



### **Washington's bright future:**

- Students have big dreams, and Washington offers amazing opportunities to achieve those dreams, thanks to a diverse economy and employers ready to hire across industries and high-demand fields.
  - Washington state job growth from 2023 to 2032 is projected at 12.8%, a rate that will eclipse the projected national average of 2.8%.
  - Washington can expect 1.5 million+ job openings over the decade, accounting for new jobs being created and jobs that come open due to retirements.

### **Opportunity for skilled workers:**

- The coming years will present unparalleled opportunities for skilled workers in Washington state.
  - 75% of job openings will require post-high school credentials such as degrees, apprenticeships, and industry-aligned certificates and licenses.
  - Bachelor's and advanced degrees will be in highest demand—necessary for 45% of all job openings—and will continue to offer workers the greatest long-term wage premiums.
  - To meet this demand will require increased enrollment across our higher education institutions including community and technical colleges.

### **The challenge we face:**

- Washington is not on pace to meet the need for skilled workers.
  - Credential Attainment Rate: Only 40% of Washington high school students are projected to complete a credential by the time they're 26.
  - Credential Shortfall: Washington faces a projected shortfall of nearly 600,000 skilled workers by 2032, including a deficit of 301,000 workers with bachelor's and advanced degrees, 67,000 with associate degrees, and 228,000 with certifications, apprenticeships, and other training credentials.
  - Challenges for Uncredentialed Workers: An oversupply of uncredentialed workers—those with a high school education or less—could economically sideline more than a quarter million adults who will be competing for a smaller pool of opportunities, leaving them unable to access living-wage jobs.

### **Our shared goal:**

- Education beyond high school is as important as ever for jobs and career paths that pay enough to support a family. Our coalition is committed to ensuring that 70% of Washington students – across all racial and ethnic communities – earn a post-high school credential. We have work to do.



### **Positive signs, long way to go:**

- Polling and studies show that Washingtonians value post-high school education.
  - CPC Polling Data: 76% of Washingtonians agree that education beyond high school is necessary for success in today's work world. Three-quarters of Washington voters support the 70% credential attainment goal.
  
- Postsecondary institutions in Washington saw the first signs of positive enrollment trends in fall 2023 after three years of pandemic-induced decline.
  - WSAC Enrollment Data: Year-over-year enrollment was up 5% at Community & Technical Colleges (CTCs) and down approximately 1% at the public and private, not-for-profit baccalaureate institutions.
  - Bright Spots in Equity Data: CTC enrollment increased more substantially for students who received need-based aid than those who didn't, and the CTCs saw increased enrollment for nearly all racial groups. The baccalaureate institutions saw increased year-over-year enrollment for Black/African American, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native students. Private, not-for-profit institutions saw increased year-over-year enrollment for Black/African American, Latino, and Asian students.
  - Long Way to Go: Despite these signs, the state still has a long way to go to return to pre-pandemic enrollment levels. There were about 28,000 fewer students enrolled at CTCs in fall 2023 than in fall 2019, a 21% decline. Public baccalaureate institutions had about 12,000 fewer undergraduates enrolled, or an 11% decline over the four-year period, and private, not-for-profit campuses saw similar declines, 11.7% overall.

### **Barriers to overcome:**

- Most students want to pursue more education, but not enough follow through for many reasons, college costs being among the main ones.
  - Gates Data: A recent Gates Foundation study found that in Washington state, "nearly 90% of high schoolers say they want to pursue more education after graduation, but only 50% enroll in postsecondary programs that can set them on a path toward the future they want." A prior edition of the survey highlighted concerns about college costs as a major reason why young people across the U.S. aren't taking the next step after high school to pursue a postsecondary degree or credential.
  - FAFSA Challenges: Ongoing FAFSA issues posed yet another barrier to postsecondary attainment in 2024-25. The delayed rollout of the 2025-26 Federal Student Aid applications in late November –nearly two months later than the typical FAFSA timeline– could pose a further stumbling block.



### Path forward:

- Now is the time to redouble collective efforts to reduce barriers to postsecondary enrollment and support students' pathways to postsecondary credentials that will support their dreams, provide economic mobility, and enable them to support a family.
  - **Protect the Progress We've Made:** We have made significant progress in expanding access to education after high school, reducing financial barriers for students and recovering from challenges created by the pandemic. We cannot go backward. At a minimum, we must maintain current investments, especially for students receiving financial aid through the Washington College Grant.
  - **Continue Investing in Postsecondary Education:** If Washington is going to meet its projected workforce needs and make good on the promise of opportunity for its students, it must continue to invest in postsecondary education, grow enrollment, and support clear pathways to credentials with labor market value. This includes investments in regional initiatives, like WSAC's Regional Challenge Grant. Investing in postsecondary education also includes investing in faculty and staff. The ability to recruit and retain staff and faculty is critical to providing high quality education for students. As with other professions, inflationary pressures and the rising cost of living are impacting our colleges and universities across the state. The Legislature has made significant investments in compensation across higher education, but there is more to do. Ensuring that we are providing competitive salaries and benefits will keep faculty and staff at our campuses and allow our colleges and universities to continue to serve students, provide the services and programming to retain and complete students and compete in a global marketplace.
  - **Remove Barriers to Enrollment:** Through the Washington Guaranteed Admissions Program (WAGAP), high school students from partner school districts who have a 3.0 GPA or higher and meet specific course requirements have guaranteed admission to six of the state's public four-year university campuses. Extending the WAGAP program to students in all public school districts will send a clear message to all students statewide that there is a place for them at Washington's colleges and universities.

Develop and Implement Digital High School Transcripts: Currently, colleges and universities receive paper or electronic high school transcripts as PDFs. An investment in digital transcripts will enhance the accuracy, timeliness, and security of a student's high school transcript data shared between K-12 and colleges and universities.

- **Raise Awareness of the Washington College Grant (WA Grant) & Advocate for FAFSA/WASFA Completion:** Washington offers the nation's most generous financial aid program. The FAFSA/WASFA opens the door to that aid, but our state



ranks near the bottom in the percentage of high school seniors completing the FAFSA/WASFA each year. Raising awareness about the financial aid available, including promoting the WA Grant to Washington students and families, and assisting them with FAFSA/WASFA completion is critical to helping more students enroll in postsecondary programs.

- **Support Dual Credit:** Washington should continue strengthening dual credit programs like Running Start, College in the High School, and CTE dual credit pathways so that all high school students can earn college credit and progress toward postsecondary credentials.
- **Increase Delivery and Completion of High-Value, High-Demand Credentials:** Our state must grow and leverage all capacity in workforce training and high-demand fields. A sampling of industries with significant needs over the coming decade include advanced computing and technology, construction and skilled trades, healthcare, education, business and management, and clean technology.
- **Deliver High-Quality Career Navigation and Advising:** College and career counselors can help students find and succeed on their best-fit education-to-career pathway. Greater consistency and availability of career navigation and advising will enable students to pursue the credentials needed to achieve their career aspirations and support economic mobility.
- **Support Career Connected Learning:** The state should continue to build and expand career connected learning opportunities that align with workforce needs and provide students with hands-on experiences, as they explore and prepare for high-demand careers.

**Call to action:**

- Meeting the needs and aspirations of Washington's students – and supporting the future of our state's economy – demands sustained attention and action. State lawmakers have shown continued support for Washington students over the last several years. As a state, we must maintain this momentum and go further to make Washington students a priority, remove barriers, and ensure they have pathways to the credentials that match their dreams and enable them to support a family, and strengthen our communities and economy.