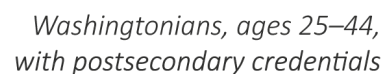


Increasing Postsecondary Educational Attainment and Equity in Washington State



Strategic Action Plan 2026

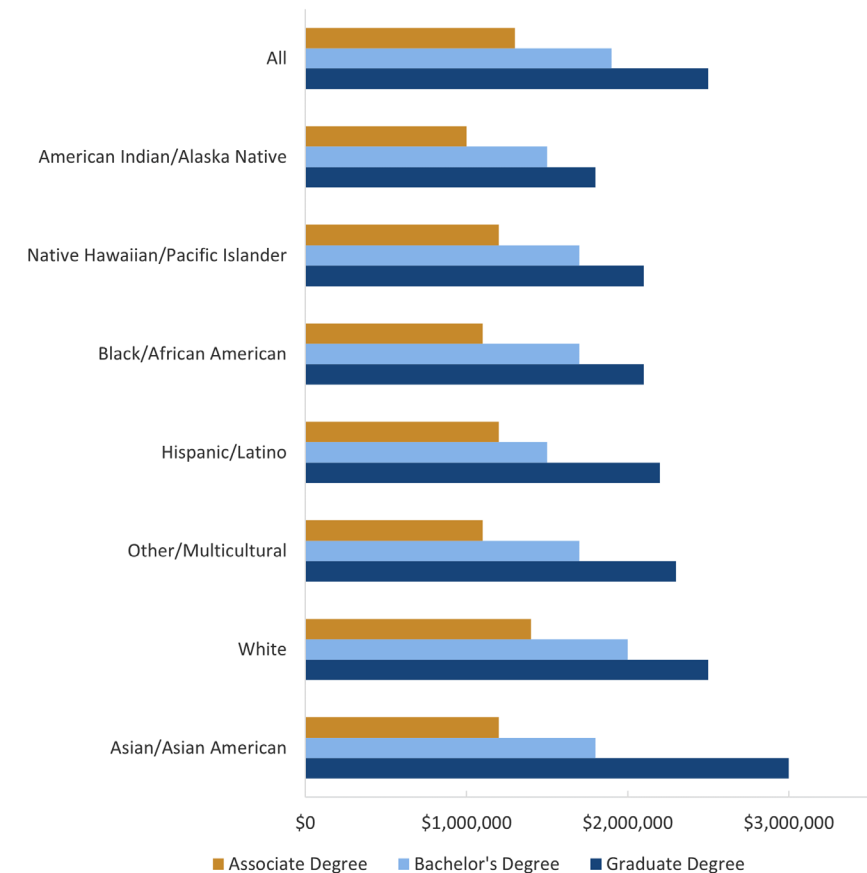
Washington's State Goal for Educational Attainment

An education or training credential beyond a high school diploma is essential to earn a living wage and achieve economic mobility. These credentials include traditional college degrees, certificates, apprenticeships, and other career-based programs. They are provided by public and private colleges and universities, community and technical colleges, and training programs by employers. In Washington, students from families in the bottom quartile of income [earn more than their parents](#) (combined) by the third year after postsecondary graduation. Additionally, earning a credential or degree after high school offers key opportunities for jobs paying higher wages and better benefits. Higher levels of education are associated with increasing lifetime earnings for all races and ethnicities (Fig. 1).

The individual and broad economic benefits of continued learning and training provide a strong rationale to increase statewide educational attainment. In 2013, the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) proposed that, as our state goal, 70 percent of the state's 25- to 44-year-olds (i.e., our early and mid-career residents) should have a credential beyond high school. The Legislature approved the goal, and it was signed into law by then Governor Jay Inslee.

The 70 percent goal was based on an analysis of the skill demands in the state job market, but more importantly, it is an aspirational vision. Our attainment level has grown by nearly seven percentage points over the last decade. At that rate, it will take us another decade to achieve our goal. Unfortunately, the job market demands higher skill levels every year. By the time we reach 70 percent, a much higher goal will be long past due. Washington needs an aggressive change agenda and financial investment to maximize opportunities for all state residents.

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.

Introduction

Federal Higher Education Policy and Impacts on Washington State

Current federal higher education policy is radically shifting the ability to afford and access higher education. The reduction in force initiative is impacting nearly half of the Department of Education's workforce. This includes workers who served in the Federal Student Aid (FSA) office, the Institute of Education Sciences, the Post Secondary Education office, and others.

The Department of Education has said that it will continue to deliver on all statutory programs without disruptions, including Pell Grants, student loans, [TRIO](#), and [GEAR UP](#). However, there have been delays in the processing of FAFSA applications that were held for possible errors. FSA staff ordinarily work to reduce this backlog, but no staff are available to do this. Some functions of the department may be transferred to other federal agencies or privatized. Detailed plans for these changes have not been made available yet. Overall, there is a lot of uncertainty, and this landscape is evolving.

Higher Education Policy in Washington State

For many years, state and federal higher education policy focused on the supply and affordability of postsecondary education. Capital budgets for new facilities, appropriations to subsidize the cost of education, tuition policy, and funding for financial aid programs dominated the policy landscape.

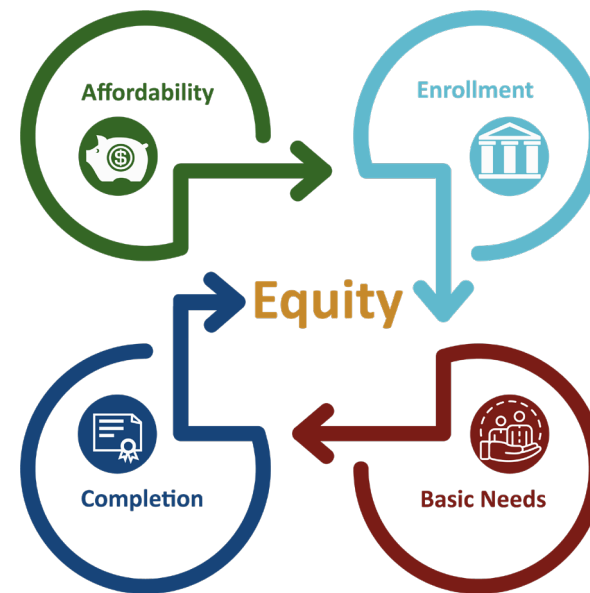
Education and training increase the knowledge and skills that enable all people to succeed in their life goals. The benefit of educational attainment for more residents takes our work beyond education policy. We seek to build a movement shaped by all voices that support stronger and more prosperous communities.

Government policy has become more focused on educational attainment over the past fifteen years. This has given rise to new issues of access and success, with an increasing awareness of opportunity and student success gaps by gender, race, and ethnicity.

WSAC's Strategic Action Plan (SAP) provides a framework to organize the policy and practice innovation needed to achieve our goal. The SAP strives to speak for all partners and stakeholders who share this goal and who 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 level.

The work is framed by four strategic cluster areas. Centering Equity, the four areas include Affordability, Enrollment, Basic Needs, and Completion (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. WSAC Strategic Cluster Areas



*If we build an **affordable** educational environment and **support students' basic needs**, more Washingtonians will **enroll** in programs and **complete** credentials.*

Introduction

The framework is based on our belief that if we build an affordable and supportive educational environment, more Washingtonians will enroll in programs and complete credentials. Ensuring equitable access and success for all students is central to the strategic framework.

The Council also adopted six values to guide our work

- » Equity
- » A student-centered approach
- » Regional and community leadership
- » Partnerships to build collaboration at all levels
- » Aligned with all public investments to support students
- » Innovation

The WSAC Strategic Action Plan (SAP)

The SAP discusses our attainment goal, our strategic clusters and values, a snapshot of current state policy by cluster, and our priorities for the short-term.

Discussion of public policy and legislation understandably focuses on new ideas and can be narrowly focused on a particular program. Policy and legislation have increasingly focused on supporting existing foundation areas to increase postsecondary attainment. The following sections are the Council's effort to capture that broader policy landscape as a baseline to inform our change agenda. It also allows community leaders to see the state's approach in full.

We define "state higher education policy" broadly to include statutes, budget investments, and agency rules. It also includes more informal, recurring state practices or actions that can define a meaningful commitment to a policy approach.

Equity

Equity

The Council has committed to equity as the defining priority for our work in developing state higher education policy. Equity is an outcome in which justice is realized within our society. This happens through a continuous, intentional process of identifying and abolishing racism and all forms of oppression designed to marginalize students, communities, and families. We are committed to bringing equity to all who are Black, Indigenous, Latino, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, Asian, and multiracial, regardless of immigration status, and all groups who experience oppression.

To reflect this commitment, in 2021, the Council determined that our state's 70 percent attainment goal should be assessed through a lens of race and ethnicity. It should also be evaluated within all clusters and strategic planning efforts, including policy, knowledge development, and practice work. The most recent statewide attainment data by race or ethnicity is discussed below. We begin our Strategic Action Plan by centering equity from the start.

Figure 3. Racial distribution at public high schools and postsecondary institutions in Washington, 2023-24

Race	High School	Public 2-Year	Public 4-Year
White	49%	40%	48%
Hispanic or Latino	27%	12%	14%
Two or More Races	8%	13%	8%
Asian	9%	11%	15%
Black or African American	5%	7%	4%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%	1%	1%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1%	1%	<1%
Not Reported	N/A	16%	8%

Note: Due to rounding, total may not equal 100%.

Source: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Data Portal: Report Card Enrollment 2023-24 School Year, Grades 9-12.; State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), Enrollment Data Dashboard: Demographics, Annual Headcount by Race/Ethnicity, Academic Year 2023-24; Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) staff: Annual Enrollment, Undergraduate Headcount by Race/Ethnicity, Academic Year 2023-24.

Issues of racial equity are not unique to attainment—they are systemically and institutionally recreated throughout our society. However, one sign of inequity is the racial distribution of students at public high schools compared to public postsecondary institutions. In Washington, the racial demographic makeup of public high schools is different than public higher education in the state (Fig. 3). For instance, Hispanic or Latino students make up over a quarter of the public high school population but account for 12 to 14 percent of the public higher education population. Ensuring racial equity in our state requires that our higher education system reflects the diversity of our population.

Strategies for Eliminating Systemic Barriers in Higher Education

The Council recognizes the historic and current institutional and structural racism in Washington State and in our country and acknowledges our complicity in maintaining this reality by upholding policies, processes, and practices that have created barriers on the path to this goal for Black students, Indigenous students, Latino students, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students, regardless of immigration status, and their families and communities. We hold ourselves accountable as Council members and as individual leaders to eliminate these barriers by:

- » Building authentic, long-term relationships with Black students, Indigenous students, Latino students, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students, regardless of immigration status, in service of co-creating new and equitable policies, practices, and processes informed by those who have been most impacted.
- » Strongly advocating for funding and clearly prioritizing resources for systems change in support of Black students, Indigenous students, Latino students, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students.
- » Collecting and sharing racially disaggregated data and bringing awareness of the opportunity gaps and progress made with organizational partners to invoke advocacy and action.
- » Ensuring the Council and WSAC executive leadership reflect the racial diversity of the students and communities they serve.
- » Engaging in continuous and long-term assessment of target intervention programs and the Council's progress against its postsecondary attainment goal and the associated Strategic Action Plans.

Centering equity calls the Council to consider and seek to understand the critical resources needed to reach and support all students. While guided through the lens of race, understanding students' intersectional and layered identities (e.g., age, gender) and assessing their experiences (e.g., adult learners, geographic proximity to institutions, English language learners, immigration) ensures that learners in Washington can access, pursue, and complete credentials.

Guiding Questions: Equity

- » What additional inputs or indicators can help the state identify or respond to equity gaps in attainment?
- » How can WSAC prioritize building or restoring trust with communities, government agencies, institutions, and community partners to initiate honest conversation and shared solutions?
- » How is WSAC centering community and student collaboration in its programs? Likewise in its policy, knowledge, and practice development?

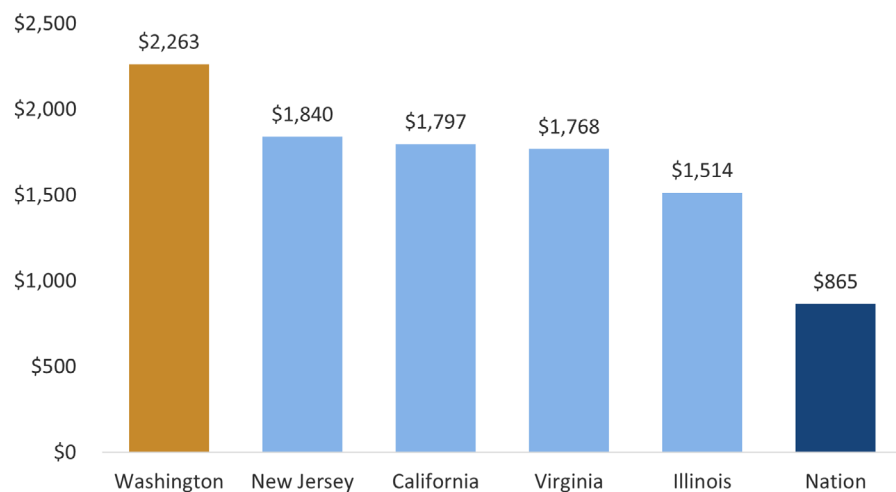
Affordability

Affordability

Affordability is the most-cited barrier to enrolling and continuing in education beyond high school. The financial barriers go beyond the cost of the education itself, expressed as tuition and fees. Many students must support, or contribute to the support of, their household. Because these other costs are so significant—and often overlooked—the Council addresses those barriers as a separate cluster entitled Basic Needs.

The Affordability cluster focuses on addressing Washingtonians' concerns about the costs associated with postsecondary education via tuition and fees. It also considers the lifetime earnings, debt, and employability that contribute to the overall value of a postsecondary credential. Washington has one of the most comprehensive and equitable state policies on affordability in the nation. Washington awards the highest amount of need-based grant aid per undergraduate full-time equivalent student in the country (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. Need-Based Grant Aid per Undergraduate Full-Time Equivalent Enrollment, by State, 2022-23



Source: National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs (NASSGAP) Survey, 2022-23, pg. 21.
www.nassgapsurvey.com/survey_reports/2022-2023-54th.pdf

In addition, the total of state grants exceeds the total of Federal Pell Grants to Washington residents attending in-state institutions (Fig. 5).

Financial aid programs are designed to make postsecondary education affordable for students who face financial barriers. Many students in Washington are eligible for state aid to help cover the costs of college, in addition to the Federal Pell Grant (Fig. 5). As expected, most students who receive state financial aid have incomes below 65 percent of the state median level. The same is true for students receiving federal aid.

Figure 5. Washington Financial Aid Recipients by Median Family Income

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%

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%

Note: The MFI structure used in 2023-24 has been revised for the 2025-26 academic year.

Source: WSAC Unit Record Report, Washington state financial aid and Pell Grant recipients by state median family income (MFI), academic year 2023-24.

Affordability

Washington's affordability policy is based on the logic that an affordable higher education system will allow more students to enroll and complete postsecondary programs. This in turn will lead to an increased number of credentials toward the state attainment goal. Research shows that Washington's investment in need-based aid offers a path toward a credential and economic mobility for Washingtonians.

Guiding principles for making higher education affordable for all Washingtonians.

- » Higher education should be affordable [without imposing limits by age](#), to include adults, recent graduates from high school, and students earning credits, degrees, and credentials while in high school.
- » Higher education should be affordable to state residents, regardless of [citizenship status](#).
- » Washington's effort to ensure affordability for students should encompass all forms of postsecondary programs. This includes traditional degrees; career-technical education certificates; registered apprenticeships; and credits, degrees, and credentials earned while in high school.
- » Policies to ensure affordability should also enable student options across all types of institutions, both public and private.
- » Students need support with financial literacy and planning to maximize the affordability of higher education.

Washington makes higher education affordable through four major policies.

- » State subsidy and tuition policy for public institutions promote affordable higher education costs.
- » State aid programs are based on income eligibility (need-based).
- » State investment programs are available to help families save.
- » Postsecondary credits can be earned while in high school.

All Washington residents who meet income eligibility standards are guaranteed financial aid for higher education.

State financial aid programs offer flexibility and reach beyond the lowest-income households.

- » All Washington residents who meet the [income eligibility standards](#) are guaranteed financial aid.
- » State aid pays tuition and fees for students from families making up to 60 percent of median family income (MFI)—currently \$78,500 for a household of four.
- » The state contributes part of tuition and fees for students from households above 60 percent MFI and up to the statewide median—currently \$131,000 for a household of four.
- » Income-eligible students who receive federal grants can keep and combine 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.

Policy changes in 2025 will affect student affordability through reductions in state aid.

- » 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, effective in the 2025-26 academic year.
- » The WA Grant will be reduced for private nonprofit institutions, apprenticeship programs, and vocational schools beginning in the 2026-27 academic year. WA Grant will be eliminated for students attending private, for-profit institutions in the 2026-27 academic year.
- » The Bridge Grant, a \$500 grant to cover non-tuition expenses, will be eliminated starting in the 2025-26 academic year. Bridge Grant was awarded to students receiving full WA Grant and not eligible for the College Bound Scholarship.
- » Students receiving College Bound Scholarships will experience further reductions comparable to those affecting WA Grant recipients at private, nonprofit, and for-profit institutions beginning the 2027-28 academic year. However, students will continue to receive \$500 for books and materials.

Affordability

The state subsidizes public colleges and universities for all students.

- » The amount of state subsidy directly affects the level of tuition and fees. This is recognized by the state's statutory commitment to backfill on an ongoing basis the net revenue lost to tuition reductions, as adjusted for inflation.
- » State law ensures tuition increases are not greater than the rate of inflation.
- » State investment combined with tuition funding meets the cost of delivering education for students.
- » State support helps colleges and universities provide higher-quality academic and basic needs programs that otherwise might not be affordable within 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 credit while in high school by investing in colleges and universities.

Some state financial aid programs are designed to increase college and career readiness and are intended to support specific populations.

- » [An early vision for college](#): Students from our lowest-income households see in middle school that there is a path to an affordable higher education for them.
- » [High demand STEM and technical jobs](#): Financial aid is tied to increased access to high-demand education pathways for lower-income students.
- » Specific populations: Some financial aid programs support populations beyond income eligibility to include [foster youth](#), [homeless youth](#), [Native American students](#), etc.
- » Work-based learning: Financial aid supports work-based learning by partnering with employers to fund jobs for students, with additional incentives for employers who do college access work through [Washington Jobs Initiative](#).

- » Public needs in the job market: Financial aid programs can be used to attract Washington residents to jobs with high public need, such as [teaching](#), [healthcare](#) in underserved communities, etc.
- » Multiple pathways: [Apprentices in approved programs](#) can receive financial aid to continue their path toward credit and a credential.

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.

Washington mostly relies on the federal model for students to apply for and receive financial aid.

- » State financial aid is awarded and distributed by the college or university that the student attends.
- » All colleges and universities must meet certain state eligibility requirements and standards to participate in state financial aid programs.
- » The federal application form (FAFSA) is used for most students to [apply for and receive state financial aid](#). This prevents students from having to fill out two separate applications.
- » 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. This will be expanded to include families of high schoolers receiving SNAP in 2025-26.
- » Washington offers financial aid to students who are ineligible for federal aid because of their citizenship status through the [Washington Application for State Financial Aid \(WASFA\)](#).
- » 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.

Affordability

Washington helps families save for college.

The state provides programs to address student debt.

- » The Office of the [Student Loan Advocate](#) provides information to Washington residents about student loans and offers resources to help current borrowers manage existing student loan debt.
- » The Student Loan Advocate provides outreach and support for borrowers who work in public service jobs on how to take advantage of Public Service Loan Forgiveness.
- » The state has created [loan programs and loan repayment programs](#) that are targeted to meet workforce needs.

Washington helps families save for college.

- » 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](#)).

Guiding Questions: Affordability

- » How can we better understand the differing impacts of affordability barriers on families of varying income levels?
- » How can we better align outreach regarding financial aid eligibility with public benefits receipt? How could we measure the potential impact of that alignment on enrollment and retention?
- » What do we know about the effectiveness of the Washington College Grant in improving educational outcomes for Washington students?

Enrollment

Enrollment

Postsecondary education is a proven pathway for upward mobility and can support Washingtonians' life goals. Washington has invested in high-demand and diverse programs for high school students and adults. Washington also has a robust economy that needs a skilled and educated workforce.

Hence, **Washington needs more residents to enroll in a wide range of education and training programs.** While some of the critical elements are in place, the state must continue to work towards a more equitable and comprehensive enrollment policy to support all Washington residents.

Current Landscape

Between 2019 and 2024, Washington's fall enrollment at public four-year institutions increased by seven percent for students who received need-based aid. It decreased by 21 percent for those who did not (Fig. 6a). Over the same period at our public two-year institutions, fall enrollment increased by 15 percent for students who received need-based aid. It decreased by 32 percent for students who did not (Fig. 6b).

Need-based financial aid mitigated pandemic enrollment declines.

Washington's undergraduate enrollment has followed the national pattern of flat enrollment for two decades, with some declines since the pandemic. Four-year institutions saw about a one percent decline from 2021-22 to 2022-23. Two-year institutions saw a four percent decline (Fig. 7).

Washington's proportion of adults (25-44) with a postsecondary credential increased from 61 percent in 2022 to 62 percent in 2023 (Fig.8).

Enrollment

Need-based financial aid mitigated pandemic enrollment declines.

Figure 6a. Fall Enrollment Change for Pandemic Years (2019 to 2024) at Public Four-Year Institutions

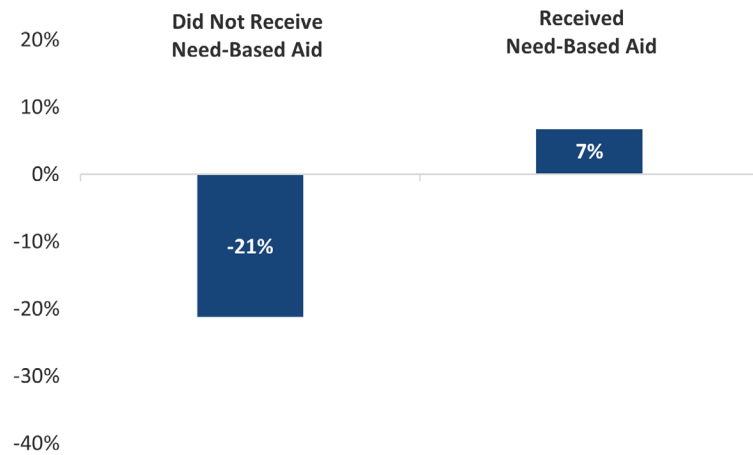
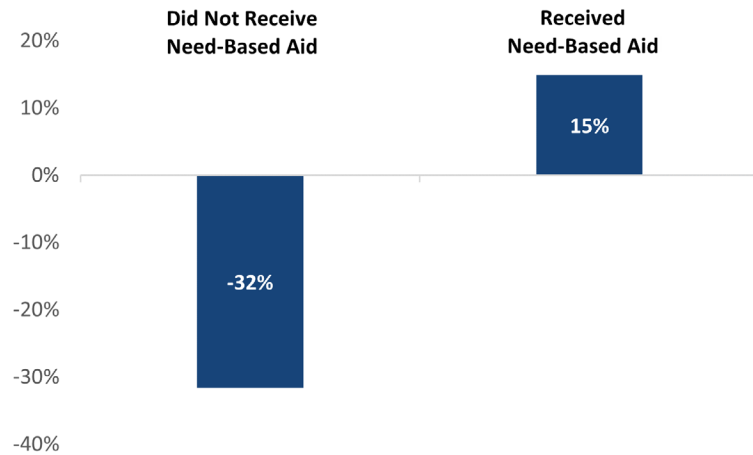
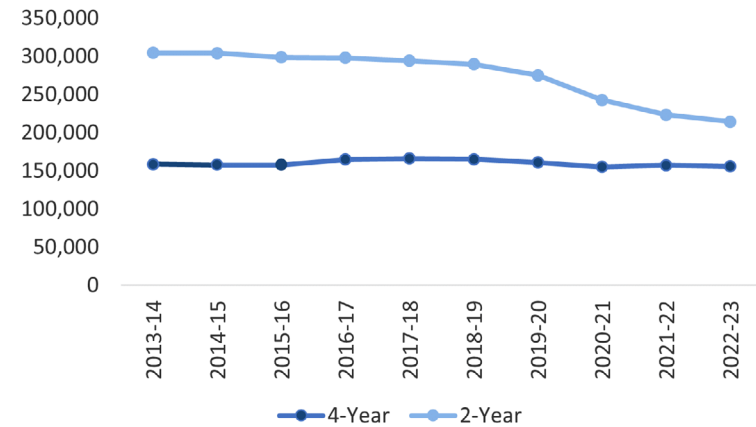


Figure 6b. Fall Enrollment Change for Pandemic Years (2019 to 2024) at Public Two-Year Institutions



Source: wsac.wa.gov/sap-dashboard

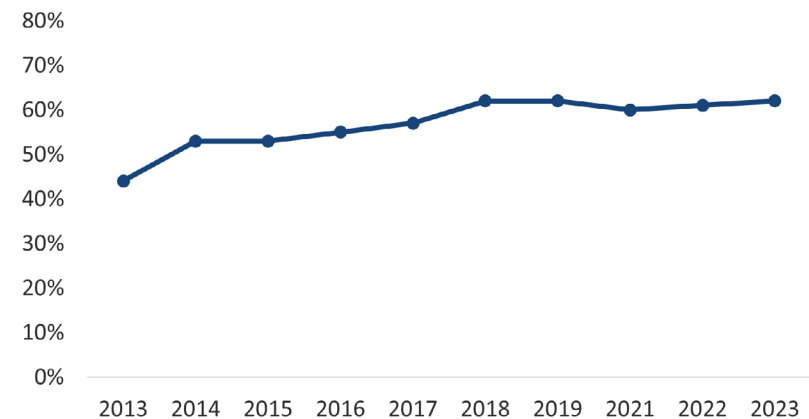
Figure 7. Undergraduate Enrollment at Washington Postsecondary Institutions by Institution Level



Note: In IPEDS data, institution level (two-year/four-year) is determined by the highest degree level offered. This means that IPEDS classifies most of Washington's career and technical colleges, Northwest Indian College, and others as four-year institutions because they offer four-year degrees. However, WSAC has reclassified these as two-year institutions because the overwhelming majority of credentials they confer are associate degrees and certificates.

Source: wsac.wa.gov/sap-dashboard

Figure 8. Proportion of Adults (25-44) in Washington with a Postsecondary Credential

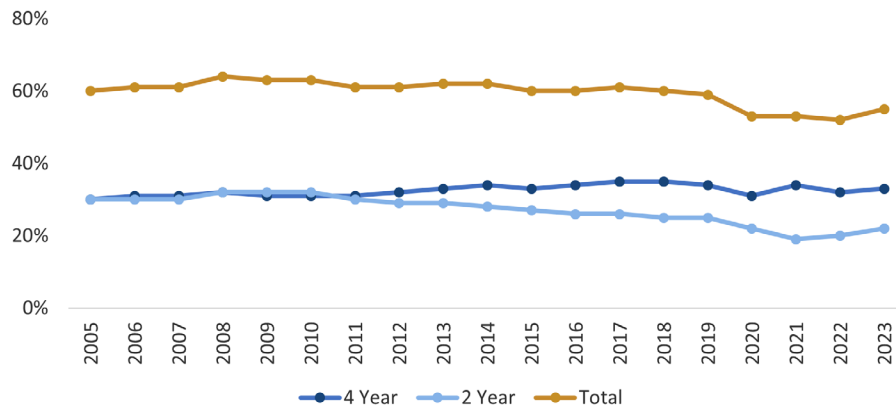


Source: wsac.wa.gov/attainment-dashboard

Enrollment

Washington’s direct enrollment from high school graduates increased from 52 percent to 55 percent from 2022 to 2023 (Fig. 9). This indicates that we are recovering from the pandemic-related declines.

Figure 9. Direct Postsecondary Enrollment Rate from High School



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

Enrollment is more a matter of practice than formal policy. While colleges and universities recruit students to their programs, societal attitudes shape college going broadly. Potential students interact with these attitudes in the communities where they live, study, and work. This environment is shaped by peers, family members, teachers, school counselors, neighbors, co-workers, and what some might call “conventional wisdom.”

Community attitudes can support or impede the likelihood that students will see college as a valuable, welcoming, affordable, and supportive opportunity. Washington must support communities directly with investments in regional partnerships. This includes building a supportive infrastructure of accessible and affordable capacity, technical assistance to support schools and community groups, communication tools, and outreach. While some of these critical elements are falling into place, the state must continue to work towards a more equitable and comprehensive enrollment policy that will support both high school students and adults.

The 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](#).

Guiding principles to ensure that all Washington residents have a clear and accessible path to enroll in postsecondary education.

- » All Washington residents should be aware of the benefits of continuing their education past high school. This includes the economic, social, and health returns of earning a credential.
- » Washington must increase postsecondary enrollment for both traditional K-12 students and working-age adults.
- » Washington’s effort to increase enrollment should include all forms of postsecondary programs, including traditional degrees, career-technical education certificates, apprenticeships, noncredit pathways, and more.

Enrollment

- » Washington's effort to increase enrollment should be particularly focused on supporting students of color. Especially Black, Indigenous, and Latino students, who have been historically and institutionally marginalized from accessing higher education.
- » Policies to ensure ease of enrollment should also enable student choice across all types of institutions and programs, including apprenticeships and private colleges.

The state's K-12 system provides some funding, infrastructure, and programming to motivate and prepare students for postsecondary pathways.

- » A range of [dual credit programs](#) enable students to receive college credit in high school. Students complete a college course, pass a standardized exam, or participate in technical programs that have articulation agreements. High school students are required to be notified of these programs.
- » The state continues to cover costs for high school students to enroll in and receive postsecondary credits. This includes a more generous coverage of College in the High School and Summer Running Start.
- » 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, the K-12 system will adopt a statewide online platform to engage students and help them better navigate the transition into higher education.
- » Students can graduate high school by demonstrating readiness through [multiple graduation pathways](#). These include course-based, test-based, and performance-based pathways.
- » The state requires data sharing between K-12 and public institutions of higher education. The requirement ensures high school students are informed of educational opportunities in Washington. The requirement also allows the state to track student enrollment and outcomes.

The state provides additional infrastructure outside of the K-12 system to support Washington students' pathways from high school to postsecondary.

- » Beginning in the 2025-26 academic year, students in 10th, 11th, and 12th grades who qualify for the Basic Food Program will automatically qualify as income eligible for the Washington College Grant when enrolling directly after high school.
- » The state has funded WSAC's [Regional Challenge Grants](#) to support community partnerships among K-12, colleges, workforce/industry, and community-based organizations. Partnerships work to expand innovative interventions to increase college enrollment and completion. They focus on eliminating opportunity gaps for marginalized populations. to support community partnerships among K-12, colleges, workforce/industry, and community-based organizations. Partnerships work to expand innovative interventions to increase college enrollment and completion. They focus on eliminating opportunity gaps for marginalized populations.

Washington must aim to support enrollment among students of color in particular.

- » Most public and private nonprofit universities offer a guaranteed admissions program based on GPA and course distribution with tests optional.
- » The state invests in college-going programs like the [12th Year Campaign](#). The state has invested in other programs provided by [nonprofit groups](#). These programs provide resources, navigation supports, and information to students and families about how to navigate financial aid and how to enroll in college.
- » WSAC supports many low-income high school students enrolled in [College Bound](#) with [OtterBot](#). This chatbot shares outbound messages on financial aid and college and career pathways and can answer questions in multiple languages 24/7.

Enrollment

- » [Career Connect Washington](#) is increasing options for students to participate in Career Explore, Career Prep, and Career Launch programs (paid work-based learning opportunities), apprenticeships, and dual credit. These programs provide college and career readiness. Participants earn college credits, industry-valued credentials, and wages.
- » Washington has a network of federal programs, including [GEAR UP](#). WSAC administers the GEAR UP state grant, and some institutions in the state administer GEAR UP partnership grants. Institutions also administer other campus programs similar to GEAR UP, such as TRiO. These programs support low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented students in their preparation for postsecondary.
- » The state subsidy to postsecondary institutions may also provide support for campus operations, including admissions, outreach, and enrollment activities.

Work-based and academic programs offered through Career Connect Washington prepare students for college and career while earning college credit or wages.

Washington provides resources to support working-age adults' ability to pay for and access college and career programs.

- » Workforce conditional scholarships and loan programs are available to increase postsecondary enrollment for eligible students in specific high-need industries.
- » State agencies offer web-based information and digital tools to support working-age adults in navigating college enrollment, various programs, and basic needs resources.
- » Federal funds support education and training through the Washington Jobs Initiative and Workforce Development Councils' work to increase the number of adults in education and training programs.

- » Some 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.
- » Credits for prior learning for military students have increased drastically in recent years.

Guiding Questions: Enrollment

- » What would it look like to build an aligned and supportive environment for Washington residents to access postsecondary pathways?
- » Enrollment into postsecondary education involves uncertainties around affordability and preparedness. What are ways to systemically reduce uncertainty in the enrollment process?
- » How can we build diverse pathways across education and training to allow seamless movement for Washington residents?

Basic Needs

Basic Needs

Basic needs insecurity—lack of access to affordable housing, food, healthcare, childcare, and other needs—is a critical barrier that can undermine persistence and completion rates for Washington postsecondary students. These challenges were highlighted during the recent pandemic, but basic needs insecurity has been a long-term challenge impacting persistence and success.

Access to basic needs should not be a barrier for Washington residents seeking a postsecondary degree. Washington is one of the few states to expressly identify support for students' basic needs as a core strategy. Examining the underlying challenges and the prevalence of needs, as well as learning through pilots and stakeholder engagement, is important to understanding and addressing barriers and gaps in support for students.

Background

Students face many different types of costs beyond tuition and fees. Costs for 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 (Fig. 10a and 10b). Earnings loss due to class and study time exacerbates the challenge students face in covering basic needs.

Despite a strong financial aid grant program in Washington, there is often a gap for students from low-income families between the amount of aid they receive and the costs of their basic needs. Rising inflation and skyrocketing rental expenses deepen the funding gaps. These financial burdens can derail students even when financial aid covers their full tuition and fees. This can cause them to drop out of their postsecondary programs or turn away completely from their educational goals.

The majority of attendance costs are not tuition.

Figure 10a. Four-year research university undergraduate costs, living on campus

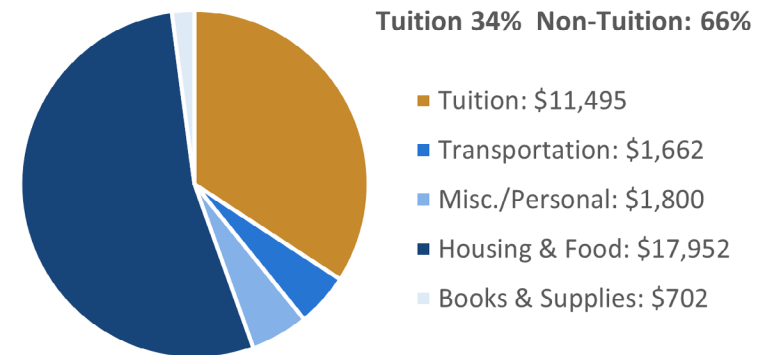
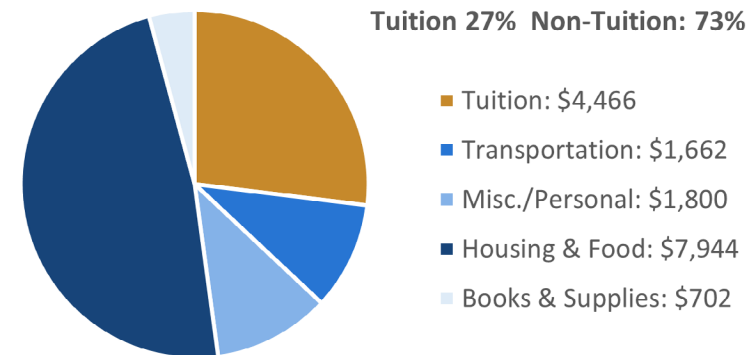


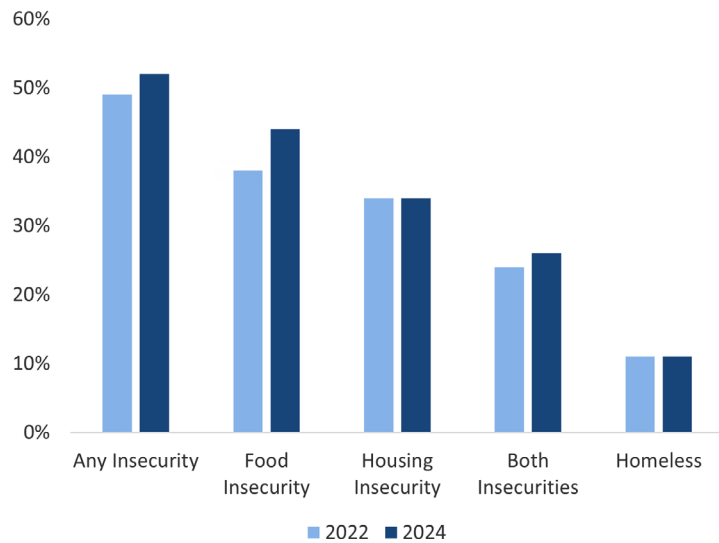
Figure 10b. Community or technical college costs, living with parents



Source: <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/COA%20Gap%20Myth%20of%20Full%20Ride%20Financial%20Aid%202803.20.23%29.pdf>

Basic Needs

Figure 11. Surveyed students at two-year and four-year colleges in 2024 reported a higher rate of basic needs insecurity overall compared to 2022 rates

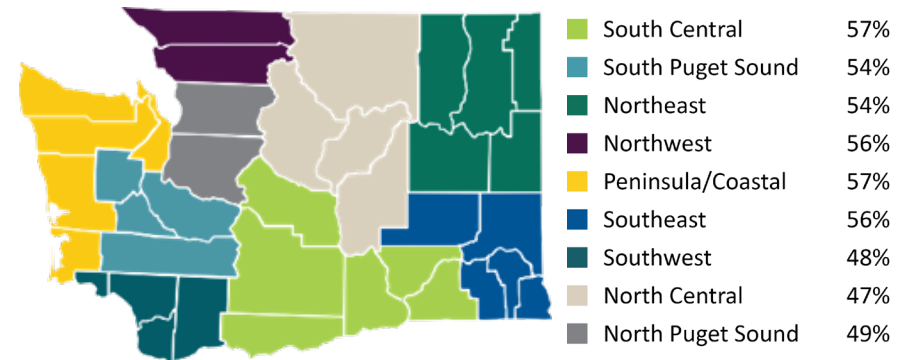


Source: Washington Student Experience Survey 2025 Findings Report: wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2025.BasicNeedsReport.pdf

The gaps in covering these critical non-tuition costs, such as housing and food, are pervasive among Washington students in both two-year and four-year institutions. Approximately 1 in 2 students reported basic needs insecurity in regions across the state (Fig. 12).

Rates are higher in the 2024 Washington survey data compared to 2022 rates (Fig. 11). Struggles with housing and food stability were common among respondents in 2024: 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 2022 and 2024 surveys, food insecurity was reported at a 14 percent higher rate (5 percentage points higher).

Figure 12. High percentages of surveyed students reported basic needs insecurity in all regions



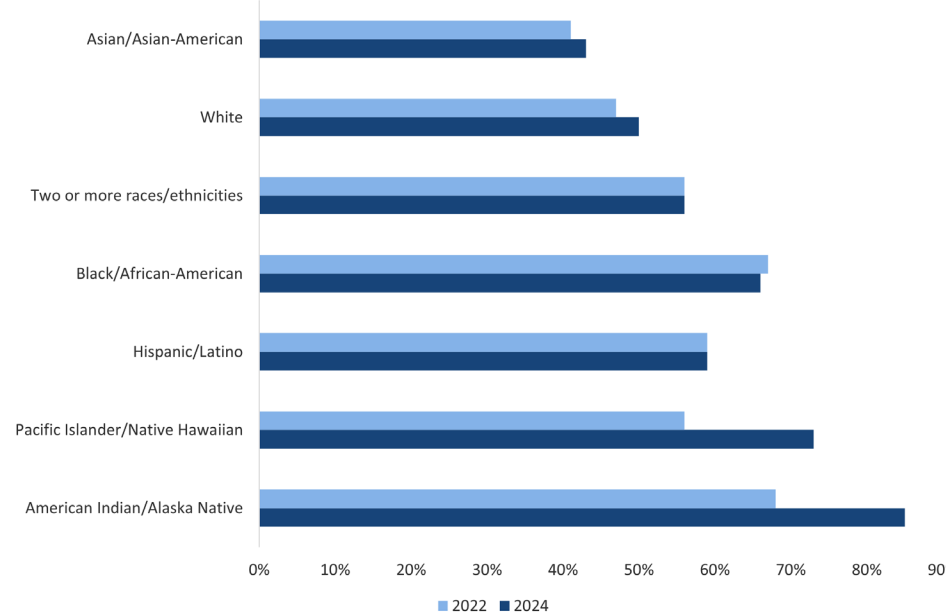
Source: Washington Student Experience Survey 2025 Findings Report: wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2025.BasicNeedsReport.pdf

Basic needs insecurity impacts some Washington student populations more than others. Insecurity rates were disproportionately high among some race and ethnicity groups (Fig. 13). American Indian/Alaska Native and Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian students were most severely impacted and reported even higher rates in 2024 compared to 2022.

Despite a strong financial aid grant program in Washington, there is often a gap for students from low-income families between the amount of aid they receive and the costs of their basic needs.

Basic Needs

Figure 13. Basic needs insecurity is disproportionately high among some race and ethnicity groups



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

Of all student 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).

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 regions. Rates of students unable to afford needed childcare were above 70 percent in seven out of nine regions across the state.

Access to needed healthcare was also worse compared to 2022. 46 percent of respondents indicated that they had inadequate access to needed healthcare (compared to 40 percent in 2022). 50 percent of students reported that they had inadequate access to needed mental/behavioral healthcare (compared to 38 percent in 2022).

A critical survey insight is that there have been some improvements in access to resources for students reporting basic needs insecurity. 53 percent accessed public resources (compared to 49 percent in 2022) and 41 percent accessed campus resources (compared to 34 percent in 2022). This possibly points to increased awareness and access to resources. There is much room for growth in navigation, removing restrictions for students to access resources, and filling gaps where resources are non-existent or insufficient.

Policy Landscape

Access to basic needs can be provided through a variety of sources: financial aid programs, existing federal or state public benefits, local resources such as community-based organizations (ex. food banks, utility assistance funds, shelters), and postsecondary institutions' resources.

Washington's financial aid programs may cover costs beyond tuition and fees.

- » The federal definition of "cost of attendance" includes tuition, fees, and other expenses such as housing, food, and other categories. If a student receives more total financial aid across all sources than the cost of tuition, these additional funds may be applied to help support the cost of housing, food, and other needs.

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.
- » The federal FAFSA Simplification Act modified how emergency funds are treated. Emergency funds no longer count towards a student’s cost of attendance provided the college documents that the emergency funds were for unexpected expenses. This enables all students to access emergency funds, where available, without jeopardizing their other financial aid awards.

Some Washington students may be eligible for federal or state public assistance programs to address food, housing, childcare, and other needs.

- » The state administers and builds off federal programs to provide programming and support to some income-eligible students to help with housing, food, and other emergency funds.
- » State childcare subsidies have become increasingly more accessible for full-time students in two-year institutions and apprenticeship programs, regardless of immigration status. However, students in bachelor’s or graduate programs are limited in accessing childcare subsidies.
- » The state has encouraged partnerships with community providers to expand access to food for students.

Passport to Careers addresses the needs of students who experienced foster care or unaccompanied homelessness in high school.

- » Established in 2008 and expanded in 2018, Passport includes scholarships to eligible students, grants to campuses providing support, and additional emergency funds to address students’ unanticipated needs. It is a nationally recognized state program that serves students with the highest prevalence of basic needs insecurity.
- » As the number of Passport-eligible students has risen in Washington, the amount of the scholarship and support funds has dropped sharply in fiscal years 2024 and 2025.

Three out of four parenting students report being unable to afford needed childcare

Building on policy and investments in prior years, broad statewide policies to increase support for basic needs were enacted in 2023.

- » **Access to resources:** Public and tribal institutions now provide a campus navigator to support students’ access to basic needs resources and increase coordination of community and campus support. WSAC, State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, and community-based partners provide a navigator training network to support staff and align data collection efforts.
- » **Housing:** Policy and investment made permanent the [Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness \(SSEH\)](#) grant for all public universities and community and technical colleges (CTCs). SSEH provides wrap-around services to address the needs of students experiencing homelessness or who aged out of foster care. A 2024 proviso also funds a study of housing opportunities for students with low incomes attending CTCs. Legislation in 2025 included Washington’s accredited tribal college in SSEH.
- » **Planning and assessment:** Public institutions are required to develop and report on basic needs-focused strategic plans. They also collaborate with WSAC on surveying students to better understand the prevalence of basic needs insecurity and students’ access to resources.

Washington continues to support pilot learning and sector-based strategies:

- » **Food security:** A small [Postsecondary Food Security pilot](#) is testing preventative approaches in two public universities and four community and technical colleges with free and reduced-price meals.
- » **Targeted outreach to connect students with benefits:** WSAC leads a [pilot testing targeted outreach strategies](#) with 15 institutions, focused on students who are likely income-eligible but not currently receiving benefits.

Basic Needs

- » **Workforce programs pilots:** [E2SSB 5600](#) establishes grants for wrap-around support services for state-registered apprenticeship program participants. In addition, WSAC is testing proactive basic needs support in the Behavioral Health Apprenticeships Stipend pilot, the Substance Use Disorder Professionals Block Grant, and the Native American Apprenticeship Assistance Program.
- » **Emergency assistance:** 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.
- » **Healthcare:** The state has supported a [pilot grant program to address mental healthcare access](#) at four community and technical colleges, with completion in fiscal year 2025. A two-year study of student health care and insurance access and a two-year [pilot for health insurance navigation](#) were completed in 2024. The state also provided a [grant program](#) to public institutions to increase access to contraception and overdose prevention supplies on campuses in fiscal years 2024 and 2025.

50 percent of students reported that they had inadequate access to needed mental/behavioral healthcare

In addition to state-level action, 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 food pantries or partnerships with local food banks.
- » Innovative partnerships between local housing authorities, private property businesses, and institutions.
- » Case management and integrated teams providing navigation and wrap-around supports for basic needs and mental/behavioral health.
- » Childcare centers on some campuses provide early education and childcare for enrolled students.
- » Health and mental or behavioral care services may be available at various levels and capacities.

Guiding Questions: Basic Needs

- » How can we ensure that all postsecondary students have access to **emergency support** to address urgent basic needs that emerge for students?
- » How might Washington create **proactive systems** to prevent basic needs insecurity for postsecondary students?
 - Considering the gaps in funding for non-academic costs, how might **proactive and flexible funding** support increased persistence and completion for vulnerable student populations?
 - How can equitable access to needed **mental healthcare** be ensured for all students?
 - How can Washington support state and regional partnerships to increase **affordable housing** for students?
 - What opportunities exist to develop preventative and sustainable systems to address high levels of **food insecurity**?
 - How can available and affordable **childcare** be ensured for parenting students?

Completion

Completion

Reaching our goal of dramatically expanding the postsecondary education level of Washington residents requires both higher enrollment and increased completions. While not the only measure, successful completion of a postsecondary program is a widely accepted indicator of student success. Completing a program is necessary to earn a credential that can help students achieve their life and career goals.

Currently, Washington's overall completion rate is 68 percent at public four-year institutions. It is 36 percent at public two-year institutions. For a bachelor's degree, this is measured over a six-year period beginning at first enrollment. For an associate degree, the period is three years from enrollment.

For all students to achieve success in their college and career endeavors, we must advocate for the necessary resources to support and understand their experiences and identities. These include adult learners, English language learners, proximity to institution, race, age, and gender. Focusing on learners furthest from educational attainment is necessary to ensure all of Washington's diverse learners are supported toward completion.

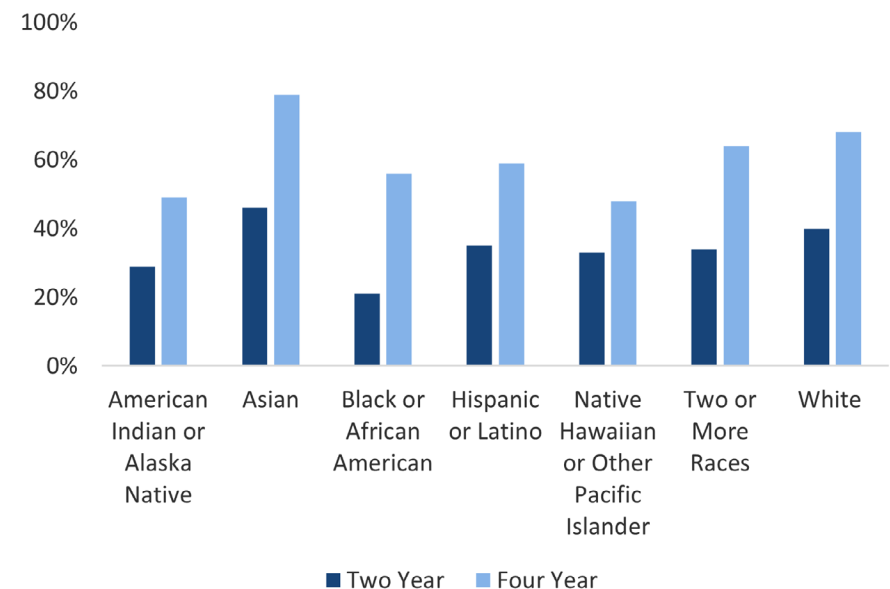
Postsecondary students should persist and earn a credential.

- » Higher education should guide and support student academic pathways through higher education into the workforce no matter where or when a student enters a pathway.
- » Credential completion is not always linear. Noncredit coursework is a critical component for some students and can be a building block toward a credential.
- » If Washington provides the necessary resources and establishes a supportive learning environment, then all students who want to, can, and should be able to succeed at earning a credential.
- » The time it takes students to complete a credential may vary. This depends on their academic or career interests (short-term credential vs. doctoral degree) and enrollment (part- or full-time).

Inequities exist in graduation rates in our state, especially by race and ethnicity.

Significant disparities in postsecondary education rates across different racial and ethnic groups in Washington indicate that some groups are facing substantial systemic challenges that are affecting 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, 150% of normal time, 2022-23. Retrieved 3/18/2025.

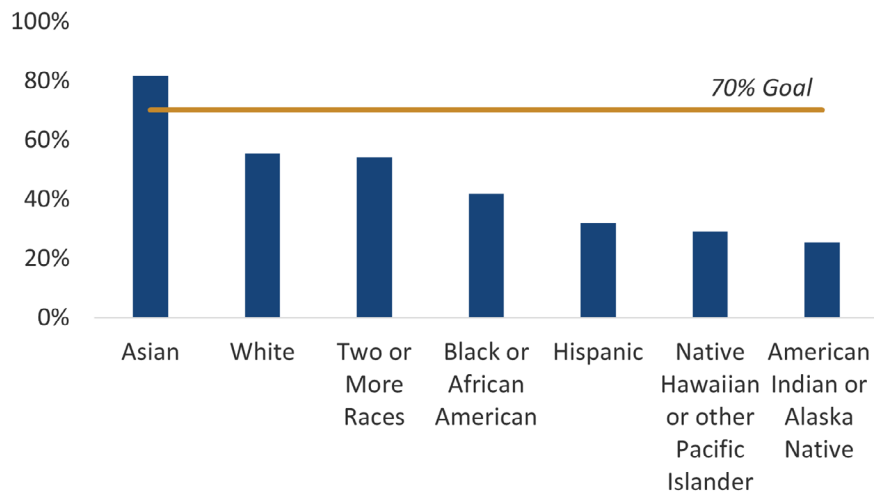
Successful completion of a postsecondary program is an indicator of student success.

Completion

Inequities exist in graduation rates in our state, especially by race and ethnicity.

The percentage of Washington residents with postsecondary credentials shows distinct gaps across racial groups and in relation to our state's 70 percent attainment goal (Fig. 15). Washington's effort to increase completion rates should be particularly focused on supporting students of color. This is especially true for Black, Indigenous, and Latino students, who have been historically and institutionally marginalized within education.

Figure 15. Proportion of Washington Residents Ages 25–44 with Postsecondary Credentials by Race/Ethnicity



Source: WSAC staff analysis of ACS 1-Year PUMS Data, 2023. Retrieved 3/18/2025.

Washington is committed to improving outcomes for students from historically marginalized communities through diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

- » State law directs public higher education institutions to provide professional development for faculty and staff with the purpose of eliminating structural racism against all races and promoting DEI. It requires campus climate assessments, including listening and feedback sessions. It also provides programs on DEI and antiracism for students.

Washington has made significant investments to support the implementation of Guided Pathways at community and technical colleges.

- » [Guided Pathways](#) can be an effective approach to increasing persistence and completion for students from low-income families.
- » Washington's implementation of the Guided Pathways model includes an intentional focus on closing racial equity gaps.
- » 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.

Washington students are mobile and move among institutions while pursuing a postsecondary credential.

- » Colleges have statewide agreements that give students flexibility to transfer between sectors. This is reinforced through longstanding 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 aligned to four-year degree programs at bachelor's-granting institutions.
- » Washington regulates institutional transcript withholding practices, protecting student access to transcripts. Institutions must release transcripts for students transferring to another higher education institution, job applications, financial aid, military opportunities, or other postsecondary opportunities.

Completion

Washington has opportunities to recognize and validate learning from workplaces, colleges and universities, and more.

- » Institutions of higher education have policies to determine how students may receive academic credit for prior learning (ACPL). Students can request that institutions consider their prior learning from the military, industry training, or other training areas.

Higher education should guide and support student pathways from postsecondary education into the workforce.

The state investment in public colleges and universities supports student persistence and completion.

- » The amount of state subsidy directly affects the degree to which advising and academic support is available to students.
- » Colleges and universities provide a wide range of programs and initiatives to support students in completing their programs and earning credentials.

Washington's funding model for the community and technical colleges has some connection to student completion.

- » The state has an allocation formula that includes a factor measuring student performance at two-year institutions. The [funding model](#) acknowledges the achievement gaps of historically underserved students and provides a focus on these populations.

Guiding Questions: Completion

- » How can the state support the needs of increasingly mobile students regarding credit mobility, inclusive of 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 and develop more robust pathways for trade and apprenticeship completion?

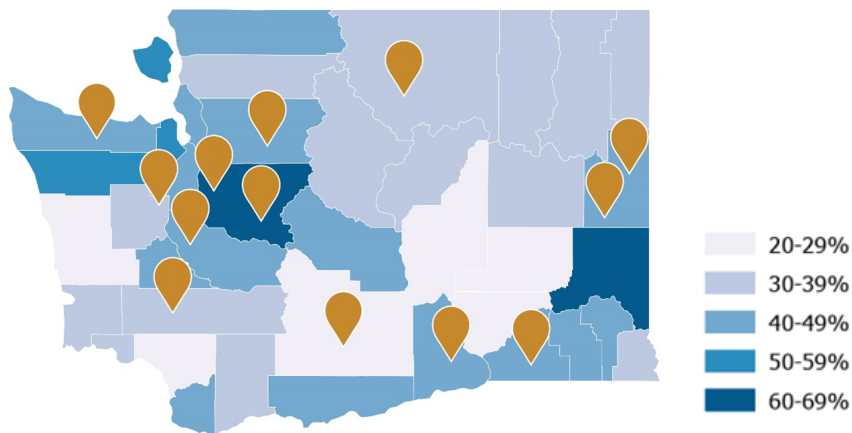
Regional Partnerships

Regional Partnerships

WSAC’s plan to achieve the 70 percent statewide attainment goal relies on community solutions. The Regional Challenge Grant (RCG) is a key mechanism in WSAC’s broader Regional Partnership (RP) approach to invest in partnerships that identify strategies to drive change to targeted populations in their local communities. RP elevates place-based approaches as a meaningful strategy for creating an educational system that works to help all learners succeed. The approaches funded by RP are built for and by local partnership networks because those closest to and most impacted by inequitable systems are best positioned to identify and implement what will prove effective in their communities.

The cohort of 13 regional partnerships covers a wide geographic range of 18 counties. This includes rural, suburban, and urban areas on the East and West sides of the dividing Cascade Mountain Range (Fig. 16). Regional communities self-identify the geographic boundaries where their focal population resides, reflective of a variety of populations across age ranges and college and career pathways.

Figure 16. Regional Challenge Grant Partnerships as of April 2025, Overlaid on Percentage of Residents With At Least an Associate Degree, by County



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, “American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates: Comparison Profiles 5-Year,” 2022, api.census.gov/data/2022/acs/acs5, accessed on January 2, 2025.

Our breadth in Regional Partnerships is across the state from Forks to Spokane and includes a wide range of populations such as serving early learning families in Chehalis to adult learners with previous credit for prior learning in Everett. Interventions span across supporting culturally responsive mentoring with mentors in Seattle Public Schools to recruiting necessary partnership voices in Benton City that serve migrant learners and families.

The strongest asset of this work is what we recognize: that increasing the postsecondary attainment goal is not about any one single intervention but is about building a regional culture that values educational opportunities for all.

When We Innovate, There’s Reason for Hope

Although only passed by the Legislature in 2022, by 2025 we are already seeing hope for continued progress as a result of the innovative work at the program and community level through the Regional Partnerships approach. Included are two example partnerships that exemplify what this looks like in practice, in one rural and one metropolitan community setting.

Yakima Valley Partners for Education

Mabton School District accelerates FAFSA filings

Through trusted community surveying, the Yakima Valley Partners for Education (YVPE) identified that students are interested in pursuing college and career pathways but are unsure of ‘how’ to get there. Their work resides in the lower Yakima Valley, a rural community in central Washington known for its rich agriculture.

This is a direct reflection of a student population that is nearly 80 percent Hispanic, with many students who would be the first in their family to attend college. Their families are supportive of their ambitious post-high school desires and want to help them get there.

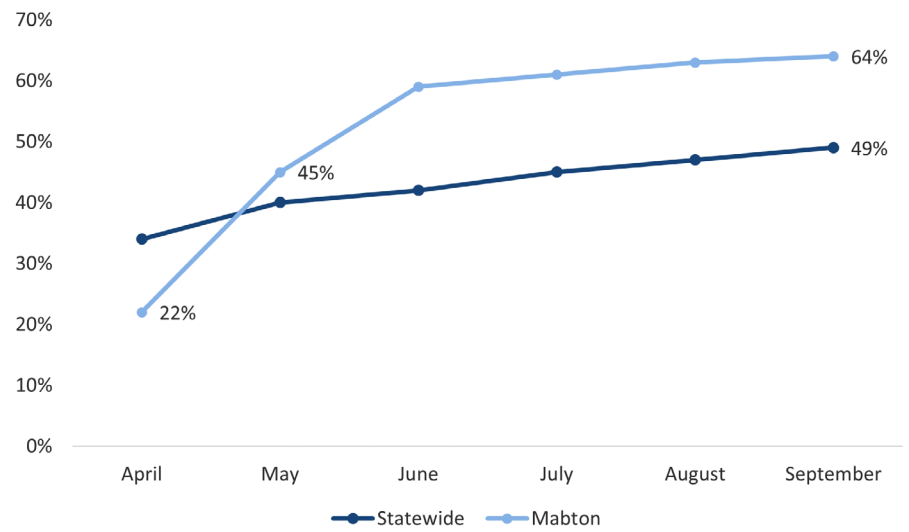
Regional Partnerships

YVPE partner organizations understand that the intersection of rurality and demographics necessarily shapes how the partnership approaches financial aid support. Rather than focus their attention solely on financial aid completion nights, the partner organizations connect families with tax preparers first before they file an aid application.

Mabton School District—one of the districts partnering with YVPE—managed to quickly accelerate FAFSA filing in Spring 2024, going from 22 percent in April to 45 percent in May.

By September, the 64 percent filing rate in Mabton well exceeded the state rate of 49 percent (Fig. 17).

Figure 17. Comparing Mabton FAFSA Filing Rates to Statewide Rates Over Time (2024 Cycle)



Source: wsac.wa.gov/fafsa-completion

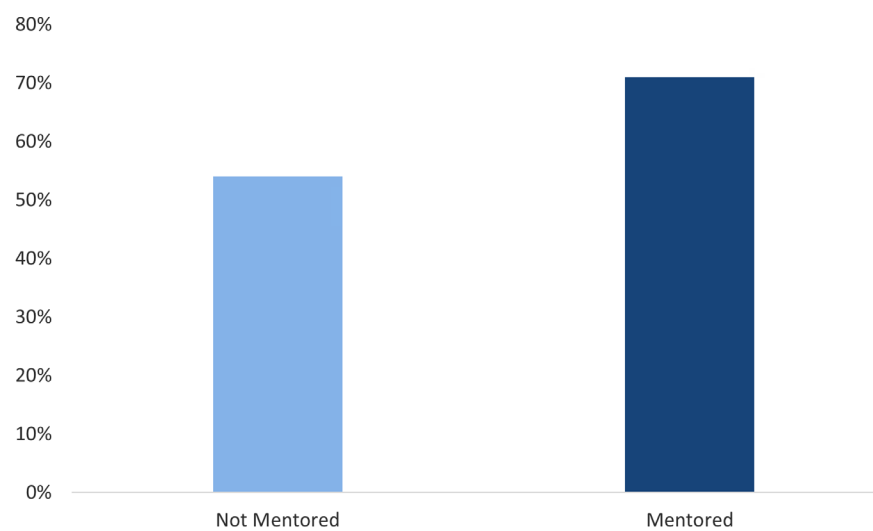
Postsecondary Student Success Network

Increasing BIPOC student retention in Seattle

In Seattle, many neighborhoods and schools still reflect the consequences of unjust housing policies like redlining. In the Central District and parts of South Seattle in particular, neighborhoods have experienced historical underinvestment or ongoing disinvestment. At the same time, the city has many strong community networks, nonprofits, and programs, like Seattle Promise, which focus on increasing educational equity and access.

The Postsecondary Student Success Network (PSSN), led by the City of Seattle’s Department of Education and Early Learning, takes a responsive approach. It focuses on these neighborhoods and coordinates the delivery of career exploration and college-going resources to better serve Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students.

Figure 18. Fall-to-Fall Retention Rates for First-Year BIPOC Seattle Promise Students in the Seattle Colleges, by Mentorship Status



Source: Partnership data submitted to WSAC for annual reporting

Regional Partnerships

Preliminary data shows a higher rate of fall-to-fall retention—71 percent vs. 54 percent—for BIPOC Seattle Promise Scholars who receive mentorship than for those who do not (Fig. 18). Based on this promising outcome, the partnership is seeking to expand these mentorship opportunities for students.

These two examples demonstrate the scope of intentional strategies within the Regional Challenge Grant portfolio that are created as a result of community trust. Each regional partnership exists in a robust community reflected in the chosen place-based strategies to increase local postsecondary attainment. You can see summaries of all 13 partnerships in our [2024 Legislative Report](#) on program implementation. You can also see early impact and outcomes from our first cohort of eight partnerships at our brief, [What We Know: Regional Challenge Grants](#).

Vision for Shifts in Postsecondary Culture

Our process provides disciplined investment and scaling. As we observe early outcomes proving the necessity of this work, we also see the hard work ahead for what it takes to shift implicit mental models in regional communities that lift barriers for students who have been historically excluded from postsecondary pathways.

Each RCG partnership is awarded a two-year grant in alignment with the state biennium. This allows WSAC to continuously evaluate the progress of work. As each partnership grows, we anticipate a 10-year timeline for partnerships to move into implementation phases that create noticeable shifts in regional culture alongside increased postsecondary attainment.

The vision of Regional Partnerships (RP) is beyond just an investment strategy. Our Theory of Change is that we anticipate increased postsecondary attainment because of grant funding and that WSAC will learn alongside partnerships in this process from effective strategies that inform statewide policy change.

RP's Theory of Change

A regional culture that values educational opportunities for all residents will improve educational attainment more than any one program or intervention. WSAC believes that the work of cross-sector, community-based collaborations can nurture this culture alongside local populations, and the combination of local work and state dollars offers regional partnerships the capacity to do exactly this. In contrast to state-level officials, local community members can shape student outcomes from a position of deep community knowledge, trust, and needs.

Furthermore, a regional partnership's learning becomes statewide learning that can ignite the creation of state policies that close institutional gaps in educational access and outcomes.

Regional Partnerships

Work Plan

- » After the reapplication evaluation, execute new two-year grant agreements for the first cohort of eight partnerships. This will total more than four years of sustained work.
- » Continue to steward a Learning Community to engage in peer-to-peer learning across partnerships to de-silo learning from community-centered work.
- » Integrate strategies from a \$1.5 million Ballmer Group investment. This funding provides support for partnerships ready to scale, technical data assistance for rural partnerships, and a focus on strategies associated with completion, persistence, and retention.
- » Continue to implement an investment strategy relative to revenue from state funding. The 2025-27 Biennial Budget removed all funding to RCG. Our strategic vision follows our values to move systems change in Washington state. We will prioritize sustaining existing investments and will not open a Request for Letters of Interest.
- » Steward the reapplication process for the second cohort of five partnerships in 2026 for a two-year grant award.

Each regional partnership exists in a robust community reflected in the chosen place-based strategies to increase local postsecondary attainment.

Guiding Questions: Regional Partnerships

- » Our state offers a wide range of regional experiences from the mountains of the Olympic Peninsula, to the dense and metropolitan Seattle, to the farmlands of the Blue Mountains. **How can we build postsecondary pathways that are responsive to the unique needs and assets of specific geographic regions?**
- » Our hypothesis is that communities are best equipped to understand place-based interventions, as opposed to policy-level officials at the state level. **What would it look like to build more policies and programs that center community-level education leaders as the experts to drive change?**
- » Systems-change refers to policies or strategies that target the root cause instead of any standalone issue. **How can we reflect lessons learned from Regional Partnerships to remove systems-level barriers that impede educational access and outcomes within policy development?**

Equity

Policy and Practice Development

- » Embed an equity lens across all clusters and strategic planning efforts.
- » Engage state, community, and regional BIPOC leaders in Council meetings and agency work.

Knowledge Development

- » Conduct a thorough analysis of disparities in access and success within higher education. Identify existing programs and initiatives that address discriminatory practices and promote equitable outcomes in alignment with the directives of Executive Order 22-02.

Affordability

Policy Development

- » Explore the ability to define a standard(s) for affordability based on total cost of attendance across household income levels that recognizes the effects of state subsidy, tuition policy, and financial aid.

Knowledge Development

- » Evaluate the effectiveness of the Washington College Grant in improving postsecondary educational outcomes for Washington students.
- » Visualize the affordability of postsecondary education based on family income with stakeholders utilizing the [Affordability Model](#) tool.
- » Develop a comprehensive understanding of the anticipated decline in state financial aid and its implications for college affordability in Washington state.
- » Examine the influence of recent and future federal policy changes on higher education funding and their broader impact on educational equity and economic opportunity for Washington State residents.

Enrollment

Policy Development

- » Continue to identify state strategies to increase postsecondary enrollment, career development, and advancement opportunities:
 - Improve readiness to continue in education and training, including:
 - Explore strategies to provide intentional advising to high school students and school districts. This includes sequencing of courses around dual credit opportunities and dual enrollment programs.
 - Build accessible pathways to industry-recognized credentials, trade schools, apprenticeships, college, and university.
 - Regionalize and leverage AI to fill information gaps related to financial aid and postsecondary access. Enhance advisors' and counsellors' capacity to support high school and adult students and families.
 - Improve access to work-based learning for high schoolers and adults.
- » Work with employer associations to support adult enrollment to help meet their hiring and upskilling needs and increase adult enrollment rates.

Knowledge Development

- » Analyze the relationship between school-to-work pathways and labor market outcomes to inform future policy priorities.
- » Customize OtterBot to serve regionally and report learnings from those efforts.
- » Continue to update and improve OtterBot messaging based on advancements informed by behavioral science.
- » Evaluate college access initiatives and adult pathways programs to increase effectiveness.
- » Monitor and report fall enrollment trends. Track the changing landscape at the state- and federal-levels.

Related Practice Work with Partners and Stakeholders

- » Expand efforts to proactively engage with schools, community organizations, students, families, institutions, and other stakeholders on FAFSA/WASFA filing. Begin efforts in the spring of 2025.
- » Share consistent financial aid information with priority populations. This includes Black, Indigenous, Latino, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students, students from low-income families, students from mixed-status families, and all marginalized groups.

Postsecondary education is a proven pathway for upward mobility and can support Washingtonians' life goals.

- » Leverage OtterBot to connect with trusted messengers in regional communities. Provide relevant, customized, and timely information around college-going and financial aid applications and programs.
- » Phase the implementation of notifying 10th, 11th, and 12th graders who qualify for the Basic Food Program or Food Assistance Program for the Washington College Grant. Develop a behavioral science informed messaging strategy to reach target audiences.
- » Implement the Washington State GEAR UP (WAGU) federal grant, focusing on capacity-building in thirteen school districts from high-poverty, rural regions. These span four counties: Chelan, Okanogan, Grays Harbor, and Lewis. WAGU schools provide early intervention services, including career and college readiness programs and a comprehensive counseling and advising curriculum from 7th grade through the first year of postsecondary education.
- » Utilize the State Work Study program to pilot at a partner site where students are employed to support high school students enroll in postsecondary.

Basic Needs

Policy Development

- » Explore policy strategies to better support the basic needs of students in workforce training programs.
- » Pursue policy and investments to ensure access and support for students who experienced homelessness or foster care in high school.
- » Pursue policy to ensure that all students have access to flexible resources to address or prevent basic needs insecurity emergencies.
- » Explore policy strategies supporting low-cost housing to address the needs of students experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness.

Knowledge Development

- » Develop a sustainable strategy for survey data on the statewide basic needs insecurity prevalence at institutional, regional, and state levels.
- » Engage with national and state partners to develop a research plan in relation to the Washington Postsecondary Food Security pilot. Seek to understand the impact of food security strategies, including proactive approaches, on persistence and attainment.
- » Collaborate with partners to develop a brief on the WSAC targeted outreach pilot to connect students with benefits and resources.
- » Develop a brief highlighting insights from WSAC workforce pilot programs regarding proactive, flexible funding to address basic needs.

Related Practice Work with Partners and Stakeholders

- » Based on insights from data sharing with the Washington Department of Social and Health Services, develop a partnership with an additional state agency to provide targeted outreach and support for students who are likely eligible for public benefits.
- » Support regional partnership development for affordable housing for students experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness.

- » Develop a plan with partners to better understand and address the needs of parenting students. Include access to basic needs, such as affordable childcare across different regions.
- » Develop a plan to provide basic needs navigation for working and adult learners.

Completion

Policy Development

- » Foster consensus on key components of student success that encompasses both academic and career pathways. Consider the diverse needs and backgrounds of all learners.
- » Advocate for the necessary resources to support all students in achieving success in their career endeavors, inclusive of colleges and universities, on-the-job learning, trades, and apprenticeships.
- » Evaluate the landscape of non-degree credentials, with a particular focus on those offered by colleges and universities. Determine how these credentials can contribute to student completion and career advancement.
- » Identify strategies for successfully completing adults with some or no prior postsecondary credits. This includes adults in need of a high school credential, English language learners, and re-entering justice-involved individuals.
- » In partnership with industry sectors, identify strategies to maximize the application of prior learning assessment towards a certificate, degree, or industry-required credential for incumbent workers.
- » Develop analysis regarding apprenticeship completion and related factors for student success.

For all students to achieve success, we must advocate for the necessary resources to support and understand their experiences and identities.

Knowledge Development

- » Investigate differences in pathways young people take from high school to postsecondary education and work. Aim to understand the extent these pathways may explain inequities in degree attainment and earnings.
- » Engage in nationwide endeavors focused on skills-based hiring to gain deeper insights into the most effective approaches for nurturing workforce talent. These approaches will better expand and support the routes and decisions learners make regarding credentials of value.

Related Practice Work with Partners and Stakeholders

- » Collaborative Learning and Sharing:
 - Provide opportunities for institutions to actively engage in knowledge sharing and collaborative learning with one another. This exchange should focus on strategies that increase persistence, retention, and completion rates. It should also narrow equity gaps.
 - Participate in Complete College Accelerator cohort. This collaboration will provide opportunities to learn from successful models implemented by other institutions, driving innovative practices and enhancing student outcomes.
 - Facilitate a learning-centered Community of Practice centering adult learners with statewide partners.
 - Participate in Education Strategy Group's EdValue Collaborative with state partners. This collaboration will build a foundation of knowledge and begin developing a statewide strategy to define credentials of value and return on investment.
 - Participate in SHEEO and Student Ready Strategies' Constellation of Support: A Capacity-Building Approach to Institutional Change. This is a partnership with at least eight Washington institutions focused on scaling academic credit for prior learning.

- Engage in the National Governor’s Association (NGA)’s Data and Non-Degree Credentials Learning Community, exploring how our state can maximize state data systems to evaluate the quality of non-degree credential programs.
- Convene statewide partners for ongoing learning and strategy development for key populations of students. This includes adult learners and students who are undocumented or are from mixed-status families, as well as minority-serving institutions.
- Increase awareness of apprenticeship and trades opportunities across the spectrum of high-need industries and in all regions of the state.

Significant disparities in postsecondary education rates across different racial and ethnic groups in Washington indicate that some groups are facing substantial systemic challenges.

- » Student Mobility Support:
 - Develop strategies that facilitate the seamless transfer and mobility of students across different institutions, pathways, and learning experiences within the state of Washington.
 - Participate in the Universal Transfer Explorer Project with ITHAKA S+R. This is a credit mobility initiative that encourages transparency for students and institutions regarding credit transfer.
 - Facilitate collaboration across workgroups and partners involved in skills-based hiring. This will enable the transition from noncredit workforce credentials to credit-bearing pathways. Additionally, devise a strategy to utilize Learning and Employment Records (LERs) as a valuable resource in crafting a comprehensive statewide framework for ACPL.

Council Focus Areas

- » Continue to develop and nurture Regional Challenge Grant participants. Create innovative programs in various regions of the state that could potentially yield new strategies in helping Washington achieve its 70 percent attainment goal.
- » Develop comprehensive policy proposals to increase enrollment in valuable student pathways and programs for both high school graduates and adult learners, and to support students in attaining these in-demand credentials.
- » Define and then track all postsecondary credential attainment across all public and private job sectors.
- » Create a comprehensive communication strategy regarding the future value of attaining a postsecondary credential in a rapidly changing job market and demystify the process in attaining those credentials.
- » Support various partners, through the summer and beyond, to address ongoing challenges with the new FAFSA launch and help WA students pursue financial aid to enroll in postsecondary education.