

Washington's Celebration Of Advancing High School Seniors Inspires Others To Pursue Higher Education

[Civic Nation](#) *Voice*

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Today's rapidly-evolving marketplace requires an agile, creative and technically-proficient workforce. The nature of this change constantly redefines what it means to be successful, and it breaks centuries-old expectations of how to get there.



In Washington state, we see this in our anchor employers who are global leaders in information and communications technology, aerospace, online commerce, and precision manufacturing. Our seventh-fastest growing economy in the nation also enjoys traditional stronghold sectors—such as trade, natural resources, agriculture, manufacturing, and services—all of which provide a vibrant and diverse employment mix.

In 2017, Washington state engaged more than 60,000 students in College Signing Day.

Our demanding state economy, combined with the needs of our secondary education teachers, administrators, and students, requires a deep reconsideration of the pathways to postsecondary education.

While we can all agree a traditional four-year higher education might be the best choice for some, it is not a universal solution. This is reflected in the rise of postsecondary education options among community colleges, technical training programs and schools, and other professional training institutions.

Former First Lady Michelle Obama's [Better Make Room](#) campaign, featuring the [Reach Higher initiative](#) and established during her time at the White House, is alive and well in Washington State through our organization, [Washington College Access Network \(WCAN\)](#), powered by the [College Success Foundation](#). At WCAN, we support and enrich school counselors and the students they shepherd to postsecondary education, with customized training and support of readiness teams. Our collective goal is to level the playing field to higher education *of all kinds for everyone*.

Based on the simple notion that the process of moving on is an achievement worth acknowledging, and the act of continuing education is worth celebrating, our team at WCAN collaborates with Reach Higher to continue the phenomenon of [#CollegeSigningDay](#). This annual event has become one of the most anticipated and emotionally-powerful school events in our



state, and celebrates all students who are pursuing postsecondary education.

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“College Signing Day is an opportunity for underclassmen to witness someone achieving and moving on, an important milestone in a student’s maturity arc,” said Natalie Hart, a College and Career Counselor at Stadium High School in Tacoma, Washington. “It’s a high-energy opportunity for students to celebrate their friends who achieved college acceptance, and be inspired to chase that opportunity for themselves, where they’ll ultimately encourage another student to do the same. This event makes them excited for senior year and being celebrated on College Signing Day, and then anticipate the reward of walking across the stage on graduation day.”



Our work at WCAN uses the enthusiasm generated by College Signing Day to create a measurable shift toward a campus culture of fostering the expectation of post-secondary education.

In 2016, 60 schools from across the state hosted College Signing Day events in May and June, engaging more than 14,000 students. These events ranged from middle school college commitment celebrations to large, all school assemblies with college mascots, dancing, college gear gift bags, and city mayors as guest speakers. In 2017, Washington state doubled its numbers of participating schools and engaged more than 60,000 middle and high school students across the state, ultimately moving the needle to postsecondary education attainment for all.

According to our 2017 College Signing Celebration site survey, 89% of first-time College Signing Day hosts said they plan to host the event this year. Several participants also indicated leveraging College Signing Day as motivation for middle and elementary school students.

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“The recognition is great for the seniors, but the message to the younger students might be the most important piece of the presentation,” said Chris Davis, a principal at River View High School in Kennewick, Washington.

After all, when it comes to motivating students toward an education after high school, it's the continued momentum that matters.

Tahiera Price, an alumna of Tacoma Public Schools, and currently a student at Evergreen State College, said it the best. "It's definitely something that needs to be carried on. A lot of underclassmen need to realize that you can't get to where you want to go if you don't work hard, and they need to see how that's modeled by their peers. So recognizing all the seniors that are going to college or exploring education after high school elsewhere is deeply important!"