



FROM ACCESS TO ACHIEVEMENT: UNDERSTANDING EQUITY IN RUNNING START PARTICIPATION

RESEARCH BRIEF

November 2025

McCowan, K., Bravo, N., Nishimura, J., Hamidani, K., Malikova, N., Galoro, B., (2025). From Access to Achievement: Understanding Equity in Running Start Participation (*Research Brief #1*).
www.ccedresults.org/access-to-achievement/



Overview

CCER launched the Running Start Research Project following a welcome event for incoming UW students hosted by the Othello- UW Commons. During this meeting, eight Running Start students expressed that they need more college and career support, as they are often off campus while preparing for college. These students shared concerns that not being physically present at school affects their ability to receive the same level of college access services as their peers who are not in Running Start.

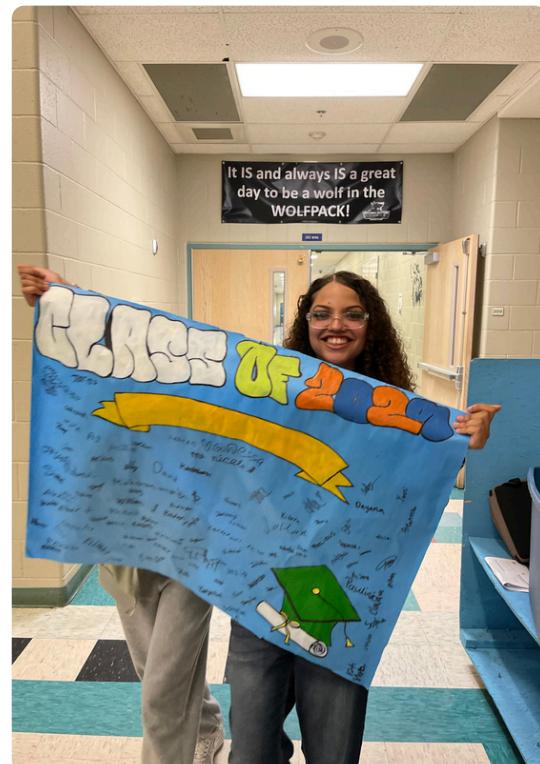
This gap in access led CCER to launch the project to better understand and amplify the experiences of Running Start students.

Background

Washington State's Running Start program, established in 1990, allows high school juniors and seniors to earn college credit at community and technical colleges. While the program was designed to expand access to college-level coursework, data shows persistent underrepresentation of students of color, multilingual learners (MLLs), and those eligible for free/reduced-price lunch (FRPL) even when controlling for academic readiness^{1,2}.

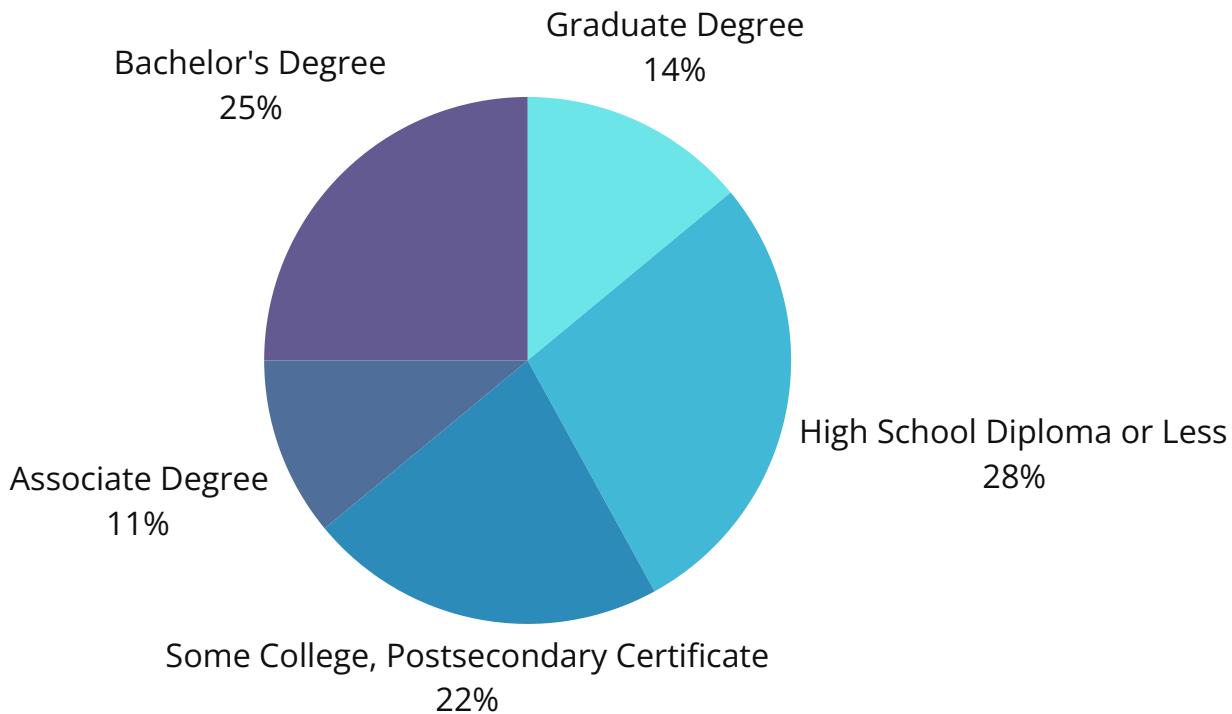
Methodology

To better understand the accessibility and outcomes of participating in Running Start, CCER conducted a literature review of existing research studies about the running start program in Washington state. Next, we explored existing data to understand participation and outcomes among students within our region. Based on the findings from our literature review and initial analysis of public data, we identified a target population of students that participated in running start based on demographic characteristics such as race, ethnicity and income status. We developed an interview protocol and conducted interviews among our target population. The findings below highlight the results of each phase.



Why Running Start Is Important

Jobs requiring a postsecondary degree are increasing. Washington is ranked 5th among the top states for share of jobs requiring postsecondary education³. By 2031, 39% will require at least a Bachelor's and 33% will require a certificate or AA.



#5

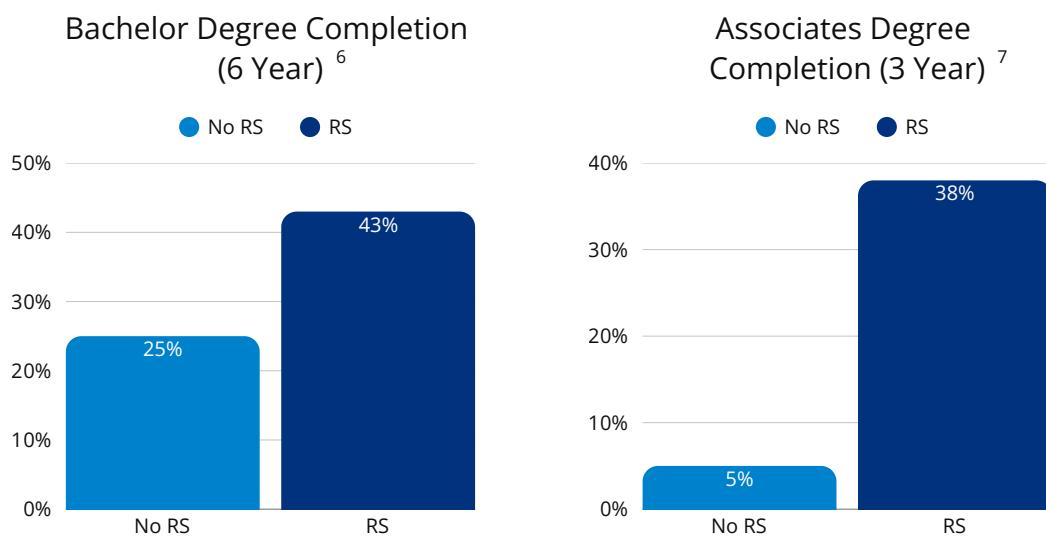
Washington is ranked 5th among the top states for share of jobs requiring postsecondary education. (Georgetown Center, 2023)



2023 • 70% of jobs require postsecondary education

2031 • 72% of jobs will require postsecondary education

Running Start students are more likely to earn a college degree. According to the ERDC Postsecondary Credential Outcomes for Students Who Enroll in Dual Credit (2024)⁴, Running Start students earn bachelor's degrees at 1.7 times the rate of non-Running Start students. Moreover, the data below shows that Running Start can be a strong pathway to earning an associate degree. Underrepresented Minority Students (non-Asian, non-white) showed larger effects from Running Start on college enrollment⁵.



Data: ERDC Postsecondary credential outcomes for students who enroll in dual credit (2024)

Running Start participation is associated with an increased probability of any college enrollment for underrepresented minority students. Data showed students consistently enrolled in postsecondary education at higher rates than non-Running Start students (60% to 40% and 77% to 60%). The figure below illustrates how college enrollment rates among groups that typically participate less in Running Start (such as Hispanic, Native American, and Black students) are positively impacted by participation in the program.

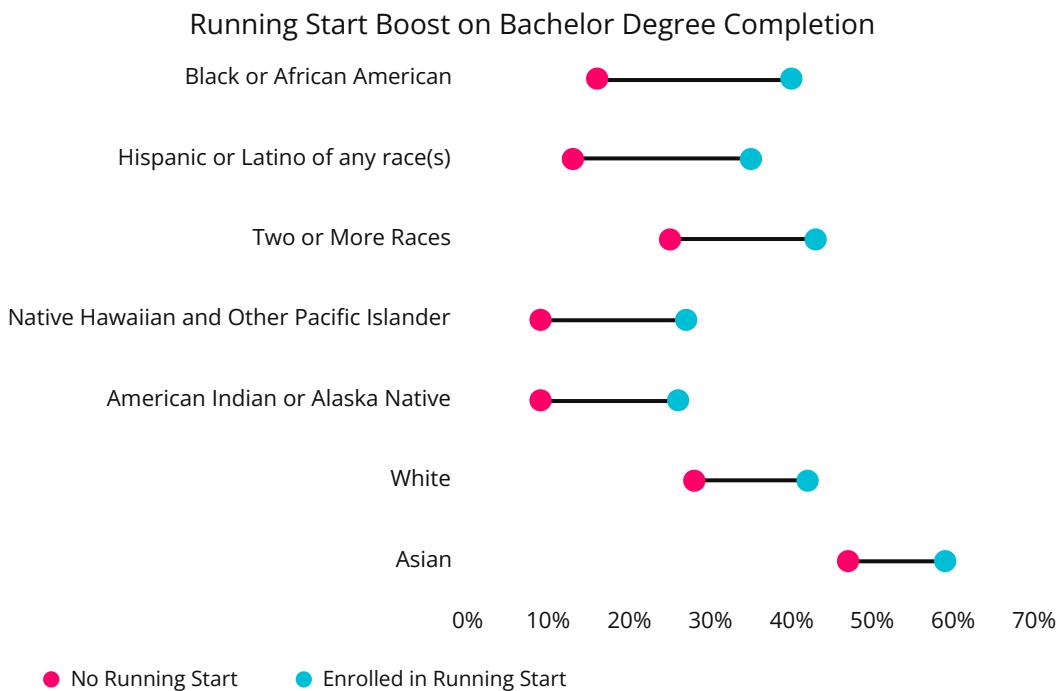


Figure shows the rate of college enrollment for Running Start students vs non-Running Starts students⁸.

What Influences Running Start Enrollment Decisions

Sense of Belonging The greater the connection students feel toward their affiliation to high school, the less likely they are to participate in Running Start^{9,10}.

Independence Expectations The program was a solid choice for “highly motivated and self-directed high school students”¹¹. Students’ follow-through and self-selection were considered necessary for Running Start¹².

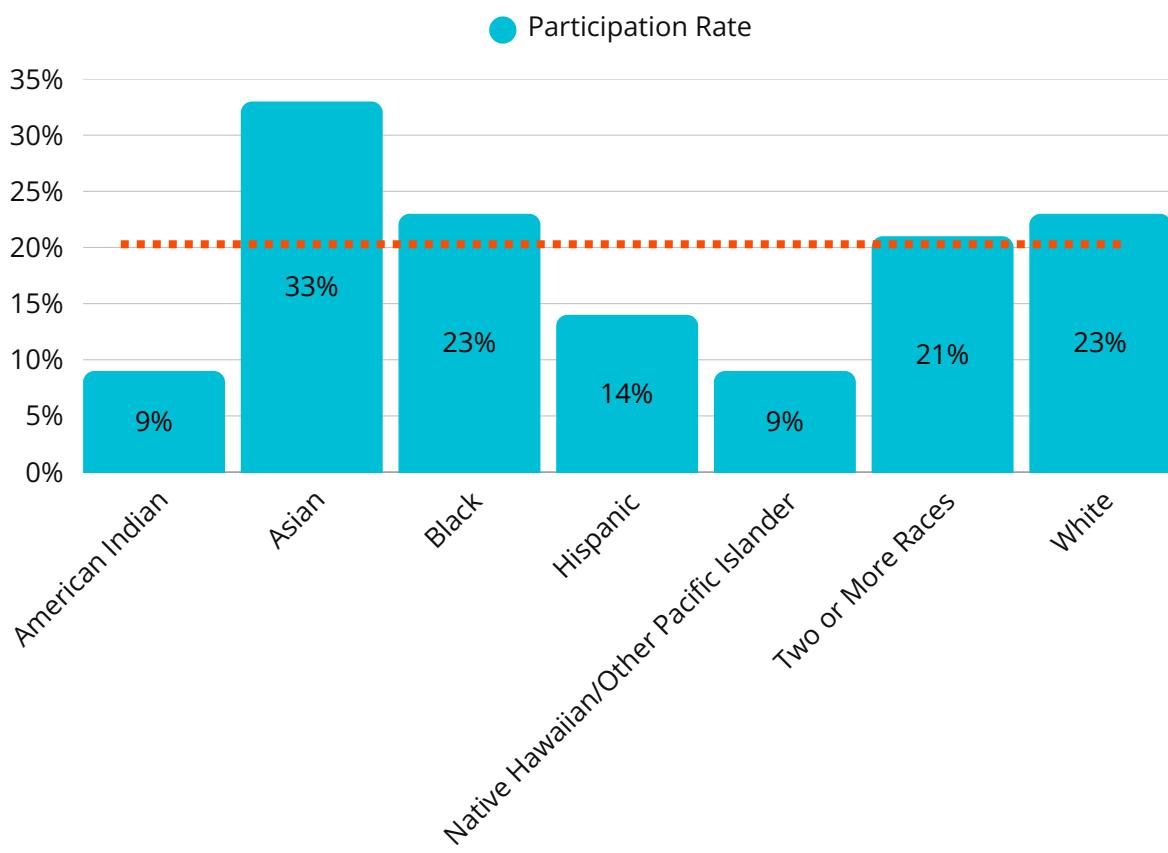
Familiarity with the Program Early outreach, advising, and support is needed to not limit participation to non-first gen students. Multilingual and culturally relevant outreach, and targeted advising that shape students’ perceptions about themselves, dual credit, and a college-going mindset is important to facilitate students’ decision to enroll in Running Start¹³.

Program Requirement Many Running Start access policies align with national best practices, but these have not consistently addressed access challenges for minority and low-income students that include cost, eligibility criteria, and social factors¹⁴.

College and Career Plan Early start in college and career was an important consideration along with free tuition¹⁵. The majority of RS students already had a plan to have a bachelor’s degree. Transfer credits was also an important consideration before enrollment¹⁶.

Gaps in Enrollment

Birkeland's 2019 dissertation on *Dual-credit Access, Participation and Outcomes in Washington State*¹⁷ focused on 249 of the 296 Washington state school districts with 91,361 students enrolled in the 2014-2015 school year. Of the total sample, 16,766 (18%) of students took at least one Running Start course. The demographic characteristics of the overall student sample (91,361) compared to the 16,766 enrolled in Running Start, showed lower enrollment in Running Start for students who had the following characteristics: male, ELL, SPED, Free and Reduced Priced Lunch (FRPL), American Indian, Black, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, and multi-racial.



The figures highlight disparities in 2024 enrollment by race, as well as the combined effects of race and income. Students from marginalized backgrounds show lower enrollment in Running Start compared to the state average, particularly Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, and multiracial student's enrollment rate being lower than the statewide average. Also, income is a factor for a big gap enrollment of these group.

Gaps in the Literature

Many studies have not included student perspectives directly, missing a valuable opportunity to understand how students navigate participation in Running Start. While some factors influencing participation are known, more research is needed to explore the barriers faced by students who choose not to enroll—whether due to cost, lack of information, or institutional discouragement. Quantitative data can show us what is happening, but to understand why, we need qualitative data that captures the lived experiences of the students behind the numbers. Running Start is an impactful program, yet it isn't reaching many of the students who could benefit from it the most.

Emerging Qualitative Insights: Students' Voice

Through one hour virtual interviews, students shared with CCER how they learned about Running Start (RS), their motivations, challenges, experiences, and post-Running Start outcomes¹⁸.

Learning about RS	Students typically learned about Running Start through counselors, teachers, siblings, cousins, or peers. Word-of-mouth and school information sessions were common ways of learning.
Motivations	Key drivers for joining Running Start included earning college credits early, saving money, dual credit opportunities, and working toward an AA degree
Challenges	Barriers included feelings of isolation or disconnection from high school peers, difficulty balancing Running Start responsibilities, lack of support, and navigating transportation to extracurriculars like sports at the high school.

"The main one in the beginning was wanting to still feel like I was a part of my high school, but then I feel like doing sports ... kind of resolved that issue. I just also think you have to be really self-motivated. There's some days when you're like, "I don't want to get up and drive myself all the way down there, and be there all day...sometimes you struggle to be motivated"

- 2019 Bellevue College Running Start Graduate

Experience	Students described their experiences as offering flexibility, independence, maturity, and growth in confidence. Some also compared it to traditional high school options (e.g., IB or AP), noting differences in workload and belonging.
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"In high school it's different because your teacher is always gonna be there and classroom wise everybody's kind of on the same page. We're all in high school. The teachers really there for you and not that in college it's different, but they offer after class help and that's it."

- 2020 Bellevue College Running Start Student

Post-RS Outcomes	Many students highlighted where Running Start led them, including completing AA degrees, transferring to four-year universities, pursuing professional programs, and entering careers. This theme reflects the program's role in shaping future education and career pathways.
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"I think it (Running Start) definitely paid its dividends for me. That was probably what helped me, kind of get into my career"- 2018, Highline College Running Start Student



The Importance of this Study and Future Direction

These emerging insights support what is in the literature:

- The educational outcomes and money savings being a motivator for participation, but many students learn about the program through their network which might be limiting for first-generation college students and not accessible for low-income students who rely on free/reduced lunch at school or do not have access to transportation to the college.
- Students stay at the high school if they feel a great sense of connection and community. For multi-lingual students this can be a contributing factor for why they don't enroll if they have a community, such as bi-lingual staff they've identified and know they can communicate to in their home language.
- The program requires a level of independence that is not accessible to students who need more support. It should be considered how can the program be restructured with more supports to be accessible to all types of learners and how high schools can better prepare all students to be independent learners.

Future Direction

Beyond this initial exploration, CCER will include a formal Running Start Study in our Annual Research Agenda for 2026 and begin pursuing a formal research study. The guiding research question is: ***How does participation in Washington State's Running Start dual enrollment program influence postsecondary outcomes and educational equity, and how can student experience data be leveraged to identify and address disparities across intersecting lines of race, ethnicity, economic status, and language minority background?***

Aim 1

To investigate how participation in Running Start influences postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion, with a focus on identifying causal mechanisms that support or hinder equity for students of color, multilingual learners (MLLs), first-generation and those eligible for free/reduced-price lunch (FRPL).

Aim 2

To develop, validate, and disseminate an equity-centered student experience survey tailored to the Running Start context, capturing academic, social, and behavioral outcomes, and designed to identify actionable levers for improving institutional practices and student support.

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