

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

Laura Perna and Joni Finney
University of Pennsylvania, Institute for Research on Higher Education

Patrick Callan
National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

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Performance and Policy in Washington Higher Education: Key Points

THE CONTEXT

- By 2018, 67% of all jobs in Washington are projected to require workers to have at least some postsecondary education or training. 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 in order for 55% of its workforce (ages 25 to 64) to hold at least an associate degree by 2020, which is the level of attainment of the best-performing nations.

SIGNS OF TROUBLE

- 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. But this statistic masks the fact that Washington lags behind most other states in the total number of bachelor's degrees produced per capita. And although Washington ranks 11th in the nation in the percentage of adults who have earned at least an associate's degree, 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. Of particular concern:
 - 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 Washington adults between the ages of 18 and 24 lack a high school diploma.
 - Only 40 of every 100 Washington students who start ninth grade enter college on time.
 - In 2005-06, Washington produced 21.3 bachelor's degrees per 1,000 residents ages 20 to 34, fewer than the national average (24).
- College is becoming less affordable in Washington. From 1999 to 2009, median family income declined by 1.9% in constant dollars. At the same time, tuition increased by 42.4% in constant dollars at the state's public two-year colleges and by 39.5% at its public four-year colleges and universities.
- Compared to other groups, Washington's Hispanic population, now at 10% and expected to grow rapidly, has lower high school graduation rates, lower scores on standardized tests, and lower rates of college participation and completion. Black residents of Washington also face persistent achievement gaps compared to whites.
- Washington has experienced substantial revenue shortfalls over the past several years, resulting in dramatic reductions in appropriations to the state's public higher education institutions. Like other states, Washington will also likely face severe budget cuts into the future as a result of structural deficits.

REASONS FOR WASHINGTON'S HIGHER EDUCATION PROBLEMS

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

Lack of Political Commitment to Implement a Statewide Plan for Higher Education

- Planning efforts such as *Washington Learns* and the *2008 Strategic Master Plan for Higher Education in Washington* have produced few tangible results.
- The community college system is unified and politically powerful; the system of four-year public universities is fragmented and politically weak; no single group or institution advances a statewide agenda for public higher education in the state.
- Gov. Gregoire has tried to restructure higher education governance, with little success. The elimination of the Higher Education Coordinating Board and deregulation of tuition policy may further limit the state's capacity to pursue a public agenda that is greater than the interests of individual campuses.

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

- High school graduation requirements have not been aligned with college admission requirements, although new graduation requirements will soon come into effect.
- One approach to addressing the reality that much of the population lives far away from four-year public universities is branch campuses. Branch campuses have been attached to the state's two public research universities, rather than the less expensive comprehensive universities; bachelor's degree production at the branch campuses has not met expectations.
- Because upperclassmen are more expensive to educate than underclassmen, four-year institutions have a financial disincentive to accept transfers from community colleges. 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.

Decline in the Strategic Use of Available Fiscal Resources to Achieve Statewide Goals

- As state appropriations fell, higher education institutions won more control over tuition, making it more difficult to link tuition to statewide priorities.
- Although Washington has been a leader in providing need-based financial aid, the budget crisis is undermining its ability to meet its commitments. In recent years, available state aid has been insufficient to meet the demand from all eligible students.
- Unlike funding for community colleges, funding for four-year public universities is not yet tied to performance.