



Postsecondary Enrollment in Washington: The Crisis Intensifies

Washington’s economy was the envy of much of the nation prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, our state added 412,000 new jobs between 2014 and 2019 and enjoyed persistent job growth that exceeded the national average.¹ The early months of the pandemic appeared to wipe out that progress with the loss of 415,000 jobs from February to May 2020,² but the underlying strength and diversity of Washington’s economy shined through. Employers added 344,000 jobs back from May 2020 to October 2021,³ and the future looks even brighter, particularly for workers who attain a post-high school credential.

Based on recent labor market analysis, it is estimated that employers will add 373,000 net new jobs in Washington state over the next five years.⁴ The state’s anticipated annual job growth rate of 2.1% will far outpace the national rate of 1.3%. Most of these jobs – an estimated 70% – will require or be filled by workers with a post-high school credential, such as a degree, apprenticeship, or certificate.⁵ Washington employers want to hire local talent to fill these positions whenever possible and it’s essential that our young people are ready.

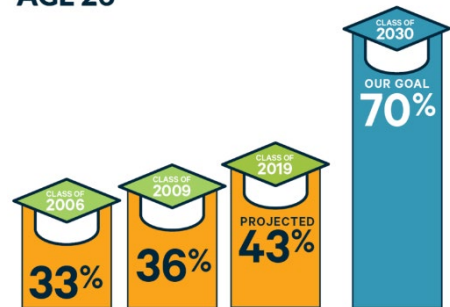
373,000 new jobs in WA over 5 years

Washington Roundtable and our education foundation, Partnership for Learning, are focused on one goal: By the high school class of 2030, 70% of Washington students – overall and within each racial and ethnic group – will complete a post-high school credential by age 26.

Even before the pandemic, too few of Washington’s young people, particularly young people of color and those from low-income backgrounds, were enrolling in postsecondary education and completing credentials.

Based on estimates for the high school class of 2019, 43% of Washington students are expected to earn a credential by age 26. There is a 27-point gap between economic demand for credentials and the rate of actual attainment. Many factors contribute to this gap. Of significant concern, the postsecondary enrollment rate for high school graduates has continued to stagnate or decline for more than a decade.

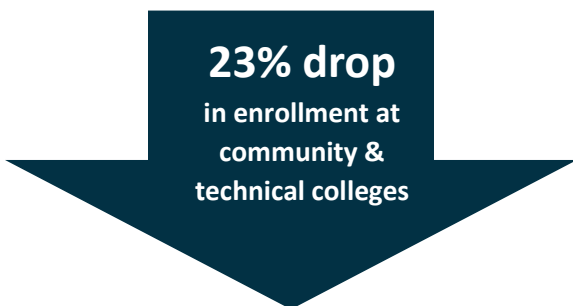
CREENTIAL ATTAINMENT BY AGE 26



Source: Kinetic West

New data from Washington’s public two- and four-year postsecondary institutions indicate that postsecondary enrollment rates continued to contract in the second year of the pandemic. These declines are particularly concerning as historic data indicate that delayed enrollment significantly reduces likelihood of credential completion and lifetime earnings.⁶

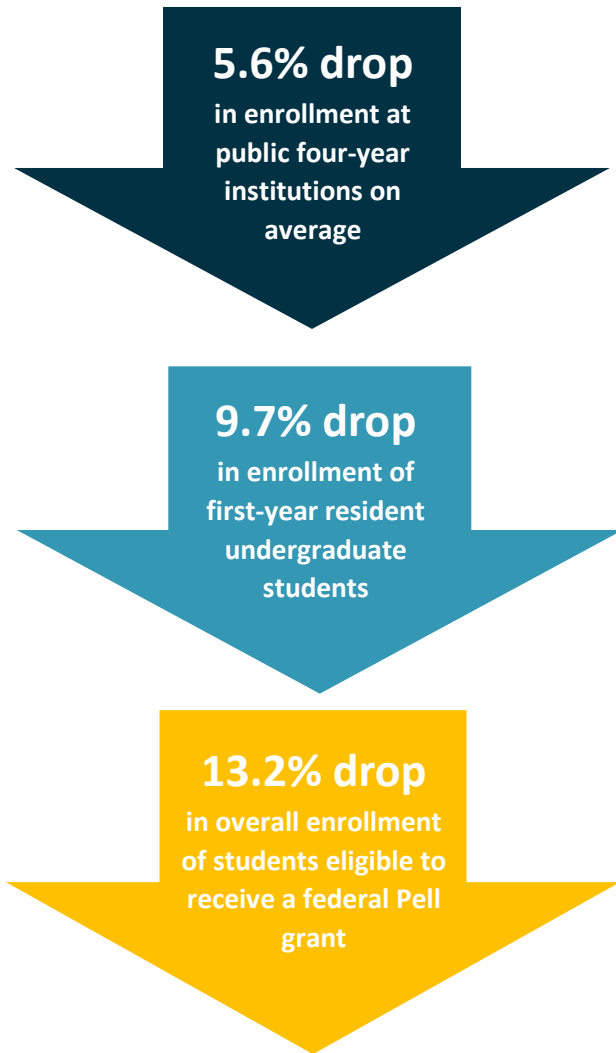
Washington Community & Technical College Enrollment: 2019 vs. 2021



Nearly 50,000 fewer students enrolled at Washington’s community and technical colleges in fall 2021 than in fall 2019. Enrollment among students aged 30 and above rebounded from fall 2020, rising 1.1% in fall 2021. However, enrollment of students under age 30 dropped 10.5% in fall 2021, on top of a 12.1% decline in fall 2020.⁷

Enrollment at Washington’s Public Four-Year Colleges & Universities: 2019 vs. 2021

Resident undergraduate enrollment at Washington’s four-year institutions experienced a concerning dip in the first year of the pandemic, falling 2.1% at the state’s public four-year institutions.* The situation worsened in 2021 as students continued to face both historic and new hurdles in their efforts to plan for and pursue post-high school credentials.



Washington’s public four-year campuses* enrolled 4,311 fewer total resident undergraduate students in fall 2021 than in fall 2019. The year-over-year enrollment decline was larger in 2021 (3.6%) than in 2020 (2.1%).

The public four-year campuses enrolled 1,514 fewer first-year students in fall 2021 than in fall 2019. Even more concerning, if enrollment at the University of Washington (UW) is excluded (that institution saw a 1.4% uptick when comparing first-year enrollment data in 2019 versus 2021), the remaining institutions saw an average 16.4% enrollment decline among first-year students. Similarly, while updated enrollment data was not available through 2021, Independent Colleges of Washington reported a 16% drop in first-year enrollment across its 10 private, not-for-profit four-year campuses in 2020.⁸

The pandemic’s impact on enrollment of students from low-income backgrounds is particularly worrisome. Washington’s public four-year institutions enrolled 3,291 fewer Pell-eligible students in fall 2021 than in fall 2019. Further, enrollment among Pell-eligible students declined at a faster rate in fall 2021 (8%) than it had in fall 2020 (6%), and Pell-eligible students account for 76% of the year-over-year decrease in overall enrollment of undergraduate students. Additionally, enrollment of Pell-eligible first-year students is down a staggering 19.2% over the last two years, the same time period when financial assistance was dramatically expanded via the Washington College Grant.

One bright spot: Enrollment of students of color (those who identify as American Indian, Alaska Native, Black, Hispanic, Latino/a, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, or two or more races) across all undergraduate levels is up slightly (0.8%) from fall 2019 to fall 2021. This overall growth is attributed to UW, which saw a 5% increase in enrollment of students of color over that time period. However, there was a notable 5.9% average decline in enrollment of first-year students of color across the sector, despite a 3.7% improvement at UW.

**Self-reported data gathered in December 2021 from Central Washington University, Evergreen State College, University of Washington, Washington State University, and Western Washington University. Eastern Washington University did not report data.*

Doubling Down on Statewide Effort to Accelerate Postsecondary Enrollment

Increasing the rate at which Washington high school graduates enroll in postsecondary education is the most significant opportunity available to accelerate progress toward the 70% credential attainment goal.

Benchmark data comparing the high school classes of 2006 and 2019 indicate that progress is being made at two key junctures. The high school graduation rate increased 9 percentage points, indicating more students were positioned to take the next step to postsecondary education. Additionally, the rate at which Washington high school graduates who enroll in postsecondary education go on to complete two- and four-year programs is estimated to increase 7 percentage points. However, the postsecondary enrollment rate for Washington high school graduates declined 2 percentage points.⁹

	HS CLASS OF 2006	HS CLASS OF 2019	RATE OF CHANGE
HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION	75%	84%	+9 points
POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT	78%	76%	-2 points
POSTSECONDARY COMPLETION	56%	63%	+7 points

Source: Kinetic West, 2021

Clearly, a concerted effort to increase the rate at which students enroll in postsecondary education is needed. It will require new ways of preparing, attracting, and supporting students to and through postsecondary education.

Washington’s colleges and universities are committed to enrolling far more students and seeing them through to credential completion. Our public institutions have made unprecedented individual commitments to increase enrollment 9 to 50% based on the unique position of the institution. The 10 private, not-for-profit institutions have also committed to increase enrollment 51%.



Realizing needed enrollment gains will require targeted, thoughtful, and direct outreach to better prepare, encourage and support student enrollment.

In 2022, the Washington Roundtable urges the Legislature to:

- Tackle ongoing educational equity and postsecondary enrollment crises by expanding dual-credit and dual-enrollment opportunities, providing direct supports to students, and developing regional partnerships to build and expand pathways to and through post-high school education and training.
- Ensure Washington students are prepared for success by maintaining rigorous and relevant K-12 learning standards and state graduation requirements.
- Build and expand career connected learning opportunities.
- Ensure funds for learning recovery are directed to students most impacted by the pandemic.

Learn more at waroundtable.com.

Sources & Methodology

Economic and jobs growth data and projections are based on research conducted by [Kinetic West](#), a Seattle-based social impact marketing firm. Enrollment data for Washington’s community and technical colleges is drawn from information published by the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges. Additionally, we are grateful to representatives from our state’s public postsecondary institutions – including Central Washington University, Evergreen State College, University of Washington, Washington State University, and Western Washington University – for providing fall 2021 enrollment data for inclusion in this analysis.

¹ Kinetic West analysis based on historical job growth from [U.S Census Data](#), Dec. 2021.

² Kinetic West analysis based on historical job growth from [U.S Census Data](#), Dec. 2021.

³ [BLS Washington State Analysis](#), Dec. 2021

⁴ Kinetic West analysis based on [U.S Census Data and historical job growth](#) and [BLS National Projections](#), Dec. 2021.

⁵ Kinetic West analysis based on Bureau of Labor Statistics Data, Dec. 2021.

⁶ Community College Research Center, “[Timing Matters: How Delaying College Enrollment Affects Earnings Trajectories](#),” Feb. 2021.

⁷ [SBCTC Fall 2021 Research Brief](#), 2021.

⁸ Washington Roundtable, “[Path to 70% Credential Attainment: Recovery & Reimagining](#),” Jan. 2021.

⁹ Kinetic West analysis of National Student Clearinghouse and Economic Research and Data Center data, Dec. 2019.