

Washington state budget and federal cuts create “perfect storm” crisis for state colleges and universities

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Public colleges and universities across the state of Washington are laying off staff, eliminating programs, and sharply raising tuition to make up for deep budget shortfalls. While costs rise across the board, driven by inflation and increasing costs of living, colleges nationally face cuts in the federal budget and political attacks from the Trump administration. The Washington state legislature has also enacted deep cuts in its state operating budget at the demand of the state’s Democratic governor, Bob Ferguson.

Facing unprecedented shortfalls in its budget, the state has enacted 1.5 percent across-the-board cuts to higher education funding, as well as cuts to other state agencies. The University of Washington is further affected with additional cuts to state funding for employee compensation and benefits, amounting to an effective 6.5 percent cut in state money directed to the university.

To make up for the loss of state funding, public universities and colleges across Washington state cut jobs and hiked tuition rates by 3.3 percent, the maximum amount allowed by state law in a single term. Another bill passed this term by the Democrat-controlled state legislature, and signed by Governor Ferguson, will further increase the amount that institutions are allowed to raise tuition in the 2026–27 academic year to 5 percent. This bill will simultaneously reduce the number of students eligible for the WA College Grant program.

Additionally, the Trump administration has withheld hundreds of millions of dollars of federal research grants and funding, for which the University of Washington is among the nation’s largest recipients. The *Seattle Times* reported that UW has lost 26.8 percent, or \$280 million of its federally sponsored research funding and \$376 million in sponsored research overall. According to the *Times*, the cuts have led to 178 layoffs at UW and the reduction of over 100 full-time positions to part-time, either permanently (42 positions) or temporarily (62 positions), as well as 21 staff furloughs.

In addition to lost research funding, UW also operates a system of major hospitals that may lose millions more in Medicaid reimbursement for emergency room treatment, as the federal low-income health program faces deep cuts in the 2025 federal budget passed by Republicans and signed by President Trump—the so-called “Big Beautiful Bill.” As part of a broader assault on higher education, the Trump administration has been targeting international student and faculty visas, and demanding control over education standards and course curricula.

The budget bloodbath extends to other state colleges and universities as well. This summer, the Board of Regents of Washington State University, the state’s second largest university system, based in Pullman, adopted a budget cutting over \$17 million from its operations (4 percent). WSU CFO Leslie Brunelli admits this will result in layoffs—one estimate suggests over 180 positions may be affected, though the precise figures have yet to be determined.

Western Washington University, based in Bellingham, has eliminated approximately 100 staff positions over the summer. Eastern Washington University, in Cheney, has eliminated dozens of degree programs, including 45 undergraduate degrees (notably among them, physics), 10 graduate degrees and 34 minors and certificates. Central Washington University, based in Ellensburg, cut over 90 percent of the funding for its student newspaper, as well as arts and theater programs.

While the strained funding situation at public colleges and universities has been used to deny employee pay increases, unions representing academic workers have accepted the cuts. This summer, beginning May 28, Operational Student Employees (OSEs) at Western Washington University carried out a five-day strike against the university to demand bargaining rights and a contract for students employed in operational (non-academic) roles.

The Western Academic Workers United (WAWU-UAW

local 4929) ended the strike without securing a contract, instead declaring victory on the basis of a flimsy two-page letter from university president Sabah Randhawa that maintained the university's right to fire student employees without notice if it was due to budget cuts. The union has pledged to continue working with the university to ask the state government for more favorable legislation.

The capitalist ruling class is determined to make the working class bear the costs of the intensifying social and economic crises. The Democratic Party establishment that dominates the state government has demanded sharp budget cuts to state agencies and services to deal with the state's operating budget deficit. Facing a claimed \$15 billion budget shortfall driven by declining revenues and rising costs, the governor has resisted tax increases on businesses and wealthy individuals. The majority of the state's tax revenues are raised from a highly regressive sales tax on retail purchases.

Upon taking office in January this year, Governor Ferguson ordered most state agencies to find 6 percent in cuts in their respective operating budgets and 3 percent cuts from four-year universities. The governor's proposal for \$7 billion in cuts included \$3 billion of "savings" proposed by his predecessor, Jay Inslee, along with \$4 billion in additional cuts made to higher education, behavioral health and public health programs, assistance to families with children, and early childhood education. Following the passage of the 2025 budget, Ferguson has further instructed state agencies to find even deeper cuts for their operating budgets. Notably, state police and prisons are exempt from all state budget cuts and furloughs.

Also exempt from state budget cuts is K-12 public education. In 2007 the state was sued by its citizens for failing to satisfy, per its constitution of 1889, Article IX, "the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders, without distinction or preference on account of race, color, caste, or sex." In 2012, the state supreme court found in *McCleary, et al. v. State of Washington* that the government was in breach of its constitutional obligations. The state was ordered to fully fund public education. Two years later the court found the state to be in contempt of this ruling and issued a \$100,000 per day fine.

In 2018, the court ruled that the state was finally in compliance with its *McCleary* order and returned jurisdiction to the state government. The plaintiffs maintained in their court filings, however, that "the State's new funding scheme falls short of providing the ample funding," as supported in a court briefing submitted by the advocacy group Washington's Paramount Duty. While the court-approved framework guarantees continued

underfunding for public education, the Washington Education Association hailed the decision as a "victory" for public schools.

Despite K-12 schools being spared the burden of cuts in the latest state budget and being granted a nominal increase in funding, rising education costs have outpaced state funding, as highlighted in a 2024 report by the League of Education Voters, titled "Underfunded and Unsustainable." The report details how the costs of nearly everything, from teaching and support staff, to materials, technology, facilities repair and maintenance, insurance, natural gas and food expenses, have increased dramatically. Special education is known to be particularly underfunded, often relying on local tax levies to supplement insufficient state and federal funding. Of 295 school districts in the state, 230 are reported to show either "cautionary" or "concerning" indicators of financial health.

While Governor Ferguson and the state legislature enact deep cuts to higher education and social services, the riches of extremely wealthy individuals residing in the state and its largest companies remain virtually untouched. Washington is home to a dozen billionaires in 2025, according to Forbes, including Steve Ballmer (worth \$118 billion) and Bill Gates (worth \$108 billion) both formerly of Microsoft (market capitalization of \$3.88 trillion). Other large companies based in the state are Amazon (market cap \$2.37 trillion), Costco (market cap \$435 billion), T-Mobile (market cap \$275 billion), Boeing (market cap \$173 billion) and Starbucks (market cap \$104 billion). Such concentration of extreme wealth controlled by a financial oligarchy is incompatible with the basic social needs of the population.



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