InformEd States-WSAC Research-Practice Partnership: Early Path to WA Grant

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WA Grant (Washington College Grant)

- WA Grant is one of the largest state need-based financial aid programs in the county
- $541m awarded to >100k students through WA Grant in 2024-25
- Award amount based on income, family size, & college/program type
- Full WA Grant covers tuition at public colleges in Washington or equivalent amount at a private college

Early Path to WA Grant

- HB2214 in 2024 linked eligibility for full WA Grant to receipt of food assistance programs (SNAP, FAP)
- Beginning 2025-26, 12th graders who received food benefits were automatically eligible for full WA Grant
- Will expand to 10th, 11th, & 12th graders in 2026-27

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Early Path to WA Grant

- Policy aims to send **clear & early** message to eligible students that **public college is tuition free** (or equivalent amount at private college)
- Prior research indicates that early notification of eligibility for free tuition can increase applications & enrollment among lower-income students (e.g., Burland et al., 2023)
- Opportunity to explore the design, implementation, & impact of this type of policy at a statewide level

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- Formed in 2024 after HB2214 was enacted
- InformEd States: multi-institutional research team focused on equity in state higher education funding policies
- WSAC: state agency that administers state financial aid & oversees implementation of Early Path to WA Grant

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- In 2025-2026 the RPP, with funding from Strada Education Foundation, focused on two key activities:
  1. Examining challenges & lessons learned in implementing automatic eligibility for free public college tuition; &
  2. Designing & implementing statewide outreach to inform students of their potential eligibility & next steps in the college-going process

- Partnership involved monthly conversations with additional meetings between state agency & research team to understand implementation & design an outreach strategy

Implementation challenges & lessons learned

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- Data sharing: difficulty establishing DUA with state agency to identify SNAP/FAP participants; WSAC explored alternate options to identify potentially eligible students (e.g., Working Families Tax Credit)

- Vendor contracts/technology: data sharing challenges meant WSAC had to find additional technology to help verify eligibility; this required time & external funding to set up; technology platform was bought by a different non-profit group, which slowed down data sharing around eligibility & verification

Implementation challenges & lessons learned

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- Communication: need to communicate with students regarding Early Path to WA Grant & coordinate communication with other outreach; highlight continued importance of filing FAFSA

- Facilitating counselor awareness: WSAC held school counselor workshop & some counselors were part of outreach, but not clear how much counselors are aware of the policy

Targeted Outreach to Increase Take-up

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Challenge: Seniors may not know about automatic eligibility policy rollout, and may not take steps to guarantee WA Grant

Plan: Outreach communication to:

- Raise awareness / share information
  - Establish legitimacy
- Prompt immediate action / guidance
  - Encourage longer-term planning

Open questions: Best communication streams, most trusted voice, value of student-only vs. parent and school outreach

Spring 2026 Early Path to WA Grant Outreach RCT

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Contrast: Trusted voice

- **Letter from Governor Ferguson**
  - *9,143 students*
- **Trifold from WSAC**
  - *10,224 students*

Contrast: Guidance and range of recipients

- **Group A: "Information"**
  - Student receives a mailer in April
  - *5,575 students*
  - *2,480 received letter from governor, 3,095 received trifold*
- **Group B: "Information and guidance - student only"**
  - Student receives a mailer in April, receives weekly email messages throughout spring
  - *6,503 students*
  - *3,226 received letter from governor, 3,277 received trifold*
- **Group C: "Information and guidance - whole group"**
  - Students + parents + school counselor receives a mailer in April, receives weekly email messages throughout spring
  - *7,361 students*
  - *3,509 received letter from governor, 3,852 received trifold*

Outreach Step 1: Information

STATE OF WASHINGTON
OFFICE OF GOVERNOR BOB FERGUSON

Take these steps to secure your grant:

- **See if you automatically qualify.** If your family receives food benefits like food stamps or EBT cards, you can verify your WA Grant eligibility in one easy step at: wsac.wa.gov/wcg-path
- **Also complete a FAFSA or WASFA** financial aid application, regardless of your benefits status. This ensures you get all the money that's available to you. It takes about **30 minutes**, and you can start here: wsac.wa.gov/apply

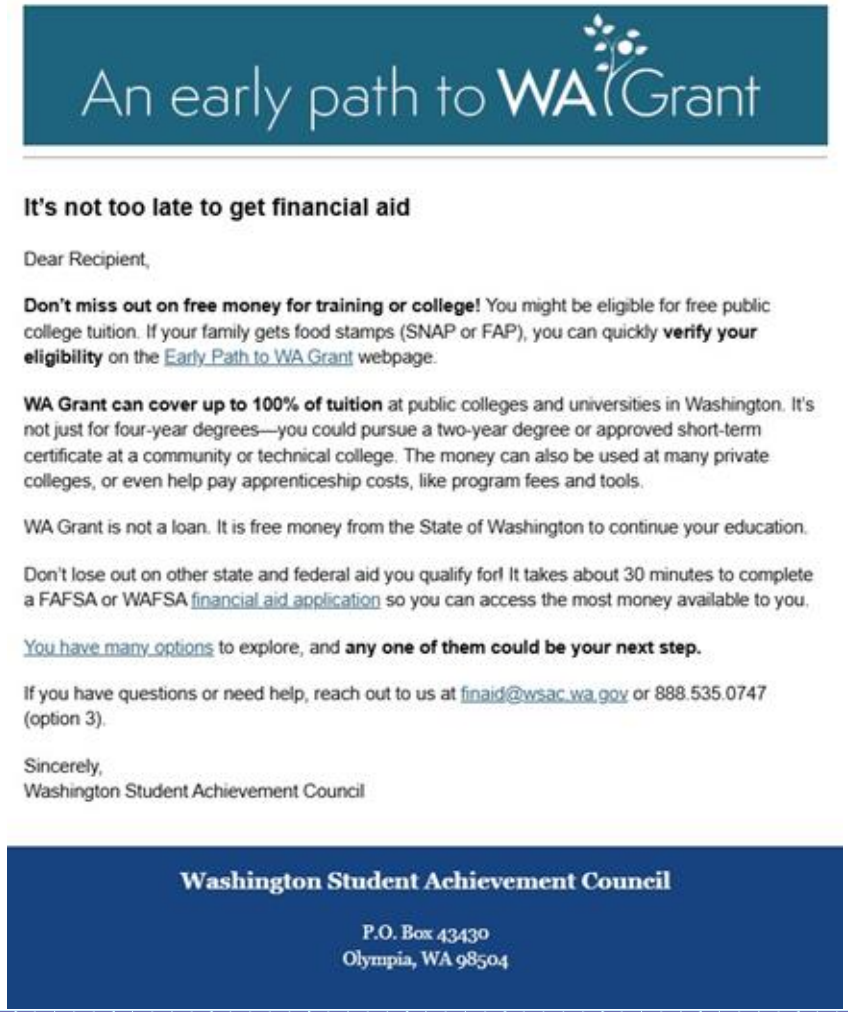
Then what?

- **Pick your education pathway!** What kind of career training or college program are you interested in pursuing? You'll need to apply for admission and enroll to start using your WA Grant funds. Explore your education options at: wsac.wa.gov/sfa-institutions

Students received either a signed letter from Gov. Ferguson or a mailer from WSAC

- Introduce automatic eligibility
- Outline steps to verify on trusted platform
- Remind students to complete FAFSA
- Highlight next steps

Outreach Step 2: Guidance



An early path to WA Grant

It's not too late to get financial aid

Dear Recipient,

Don't miss out on free money for training or college! You might be eligible for free public college tuition. If your family gets food stamps (SNAP or FAP), you can quickly **verify your eligibility** on the Early Path to WA Grant webpage.

WA Grant can cover up to 100% of tuition at public colleges and universities in Washington. It's not just for four-year degrees—you could pursue a two-year degree or approved short-term certificate at a community or technical college. The money can also be used at many private colleges, or even help pay apprenticeship costs, like program fees and tools.

WA Grant is not a loan. It is free money from the State of Washington to continue your education.

Don't lose out on other state and federal aid you qualify for! It takes about 30 minutes to complete a FAFSA or WAFSA financial aid application so you can access the most money available to you.

You have many options to explore, and **any one of them could be your next step.**

If you have questions or need help, reach out to us at finaid@wsac.wa.gov or 888.535.0747 (option 3).

Sincerely,
Washington Student Achievement Council

Washington Student Achievement Council

P.O. Box 43430
Olympia, WA 98504

Emails focused on different populations' next steps

- Remind students about program
- Quick links to complete verification
- Wove in behavioral messaging ("It's not too late")

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Preliminary Insights from Outreach

Student Emails		
	Open rate	Click rate*
April (11,148 delivered)	43%	63%
May (11,075 delivered)	44%	84%
June (10,298 delivered)	36%	77%

- Open rates remain similar, lower after school ends
- Large number of clicks throughout spring
- (Not shown) about 80% of messages delivered and 20% bounced back / invalid emails

**Click rate measured as total number of clicks divided by total number of recipients; share of recipients ever clicking not yet available*

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Preliminary Insights from Outreach

Parent Emails		
	Open rate	Click rate*
April (6,122 delivered)	54%	4%
May (6,084 delivered)	48%	2%
June (6,044 delivered)	49%	3%

- Highest open rates, though also drops after school ends
- Lowest click rates - almost no clicks
- (Not shown) nearly 100% delivery rate; high accuracy of parent contact information when available

**Click rate measured as total number of clicks divided by total number of recipients; share of recipients ever clicking not yet available*

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Preliminary Insights from Outreach

Counselor Emails		
	Open rate	Click rate*
April (104 delivered)	46%	19%
May (104 delivered)	34%	15%

- Open rates slightly dropped off between April and May
- Less likely to click on links than students
- (Not shown) nearly 100% delivery rate; school official emails more reliable than students

**Click rate measured as total number of clicks divided by total number of recipients; share of recipients ever clicking not yet available*

Preliminary Insights from Outreach

- Design messaging campaigns recognizing different populations engage with email differently
  - High open rates from parents - almost never click
  - Medium open rates from students - high levels of clicking through to multiple links within an email
  - Counselors less interested in follow-up / repeated messaging

Discussion and questions