

State Policy
Leadership Vacuum:
Performance and Policy in
Washington Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

Washington is a national leader in the educational attainment of its population; the state ranks 11th in the percentage of adults who have earned at least an associate's degree. However, much of the state's success in this area stems from its ability to attract well-educated residents from other states and countries, who help to raise the level of education of the state population as a whole.

To reach the level of educational attainment of top-performing states and countries, Washington must increase educational attainment, particularly among younger residents. The share of Washington's population that holds at least an associate degree is lower among younger adults (ages 25 to 34) than among older adults (ages 45 to 54). Based on trends in degree production and projections of population growth, Washington must increase its annual production of associate and bachelor's degrees by 6.2% each year so that by 2020, 55% of its workforce (ages 25 to 64) holds at least an associate degree, which is the level of attainment of the best-performing nations. Washington also needs to improve higher education to meet workforce demands. The state's economy is one of the most technology-intensive in the nation. By 2018, 67% of all jobs in Washington are projected to require workers to have at least some postsecondary education or training.

Washington's college-age population is projected to increase by 38% from 2000 to 2030, which will put pressure on the state's K-12 and higher education institutions to serve more students. Most of the state's growth in high school graduates is projected to be among Hispanics, who now represent 10% of the state's population overall, while Blacks constitute 3%. Both groups are less likely than whites to attain a college degree; 15% of Hispanics and 36% of Blacks age 25 to 34 held at least an associate degree in 2005, compared to 43% of whites.

Efforts to increase educational attainment need to recognize and account for financial constraints. Washington has experienced substantial revenue shortfalls over the past several years. Following reductions to higher education by the Legislature in the 2009-11 operating budget and the 2011 supplemental budget, the biennial budget for 2011-2013 reduces appropriations to the state's public higher education institutions by 24% over 2007-09 and assumes a 20% increase in tuition revenue. These appropriations could be reduced even further: in November 2011, the state announced that revenues through June 2013 would be even lower than projected, resulting in a \$1.4 billion shortfall for 2011-13. Like other states, Washington also faces severe budget cuts into the future as a result of structural deficits. The state is one of the few in the nation without an income tax. And Washington's ability to raise revenues or increase expenditures for public services is limited by Initiative 601, approved by voters in 1993 and modified in 2005. Initiative 601 mandates an annual expenditure limit across the major state accounts, including the general fund, and "requires the Governor's budget to be consistent with the expenditure limit."

HIGHER EDUCATION PERFORMANCE

Washington leads the nation in the percentage of students in four-year colleges and universities who graduate within six years of enrolling. However, the state's production

of bachelor's degrees per capita is below the national average. Washington's performance also lags behind the national average in preparing students for college. In addition, the performance of the state's growing Hispanic population, when compared with whites, is considerably lower on most indicators of college preparation, participation and completion.

Preparation for Postsecondary Education: Despite some recent improvement, Washington continues to lag behind national averages on many measures of academic preparation for postsecondary education. Washington's high school graduation rate of 67.9% in 2007, as calculated using the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI), was the 16th lowest in the nation—lower than the median of most western states (72.6%) and well below the top-performing states (81.0%). One-fourth of adults in Washington between the ages of 18 and 24 lack a high school diploma.

Participation: Washington also performs poorly in the proportions of young and working-age adults enrolled in higher education. Only 40 of every 100 students who start ninth grade enter college on time. Only 6% of 25- to 49-year-olds without a bachelor's degree were enrolled in postsecondary education in 2007, down from 7.8% in 1991.

Completion: Washington is one of the top-ranked states in the nation in the share of students who graduate from public four-year institutions within six years of enrolling. In 2008, about 65% of first-time full-time students completed a bachelor's degree within six years, substantially higher than the national average (56%) and the average for western states (48%). However, Washington lags behind most other states in the total number of bachelor's degrees produced per capita. In 2005-06, Washington produced 21.3 bachelor's degrees per 1,000 residents ages 20 to 34, fewer than the national average (24).

Inequity: Washington has also failed to close gaps in performance based on race/ethnicity and family income. In 2007, high school graduation rates were substantially lower for Hispanics (55%) than for whites (72%). Among public high school graduates in 2008, a substantially smaller share of Hispanics (45%) than Blacks (60%), whites (64%) and Asian Americans (71%) enrolled in college within a year of graduation. College completion rates in Washington are also substantially lower for Hispanics than for whites. In 2008, 52% of Hispanics completed a bachelor's degree within six years, compared with 66% of whites.

Affordability: Attending college in Washington has become less affordable for students and their families in recent decades. The net price of college (that is, college expenses less financial aid) represents a growing portion of family income at Washington's community colleges, public four-year colleges and universities, and private institutions. From 1999 to 2009, median family income in Washington declined in constant dollars by 1.9%. At the same time, tuition increased in constant dollars by 42.4% at public two-year colleges and by 39.5% at public four-year colleges and universities.

WASHINGTON'S HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Washington's system of higher education comprises two public research universities (with five branch campuses), four public comprehensive universities, 34 public community and technical colleges, 18 private not-for-profit four-year institutions, and 17 for-profit institutions. About 88% of students enrolled in degree-granting institutions in fall 2008 were attending a public rather than a private not-for-profit (9%) or private for-profit (3%) institution.

Community colleges account for 64% of public enrollments in Washington, compared with 48% nationally. Conversely, public research universities account for a lower share of public enrollments in Washington (21%) than the national average (30%)—as do public master's institutions, which account for 15% of public enrollment statewide, compared with 19% nationally.

EXPLAINING WASHINGTON'S HIGHER EDUCATION PERFORMANCE

What accounts for Washington's relatively low levels of college preparation, and high rates of bachelor's degree completion but low production of bachelor's degrees? Three themes stand out:

1. Lack of political commitment to implement a statewide plan for higher education.
2. Insufficient strategies to support student readiness for and participation in bachelor's degree programs.
3. Decline in the strategic use of available resources to achieve statewide goals and priorities for higher education.

Lack of Political Commitment to Implement a Statewide Plan for Higher Education
Over the past several years, state policymakers and college and university leaders in Washington have consistently articulated the need to improve college preparation and raise degree production. In its January 2011 final report, the Governor's Higher Education Funding Task Force called for producing 6,000 more bachelor's degrees annually by 2018, with one-third of those degrees coming from science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields. The state has produced several other plans that document the need to improve educational attainment and that describe the magnitude of the improvement required, and Washington's Legislature has approved these plans. However, the state has had difficulty developing and gaining traction on statewide initiatives based on these planning efforts.

State Planning Has Produced Little Change in State Policies

Statewide planning efforts initiated by the Governor, such as *Washington Learns*, six of whose recommendations were formally adopted by the Legislature in 2006, have not produced real changes for higher education. More recently, the *2008 Strategic Master Plan for Higher Education in Washington*, produced by the Higher Education Coordinating Board, set a goal "to increase the total number of degrees and certificates produced annually," so that Washington continues to lead other states in the production of associate's degrees and certificates but improve its performance relative to other states in the number of bachelor's degrees awarded.

However, state and institutional leaders criticized the *2008 Strategic Master Plan* for lacking rigor, innovation and solutions, and for including unrealistic goals and having limited impact. In the words of a state leader we interviewed, “It is safe to say the state legislators and governor have understood it [the master plan], and it has been kind of constant in the policy reports that have been produced, yet the state has not made much headway on it and certainly isn’t making any at this time.”

Gov. Christine Gregoire has identified education as a top priority, but state and institutional leaders we interviewed gave mixed reviews to her efforts, including her follow-up on the master plan’s recommendations. Some acknowledged that she played an important role in using her “bully pulpit” to garner support for the plan. But many criticized her for failing to influence the Legislature and deferring to institutional agendas rather than broader public needs for higher education.

Severe fiscal restrictions also limit efforts to achieve the master plan’s goals. But even before the current fiscal downturn, state policy efforts often reflected institutional and sector-based needs rather than a shared, statewide perspective on the goals and priorities for higher education. One reason may be the absence of effective mechanisms for fostering collaboration or coordination across public and private, two-year and four-year sectors, as well as across institutions within the public four-year sector.

Attempts to Create Structural Changes in Governance Lack Clear Goals

Gregoire has sought several structural changes that might facilitate collaboration and cooperation across education agencies, though with limited success. In 2007, she created a P-20 Council to “hold state government accountable and measure progress toward 10 long-term goals for a world-class education system.” But the P-20 Council was short-lived, meeting only a few times. In January 2011, Gregoire proposed combining existing early learning, K-12 education, including a statewide elected school superintendent, and higher education agencies into one cabinet-level Department of Education. The Legislature did not approve this reorganization in its 2011 session.

Meanwhile, the state leaders we spoke to expressed dissatisfaction with the existing governance frameworks for the state’s public four-year colleges and universities, largely because they can’t generate shared action toward statewide policy goals. In contrast, we found that state, institutional, and business leaders uniformly characterized the state’s community and technical college system as effective and politically powerful. The state’s six public four-year colleges and universities are decentralized, each with its own board that is appointed by the governor and approved by the Senate. The Council of Presidents, a voluntary association established in 1968 by the presidents of these institutions, appears to be effective on issues where consensus can be reached easily, but less effective when it tackles issues where members’ interests diverge.

Similarly, state and institutional leaders said that the Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) has played a limited role in promoting the attainment of statewide goals for higher education. In spring 2011, the Legislature abolished the HECB, effective July

1, 2012. The board will be replaced by two new entities: the Office of Student Financial Assistance and the Council on Higher Education. The “purpose and functions of the Council for Higher Education” will be determined by a higher education steering committee that is comprised of representatives from the governor, legislature, higher education institutions, and the public. The law authorizing these changes indicates the Legislature’s perception that the coordinating board is ineffective in its policy functions, and delegates the board’s public policy responsibilities to the colleges and universities.

The Legislature further intends to eliminate many of the policy and planning functions of the higher education coordinating board and rededicate those resources to the higher education institutions that provide the core, front-line services associated with instruction and research. Given the unprecedented budget crises the state is facing, the state must take the opportunity to build on the recommendations of the board and use the dollars where they can make the most direct impact.

Insufficient Strategies to Support Student Readiness for and Participation in Bachelor’s Degree Programs

State and institutional leaders we interviewed repeatedly contrasted the high rate of student enrollment in community colleges with the low rate of bachelor’s degree production per capita. The reasons for this disconnect include insufficient academic preparation to enroll in four-year institutions, a mismatch between the distribution of the population and the location of public four-year colleges and universities, and disincentives for four-year institutions to enroll transfer students. Community colleges received authority to offer bachelor’s degrees in applied technical fields, but the numbers of degrees awarded through these programs are very small. This change also raises questions about community college mission creep.

Insufficient Academic Preparation to Enroll in Four-year Institutions

The state operates several programs that are perceived by many to improve students’ academic readiness for college. Running Start, the largest dual enrollment program in the state, lets high school students simultaneously earn college and high school credits. Running Start’s effectiveness in improving academic readiness for college may be limited, however, by the underrepresentation of racial/ethnic minorities and lower-income students.

A second program, the Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program, is a national model for promoting educational attainment among adult learners. The program pairs instructors of English as a second language (ESL) or adult basic education with professional-technical instructors. Available at all 34 community and technical colleges, the I-BEST program is also designed to provide an educational pathway for students, beginning with a high school diploma and continuing to at least a certificate.

Despite the potential benefits of these two long-standing programs, the state has made slower progress in systemically improving college readiness for all students by aligning high school graduation requirements with college entrance requirements. In November

2010, the state Board of Education recognized that Washington's high school graduation requirements were not aligned with minimum college admissions requirements, were lower than those of other states, and were the same as those required of the state's high school graduates in 1985. In response, the state board adopted a new set of graduation requirements that will take effect for the graduating class of 2016. Nonetheless, while ensuring that students have taken the minimum courses required for admission to public four-year institutions in the state, these new requirements do not ensure that students are prepared to meet the academic expectations of higher education.

A Mismatch Between the Distribution of the Population and the Location of Public Four-year Colleges and Universities

The state's four public comprehensive universities are designed to serve particular regions, but the number of these institutions is small. One of the state's research universities (Washington State University) is in a relatively isolated area. The state's population, meanwhile, is widely dispersed, and many people live in sparsely populated areas. As a result, too few of the state's residents have easy access to public four-year institutions.

For many Washington residents, the state's 34 community and technical colleges are the primary point of access to higher education. These institutions are geographically dispersed throughout the state and offer opportunities to enroll via distance education. The success of the community colleges in providing access to college can be seen in the high rate of community college enrollment.

The state has attempted to expand regional access to four-year degree programs through branch campuses of the two research universities. One challenge of this strategy is the affiliation of branch campuses with the state's public research universities rather than the less-expensive comprehensive institutions, which raises the cost of a degree. Moreover, branch campuses have had a limited effect on bachelor's degree production. At first they were limited to upper-division students, as a concession to community colleges; though that restriction has been lifted, the branch campuses are still held back by inadequate funding and a lack of diverse programming, and enrollments are far below initial expectations.

The state has also sought to expand access to bachelor's degree programs through 10 "university centers," operated jointly by two- and four-year institutions or on a stand-alone basis, but these have also had minimal impact on increasing bachelor's degree production.

Disincentives for Four-year Institutions to Enroll Transfer Students

The number of students who transfer from two-year programs to four-year colleges and universities has been rising in Washington. One aspect of the transfer process that appears to be working well is the transfer of eligible credits from two-year to four-year institutions. The Policy on Intercollege Transfer and Articulation among Washington Public Colleges and Universities, established by the Higher Education Coordinating Board in response to legislation passed in 1983, provides that community college

students who complete an approved associate's degree program (e.g., Direct Transfer Agreement, Associate in Science, or one of 19 Major-Related Programs) enter public and participating private four-year institutions in the state with junior-year status and lower-division and general education requirements met.

A second aspect of the transfer process, however, appears to be more problematic: the acceptance of transfer students by four-year colleges and universities. Leaders of both two-year and four-year institutions expressed concern about the implications of continued growth in the number of transfer students for the capacity and funding of four-year colleges and universities. Public four-year institutions face financial disincentives to increasing transfer enrollments, because it is more expensive to educate upperclassmen, who enroll in upper-division classes with much lower instructor-to-student ratios. While upper-division courses are more expensive than lower division courses in other states, this reality has greater implications for Washington, given the state's above-average reliance on community colleges as the point of entry into the higher education system.

Expansion of Community College Missions to Award Bachelor's Degrees in Applied Science

In an effort to expand access to bachelor's degree programs, the state has allowed seven of the state's 34 community colleges to begin awarding bachelor's degrees in applied sciences, including interior design, behavioral science, applied management, hospitality management, radiation and imaging sciences, nursing, and applied design.

Allowing community colleges to award applied bachelor's degrees may expand the state's capacity to deliver upper-division curricular programming. Yet it may also bring another set of problems. In particular, some leaders fear that allowing public community colleges to award applied bachelor's degrees may distort the mission of these institutions.

Decline in the Strategic Use of Available Fiscal Resources to Achieve Statewide Goals and Priorities for Higher Education

Decisions about state funding for higher education and tuition have historically been more closely linked in Washington than in other states. As a result, before the recent economic downturn, Washington performed better than most states in maintaining a balance between the state's and students' share of higher education costs over the past decade.

However, in recent years the link between state funding and tuition has eroded. From 2000 to 2009, state appropriations per full-time student decreased by 23% at the public research universities (in constant 2009 dollars) and by 20% at the public comprehensive institutions (though they increased by 4% at community and technical colleges).

Devolution of Tuition-Setting Authority

Until 2011, the state Legislature set a ceiling on annual tuition increases for resident undergraduates. But reflecting a devolution of tuition-setting authority to the public four-year institutions, this ceiling has been increasing over time. For the 2009-10 and 2010-11 academic years, the Legislature agreed that the governing boards of each of the state's

public four-year institutions could raise tuition for resident undergraduates by up to 14% per year, up from the 7% cap set by the 2007 Legislature. In the context of recent declines in state appropriations, the state's four-year colleges and universities have more recently won even greater tuition-setting authority, making it more difficult to link tuition to statewide priorities.

Historic Commitment to Need-Based Student Financial Aid

In recent years, Washington has been a national leader with regard to the availability of need-based state financial aid. Since 2005-06, Washington has ranked in the top five states nationally in the estimated need-based undergraduate grant dollars provided per full-time student. Total state grant expenditures as a percentage of state fiscal support for higher education increased steadily in recent years, rising from 11.3% in 2006-07, to 15.2% in 2009-10. In 2009-10, Washington ranked 12th nationally on this indicator, up from 15th in 2006-07.

Virtually all (95%) available state financial aid in Washington is allocated to undergraduates based on financial need. The largest state aid program, the State Need Grant, is available for undergraduates whose income is 70 percent or less of median family income. Washington also allocates state financial aid dollars to a need-based State Work-Study Program.

Yet, in response to state revenue shortfalls, the governor proposed a 2010 supplemental budget that included substantial reductions in the State Need Grant and Work-Study programs. In the end, the state fully funded the State Need Grant, and restored funding for Work Study to 70% of its prior level.

The law creating the new Office of Student Financial Assistance emphasizes the need for an entity devoted strictly to administering student financial aid so as to provide the "highest level of service" in this area. Recognizing the importance of student financial assistance for low-income students and the realities of state revenue constraints, the state has proposed an alternatively funded student aid program, the Washington Pledge Scholarships, to be supported through individual and business donations. The viability of this approach is not clear, however.

Use of State Funding to Incentivize Improved Institutional Performance

The Student Achievement Initiative, a performance funding system developed internally by the community and technical colleges, likely contributes to the credibility and political leverage of the community and technical college sector. Some state and institutional leaders we interviewed said that the absence of accountability measures for public four-year colleges and universities may hurt their credibility and leverage. Following previous attempts to implement performance funding for the public four-year institutions, the 2011 Legislature authorized a "performance reporting" system requiring colleges and universities to annually report on the metrics specified by the Complete to Compete Initiative.

CONCLUSION

Washington has a well-coordinated and well-respected community college system that promotes well-defined transfer paths for students who enroll and workforce readiness for adult learners. Bachelor's degree completion rates are high for those fortunate enough to gain access to the state's public four-year institutions, but too few high school students are academically prepared for and enroll in four-year degree-granting institutions. The state has developed initiatives to increase access to public four-year colleges and universities, including university centers, branch campuses, and applied baccalaureate degrees offered by community and technical colleges. These efforts, however, produce relatively few bachelor's degrees. As a result, the state lags behind other states in bachelor's degree production and depends heavily upon imported talent.

The state has developed and the legislature has approved a number of plans for improving the performance of higher education. Although these plans provide a solid foundation, greater progress is required to fully implement these plans so as to ensure college readiness for all state residents and increase bachelor's degree production.

Rather than implementing a statewide plan for higher education, state leadership has recently focused its efforts on structural changes in education governance, with the legislature replacing the Higher Education Coordinating Board with new entities in 2012. Available state fiscal resources are not being used systematically to achieve statewide goals and priorities for higher education. Particularly noteworthy is the erosion of the state's historical efforts to link appropriations, tuition, and financial aid and the devolution of tuition-setting and policy-making to the public four-year institutions. The elimination of the Higher Education Coordinating Board and likely future reliance on higher education institutions to drive policy may further limit the state's capacity to pursue a public agenda that is greater than the interests of individual campuses. Whether the state can implement a statewide plan for higher education that links statewide goals to resources regardless of whether the economy is contracting or expanding is yet to be seen.

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State Review Project on Policy and Performance in Higher Education

Purpose of The Project

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education's biennial state-by-state report card, *Measuring Up*, shows that, between 2000 and 2008, many states improved their performance on key measures of college preparation, participation, and completion. While shedding light on performance in key areas relative to other states, the report cards do not reveal the policies and practices that contribute to a state's performance or the reasons that some states improved their performance while other states declined. Understanding these issues is a critical step toward identifying how to improve higher education performance within a particular state and subsequently realize the level of degree production required to compete in a global economy. This project improves our understanding of how states can improve degree attainment in the context of fiscal, demographic, and other challenges.

Methods

This project draws on data collected from case studies of five states: Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Texas, and Washington. We used a number of data sources to construct the case studies. For each state, existing data sets, media reports, and government and other documents were first used to produce a "briefing book" that described trends in the state's higher education performance, as well as the state's demographic, economic, and political context. The briefing book also presented a preliminary report of the public policies that operate within the state. The briefing books were then used to generate state-specific hypotheses about the relationship between public policy and higher education performance in the state.

We then used state-specific protocols to collect data explaining the relationships between formal and informal policies and state performance. The research team spent three to five days in each state conducting individual and group interviews with institutional and state leaders who were expected to be knowledgeable about particular dimensions of higher education performance and relevant policies and practices. In each state we spoke with elected officials and staff in the executive and legislative branches of government, staff and leaders of administrative agencies and governing boards, K-12 and higher education leaders, business and civic leaders, and leaders of associations representing other relevant constituencies (e.g., private college association). Many of these informants provided us with additional relevant supporting documents. A case study report drawing on the multiple sources of data was produced for each state. Cross-state analyses identify themes that cut across the five states.

Project Team

This project was completed by a team of researchers from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and The Institute for Research on Higher Education (IRHE). This team was led by Joni Finney and Laura Perna, co-directors of the project and professors of higher education at the University of Pennsylvania. Other members of the project team were Michael Armijo, Awilda Rodriguez, and Jamey Rorison. Scott Stimpfel and Christopher Miller also provided assistance.

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Founded in the mid-1980s, the Institute for Research on Higher Education (IRHE) is a university-wide research institute that conducts research relevant to policymakers and educational practitioners. Under the leadership of its first director, Robert Zemsky, one of the first projects, undertaken with the College Board, resulted in the development of a framework for understanding the higher education market for undergraduate education. IRHE also served a national convening role in the 1990s, publishing *Policy Perspectives* focused on the future of American higher education. In 1995 IRHE won the competition for a five-year federally funded National Center on the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. From 2009 to 2011, under the leadership of its new director, Joni Finney, IRHE collaborated with the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education to complete a five-state policy review, to determine the relationship between public policy and state performance in higher education. For further information about the state policy review project, visit www.gse.upenn.edu/irhe/srp.

Founded in 1740 by Benjamin Franklin, the University of Pennsylvania is America's first university and one of the world's premier research universities. The Penn Graduate School of Education (Penn GSE)—one of only three schools of education in an Ivy League institution—is recognized as one of the best in the United States. Penn GSE is broadly interdisciplinary with a long history of excellence in qualitative research, language and literacy studies, practitioner inquiry and teacher education, quantitative research, policy studies, evaluation, higher education, and psychology and human development. Faculty in the School's Higher Education Division focus their research on access and equity; diversity and higher education; policy and public financing; civic engagement; organizational change; and the impact of the marketplace on colleges and universities.

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education promotes public policies that enhance Americans' opportunities to pursue and achieve high-quality education and training beyond high school. As an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, the National Center prepares action-oriented analyses of pressing policy issues facing the states and the nation regarding opportunity and achievement in higher education—including two- and four-year, public and private, for profit and nonprofit institutions. The National Center communicates performance results and key findings to the public, to civic, business, and higher education leaders, and to state and federal leaders who are in positions to improve higher education policy.

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