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Higher Education Demands a Closer Look

As the children of the baby boom — the “echo” — graduate from high school in record numbers, the growing pressure on the state’s colleges and universities has excited the attention of lawmakers and the governor. Few would question the need to provide for adequate opportunity for Washingtonians to receive a good college education. However, the very importance of the issue makes it incumbent upon policy makers to evaluate critically the choices before them. Our goals should be to protect and enhance the quality of Washington’s higher education institutions, to assure student choice, and to preserve access for the increasing college-age population.

*In this **Policy Brief**, the first in an occasional series on higher education, the Washington Research Council presents some findings of its ongoing examination of the state’s system of colleges and universities.*

- “ Washington is meeting the current demand for higher education. Capacity expansion should be approached cautiously.
 - According to the state’s Applications Match Study, of a total of 1,972 unserved applicants to public four-year colleges in 1994-95, only 168 were qualified graduates of Washington high schools applying for freshman admission, while 269 were community college students seeking to transfer. Since that time budgeted FTE enrollments at the four-year institutions have increased by 4,683. And as was reported earlier this year, enrollments at Washington State University and Eastern Washington University have fallen below forecast by nearly 4% and more than 11% respectively.

The Enrollments in Colleges and Universities in the Fall of 1994 as Shares of the Population Over the Age of 17

	Private	Public	Public and Private Combined
Washington State	0.95%	6.67%	7.62%
United States	1.49%	5.69%	7.18%
Washington's Rank Among the States	31st	13th	20th

Source: Office of Financial Management, Higher Education Enrollment Statistics and Projections, 1997-99 Biennium, February 1997.



- .. Maintaining participation levels for the projected growth in graduates from Washington high schools will require capacity to expand by 60,000 FTEs by 2010.
 - Washington ranks 13th in participation in public higher education, 31st in participation at private colleges and universities, and 20th in overall participation in higher education (public & private combined). Further, the state exceeds the nation as a whole in baccalaureate degrees granted by public institutions relative to population.
 - The 1996 Master Plan for Higher Education goal of 84,100 additional FTEs, which includes increased participation in upper-division, graduate and professional programs, represents an ambitious change in direction unrelated to current demographic pressure. The goal exceeds the capacity required to meet the increase in demand by 40%.
- .. Innovative and incentive-sensitive approaches will result in a more efficient allocation of resources to meet the actual demand for higher education. Examples of such approaches include varying tuition rates between programs and institutions in the public system, expanded student financial aid to support enrollment in Washington's independent colleges, and public-private partnerships between institutions (e.g., shared facilities).
- .. Until it is clear that all available resources in the state, including private sector and technology alternatives, are being used to capacity, long-term commitments to capacity expansion should be approached with caution.

