



2021 Joint Legislative Agenda

Avoid repeating the history of cuts to higher education during economic downturns

During the Great Recession, cuts to higher education were disproportionately deep. Public higher education institutions and their students shared a considerable burden in the form of deep appropriation reductions that were only partially backfilled by aggressive tuition increases. While great advancements have been made to enhance affordability, bolster academic success for students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, and increase degree production in high demand fields, our colleges and universities have still not fully recovered from those cuts. In fact, most returned to pre-recession funding levels — in real dollars **unadjusted for inflation** — just last year, a decade after the recession ended. Washington's colleges and universities barely recovered from the rigors of the Great Recession. Now is the time to avoid past mistakes, not repeat them.

Protect the progress we have made

Since the last recession, student enrollments have grown by the thousands across our institutions, requiring additional faculty and student services capacity to ensure their success. During that same time, the Legislature has invested in new high-demand programs such as computer science, engineering, medicine and nursing and at new locations to increase access. New appropriations over the past decade also funded enhanced student services to meet the complex needs of today's growing and changing student body that increasingly reflects participation by more first-generation, low-income, and BIPOC students.

In 2019 and 2020, the Legislature took historic steps to support our state's students and families by passing the Workforce Education Investment Act (HB 2158). WEIA investments support and expand the Washington College Grant, which ensures equitable access to higher education for low-income students. WEIA investments also fund high-demand degree programs such as medicine, engineering, teacher preparation, and psychology and competitive salaries for community and technical colleges faculty who teach nursing and other high-demand programs, which in turn increases program capacity. WEIA investments are critical to student success as they support advisors, mental health counselors, veterans, childcare, Guided Pathways, and much more.

Higher education is a critical part of our recovery strategy

As we emerge from the current crisis, our economy will be reshaped in many ways. Displaced workers and future students will need more training and educational opportunities, not fewer. COVID-19 has highlighted critical workforce shortages — particularly in healthcare — that must be addressed through education and training programs at both our community and technical colleges and 4-year colleges and universities.

The higher education community stands ready to work with the Governor and legislators to develop recovery strategies that continue our commitment to providing education and training opportunities for Washington jobs.

Further, improved credential attainment is the key to recession-proofing the careers of Washingtonians. Unemployment and wages during the Great Recession improved with each level of credential attainment, with holders of both two-year degrees and four-year degrees achieving employment rates considerably higher than the general population.
