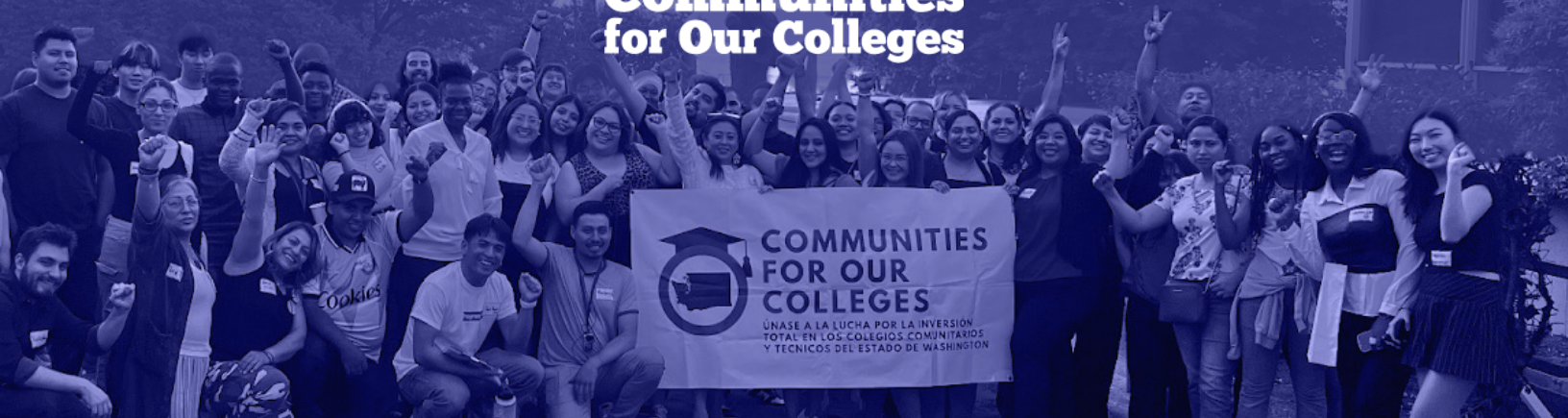


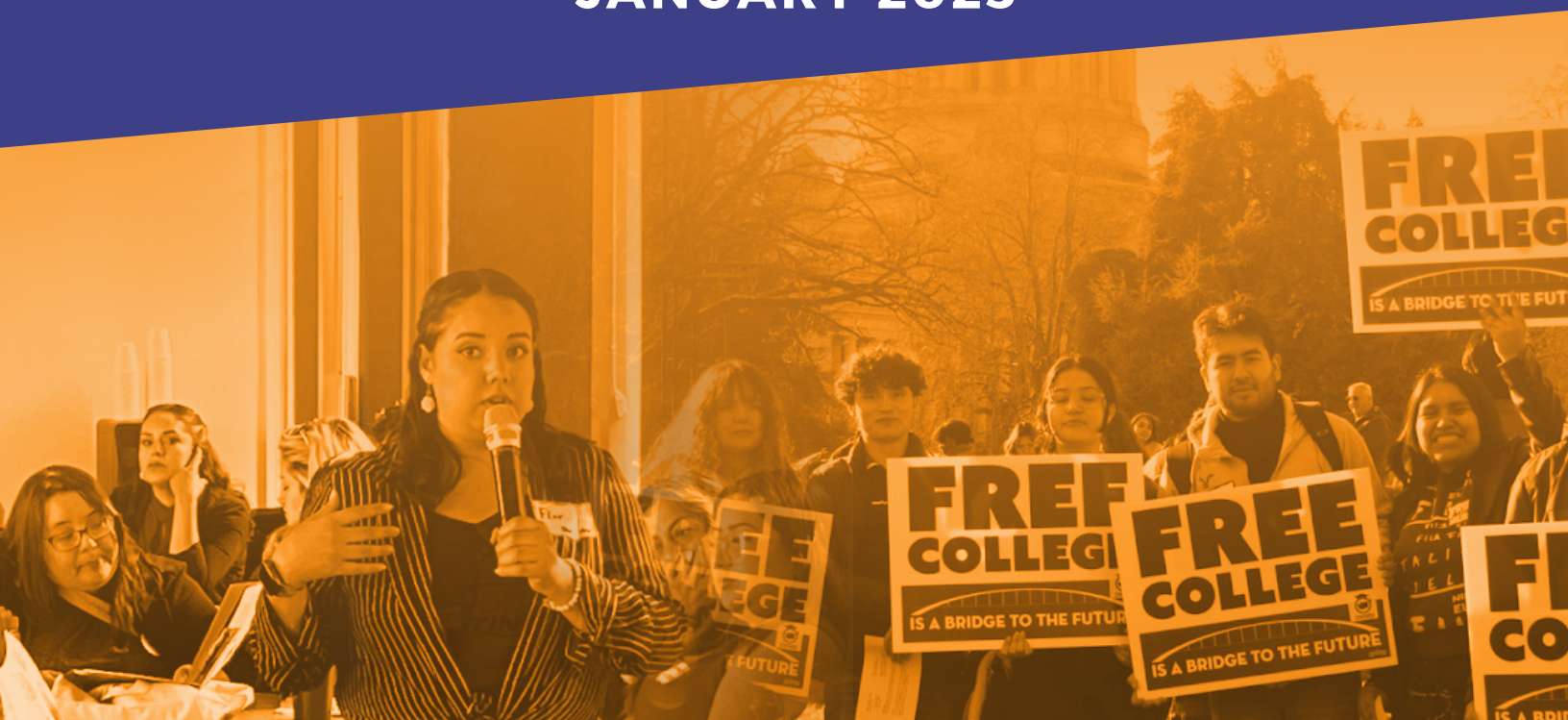


**Communities
for Our Colleges**



**WORK-STUDY FOR ALL:
PAID PATHWAYS FOR
UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS**

JANUARY 2025





INTRODUCTION

Undocumented students struggle to navigate higher educational opportunities; one significant barrier is the lack of access to paid work experiences. This report argues why undocumented students should be granted access to work-study programs. It also provides a blueprint for Washington to develop a program similar to California’s Dream Act Service Incentive Grant (DSIG) Program.¹

Washington is home to more than 240,000 undocumented individuals, representing 3% of the state population.² As the state with the 10th-largest population of undocumented people, undocumented students are integral to Washington’s community and economy. They are our neighbors, classmates, and future leaders, deserving of the same opportunities to succeed and contribute to our community. An estimated 2,000 undocumented students graduate from high school every year in Washington state.³

A report by Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC), State Board of Community and Technical Colleges, Association of Washington Business, and Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, **“Washington State Higher Education and Labor Market Report,”** states that **72% of jobs in 2031 will require a post-secondary education. Today, 47% of Washington workers have a post-secondary degree.** WSAC statistics show that across the board, from high school graduation rates to college enrollment and completion rates, low-income students of color and young men are falling behind.

Around 10,000 (or 2.3%) of undocumented students are in post-secondary education in Washington alone. Of those, only .5% are DACA-legible.⁴ Undocumented students in the United States face numerous challenges in accessing higher education and employment opportunities. Washington has passed legislation that has allowed undocumented students to pay in-state tuition, get state financial aid, and apply for professional licensing. Higher education and career opportunities are becoming more accessible for undocumented young people in Washington.



Between 2019 and 2020, there were 5,406 applicants for the Washington State Application for Financial Aid (WASFA),⁵ a program that extends financial aid to undocumented students. Like programs for many other low-income students, WASFA created an important pathway for undocumented students to access higher education. This financial aid is necessary but inadequate. Like their peers, these students can benefit from a state-supported work-study program. Such a program would not only give students needed income but would give them real work skills and connections to advance future employment.

PROBLEM

Federal work-study programs are designed to provide part-time employment to students with financial need, allowing them to gain work experience and alleviating financial stressors. However, undocumented students are ineligible for federal work-study programs due to current federal regulations that require work authorization (DACA, Green Card, TPS, etc.), prohibiting undocumented students from participating.

While undocumented students can get training and experience through fellowships, internships, or independent contracting, these opportunities can often be unpaid or offer limited compensation. Undocumented students are ineligible for fellowship grants administered through financial aid (which have strict caps on funding, limiting the amount a student can get) or through payroll (which require work authorization).

In addition, there is very limited information on how to attain paid/unpaid work experience if you are undocumented. This is a problem for educators, counselors, and students alike.⁶ This lack of access creates financial hardships and limits the economic and professional mobility for undocumented students, all of which creates a system of inequity for undocumented students.

1. <https://www.csac.ca.gov/dsig>

2. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigrants-in-washington>

3. <https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/state/washington/>

4. https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/07.23-Undocumented-Students_v3.pdf

5. https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2020-11-WSAC.FAFSA_Report.pdf

6. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10035561/>



A report by the National Library of Medicine entitled “A qualitative examination of the impacts of financial stress on college students’ well-being: Insights from a large, private institution,” shows that **“despite the fact that 75% of community college students work, many still face financial insecurities.”**⁷ Another study, “Struggling to Survive – Striving to Succeed: Food and Housing Insecurities in the Community College,” found that a **“third of community college students experienced housing insecurity, and more than 1 in 10 struggled to feed themselves and their families.”**⁸ This financial stress is magnified for students who can not access work study or paid fellowships. Financial instability limits students’ academic and professional success, with reports showing lower grades, decreased engagement, and higher dropout rates. A Trellis Company survey, “Student Financial Wellness Survey,” reported that **48% of students who experienced financial hardships agreed they had difficulties concentrating on their academics.**⁹

MAKING UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS ELIGIBLE FOR WORK-STUDY IS A WIN-WIN FOR WASHINGTON’S STUDENTS AND ECONOMY

Federal Work-Study (FWS) programs play a crucial role in supporting students’ financial, academic, and professional success. By providing financial aid to students in need, it helps subsidize the increasing costs of higher education, including tuition, books, transportation, and living expenses. Since its inception, more than 33 million students have benefited from FWS, serving 700,000 students per year—in fact, 1 out of every 10 full-time students receives FWS support.¹⁰ Work-study programs provide several key benefits to both students and community:

7. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8141976/>

8. <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2024/07/16/restructuring-work-based-learning-persistence-opinion>

9. https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SFWS-Aggregate-Report_FALL-2022.pdf

10. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272775715000825>



- **FINANCIAL STABILITY:** Work-study programs offer students the opportunity to earn money while studying, reducing their financial burden and enabling them to focus more on their education. On average, students in the FWS program earn \$2,340 per academic year.¹¹ Payment is crucial to cover expenses such as textbooks, transportation, and housing.
- **REDUCTION OF POVERTY:** Studies show that FWS generally provides low-income students with better access to better work opportunities. The Columbia University’s Community College Research Center (CCRC) fact sheet, “Participation in Federal Work Study,” found that students who would have otherwise worked through college have better and more supportive environments through FWS, including better working hours, proximity, and relation to study/major.¹² By participating in FWS, students have better chances at attaining employment, ensuring long-term economic stability. By providing undocumented students with access to professional paid experience, work-study programs can help reduce poverty levels within immigrant communities.
- **BETTER ACADEMIC RESULTS:** Since work-study students are less likely to be sidetracked by financial hardship, they tend to perform better academically. While more research is needed, CCRC stresses that on-campus paid experience has a positive influence on completion, with FWS students being 3.2% more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree after six years and 2.4% more likely to be employed after graduation.¹³

11. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/participation-federal-work-study.pdf>

12. Id.

13. Id.



- **DEVELOPMENT OF SKILLS:** Work-study programs help students gain useful work experience and develop skills that will improve their employability in the future, such as time management, communication, and problem-solving. Building a network and connections is also a benefit, especially if work-study programs are in the student’s related major. CCRC also found that students who would not have worked during college without participating in the federal work-study program were more likely to be employed after college, at least when compared to similar, nonworking students.¹⁴
- **EQUITY:** Expanding access to work-study programs to undocumented students is a matter of equity. Undocumented students face unique challenges and are often disproportionately impacted by financial barriers. Washington state needs to ensure that all college students get the same opportunities regardless of immigration status.

SOLUTION: STATEWIDE SERVICE INCENTIVE PROGRAM

Washington should establish a statewide work-study or service incentive program. Permitting students to participate in meaningful work-study programs would provide much-needed financial support and help students build their professional connections and experience. This could be accomplished by passing legislation modeled after the California Dream Act Service Incentive Grant that awards students for volunteer/service hours.

A similar program in Washington state can be designed to address the needs of undocumented students. Funded through the state, the program should ensure that students can participate regardless of immigration status.

14. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/participation-federal-work-study.pdf>



- **ELIGIBILITY:** Students need to meet the financial criteria as determined by the Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WASFA) and who are also A) a student in an undergraduate or graduate program, B) a Washington resident, C) a student who has lived in the state for one year immediately prior to starting their college or program, and D) someone who has a high school diploma or equivalent. Part-time and full-time students should qualify.
- **TYPE OF EXPERIENCE:** Positions offered to students, similar to the Dream Act Service Incentive Grant, would be nonprofit or with any federal, state, or local government entity. Experience should be diverse and related to the student's major.
- **COMPENSATION:** Financial need determination would be measured through the student's WASFA application. The number of hours worked is based on an individual's financial need and award package. The maximum award will be 19 hours/week multiplied by the state minimum wage multiplied by the number of weeks a student is employed. Compensation should be biweekly, ensuring that students receive steady payments.

CONCLUSION

In 2025, Washington needs to pass legislation to authorize and fund a statewide work-study program. It is a necessary step in creating equitable pathways for all students. This program should be able to support the financial, academic, and professional success of undocumented students.

STUDENT QUOTES:

“I dream of studying and getting a college degree. Although I can get financial aid, I will still need to work. Having access to work-study like other students would help me pay my bills and get the experience needed to succeed in the future.”

– LUIS, BIOLOGY, HIGHLINE COLLEGE

“If I were able to work on campus, it would be a huge help. The money would go toward paying for my classes, which is always a concern. Plus, working on campus offers flexible schedules that are designed to accommodate students’ class schedules. The environment is also more supportive because employers on campus understand that your education comes first. But without work-study, I have to look elsewhere for ways to make money, which adds another layer of difficulty. I have the same ambition as other students, and I want to succeed just as much, but the lack of work opportunities holds me back.”

– DANIELA, NURSING, HIGHLINE COLLEGE

“One of my friends is undocumented – having a stipend program for undocumented students would have a positive effect on their college experience. They would have better work hours, making them less overworked, as well as, they would have more time for school and for achieving a professional career. “

– SERABI, INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY, EVERETT COMMUNITY COLLEGE



STUDENT QUOTES:

“Allowing undocumented students the opportunity to have work experience before graduating would be a major change to future generations. I have personally faced challenges due to my legal status. I have had to shut down job opportunities on campus that would have brought knowledge and experience for future job opportunities. I want upcoming generations to receive the opportunities I never got the chance to have.”

- DAFNE, SPORTS MEDICINE, EVERETT COMMUNITY COLLEGE

“I want to be able to get a job and be able to provide for myself. I’ve been exploring work-study opportunities and have even attempted to become a tutor for physics. Unfortunately, because of my undocumented status, I can’t access certain opportunities. I am interested in working on campus as a tutor because it would help develop my teaching skills.”

- FELIX GUERRERO, MATH, TACOMA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

“I support paid pathways because the undocumented community deserves access to paid internships, fellowships, and volunteer opportunities in community colleges and universities. These are students who are the future of the state. By Washington state’s investing in them, it will promote growth in the state economy, showing it will not just benefit the students but also the state.”

- PERLA VAZQUEZ, LAW & POLICY, UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON-TACOMA



LEAD AUTHOR: LESLIE HERNANDEZ holds a B.A. in Political Science and Law, Societies, and Justice from the University of Washington. As a U.C.L.A. Dream Summer recipient, she interned with Communities for Our Colleges, contributing to multiple campaigns focused on education equity. She also interned with the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, advancing immigrant rights. Leslie is passionate about the intersection of law, policy, and equity and aspires to pursue a legal career to further these causes.

In June 2024, the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) and Communities for Our Colleges held a joint convening to further the conversation on paid work experiences for undocumented students. The convening brought together undocumented students, University of Washington Purple Group and UW-Tacoma Monarchs, faculty from across the state including University of Washington, Highline College, Evergreen State College, Everett Community College, Clark College, Columbia Basin College, Seattle Central College, community organizations including Communities for Our Colleges, Latino Community Fund, Nuestras Raíces Community Center (Spokane), Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network, Northwest Immigrants Rights Project, labor organizations including American Federation of Teachers, Washington and UAW 4121, and state agencies including WSAC and the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. This gathering provided the vision for this report.

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ABOUT COMMUNITIES FOR OUR COLLEGES

Communities for Our Colleges (C4C) is a multiracial student-centered coalition in Washington State that works to improve the state’s community colleges by engaging students, faculty, staff, and the community to advocate for improved funding, access, and racial equity. Washington’s thirty-four community and technical colleges are engines of local economies, individual advancement, and racial justice. Community colleges are essential to successful four-year colleges. They serve communities of color and low-income communities, prepare tomorrow’s workers, and offer opportunities to the underserved. Our community colleges benefit all Washingtonians. Full funding for our colleges is an investment in a prosperous and equitable future for the state. C4C is a project of the nonprofit Alliance for Just Society.

ABOUT ALLIANCE FOR A JUST SOCIETY

Alliance for a Just Society (AJS) is a national center for innovative organizing and strategy based in Seattle, Washington. We build powerful organizations and communities. We fight for racial, social, and economic justice.

Executive Director: LeeAnn Hall | Alliance for a Just Society © 2025