

Why Washington's kids aren't going to college

Washington state was once well above the national average for the percentage of high-school students who went to college. But today, by some measures, we are one of the lowest states in the country.

About this series

This is the first in an occasional series of stories in the coming months examining Washington state's low rate of college attendance.

By [Katherine Long](#)

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We think of ourselves as a well-educated state, and in many respects we are. More than half of Seattle adults 25 and older hold a bachelor's degree, making it one of the most well-schooled cities in the nation.

So it may come as a surprise that only about one in four public-school students from Washington's high-school class of 2009 will finish college by 2015, according to a Seattle Times analysis of recent trends.

While the percentage of high-school graduates who went to college jumped by nine points in the United States over the past two decades, the percentage of college-going high-schoolers in Washington fell.

We were once well above the national average for the percentage of high-school students who go on to a two- or four-year college.

But today, by some measures, we are one of the lowest states in the country.

The decline happened over two decades, as high-tech companies were born or grew, and thousands of spinoffs and startups remade the Puget Sound business landscape.

The college grads who got those high-paying jobs? Many of them came from elsewhere - from California and the East Coast, from India, China and South Korea.

Sure, there are plenty of Washington-educated sons and daughters who made good in their home state. But what might have been a boon for untold numbers of local kids was only good for some of them.

As University of Washington computer-science professor Ed Lazowska says: "We are creating great jobs, and they're going to other people's children."

Education experts say there is no single reason why Washington has stumbled at getting kids to go to college. It's the sum of a variety of issues that have together created a weak college-going culture.

Among them:

- . A K-12 public-education system that scores just above average on many national measures of quality, and in some cases - such as funding - falls below average.

- . A lack of coordination between the K-12 and the college systems. State graduation requirements don't line up closely with the minimum requirements needed to go to a four-year school, and some students who do go to college are not prepared for its rigor, especially in math - raising the chance they will eventually drop out.

- . A relatively slim selection of four-year schools to choose from. Four of Washington's five public universities are located outside major population centers, and the state has no top-tier private universities on the order of a Stanford or MIT.

- . A reliance on community colleges. More than half of all college-bound students go to a two-year school, and while Washington's community-college completion rates are better than the national average, they're still much lower than at four-year schools.

"It's an uncomfortable conversation - it seems like it's anti-community college," said state Rep. Reuven Carlyle, D-Seattle. "But because we have grown accustomed to a strong two-year system, we have grown lazy in our sense of obligation to push toward four-year as a central piece of our higher-education strategy."

In the past two decades, the percentage of Washington students who enrolled full time in college right after high-school graduation has fallen from 58 percent in 1992 to 51 percent in 2008, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. (The numbers include students who enrolled in two-year colleges.)

When they do go to four-year colleges, Washington students do well: The average graduation rate at the state four-year schools is 69 percent, one of the highest in the nation.

The state has been slow to recognize that the era of high-wage, blue-collar jobs in timber and airplane manufacturing is gone, and that the state's economy increasingly relies on workers with greater skills - preferably, math, engineering, science and technical skills, said Mary Jean Ryan, executive director for the Community Center for Education Results, a regional partnership of South King County schools that is trying to improve that area's rate of postsecondary education.

Some say the Legislature's tendency to treat higher-education money as a rainy-day fund when tax revenues drop has kept Washington higher education chronically underfunded.

Even in the best of times, Washington has made higher education a priority only for short periods, when policymakers felt the state could afford it, said William Zumeta, professor of public affairs and education at the University of Washington.

A few legislators believe some of the blame is due to a high-tech business community that only recently began supporting higher education more vigorously.

Washington's most successful businesses saw the world as its talent pool, skimming recruits from Washington's top graduates, then going beyond the state's borders to hire, said state Sen. Larry Seaquist, D-Gig Harbor.

Statistics bear this out. In 2007, the state had the highest per capita rate in the nation of 22- to 39-year-olds with college degrees moving here. In other words, people with college degrees are moving to Washington because the jobs are here.

Carlyle thinks Washington lawmakers should be credited with at least one smart move: The state has set aside more money for college financial aid than almost any state in the nation.

And yet he believes there's a lack of drive in this state to see high-school graduates get four-year degrees. "Our kids are not getting the bug for learning," Carlyle said.

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