


PATH TO 70 UPDATE:

70,000+ Fewer Postsecondary Students Enrolled in Washington Compared to Pre-Pandemic

National data indicate the crisis of stagnant or declining postsecondary enrollment—already a concern before the pandemic—is deepening at colleges and universities across the country.¹

The situation is no different in Washington state. According to data shared with the Washington Roundtable by the state's public postsecondary institutions, fall 2022 enrollment of resident undergraduate students at Washington's public four-year colleges and universities is down by nearly 10,000 students (or 11.3%) compared to pre-pandemic figures (fall 2019). Preliminary data also indicate that enrollment across the state's 34 community and technical colleges could be down by approximately 60,000 students or more (an estimated decline of 26% or more).

**WA STATE
ENROLLMENT DECLINES
FALL 2019 – FALL 2022**

**Public Four-Year
Institutions
down nearly
10,000 students**

**Community &
Technical Colleges
down an estimated
60,000 students
or more**

The decline in postsecondary enrollment contrasts with the increasing economic need for **credentialed workers in Washington state**. From Nov. 2021 to Nov. 2022, employers added more than 130,000 jobs in Washington state,² representing a 3.8% year-over-year increase. That follows a decade of economic growth when a credential—such as a degree, apprenticeship, or certificate—had become essential for jobs that offer a good salary and advancement opportunities. National and state-level research in 2018 estimated that 70% of the jobs here would be filled by workers with postsecondary training and credentials.

PUBLIC FOUR-YEAR RESIDENT UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT

Fall 2022 enrollment is down 11.3% (or nearly 10,000 students) compared to 2019 pre-pandemic enrollment.

- Washington's public four-year institutions experienced a concerning dip in enrollment during the first year of the pandemic, with an overall resident undergraduate enrollment drop of 2.3% from fall 2019 to fall 2020. The problem worsened with a 5.3% decline in fall 2021. Enrollment is down for a third year in fall 2022 (4.1%).
- The size of enrollment decline compared to pre-pandemic numbers varies by institution, with enrollment down 1.3% at University of Washington; a little more than 11% at Washington State University and Western Washington University, and 22% to 27% at the other regional institutions.
- Enrollment of Pell-eligible students is down 22.1% (or 6,335 students).
- Enrollment of students of color is down 2.5% (or 900 students). However, enrollment of students of color at University of Washington is up for the third consecutive year.

Fall 2022 enrollment is down 4.1% (or 3,344 students) compared to fall 2021.

- Year-over-year enrollment declines vary by institution, with a percentage drop ranging from 0.4% at Evergreen State College to 7%–9% at some regional institutions. Notably, University of Washington saw a relatively small decline (down 1.5%).
- Resident undergraduate enrollment fell dramatically among Pell-eligible students, with a decline of 8.6% (or 2,102 students).
- Enrollment for students of color declined by 1.6% (or 551 students).

Enrollment of first-year resident undergraduates is recovering faster than enrollment overall.

- Enrollment of all first-year students increased by 2.7% (or 418 students) from 2021 to 2022.
- The number of enrolled resident first-year students who were Pell-eligible grew by 4.5% (or 202 students), and the number of resident first-year students of color grew by 5.6% (or 400 students) from 2021 to 2022.

COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

After year-over-year enrollment declines of 18.9% in fall 2020 and 6.6% in fall 2021, preliminary fall 2022 headcounts* indicate a third year of declining community and technical college enrollment.

- The preliminary fall 2022 total headcount of 156,133 suggests that final enrollment across the state's 34 community and technical colleges will likely fall between 148,326 and 163,940. Compared to fall 2021, this range suggests a decline of between 2.3% and 11.6%.
- Compared to fall 2019 (pre-pandemic), total headcount at Washington's community and technical colleges is likely down by between 26% and 33% or about 58,000 to 70,000 students.
- Enrollment of students of color is also down compared to pre-pandemic levels. Fall 2022 preliminary data suggests a decline of between 18% and 26% (or about 16,000 to 23,000 students).

*Community and technical college data for 2019 to 2021 are final. Data for 2022 is preliminary. These data do not include enrollments from rolling-entry programs (such as some apprenticeships), and it may vary up to +/- 5% compared to final enrollment counts.

SEEKING SOLUTIONS: Meeting students where they are

The rate of postsecondary enrollment for Washington students was nearly stagnant before the pandemic, and 43% of the state's high school class of 2019 were expected to complete a credential by age 26.⁴ Given the level of pandemic-related disruptions and the subsequent decline in postsecondary enrollment, there's every reason to believe that the gap between credential attainment and economic demand for credentialed workers in Washington state has widened.

Data suggest that Washingtonians aren't opting out of postsecondary education because they don't believe in it. Research in 2022 among Washington adults who hadn't pursued or completed postsecondary education confirms that the majority believe they would be better off with a credential, but several barriers—including concerns about cost, stress and life circumstances, and lack of access to flexible learning models—stopped them from pursuing and/or completing one.⁵ A sustained effort to remove barriers and spark dramatic gains in postsecondary enrollment and completion is needed.

In 2019, Washington's public postsecondary institutions committed to unprecedented enrollment and credential completion goals. This included individual commitments to increase enrollment by 9% to 50% and increase completion by 4% to 35%.⁶ Reaching these goals is more challenging following three years of pandemic-related enrollment declines, but catalyzing dramatic gains is even more important.

Washington must better prepare far more of its students for postsecondary education and better support them through to credential completion. Transformation of the state's postsecondary system as well as clear communications to prospective students about education-to-career pathways and supports that mitigate or remove common barriers will be critical.

As employers, we look to the postsecondary leaders in our state to lead this transformation and consider the design of models that better meet students where they are and align with workforce demands. We seek to collaborate in that effort and look forward to working together to ensure Washington students are prepared for the jobs that await.



1. Axios, "[Higher Education's Sea Change](#)," December 2022.

2. Washington State Employment Security Department, "[Nov. 2022 Monthly Employment Report](#)."

3. Washington Roundtable, "[The Path to 70% Credential Attainment for Washington Students](#)," 2018.

4. Washington Roundtable, "[Postsecondary Enrollment in Washington: The Crisis Intensifies](#)," January 2022.

5. Washington Roundtable, Kinetic West, "[Why Washingtonians Value Credentials But Aren't Completing Them](#)," December 2022.

6. Washington Roundtable, "[Path to 70% Credential Attainment: Recovery & Reimagining](#)," January 2021.