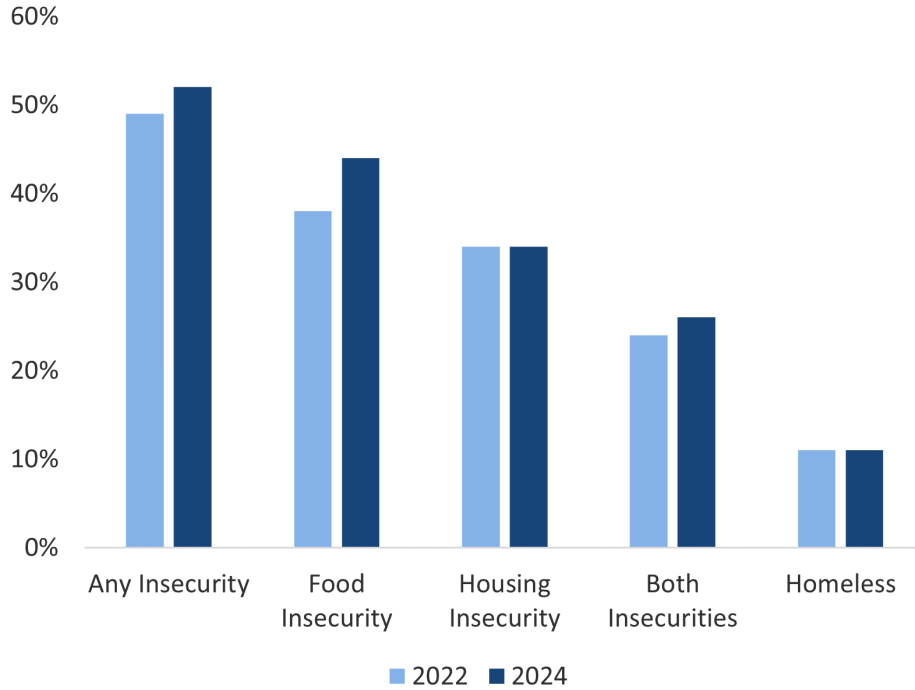
Figure 11. High Percentages of Students Reported Basic Needs Insecurity in all Regions



Source: Washington Student Experience Survey 2025 Findings Report: wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2025.BasicNeedsReport.pdf

The gaps in covering essential costs, such as housing and food, are pervasive among Washington students in both two-year and four-year colleges. About half of students reported basic needs insecurity in regions across the state (Fig. 11). Rates are higher in the 2024 Washington survey data compared to 2022 rates (Fig. 12). Struggles with housing and food stability were common among 2024 respondents: 44 percent experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days; 34 percent experienced housing insecurity; and 11 percent experienced homelessness in the prior 12 months. While housing insecurity and homelessness were reported at similar rates in the 2022 and 2024 surveys, food insecurity was reported at a 14 percent higher rate in 2024 (5 percentage points higher).⁴

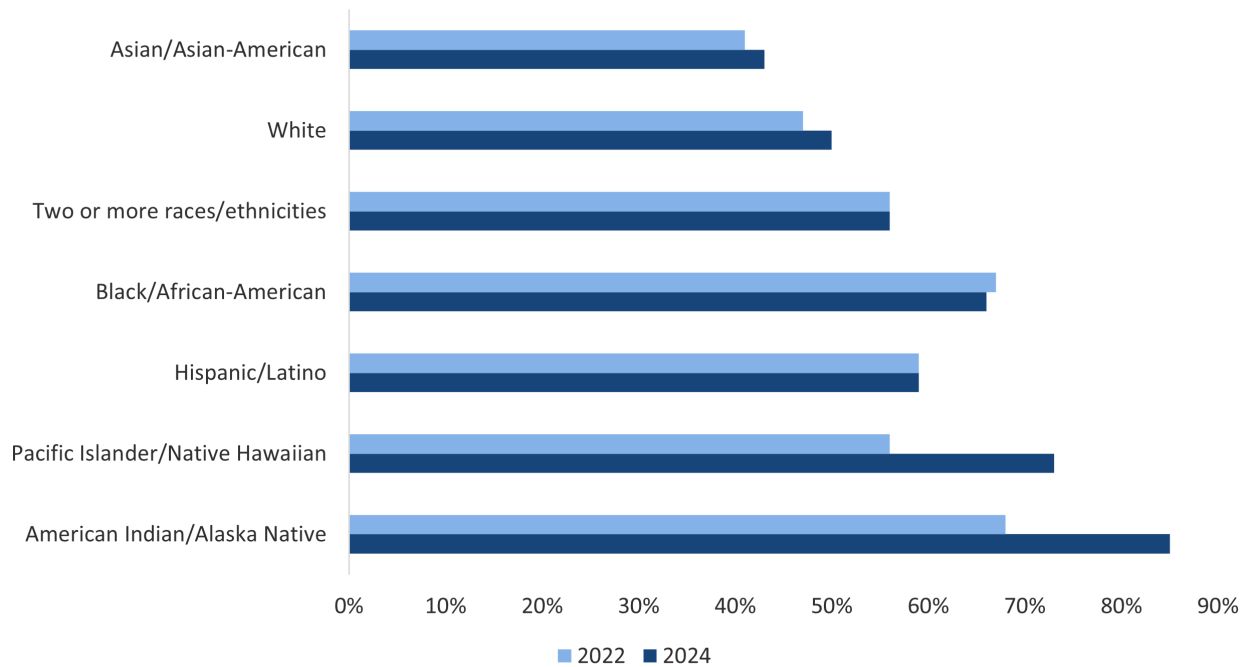
Figure 12. Surveyed Students at Two- and Four-year Colleges in 2024 Reported a Higher Rate of Basic Needs Insecurity Compared to 2022



Source: Washington Student Experience Survey 2025 Findings Report: wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2025.BasicNeedsReport.pdf

Basic needs insecurity impacts some Washington student populations more than others. Insecurity rates were much higher for some racial and ethnic groups (Fig. 13). American Indian or Alaska Native and Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian students were most severely impacted and reported even higher rates in 2024 compared to 2022.⁵

Figure 13. Basic Needs Insecurity is Higher for Some Racial and Ethnic Groups



Source: Washington Student Experience Survey 2025 Findings Report: wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2025_BasicNeedsReport.pdf

Of all subgroups, students who experienced homelessness or foster care in high school had the highest rates of basic needs insecurity—over 84 percent. Other subgroups who reported significantly higher than average rates of basic needs insecurity included:

- Students with low incomes (70 percent).
- Students with dependents (68 percent).
- Students living with a disability (65 percent).
- First-generation students (63 percent).
- Students who reported belonging to the LGBTQI+ community (58 percent).
- Students with military service (54 percent).⁶

Washington students also reported significant gaps in childcare access. Three out of four parenting students reported that they are unable to afford needed care—10 percentage points higher than in 2022. Parenting students’ access to childcare was a challenge across all regions. Rates of students unable to afford needed childcare were above 65 percent in eight of nine regions across the state.⁷

Access to needed healthcare was also worse compared to 2022. 46 percent of respondents reported lacking access to needed healthcare (up from 40 percent in 2022). 50 percent of students reported lacking access to needed mental or behavioral healthcare (compared to 38 percent in 2022).⁸

With new studies in 2025, Washington has a better understanding of the basic needs insecurity adult learners face. Students in Basic Education for Adult (BEA), apprentices, and people who have completed a credential with conditional scholarships all face large challenges. For example, over half of

registered apprentices reported difficulty paying for everyday items like food, housing, and transportation. About one in five worry that housing and transportation costs could stop them from finishing their apprenticeship.⁹

That said, more students are finding help with basic needs. In 2024, 53 percent of students reporting basic needs insecurity accessed public resources, up from 49 percent in 2022. Additionally, 41 percent accessed campus resources, compared to 34 percent in 2022.¹⁰ This suggests better awareness and access to resources. However, many students still find it difficult to navigate these systems.

There is much room to improve navigation, remove barriers, and increase resources. We need to provide both emergency and preventative strategies to fill gaps where resources are lacking or insufficient. Addressing these challenges requires more than isolated programs. Basic needs support should be integrated and holistic within student support systems. This means coordinating efforts across campus teams and working with community partners so that students can find support when and where they need it.

Policy Landscape

Washington addresses students' basic needs through a variety of systems. These include financial aid, public benefits, campus services, and local resources such as community-based organizations (ex. food banks, utility assistance funds, shelters). Together, these approaches aim to reduce barriers to persistence by helping students meet essential needs while enrolled.

Financial aid and direct student supports

Financial aid policies play a key role in supporting students' basic needs beyond tuition and fees.

» The federal definition of "cost of attendance" includes tuition, fees, and other expenses such as housing, food, and other categories. When financial aid exceeds tuition and fees, remaining funds may be applied to help support basic needs.

» If a student has received financial aid at the level of their "cost of attendance," an institution may be limited in providing additional aid.

» Changes under the federal FAFSA Simplification Act modified how emergency funds are treated. Emergency funds no longer count towards a student's "cost of attendance" if the college documents that the emergency funds were for *unexpected* expenses. This enables all students to access emergency funds, where available, without risking their other financial aid awards.

Public benefits and state programs

Students may access a range of public programs to meet basic needs, but eligibility and access vary.

» The state administers and builds off federal programs to help eligible students with housing, food, and other emergency funds.

» State childcare subsidies are now easier to access for full-time students in two-year colleges and apprenticeship programs, no matter their immigration status. However, students in bachelor's or graduate programs face limits in accessing these childcare subsidies.

» WSAC runs a state-funded [Child Care Grants program](#). Created in 1999, the program gives block grants to public four-year colleges, which can then allocate funds directly to parenting students.

» Passport to Careers provides scholarships to eligible students who experienced foster care or unaccompanied homelessness in high school, grants to campuses to provide support, and emergency funds for students' unexpected needs. It is a nationally recognized state program that began in 2008 and expanded in 2018. In Washington, the number of Passport-eligible students has risen. However, with flat funding, the increase in students has resulted in a drop in the amount of scholarship and campus support funds in fiscal years 2024 and 2025.

College-based supports and services

Colleges may offer services such as emergency financial aid, food pantries, housing assistance, childcare supports, and health services. These services are critical, but their availability and capacity can vary across campuses.

» [Public and tribal institutions now provide a campus basic needs navigator](#) to help students access basic needs resources. They also increase coordination between community and campus support. WSAC, State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, and community-based partners provide a training and learning network for navigators. This network helps staff and improves how data is collected.

» Public institutions must create and share strategic plans focused on basic needs. Colleges completed their plans in 2024 and [reported](#) on their progress in 2025. Over 95,000 students received help with benefits and resources, and new partnerships were formed to improve access to resources on campus.

» The [Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness \(SSEH\) grant](#) is now a permanent program for all public and tribal universities and community and technical colleges (CTCs). SSEH provides support services for students experiencing homelessness or who aged out of foster care. A 2024 budget also funded a study on [Low-Income Student Housing Opportunity](#) for CTCs.

» The [Student Emergency Assistance Grant program](#) distributes funding to community and technical colleges to help students cover emergency expenses. The grant program does not include universities.

» Most public and private institutions provide some form of access to basic needs for students, including:

- Emergency grants to cover one-time needs like rental assistance.
- On-campus meal donation programs, food pantries, or partnerships with local food banks.
- Housing partnerships between local housing authorities, private property businesses, nonprofit organizations, and colleges.
- Case management and support teams to provide navigation and support services for basic needs and mental or behavioral health.
- Childcare centers on some campuses provide early education and childcare for enrolled students.

Washington's investments in innovation

Washington has invested in pilot programs and strategies that target specific sectors to find better ways to address students' basic needs. These efforts aim to build strong evidence, improve coordination across systems, and identify ways to reduce basic needs insecurity.

- » **Food security:** A [Postsecondary Food Security pilot](#) tested ways to prevent food insecurity at two public universities and four community and technical colleges with free and reduced-price food.
- » **Enhanced outreach to connect students with benefits:** WSAC led a [pilot testing targeted outreach strategies](#) with 15 institutions. The pilot focused on students who are likely income-eligible but not currently receiving benefits. A unique data sharing agreement between WSAC and Department of Social and Health Services facilitates targeted benefits outreach.
- » **Workforce programs pilots:** [E2SSB 5600](#) provides grants to help support participants in state-registered apprenticeship programs. In addition, WSAC is testing ways to offer basic needs support in many programs. These include the Federal Washington Jobs Initiative program, Behavioral Health Apprenticeships Stipend pilot, the Substance Use Disorder Professionals Block Grant, Migrant Student Support Grant, and the Native American Apprenticeship Assistance Program.
- » **Childcare:** WSAC and SBCTC run a [pilot program](#) to give childcare stipends to students in college and university programs that prepare them for jobs in the aerospace industry.
- » **Healthcare:** The state supported a [pilot grant program to address mental healthcare access](#) at four community and technical colleges, which ended in fiscal year 2025. A two-year study of student health care and insurance access and a [pilot for health insurance navigation](#) ended in 2024. The state also provided a [grant program](#) to public colleges to provide more contraception and overdose prevention supplies on campuses during fiscal years 2024 and 2025.

Guiding Questions on Basic Needs:

- How can Washington ensure that all learners have access to **emergency support** when needed?
- How can **equitable and proactive supports** be ensured for all learners, addressing food security, affordable housing, childcare, and physical and mental healthcare?
- How can **flexible funding** prevent basic needs insecurity by helping cover non-academic costs, thus supporting vulnerable students to stay in school and finish their programs?
- What **solutions-oriented metrics and goals** can help campuses and the state scale impact and improve the effectiveness of basic needs support?

When students can meet their basic needs, they are better positioned to persist. The next area of focus is to make sure they can navigate pathways and complete credentials that lead to meaningful opportunities.

Completion

To dramatically increase the number of Washington residents with a postsecondary education, we need more students to enroll and complete their credentials. Completion is the point at which students realize the full value of postsecondary education. Completing credentials, including degrees, certificates, and industry-recognized credentials, is a key strategy to improve economic mobility and earn family-sustaining wages. It shows how well systems support students not only to enroll, but to persist and earn credentials. These credentials can help them in their careers, serve their communities, and reach their life and career goals.

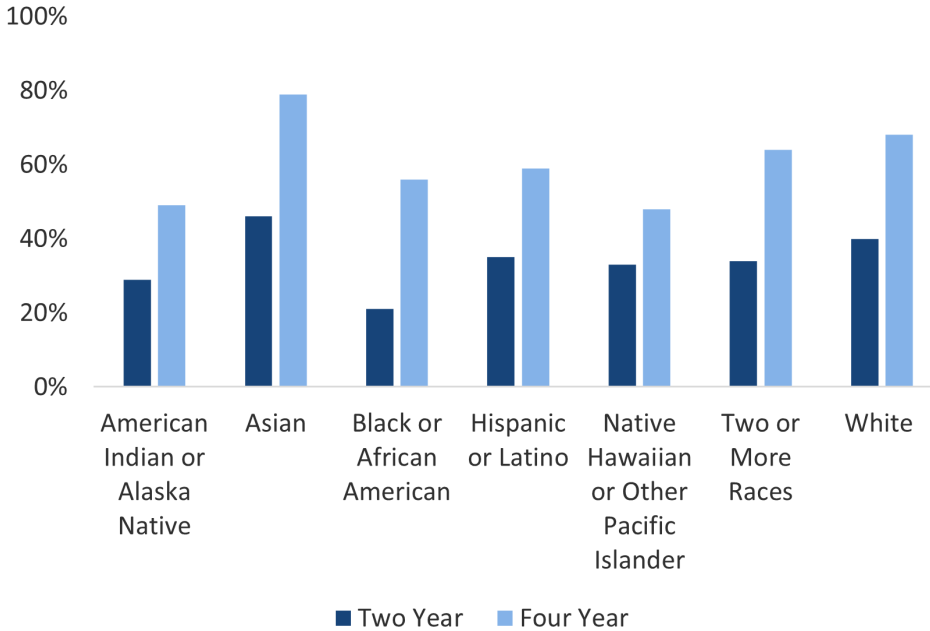
Current Landscape

Currently, Washington's completion rate is 68 percent at public four-year colleges. It is 35 percent at public two-year colleges. For a bachelor's degree, this is measured over six years, beginning at first enrollment. For an associate degree, the period is three years from enrollment.

Some students successfully complete their programs. However, completion and attainment rates show that many Washingtonians are either not earning credentials or are taking longer to do so. These patterns show how important it is to understand and address the different experiences, needs, and barriers students face. This is especially true for those who are furthest from educational attainment.

- Nearly half (45 percent) of Washington adults aged 25-44 have not earned an associate's degree or higher. Notably, 50 percent of men in this age group lack a credential compared to 40 percent of women.¹¹
- As of 2025, 1.2 million Washingtonians had some college credit but no credential. This represents a large number of learners who pursue, but do not complete, postsecondary education.¹²
- We have more work to do to understand non-degree credentials, including apprenticeship completion rates. While some information on apprenticeship retention is available from Washington's Department of Labor and Industries, completion rates are hard to report.¹³
- Of students who graduate from high school in Washington, 56 percent do not earn a postsecondary degree within 8 years. Of those who do earn a degree, 33 percent receive bachelor's degrees, while 11 percent earn associate degrees or certificates.¹⁴
- Large gaps remain across racial and ethnic groups in graduation rates at two-year and four-year colleges. This shows that some groups face sizable systemic challenges that affect completion (Fig. 14).

Figure 14. Washington Graduation Rates within 150 percent of Normal Time, by Race/Ethnicity and Institution Level



Source: WSAC staff analysis of IPEDS Graduation Rates survey, all Washington 2 and 4 year institutions, 150% of normal time, 2023-24. Retrieved 3/16/2026.

Many factors affect student completion rates. These rates depend on the whole student experience, not just academic readiness, finances, or basic needs. Students are more likely to persist and succeed when systems are set up to support them during transitions. These systems should help students find flexible paths to earning credentials, including part-time and non-linear options. They should also reduce barriers by recognizing prior learning, validating noncredit courses as a way to credentials, and improving credit transfer between institutions.

System-level barriers, such as complicated transfer processes and limited recognition of prior learning, can slow progress or lead to lost credits. Today's students are often more mobile and follow different paths. Many study part-time, move between colleges, or balance education with work and family. Systems designed for traditional, full-time students do not always fit these realities.

Students who begin a postsecondary pathway should have a clear and supported path to completion. This path should include access to the resources, guidance, and learning environments needed to succeed.

Policy Landscape

Washington supports completion through policies and initiatives that focus on student success, pathway clarity, and student-centered system alignment. These efforts span student support systems, pathway design and transfer, recognition of prior learning, and funding and incentives.

Credential Types

Washingtonians can earn many different types of credentials.

» Learners in Washington can choose their credentials and learning environment. These include on-the-job training such as apprenticeships or short-term credentials, and degrees earned at colleges or universities.

Student Support Systems

Washington's postsecondary and workforce partners provide a range of supports to help students persist and complete programs.

» Colleges, universities, apprenticeship sites, and employers provide many programs and initiatives to support students in completing their programs and earning credentials.

» [Guided Pathways](#) is an investment in community and technical colleges. Colleges receive technical and leadership support to clarify pathways for students. They help students access and pursue that pathway. They help students stay on course. And they ensure students successfully learn and complete the pathway.

» State law directs public colleges to provide professional development for faculty and staff to eliminate structural racism and promote DEI. It requires campus climate assessments, including listening and feedback sessions. It also provides programs on DEI and antiracism for students.

Credit Mobility and Transfer

Washington's students move between institutions while pursuing a credential. They also have ways to earn recognition for their learning to reduce the time to completion.

» Statewide transfer agreements allow students to move between participating schools and programs. These agreements are supported by strong partnerships across sectors (SBCTC, COP, and ICW) with respect to statewide transfer and articulation policies.

» Students can earn transfer associate degrees and professional technical associate degrees, which are aligned to four-year degree programs at bachelor's-granting institutions.

» State policy requires schools to release student transcripts. This helps students who want to transfer to another school, apply for jobs, seek financial aid, join the military, or find other postsecondary opportunities.

Funding and Incentives

In the community and technical colleges, state funding models reinforce focus on student success and completion.

» Washington's funding model for community and technical colleges includes incentives for student achievement tied to increased completion. The [funding model](#) acknowledges the opportunity gaps and unique challenges faced by many students and prioritizes these populations.

Guiding Questions on Completion:

- How can the state support the needs of increasingly mobile students to include credits earned not only in high school and postsecondary institutions but also through workforce learning?
- What is the role of noncredit learning and credits for prior learning in adult credential attainment? What lessons can be learned from other states that are further along in the noncredit space?
- How do we better understand indicators of success that contribute to credential completion and success in the workforce? What can be learned from institutions in our state that are currently modeling supportive practices?
- How can we deepen our understanding, develop and incentivize more robust pathways for trade and apprenticeship completion?
- How does earning a credential open doors to economic opportunity? What do the outcomes tell us about which pathways create the greatest opportunities, and for whom?
- How will advances in AI reshape the skills, credentials, and supports learners need to successfully complete postsecondary pathways and transition to meaningful employment?

Improving completion depends not only on policies and institutional practices, but on how these efforts are experienced by students in their communities. Many of the barriers to completion, such as adequate student supports, alignment to workforce opportunities, and pathway navigation, and their solutions are shaped at the local level.

Regional Partnerships

To meet our state attainment goal, WSAC requires community solutions. While this goal has been improving, there is still work to be done, especially when we look at rates by race, ethnicity, and region.

Regional partnerships are essential for improving educational outcomes for all. We support partnerships that self-identify place-based strategies to address systemic barriers and create a culture in which pathways after high school are built for and meant for them.¹⁵ Regional partnerships include K-12, higher education institutions, workforce networks, and community-based organizations. Collectively, they change how local communities work together to better serve students and their families. By collaborating, we can support Washingtonians on their educational journeys and fill gaps in our systems.

“There is no question that we know what students and families want. No question at all. The question is how we move these systems in alignment with students and families.” - Suzy Diaz, from the Yakima Valley Partners for Education Regional Partnership

Current Landscape

The Regional Challenge Grant is one part of WSAC’s regional partnership vision and is in its third academic year of implementation. Each partnership uses different, place-based approaches to increase attainment. There are 12 unique methods being implemented, including Spanish-language financial aid supports for first-generation families, rural career and technical education strategies for alternative

learners, and health education pathways for Indigenous students. Across all partnership investments, communities are showing promising results from locally designed, place-based strategies:¹⁶

- Seattle BIPOC students who received mentorship have a retention rate of over 70 percent. In comparison, those who did not receive mentorship have a retention rate of 54 percent.
- FAFSA filing rates increased from 43 percent to 71 percent in a rural Yakima school district.
- Two-generation supports in Chehalis resulted in 11 adult learners enrolling in local colleges.
- Enrollment from a rural school district to WSU Tri-Cities grew from 1 student to 7 students year-over-year.

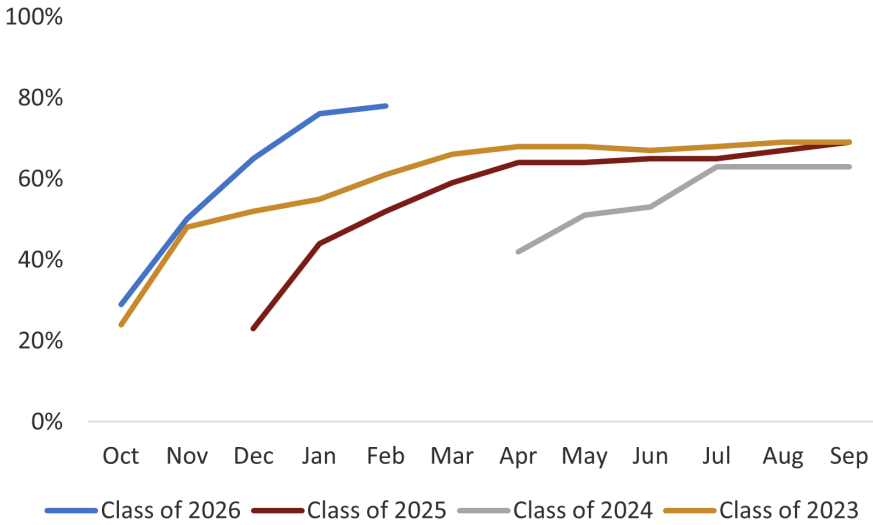
This early evidence shows that students do better and the culture improves when communities work together. In the regional partnership model, partnerships collaborate with their communities to create strategies that work for *their* context.

Methow Valley increases apprenticeship opportunities and FAFSA completions

In the Methow Valley, a large area with a small population, Methow Futures stewards cross-generational investments in local industry. The partnership connects learners with the local workforce by creating apprenticeship opportunities tailored to students' pathways after high school. This approach provides local businesses with the skilled workers they need to grow and succeed. In this rural community, skilled workers are in much-needed demand.

The impact on the college-going culture in the community has been swift. FAFSA filing rates in the community are signaling change. As of February 2026, the district-wide filing rate has already reached 78 percent among expected high school seniors. This completion rate is nearly double the statewide filing rate of 40 percent at the end of February. This rate is just under 10 percentage points above the district's previous high of 69 percent for the Class of 2023. This percentage places the school district in the top five across all school districts in the state for FAFSA completions.

Figure 15. In the Methow Valley, more students are filing the FAFSA earlier in their senior year, leading to higher overall completions



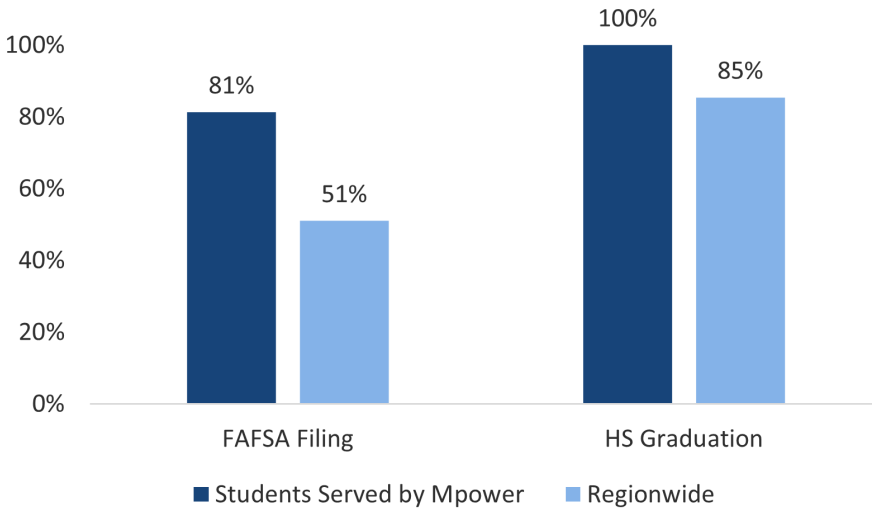
Source: WSAC's FAFSA Dashboard for Expected High School Seniors as of February 2026.

Greater Spokane area increases high school graduation and FAFSA filings

In Eastern Washington, the Mpower partnership is supporting over half a dozen high schools in the Spokane area. Mpower uses a mentoring and career readiness approach to prepare students to enroll and persist in their education pathways. The partnership uses a collaborative approach and includes site coordinators from local organizations who work full-time in school to connect mentors and students.

In the 2024-25 academic year, more than 350 students in grades 10 – 12 received mentoring services. Among seniors who were mentored, over 80 percent completed a FAFSA (compared to 51 percent in the region). In addition, 100 percent of mentored seniors graduated from high school (compared to 85 percent in the region).

Figure 16. In the greater Spokane area, a partnership-driven mentorship model increases FAFSA filing and high school graduation rates



Source: Partnership’s self-reported short-term outcomes for the period covering the 2024-25 academic year.
Note: Regionwide HS Graduation rate calculated using data for the Class of 2023 based on data availability at the time of reporting.

In Everett, more adult learners are being supported to complete their degree or short-term certificate

“ELEVATE is the guiding force to me finishing my college degree. I also will be first generation graduate, as neither parent graduated from college... If it hadn't been for the ELEVATE program, I would not currently be enrolled in college, as I was too frustrated from previous college barriers to want to enroll before ELEVATE came along.” - Adult learner from the ELEVATE Regional Partnership

North of Seattle, the ELEVATE partnership in Everett has enrolled 43 new adult learners through effective strategies to support adult learners. Most notably, through new articulation agreements with Academic Credit for Prior Learning (ACPL), adult learners can now earn up to 40 credits from Adult Basic Education courses at the local community college. Paired with wraparound services and basic needs supports, the partnership is creating new opportunities and a new culture of college-going for refugee and asylee adult learners. Most of these students have prior credits from their home countries that can be honored toward meaningful pathways that support their economic mobility. This represents meaningful systems change, as many institutions may lack the infrastructure, willingness, or readiness to accept prior learning toward degrees.

WSAC invests in partnerships that collaborate with local communities. This approach is necessary for creating lasting changes in educational culture and outcomes.

Policy Implementation

The Regional Challenge Grant (RCG) passed in 2022 with bipartisan support in Senate Bill 5789. Due to the state ending funding in the 2025 session, RCG is unable to award any new awards to partnerships

after 2026. RCG is an effective lever for increasing attainment. After three years of implementation, partnerships have tested new strategies and improved educational outcomes. This has led to new and innovative learning, which WSAC is sharing widely. Approaches are built for and by local partnership networks because those most impacted by inequitable systems can best identify what will prove effective in their communities.

The 12 partnerships currently funded represent 18 counties across the state. They include rural, suburban, and urban areas on both sides of Washington (Fig. 17). Communities define their own geographic boundaries based on where their populations live, work, and study. Populations include a variety of age groups and paths for education.

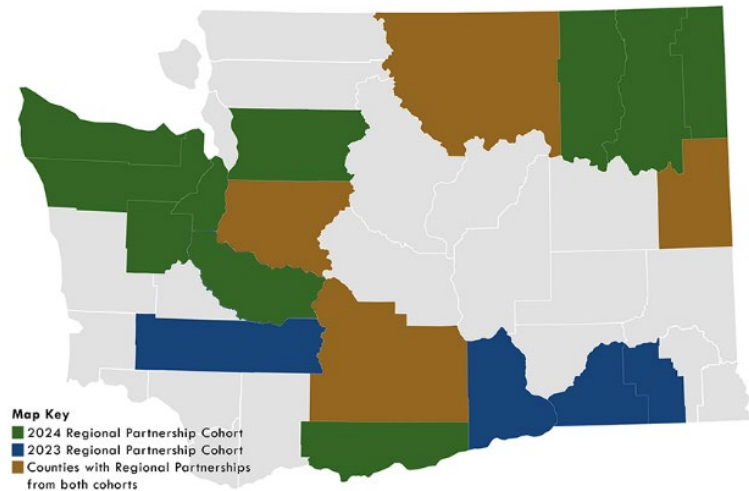


Figure 17. Map of 12 Regional Partnerships by award year across 18 counties.

The evaluation framework helps us track progress across different populations and within the communities served. This way, we can better understand whether our efforts are working and whether the people served are benefiting. Improvements in educational outcomes at the local level lead to higher attainment rates across the state. This means our first signs of success will not appear in population-level outcomes but in measures of continuous improvement that honor community knowledge and lived experience. Co-designed short-term outcomes highlight the urgency of the work by capturing and celebrating positive results early and often. This focused learning also helps the field and leaders across the nation learn from and build on successful strategies developed by regional partnerships.

WSAC's efforts to support regional partnerships show the value of place-based approaches to improve educational outcomes. Through WSAC as an intermediary, we connect partnerships with aligned state programs and policies. This makes their local strategies more effective. Importantly, all partnerships are connected to one of the nation's most generous and equitable first-dollar promise program: the Washington College Grant.

WSAC ensures we are not only supporting partnership visions but also making our work more accessible to community members on the ground. We have learned that partnerships need crucial support from intermediaries, including:

- Building the capacity of emerging place-based partnerships to grow into early implementation. This happens by recruiting intentional partners to better serve their community of learners and

working toward a common goal. We've learned that building partnership networks through trusted relationships is a time-intensive, multi-year effort.

- Supporting partnerships in moving from early implementation to demonstrating progress. Partnerships progress by implementing and evaluating short-term outcomes that show what is working to increase local attainment.
- We've learned that providing data capacity support, especially for rural partnerships with less infrastructure, is essential to have a thriving partnership with effective outcomes. This is particularly complex in rural communities with multiple small school districts rather than a centralized hub, requiring tailored data-sharing agreements across multiple institutions.
- Repairing institutional trust and relationships between state agencies and community partnership organizations is necessary. However, creating this systems change is a multi-year effort.
 - Promoting peer-to-peer learning across the state.
 - Engaging partnerships within the policy process to empower their regional voices and reflect lessons learned within the legislative session.

WSAC will continue our learning and program adaptation through implementing the Regional Challenge Grant to advance agency regional goals.

Guiding Questions: Regional Partnerships

- How can we continue to advance regional partnership strategies that are responsive to statewide goals and the unique needs and assets of specific regions?
 - What would it look like to build more policies and programs statewide that center community-level education leaders as the experts to drive local change?
 - How can we use lessons from Regional Partnerships to remove systems-level barriers when developing policy to advance educational access and outcomes?

The value of place-based approaches implemented by Regional Partnerships is evident. Rates for financial aid applications, high school graduation, and college retention are improving as barriers are addressed and culture is shifted for learners.¹⁷

2026-27 WSAC Priorities

Equity

Practice and Policy Development

» Seek opportunities to make our agency and resources easier to access for students and community members. This includes improving translation services, improving data disaggregation, implementing mobile-friendly resources, and staffing to steward tribal connections.

» Engage in authentic, ongoing, and collaborative relationships. Create regular opportunities to share ideas, challenge assumptions, and improve our ability to work towards equity.

» Advance the agency's focus on equity with all partners. This may include creating or using strategies to align goals, foster accountability, or build shared commitments.

Knowledge Development

» Collaborate with ERDC to use Washington's administrative datasets from Kindergarten to postsecondary. Uncover the key points where they are most at risk of not completing. The focus of this work is to understand who is most affected at each point.

» Continue to look for inequities in postsecondary access and success. Examine student subgroups and their outcomes.

Affordability

Practice and Policy Development

» Support the Council as it explores changing the 70 percent attainment goal to one focused on the value that earning a credential creates for successful students.

» Facilitate a workgroup that drafts a model for the Council to understand how Washington households pay for postsecondary education by income class. Work to understand how affordability is changing for WA families and students amid ongoing economic change.

» Find agreement on the upper income limit in the model and the data on federal, state, and institutional aid.

» Understand how we can clearly measure the expected savings and contributions from current income.

» Work with partners to assess how well current "cost of attendance" estimates reflect students' actual costs.

Knowledge Development

» Map the data environment that shapes our ability to measure borrowing to pay for postsecondary education.

» Evaluate the impact of including apprentices in state financial aid.

» Release findings from an impact evaluation of the Washington College Grant, created in partnership with MDRC and funded by the US Department of Education.

» Release findings from an implementation evaluation of the Washington College Grant for Apprenticeships.

Enrollment

Practice and Policy Development

- » Bring together leaders from higher education and high school, along with other interested partners, to create a plan. The plan is to achieve increased direct enrollment into postsecondary education and training while increasing the level of readiness of students who enroll.
- » Lead the policy effort to define youth apprenticeship and ensure it aligns existing CTE pathways in Washington State. This work will be done in partnership with the Governor's office and stakeholders from K12, the labor council, workforce training board, and apprenticeship providers.
- » Work with OSPI and other partners to support postsecondary pathways into the High School & Beyond web platform, with support from Lumina Foundation. This will include sending alerts to students to raise awareness of Guaranteed Admission, early commitments of WA Grant, and assistance with FAFSA applications.
- » Lead the Washington Completes FAFSA Campaign, created by Executive Order 25-08. Work to build strong partnerships with schools, districts, and community organizations. Focusing on ongoing improvements of how we coordinate statewide efforts to increase FAFSA and WASFA completion.
- » Test OtterBot's AI capability in supporting school counselors at one school district. Support Campus Evolve's Pathways AI project pilot with a community-based organization and two school districts. Help design an AI guide for high schoolers that includes information on state-level college and career pathways.
- » Launch an outreach campaign for students and families eligible for "free tuition" from WA Grant based on SNAP participation, foster youth, and other factors. This will include large-scale digital media outreach (e.g., Otterbot) and face-to-face supports at schools and in the community.
- » Build more partnerships with other state agencies that help serve students and families eligible for WA Grant. This will help them understand how affordable postsecondary education is in our state and the support available for the FAFSA and WASFA application process.
- » Use the State Work Study program to employ students to provide navigation supports to high school students. The goal will be to increase postsecondary enrollment.
- » Create joint articulating agreements with six institutions in Washington to award ACPL for paraeducators. Promote paraeducator conditional scholarship's ability to cover costs to encourage enrollment.
- » Pilot targeted outreach to adults with no college credit. Offer ACPL as an incentive for enrollment, in partnership with one CTC and one public college.

Knowledge Development

- » Release findings from research on the relationship between school-to-work pathways and labor market outcomes, created in partnership with MDRC.

- » Share results of lessons learned from adapting OtterBot to serve diverse students across the state and through regional partnerships funded by Axim Collaborative.
- » Identify the traits and job outcomes of adults who do not have a postsecondary credential.
- » Publish a brief on opportunity youth disconnection rates at the state and regional level. Include disconnection rates across high school, postsecondary, and workforce.

Basic Needs

Practice and Policy Development

- » Create a partnership across different sectors to determine clear goals and metrics for the state. This will help foster ongoing engagement and scaled actions.
- » Expand the access to and effectiveness of benefits navigation. Create a plan to provide basic needs navigation for working and adult learners. Create a regional cohort of colleges focused on growing measurable impact in connecting students with benefits and resources.
- » Create a plan with partners to better understand and address the needs of parenting students including access to basic needs.
- » Based on insights from data sharing with the Washington Department of Social and Health Services, build a partnership with another state agency to provide targeted outreach and support for students who are likely eligible for public benefits, such as the Working Families Tax Credit.

Knowledge Development

- » Work with national and state partners to create a research plan for the Washington Postsecondary Food Security pilot. The goal is to analyze and better understand how food security strategies impact students' success.
- » Create a brief showing insights and recommendations from WSAC workforce pilots and programs that test proactive and flexible funding to meet basic needs.
- » Create a data structure that allows analysis of Passport student persistence and completion indicators. Test campus and sector strategies on persistence data collection for Passport students.

Completion

Practice and Policy Development

- » Retention and Persistence Support
 - Participate in the Complete College Accelerator cohort with five institutions. Institutions receive technical assistance to drive best practices and enhance student outcomes.
 - Lead LEARN, a Community of Practice focused on adult learners. Analyze the current landscape, support ongoing and new regional efforts, and help the state set policy priorities for adult learners.

- Convene statewide partners to support ongoing learning and strategy development for key groups of students and the institutions that support them. This includes Minority Serving Institutions and students who are undocumented or come from mixed-status families.
- Raise awareness about apprenticeship and trades opportunities in high-need industries across the state. This will be done by reaching out directly to sponsors, unions, and apprentices.
- Join SHEEO's Holistic Advising Community of Practice with SBCTC. Work to review the advising ecosystem and advance sustainable models to improve student persistence, completion, and career success.

» Student Mobility Support

- Participate in the Universal Transfer Explorer Project with ITHAKA S+R. The pilot includes six institutions testing a credit mobility tool to help students see what credits will transfer and how they will be applied.
- Participate in SHEEO and Student Ready Strategies' Constellation of Support: A Capacity-Building Approach to Institutional Change. This is a partnership with eight institutions that will grow academic credit for prior learning on their campuses.
- Learn from peer Washington agencies about how to implement [Executive Order 24-04](#) and the laws HB 2309 and SHB 2216. These efforts will aim to help workers advance their careers.
- At the direction of the Governor's office, work with SBCTC and WTB to implement Workforce Pell in Washington. The goal will be to understand how campuses are creating policies to articulate and award credit.

Knowledge Development

- » Release initial findings from research that helps identify programs that may be eligible for workforce Pell grants. This research is in partnership with the Postsecondary Education & Economics Research (PEER) Center.
- » Examine the experience of transfer students to understand the challenges they face and the support that helps them successfully complete the transfer process and earn a degree.
- » Investigate and understand how paid and for-credit work-based learning opportunities are drivers of completion.

Regional Partnerships

Practice and Policy Development

- » Embed a regional lens and approach across all clusters and strategic planning efforts.
- » Explore ways to grow meaningful partnerships between state, community, and regional partnerships.

Knowledge Development

- » Continue to identify the impact of partnerships' WSAC-funded work on learners served.
- » Design and implement peer-to-peer research and evaluation workshops.
- » Explore the pattern and trends in educational outcomes for partnership service regions.

Council Focus Areas

- » Support the FAFSA campaign outreach by helping staff extend the network of engaged local and regional partners.
- » Lead the conversation with high school, university, college, faculty, and student leaders to build a sustainable agenda to increase college readiness and college enrollment.
- » Explore changing our 70 percent attainment goal to a measure based on the value that earning a credential creates for successful students.
- » Lead the interim management, search process, and transition to a new Executive Director.

Endnotes

¹ WSAC. 2023. "The Myth of 'Full Ride' Financial Aid." Retrieved 4/6/26, from <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/COA%20Gap%20Myth%20of%20Full%20Ride%20Financial%20Aid%20%2803.20.23%29.pdf>.

² Ibid.

³ Washington Roundtable. March 2026. "Prices We Pay: Understanding Washington's Affordability Crisis." Retrieved 4/1/26 from <https://www.waroundtable.com/understanding-washingtons-affordability-crisis/>.

⁴ WSAC. 2025. "Reassessing Basic Needs Security Among Washington College Students." Retrieved 4/1/26 from <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2025.BasicNeedsReport>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kukreja, Arya and Deane, KC. 2025. "Designing Postsecondary Education for Parenting Students." Retrieved 4/1/26 from <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/Designing-Postsecondary-Education%20for-Parenting%20Students.pdf>.

⁸ WSAC. 2025. "Reassessing Basic Needs Security Among Washington College Students." Retrieved 4/1/26 from <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2025.BasicNeedsReport>.

⁹ Washington State Department of Labor & Industries. 2025. "Apprenticeship Retention Survey." Retrieved 4/1/26 from <https://www.lni.wa.gov/licensing-permits/apprenticeship/wsac/apprenticeship-retention-survey>.

¹⁰ WSAC. 2025. "Reassessing Basic Needs Security Among Washington College Students." Retrieved 4/1/26 from <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2025.BasicNeedsReport>.

¹¹ WSAC. 2026. "Attainment Dashboard." Retrieved 3/12/2026 from <https://wsac.wa.gov/attainment-dashboard>.

¹² National Student Clearinghouse. 2024. "Some College No Credential: Student Outcomes, 2024 National/State Data." Retrieved from <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SCNC2024DataAppendix.xlsx>.

¹³ Washington State Department of Labor & Industries. 2025. "Apprenticeship Retention Survey." Retrieved 4/1/26 from <https://www.lni.wa.gov/licensing-permits/apprenticeship/wsac/apprenticeship-retention-survey>.

¹⁴ Education Research & Data Center. 2026. "High School Graduate Outcomes." Retrieved 3/12/2026 from <https://erdc.wa.gov/data-dashboards/high-school-graduate-outcomes>.

¹⁵ Kania, John; Kramer, Mark; and Senge, Peter. June 2018. "The Water of Systems Change." Retrieved from https://www.fsg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Water-of-Systems-Change_rc.pdf.

¹⁶ Evidence draws from partnership reporting documents, as well as publicly available data via WSAC's FAFSA Dashboard.

¹⁷ Deane, KC and Chang, Rita. (2025) and "[Regional Partnerships: Legislative Report on Program Implementation](#)," and WSAC, (2025.) "[Early Impact Brief: What We Know](#)."