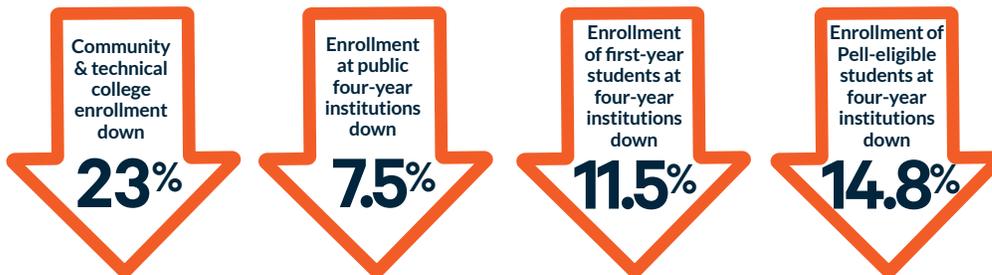


INCREASING POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT AMONG WASHINGTON STUDENTS CASE STUDY: THE PROMISE OF FLEXIBLE LEARNING

Employers will create 373,000 net new jobs in Washington state by 2026, with the anticipated annual growth rate in job creation set to outpace the nation. Seventy percent of these jobs are expected to require or be filled by workers with a postsecondary credential—such as a degree, apprenticeship, or certificate. But our state is facing a crisis in credential attainment.

Our young people, particularly young people of color and those from low-income backgrounds, have not been able to enroll in college and career pathways as planned.

FURTHER, THE PANDEMIC HAS DRIVEN ALARMING DROPS IN POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT:



OUR GOAL:

By the high school class of 2030, 70% of Washington students—overall and within each racial and ethnic group—will complete a postsecondary credential by age 26. Based on estimates for the high school class of 2019, less than half—just 43%—of Washington high school students will hit that benchmark. That number could erode for those high school cohorts affected by the pandemic.

WE MUST DO BETTER FOR WASHINGTON STUDENTS.

Strategies already underway can make up half the distance in enrollment gains needed to hit our goal of 70% credential attainment by the high school class of 2030. Getting the rest of the way will require new thinking, transformed systems, and an unrelenting effort to meet the needs and aspirations of Washington students, particularly Black, Hispanic, Latino/a, and Native American and Indigenous students and students from low-income backgrounds.

Our 2022 case study series will profile a range of opportunities that should be considered as stakeholders across Washington—educators, institutions, policymakers, employers, and families alike—work to remove barriers and support students on their best-fit pathways to a credential.

READ THE ENTIRE SERIES AT [CREDENTIALSSENTIAL.COM](https://www.credentialessential.com)



PROMISING STRATEGY: --- VIRTUAL LEARNING WITH FLEXIBLE SCHEDULES, CONSISTENT MENTORING, CLEAR ACADEMIC PATHWAYS

The COVID-19 pandemic drove learning across all levels online, with wildly varying results across the state and country. But even before the pandemic, colleges and universities have been implementing virtual education options to meet students' growing range of needs. For example, Washington State University (WSU) created [WSU Global](#) in 1992 and approved it as WSU's fifth campus in 2012. WSU Global serves 4,100 students and remains WSU's second largest campus. Similarly, [Eastern Washington University \(EWU\)](#) has expanded its virtual presence, offering nine bachelor's degree programs and 18 graduate degrees fully online. Prior to the pandemic, EWU enrolled about 1,700 online-only students annually.

One particularly bright enrollment success story comes from the all-virtual Western Governors University in Washington ([WGU Washington](#)). From 2011, when state lawmakers partnered with national nonprofit Western Governors University to create WGU Washington as a state affiliate, to 2019, WGU Washington grew from less than 1,000 to 12,000 students. **As of March 2021, there were 13,905 students attending WGU Washington, and enrollment had grown 15.8% in just the last two years.** By comparison, nearly all of Washington's public two- and four-year postsecondary institutions experienced enrollment declines during the same time period.

WGU WASHINGTON CITES FIVE REASONS FOR ENROLLMENT GROWTH: ---

- #1 ALL-VIRTUAL MODEL:** During the pandemic, when education existed almost exclusively online for many months, WGU Washington was poised with robust, scalable, and industry-aligned degree offerings.
- #2 FLAT TUITION RATE:** Students pay a flat fee every six months, no matter how many courses they enroll in or complete. The more classes a student takes, the faster they earn a degree, and the cheaper the cost per course.
- #3 FLEXIBLE AND STUDENT-DIRECTED LEARNING:** A student can start a program of study any month of the year and leverage asynchronous learning to meet individual learning styles. Students schedule exams when it works for them.
- #4 CONSISTENT MENTORING:** A specified faculty advisor mentors each student regularly throughout their time at WGU Washington.
- #5 STREAMLINED ACADEMIC PATHWAYS:** Accredited programs are delivered via single-focus tracks. Students choose their direction before starting, increasing the likelihood of finishing and entering a competitive labor market with a marketable credential.

WGU'S APPROACH

WGU Washington has arranged its operations to be highly responsive to both students and employers in a virtual setting. This approach means WGU has no physical space or location-based limitations, no other services to scale, and it can quickly increase available slots in academic tracks based on labor market demands.

WGU Washington also has built key partnerships with community and technical colleges in Washington that serve high concentrations of Black, Native American and Indigenous, Hispanic, and Latino/a students, as well as community-based organizations that share information about the institution's flexible approach. WGU Washington attributes its significant enrollment increases in part to the model's success in meeting the needs of students who have been systemically underserved.

According to 2021 national data from WGU, 69% of its students come from at least one of these populations:

- 39% first-generation college students
- 27% students of color
- 22% students from low-income backgrounds
- 16% rural residents

FLEXIBLE LEARNING WITH CLEAR COST STRUCTURE

One key incentive to enroll is that students can move at their own pace while paying a flat fee of about \$3,500 per six months. Students can start their coursework at the beginning of each month, as WGU does not use quarter or semester structures. Lectures, materials, and resources are available on demand, which means students can move quickly through content they grasp well or slow down with more challenging material. On average, students enter WGU Washington with prior credits and complete a bachelor's degree within 2.5 years.

- Average annual undergraduate tuition and fees after financial aid: **\$6,740**
- Average total cost to earn a bachelor's degree, without financial aid: **\$15,165**
- Average time to bachelor's degree: **2 years 3 months**

Sarah Williams earned her RN license at a traditional, brick-and-mortar institution and started working as a nurse. The flexibility at WGU Washington allowed her to continue work while pursuing her next degree.

After graduating, Sarah said, "I've already reaped a lot of rewards. I've gotten an increase in pay, and I also teach LPN clinicals now."¹



CONSISTENT MENTORING

The WGU model includes one-on-one coaching and mentoring to support every student academically and address personal challenges that arise. Full-time faculty mentors serve no more than 100 students at a time, and technology facilitates easier interaction. WGU uses Salesforce to track students' needs, and mentors use hashtags that allow leadership to identify trends and address global student needs in real time. This strategy enabled faculty to respond quickly to students' changing circumstances at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, including implementing a mental health check-in as part of mentoring time. Utilizing technology this way also spotlights student struggles with difficult subjects, providing opportunities for early interventions and targeted assistance such as tutoring.

STREAMLINED ACADEMIC PATHWAYS

Strong industry and employer partnerships enable WGU Washington to develop specific academic pathways that map to workforce demand. WGU Washington developed an Open Skills Network that maps WGU degrees to labor market data and in-demand skills. This effort benefits both students and employers by helping students identify and pursue skills that match their professional goals and by developing a shared language between industry and postsecondary institutions.

Employers regularly praise the quality of WGU's graduates. **Of 300 Washington employers surveyed, 98% said WGU Washington graduates meet or exceed expectations and 96% said they would hire another WGU Washington graduate.**²

LEARN MORE AT [CREDENTIALLESSENTIAL.COM](https://www.credentialessential.com)

JOIN US ON THE [#PATHTO70](https://twitter.com/WGU_PathTo70)

1. Sarah Williams story.

2. Data from a 2020 survey of 300 employers of WGU graduates by Harris Poll.