

MYTHS, MISINFORMATION, AND UPWARD MOVEMENT: WHY HIGHER EDUCATION MATTERS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In recent years, there has been a growing sentiment among Washington leaders and educators that “not all students need to go to college” – implying, perhaps, that (some or most) students do not need a post secondary credential – especially a bachelor’s degree – to be successful in Washington’s growing economy. This opinion may be enticing for those hoping to avoid years of schooling or potential debt; and those who hold this opinion likely mean well by these sentiments, but they rely on outlier cases that misconstrue the realities of workforce demand, student debt load, and the potential for interrupting intergenerational cycles of poverty. **Washington STEM aims to set the record straight: we need to support more students to be prepared for and to complete all types of postsecondary pathways – apprenticeships, certificates, associate’s degrees, and bachelor’s degrees.** In our haste to lift up and call out certain pathways, we must not, at the same time, degrade or devalue bachelor’s degrees or the institutions that confer them.

MYTH 1: “THERE ARE PLENTY OF JOBS THAT DON’T REQUIRE A COLLEGE DEGREE.”

FACT: Fewer than 30 percent of the job openings that pay a family-sustaining wage over the next 10 to 15 years will require solely a high school diploma (70 percent will require a credential).¹

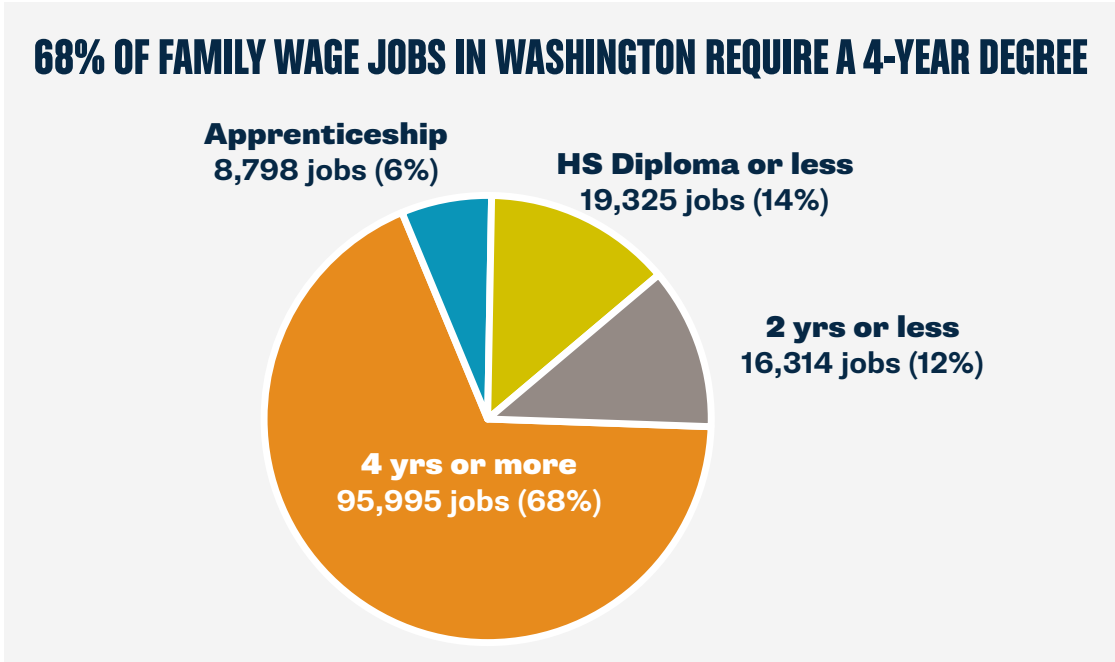
FACT: Every single region of our state has a large supply-demand gap for jobs that require a bachelor’s degree; this gap is bigger than any other type of credential gap.² This means that companies are more likely to import bachelor’s degree holders from out of state,³ and it means that home-grown students are more likely to be the lowest wage-earners in our state.⁴



Getting a **bachelor’s degree** is the only and best predictor in a student’s control of earning a good wage in Washington state.⁵ Outside of uncontrollable factors, getting a bachelor’s degree can narrow the racial **income gap by up to 70%**.

FACT: We need more students to complete bachelor’s degrees and other postsecondary credentials like apprenticeships, career certificates, and associate’s degrees; this is not an either-or situation, so making the claim that students don’t need to get a college degree creates a false comparison that one kind of credential or path is better than another—that’s bad for everyone and bad for our economy.

FACT: While many companies are considering or have started to drop bachelor’s degree requirements for jobs, those cases make up 15 percent or less of the available jobs and still require individuals to have significant work experience and skills, which reinforces the already large opportunity gap that underserved students face in attaining family-sustaining jobs



MYTH 2: “SOME STUDENTS WOULD BE BETTER SERVED BY NON-COLLEGE PATHWAYS.”

FACT: Bachelor’s degrees are more likely to interrupt intergenerational cycles of poverty and to close race-based and income-based equity gaps than any other pathway, making them especially important as an option for low-income students and students of color.



FACT: College provides social capital, access to high-quality learning experiences, and a level playing field for access to things like internships – all of which may have been inaccessible to students prior to leaving the K-12 system. This means that participation in college can make up for significant disadvantages like poverty, racism, and other structural barriers a student may experience in their life.

MYTH 3: “COLLEGE IS ELITIST AND AN EXPENSIVE CONSTRAINT; STUDENTS WILL BE BURIED IN DEBT WITH NOTHING TO SHOW FOR IT.”

FACT: Washington has some of the most accessible, diverse, and low-income, student-friendly colleges in the nation. While racial and income gaps⁶ are still an issue in our state, we have a top-10 community college system and a top-10 poverty-serving baccalaureate rating in the U.S.

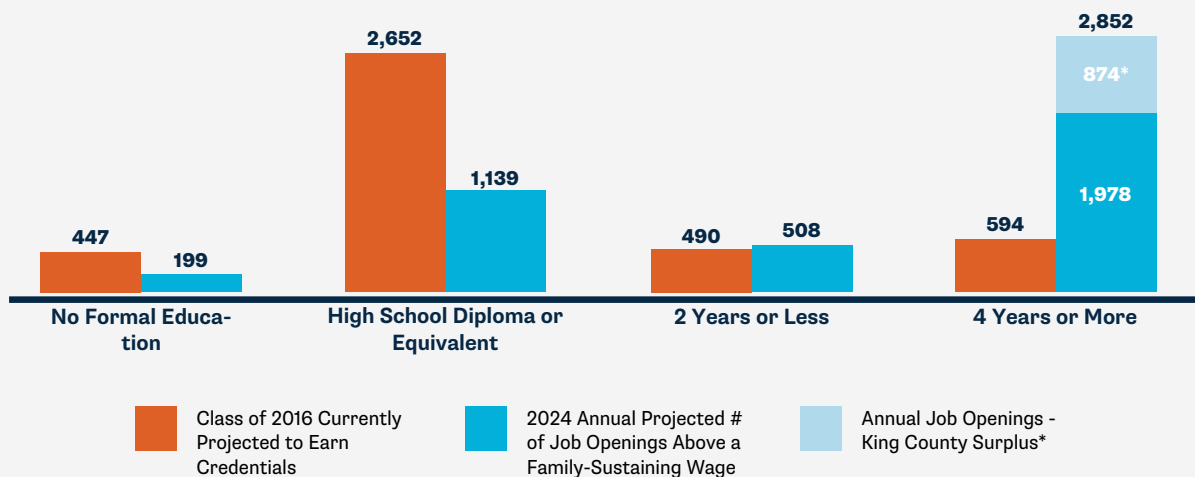
FACT: Students who graduate from Washington colleges have some of the lowest debt (bottom 10) among all 50 states;⁷ this is despite the fact that we also have some of the lowest financial aid completion rates (ranked bottom five) in the U.S.⁸

FACT: College credentials, and specifically bachelor’s degrees, still provide the surest way to access life-long career and family-sustaining jobs, economic stability, and civic engagement.

THE SUPPLY-DEMAND GAP FOR BACHELOR’S DEGREES

As technology and automation increase in every thriving industry in our state, even our most rural regions have more job openings that will require bachelor’s degree holders than any other type of credential. For example, the North Central region of Washington⁹ will have hundreds of openings for nurses, K-12 teachers, and computer scientists. The region’s agriculture and manufacturing employers are hiring individuals who can operate complex computer-controlled technology, and they have to import talent from out-of-state if local students don’t earn the bachelor’s degrees that get them ready for these great jobs.

NORTH CENTRAL REGION SUPPLY-DEMAND PROJECTIONS



*Over the next 12 years, there will be a surplus of jobs in King County compared to the number of new, local, credentialed individuals in King County. That means that if other regions throughout the state only attended to their own regional job openings, King County would be solely under-supplied by Washington state-originating kids. This surplus represents a proportion of the surplus jobs that could be supplied by students from the North Central Region.

WHAT MESSAGE ARE YOU SENDING?

“Not all students should/need to go to college.”

INTENT: There are jobs that pay well and don’t require a degree.

IMPACT: Students who already face systemic barriers hear in this message that they can skip college, when in fact these students need to attend college to earn a good, family wage.

“There are plenty of jobs that don’t require you to go to college.”

INTENT: Save yourself the time and money; you’ll be just fine getting a job without a degree.

IMPACT: Students have the incorrect assumption that there are many jobs that will sustain them and their future families without having to get a degree, when in fact over 68 percent of the jobs that pay enough to sustain families will be held by individuals with bachelor’s degrees.

**To download this executive summary and the full report, visit:
www.washingtonstem.org/STEMbythenumbers.**

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