

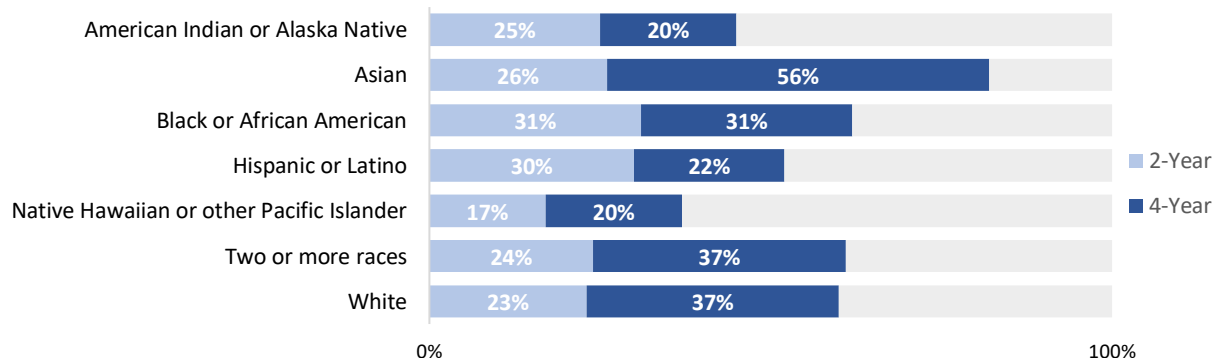
What Evidence from Research Tells Us: Closing Racial Equity Gaps in K-12 Postsecondary Transitions

January 2021, By Isaac Kwakye and Emma Kibort-Crocker

Washington is working to increase educational attainment so that 70 percent of all adults ages 25 to 44 have a postsecondary credential. However, ongoing inequities in education have impeded access to educational opportunities, and some racial groups are further from the statewide goal. Part of the issue is the transition from K-12 to postsecondary programs. Some students enroll within one year of high school graduation, which we define in this Research Spotlight as immediate postsecondary enrollment. Other students take gap years or do not attend postsecondary programs at all. Evidence from research suggests that students who delay enrollment earn postsecondary credentials at significantly lower rates than those who enroll directly from high school¹. There is also extensive evidence of the benefits of having a postsecondary credential, including higher earnings and lower unemployment². Higher education can help improve outcomes for Washington residents so they will have the opportunity to lead productive and financially rewarding lives and contribute to the economic success and social wellbeing of our state.

Not all students in Washington are enrolling in postsecondary programs at equal rates, and racial equity gaps are evident. This Research Spotlight will focus on evidence-based research to close racial equity gaps in immediate postsecondary enrollment. Overall, 60 percent of graduates from public high schools in Washington enroll in postsecondary programs within one year. A closer look at the data reveals racial disparities in immediate postsecondary enrollment in Washington (figure 1).

Figure 1. There are large disparities in immediate postsecondary enrollment by race in Washington



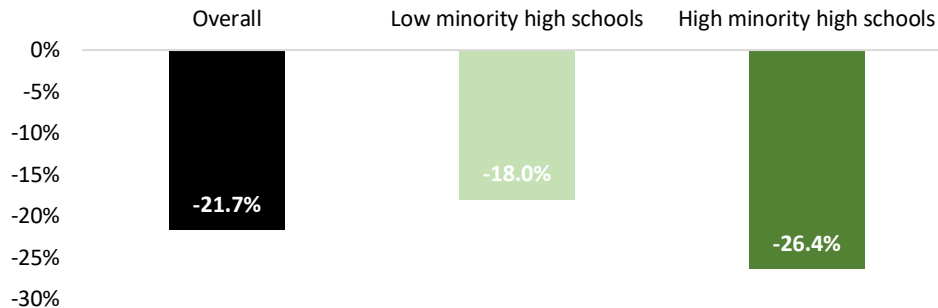
Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC), Washington postsecondary enrollment during first year after graduation, 2018 graduates. Note: Sum of proportions enrolling in 2-year and 4-year institutions equals total immediate postsecondary enrollment rate.

Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (37 percent), American Indian/Alaska Native (45 percent), and Hispanic (52 percent) students have lower immediate postsecondary enrollment rates than White (60 percent), multi-racial (61 percent), Black (62 percent), or Asian (82 percent) students. Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Hispanic students are also considerably less likely to enroll in 4-year institutions than their peers. However, Black and Hispanic students are more likely to enroll in 2-year institutions than other racial groups. There are many obstacles to postsecondary access, including academic, financial, and informational barriers that may hinder enrollment for some groups disproportionately.

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The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has made it even more important to confront barriers to postsecondary access as many students are facing increased challenges due to the crisis. Data about Fall 2020 postsecondary enrollment for the high school class of 2020 in Washington is not yet available, national data helps illustrate possible enrollment trends. Figure 2 shows that there was a 21.7 percent drop in college enrollment in Fall 2020 for the high school class of 2020 compared to the class of 2019. Nationally, high minority high schools, defined as having at least 40 percent of students who are Black or Hispanic, had even more extreme declines in the number of students enrolling in college in Fall 2020³.

Figure 2. Nationally, fewer students from the high school class of 2020 enrolled in college in Fall 2020



Source: *High School Benchmarks 2020: National College Progression Rates*. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSC).

Note: Graph shows change in number of students who graduated in 2020 who enrolled in college in Fall 2020 compared to 2019. Sample includes preliminary data from high schools and colleges reporting to NSC as of September 18, 2020. Immediate enrollment rates are estimated for 2,324 high schools nationwide with differing income, minority, and urbanicity characteristics.

Early indications from national enrollment data at postsecondary institutions supports the cohort trends that we see in figure 2. Nationally, overall enrollment among first-time freshmen was down by 13 percent in Fall 2020 compared to the prior year. Enrollment declines were even steeper for some students of color, including Native American (down 23 percent), Hispanic (down 20 percent) and Black (down 19 percent) students⁴. Unless we address the uneven burden of the COVID-19 crisis on students of color, in addition to ongoing disparities in postsecondary transitions, we are likely to see equity gaps in postsecondary enrollment widen.

Narrowing equity gaps in enrollment requires proactive and targeted policies and programs focused on increasing college access and completion for students of color. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, there are proven programs and policies that have been shown to boost postsecondary enrollment for students of color. This Research Spotlight presents evidence from existing research and emerging strategies to close equity gaps in postsecondary transitions.

What Works to Close Racial Equity Gaps in Postsecondary Enrollment

Teacher diversity in K-12 schools that reflects the demographics of the student body can improve outcomes for students of color. Students of color assigned to a same-race teacher in early elementary grades were 4 percentage points more likely to enroll in college than students of color without a same-race teacher⁵. These outcomes, often called “role model effects,” demonstrate the need to ensure a diverse teacher workforce in the state.

High school counselors can also have an effect on whether students enroll in college. Students in Massachusetts with an effective school counselor were more likely to attend college (an increase of 1.5 percentage points)⁶. Furthermore, students of color were found to be more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college if they had a counselor of color (an increase of 3.8 percentage points)⁷.

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Increasing the number of high-quality counselors and encouraging a diverse staff that reflects the student population may boost college enrollment for students of color.

College access and advising programs for high school students, specifically aimed at low-income students and students of color, can increase college enrollment for these groups. Assisting students in applying for college, understanding financial aid, and developing a college-going mindset can reduce barriers to entry for underrepresented minority student populations. A statewide college access study in Texas invited high schools that met certain criteria around income and college transitions to participate in a randomized control trial. Results from the study indicate positive impacts for Hispanic students in the program⁸. This may be particularly effective in Washington as Hispanic people make up the second largest racial group in the state.

Test-optional admissions policies have shown increasing promise of boosting applications and enrollment of a more racially diverse student body. Evidence from research shows that on average, students of color tend to score lower than their White peers on standardized admissions exams, decreasing their chances of admission⁹. Higher education institutions that implemented a test-optional policy received more applications from underrepresented minority students. Additionally, most of the institutions with test-optional policies enrolled a higher proportion of underrepresented minority students than peer institutions that required standardized test scores¹⁰. Refining admissions practices may result in more students of color enrolling in postsecondary programs.

Ensuring sufficient need-based financial aid that covers tuition, fees, and expenses can help students afford higher education opportunities. National research findings show that college students of color have a higher prevalence of unmet financial need than White students¹¹. Additional evidence reveals disparities in student borrowing—including a substantial Black-White student debt¹². Providing students with grant-based aid, like the Washington College Grant, can boost postsecondary enrollment and may be especially important for reducing racial equity gaps and improving longer-term outcomes for students of color¹³.

Increasing postsecondary enrollment for students of color is critical to closing racial equity gaps and advancing educational attainment in Washington. Implementing evidence-based programs and policies that center the success of students of color can improve transitions from K-12 to postsecondary programs.

¹ Laura Horn, Emily Forrest Cataldi, and Anna Sikora, "Waiting to Attend College: Undergraduates Who Delay Their Postsecondary Enrollment," *National Center for Education Statistics* 152 (2005): 88.

² Isaac Kwakye, Emma Kibort-Crocker, and Sarah Pasion, "Equity Landscape Report: Exploring Equity Gaps in Washington Postsecondary Education" (Washington Student Achievement Council, October 2020).

³ "High School Benchmarks 2020: National College Progression Rates" (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, December 10, 2020), https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020_HS Benchmarks Report.pdf.

⁴ "COVID-19: Stay Informed with the Latest Enrollment Information," National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, October 22, 2020, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/>.

⁵ Seth Gershenson et al., "The Long-Run Impacts of Same-Race Teachers" (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, November 2018), <https://doi.org/10.3386/w25254>.

⁶ In this study, effective counselors are defined as performing one standard deviation above average with respect to their influence on high school graduation, college enrollment, selectivity, and persistence in prior years

⁷ Christine Mulhern, "Beyond Teachers: Estimating Individual Guidance Counselors' Effects on Educational Attainment," November 2019, 76.

⁸ Eric P. Bettinger and Brent J. Evans, "College Guidance for All: A Randomized Experiment in Pre-College Advising," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 38, no. 3 (2019): 579–99, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22133>.

⁹ Greta Anderson, "More SAT Test Takers but Lower Scores," *Inside Higher Ed*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2019/09/24/minority-and-first-generation-sat-scores-fall-behind>.

¹⁰ Steve Syverson, Valerie Franks, and Bill Hiss, "Defining Access: How Test-Optional Works" (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2018).

¹¹ Lauren Walizer, "When Financial Aid Falls Short: New Data Reveal Students Face Thousands in Unmet Need" (CLASP, December 2018).

¹² Judith Scott-Clayton and Jing Li, "Black-White Disparity in Student Loan Debt More than Triples after Graduation," *Brookings* (blog), October 20, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/black-white-disparity-in-student-loan-debt-more-than-triples-after-graduation/>.

¹³ Susan M. Dynarski, "Does Aid Matter? Measuring the Effect of Student Aid on College Attendance and Completion," *The American Economic Review* 93, no. 1 (2003): 279–88.