

Washington State Is Using Data to Better Inform Families of Financial Aid Eligibility



The affordability of postsecondary education and training programs—including two- and four-year degree programs, career and technical education (CTE), and apprenticeships—affects efforts across the nation to help more students achieve their goals after high school. Improved postsecondary access, completion, and return on investment is a goal of many state leaders, educational institutions, and economic and education advocacy groups—but accessing financial aid is persistently a barrier for students and families.

Washington is addressing this challenge by using interagency data through carefully constructed data-sharing agreements to remove the need for families who already receive assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to report their income twice just to verify that they are income eligible for state financial aid. Washington's approach provides insights that other states can use to develop their own data-sharing agreements and better serve students and their families.

Using Data to Change Students' Perceptions of College and Career Training Affordability

Even before high school, students and their families often have misconceptions about the costs of college or career training programs and may lack information about what financial aid is and the amount for which they might be eligible. These misconceptions can lead to an impression that college and career training programs are prohibitively expensive and out of reach. Knowing this situation, the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) is intentionally trying to reach individuals early in their high school journeys to begin raising awareness about financial aid programs and other resources that can support students' journeys after high school. Part of WSAC's efforts involves implementing recently passed legislation. This legislation guarantees that students who participate in certain public benefit programs, including Basic Food (Washington's implementation of SNAP), are income eligible as early as 10th grade for the state's Washington College Grant program, which provides financial aid for a range of postsecondary options, including apprenticeships, CTE, and two- and four-year degree programs.



Financial aid applications for postsecondary programs use questions about a student's or family's financial situation to determine eligibility. Yet many families have already provided this information in their applications for other public assistance programs, such as SNAP. Rather than making these families fill out more paperwork with the same information to prove their eligibility, Washington's approach uses "status eligibility." With status eligibility, if a family has already qualified for a program, the state can use existing data to prove the family's financial status without collecting that same data again.

Now, anyone in Washington who is eligible for Basic Food and other select state public benefit programs is guaranteed to be income eligible for financial aid through the Washington College Grant.

Before state leaders adopted the new legislation, Washington's Department of Social and Health Services was already communicating about financial aid to families receiving Basic Food assistance—but its efforts were limited

to awareness-building. Allowing Washington agencies to leverage existing data in this manner enables the state to improve financial aid outreach in significant ways:

- Starting in January 2026, high school staff members and dedicated financial aid staff will be able to reach families with students who will likely be eligible for the Washington College Grant much earlier in their students' educational journey. Because many students start making decisions that affect their post-high school journey much earlier than in 12th grade, Washington aims to inform students of their financial aid guarantee by 10th grade.
- Using Basic Food eligibility means state agencies and school staff also can make sure these families receive information about financial aid options and student support programs sooner, before students and their families make key decisions about their students' course choices or activities.

Lessons From Washington's Approach

As other states explore possible ways to use data-sharing agreements to serve students and families, they can leverage lessons from Washington.

- **Data is key, but implementation must also involve outreach.** For Washington, this effort involves developing outreach that goes beyond sending emails; instead, the state is using multiple approaches to help low-income families learn about and access public benefits such as financial aid. WSAC takes a comprehensive and user-centered approach to awareness-building outreach efforts, starting with anticipatory messaging to prepare students and

families before the program fully launches. WSAC also partners with high schools, colleges, and trusted community organizations so families receive messages from entities they know, even if they may be unfamiliar with WSAC itself.

- **Leveraging education institutions as partners** can support both the exchange of information and eligibility awareness. Washington is partnering with schools, colleges, and CTE programs to develop robust data systems that help students access benefit programs and to create engagement efforts that encompass communications and outreach strategies.

How Federal Support Can Help

Federal leaders can support states in their efforts to use data to better inform families by:

- **Clarifying regulations and offering guidance.** The federal government can provide clearer guidance on federally funded programs so states can more readily leverage data to benefit students and families. Federal guidance on what data sharing is permissible under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act would allow states to develop partnerships strategically tailored to meet state needs and goals for improving workforce development, health and human services,

and education outcomes. And clear, explicit language on what SNAP data can be shared across state agencies would prove useful for informing students and families about their eligibility for other income-dependent programs such as financial aid. The US Department of Education provided similar guidance in a [letter](#) to states on how to navigate the use of Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) data at the state level while still complying with federal law, followed by updated [guidance](#) to address changes as a result of the enactment of the FAFSA Simplification Act and FUTURE Act.

- **Providing resources that encourage and support states.** Building robust state data systems that allow for the type of data sharing state agencies need requires resources, including dedicated funding and technical

support. Federal support could also include incentivizing states to develop data-sharing efforts by providing grant or funding opportunities, recognition programs, or other resources states can leverage.

What Comes Next

Providing meaningful access to data can open doors of opportunity for students and in turn support state education and workforce goals, economic mobility, and economic growth. The more students know about their full range of educational and career opportunities post-high school—and the range of resources available to support those options—the more students are empowered to make decisions about what is best for them. Exchange of information across state agencies can help students

access these pathways by tangibly reducing red tape for them and their families. Washington’s approach demonstrates the power of state data systems and the concrete impact they can have on people’s lives. As more lessons emerge from efforts like those of Washington state, federal leaders also have an opportunity to develop proactive measures that allow states to efficiently and effectively support their communities.