



**Report to the legislature**

Senate Bill 5187 Sec. 611 (23)  
Orientation program proposal for Washington College Grant  
recipients

**December 2023**

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## **Executive Summary**

As directed by Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5187, Section 611 (23), this report details a program proposal designed to meet the needs of incoming first-year, first-generation, underserved students:

*(23) \$1,577,000 of the workforce education investment account— state appropriation is provided solely for expanded remedial math and additional English 101 courses, as well first year seminars, and disability accommodation counselors. Of the amounts provided in this subsection for first year seminars, \$125,000 of the general fund— state appropriation for fiscal year 2024 and \$125,000 of the general fund—state appropriation for fiscal year 2025 are provided for the university to develop a student orientation program for students receiving the Washington college grant, focusing on first-generation and traditionally underrepresented students. The program may include evidence-based student success metrics, peer support, and mentorship following orientation. The program proposal must be submitted to the legislature by December 1, 2023 for implementation in the 2024-2025 academic year.*

## **Summary of proposed program**

The proposed program offers an early-start onboarding opportunity to incoming, first-year, first-generation, underserved students who are recipients of the Washington college grant. This early-start then leads to a year-long series of academic seminars and enhanced opportunities for community engagement, development of a sense of place, support for mental health needs and scaffolding for academic success. The structure of the program is based on a cohort model that relies on peer support through the work of learning assistants who will be embedded in the seminar courses. A variety of high-impact experiences will be offered to students in the program, including direct contact with faculty, peer mentoring, access to early internships, and opportunities for field study and study abroad. Students completing the program will be invited to undergo training in peer mentorship and offered the opportunity for paid employment as learning assistants in future years of the program.

## **History of first-year seminars at WWU**

Western has a variety of academic and co-curricular programs designed to support first-year students. In terms of coursework, this includes several decades of “First-year Interest Groups” that provide first-time students an option to combine two general education courses with a small enrollment seminar in their first quarter. More recently, Western initiated “new student experience” courses that support transfer students and others not needing to take those general education courses. These programs provide a valuable experience for new students, allowing them to make more personal contact with faculty than in a traditional large lecture course. They also focus on student success strategies and provide the opportunity for early monitoring of student progress in their first quarter. More information about these programs is available here: <https://firstyear.wvu.edu/>.

Western Washington University is proud of our strong record of providing a diverse group of students with a high quality undergraduate educational experience. Key metrics related to student success are publicly available here: <https://oie.wvu.edu/retentiongraduation/>. This tool allows for retention and graduation rates to be assessed over time and disaggregated based on a variety of demographic factors. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, Western’s retention rate for first-year students was typically 81-82%. This compares very favorably to the other public, regional comprehensive universities in Washington. At that point,

the gap in retention for key demographics such as first-generation students was typically 4-6 percentage points of difference. During the pandemic, we observed a number of concerning trends. First, admissions of first-time, first-generation students dropped significantly (by 39% from fall 2018 to fall 2022). Next, we saw key metrics of student success lag for first generation students. For example, the gap in first-year retention rates for first-generation students grew to 10% by 2021. Finally, saw unprecedented gaps in grade results for first generation students in English 101, a key prerequisite course. It was these trends that motivated Western to request the funding referred to above.

### **Program Design**

Western's data analytics indicate that most of the variation in student success can be attributed to three factors: academic preparation, first-generation student status and student income levels. We also know that students choosing not to continue their education self-report that they made that decision based on: 1. Mental health; 2. Lack of financial aid; 3. Lack of a sense of belonging at Western; 4. Inadequate finances to meet basic needs 5. Academic performance.

The twofold intended outcomes of the seminar series are:

- To close the observed gaps described above in how well the university is meeting the needs of first-generation, low-income students, and
- To build leaders from within this student group who will serve as mentors for incoming students of the same population.

The early start opportunity that begins this program provides time for students to familiarize themselves with university campus life prior to the official start of the fall quarter and to transition into that quarter as a cohort who have started building a community. Faculty support of students' academic success and college preparation skills are built into the first two weeks of classes. Students will work closely with Western Washington university faculty in these small enrollment seminars. Group activities offered outside of the class times will encourage students to share the cultural wealth that they arrived at the university with. The early campus arrival serves as a bridge between student transition from high school into higher education as they encourage them to build on the social capital that is grounded in the twofold purpose of the seminar series.

The seminar series includes the following course titles/themes:

- Fostering Community and Cultural Competence;
- Building Scholarship and Service-Learning;
- Strengthening Mentorship and Academic Advising; and
- Leadership Growth and STEM Development

Multiple sections of each course theme will be offered per quarter with a capacity of 20 students per class, with an eventual goal of building on the resources provided in this appropriation to enroll a majority of qualifying students in this program.

The four 1-credit course offerings are repeatable up to 3 times with an added 1-credit mentorship component that begins in the second year and extends as an option for continued leadership into the third year.

There will eventually be three cohorts at any given time, one per class year (first-year, sophomore, junior) with an understanding that advancement into the second cohort will

require completion of three seminar classes from the series within the first academic year. Three incentives will be offered upon completion of the three classes within the first year, which are (a) advancement into the second cohort, (b) paid mentorship opportunities, and (c) paid scholarship for partial tuition reimbursement for completion of the first year.

Only half of the classes will have trained peer mentors from existing Western Washington University peer mentorship program during the inaugural years of the program – this will allow an assessment after the first-year completion of students' progress or lack thereof with and without a mentor. Peer mentors will be inserted into classes 1:10 ratio to other students.

Student services support teams are integrated into the fall quarter classrooms by means of short presentation visit so students can learn more about the variation of support systems. The integration of student services as support systems within the seminar classes calls for staff classroom visits from existing Western Washington University resources for students, such as Office of Student Life, Academic Advising & Student Achievement Center, Counseling and Wellness Center, to name a few (see <https://syllabi.wvu.edu/campus-resources/>). The student resource representative visits to the seminar classes will occur four times per quarter as a 30-minute presentation with Q&A. The visits serve as a reminder of services that support students' academic achievements while enrolled at Western Washington University.

The classes will be led by faculty members who are program or department directors, as they bring their expertise to support students with the following:

- Math required course preparation
- Library curriculum practices
- English comprehension and readiness
- Mental health and well-being practices
- Peer engagement and leadership
- Community engagement and socialization skills

The fall quarter classes will focus on curriculum and core academic skills and strategies for success.

The winter quarter courses will focus on co-curriculum. This quarter will give students the opportunity to leverage what they learned as they enter the second quarter with the knowledge of the support systems that are set in place for their academic success. Students will partner with peer-mentors, various clubs such as English and Math clubs, the First-Year First-Generation Club, to name three.

The spring quarter courses will focus beyond the traditional campus curriculum and co-curriculum into the community to explore the “extra” curriculum. The team of faculty members who are scheduled to teach these classes are leaders at neighboring institutions, such as local high schools, community college, and other off-campus partners who share a common interest of supporting underprivileged student.

These seminar courses will offer students a coherent, integrated orientation to Western, with the support of their faculty and the peer learning assistants, who will provide supplementary academic support as well as monitoring and support for issues such as financial stress or mental health challenges. This group of students will be provided with individualized advising prior to registering for subsequent quarters. Our goal is to take a proactive approach to supporting student success. We know that first-generation students who experienced the

pandemic as K-12 students have a harder time asking for help. We will not assume that these students will be ready to take the initiative to get access to the campus support services that they need.

Students in this program will have the social support of the cohorts in their seminars, and will also be part of the larger community of first-generation students in the whole cohort of participants, who will be brought together for events at key points in their educational journey. We will actively support and encourage students to form, within this larger cohort, their own affinity groups based on specific interests. These might include interests represented by existing Western Washington University [clubs](#), or it could be new interests that these first-generation students are bringing to the mix. The intention is for these affinity groups to work toward completing a project of their choosing by the end of the year, which will be presented to the larger cohort of students at a capstone presentation in the spring.

### **Program Assessment**

A key to our assessment of the first year of this new program will be to create a comparison group of similar students who are not invited to participate. Our initial funding will be sufficient to offer the program to about 20% of the incoming first-generation students, and we will statistically pair participants with non-participants in a way that avoids the self-selection bias. Upon completion of the program, students will be asked to complete a survey on their experiences and satisfaction with the program and will be invited to participate in focus groups on program design that will inform modifications for subsequent years. This cohort of students will be monitored for their first-year grades, retention into their second year, and four and six-year graduation rates. Our goal for the program is that participating students will have zero gap in retention and graduation rates compared to their non-first-generation student colleagues.