



The pandemic's impact on credential attainment

WSAC Research Digest #4: Completion



*This is the fourth 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](#).*

A lot of policy and program efforts in higher education are centered on access and enrollment. But students have to complete their programs and reach graduation in order to earn the credentials that offer the best benefits of higher education. A huge array of academic, financial, and personal factors can influence completion outcomes, as evidenced by the sizable proportion of students who, as of 2022, had not graduated within 3 years at CTCs or 6 years at 4-year institutions.

Overall, the graduation rate for full-time, degree-seeking students in Washington was about 57 percent in 2022. This rate has remained steady for the past few years and is only slightly higher than the rate a decade ago. This means that for more than 40 percent of Washington's college students, it either takes them more than 150 percent of the "normal" time to graduate (which is expensive and time-consuming) or they are not graduating at all.

There are also significant disparities in completion outcomes. For instance, the graduation rate was under 50 percent for American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Black, and Hispanic students in 2022.

Alongside the state's declining enrollment numbers, the stagnant graduation rate has meant that there has been a drop in the total number of credentials conferred in recent years. Before the pandemic, there were about 106,000 degrees or certificates conferred each year. **In the most recent year, there were about 95,000 degrees or certificates conferred to students in Washington—a roughly 10 percent decline from before the pandemic, or about 10,000 fewer degrees or certificates.**



WSAC Research Digest #4: Completion

This has a direct impact on postsecondary attainment in the state, limiting the wages and economic mobility of Washington residents and forcing employers to look out of state to fill job openings that increasingly require a skilled labor market.

Boosting the state’s postsecondary credential attainment rate will require the conferral of more degrees, which will take collaborative and concerted effort from institutions, the state, and community partners.

Of course, institutions play a central role in providing programs and implementing initiatives to boost completion on their campuses. But there is also a role for the state to play, and WSAC is engaged in several efforts to support completion outcomes for postsecondary students in Washington. For example, WSAC and SBCTC were recently awarded a [grant](#) to explore implementation of the Accelerated Student in Associate Programs (ASAP) program in Washington. The comprehensive program model combines supports like advising and tutoring with financial aid for expenses beyond tuition. The ASAP model has been rigorously [studied](#) and proven to double graduation rates.

WSAC has also prioritized completion in its most recent round of [Regional Challenge Grant](#) funding by inviting applications from partnerships that are focusing on work to equitably boost credential completion in their communities. The goal of Regional Challenge Grants is to empower local community members to shape supports from a position of deep community knowledge and trust. Furthermore, a regional partnership’s learning becomes statewide learning that can ignite support for state policies that close gaps in educational access and outcomes. Letters of interest were due in mid-February and selected grantees will be formally announced after Council approval in mid-May.

Boosting the state’s postsecondary credential attainment rate will require the conferral of more degrees, which will take collaborative and concerted effort from institutions, the state, and community partners. Focusing on strategies that not only address enrollment decline, but also support students to persist and reach graduation, is the only way we are going to reach our attainment goals.

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

Emma Lacalli

Associate Director of Research, WSAC
media@wsac.wa.gov