



2019 Roadmap Progress Report

Measuring progress toward increased educational attainment

December 2019

Key Takeaways

We invest in public education because we know that it can change lives and communities. We measure these efforts to evaluate if opportunities are improving Washingtonians.

Increases in the rates of both high school and postsecondary educational attainment are modest.

- ▶ Washington's high school attainment rate is just under 91 percent, up one percentage point since 2013.¹
- ▶ Our postsecondary educational attainment rate is 57 percent, up five percentage points since 2013.²

Critical populations are still underserved and underrepresented in high school attainment and postsecondary enrollment.

- ▶ It is critical to continue focusing on policies and programs that can improve equity and close opportunity gaps.

Progress on Strategic Priorities

Washington ranks near the bottom of all states for the percentage of high school seniors who complete a FAFSA. Washington offers robust state financial aid. Filling out a financial aid application (FAFSA or WASFA) is the key to accessing those funds for an affordable education.³ The benefits of increasing FAFSA filings are clear: seniors who complete a FAFSA are 84 percent more likely to continue their education directly after high school.⁴

Washington's enrollment lags behind the national average. And enrollment is declining nationwide. In Washington, nearly five in ten graduating seniors delay or forgo enrollment—a reality that places the state 46th in the country.⁵

Food and housing insecurity, childcare, and access to mental health care are primary concerns. Most students are in or near poverty or have lower incomes. Over a third of all college students are over the age of 25.⁶ And over a quarter of undergraduate students are parents. Many of those are single parents.⁷

Less than half of Washington high school graduates who enroll in college complete their credential within eight years.⁸ While our completion rates are above the national average, students of color and those from low-income families—students who must overcome disadvantages throughout the education pipeline—are less likely to succeed.⁹ Students of color who make it through high school to enroll in college complete at a rate 16 percentage points below the average.¹⁰

Strategic and aligned efforts improve outcomes.

If we build an affordable and supportive educational environment, more Washington residents will enroll in a postsecondary program and complete a credential. To coordinate this effort, the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) has identified four strategic priorities. This report is organized around those priorities, highlighting measures indicative of progress, with a focus on equity.

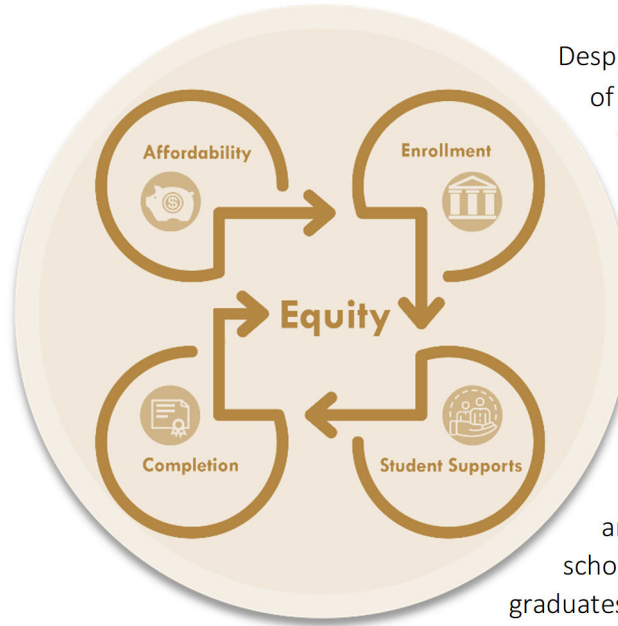
Equity is the focus.

Central to this work is our ongoing commitment to address persistent opportunity gaps. For each strategic priority, we have included data indicative of the work needed to address equity disparities.

Affordability

Reduce financial barriers to support every Washington resident who desires and is able to attend postsecondary education.

Equity Focus. Financial aid provides equitable access to affordable pathways. Affordability is at its core an equity issue: nearly half of the K-12 population comes from low-income families, and students of color are over-represented in this group.¹¹



Despite the extraordinary benefits of financial aid, thousands of Washington students and families don't submit a financial aid application, leaving money on the table.

Enrollment

Increase the number of students pursuing a postsecondary credential—both recent graduates and adult learners.

Equity Focus. Students from low-income families enroll at rates 19 percentage points below their peers. And the differences in enrollment by race and ethnicity are stark—from 44 percent among American Indian high school graduates to 81 percent for Asian high school graduates.¹²

Student supports

Provide a comprehensive and coordinated system of support to help postsecondary students with food and housing insecurity, childcare expenses, behavioral health, and other impediments to educational attainment.

Equity Focus. In 2018, almost 60 percent of community college and a little over 50 percent of bachelor's degree students reported experiencing food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness during the past year. The impacts prove particularly harmful to low-income, first-generation, and marginalized student populations.¹³

Completions

Increase the number of students who earn a postsecondary credential.

Equity Focus. Nearly half of Washington graduates who enroll in college complete their credential within eight years.¹⁴ While this is above the national average, students of color who enroll in college complete at a rate sixteen percentage points below the average.¹⁵

Increases in educational attainment remain modest.

Measuring the state's educational attainment—the percentage of working-age adults who earn a postsecondary degree or certificate—is a good indicator of our system's strength and capacity to serve Washingtonians.

To prepare Washington residents for the workforce, the state's two educational attainment goals for working-aged adults (ages 25–44) are:

- ▶ All adults earn a high school diploma or equivalent.
- ▶ At least 70 percent of adults attain a postsecondary credential.

In 2017, Washington saw modest increases in both high school and postsecondary educational attainment.

- ▶ Washington's high school attainment rate is just under 91 percent, up one point since 2013.¹⁶
- ▶ Our postsecondary educational attainment rate is 57 percent, up five percentage points since 2013.¹⁷

The good news: Washington's overall postsecondary educational attainment is higher than the national average. So is per-capita personal income and job growth. Students enrolled in our postsecondary system complete at rates above the national average.¹⁸ And the state's strong demand for skilled labor means graduates often find work near home.¹⁹

Washington is home to innovative and high-paying employment opportunities. Access to most of those jobs hinges on education or training after high school. Washingtonians are fortunate to live in a state where the return on investment in education is strong. Seattle and other urban areas pay high wages for skilled workers. Meeting the state's attainment goals can give high school graduates and working-age adults the chance to compete for the best jobs in the state's growing economy.

We must expand opportunities for Washington residents to benefit from Washington's growth.

The profound impact of continued education after high school is clear. The benefits—increased earnings, job security, longer life span—can significantly improve quality of life.²⁰ These benefits can extend to the household and across multiple generations. And a credentialed population positively influences our society through reduced strain on social services, reduced incarceration rates, and increased civic engagement. We invest in public education because we know that it can change lives and communities. We measure these efforts to ensure we meet the needs of the public we serve.

Cost is a barrier to higher education.

Many prospective students avoid higher education because of the cost. Even for enrolled students, the expense can lead to delayed progress or dropping out entirely. Earnings, savings, and scholarships combined can still sometimes not be enough. Access to grant aid has been limited.

*Last year the gap between educational costs and financial aid received was over \$10,000 for low-income students—nearly 93,000 undergraduates took on debt.*²¹

Washington has taken unprecedented steps to address affordability concerns, minimizing tuition increases while expanding access to guaranteed financial aid through the new Washington College Grant.

The promise of aid to students from low- and middle-income families has the potential to change both the perception and reality of higher education affordability.

Financial aid provides equitable access to affordable pathways. Affordability is at its core an equity issue: nearly half of the K-12 population comes from low-income families, and students of color are over-represented in this group.²² The first, best step for students is to file a financial aid application.

For most students, this is the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). For those who can't file a FAFSA due to immigration status, Washington has the WASFA (Washington Application for State Financial Aid).

Less than half of Washington seniors completed a FAFSA



64% national average

46% in Washington

Despite the extraordinary benefits, thousands of Washington students and families don't submit a financial aid application, leaving money on the table. Washington must do more to encourage and support students and families in applying for financial aid.

Washington ranks 49th in financial aid applications by high school seniors.

The benefits of increasing FAFSA filings are clear: seniors who complete a FAFSA are 84 percent more likely to enroll in further education directly after high school. The rate is even higher for students from lower-income families.²³ Yet not enough students are applying for financial aid. Less than half of all Washington seniors file a FAFSA.



in the nation for
FAFSA Completion
among high school seniors

And despite a slight increase from the class of 2016 to 2017, the rate of high school seniors completing a FAFSA has been stagnant since, with Washington ranking 49th in this measure.²⁴

WSAC helps high schools track FAFSA-filing through an online portal, which helps schools identify students who are on track to graduate but have yet to file. Using this measure, less than 60 percent of expected graduates are completing the FAFSA. In a state where the economy rewards educational attainment, these results are unacceptable.

A closer look at key affordability indicators.

In addition to increasing financial aid applications, the following indicators measure progress on affordability.

College Bound Scholarship sign-up rate

College Bound's early commitment of financial aid inspires students from low-income families to work hard and prepare for education after high school. College Bound benefits thousands of Washington families. The program is key to addressing equity gaps, as most participants are students of color.

The early promise makes a difference. In 2017, College Bound students graduated at a rate 12 percentage points higher than their low-income peers who were eligible but did not sign up.²⁵ In that same year, CBS students enrolled in postsecondary education at a rate just two percentage points under the state average.²⁶ CBS students are not only more likely to enroll in

college, but they are more likely to persist, accumulate credits, and earn a credential.²⁷

The College Bound sign-up process takes place in 7th through 9th grades. About 71 percent of low-income students—over 40,000—sign up for College Bound. Unfortunately, that leaves about 12,000 eligible students out of the program. The statewide sign-up rate has held steady for several years, but it varies across districts and regions. While some districts sign up nearly 100 percent of their eligible students, others are leaving many eligible students unserved.²⁸

Financial aid application error rate

Completing the FAFSA is a crucial step. But some applications are rejected due to missing information or other unresolved issues. Otherwise-eligible students lose access to the Washington College Grant, the Pell Grant, and most other federal, state, and institutional aid until their application is fixed. For many would-be students, such an obstacle is enough to thwart their continued education.

*FAFSA errors leave millions of dollars on the table. Last year, nearly seven percent of applications from Washington's senior class had unresolved errors.*²⁹

Verification melt

Similarly, students who file the FAFSA are sometimes asked to submit documentation proving the accuracy of their information, a process known as “verification.” This burdensome process creates a barrier for low-income students. On average, the U.S. Department of Education will select 30 percent of high school seniors' FAFSA applications for verification.

The verification process directly impacts student enrollment and whether students receive aid. Students subjected to verification enrolled and received financial aid at rates ten percentage points lower than their peers who were not selected for verification.³⁰

FAFSA filing and adult learners

Nearly 58,000 adult learners received need-based financial aid as undergraduate students last year.³¹ The number of returning adults (ages 25 and over) filing a FAFSA was over 124,000. When comparing working-aged (25-44) adults filing FAFSAs compared to the population not enrolled, 10.8 percent of adults are completing the form.³²

Unlike high school students, prospective adult students do not have consistent access to financial aid information and support.

Enrollments are in decline.

Too few students enroll in education right after high school, especially students of color. That delay hampers success. High school students who enroll soon after graduation are more likely to persist in college and earn a credential.³³

We are also seeing a drop in the number of adult students enrolled. Often, in an improving economy, some adults choose work over coursework, even if that means employment in below-living-wage jobs.

The choice to stay in a job and not pursue a credential is a costly one. Students who complete their education see lifelong and generational benefits. They can compete for today's best jobs and careers, most of which require a credential.

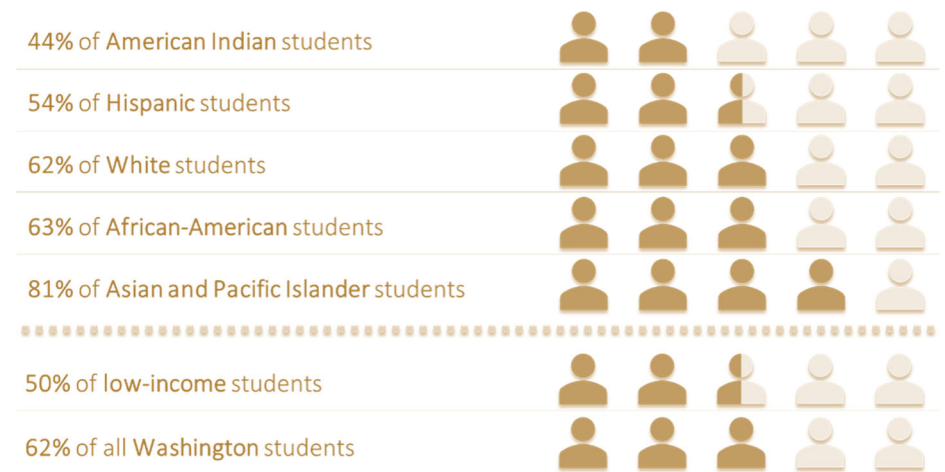
Not enough high school graduates continue their education.

The skilled economy is a growing share of our state's output, yet too many students don't see a role for themselves in it. Many high school students drop out, or graduate but do not enroll in college. And enrollment rates for working-age adults rise and fall with the unemployment rate.

Washington is not alone; states across the country struggle with declining enrollment. But Washington's enrollment lags behind the national average.

*Nearly five in ten graduating seniors delay or forgo enrollment—a reality that places Washington 46th in the country.*³⁴

Figure 1: Direct College-Going Rates for High School Graduates in 2016



The enrollment rate for students who entered college within the first year after high school graduation declined by three percentage points from 2014 to 2016.³⁵ The proportion of high school graduates who don't directly enroll in education beyond high school has hovered at around 40 percent during the 13 years between 2004 and 2017.

Washington also continues to struggle with enrollment of students from low-income families. Students from low-income families enroll at rates 19 percentage points below their peers. And the differences in enrollment by race and ethnicity are stark—from 44 percent among American Indian high school graduates to 81 percent for Asian high school graduates.³⁶ Further, the low direct-enrollment rate—and gaps between urban and rural schools—contribute to low attainment rates eight years after high school graduation.³⁷

Washington risks becoming a divided society, one where relatively wealthy suburban students comprise most enrollments.

Education after high school can reduce economic inequality only if we design systems to ensure that all can take part.

A closer look at key enrollment indicators.

In addition to improving the number of direct enrollments from high school, the following indicators measure progress on enrollment.

Adult enrollment rates

Washington's employers need a skilled and educated workforce. But even if we drastically improve the rates of enrollment and completion, there won't be enough recent high school graduates to meet the demand. To meet workforce demands, more adult students must enroll and complete.

In 2018, less than two percent of the adult population, ages 25-44, enrolled in higher education for the first time. For adults with some college but no degree, the 2017 re-enrollment rate was six percent.³⁸

Washington is developing a comprehensive framework to support adult learners, the College and Career Compass, with outreach to begin in 2020.

These enrollment metrics serve as a baseline to assess progress throughout the framework implementation.

Equitable participation in dual credit

Participation in dual credit programs comes with a variety of benefits, including increased academic confidence, lower-cost college credits, and higher rates of postsecondary enrollment and completion.

Washington is well-positioned to offer students many options for dual credit pathways. In 2017-18, every district in the state provided at least one type of dual credit program. Dual credit courses are increasingly popular, with over 60 percent of high school students participating in a course in 2018.³⁹

Unfortunately, equity gaps persist in dual credit participation. Low-income students and students identifying as Black, Hispanic, American Indian, or Pacific Islander are underrepresented in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Running Start, and College in the High School programs.⁴⁰

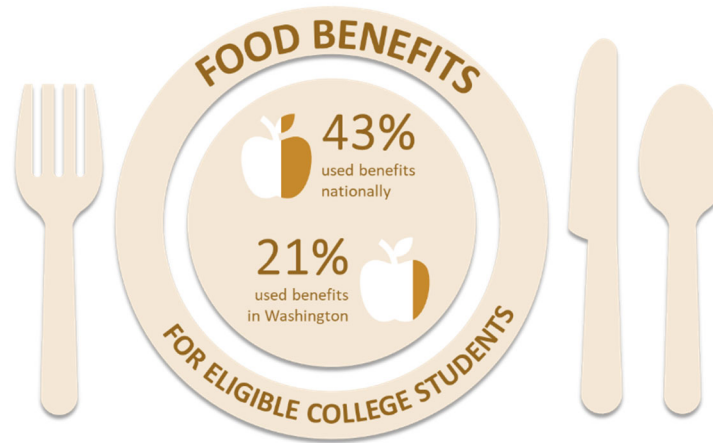
Students need support for basic needs.

College campuses are commonly portrayed as full of young students from privileged backgrounds coming straight from high school. While this may be the case in some areas, the demographics of college students are changing. Nationally, over a third of all college students are over the age of 25.⁴¹ Almost a quarter of undergraduate students are parents. Many of those are single parents.⁴²

In Washington, our understanding of the basic needs and barriers faced by students is evolving. Still, we know that food and housing insecurity, childcare, and access to behavioral health care are primary concerns.

*Most students are in or near poverty or have lower incomes.*⁴³

Food and housing insecurity keep students from persisting and completing.⁴⁴ According to one national study, 70 percent of community college students and 60 percent of bachelor's degree students reported experiencing food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness during the past year. The impacts prove particularly harmful to low-income, first-generation, and marginalized student populations.⁴⁵



Infant care costs can exceed in-state public college tuition

Childcare expenses can hinder caregivers' educational progress, especially for low-income students. Students also have inequitable access to on-campus childcare centers. While subsidies for childcare are available to eligible students, they impose limits on the types of programs students can pursue.

Adequate mental health resources and counseling are integral to supporting students.

Academic, financial, and social pressures can be mentally and emotionally exhausting. The culmination of those stressors negatively impacts students' ability to learn and persist through school.⁴⁶ In one national survey, approximately 60 percent of students reported feeling "overwhelming anxiety," and almost 40 percent reported feeling so depressed "it was difficult to function" in the past year.⁴⁷

Washington students underutilize available food benefits

Food security supports, including campus food pantries, are increasing across Washington. Those increases, however, fall short of meeting our statewide need. And the challenges don't end there. Even when food security resources are available, students don't always take advantage. Nationally, an estimated 57 percent of college students at risk of food insecurity who would be eligible for food benefits did not receive them.⁴⁸

Washington students fare worse, with only 21 percent of eligible students enrolled in federal food benefits.

That number falls even farther for the students who need it most.⁴⁹ Just 16 percent of the lowest-income FAFSA-completing students used Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.⁵⁰

A closer look at key support indicators.

WSAC will work with partners to develop and refine indicators to better understand the student support and basic needs landscape. We will focus our work on three specific areas:

1. The percentage of financial aid recipients who are also receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), SNAP, and other public benefits.
2. Persistence and completion data for students receiving public benefits, accounting for the effects of students receiving multiple benefits.
3. Disaggregated rates for students participating in state and federal benefits.

Washington does well in credential completion—but with a catch.

Access to higher-paying jobs. A lifetime of increased earnings. Benefits that extend to one's family and community. It all starts with a credential. And our higher education system does better than most—if we can enroll more students and close equity gaps. Enrollment and supports are critical, but they remain a means to an end. Completion is the measure most directly tied to educational attainment.

Washington's postsecondary completion rates are above the national average. This is true across sectors, for public and private, two-year and four-year institutions. And for all students completing within eight years, Washington's graduation rates are among the highest in the nation.⁵¹

Graduation rates are particularly strong at public and private four-year colleges. At Washington's four-year institutions, 70 percent of full-time students graduated within six years, which is nine percentage points higher than the national rate.⁵² This reflects well on Washington's transfer and articulation systems.

Still, the simple fact is that not enough Washington students make it to completion.

Of course, the impact that relatively good completion rates have on our overall educational attainment rates wanes with declining enrollment. If we can bring thousands of non-traditional-age adults back to the system,

attainment could increase more quickly than we have seen to date. Low direct-enrollment rates and equity gaps in progress and graduation in college also continue to be serious issues. However, given the current strengths of our postsecondary system, improvement in these other vital measures should lead to higher completions.

We must do more to ensure all students have equitable opportunities to earn credentials. This begins with enrollment—for low-income students, students of color, and students from both urban and rural schools. With increased enrollment, affordable education options, and comprehensive student supports, more students can complete their education and enjoy the benefits of a credential.

Underrepresented populations are not completing

While completion rates are above the national average, students of color and those from low-income families are less likely to succeed. Degrees and certificates awarded to Latinx students have surged in recent years, partially due to their growing share of high school graduates. Latinx students made up 11.1 percent of all students who earned a degree in 2018, up from 6.9 percent just six years earlier. Meanwhile, the share of black students who earned a credential is four percent, compared to eleven percent nationally.⁵³

A closer look at critical completion indicators.

In addition to improving postsecondary completions for underrepresented populations, the following indicator measures progress toward increasing completion rates for adult learners.

Completion of adult learners

Washington employers need a skilled and educated workforce. The number of graduates who progress directly from high school through college to the job market will not be enough to meet demand. We need an increasing number of adult students to return to the classroom and complete their credentials.

Almost one million working-age adults in Washington—slightly more than half—don't have the education or training to compete for living-wage jobs in the state.

Nearly 400,000 of them have already earned college credits, but have yet to complete a credential.⁵⁴ In 2018, almost half of all the credentials awarded were earned by students 25 or older.⁵⁵

Reengaging prospective students and providing support throughout their education journey is critical. Adult learners face unique challenges, but we will not meet our educational attainment goals without them.

Increasing attainment is about people, not rankings.

Education is the foundation of economic development; skilled workers are integral to a healthy and growing economy. But broadening college-going isn't about moving up national rankings. It's about ensuring that teachers can afford to live near where they teach, and that graduates in Quincy can pay off student loans as readily as

Figure 2: Attainment numbers for working-age adults in Washington



graduates in Bellevue. It's about ensuring that workers can learn new skills and advance in their careers, without being stuck in a cycle of debt and difficulty. It's about ensuring that every young person understands their options after high school and knows what the state will do to help them achieve their goals. And it's about providing opportunities to those adults no longer connected to the educational system. What's at stake is far more significant than our economic competitiveness relative to other states.

We should not leave Washingtonians behind.

Affordability

- ▶ Expand the number of seniors completing a FAFSA/WASFA through the statewide Aim Higher initiative. This includes extending WSAC's 12th Year Campaign and other collaborative efforts with partners across K-12 and higher education.
- ▶ Support College Bound Scholarship students from high school through higher education using the new Otterbot two-way communication tool.
- ▶ Increase awareness of the new Washington College Grant by developing promotional materials and working with partners.
- ▶ Support students as they navigate the verification process by partnering with college financial aid offices.
- ▶ Support adult learners by promoting the Washington College Grant and providing guidance on financial aid applications through College and Career Compass.

Enrollment

- ▶ Make apprenticeship training more affordable through collaboration with institutions and employers.
- ▶ Increase the number of low-income students enrolled in dual credit courses by coordinating with partners.
- ▶ Encourage enrollment of returning adult students through new campus supports and a digital tool, the College and Career Compass.
- ▶ Alleviate small financial barriers for adult students prior to enrollment by administering a regional microgrant program.

Student Support

- ▶ Engage a non-academic student supports advisory group. Identify policy barriers, promising practices, and opportunities to coordinate among participating student leaders, college administrators, and community-based and agency partners.
- ▶ Organize a basic needs assessment for students in coordination with postsecondary institutions.
- ▶ Address the needs of homeless and housing-insecure students by administering a grant for select colleges to create pilot programs and establishing a learning community.

Completion

- ▶ Promote equity-focused policies and strategies for educational success by engaging with attendees of the Pave the Way Conference.
- ▶ Gather and share best practices to support returning adult students across Washington's institutions.

Endnotes

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⁴⁸ "United States Government Accountability Office Report to Congressional Requesters FOOD INSECURITY," 2018. Accessed on November 1, 2019. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/696254.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Allison, Tom. "Rethinking SNAP Benefits for College Students." February 2018. Accessed on November 1, 2019. http://younginvincibles.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Rethinking_SNAP_benefits.pdf

⁵⁰ WSAC staff analysis of Unit Record Report data (2019).

⁵¹ WSAC staff analysis of 8-year Outcome Measure data as reported by the Integrated Postsecondary Education and Data System for entering cohort of 2008.

⁵² A First Look at IPEDS Data for WA Institutions 2017-18, p. 4.

⁵³ WSAC staff analysis of 2019 completion data (Part B) from Integrated Postsecondary Education and Data System, National Center for Education Statistics.

⁵⁴ WSAC staff analysis of One-Year American Community Survey data, U.S. Census (April 2019).

⁵⁵ WSAC staff analysis of 2018 completion data (Part C) from Integrated Postsecondary Education and Data System, National Center for Education Statistics.