

Washington

Affordability in Action

The state focuses on need-based financial aid for low-income students and awarding bachelor's degrees at lower-cost community colleges.

Washington has worked to address affordability concerns for learners by continuing to focus on financial aid, low-cost degree opportunities, and innovative funding policies. Affordability is highlighted as one of four strategic clusters to achieve the state's attainment goal in its current strategic action plan.¹ Along with traditional policies, the state is identifying innovative strategies for addressing the cost of college for in-state learners.

For example, legislation passed in 2024 allows students in high school to qualify for the state's need-based financial aid grant early without having to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid.² This allows learners to begin thinking about college as early as their sophomore year of high school, knowing that they qualify for an award that will cover up to the full cost of tuition.³ In addition to a traditional state-funded need-based grant program, Washington also established a scholarship for learners in high-need fields that combines state and private support to provide funding and industry exposure.⁴

- ➔ Between K-12 education and public universities and community colleges, Washington invests nearly 45 percent of its total state budget in education.



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Washington's approach

Washington focuses financial aid on low-income students, awarding \$2,263 per full-time undergraduate student in 2022-23, the highest amount per student in the nation and outpacing the average national award of \$865.⁵ The state is a national leader in providing opportunities for place-bound students to complete a regionally workforce-aligned bachelor's degree at a lower-cost community college, awarding more than 1,800 bachelor's degrees to community college learners in 2022-23 and adding 7 percent more bachelor's degrees to the total for public institutions.⁶ Washington also is leading the way in finding innovative financial aid solutions, establishing the nation's first public-private partnership scholarship program in 2011.⁷

Alignment with goals of state leadership

Washington's constitution requires the state to "make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders."⁸ To that end, Washington invested just over \$3 billion, or 4 percent of the total state budget, to higher education in fiscal year 2024.⁹ When combined with the investment in K-12 education, Washington invests nearly 45 percent of its total state budget to meet this constitutional requirement. The investment in education has increased at a higher rate than the overall growth of the total state budget over the last decade. Since fiscal year 2014, the state budget doubled from \$35.1 billion to \$73.1 billion, while state funds provided to K-12 and higher education increased by 150 percent over the same time period.

Additionally, Washington is a member of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, or WICHE, which promotes regional collaboration and resource-sharing with other Western states. Students in Washington can benefit from the Western Undergraduate Exchange program, which provides reduced tuition opportunities to Washington students attending college at another WICHE state institution.¹⁰ WICHE estimates that Washington students have saved more than \$550 million in tuition costs since the state began participating in the Western Undergraduate Exchange almost 40 years ago.¹¹

Strategy and implementation

Washington's 2025 strategic action plan for higher education identifies several key policies, including increasing college affordability, to meet the state's educational attainment goal of 70 percent of adults aged 25 to 44 earning a postsecondary credential (i.e., high-quality certificates or associate or bachelor's degrees).¹² In order to achieve this goal, Washington has implemented these affordability strategies:

➤ **Focusing on need-based state financial aid programs.** Washington focuses state-funded financial aid on low- and middle-income families. Known collectively as "opportunity pathways," Washington offers six need-based financial aid programs, including the flagship Washington College Grant and Passport to Careers, which helps homeless youth and students from foster care enroll and succeed in college.¹³ Washington provided nearly \$475 million in state-funded need-based financial aid to undergraduate students, accounting for nearly 5 percent of all need-based undergraduate aid distributed nationally in 2022-23.¹⁴

In 2019, the Washington State Legislature passed the Workforce Education Investment Act, creating the Washington College Grant, which guarantees free tuition and fees for students from Washington families with incomes at or below 50 percent of the state's median household income, making it one of the most generous "free college" programs in the nation.^{15, 16} Eligibility for the Washington College Grant was modified in 2025 to increase eligibility for the full award to up to 60 percent of the state's median family income.¹⁷ For example, in the 2025-26 academic year, an eligible student from a family of four with a household income of \$78,500 or less will earn a full WCG award. Middle-income families also qualify for support, though the amount is lower.

While eligibility is tied to family income, award amounts are determined by the institution the student attends. This means that students attending more expensive institutions qualify for larger awards, lowering the cost barrier to attend public research and comprehensive universities, which traditionally cost more than regional universities. The state-funded flagship scholarship ensures that buying power does not diminish for low-income students admitted to higher-cost universities.

➤ **Reducing cost to credential completion.** In 2023, 32 Washington community colleges offered at least one bachelor's degree option.¹⁸ Washington offered 143 programs in 2023 and awarded 1,555 bachelor's degrees to community college students in 2021–22, the second-most awards in the nation.¹⁹ The most approved programs in Washington are in business, health professions, and computer and information sciences, with each area of study offered at 30 or more community colleges across the state.²⁰ While enrollment in community college baccalaureate programs peaked in 2020, participation in these programs continues to rebound along with the overall enrollment in community colleges.

Another strategy for reducing the cost of completing a credential is by lowering the cost of course materials through the use of open educational resources, which are free materials that are openly licensed or exist in the public domain. Research has shown that the use of open educational resources saves, on average, \$65 per course on these materials.²¹

Washington also is addressing the cost of textbooks through several pieces of recent bipartisan legislation. In 2017, Washington passed legislation that required the Washington State Board for Community and Technical College system to provide cost information for required course materials at the time of registration, including identifying all courses that use open educational resources.²² Legislation passed in 2020 expanded this requirement to courses that use “low-cost” materials priced at \$50 or less.²³ This ensures students are more aware of the cost of course materials.

➤ **Innovative financial aid opportunities.** In 2011, Washington passed the Opportunity Scholarship Act, creating the Washington State Opportunity Scholarship. The program provides financial assistance, critical peer and industry mentorships, and career training support to qualifying students enrolled in eligible baccalaureate, career and technical, and graduate programs. Over 60 percent of scholarship recipients are students of color, over 70 percent are first-generation college students, and all are from low- or middle-income families. The state opportunity scholarship uses a 1-to-1 match of state funds with philanthropic and corporate investment and is on course to support more than 25,000 Washingtonians by 2025. The state has set a goal of keeping 95 percent of scholars in high-demand STEM and health care fields in Washington to meet critical workforce needs.²⁴

As one of three scholarship opportunities, the Baccalaureate Scholarship provides up to \$22,500 in scholarship dollars to pursue an undergraduate degree in a high-demand STEM or health care major at any eligible public or private college or university in Washington.²⁵ The state opportunity scholarship can be applied to costs beyond tuition, including housing, transportation, and other costs associated with college attendance.

Implementation and oversight

Washington participates in extensive internal and external evaluations of its affordability initiatives. Below are several examples of upcoming or completed evaluations of affordability interventions across the state:

- **Washington College Grant success.** The National Center for Education Research awarded \$1 million to the Washington Student Achievement Council and the social policy research organization MDRC to study the success of the Washington College Grant. This project will evaluate the effectiveness of the Washington College Grant²⁶ by focusing on the implementation of the program, identifying any differences to prior programs, usage by low-income families, results for low-income families using the award, and overall postsecondary education outcomes.²⁷ Program evaluation results are expected in late 2026.
- **Community college bachelor's degrees.** A 2022 study examined the expansion of community college baccalaureate degrees in career-technical education programs and assessed the labor market outcomes for completers in three high-demand programs, finding that community college bachelor's degree recipients experienced higher employment and earnings outcomes compared to regional university graduates immediately after graduation. This study also found that the "wage premium" disappeared three years post graduation.²⁸

Another report found that 70 percent of bachelor's degree-seeking community college students in Washington complete a bachelor's within four years of enrolling, similar to students who transferred to a public four-year college or university.²⁹ This report also found that community college bachelor's degree graduates earn more than the average new bachelor's degree holders from universities.³⁰

- ➔ Students at Green River College, like students at at least 30 community colleges across the state, can earn bachelor's degrees. Washington awarded more than 1,800 bachelor's degrees to community college learners in 2022–23.



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- **Implementation of open educational resources.** The Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges released a report on the progress made by the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges institutions implementing legislation focused on textbook costs. This report estimates that implementation of these laws resulted in more than \$19.6 million in total savings, or about \$100 for each of the nearly 200,000 community and technical college students enrolled in open educational resource or low-cost materials class sections in 2023–24.³¹
- **Success of Washington State Opportunity Scholarship.** As part of the creation of the Washington State Opportunity Scholarship, the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee completed a review of the program in December 2019.³² The report examined several affordability metrics to determine whether Opportunity Scholars experienced greater college affordability compared to their non-Scholar peers, including net price, percentage of students borrowing and annual loan amounts, and overall unmet need (net price less family contributions). The committee found that compared to their peers, students receiving the scholarship paid lower net price, borrowed less in loans, and had lower unmet need.³³

TOOLS AND RESOURCES

Washington has developed several tools and resources to support its efforts:

- The [Education Research and Data Center](#) includes data dashboards focused on dual credit and enrollment, success at four-year institutions, and graduate earnings. The state's longitudinal data system links educational outcomes from pre-kindergarten through employment and workforce success.
- [OPEN Washington](#) offers a 10-module self-paced workshop or a facilitated training program focusing on techniques to incorporate open educational resources into teaching practice. As part of its work with open educational resources, the state launched a network supporting the creation and integration of free course materials into college courses.
- The [Open Course Library](#) project redesigned 81 courses using open educational resource materials for multi-modalities as part of the Washington State Student Completion Initiative. The project included a goal to lower overall textbook costs for all students.

Endnotes

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