Some College, No Credential

Students Who Leave College Before Graduating Are an Untapped Resource

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Young people face a complex array of options as they transition out of K-12 education, through postsecondary education and training, and into the workforce. The complexity of their choices is exacerbated by the proliferation of options in postsecondary education over the last decade, including certificates, apprenticeships, dual-enrollment programs, and non-credit credentials.[1] To shed light on how students navigate these options, MDRC and the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) partnered on the Sequences to Success in Washington State project. Using longitudinal data from the Washington State Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) on students who graduated public high schools on time in 2017, the team applied sequence analysis to identify 12 pathways students took after graduating, as described in a previously published infographic.[2] This brief shares insights on one pathway where improving students' outcomes could help Washington reach its stated goal of having 70 percent of adults ages 25 to 44 hold a postsecondary credential: the pathway taken by people who enroll in college but stop attending before they earn a credential.[3]

Some College, No Credential Is the Most Traveled Pathway

The Some College, No Credential pathway is the one traveled by students who enrolled in postsecondary education but stopped attending before attaining a credential. About 18,500 of Washington's on-time 2017 high school graduates traveled this pathway, or about 29 percent of the cohort (that is, that graduating class).[4] That makes it the most traveled pathway identified in this analysis. Nearly three-quarters of the students on this pathway enrolled at a community college, while roughly one in four enrolled at a four-year institution. About half enrolled in a postsecondary program in the fall immediately following high school graduation, and another 13 percent earned college credit through a dual-enrollment program in high school but did not continue enrollment in college after graduating high school.[5] The rest enrolled in subsequent terms. Many students on this pathway enrolled for multiple terms, and while those who enrolled in four-year institutions enrolled for only one term on average, those who enrolled at community and technical colleges enrolled for over three terms on average. These terms may represent a substantial investment of time and money.

Washington is not an outlier in the size of its Some College, No Credential population. A 2025 report published by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center found that nationwide, nearly one in five working-age adults under 65 (37.6 million in total) started college but did not earn a credential.[6] These individuals may be missing out on the economic advantages associated with earning a postsecondary credential.

Supporting Students on the Some College, No Credential Pathway Is Central to Washington's Credential-Attainment Goals

Identifying approaches to better support students who enroll in college but do not complete degree programs is an important step toward meeting Washington's goal described above. If all the students on the Some College, No Credential pathway (29 percent of the 2017 graduates, as noted above) went on to complete their programs, then Washington would surpass that 70 percent goal for at least this graduating class.

Moreover, for Washington to reach its overall goal, it will need to increase rates of credential attainment among subgroups of students whom previous research studies have identified as needing additional support.[7] WSAC has identified these populations as critical to the state's progress; they include students who identify as men, students who identify as Hispanic or Latino, students from low-income households (represented as students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches in high school), and students who attended high schools in rural locations. These populations are overrepresented among students on the Some College, No Credential pathway (as shown in Table 1). This overrepresentation is perhaps most noticeable among students from low-income households, who make up half of the graduates in total, yet constitute 60 percent of those on the Some College, No Credential pathway. These groups are historically and presently underrepresented in postsecondary education.[8] Their overrepresentation on the Some College, No Credential pathway suggests that more customized support may be needed to boost the percentage of them who earn credentials.

Table 1. Characteristics of Some College, No Credential Pathway Students Compared with Those of the Full Cohort

Characteristic	Cohort (%)	Some College, No Credential Pathway (%)	Difference (Percentage Points)	Difference (%)
Race/ethnicity				
American Indian or Alaska Native	1.1	1.5	0.4	36.4
Asian	8.3	5.2	-3.1	-37.3
Black or African American	4.3	5.4	1.1	25.6
Hispanic or Latino of any race(s)	18.4	21.9	3.5	19.0
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	0.8	1.1	0.3	37.5
Two or more races	6.5	6.7	0.2	3.1
White	60.7	58.3	-2.4	-4.0
Sex				
Female	50.7	47.5	-3.2	-6.3
Male	49.3	52.5	3.2	6.5
Urban/rural character				
City	34.5	34.7	0.2	0.6
Rural area	12.2	13.4	1.2	9.8
Suburb	40.7	38.4	-2.3	-5.7
Town	12.6	13.5	0.9	7.1
Household income				
Not eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	49.8	39.5	-10.3	-20.7
Eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	50.2	60.5	10.3	20.5
Sample size				18,498

SOURCE: Authors' calculations using Washington state longitudinal data provided by ERDC.

NOTES: Household income is represented by students' eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch while in high school.

Meager Earnings Benefits and Noticeable Gender Gaps

As shown in Table 2, students on the Some College, No Credential pathway who were stably employed during 2023 had median annual earnings of $42,473.[9] This amount is only about $500 more than the earnings of students who did not enroll in postsecondary education at all, and about $300 to $900 less than those of students who earned associate's degrees.[10] Furthermore, the rate of stable employment among students on the Some College, No Credential pathway (50 percent) is similar to the rate among students who did not enroll in college (49 percent) and to that among

students who received college credit while in high school and used it to earn associate's degrees faster (49 percent), but was much lower than those of students on the two other associate's degree pathways, who had employment rates of 58 percent and 57 percent.[11] Even a short time enrolled in college can impart valuable skills, from the actual content of the courses a student took to more abstract knowledge about how to navigate institutions.[12] However, these earnings findings suggest that, on average, the value of an initial foray into postsecondary education among students on the Some College, No Credential pathway might not outweigh the costs. On the other hand, students with some college but no credential in Washington state have median earnings that are not too far off from those of students who earn associate's degrees, though their rates of stable employment are lower.

Table 2. Median Earnings by Subgroup Among Those Stably Employed

Characteristic	Median Earnings ($)
Overall	42,473
Race/ethnicity	
American Indian or Alaska Native	40,480
Asian	43,238
Black or African American	41,509
Hispanic or Latino of any race(s)	42,318
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	42,713
Two or more races	41,596
White	42,697
Sex	
Female	39,191
Male	46,463
Urban/rural character	
City	41,096
Rural area	42,703
Suburb	44,476
Town	40,741
Household income	
Not eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	43,888
Eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	41,710
Sample size	9,338

SOURCE: Authors' calculations using ERDC state longitudinal data.

NOTES: "Stably employed" is defined as being employed in all quarters of 2023 and earning at least $14,000.
Household income is represented by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch in high school.

Among students on the Some College, No Credential pathway, labor market outcomes differed across subgroups. The most prominent pattern relates to differences in earnings between men and women: Working women on the Some College, No Credential Pathway had median earnings of about $39,000 in 2023, whereas working men had median earnings of over $46,000. This pattern holds true to varying degrees across all but one of the 12 pathways identified in the study. In line with what research has previously shown, the labor market outcomes and the analysis of demographic characteristics above show broadly that some structurally disadvantaged groups, such as women, are making advances in postsecondary access and credential attainment, but some of those advances may dissipate in the workforce.[13] Importantly, some of the differences in earnings are probably due to differences in hours worked, program of study, or both.

Policy Implications

Survey findings from the Community College Research Center published in 2025 suggest that students who enroll in college but do not complete credentials step away from college for multiple, interacting reasons.[14] One of the most frequently cited reasons in the study is financial hardship, which was experienced by 45 percent of survey respondents. This finding aligns with those of Washington's 2024 Student Experiences Survey, which found that over half of Washington students surveyed experienced basic-needs insecurity.[15]

Promisingly, most students in the Community College Research Center's survey intended to return to college.[16] This finding implies that, given the right circumstances, some students on the Some College, No Credential pathway might be receptive to targeted and complementary policy interventions that could help them stay enrolled until they completed their degree or certificate programs. Specifically, promising interventions could:

- **Identify opportunities in short certificate programs that lead to well-paying careers:** With their shorter timelines, certificate programs could improve postsecondary and labor market outcomes among historically disadvantaged subgroups of students, as they are relatively affordable and potentially pave the way to well-paid jobs. Furthermore, certificates may be more attainable than degrees for students who are already at a higher risk of stopping enrollment. The research team's analysis of labor market outcomes reveals that, in the short term, earnings among students on certificate pathways are higher than those of students on pathways that only include associate's degrees.[17] That said, the number of students on the certificate pathways is currently quite small, and, while the certificate pathways identified in this study had median earnings that were higher than those among associate's degree pathways, it is not yet known whether these higher earnings will be sustained in the long term.

- **Focus on community and technical colleges:** About three in four students on the Some College, No Credential pathway connected with postsecondary education through a two-year community or technical college (73 percent). As policymakers look to develop additional support for students who stop attending college, focusing on community and technical colleges may have an outsized influence on credential attainment. WSAC and the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges are participating in Holistic Advising for Student Success, a two-year, multistate initiative led by the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association in partnership with MDRC. Through this initiative, Washington joins six other participating states in receiving structured assessment, coaching, and peer learning opportunities designed to help state agencies develop coordinated, evidence-based advising policies and practices across institutions.[18] This group will seek to identify strategies that colleges can employ to more effectively advise students who navigate multiple phases of enrollment.[19]

- **Invest in targeted support for structurally marginalized groups:** Washington's Strategic Plan calls for the postsecondary education system to reflect the demographics of the state.[20] Research suggests that the most effective ways to help students reach their academic and pro-

fessional goals may be to provide them with more support.[21] Programs that support students holistically can serve double duty: assisting students who are already enrolled and signaling to potential students from structurally marginalized backgrounds that postsecondary education is also designed for them. The Re-Enrollment and Completion Team program in Florida is one example of what such an intervention could provide. A recent randomized controlled trial of this program for students who had stopped attending college, most of whom were within 15 credits of an associate's degree, found that combining outreach, dedicated advising, and tuition waivers nearly doubled reenrollment rates, with consistent effects across groups defined by race/ethnicity, gender, age, and grade point average.[22] Leaders in postsecondary education can look to the robust research on comprehensive approaches to student success and student basic needs.[23]

- **Expand opportunities for adult learners (those 25 and older) to earn Academic Credit for Prior Learning (ACPL).** As adult learners navigate employment, they accrue skills and competencies that contribute to their long-term success but are not eligible for college credit through traditional credit-transfer processes.[24] ACPL is a way to formally acknowledge skills acquired outside of traditional education and can help individuals with a mix of school and work experiences earn credentials.[25] Policy changes could make it easier and more affordable for Some College, No Credential learners to receive ACPL. Initiatives such as Constellation of Support (a three-year partnership launched in April 2025 by the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association and Student Ready Strategies) are already underway in Washington. The initiative provides participating state higher education agencies and their institutions with coaching, structured workshops, and access to a technology platform to help redesign policies and processes, specifically to expand ACPL practices.[26] Meanwhile, pilot projects led by WSAC focus on expanding ACPL opportunities for paraeducators who pursue teacher certification and on region-specific outreach to attract individuals for whom earning ACPL is a viable option.[27]

Conclusion

The Sequences to Success in Washington State Project found that a plurality of the state's 2017 high school graduates — nearly one in three — stepped away from their educational goals. Many of these students had spent multiple terms in postsecondary education, yet their earnings six and a half years after graduation are comparable to those of their classmates who entered the workforce immediately after graduating high school. The number of people on the Some College, No Credential pathway in Washington and the number of adults with some college and no credential nationwide both suggest that the barriers to continuing college enrollment are widespread and rooted in the structural tensions of young adulthood. While there are no simple fixes to solve structural problems, the wave of interest and investment in short-term postsecondary programs presents an opportunity for policymakers to bolster short yet substantial credentials that align with well-paid careers.

Notes and References

1. Dual enrollment refers to earning college credit while in high school. Noncredit credentials are ones granted outside of colleges, for example through apprenticeships and industry certifications and licenses.

   For more information on the growth in postsecondary education options, see Education Northwest, "Apprenticeship in the United States: Understanding the Landscape" (website: https://educationnorthwest.org/resources/apprenticeship-united-states-understanding-landscape, 2026); Credential Engine, "Counting Credentials, In Context: 2025 — The Opportunities of Digital Credentials" (Credential Engine, 2025), available at: https://credentialengine.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Counting-Credentials-2025-Report.pdf; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, "Fall Undergraduate Enrollment Shows Overall Growth Despite Decline at Private Colleges," press release (January 15, 2026), https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/news/fall-undergraduate-enrollment-shows-overall-growth-despite-decline-at-private-colleges/; Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, "Understanding Dual Enrollment" (Community College Research Center, 2026), available at: https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/understanding-dual-enrollment-fact-sheet.html.
2. Brit Henderson, Audrey Yu, Xavier Alemañy, and KC Deane, "What School-to-Workforce Pathways Are Washington Students Taking After High School?" (MDRC, 2026), available at: https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Sequences_to_Success_in_WA_State_Infographic.pdf.
3. Washington Student Achievement Council, *2026 Strategic Action Plan: Increasing Postsecondary Educational Attainment and Equity in Washington State* (Washington Student Achievement Council, 2025) available at: https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2026-Strategic.Action.Plan_.pdf.
4. This cohort includes students who entered high school in 2013 and graduated in 2017. It does not include students from other entering years who graduated in 2017 because they took more or fewer than four years to do so.
5. The research team decided to count students with dual-enrollment credits as being on the Some College, No Credential pathway because the same interventions used to help other students who have stopped attending college to reengage and complete credentials (such as targeted outreach, advising, and financial support) are available to students whose only college credit came through dual enrollment.
6. See Jeremy Cohen, Jennifer Causey, Bea Randolph, Matthew Holsapple, and Doug Shapiro, *Some College, No Credential: A 2025 Snapshot for the Nation and the States* (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2025), available at: https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SCNCReport2025.pdf.
7. For examples of previous research that identified these subgroups, see Erika Lundquist, Brit Henderson, Sophia Sutcliffe, Laura Cojocaru, Kasey Eickmeyer, Annabel Utz, Sufiyan Syed, and Audrey Yu, *Improving a Chatbot to Increase Financial Aid Applications: Findings from the Optimizing Texting Technology through Engagement Research with Students (OTTERS) Project* (MDRC, 2025), available at: https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Optimizing_Texting_Text_Report.pdf; and Brit Henderson, Darren Holman, and Emma Lacalli, *Bridge to Finish Outcome Study* (Washington Student Achievement Council, 2023), available at: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED628929.pdf.
8. Richard V. Reeves and Will Secker, "Degrees of Difference: Male College Enrollment and Completion" (website: https://aibm.org/research/male-college-enrollment-and-completion/, 2024); Kiley Hurst, "U.S. Women Are Outpacing Men in College Completion, Including in Every Major Racial and Ethnic Group" (website: https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/11/18/us-women-are-outpacing-men-in-college-completion-including-in-every-major-racial-and-ethnic-group/, 2024); Delma Ramos and Morgan Taylor, "Aligning Demographic Shifts and College Participation: Increasing Latino Degree

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9. The stably employed measure is based on the ERDC definition and indicates that an individual had earnings in all four quarters of 2023 and earned a minimum of $14,000.
10. Among those who were stably employed, median earnings were $41,976 for students who did not enroll in college at all, $42,746 for those who earned associate's degrees, $43,391 for those who earned college credit while in high school and then earned associate's degrees, and $43,183 for those who earned associate's degrees after longer than is considered typical.
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12. Peter Riley Bahr, "The Labor Market Returns to a Community College Education for Non-Completing Students," CAPSEE Working Paper (Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment, 2016), available at: https://capseecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/the-labor-market-returns-to-a-community-college-education-for-non-completing-students.pdf.
13. Mary Alice McCarthy, Lul Tesfai, and Kim Dancy, "Paying More and Getting Less: How Nondegree Credentials Reflect Labor Market Inequality Between Men and Women," New America (website: https://www.newamerica.org/insights/paying-more-and-getting-less/, 2018).
14. Estefanie Aguilar Padilla, Rachel B. Baker, Hana Lahr, and Veronica Minaya, *Why Did They Leave? Learning From the Experiences of Former Community College Students* (Community College Research Center, 2025), available at: https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/why-did-they-leave-experiences-former-community-college-students.pdf.
15. In this survey, "basic needs" referred to food, housing, access to health care, and access to childcare. See Matt Bryant and Ami Magisos, *Reassessing Basic Needs Security Among Washington College Students: Washington Student Experience Survey, Second Administration Findings Report* (Washington Student Achievement Council, 2025), available at: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED673592.pdf.
16. Aguilar Padilla, Baker, Lahr, and Minaya (2025).
17. Henderson, Yu, Alemañy, and Deane (2026).
18. Read more about the initiative at State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, "SHEEO Launches National Initiative to Expand Holistic Advising for Student Success," press release (February 10, 2026), https://sheeo.org/holistic-advising-launched/.
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20. Washington Student Achievement Council (2025).
21. Aguilar Padilla, Baker, Lahr, and Minaya (2025).
22. See Julie Rubin, Colleen Sommo, and Justin Ortagus, "REACT Reenrolls Nearly Twice as Many Students Who Have Stopped Attending College" (MDRC, 2026), available at: https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/REACT_Reenrolls_Students.pdf.
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24. New America, "Prior Learning and Competency-Based Education" (website: https://www.newamerica.org/insights/prior-learning-and-competency-based-education/, 2013).
25. Washington Student Achievement Council, "Academic Credit for Prior Learning" (website: https://wsac.wa.gov/assessments-prior-learning, n.d., accessed on July 8, 2026).
26. State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, "Constellation of Support: A Capacity-Building Approach to Institutional Change" (website: https://sheeo.org/project/constellation-of-support/, n.d., accessed on July 8, 2026).
27. See Washington Student Achievement Council, "Credit Mobility Brief: Issues in Credit Mobility" (Washington Student Achievement Council, 2026), available at: https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2026-05-12-0741-Credit.Mobility.Brief_.pdf. A paraeducator is a school staff member who works under the supervision of a certified teacher to support classroom instruction but does not hold an independent teaching credential.

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