



Why enrollment rates hold more hope than alarm

WSAC Research Digest #2: Enrollment



*This is the second of the series of **WSAC Research Digests** that highlight interesting data insights and takeaways from WSAC's new [Strategic Action Plan \(SAP\) Dashboard](#). The goal of the series is to communicate and interpret data in a brief and informal manner to surface important education issues in the state. You can also [view it online](#).*

It's no secret that postsecondary enrollment has declined since the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, there were about 80,000 fewer undergraduate students enrolled in Washington in 2021-2022 than there were before the start of the pandemic, amounting to a 17 percent drop in enrollment. But the [SAP Dashboard](#) also calls out one of the state's bright spots: **pandemic enrollment declines were tempered for students who received need-based financial aid.**

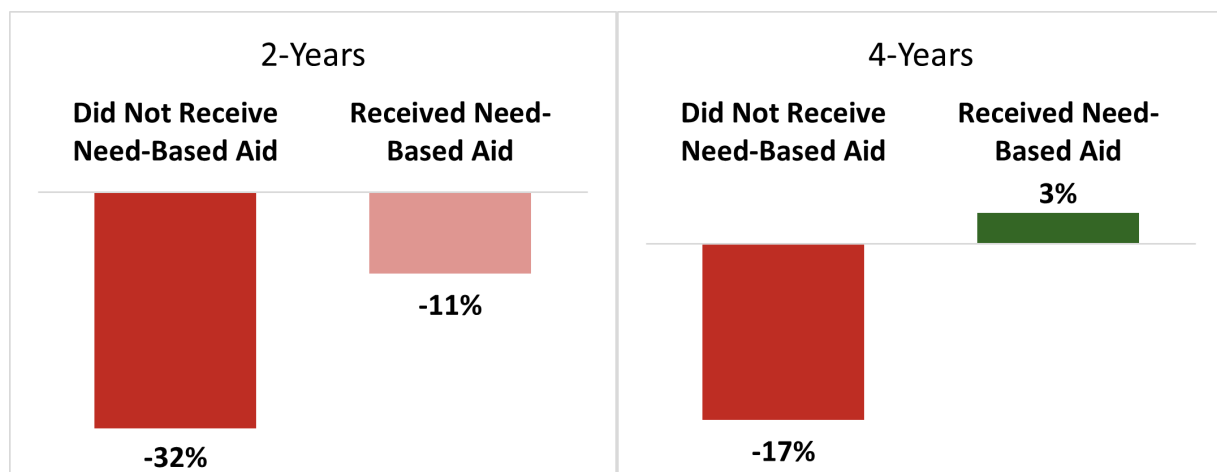
Let's compare enrollment for undergraduate, degree-seeking students at public institutions in fall 2019 with enrollment in fall 2022, grouped by whether or not they received need-based financial aid. (Note that the definition of need-based aid recipients varies slightly for 2-year and 4-year institutions.)

Enrollment for students at 2-years who received need-based aid dropped by 11 percent over the three-year pandemic period, compared to a 32 percent drop for students who did not receive need-based aid. At 4-years, enrollment for need-based aid recipients actually increased by 3 percent over the three-year period, compared to a 17 percent drop in enrollment for students who did not receive need-based aid. **This seems to suggest that financial aid was a boon for students during the pandemic enrollment slump.**

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Importantly, there was also a shift in the state’s financial aid policy at the onset of the pandemic that likely contributed to these trends. In the 2020-21 academic year, Washington implemented the Washington College Grant (formerly the State Need Grant) that expanded eligibility for the largest need-based state financial aid program to more students. The eligibility expansion might have helped to offset the negative enrollment impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by increasing the number of students who had access to aid.

A closer look at the year-over-year changes at 2-year institutions shows some volatility—an enrollment dip in fall 2021 and then a subsequent rebound in fall 2022 for need-based aid recipients. Sources from SBCTC tell us that this is likely a combination of pandemic disruptions, Washington College Grant expansion, and the rollout of a new data system that shifted the method of defining “economically disadvantaged” status.

The takeaway: a greater proportion of students enrolled at public institutions in Washington are receiving need-based aid than before the pandemic. This is likely because of expanded eligibility for the Washington College Grant, a critical resource for postsecondary education in our state. As the state continues to recover from pandemic-induced enrollment decline, the Washington College Grant and other aid programs can help boost enrollment and support students along their education journey.

Start exploring: <https://wsac.wa.gov/sap-dashboard>

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