In 2016, the Washington Roundtable set a goal: By the high school class of 2030, 70% of Washington students will complete a post-high school credential—such as a degree, apprenticeship, or certificate—by age 26. We set this goal in response to state and national data, and evidence within our member companies, indicating that jobs in Washington state are increasingly being filled by credentialed workers. This goal reflects our members’ ongoing desire to hire Washington talent, and concern that far too few of our students earn credentials that are increasingly essential.

Just 41% of Washington’s high school class of 2017 is expected to earn a credential by age 26. Estimated credential attainment for Black students (31%), Hispanic and Latinx students (30%), Native American and Indigenous students (18%), and students from low-income backgrounds (26%) is concerningly low.

WASHINGTON CAN AND MUST DO BETTER FOR OUR STUDENTS AND FOR OUR FUTURE WORKFORCE. THE WASHINGTON ROUNDTABLE AND OUR EDUCATION FOUNDATION, PARTNERSHIP FOR LEARNING, CONTINUE TO LEAD A MULTI-YEAR EFFORT TO UNITE THE BUSINESS, EDUCATION, GOVERNMENT, AND NON-PROFIT SECTORS IN PURSUIT OF THE 70% CREDENTIAL ATTAINMENT GOAL FOR WASHINGTON STUDENTS.

In the last five years, we have focused on research, working to understand inflection points and set benchmarks for improvement in high school graduation, postsecondary enrollment and completion, and reengagement of students who fall out of the education system prior to credential attainment.

In 2020, we dug deep into opportunities to rapidly increase the rate at which students prepare for, pursue, and complete credentials. That work revealed that the annual increase in credential attainment growth must nearly triple among students in Washington, and the system must support far more students—particularly more Black, Hispanic and Latinx, and Indigenous and Native American students as well as students from low-income backgrounds—to enroll in and complete postsecondary programs.

To support these gains, we put forward clear principles and metrics to guide investment from the state’s new Workforce Education Investment Account (WEIA), which is funded with business taxes. We documented lessons from the Great Recession to better understand how Washington can best respond to the COVID-19-induced recession and help students get and stay on track to a credential.

Throughout this work, we have partnered with leaders from the state’s K-12 and postsecondary institutions, agencies, and associations, as well as community-based organizations. These stakeholders join us in committing to the 70% credential attainment goal, and each has a unique and vital role to play in getting there.
In this report, we assess potential impacts of two crises affecting Washington’s education systems—a persistent equity crisis and the COVID-19 health and economic crisis. We applaud public commitments from postsecondary institutions in Washington to increase enrollment and completion. We offer recommendations to transform Washington’s postsecondary system in response to the pandemic to better serve students, particularly students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and those furthest from opportunity; to build on the role colleges and universities in Washington each play in the state’s postsecondary system and our economy; and to further chart a course to the 70% credential attainment goal.

Our goal remains ambitious and the challenge is magnified by disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic. Recovering from the current crises and reimagining a postsecondary system that better serves Washington students and our state will take focused effort from all of us—from business, education, and community leaders; policymakers; families; and students. We remain steadfast in our pursuit of this goal. We are inspired by commitments from postsecondary institutions in Washington to own their part of this challenge. We look forward to continued partnership and to making clear progress, together.

KEY FINDINGS

1. A persistent educational equity crisis and a COVID-19 health and economic crisis are magnifying educational disparities in Washington and threatening progress toward the goal of reaching 70% credential attainment for Washington students by the high school class of 2030.

2. The COVID-19 pandemic, projected state revenue shortfalls, and loss of auxiliary and on-campus revenue are putting added pressure on postsecondary education resources.

3. Washington’s postsecondary institutions are expanding their commitment to the 70% credential attainment goal and, for the first time, are making public, aligned institution-level commitments to increase enrollment and completion.

4. Individual institution-level commitments and strategies to grow enrollment, increase credential attainment in high-demand fields, and better support students to credential completion are unprecedented and ambitious. These strategies can drive half the growth in postsecondary enrollment that is needed to reach the 70% credential attainment goal.

5. Additional, system-level transformation across Washington’s postsecondary sector, as well as its K-12 system, is necessary to fully reach the 70% goal.
PATH TO 70% CREDENTIAL ATTAINMENT: RECOVERY & REIMAGINING

EDUCATIONAL EQUITY CRISIS

A 2020 study initiated by the Washington Roundtable and Challenge Seattle examined the racial inequities Black Washingtonians experience across multiple dimensions of life, including education. For example, Black students in Washington state are 30% more likely to be taught by less-experienced teachers. In addition, Black students are suspended from school at more than two times the rate of white students.

The impacts of educational inequity compound over time, leading to disparate outcomes. The high school graduation rate for Black students in the class of 2019 (73.6%), trails that of white students (82.8%). The education attainment gap grows to 13 percentage points when estimating postsecondary credential completion by age 26 (31% projected attainment for Black students versus 44% for white students in the 2017 high school cohort).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LOW-INCOME</th>
<th>NON-LOW-INCOME</th>
<th>NATIVE AMERICAN</th>
<th>HISPANIC/LATINOX</th>
<th>BLACK</th>
<th>WHITE</th>
<th>ASIAN</th>
<th>GIRLS</th>
<th>BOYS</th>
<th>GOAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POSTSECONDARY COMPLETION</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL COHORT CREDENTIAL ATTAINMENT</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kinetic West, 2020

These outcomes contribute to limited career opportunities, affecting earning potential, the ability to purchase a home, generate wealth, or pass inheritance to the next generation. Compounding disparities widen the equity gap over the course of a lifetime and set the next generation up for persistent disadvantage.

The impacts of Washington’s equity crisis affect many communities of color as well as students from low-income backgrounds. These students are not equitably served by Washington’s education and workforce development systems and are thus underrepresented at each stage of the education experience.

TWO CRISSES IN WASHINGTON STATE: PERSISTENT EDUCATIONAL EQUITY CRISIS & AN ECONOMIC & PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS
Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic recession are rippling across Washington’s education and workforce systems. Our state was one of the first in the nation affected by the pandemic, and among the first to experience broad closures and disruptions at K-12 and postsecondary campuses and work sites. The cumulative impacts of these disruptions on student growth, postsecondary participation and credential completion, and long-term employment opportunity are not yet fully realized and create clear, immediate cause for concern.

**ASSESSING COVID-19 IMPACTS ON STUDENT GROWTH**

A recent national study estimates that, due to COVID-related disruptions in the spring and fall of 2020, K-12 students could return to school in January 2021 experiencing seven months of learning loss. Learning loss will be even greater if students do not return to school in January 2021. The study concludes that learning loss experienced by Black students (10.3 months), Latinx students (9.2 months), and students from low-income backgrounds (12.4 months) could be even greater. The study further anticipates that COVID-related disruptions to academic engagement, connections to supportive adults, and home environments also put students at greater risk of dropping out of high school (McKinsey, 2020).

It is critical that schools and districts use high-quality diagnostic tools to assess student learning loss and target academic and non-academic interventions and instruction. Additionally, continued administration of statewide assessments in 2021 will be vital to parents and the public in understanding the large-scale effects of learning loss in their schools and districts.

**ASSESSING COVID-19 IMPACTS ON POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT**

National polls in the spring and summer of 2020 suggested that students were considering dropping out of postsecondary education or electing not to enroll at startlingly rates (Simpson and Scarborough, 2020). Fall postsecondary undergraduate enrollment in Washington did not drop as much as feared. However, while the University of Washington experienced enrollment increases, most two- and four-year public postsecondary institutions saw decreases for at least some groups of students. Overall, undergraduate enrollment in the fall of 2020 is down 2.7% at the state’s public four-year institutions, compared to enrollment in fall of 2019. Undergraduate enrollment among students of color has grown by 1.5% across the four-year sector, with Black undergraduate enrollment up 4.1% and Hispanic and Latinx undergraduate enrollment flat.\(^1\) Independent Colleges of Washington reports that undergraduate and graduate enrollment across its 10 private, not-for-profit member campuses is 5.6% lower than a year ago. Preliminary data from Washington’s 34 community and technical college campuses indicate a 17.1% decrease in year-over-year enrollment.\(^2\)
FOUR-YEAR POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT IN WASHINGTON

Despite some critical bright spots, the data reflect concerning changes in the make-up of the student body, which could have long-term impacts on progress toward the 70% credential attainment goal and on students’ long-term employment trajectory. Average enrollment for first-time freshmen is down 9.1% across the public four-year postsecondary sector. This means public four-year campuses are serving nearly 1,900 fewer freshmen. If we exclude enrollment at the University of Washington, which experienced a slight uptick in freshman enrollment (+1.7%), the remaining public four-year institutions saw a 16.6% enrollment decline among freshmen students. Similarly, enrollment of first-time students is down 16% across the 10 private, not-for-profit four-year institutions in the state.

The impact on students from low-income backgrounds has been more dramatic. Across all of Washington’s public four-year campuses, undergraduate enrollment among students eligible to receive a federal Pell Grant is down 8.7%, with two institutions seeing large drops (27% and 35%). Pell-eligible students account for 85% of the year-over-year decrease in overall enrollment of undergraduate students at public institutions. Pell-eligible freshmen enrollment is down a staggering 14.4%.3 These declines are concerning as historic data indicate that delaying enrollment decreases the likelihood of credential completion and may negatively impact long-term earnings (Community College Research Center).

WASHINGTON COMMUNITY & TECHNICAL COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

While Washington’s community and technical college campuses generally saw year-over-year decreases in enrollment headcount in preliminary data, the enrollment trends varied by program. Academic transfer programs saw a 7.1% decrease and professional technical programs with more hands-on instruction saw an even larger enrollment drop of 18.1%. On the other hand, Bachelor of Applied Science programs saw a 9.2% increase, and Running Start enrollment showed little change in comparison to fall 2019. Enrollment trends also varied by student characteristics. Early data indicate enrollment among older students (age 30 and older) declined significantly, down 27.4%, compared with younger students (under age 30) whose enrollment declined 12.1% year-over-year.

ENROLLMENT ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY: Kinetic West worked with Washington’s public four-year postsecondary institutions, Independent Colleges of Washington, and the State Board for Community and Technical College to gather enrollment data. Among the public four-year institutions, enrollment data was gathered and analyzed for overall student body, undergraduates, new freshman, and new transfer students, as well as disaggregation for specific student characteristics including Pell-eligibility and race/ethnicity. We are grateful to the institutions for providing data to help better understand early impacts of the pandemic on college enrollment in Washington.

1 Enrollment data disaggregated by race was not available for WSU at the time of this analysis
2 Final Washington CTC enrollment data will be available upon completion of fall quarter in early 2021
3 Freshmen Pell-eligible data not available for CWU at the time of this analysis
ASSESSING COVID-19 IMPACTS ON EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY

Previous research in our “Path to 70% Credential Attainment” series demonstrates the disproportionate impacts of the Great Recession on people of color, young workers, and workers without a postsecondary credential. The Great Recession intensified a shift, begun in the second half of the 20th century, toward job creation favoring credentialed workers (Georgetown University, 2016). Our research in 2017 documented that trend in Washington.

Employment patterns during the pandemic also reflect disproportionate impacts on workers who haven’t completed a postsecondary credential. Nationwide, workers with only a high school education are experiencing unemployment at markedly higher rates than workers with a bachelor’s degree or higher. Clearly, the credential is now even more essential.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNEMPLOYMENT RATE BY EDUCATION ATTAINMENT</th>
<th>NOV. 2019</th>
<th>NOV. 2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LESS THAN A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE, NO COLLEGE</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOME COLLEGE OR ASSOCIATE DEGREE</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BACHELOR’S DEGREE OR HIGHER</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bureau Labor Statistics, Not Seasonally Adjusted
COVID-19 CRISIS & ECONOMIC RECESSION PUT INTENSE PRESSURE ON POSTSECONDARY RESOURCES

More than half (55.2%) of state operating spending is protected by the state constitution; this includes spending for K-12 basic education. Another 14.7% of the operating budget is required by law or tied to matching funds from the federal government, making it more difficult to cut. That leaves 30.1% of the budget that the state Office of Financial Management views as discretionary. Postsecondary education makes up 27.4% of that discretionary bucket. Consequently, it can be an outsized target for cuts during an economic downturn, as it was during the Great Recession (Washington Research Council, 2020).

Between 2008 and 2012, Washington lawmakers reduced total state postsecondary funding (adjusted for inflation) on a per-student basis by 35.4% (fiscal.wa.gov). Tuition at Washington’s public colleges and universities rose dramatically to compensate for the losses, which put increased pressure on students and families.

Since 2012, the state has worked to restore postsecondary funding, especially with new spending from the Workforce Education Investment Account (WEIA) beginning in FY 2020. However, average state funding per FTE at the state’s four-year institutions in 2019 was still 29.2% below 2008 levels, adjusted for inflation (fiscal.wa.gov). Nonetheless, many of Washington’s postsecondary institutions have increased the size of their student bodies since the Great Recession.

PRIORITIZING POSTSECONDARY INVESTMENT

The COVID-19 recession is putting added pressure on the state budget and on postsecondary resources. Institutions are now challenged by enrollment declines. Campus closures have led to significant losses in auxiliary and campus-generated revenue (i.e., room and board, athletics, events, etc.). The threat of state funding cuts also looms large.

The state must commit to supporting postsecondary education as a critical lever in advancing economic recovery, addressing persistent educational inequity, and supporting Washington students on their best-fit pathways to credentials. Washington’s colleges and universities also must transform in the face of these challenges.
PRINCIPLES FOR INVESTMENT

We worked closely in 2019 with the leaders of the state’s private not-for-profit and public four-year institutions, the State Board for Community and Technical colleges and two-year college presidents, and leaders from the state’s education agencies to develop principles for investing and measuring impact of the state’s new Workforce Education Investment Account (WEIA). The same principles apply for making postsecondary investments during the recession and in recovery.

POSTSECONDARY INVESTMENTS SHOULD BE:

STUDENT & OUTCOME FOCUSED: Help achieve the goal that 70% of students in Washington’s high school class of 2030 complete a postsecondary credential by age 26.

COLLABORATIVE: Improve statewide systems, policies, and innovation that can be replicated across institutions.

EQUITABLE: Provide access and support for systemically underserved students.

COST-EFFECTIVE: Focus on the most efficient and cost-effective approaches.

INDUSTRY ALIGNED: Help Washington employers fill the jobs of the future with qualified, home-grown talent.
Previous research identified gains in postsecondary enrollment and completion as the highest leverage opportunities to make progress toward the 70% credential attainment goal for Washington students. Building off that research, the Washington Roundtable and Partnership for Learning have engaged in robust conversations with our state’s postsecondary leaders over the last two years about what it will take to dramatically increase postsecondary enrollment and completion. We are inspired by the willingness of Washington’s postsecondary institutions to make public commitments to meet these challenges, and by their efforts to deploy clear strategies to maximize enrollment capacity, reduce time to credential, and increase program completion.

WASHINGTON’S PUBLIC POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS ARE MAKING INDIVIDUAL, PUBLIC COMMITMENTS TO INCREASE ENROLLMENT 9% TO 50% BY THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASS OF 2030. THEY ARE COMMITTED TO RAISING THE COMPLETION RATE OF ENROLLED STUDENTS BY 4% TO 35%.
In addition to our public postsecondary institutions, other postsecondary leaders are committed to supporting the 70% credential attainment goal. **Independent Colleges of Washington** has committed to increasing enrollment across their 10 private, not-for-profit four-year campuses by 51% by the high school class of 2030. Further, **WGU Washington** provides affordable, effective, and flexible postsecondary pathways for Washington students. **Career Connect Washington** supports postsecondary institutions and employers in designing work-based learning pathways that allow students to earn while they learn and achieve a credential.

It is important to note that reaching the 70% goal also relies on improvements in the high school graduation rate and reengagement of students who fall out of the education system at any point. K-12 leaders also should make commitments and adopt strategies to transform their sector and support improvements.

**POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTION STRATEGIES**

Washington's postsecondary institutions are pursuing innovative and robust strategies to support progress toward their enrollment and completion goals. Washington state can bolster strategies already being deployed by supporting funding and encouraging collaboration to scale best practices across the postsecondary system.

**CURRENT INSTITUTIONAL ENROLLMENT STRATEGIES:**

- **Improve partnerships between two- and four-year institutions.** Strengthen systems and articulation for transfer students, co-location of four-year programs at community and technical colleges, and reverse-transfer degree options.

- **Position existing satellite campuses as engines for growth.** Leverage satellite campuses to relieve enrollment limitations based on geography and real estate and provide more localized options to students.

- **Build pool of students ready for postsecondary enrollment.** Focus outreach to students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and young adults with some college experience and no credential. Build mentorship and engagement programs for middle and high school students. Partner with the business community to identify and engage students. Award credit to returning students for prior work and military service.

- **Increase capacity in high-demand programs.**
CURRENT INSTITUTIONAL COMPLETION STRATEGIES:

- **Implement Guided Pathways across the community and technical college system.** Provide technical assistance to colleges that enables high-quality advising to offer students clear course options on their best-fit credential pathways.

- **Make campus culture more inclusive and supportive, particularly for students of color and LGBTQ+ students.** Provide culturally specific student supports, expand partnerships with community-based organizations, focus on students’ first-year experience, and advance diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts through policy, practice, and hiring more faculty of color.

- **Scale up targeted wraparound services, especially for first-generation students, students of color, and students from low-income backgrounds.** Provide more comprehensive academic, social, mental health, and basic needs supports. Infuse these supports into orientation for new students and leverage regular interaction points.

- **Leverage integrated data systems and predictive analytics to guide student supports.** Use financial and academic data to identify students at highest risk of dropping out or not returning and target interventions accordingly.

- **Improve first-to-second year retention rates.** Improve advising and teaching in the first year and expand opportunities for remediation or supplemental instruction. Increase communication and outreach to students during gaps in the academic calendar.

- **Grow and improve distance learning pedagogy and virtual supports.** Focus on maximizing effectiveness of hybrid learning models, particularly with the pandemic-induced switch to virtual learning, and identify how to use multiple learning modalities to best meet student needs going forward.

INSTITUTION COMMITMENTS AND STRATEGIES TO GROW ENROLLMENT AND CREDENTIAL COMPLETION ARE UNPRECEDENTED AND AMBITIOUS. IF ACHIEVED, THESE STRATEGIES WILL DRIVE HALF OF THE GROWTH IN POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT THAT IS NEEDED TO REACH THE 70% CREDENTIAL ATTAINMENT GOAL.
We partnered with Kinetic West, a Seattle-based social impact consulting firm, to examine postsecondary systems in other states and identify opportunities to support the remaining enrollment and completion gains needed to reach our 70% credential attainment goal for Washington students. Those opportunities include:

- **State-level Postsecondary System Planning**: Washington’s postsecondary institutions offer a complex mix of campuses, programs, and education models which are rapidly changing amidst growth in certificate and online programs. While planning happens at the institution and local level, currently the state lacks a comprehensive and thorough method for assessing the needs of students and employers to create a system-wide plan to meet those needs. We envision a future in which Washington’s leaders work as a unified postsecondary system to set a vision and create a plan to meet our state’s needs while minimizing inefficiencies and competition, and articulating a clear role for each institution within the system.

- **State-level Coordination**: In Washington state, a broad array of entities, including postsecondary institutions, agencies, and associations; legislative bodies; and a growing number of boards, task forces, and work groups play a coordination role in postsecondary education. These overlapping and oftentimes conflicting forums hamper opportunities for significant collaboration and fragment participation of education leaders, employers, and students. Improving coordination would allow our state’s education leaders to better work together to make decisions for the good of our system and to support progress to the 70% attainment goal. Employers and students should be authentically involved in that process to ensure the postsecondary system is responsive to their needs.

- **Funding Redesign**: Washington’s current postsecondary funding system is not equitable, transparent, or growth oriented. The base-plus funding model is not student-focused, which means it does not reflect the number of students an institution is serving, the differential costs to serve those furthest from opportunity, or the relative costs and benefits of specific programs in which students enroll. We envision redesigning Washington’s funding model to be grounded in the “true cost” to educate and support students, promote equity, and incentivize and support enrollment growth (especially in high-demand fields).

- **Data Systems for Action**: Washington has a strong education data system, but limited capacity to use data to generate insights that inform policy and practice and track progress toward education attainment goals. Better utilizing data to transform our postsecondary system requires that we analyze data in relationship to our overarching goal, focus on the needs of students and families as customers, and increase timely access to data by education researchers and policymakers. We believe Washington can build a best-in-class data system that protects privacy and makes data transparent and easily available to researchers, students, and families.
Over the last half century, our nation has experienced a steady shift toward job creation that favors workers with postsecondary credentials. The Great Recession and subsequent recovery magnified that shift and most jobs created in our state in recent years require or are filled by credentialed workers. During the pandemic, credentialed workers have been experiencing unemployment at much lower rates than those with a high school diploma or less. Clearly, the credential is increasingly essential, yet it is estimated that only 41% of Washington students earn a credential by age 26. Our goal is 70%.

We are heartened by commitments from postsecondary institutions in our state to increase enrollment and completion. These institutions are working to innovate and maximize enrollment, throughput, and delivery of high-quality credentials. Their commitments, and the strategies they already have in place to reach those commitments, can close half of the remaining distance to the 70% goal. More work is needed to get to the finish line.

The Washington Roundtable and Partnership for Learning will work to protect gains already made on the path to 70% credential attainment. We will urge policymakers to maintain high school graduation pathways; ensure administration of state summative assessments in the K-12 system to better understand learning loss due to COVID-19; preserve need-based financial aid for low- and middle-income students; support Guided Pathways at the state’s community and technical colleges; and provide access to career-connected learning. We will further encourage expansion of dual-credit and dual-enrollment opportunities and pursue strategies to improve equity within Washington’s education systems.

As we look to the future, there is opportunity to reimagine how postsecondary education is delivered in Washington state. Such exploration can include comprehensive, inclusive planning to determine statewide postsecondary system needs; funding model redesign to produce credentials across institutions and programs; work to make data more broadly available and support informed decision-making; and better coordination among the various higher education and workforce development institutions and programs. In beginning these conversations, we all have a shared opportunity to not only recover from the current crisis, but to inspire more Washington students and support them through to earning credentials that will open doors to life-long opportunity.