COLLEGE
PROMISE
COALITION

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 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 could present unparalleled opportunities for skilled workers in particular, as 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.

The challenge we face:
Washington is not on pace to meet the need for skilled workers. Only 40% of Washington high school students are projected to complete a credential by the time they're 26. Our state faces a projected shortfall of nearly 600,000 skilled workers by 2032.

Our shared goal:
Education beyond high school is as important as ever for living-wage jobs that offer opportunities for economic mobility and advancement. Our coalition is committed to ensuring that 70% of Washington students earn a post-high school credential. Reaching this goal will take strong collaboration among policymakers; business, labor, and education leaders; students, families, and communities. We have work to do.

Positive signs, long way to go:
Washingtonians value postsecondary education.

- 86% of Washington voters consider education beyond high school to be extremely or very important in helping people get better-paying jobs that can support a family.[1]
- Three-quarters of Washington voters support the 70% credential attainment goal.[2]
- Nearly 90% of Washington's high schoolers say they want to continue their education after high school.[3]

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[1] Washington Voter Views of Education Beyond High School, FM3 Research
[2] Washington Voter Views of Education Beyond High School, FM3 Research
[3] https://washingtonstate.gatesfoundation.org/what-we-do/washington-state-education

Overall undergraduate enrollment in Washington's postsecondary institutions has grown or stabilized since spring 2023, when the public health crisis ended.[4] For example:

- After dropping to a low of 98,184 award-seeking students in fall 2022, community and technical colleges (CTCs) experienced a 12% rise in enrollment to over 110,000 students in 2024.[5]
- Across public four-year institutions, enrollment of students with need-based aid increased from nearly 33,000 in 2019 to 35,080 in 2024. During the pandemic recovery period, enrollment of students receiving need-based aid has risen 30% at the CTCs and 4% at four-years. [6]
- At community and technical colleges, enrollment by racial/ethnic group rose the most for Black/African American students with a 28.4% increase and Latino students with a 26.9% increase from 2022 to 2024. Meanwhile, American Indian/Alaska Native (+16.2%) and Black/African American (+13.9%) student enrollment rose the most at public four-year institutions.[7]
- Not-for-profit, private campuses enroll Washington residents as the majority of their students, with 58% identifying as students of color.

Despite these encouraging trends, overall undergraduate enrollment at Washington's postsecondary institutions has not returned to pre-COVID levels. This is a clear sign that more (not less) work is needed to fully restore and expand access and return to pre-pandemic enrollment levels.

These data points tell a clear story: Washingtonians want pathways to opportunity. The commitment of students, educators, advocates, and community leaders is starting to show results, particularly among students of color. But these gains are fragile. Recent budget setbacks threaten to reverse this momentum.

Barriers to overcome:

Most Washington students want to pursue more education beyond high school, but not enough follow through. One of the biggest barriers? College costs. In a recent public opinion survey, 68% of voters said they're concerned about the amount of loan debt students have upon leaving college (an 11% increase from last year).[8]

More than $200 million in state funding cuts to colleges and universities risk undermining progress in credential attainment, potentially exacerbating workforce shortages and hindering economic growth.

These cuts to the state's two-year operating budget threaten to make this barrier even harder to overcome and affect critical postsecondary programs and supports, including:[9]

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[4] https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-Fall.Enrollment.Update.pdf
[5] https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-Fall.Enrollment.Update.pdf
[6] https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-Fall.Enrollment.Update.pdf
[7] https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-Fall.Enrollment.Update.pdf
[8] Washington Voter Views of Education Beyond High School, FM3 Research
[9] https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2025-05-20-0331-Leg.Session.Summary.pdf

- **1.5% reduction** in funding to public 4-year higher education institutions.
- **0.5% reduction** in funding to Community and Technical Colleges (CTCs)
- **$89 million**: Elimination of the WA Student Loan Program, which was intended to provide graduate students in high-demand fields of study with low-interest loans[10].
- **$55.3 million**: Elimination of bridge grants for students with unmet need.
- **$26.7 million**: Cuts in WA Grant and College Bound Scholarship (CBS) awards for students enrolled at private, not-for-profit universities, WGU-WA, for-profit career schools, apprenticeships, starting in the 2026–27 academic year.
- **$23.7 million**: Cuts to Career Connect Washington, which works with schools and employers across the state to give meaningful, real-world job experiences to students of all ages and workers up to age 30.
- **$16 million**: Elimination of the Regional Challenge Grant, which awarded competitive grants to regional partnerships working to increase postsecondary attainment and credential completion and close opportunity gaps for students.
- **$5.4 million**: Ending partnerships between CTCs and community-based organizations for financial aid outreach.

The effects of these cuts are already being felt on campuses across Washington. Some universities have been forced to eliminate academic programs and reduce course offerings, limiting students' ability to enroll in required classes and stay on track to graduate. Student services and advising programs have been scaled back, especially those serving low-income, first-generation, and students of color. At the same time, institutions are operating with shrinking reserves and rising costs that outpace tuition revenue, leaving the higher education system stretched thin and struggling to sustain quality and access even as student demand continues to grow.

Furthermore, broad majorities of Washington voters reject cuts to higher education (60%), financial aid (63%), and other educational programs (67%) for the sake of balancing the budget.[11]

In addition, the Legislature suspended language in the Workforce Education Investment Act (WEIA) that had guaranteed that new funding into the account went to new higher education investments. This meant that while revenues into the WEIA account grew, the Legislature shifted almost $500M from the General Fund (called "supplanting") into the account AND made the cuts outlined above.

With slowing state revenue growth and continued uncertainty at the federal level, including potential cuts to financial aid, state budget pressures are likely to intensify in 2026. Without strong and sustained leadership, postsecondary education funding could face further threats at a time when students and Washington's economy need sustained and increased investment the most.

To make matters worse, the outlook from the federal government is growing more uncertain. If federal support falters, state aid becomes even more vital. Cutting programs like the Washington College Grant will have devastating consequences for students, disproportionately impacting students of color, women, and first-generation college students.[12] This is especially worrisome

[10] https://wsac.wa.gov/graduate-student-loan-program
[11] Washington Voter Views of Education Beyond High School, FM3 Research
[12] Students at WA's private colleges could see financial aid slashed • Washington State Standard

when the data is very clear: Enrollment is up among recipients of need-based aid at CTCs and four-years, but down amongst those without need-based aid at four-year institutions.[13]

Now is not the time to retreat. It's the moment for Washington to lead. Washingtonians value education—and our students are ready to pursue the credentials they need to succeed. But they need support. Bold state leadership is essential to ensure that we don't lose hard-won momentum.

Without restored funding, Washington's colleges and universities risk losing the very programs, people, and supports that enable students to persist and complete their credentials. Continued cuts could reverse recent gains in enrollment, particularly among students of color and those receiving need-based aid. Protecting investments in higher education is essential to sustaining momentum, meeting workforce needs, and ensuring every student, no matter their background, has the opportunity to thrive.

As the next legislative session approaches, Washington has an opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to students and protect these vital investments.

Path forward:

- Protect the progress we've made in expanding access to postsecondary education, reducing financial barriers for students, and recovering from challenges created by the pandemic. Postsecondary education in Washington cannot absorb any additional cuts.
- Keep the promises made to students by restoring funding to student aid programs, and maintain support for postsecondary pathways.
- Raise awareness of the Washington College Grant (WA Grant) and advocate for FAFSA/WASFA completion, ensuring Washington students and families take advantage of the nation's most generous financial aid program. Emphasize that the WA Grant is a Washington state-backed financial aid program.

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 support for Washington students over the last several years, but this past session was tough on postsecondary education.

As the Legislature looks toward the next session, we urge lawmakers to recognize that they've already made significant and consequential cuts to postsecondary education, directly harming students by limiting access, affordability, and pathways to credentials that lead to opportunity. Additional cuts would threaten Washington's workforce pipeline, equity goals, and economic future.

CPC urges lawmakers to:

- Protect core investments and avoid additional cuts that harm students and shrink opportunity.

[13] https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-Fall.Enrollment.Update.pdf

- Champion programs that remove barriers and help students complete high-value credentials, including restorations for the inequitable cuts to proven student aid programs.

As a state, we cannot retreat from our commitment to our students. We must make them a priority, remove barriers, and ensure they have pathways to the credentials that align with their goals, lead to economic mobility and family-sustaining careers, and contribute to thriving communities and a strong economy.

Together, we can keep Washington's promise to our students and build a stronger, more equitable future.