

Knowledge is Power: Ongoing Efforts to Increase Financial Aid Awareness and Access for Washington Students



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Challenge and Opportunity

Washington has some of the strongest state financial aid programs in the country. These programs support a diverse set of educational opportunities—from certificate programs to associate and bachelor’s degrees. They are available to help cover the costs of tuition for many low- and middle-income students. Two of the largest programs are the **Washington College Grant** and the **College Bound Scholarship**. Both have expanded in recent years to reach more students. Washington’s commitment to helping students pursue postsecondary opportunities continues to grow as state financial aid programs grow.

Many more students could access financial aid by completing a financial aid application. Students must apply for federal or state financial aid with a Free Application for Federal Student Aid ([FAFSA](#)) or a Washington Application for State Financial Aid ([WASFA](#)). In 2022, only about half of high school seniors in the state completed a FAFSA. Washington historically [ranks](#) near the bottom in FAFSA completion nationally. Like other states, Washington’s FAFSA completion got even worse during the COVID-19 pandemic as fewer students applied for financial aid or enrolled in postsecondary education and training.

The Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) has led efforts to address this challenge and raise awareness about the state’s many financial aid and postsecondary opportunities. This brief shares key ongoing initiatives and new strategies.

Not Just Financial Aid Applications

Applying for financial aid by completing FAFSA or WASFA is an important step in the postsecondary process, and it is [associated](#) with postsecondary enrollment. However, it is just one of the many components needed to ensure that all students have access to postsecondary education and training opportunities after high school. Evidence from [research](#) suggests that in addition to financial aid, there are a number of practices that can help increase enrollment—ranging from dual enrollment to mentoring opportunities. The most effective programs are the ones that use targeted outreach, personalization, and socially proximate interactions. WSAC is working with partners across the state to build a more supportive environment for college access and success.

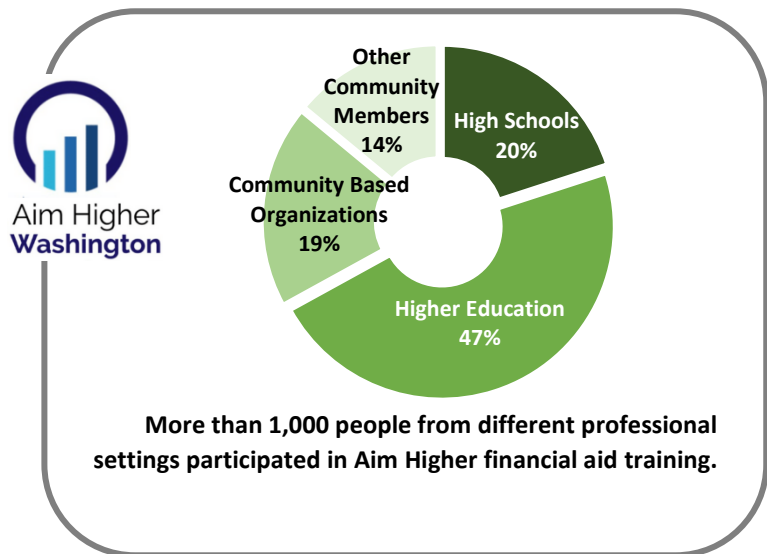
WSAC's Ongoing Initiatives to Increase Financial Aid Awareness and Applications

WSAC's variety of initiatives engage students, families, and educators across the state, with a particular focus on increasing equity by reaching low-income students and communities of color.

Building the capacity of communities to raise financial aid awareness

WSAC's [Aim Higher Washington](#) is a coordinated effort to help more students in Washington apply for financial aid. The initiative focuses on increasing equity in educational attainment for students of color and other marginalized groups. Programs under the Aim Higher umbrella provide students with early financial aid information, application support, and provides educators with resources to help students through the process. The initiative's partners help address regional needs and promote an education-oriented culture in communities across the state.

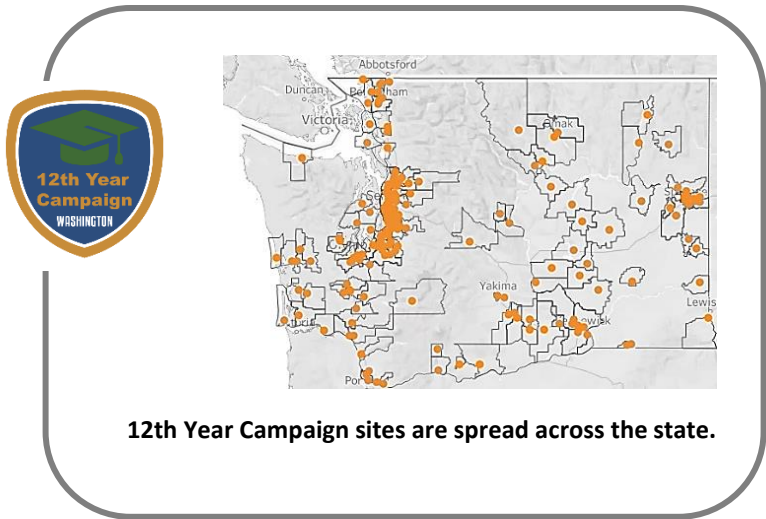
In partnership with the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, the Council of Presidents, and the Independent Colleges of Washington, [Aim Higher Training](#) provides free training for K-12, college, and community-based organization staff. WSAC has trained over 1,000 educators, community-based organization staff, and other education leaders since 2020 in financial aid basics and navigation information. Trainings are developed using an equity lens to support the students furthest away from education justice.



Washington State [GEAR UP](#) is a federally funded program managed by WSAC. GEAR UP has a strong commitment to building the capacity of its school district partners so they can expand the reach of GEAR UP beyond the eligible student and family population. The initiative provides ongoing, high-quality professional development to school staff – from administrators to support personnel – so they have the knowledge and resources to fully support students through the financial aid and college-going processes. Other WSAC programs integrate and learn from the work GEAR UP is doing to best align statewide resources and opportunities.

Providing information and support for financial aid applications

WSAC's [12th Year Campaign](#) provides schools and organizations with resources, training, and materials to aid low-income, first-generation students in applying for college admission and financial aid. Resources are provided in digital and physical formats, including posters, handouts, materials for financial aid events, and lesson plans. The 12th Year Campaign also provides support for districts that hold an annual Financial Aid Advising Day, a new statewide requirement. More than 39,000 seniors across the state attend 12th Year Campaign site high schools, which consistently have higher FAFSA completion rates than the state average. WSAC also maintains an online portal to track student-level FAFSA completion. Approved school staff can use the portal to target outreach and engagement with students and families.



WSAC's New Strategies to Increase Financial Aid Awareness and Applications

In addition to the ongoing initiatives described above, WSAC is pursuing several new, innovative strategies to broaden its approach. Together, these efforts are providing an array of supports to improve financial aid awareness and applications in the state.

Using digital tools to share information with broad audiences

WSAC is developing digital tools to share information about financial aid with a large number of students across the state. For instance, [OtterBot](#) is WSAC's artificial intelligence (AI) informed chatbot texting tool designed to help Washington high school students in the College Bound Scholarship program through the financial aid and college application processes. OtterBot was first launched in fall 2019 and WSAC continues to refine the valuable resource for students as they navigate the financial aid application process and help them reach their education goals after high school.



32,000

low-income students are receiving messages from OtterBot in the 2022-2023 school year

In partnership with the North Central Educational Service District and a local video production company, WSAC developed a set of short, animated [informational videos](#) that provide information about financial aid and the value of postsecondary education or training. Videos have been shared with students during the regular school day as part of a pilot rollout and are now available in seven languages on [WSAC's YouTube channel](#).

Engaging with parents

Parents are instrumental in supporting students with financial aid applications. High school students need their parents' or guardians' financial information and signatures to complete a financial aid application in most cases. WSAC is expanding OtterBot to reach parents of juniors

and seniors in the College Bound Scholarship program. The chatbot will share tips and answer questions as parents help their students through the college and financial aid application processes. The expansion to serve parents is funded by a [generous grant](#) from the Capital One Foundation.

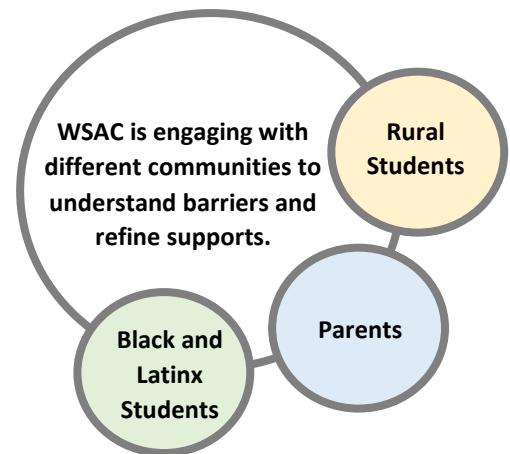


72,000

parents of low-income students will receive messages from OtterBot in the 2022-2023

Learning about barriers and designing solutions with students and families

WSAC is engaging in several qualitative research projects to learn more about the challenges students and families face in postsecondary transitions and financial aid applications. For instance, WSAC is partnering with the [Global Innovation and Design Lab](#) (GID Lab) at the University of Washington Tacoma to use human-centered design and design thinking to understand the barriers and challenges to education beyond high school. Research activities include student and educator surveys, focus groups, and four student-centered design sprints, or workshops meant to co-create solutions to identified barriers. The project will uncover insights about student experiences from around the state and co-create solutions with students to break down identified barriers.



Another example is the Optimizing Texting Technology through Engagement Research with Students ([OTTERS](#)) project, which uses behavioral science principles to optimize OtterBot messaging. The project, supported by a generous grant from the Capital One Foundation, will draw on findings from focus groups and surveys with students and parents to generate and test new messaging strategies. These projects let students and families inform WSAC's approach to building a more supportive environment for college access and success in the state.

Increasing Awareness of the Washington College Grant

Through legislative funding, WSAC is leading a statewide marketing campaign to increase awareness of the Washington College Grant. The campaign prioritizes audiences identified by WSAC's Council as being furthest from educational equity: low-income families, undocumented students, rural communities, and underrepresented students of color, including Black students, Indigenous students, Hispanic students, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students. The campaign will employ a broad range of marketing tactics in English and Spanish, including broadcast media, out-of-home advertising (billboards and transit ads), social media, and digital ads.

WSAC began working with a marketing firm in December 2022, and the campaign launched in February 2023. A new logo, tagline, and student-friendly [landing page](#) were created, and the shorthand term “WA Grant” was established to better promote the Washington College Grant as a flexible option to be used for many college and career training pathways.



Additionally, WSAC is working with the marketing firm to learn from the initial campaign to maximize the impact of future outreach initiatives.

Looking to the Future

Washington has several generous state financial aid programs; however, consistently low financial aid application and college-going rates indicate the state has a long way to go to ensure all students can access affordable postsecondary education and training opportunities. Improving access and utilization of financial aid in the state requires ongoing efforts and a multifaceted approach. Through the [Regional Challenge Grant](#), WSAC is working together with partners across the state to help all Washington residents access to financial aid and postsecondary opportunities.

Making it easier to access the Washington College Grant

Beyond supporting FAFSA and WASFA completion efforts, WSAC is working to help eligible students access state financial aid without completing an application. In 2022, the state passed [HB 1835](#) to promote a more comprehensive approach to improving Washington College Grant awareness and utilization. The bill identified three means-tested, state-run public benefits programs whose recipients are eligible for the Washington College Grant regardless of whether they complete a financial aid application.

WSAC is working to broaden this approach to other programs, too.

Learning what works

WSAC is also implementing an ongoing learning agenda to determine which outreach efforts have the greatest impact and how to best support students and families as they navigate the complex financial aid system. This includes engaging with students and families to learn about their experiences, evaluating current programs and initiatives, and identifying and sharing evidence-based practices. WSAC can make continuous strategic adjustments and improvements by incorporating research into outreach and engagement efforts that aim to improve financial aid applications. These efforts help build a more supportive environment for college access and success throughout the state.