

RCW 28B.93.005 Findings—Intent. (1) The legislature finds that college students continue to borrow in order to fund their higher education, despite an increase in access to state financial aid. In Washington state, estimates for the number of borrowers carrying student loan debt are around 800,000 with an average balance around \$33,500, resulting in a total outstanding balance of \$29.4 billion. Student loan debt outpaces other sources of consumer debt, such as credit card and vehicle debt. While research shows that earning a postsecondary credential positively impacts a person's earning potential, high student loan debt erodes much of this benefit.

(2) The legislature recognizes that people with student loan debt are less likely to get married and start a family, establish small businesses, and buy homes. High student loan debt negatively impacts a person's credit score and their debt-to-income ratio, which impacts their ability to qualify for a mortgage. However, student loan debt does not impact all borrowers the same.

(3) Student loan borrowers who struggle the most are typically lower income, first generation, and students of color. Data from the national center for education statistics of a 12-year longitudinal study based on students who began their education in the 2003-04 academic year found the following for students who defaulted: Almost 90 percent had received a Pell grant at one point; 70 percent were first generation college students; 40 percent were in the bottom quarter of income distribution; and 30 percent were African American.

(4) The legislature recognizes though that student loans are beneficial for students who have no other way to pay for college or have expenses beyond tuition and fees. Student loans can open up postsecondary education opportunities for many and help boost the state's economy by increasing the number of qualified graduates to fulfill workforce shortages. However, the legislature finds that high interest rates that accumulate while the student is in college negatively impact the student's ability to prosper financially and contribute to the state's economy after graduation. The legislature also recognizes that there is very little financial aid available to assist students pursuing graduate studies, despite the state's high demand for qualified professionals in fields with workforce shortages such as behavioral health, nursing, software development, teaching, and more. Therefore, the legislature intends to support students pursuing higher education by establishing a state student loan program that is more affordable than direct federal student loans and private loans. The legislature intends to offer student loans to state residents with financial need who are pursuing high-demand graduate studies at a subsidized interest rate not to exceed 2.5 percent. The legislature intends for the Washington state student loan program to align with the Washington college grant program, recognizing that student loans are secondary forms of financial aid that often cover expenses beyond tuition. [2023 c 389 § 1; 2022 c 206 § 1.]