



The State of Washington: *Undergraduate Enrollment*

Environmental Scan Series 2025

Understanding trends in Washington state to advance WSU

Environmental Scan Series

The State of Washington: Undergraduate Enrollment

Washington State University strives to educate Washington’s population and provide integral research, work that fuels the state’s labor market and uplifts its people. To that end, it is essential that we examine postsecondary enrollment in Washington to understand the needs and challenges of the state’s diverse communities.

In this report, we explore the shifting currents of undergraduate enrollment in Washington state. By examining changes in the education pipeline, the challenges students encounter after enrolling, and the barriers hindering enrollment, we gain insight into the broader trends shaping higher education in the state. Understanding these factors allows us to identify key pressures on enrollment and retention, helping Washington State University adapt to better support students and address emerging needs.



Education Pipeline

Go-on Rates

The go-on rate is a measurement that helps us understand and predict the pipeline of high school graduates that will seek higher education within a year after leaving high school.

Fewer and fewer of Washington’s high school graduates have been going into postsecondary education after graduation. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Washington state has historically had fewer high school graduates who enroll in postsecondary education within a year after graduation (that is, a lower go-on rate) as compared to the US average (Figure 1). While the US’ go-on rate grew from 66% in 2013 up to 70% in 2018, Washington state’s go-on rate peaked at 62% in 2013 and has overall been declining since. For both the US and Washington, the go-on rate was severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and has been slowly recovering since.

Quick Summary

Shifting Pipelines:

The share of Washington high school graduates enrolling in the state’s public four-year institutions has remained relatively stable, but the share heading to out-of-state institutions saw a significant rise before dropping sharply post-2021. Fewer students are choosing to go on to college, with the effects of the pandemic being felt unevenly across different genders, races, and ethnicities.

Declining Enrollment and Graduation Rates:

Fewer students are enrolling in undergraduate programs despite the growing population count in Washington. While Washington’s public four-year first-year retention rate is holding strong, the state’s six-year graduation rate has fallen below the national average after historically outperforming it.

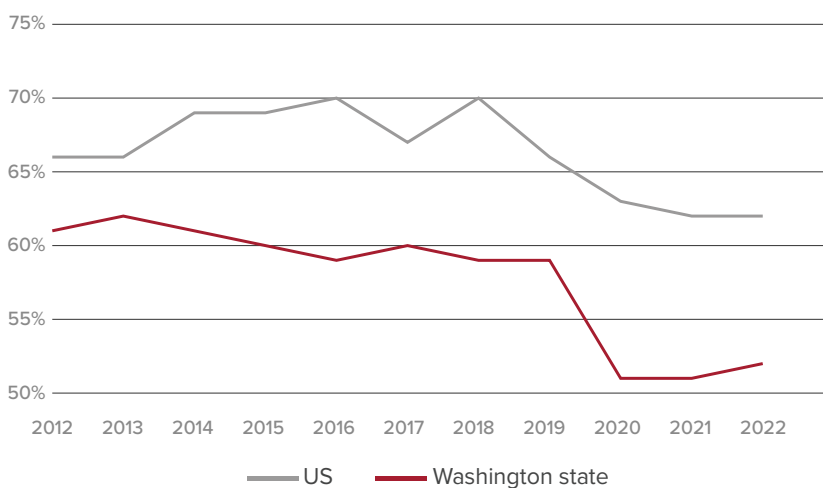
Unclear Costs and Benefits:

The value of higher education is increasingly questioned. While the cost of education has increased on paper, inflation-adjusted costs now mirror those from 2011. However, wage premiums vary significantly by race, gender, and major, creating uncertainty for prospective students. In light of this, job market-focused alternatives like vocational programs and tech boot camps are becoming more popular.

Questions to Consider

Beyond the pandemic, there are many reasons we may be seeing declining go-on rates including high median wages for jobs not requiring a degree (relative to other states), an increasing preference for fast and accessible education, and student debt concerns. Further, Gallup conducted a poll in 2023 which found that confidence in higher education in the US has declined considerably since their prior polling in 2018 and 2015. Combined with the projected decline in high school graduates in coming years, as discussed in our previous [demographic scan](#), these factors could pose a significant challenge to undergraduate enrollment.

Figure 1: Go-on Rates for High School Graduates, 2012-2022



Source: NCES

Looking at data from Washington state's Education Research and Data Center (ERDC), we can see that the percentages of Washington high school graduates heading to each of the state's public 4-year institutions have largely held steady over the last decade (Figure 2). Out of Washington state's high school graduates that choose to pursue higher education, we see that around 1% have gone to The Evergreen State College (TESC), 2-3% have gone to Eastern Washington University (EWU), 3-4% have gone to Central Washington University (CWU), 4-5% have gone to Western Washington University (WWU), and 6-8% have consistently gone to Washington State University (WSU). Only the University of Washington (UW) has shown growth in its share of the go-on rate over this period, going from 10-11% near 2012 to now more consistently receiving 12-13% of the high school graduate population.

Washington's ERDC also collects go-on data for students who enroll in a private or public out-of-state four-year institution. This category grew from 16% in 2012 to a peak of 30% in 2021 but declined by nearly one-third over the next two years and dropped to 21% in 2023.

As we review these enrollment trends for Washington state, we should think about their effect on WSU and our ability to affect them in turn. Some initial questions to ask are:

How will the declining go-on rate and increasing competition with other institutions — both inside and outside of Washington — affect WSU's recruitment efforts in the future?

What strategies could WSU use to combat declining graduation rates, especially in the face of strong financial pressures for both the institution and its students?

How could WSU integrate elements of alternative education (flexible, accessible, stackable) to remain competitive with increasingly popular alternatives?

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Figure 2: Washington Go-on Rate for Public 4-Year Institutions and Out of State, 2012-2023

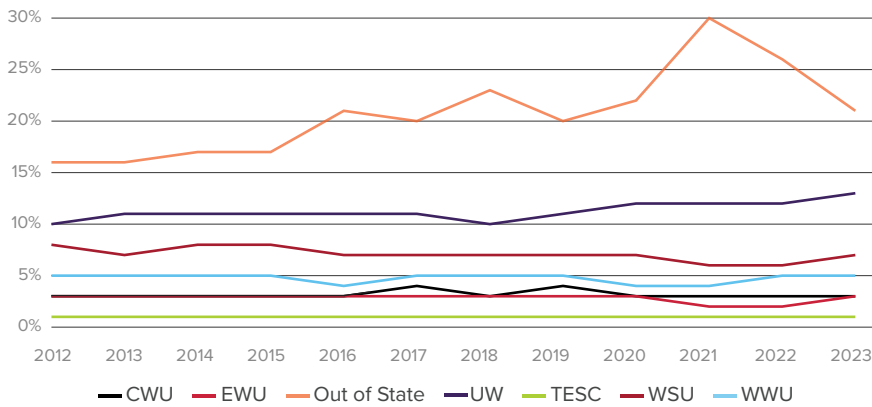


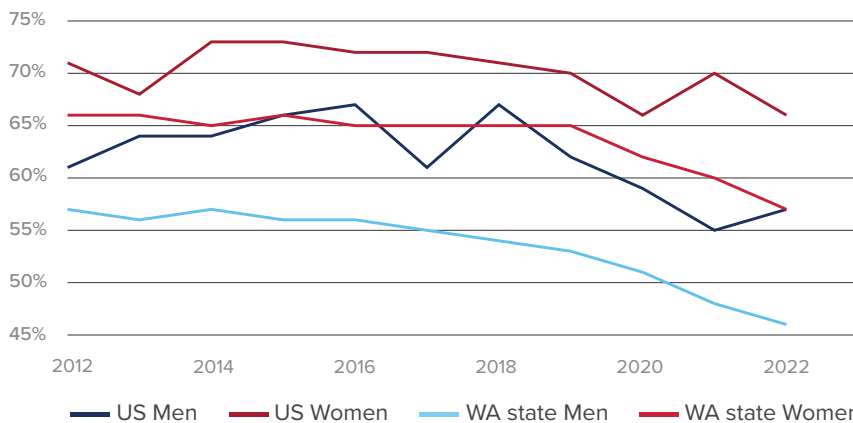
Figure 2 updated with correction on April 9, 2025

Source: ERDC

Demographics

Digging deeper into the go-on rates from both the NCES and the ERDC, we can see how go-on rates have varied across individuals of different genders, races, and ethnicities (Figure 3). Looking at the last decade, we see that the go-on rate for men has on average trailed the go-on rate for women by 8.1% at the national level and by 10.3% in Washington state. Further, we see that the pandemic created a similar reduction in go-on rates for both men and women but that by 2022 the divergence between the two had grown slightly. This tracks with the fact that fewer men are choosing to pursue higher education in comparison to women.

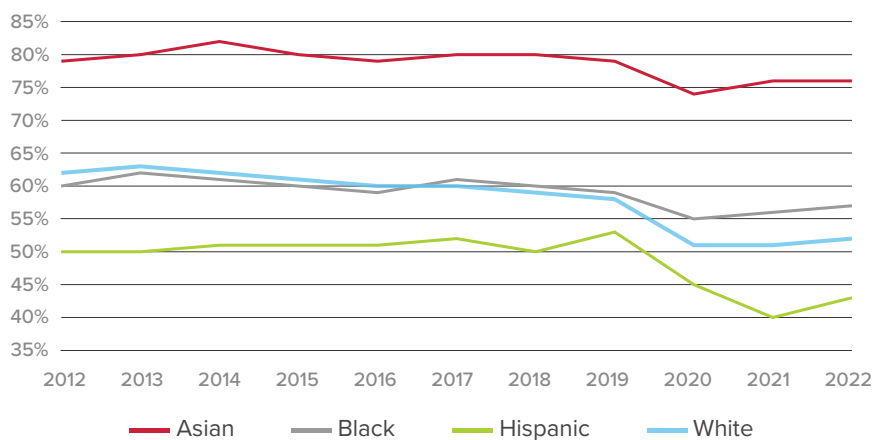
Figure 3: Go-on Rates for High School Graduates by Gender, 2012-2022



Source: NCES & ERDC

Looking at the go-on rates for individuals of different races and ethnicities here in Washington state, we can see that the pandemic impacted racial groups differently (Figure 4). Asian and Black individuals showed a 5-percentage point drop from 2019 to 2020, White individuals had a 7-point drop, and Hispanic individuals had an 8-point drop. Further, we see that while most groups recovered some going into 2021, Hispanics dropped an additional 5 points and only began to recover in 2022. Washington’s ERDC does not provide data on other race or ethnicity groups.

Figure 4: Go-on Rates for Washington High School Graduates by Race/Ethnicity, 2012-2022



Source: ERDC

Examining Enrollment

Enrollment Rates

Undergraduate enrollment rates have been declining across the US for over a decade, a trend only exacerbated by the pandemic (Figure 5). According to the US Census, undergraduate enrollment peaked for both the US and in Washington state in 2012 (19.8 million and 400.3 thousand students respectively) but by 2023 the US had lost 3.4 million students (17.3%) and Washington had lost 64.6 thousand (16.1%).

These enrollment declines in undergraduate programs have continued despite population growth, with Washington’s population growing by nearly 916 thousand individuals (13.3% growth) between 2012 and 2023, and the US having grown by over 21 million individuals (6.7% growth) in that same period. Looking at enrollment in comparison to the population at large, we see that the US went from having 6.3% of its population enrolled in

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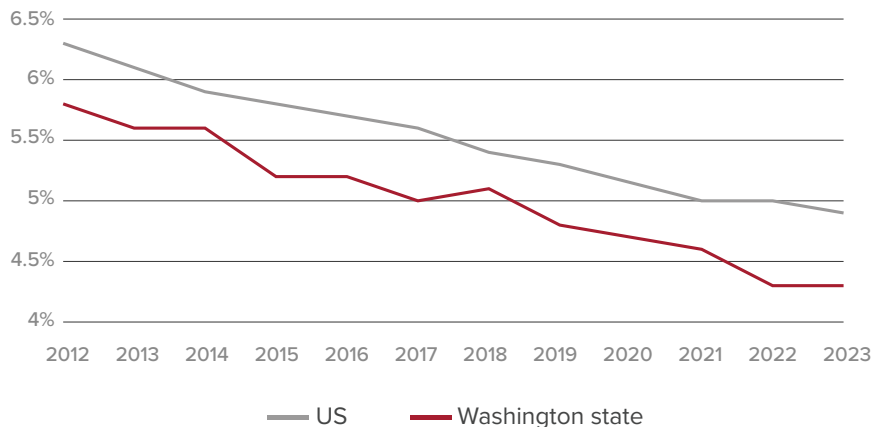
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undergraduate programs in 2012 to 4.9% in 2023. In Washington, we see that undergraduate enrollment moved from 5.8% of the population to 4.3% of the population in the same time period.

Figure 5: Undergraduate Enrollment as a Percent of Total Population, 2012 to 2023



Source: US Census

Retention Rates

Retention rates are a measurement that looks at the percentage of full-time first-year students who return for their second year and are generally measured from fall to fall.

With lower go-on rates and declining undergraduate enrollment, ensuring the continuation of enrolled students is increasingly important for postsecondary institutions. According to the NCES, Washington has had an average retention rate of 83.3% across the last decade for its first-year students, just about 2% above the US average of 81.4% in the same period (Figure 6). Looking back to 2014, the US retention rate grew between 2014 and 2020, with a peak of 82.4% before dropping to a low of 80.8% in 2021. The US' average retention has recovered quickly with a net total growth of 1.3% since 2014 for an average of 82.1% in 2023. Washington's retention rate does not appear to have been significantly impacted by the pandemic, and in 2023 Washington matched its 2016 peak with an 83.9% retention rate. This places Washington 1.8% above the US average in the same year and shows a 1.7% growth over Washington's average retention rate a decade ago in 2014.

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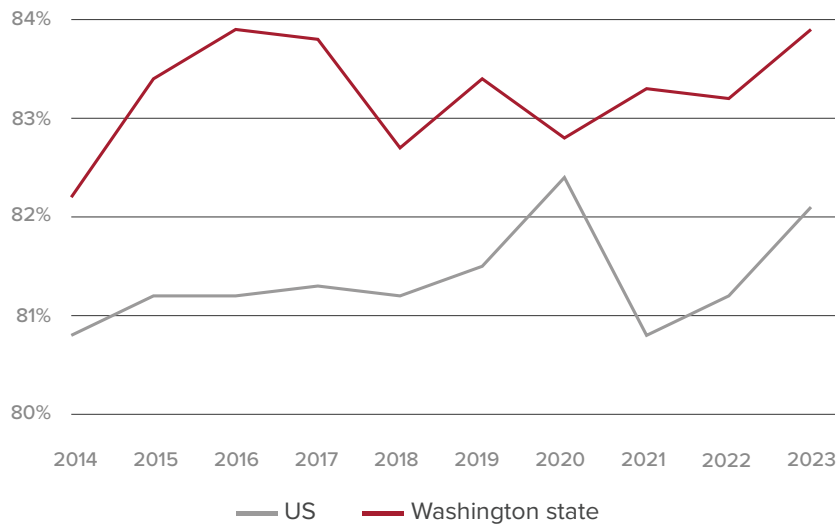
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Figure 6: Retention Rates for 4-year Public Institutions, 2014-2023



Source: NCES



Graduation Rates

Looking back to 1998, Washington has historically had a higher six-year graduation rate among its public four-year institutions as compared to the US average (Figure 7). Washington had an average graduation rate of 63.7% up until 2004 against the US' 55.8% over the same period. However, Washington's graduation rate began to decline after 2004, and by the most recent cohort of 2017, has dropped to 56.9%.

The US' graduation rate began to rise in 2010 and surpassed that of Washington state for the first time in 2012, with the 2017 cohort (graduating in 2023) having a graduation rate of 61.0%. This drop in graduation rates represents a considerable challenge for Washington institutions. As Washington has a higher average first-year retention rate as compared to the US, seeing graduation rates drop like this may be indicative of growing problems in the following years for Washington students.

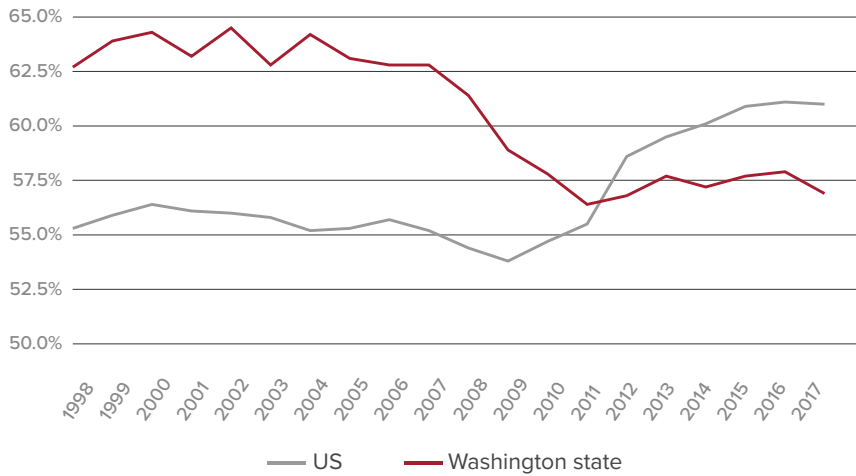
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Figure 7: Six Year Graduation Rates for 4-year Public Institutions, 1998-2017 Cohorts



Source: US Census

Evolving Student Choices

Cost of Attendance

There are many factors at play in the changing nature of undergraduate enrollment. Undeniably, concerns about cost of education are among the key forces working against undergraduate enrollment in the US. According to the Lumina Foundation-Gallup “Cost of College” study in 2024, 56% of never-enrolled or previously enrolled adults say cost is a “very important” reason why they have not enrolled or reenrolled. Further, they found that 31% of enrolled adults considered withdrawing due to cost and it was an especially important consideration for those pursuing a bachelor’s degree. These polls highlight the importance of cost as a determinant for undergraduate enrollment.

There is a public perception that the cost of education has grown considerably. If we consider the explicit price tag for education, this perception is correct: according to the NCES, the average cost of higher education in the US has more than doubled in the last two decades. However, when looking at historical prices, it’s important to look at both the nominal and the real price of education. The nominal price is what it says on the price tag for something in a given year. Given the value of a dollar changes from year to year, comparing nominal prices across time means we aren’t making an apples-to-apples comparison — nominal prices don’t account for inflation. Economists prefer to use real prices instead, as these are adjusted for inflation and thus give us a functional price we can compare over time.

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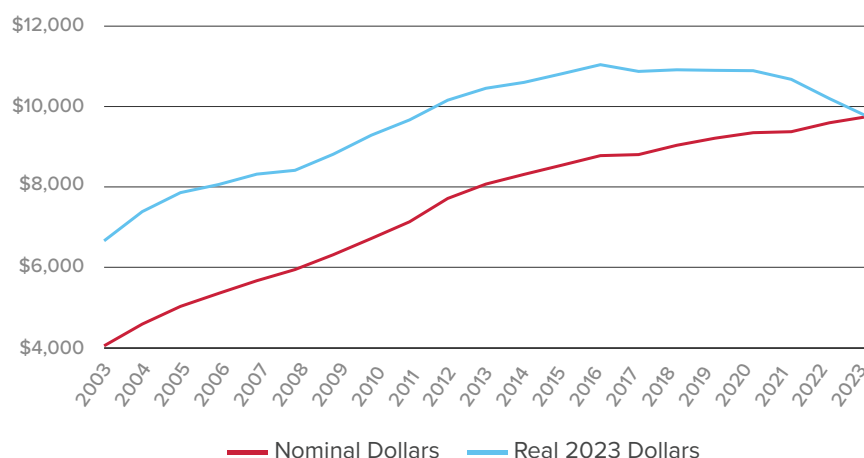
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Figure 8: Average US Undergraduate Tuition and Fees, Nominal and Real, FY 2003-2023



Source: NCES

If we instead look at the historical real price of undergraduate tuition and fees in the US (adjusting to 2023 for inflation), we see the price of education rose rapidly from 2003 (\$6.6 thousand) through its peak in 2016 (\$11.0 thousand) — increasing by 66% in those 13 years (Figure 8). However, since 2016 we see that real price of undergraduate tuition in the US has declined on average, with an 11.7% drop from the peak to \$9.8 thousand in 2023. This decline makes the current price of undergraduate education most comparable to the real price back in 2011, which had an average cost of \$9.7 thousand.

We can also see that the growth rate of the nominal price of undergraduate tuition has slowed, declining from an average annual growth of 7.2% from 2004 to 2013 to an average annual growth of 1.9% from 2014 to 2023. While this doesn't negate the perception and issues of cost surrounding postsecondary education, it may highlight the degree to which students are sensitive to price changes in education and the challenging perception of higher education costs.

Looking at the cost of education within Washington state, we see that among the public four-year institutions only Washington State University and the University of Washington have tuition and fees above national average (Figure 9). In addition to tuition and fees we can look at total expenses, which includes food, housing, and other expenses. We can also look at net price, which discounts the total expense by the average grant or scholarship aid students receive (including tuition discount waivers). According to the NCES, WSU has the highest tuition and fees across all public four-year institutions in Washington, UW has the highest total expenses, and WWU has the highest net price. The NCES dataset reflects tuition and fees for resident students on the Pullman campus.

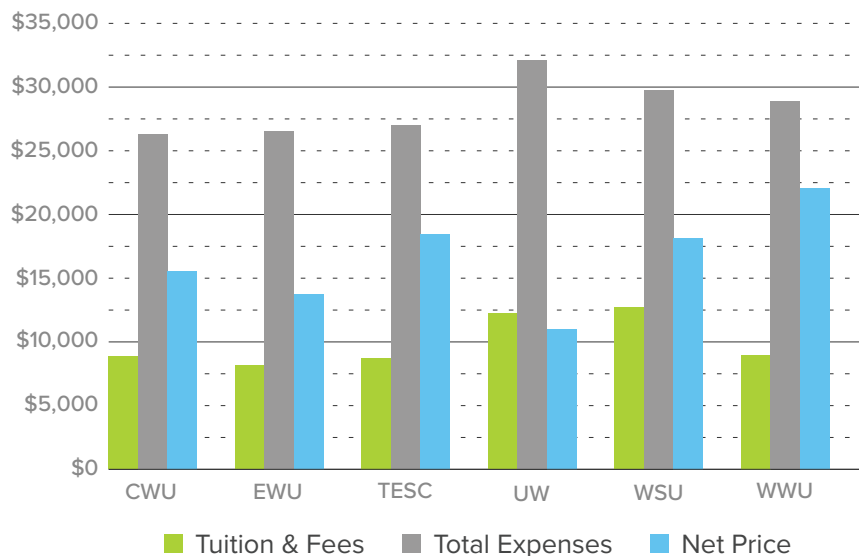
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Figure 9: Average In-State Costs for Washington 4-year, Public Institutions, FY 2023



Source: NCES

Value of Education

Pursuing higher education has clear cost and time commitments for prospective students, but the benefits are frequently less clear. According to a Pew Research Center poll from 2024, only one in four US adults believes it's extremely or very important to have a four-year degree in order to get a well-paying job. However, the average individual without at least a four-year degree doesn't make a living wage in Washington state (see our previous [demographic trends](#) report). Additionally, a 2023 report from Georgetown highlights that 36% of all jobs in the US required a bachelor's degree or higher in 2021. The report further projects that this will rise to 42% by 2031. This begs the question: why is there such a disconnect between public perception and the reality of the labor market?

Some of this public perspective may be explained by the difference between the average outcome for students and the individual outcome a student believes they may experience. The value of a degree is frequently communicated by the average increase in earnings that graduates experience. However, there is a risk that a student will not complete their degree. Further, not all degrees confer the same benefits. In 2023, College Board analyzed earnings for 2018-2019 across 29 different college majors. According to their findings, there was a \$55,000 difference in average earnings between the highest and lowest-paid degrees (seeing a \$100,000 high against a \$43,700 low) when looking at mid-career median earnings. Further, they found significant differences in the benefit of a degree when looking between men and women, and among different races and ethnicities.

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Financial concerns are high on the list of deterrents for prospective students. According to Lumina Foundation-Gallup’s “The State of Higher Education” study in 2024, the cost of the degree or credential program was a deterrent to enrollment for 85% of the surveyed adults who had either stopped out or never enrolled in higher education. When measuring variable outcomes against the clearer costs and time commitments of higher education, students may find the uncertainty to be a significant barrier to their enrollment (or their persistence, if financial struggles strike during their studies). Given the Pew Research Center’s findings on public perception of education, it’s also possible that stories of individuals with poor outcomes are simply more present within the public eye or that they are more likely to be remembered, complicating discussions around average results. Given this uncertainty around the benefits of education, institutions may want to consider providing their prospective and current students with relevant labor market data regarding their education to make better-informed decisions.

Strong Alternatives

Undergraduate enrollment is encountering stiff competition from strong alternatives like vocational schools and tech bootcamps. It appears that prospective students are increasingly looking for faster entry into the workforce than is generally afforded by a four-year degree. According to the NCES, enrollment in two-year colleges in the spring semester of 2024 exceeded that of four-year institutions. Nationally, this was especially true for community colleges with an emphasis on vocational programs, who saw an increase in enrollment of nearly 18% and now are exceeding their pre-pandemic enrollment by nearly 5%. However, Washington state has not seen this trend hold true for its institutions. According to data from the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, community colleges enrollments in Washington have continued to decline since the pandemic, with professional and technical education student headcounts having dropped from just over 123,000 in 2021 to just over 69,000 in 2025.

This trend is also emphasized by the rapid growth of tech bootcamps. These bootcamps are typically three-to-six month private programs designed to help graduates secure entry-level positions in tech. According to Forbes, the median cost of a coding bootcamp in 2025 was \$9,500 and on average takes twenty weeks to complete. Forbes surveyed 500 graduates from tech bootcamps and found that over 80% of the graduates saw at least a \$20,000 increase in salary after completion and over 43% saw a salary increase of \$30,000 or more. While they’re still providing only a small percentage of the education occurring both within the US and globally, the success of these bootcamps emphasizes the increasing demand for accessible and flexible programs that are informed by the demands of the labor market. Further, their success in addressing these demands highlights that they’re filling gaps in the market that traditional institutions are failing to address.

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What's Next

Coming Up

This report is the second in a series of environmental scans designed to enhance our understanding of critical forces shaping WSU and the broader Washington state landscape. Upcoming reports will explore the labor market and the state economy in Washington, providing some key market insights to inform institutional strategy and policy moving forward.

For more information

Access more insights and find future reports in this series at strategy.wsu.edu/system-strategy/trends/. This resource hub provides a comprehensive view of environmental scanning efforts and tools to support informed decision-making.

About OSPA

This report was compiled by the Office of Strategy, Planning, and Analysis (OSPA), which plays a pivotal role at WSU by leveraging institutional data and analytics to drive informed planning and transparent decision-making across the WSU system. OSPA ensures alignment and consistency in strategic initiatives, working collaboratively with campuses, colleges, and units to achieve WSU's vision and priorities. Through actionable insights, OSPA stewards progress toward institutional excellence.

Learn more about OSPA at strategy.wsu.edu or contact us at strategy@wsu.edu.

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