



FUNDING SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

*“It’s an extraordinary policy environment right now. These issues are broadly understood by legislators, and there’s a universe of strategic thought. ...”*

— Washington policymaker

College Spark supports the participation of six Washington community colleges in Achieving the Dream, a national initiative focused on helping more community college students succeed, particularly low-income students and students of color.

- Big Bend Community College
- Highline Community College
- Renton Technical College
- Seattle Central Community College
- Tacoma Community College
- Yakima Valley Community College

## Policy Levers To Pull

College Spark funds programs in Washington state that help low-income students become college ready and complete their degrees. To advance the work of six community colleges participating in the Achieving the Dream initiative, the foundation commissioned a state policy audit that identifies issues to address and recommendations for action. This publication offers a brief overview of that report.

### *Invest*

**Remedy data disparities.** There is strong capability for research and analysis at the state level, in contrast to outdated systems and underfunded research at many community and technical colleges.

- Community and technical colleges need institutional researchers — data gurus — who can make data accessible and evaluate programs intended to improve student success.

**Expand the reach of innovative programs.** I-Best is a best bet: a program for non-native English speakers to learn the language while learning workforce skills. Opportunity Grants offer financial aid and support services for low-income students enrolled in high-wage, high-demand training programs. Both of these programs show great returns but serve small numbers of students. Student advising is critical but often the first service to be cut in a budget crunch.

- Take I-Best to scale.
- Serve more students with Opportunity Grants.
- Strengthen student services.

**Make financial aid available for more students.** Despite gains made in providing financial aid, the cost of attending college is still higher than the financial aid award students receive. And there are more needy students than dollars to go around.

- Close the gap between the State Need Grant award and the cost of tuition, and raise income cutoff for the grant to 85 percent of the state’s median family income.

## Align

**Use one measuring stick for success.** Each state agency involved in education and training has its own goals and performance measures — and they are not the same.

- Convene all of the players to determine how to measure success for the users of the system.
- The Student Achievement Initiative, which provides financial incentives to community and technical colleges to improve student achievement, uses “momentum points” to track student progress. Education and training programs such as Job Skills and Work First should use the same measures.

### **Close the gap between high school preparation and college expectations.**

Through the Transition Math Project, school district and community college educators collaborated to develop math college readiness standards. Their work through this partnership is just the start of the effort to close the gap between what students learn in high school and what they are expected to know in community and technical colleges.

- Practitioners and policymakers must accelerate efforts at aligning high school curricula with college expectations.

## Examine

**Get consensus on the meaning of “college ready” and open up more pathways.** Community and technical colleges have different entry requirements, different tests and cut scores, and different levels of support for developmental education. Working students especially would benefit from more classes scheduled for early mornings, evenings, or weekends.

- Conduct an in-depth study of developmental education, including assessment and placement of students, supportive services, and overlaps with ABE/ESL.
- With Opportunity Grants and I-Best as a model, determine how to create different pathways to education, such as training at different times and places.

**Increase awareness of options and participation in programs.** Low-income students rarely access dual enrollment programs such as Running Start. With limited implementation of career planning, students unwittingly are closing doors to college access. The financial aid application process is so complex that some students don't even apply. Once enrolled in community and technical colleges, students find it's not always easy to transfer on to a four-year institution.

- Determine communication and outreach strategies to engage students in career planning, ensure their participation in dual enrollment or similar programs, and provide more guidance on meeting transfer requirements.
- Learn how the application process and outreach to students can be improved by gathering information from students themselves.

*This brief is based on findings from Washington State Policy Audit by Deena Heg and Bob Watrus. The full report is available at [www.collegespark.org/grants/atd.shtm](http://www.collegespark.org/grants/atd.shtm).*

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