COLLEGE AND TECHNICAL SCHOOLS

COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

As Tacoma students continue to reach their highest potential in K-12, our work now turns to college enrollment, persistence, and completion with increased focus. In the last few years, Graduate Tacoma has transitioned to using data from both the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) and Education Research Data Center (ERDC), enabling us to do a deeper study of student-level outcomes while also examining larger statewide trends.

Rising Costs, Falling Enrollment

According to NSC data, the rate of TPS students enrolled in college within one year of graduating high school has declined overall by 9 percent since 2010. Specifically, from 2016-17, we saw a 5 percent decline, driven almost entirely by a drop in low-income student enrollment from 48 to 42 percent. This has widened the poverty gap from 11 percent at baseline to 20 percent last year. ERDC calculates rates differently,* but shows that in 2016 Tacoma fell 4 percent below the statewide average of 28 percent enrollment in two-year programs.

In 2017, state legislation ended a six-year freeze on college tuition, allowing institutions to begin raising the annual costs to earning a postsecondary degree or credential. The full impact of this decision still looms for college-going students and may be a contributor to falling low-income enrollment — which similarly declined following steep state tuition hikes during the Great Recession. This only emphasizes the importance of passing future legislation to fully fund the Washington College Promise Scholarship, a guaranteed source of financial aid for more than 93,000 eligible students statewide.

The growing financial burden of college and the large percentage of low-income Tacoma graduates make it increasingly difficult to improve the rate of enrollment. Our collective effort is essential to ensuring students have the tools to apply and pay for college. It is likewise essential to building up the future of Tacoma’s economy and workforce. Graduate Tacoma’s College Support Network has made particular headway in connecting students to in- and out-of-school college enrollment resources, see pages 38-39. Their success in laying the groundwork makes Graduate Tacoma’s efforts in this area now ripe for cross-sector coordination and alignment.

*ERDC includes students in less than two-year programs and certificate programs and double counts students who enroll in both two- and four-year programs. This is true for both enrollment and completion data.

Note: Gap measures don’t perfectly match demographics due to rounding to the nearest percent.

Data Source: National Student Clearinghouse via TPS, with support from Degrees of Change.