

# **ASWWU Legislative Agenda 2022**

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## **Centering Equity at WWU**

The ASWWU plans to center equity in each issue area of our 2022 ASWWU Legislative Agenda. Our agenda seeks to promote student-identified and community-driven initiatives to guide our advocacy efforts when speaking with Washington state legislators and other state leaders. The ASWWU recognizes that all students deserve to feel safe and supported throughout their higher education journeys. Our campus must do more to create environments that are accessible, safe, and inclusive for all students. In order to meet these goals, it is instrumental that we work to center equity in each of our issue areas. The ASWWU recognizes that students have often championed and led discussions in the advancement of students' needs and rights; however, this work should not rely entirely on the labor of students. Our university, state, and the wider community must also work to ensure that students are supported through equitable funding and resources. The ASWWU requests that the Legislature address the many barriers that prevent students from completing their education and achieving their goals. This must include support for BIPOC students, LGBTQ+ students, students with disabilities, undocumented students, and other historically underrepresented students in higher education.

The Associated Students of Western Washington University is in support of [Washington Roundtable's goal of 70%](#) of Washington high school graduates earning a post-secondary credential by 2030. In order to meet this goal, the Legislature, university, and wider community must commit to centering equity on our campus. ASWWU commits to centering equity, and this commitment is reflected in the following issue areas and legislative priorities.

## **Meeting Basic Needs**

The ASWWU acknowledges the need to address basic needs insecurity amongst students at Western and other public higher education institutions in the state. Ensuring that students are able to access basic needs, including quality housing and healthy food options, will help assist students in achieving their educational goals. Securing students' basic needs is also consistent with the [Washington Roundtable's goal](#) of 70% of Washington high school graduates pursuing additional education and training. Meeting students' basic needs is the first step in assisting students in meeting their goals.

- **The ASWWU strongly advocates that the Washington State Legislature pass the WWU, CWU, EWU, and Evergreen \$5.2 million joint operating budget request.**
  - Western Washington University's \$2.1 million portion of the budget request designates funding to expand *Retention and Academic Success* services on campus. This section seeks to increase support for former foster youth and students experiencing homelessness. Passing this budget will ensure that services are offered to help support students in the completion and continuance of their education.
  - The *Retention and Academic Success* portion also seeks to secure increased funding for financial aid counseling. This would help ensure that students are aware of the programs and resources they can benefit from. Increasing financial aid counseling is instrumental in assisting students in accessing support.
  
- **The ASWWU strongly advocates for the expansion and permanent establishment of the Homeless Student Support Pilot Program [originally established as [SB 5800 \(2019\)](#)] to serve and assist students experiencing houselessness and housing insecurity.**
  - The ASWWU believes that all students should have access to safe, permanent housing when pursuing their educational goals. The Homeless Student Support pilot program established in [SB 5800 \(2019\)](#) has assisted students experiencing houselessness by providing basic necessities and other resources.
  - The program initially sought to support four institutions, including Western Washington University. More recently, [HB 1166 \(2021\)](#) worked to expand the pilot program to two additional institutions.
  - So far, [the program](#) has helped support over 500 students across Washington state; however, it is only serving six institutions in the state. By expanding the program, a much higher number of students could be assisted.
  - The program aims to provide emergency housing and homeless prevention services, food assistance, case management and referrals, showers and hygiene products, transportation, and access to technology.
  - When students have access to their basic needs, including access to laundry facilities, housing, technology, and food, they are better equipped to pursue and complete their education. The ASWWU would like to see these services expanded to all public higher education institutions in Washington state.

- **The ASWWU strongly advocates for the establishment of a biennial Basic Needs Survey modeled after [HB 1893 \(2019\)](#) that would collect data regarding food and housing insecurities, and would provide students with need-based and emergency assistance funds on a grant basis.**
  - Food and housing insecurity are prevalent amongst Western students and students across the state; however, the specific extent to which basic needs insecurity impacts students is largely unknown. Similar to HB 1893 (2019), which targets investment in Washington's community and technical colleges students, this assistance program would help to provide four-year university students with the resources they need to succeed and achieve their educational goals.
  - To apply for funding for their students, institutions would be required to collect and provide specific, up-to-date data regarding how many of their students experience food and housing insecurity.
  - In efforts to increase transparency, ensure targeted use of funds, and strengthen student advocacy, we ask that collected data be made accessible to students and the public. Access to this data will also allow the legislature and other leaders in higher education to make targeted investments in student success in the future.
  
- **The ASWWU strongly advocates for the passage of a \$200,000 budget proviso that will allow for a student health insurance study of community and technical colleges and university students.**
  - Students need access to preventative healthcare and affordable medical and behavioral health services. This is necessary for students' academic success and well-being; however, gaps in insurance coverage act as a barrier that prevents students from receiving the care they need.
  - This study will gather information regarding how many students are uninsured in Washington state, including community and technical college students, undergraduate students, and graduate students. This study will aid in the development of targeted programs to ensure that all students have access to adequate healthcare coverage and services in the future.

## **Financial Aid and College Affordability**

The rate of tuition and fee increases across Washington state are barriers to students seeking to obtain a higher education degree or credential. The ASWWU is committed to ensuring college affordability in efforts to increase college completion rates and retention, while also reducing debt imposed on college graduates. Working to ensure that college aid is distributed in an equitable way is key to increasing higher education enrollment, retention, and completion. Students should have access to reasonable financing plans to cover their college tuition and fees.

- **The ASWWU strongly advocates for the creation of equity grants for low-income students within the Washington College Grant.**
  - [The Washington College Grant](#) is one of the most generous college financial assistance programs in the country. The WCG assists many Western students in the pursuit of their educational goals. Still, many low-income students at Western, and throughout the state, continue to experience financial insecurities. In [Fall 2019](#), 39% of Western Washington University students were reported as experiencing food insecurity; 49% were reported as experiencing housing insecurity, and 19% were reported as experiencing homelessness.
  - These equity grants would help support students in covering non-tuition expenses, such as food, housing, books, and other necessities. The [Seattle Promise Equity Scholarship](#) serves as an example that has been successful in the past. Establishing equity grants would help empower and assist low-income students in completing their education.
  
- **The ASWWU strongly advocates for the legislature to fully fund the Washington College Grant for students with a Median Family Income of 55%-70%.**
  - Currently, the Washington College Grant is [fully funded](#) for students with a Median Family Income at and below 55%. The Washington College Grant's sliding scale offers some support to students with higher MFIs; however, funding provided to these students is greatly reduced compared to those at 55% MFI.
  - Students with MFIs from 55% to 70% share demonstrated levels of need within Washington state. Fully funding the Washington College Grant for students in this MFI range, and adjusting the sliding scale, will ensure that students have access to the resources they need to pay for their education.
  - Working to provide generous financial aid packages to students will ensure that they are empowered and equipped to finance their education without taking on a lifetime of debt.
  
- **The ASWWU strongly advocates for the establishment of benefits navigator positions at all public higher education institutions to ensure that students are able to understand and access financial assistance programs.**
  - Washington offers a variety of financial support to students in the state; however, navigating these financial aid offers and programs is difficult, especially for low-income and first-generation college students.

- In 2021, Oregon State’s Legislature passed [HB 2835](#) which “requires each community college and public university to hire benefits navigator to assist students in determining eligibility for federal, state, and local benefits programs”. This will help to guarantee that students are aware of all programs and benefits that they are eligible for.
  - Currently, students at Western must initiate contact with a variety of decentralized offices and clinics to receive help accessing financial benefits and programs. Additionally, students are often unaware of the various services that they qualify for; therefore, it is important that there is a more central position or resource center that engages in student outreach and education on these benefits.
  - Modeling a bill after Oregon’s HB 2835 would help ensure that students across the state have access to the many benefits Washington state offers to students. This would help ensure that current and prospective students are given financial aid notices and information that will help them plan for their futures. Students should also be directed to [SNAP benefits](#), [TANF](#), [Apple Health Care Coverage](#), [Working Connections Child Care](#), [WAFSA](#), and other, relevant aid resources. By simplifying student aid awards, students will be better equipped to navigate the financial aid process and develop plans for their futures.
- **The ASWWU asks that the Legislature prioritize investments in graduate student support and financial aid.**
    - The ASWWU values the inclusion and support of students of color, disabled students, and students of other historically marginalized identities in graduate programs across the state. This helps aid in the development of a more diverse workforce. This also ensures that more students of color and other historically underrepresented identities are a part of the growth and expansion of key workforces in Washington state, including education, medical work, and behavioral health careers.
    - The ASWWU asks for the passage of legislation that expands support and resources for Washington state’s graduate students.

## **Environmental Justice and Campus Sustainability**

The ASWWU acknowledges the need to promote and establish sustainable practices and processes on our campus. We recognize that the quality of our built and natural environments impacts student health and long-term well-being. Environmental justice work is directly tied to equity work, the success of students, and the long term sustainability of our campus. By taking steps to decarbonize Western's built environments and invest in clean energy solutions, the state would be taking steps to meet the [goal of carbon neutrality](#) by 2050.

- **The ASWWU strongly advocates for the expansion of [HB 1139 \(2021\)](#) to extend to public higher education institutions, including community colleges, technical colleges, and universities.**
  - There is no federal law requiring public universities to test their drinking water for lead concentration. Recently, Western Washington University has shared plans to [test for lead concentration](#) in drinking sources; however, this process has been halted due to the pandemic. According to the university, any water sources equal to or over the action level of 15 parts per billion (ppb) will be put out of service.
  - Last year, HB 1139 (2021) was passed that establishes standards for K-12 public schools to take action to assess for and address lead in their drinking water. [The Bill](#) gives districts the capacity to act and to apply for grants when the "lead test reveals elevated lead levels, which are lead levels above five parts per billion". This is a more stringent level that Western is currently pursuing. By expanding HB 1139 (2021) to include higher education institutions, the legislature would be taking action to ensure that students at our institutions are not ingesting water with harmful lead toxins.
  - This would compel Western, and other public education institutions, to test their water and establish an action plan consistent with the requirements as outlined in the Bill. The ASWWU requests that a reasonable, yet expedient, timeline be established for public higher education institutions to test their water sources, report findings, and develop a plan of action if needed. If these steps are not taken within the timeline, we advocate for a mechanism or consequence that ensures that these tests be administered.
  
- **The ASWWU strongly advocates for investments in the transition to a clean energy heating system on Western Washington University's campus.**
  - Currently, Western Washington University's campus buildings are heated by on-site boilers. Four of the six boilers are set to reach the [end of their life](#) by 2030, one as early as 2022. The steam production and burning of natural gas to power the heating system represents just over [33% of Western's annual carbon footprint](#). Natural gas
  - A study that was funded by the 2021-22 Capital Budget is currently underway to evaluate heating alternatives. This study is working to evaluate ways in which Western could partner with other parts of the community to create a larger sustainable energy system that would serve several parts of the Bellingham area.



We ask that the legislature use the results of this study and support a clean energy heating project for Western in 2022-23.

- The ASWWU supports the transition to a clean energy heating system to ensure that our campus is operating in a manner that promotes a healthy environment. We want Western Washington University to serve as a model for clean energy within Bellingham, Whatcom County, and Washington state.
- **The ASWWU strongly advocates for investments in sustainable farming practices to incentivize farmers and agriculturists to establish local food partnerships with public schools.**
  - Western students have expressed an interest in transitioning to a [self-operated dining system](#). Currently, Western contracts with Aramark, a for-profit company with ties to correctional facilities across the country. The self-operated dining system would be “run entirely by the university, rather than with a third party corporation”. This transition would help Western become a “school that champions food justice and supports student voices”.
  - Western students, and students throughout the state, deserve access to affordable, healthy food options; however, many continue to experience [food insecurity](#). Local and regional farmers in Washington state grow and farm many healthy produce options. If public schools and Washington state farmers developed and expanded partnerships, campus dining facilities would be able to offer food that is fresher and healthier. [These partnerships](#) would also reduce the carbon output, as foods wouldn’t have to be transported as far. This would also help strengthen local economies.
  - The ASWWU requests that the legislature support investments in these sustainable partnerships by offering incentives to farmers who engage in these partnerships. This would increase student access to healthy food options, support Washington’s farmers, and strengthen local Washington’s economies.

## **Behavioral Health and Student Wellness**

Behavioral health services at Western, and other Washington public universities, lack the funding and resources to support the needs of all students. Limited behavioral health resources prevent students from accessing and securing the support they need. Limited services have led to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide amongst students. The ASWWU commits to working to secure increased funding for behavioral health services. This will help ensure that students are healthier and better equipped to focus on their education and future.

- **The ASWWU strongly advocates for the establishment of secondary emergency response services on university campuses, consistent with the new 988 number.**
  - Washington’s [HB 1477 \(2021\)](#) takes great measures to ensure that residents in the state are connected to the appropriate resources in the event of an emergency. HB 1477 (2021) established the [Crisis Response Improvement Strategy Committee](#) which will oversee the implementation of the [988 number](#) as a part of the nationwide system. This number is set to launch mid-2022 and will help connect individuals with the appropriate responders, whether police, behavioral health providers, or other services. The strategy committee includes one member representing “a university-based suicide prevention center of excellence”. Consistent with the goals of this committee, the ASWWU recognizes the need for expanded emergency mental-health support for students on and off university campuses.
  - The ASWWU asks that the Legislature support secondary-emergency crisis response programs on university campuses. Currently, campus police are not equipped to address behavioral health crises. In order to ensure that students have access to emergency behavioral health supports, we ask that the legislature support funding for staffed emergency behavioral health responders and increased behavioral health partnerships.
  
- **The ASWWU strongly advocates for the integration of equity as a foundational element of the curriculum in Washington state’s behavioral health training programs and credentials.**
  - Last year, the Legislature passed [SB 5228 \(2021\)](#) which seeks to address disproportionate health outcomes by integrating equity into medical training programs in the state. Similarly, it is important that students pursuing credentials and degrees in behavioral health services are equipped with the knowledge and background necessary to understand issues of equity as it they relate to behavioral health needs. BIPOC individuals have often [lacked access](#) to quality behavioral health services and resources. Additionally, LGBTQ+ individuals face [disparities](#) in access to behavioral health resources that can be traced to societal stigmas and larger patterns of discrimination.
  - The ASWWU supports the establishment of an equity requirement as a part of all curriculum for students pursuing a credential or degree in behavioral health services. This will help to create a workforce that is better equipped to serve individuals who have historically been underserved in this realm.

## **Supporting Survivors of Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence and Title IX Compliance**

All students deserve a safe educational experience free of harassment and assault; however, many individuals, including women and [LGBTQ+ students](#), experience disproportionate rates of sexual harassment and violence on college campuses. The ASWWU seeks to increase access to specialists that are well-equipped to handle sexual assault cases in a sensitive and trauma-informed manner. We recognize the need for stronger accountability on our campus against perpetrators of assault and harassment. More broadly, we also seek to increase awareness of [Title IX](#) policies and procedures, mandatory reporting, and resources on our campus. Clearer paths to reporting, increased understanding of on-campus resources, and stronger accountability measures is instrumental in working to address the threat of sexual assault at Western and at other campuses in Washington.

- **The ASWWU strongly advocates the Washington State Legislature to pass the WWU, CWU, EWU, and Evergreen \$5.2 million joint operating budget request.**
  - Out of Western Washington University's \$2.1 million portion, the *Retention and Academic Success* portion includes a request for funding for sexual violence survivor support services
  - Investments in these programs are instrumental in ensuring that students have access to necessary services and resources on campus
  
- **The ASWWU strongly advocates for expanded, trauma-informed support services for students experiencing interpersonal violence and sexual assault.**
  - Students deserve access to trauma-informed handling of sexual assault and IPV cases; however, reporting processes are often difficult and traumatic for students. Currently, resources are often difficult to access, and reporting processes force students to recount traumatic experiences
  - We ask for the establishment of more in-depth, trauma-informed training for all staff working in all offices that handle SA and IPV cases.
  - We also ask that all faculty, staff, and student employees undergo yearly trainings to remind and revisit their roles and responsibilities as [mandatory reporters](#). This would help ensure that more groups and individuals on campus are aware of the resources and services the campus has to offer while, also, ensuring that student employees are aware of their responsibility to report if needed.
  
- **The ASWWU strongly advocates for the establishment of strict accountability measures for all higher education faculty and staff.**
  - Colleges and universities throughout Washington state have been under scrutiny for their handling of sexual assault and harassment cases as it relates to faculty and staff. At Western Washington University, "[it is the policy of the University](#) to provide an environment in which students, staff, and faculty can work, live and study free from sex discrimination, which includes sexual misconduct"; however staff members who have been found guilty of sexual harassment and misconduct continue to hold positions at the university

- The ASWWU asks that the legislature establish and mandate stronger disciplinary actions for all college/university faculty and staff that are found guilty of sexual harassment and misconduct. This is necessary to help ensure that students are able to study in an environment that is free from sexual discrimination from faculty and staff.

## **Establishing a Statewide Student Association**

Student-led representation and advocacy on the campus, community, and state levels is incredibly valuable, and the ASWWU seeks to continually bolster student power. Administrators at Western, and at other institutions, have created complex fee approval systems and processes that stand in the way of student fee autonomy and collective organizing. Therefore, we seek to establish a structure that will ensure student autonomy in fee usage, bolster advocacy efforts, and enable greater political action. This will help secure stronger, more robust, student-led legislative advocacy at Western and our fellow Washington state public higher education institutions.

- **The ASWWU strongly advocates for the passage of SB.. and HB... that would establish a Statewide Student Association to strengthen student advocacy and promote fee autonomy.**
  - The Statewide Student Association would grant the [Washington Student Achievement Council](#) the authority to levy fees apart from complex university fee structures. WSAC would be empowered to charge membership fees directly to students to fund the association.
  - Establishing a Statewide Student Association will:
    - Strengthen university student advocacy, including undergraduate and graduate students, as well as community and technical college students. Currently, community and technical college students have no direct route to engage in student-led advocacy. Additionally, the ASWWU wants to increase and strengthen student organizing amongst undergraduate and graduate students.
    - Ensure that fees levied to students are transparent. Many students at Western don't know where their Legislative Action Fee is spent and the role it plays in student advocacy efforts. This model, instead, would create a funding mechanism where the fee is levied directly to students on an opt-out basis. By avoiding complex Services and Activities Fees, students would have a stronger understanding of where their money is going.
    - Boost statewide involvement apart from institutional capacity. Funding constraints, institutional administration, and a lack of awareness of the value of student organizing have made it difficult for certain colleges to pay membership dues to organizing bodies, like the [Washington Student Association](#). The Statewide Student Association would allow students to organize and pay into the Association regardless of campus constraints.
  - The ASWWU anticipates that this will bolster student engagement and awareness of the Washington Student Achievement Council, the Washington Student Association, and other routes to student advocacy. It would increase funding for student advocacy across the state, allowing for students to have a larger presence in the policy-making process.

## **Civic Engagement and Voting Rights**

The ASWWU recognizes the value of student engagement in the civic and political processes in our communities, state, and beyond. Providing and maintaining clear paths to engagement with local and state officials have never been more important for students. Therefore, we seek to establish and expand paths to civic engagement, while also expanding voting rights and processes. Accessibility to our leaders helps ensure that students' voices are heard, and this is instrumental when discussing student-centered policy issues. The ASWWU also acknowledges that expanding voting rights and improving electoral processes will help ensure that student voices, and other historically marginalized groups, are well represented in our communities and state.

- **The ASWWU strongly advocates for the establishment and expansion of ranked-choice voting systems throughout the state.**
  - [HB 1156 \(2021\)](#) sought to expand and increase the capacity for ranked-choice voting in Washington State. [This Bill](#) aimed to increase representation and voter participation in local elections. Ranked-choice voting allows individuals to select and rank candidates that align with their values and preferences. Ranked-choice voting is associated with increased voter turnout, as each individual is able to make more informed, thoughtful choices when they vote.
  - Ranked-choice voting is associated with a [decrease in campaign costs](#). From an equity perspective, this will allow a more wide array of individuals to run for elected office regardless of socioeconomic status or other potential barriers. This makes running a campaign more financially feasible and accessible for a broader range of individuals.
  - Additionally, ranked-choice voting promotes [issue-centered campaigns](#) and incentivizes candidates to discuss key topics and policies. This civility leads to more productive campaigns. This also provides voters with a stronger understanding of each candidates' positions and priorities.
- **The ASWWU strongly advocates for the reintroduction of [HB 1453 \(2021\)](#) to establish reasonable guidelines and requirements for candidate statements within official Washington State Voter Pamphlets.**
  - Empowering and motivating student voters is a central goal of the ASWWU. In order to boost voter turnout statewide, it is important that accurate and transparent information is made available to all voters. Voter education is key to increasing turnout, and the ASWWU believes that the legislature can take reasonable steps to help ensure that certain voter education materials are transparent and accurate.
  - This bill would prohibit the inclusion of graphs, charts, pictographs, cartoons, or caricatures in candidate profile statements. Additionally, this would limit candidate statements to “plans and goals for the future” and “direction on where to find more information about the candidate”. This would seek to prevent candidates from “asking for contributions”, making “commercial solicitations”, and making

“obscene or otherwise inappropriate comments” in the state-distributed voter pamphlets.

- The ASWWU recognizes that candidates would have the ability to make any comments, announcements, or claims via other routes of communication; however, in the interest of accuracy and voter education, the legislature should take steps to limit the scope of Voter Pamphlets to the candidates’ goals and objectives.

## **Divesting From Prison Labor**

Many students at Western Washington University have been advocating for the end of our university's contract with Aramark Dining. Additionally, students have expressed interest in divesting our university from prison labor; however, administrative objectives and other restrictions have prevented this from happening. Students across the state have engaged in similar advocacy efforts directed toward their campus administration. University of Washington's 2019 Student Senate introduced a [referendum](#) calling on the university to fully divest from prison labor, and other student bodies across the state have taken similar actions. Currently, [RCW 39.26.250](#) requires public institutions to give preference to goods and services associated with a prison labor work program. This law currently forces universities to consider, and incentivizes them to choose, goods and services that are affiliated with a prison labor program. To many students, this is an ethical dilemma, as workers in these prison labor programs are paid a minimum of [\\$0.65 per hour](#) and a maximum of \$1.70 per hour.

- **The ASWWU strongly advocates that RCW 39.26.250 be repealed.**
  - Repealing RCW 39.26.250 will allow Western Washington University, and other public higher education institutions to freely consider goods and services produced elsewhere.
  - The ASWWU believes this is the first step in working to ensure that Western Washington University divests from prison labor and turns toward more ethical options.

## **Dedicated Revenue**

The ASWWU recommends implementing progressive, reasonable sources of revenue. Decreasing tuition and funding financial aid and student support services are necessary to assist college and university students in Washington State. Increased investments in higher education will help assist historically marginalized communities, including Black and Indigenous people of color, first-generation students, and nontraditional students. The ASWWU supports measures that will propel Washington State towards equity in both tax policy and higher education.

- **The ASWWU strongly advocates that the legislature:**
  - Remove some exemptions from the Real Estate Excise Tax, including untaxed, multi-million dollar inheritances
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  - Tax Washington State Lottery Winnings