



**POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT**

**Begins to Show Signs of Recovery; Still Down 17% Since Pandemic**

Postsecondary education is no longer the preferred pathway to middle-class jobs; it is increasingly the only pathway. That's according to the *Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce*, which finds that 72% of jobs in Washington state, and across the country, will require postsecondary training or credentials by 2031. Washington ranks among the five states with the largest share of jobs requiring postsecondary education.<sup>1</sup>

The need for postsecondary education is clear, yet Washington and the nation continue to navigate a postsecondary enrollment crisis that began well before the pandemic. According to *Deloitte*, undergraduate enrollment in the United States peaked in 2010-11. It then began a steady slide before a sharp drop during the pandemic. Enrollment at American colleges and universities declined by more than 1.2 million students from 2020 to 2022<sup>2</sup>, portending a serious workforce crisis in the years to come as the growing majority of jobs increasingly require postsecondary skills and credentials.

In Washington state, postsecondary enrollment levels are showing signs of recovery after steep declines following the pandemic's onset. Overall, 51,000+ fewer resident undergraduate students enrolled at public postsecondary institutions in Washington state in fall 2023 than in fall 2019. This includes the loss of nearly 41,000 students (or -18%) across the state's 34 community and technical colleges (CTCs) and more than 10,000 resident undergraduate students (or -12%) at the state's six public four-year institutions. These losses came at a time when the size of Washington's high school graduating classes has held steady or increased.

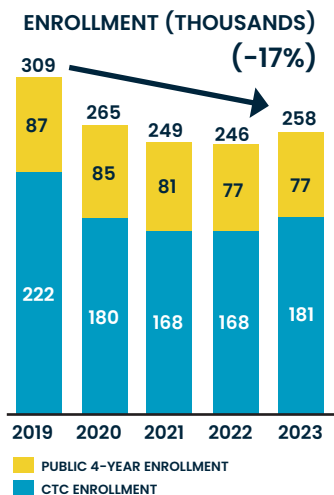
There are bright spots in the fall 2023 enrollment data. CTC enrollment is up nearly 13,000 students year-over-year. Enrollment of first-year resident undergraduate students in the public four-year system is up 3% year-over-year. Enrollment of Black students has increased since the pandemic's onset, up 2.3%.

51,000+ fewer students enrolled in Washington's public postsecondary institutions in fall 2023 compared to fall 2019.

After three years of steep declines, postsecondary enrollment increased year-over-year, led by the Community & Technical Colleges.

Black student enrollment has improved since the pandemic, up 2.3%.

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



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## PUBLIC FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS: RESIDENT UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT

### Fall 2023 enrollment is down 12.3% (-10,713 students) compared to 2019 pre-pandemic enrollment.

- Overall resident undergraduate enrollment dropped 2.3% from fall 2019 to fall 2020. The problem worsened with a 5.3% decline in fall 2021 and a 4.3% decline in fall 2022. By fall 2023, the trend showed signs of plateauing with a 1.1% overall decline.
- Enrollment declines compared to pre-pandemic numbers vary by institution. Enrollment at UW is relatively flat over the four years, down 0.8%. Enrollment declines at the other five institutions range from 12.3% to 30.4%.
- Enrollment of first-year resident undergraduate students declined 4.8% (-790 students) from fall 2019 to fall 2023.
- Enrollment of Pell-eligible students is down 21.9% (-6,266 students) compared to pre-pandemic—a decline nearly two times larger than the percentage drop in public four-year enrollment overall.
- Enrollment of students of color declined 2.6% (-932 students) compared to pre-pandemic.

### Overall fall 2023 enrollment is down 1.1% (-854 students) compared to fall 2022, but there are bright spots in the year-over-year data.

- Compared to fall 2022, enrollment of resident undergraduates in fall 2023 is up 15.5% (+243 students) at Evergreen State College and up 0.5% (+153 students) at UW. It is down between 1.2% and 5.7% at the other institutions.
- Enrollment of first-year resident undergraduates is up 3.0% (+450 students) year-over-year.
- Resident undergraduate enrollment of Pell-eligible students is up 0.4% (+98 students) from fall 2022 to fall 2023. This includes increases at UW (+1.9%), WSU (+1.0%), WWU (+1.7%), and Evergreen State College (+1.0%).
- Enrollment of students of color is relatively flat, down 0.1% (-31 students) year-over-year. Notably, enrollment of students of color jumped at Evergreen State College nearly 29.4% (+151 students). UW and WSU also saw slight increases.

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## COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

### Final fall 2023 enrollment across Washington's 34 community and technical colleges is down 18.4% (-40,725 students) compared to pre-pandemic, but year-over-year enrollment is showing signs of recovery.

- Fall 2023 enrollment is up 7.6% (+12,830) students compared to fall 2022.
- The percentage of CTC students receiving financial aid is up 37.2% (+17,633 students) in fall 2023 compared to fall 2019. This includes a year-over-year increase of 14.2% (+8,066 students) compared to fall 2022.
- Enrollment of students of color is down 11.8% (-10,574 students) in fall 2023 compared to fall 2019. However, enrollment of students of color is up 8.5% (+6,160 students) year-over-year.

# PARTNERING ON SOLUTIONS: Inviting students and adults into education and training.

Washington has added more than 500,000 jobs since the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic; another 500,000 are expected by 2030. Washington employers want to hire locally whenever possible, and these jobs come with increasing demand for higher skill levels—requiring degrees, apprenticeships, and industry-aligned certificates and licenses.

**Postsecondary enrollment trended in the opposite direction of what our state needs following the pandemic’s onset.** That’s not because Washingtonians don’t believe in the value of postsecondary credentials. The opposite is true. Seventy-nine percent of Washingtonians say education beyond high school is necessary for success. Four out of five Washingtonians support the goal that 70% of Washington students complete a post-high school credential. Further, Washingtonians overwhelmingly agree there should be more opportunities for work-embedded learning and new career paths for adults.<sup>3</sup>

**Recent state policy changes will pave a smoother path to postsecondary enrollment and completion.** Legislation passed in 2023 to make College in the High School programs free for students has already resulted in thousands more high school students enrolling in coursework where they can earn college credit. Guided Pathways programs at the CTCs streamline course selection and increase completion. Expanded availability of the Washington College Grant guarantees financial aid for students from low- and middle-income households.

## THE CHALLENGE AHEAD CALLS FOR BOLDER ACTION.

Enrollment declines during the pandemic era only exacerbated a postsecondary enrollment and credential attainment crisis that had been brewing for over a decade. Open capacity exists at nearly all of Washington’s postsecondary institutions. As a state, we must confront the challenge of lower postsecondary enrollment head-on, pursuing transformative changes that will draw Washington’s high school graduates and workers in need of upskilling into education and training programs and supporting increased credential attainment.

Washington Roundtable and Partnership for Learning are committed to engaging in and supporting systemwide and institution-specific strategies to grow enrollment, offer students the support they need to complete a credential, and eliminate inequities in our education system.



## SOURCES:

1. Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, Martin Van Der Werf, and Michael C. Quinn. After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, November 2023.
2. Cole Clark, Megan Culver, and Jeffrey Selingo. Trend No.1: College enrollment reaches its peak. Deloitte’s Center for Education Excellence, May 17, 2023.
3. FM3 Research: Survey of 612 Washington voters, Oct. 24-29, 2023, conducted on behalf of College Promise Coalition.