



**Central Washington Regional Convening
on Educational Access and Attainment**
--Convening Summary--

The State of Washington has set a bold course for its future, embracing growth in its dynamic and innovative economy with a call to invest in a new era of postsecondary access and attainment where 70 percent of adults aged 25-44 will hold some form of a credential beyond high school – an eleven percentage point increase from current levels. With disparities in household income, early learning, childcare, transportation, and other factors continuing to fall along demographic lines, the ability to reach our goal will require equity-centeredness and a deep commitment to cross-sector collaboration. It will also require us to have a deep understanding of the unique needs, challenges, and characteristics facing the distinctive regions that comprise Washington state.

In support of Washington’s momentum to build “moonshot” policy ideas to pursue our 70% educational attainment goal, Central Washington University hosted a convening of partners spanning North and South Central Washington to generate ideas for a forthcoming convening of education policy stakeholders across the state. Attendees included:

Central Washington University

- Jim Wohlpart, President
- Andrew Morse, Interim Vice President for University Relations and Chief of Staff
- Jason Jones, Executive Director, Institutional Effectiveness, Research, and Planning
- Rob Ogburn, Executive Director, Business and Community Services
- Arturo Torres, Registrar
- Veronica Gomez Vilchis, Interim Director, SLICE
- Dania Cochran, Executive Liaison, President’s Office
- Emilie Hobert, Executive Director, Marketing and Branding
- Monica Medrano, Regional Director, University Centers
- Elvin Delgado, Interim Associate Provost
- Jennifer Dechaine-Berkas, Associate Dean and Director, School of Education
- Elizabeth Adkins, Interim Director, Auxiliary Marketing and Communication
- Andres Moreno Benito, Interim Director of Admissions
- Ginny Tomlinson, Associate Vice President, Information Services and Security
- Kyle Carrigan, Director, High School Partnerships and Continuing Education

Community Partners

- Heidi Behrends-Cerniwey, City Manager, City of Ellensburg
- Sue Kane, Chief Executive Officer, NCW Tech Alliance
- Troy Tornow, Superintendent, Ellensburg School District

Bonnie Smith, Executive Director of College and Career Readiness, Yakima School District
Jeff Charbonneau, CWU Board of Trustees and Principal, Zillah High School
Shane Backlund, Deputy Superintendent, ESD 105
Jeff Cochran, Director of Future Learning, Selah School District
Mark Cheney, South Central Washington STEM Network Director
Holly Bringman, Apple STEM Network

Convening participants did not singularly focus on the snapshot of time an individual spends in postsecondary education. Rather, the purpose of the convening was to consider interrelated experiences between childhood and the individual's lifecycle to envision effective policy ideas that elevate educational access and attainment. A summary of key themes and policy ideas is provided in the sections that follow.

Early Childhood

From 2021 to 2022, the number of children in Washington living in poverty grew by nearly 200 percent – from approximately 64,000 to 186,000. Wagmiller and Adelman (2009) observed that children born into household and neighborhood poverty are two times more likely than those not born into this context to not be ready for school on one or more domain. Further, the effects of childhood poverty extend not only to early learning readiness, but also to lifelong outcomes in educational attainment and earnings; in their study, Roos, Wall-Weiler, and Lee (2019) found that 45 percent of those who spent their entire childhood (0-15) in poverty remained poor at 35 – pointing to structural barriers to education and, in turn, workforce and economic opportunity, among other interrelated factors.

It is for these reasons that the Central Washington convening participants called for universal pre-k with assurance of a competitive salary for all K-12 educators, particularly those serving poverty-impacted schools. Universal pre-k enables any family who wants their pre-school aged child to enroll in a publicly funded, pre-kindergarten care and education program with an opportunity to do so. Such programs not only provide important learning, social-emotional development, and other beneficial factors for the child's long-term development and success, but they also equip families with greater flexibility and access to pursue educational and workforce goals that benefit the entire household – enabling social mobility out of poverty.

The success of universal pre-k will also depend on a profession-ready and sufficient workforce to deliver results. Presently, Washington is in the top 10 percent in the nation in terms of pay for childcare workers and elementary, middle, and high school educators. However, pay for childcare workers (avg = \$36,920) is approximately half that of the average annual mean wage across all occupations (avg = \$72,350), pointing to an area of policy focus to assure a vibrant educational workforce that leads to a strong educational foundation for Washington residents. We need to elevate training and professional development of pre-k workforce to meet the diverse needs of the state.

High School Completion

According to Results Washington (2023), the high school graduation rate in Washington has grown by six percentage points between 2012-2022, from 76 percent to 82.3 percent, respectively; since the global pandemic, however, we have seen a slight decline in high school completion. What is more, Washington's high school completion rate lags the national average for those aged 25 and over who hold at least a high school diploma or equivalency by approximately 10 percentage points (91.1%) according to the United States Census Bureau.

The U.S. Department of Education tracks the top reasons students drop out of high school. Among the most common are, broken out by general category, summarized in the sections below.

- School-Related Reasons
 - Missed too many days of school
 - Thought it would be easier to get GED
 - Was getting poor grades/failing school
- Family-Related Reasons
 - Was pregnant
 - Had to support family
 - Had to care for a member of the family
- Employment-Related Reasons
 - Got a job
 - Could not work at the same time as school

The interrelated factors described above are especially resonant in the Central Washington region, where high school completion lags the statewide average. Convening participants identified much stronger investments in equity-centered support structures to assure Washington youth can complete their secondary credentials as a pathway to postsecondary attainment. Ideas included:

- Centering the first-generation high school student experience in developing secondary access and completion programs, services, resources, and activities. Sample ideas include (1) peer mentorship opportunities that pair freshman/sophomore students with an upper-level peer who can help them navigate the high school experience; (2) robust and intrusive postsecondary advising and support resources to prepare individuals for the navigation and preparation of opportunities after high school; and (3) the integration of language diverse resources and support services across programs, services, resources, and activities. While a host of community organizations and non-profits exist to support the social services, educational, and workforce resources involved in supporting first-generation high school access and success, enhanced investment should also coincide with the centralization and integration of these services on a regionalized basis - using client relationship management (CRM) intake systems, coordinating outreach and services among network partners, and reducing the steps a first-generation high school student might need to clear barriers to their success should be the distinctive approach

taken to further elevate the provision of services that enable educational access and completion.

- Enhanced resources for students with children, including free or greatly reduced childcare to reduce the likelihood a student will need to work to cover such expenses to remain in high school or drop out to provide such care.

In addition, participants pointed to complementary pathways that stack the secondary credential with micro credentials, short-term credentials, apprentice-able opportunities, and enhanced degree pathways prior to a student's high school graduation. Ideas included:

- Partnerships between the school district, regional workforce council, and local two- and four-year institutions to align micro-/short-term credentials in the high school that lead to pre-graduation certification for local industry needs.
- Fully articulated pathways that begin in high school and reduce the time-to-degree in fields that align with local/regional workforce demand.
- Coordinating with industry to identify and register apprenticeship opportunities that align with a student's secondary experience via the U.S. Department of Labor's Registered Apprenticeships program, particularly in fields that align with local/regional workforce demand.
- The potential for earning the associate's degree by the time a student completes their secondary credential.

Further, participants outlined strategies that would relieve the administrative burden of college-going for the student and their family while also streamlining pathways into postsecondary education at the two- and four-year levels. Ideas included:

- **Creating a centralized electronic transcript database.** Participants encouraged the state to consider the development of a centralized electronic transcript database to promote efficient record sharing that could potentially be used to reduce the number of steps an individual must take to apply and/or transfer to a two- or four-year institution in Washington.
- **Stronger alignment between CADRS and high school graduation requirements.** Several school district participants shared the desire to see an analysis of CADR requirements for each postsecondary institution in Washington relative to high school graduation requirements for the purpose of identifying and updating course-level pathways that lead to college-level admission.

Postsecondary Access and Attainment

The U.S. Department of Education tracks the most statistically significant factors associated with barriers to postsecondary access and completion. Among them are (1) delayed college enrollment; (2) no high school diploma; (3) part-time college enrollment; (4) financially independent; (5) have dependents; (6) single parent status; and (7) full-time work while in college. We also know that low-income and first-generation status are embedded in each of these non-completion factors while sometimes standing alone as singular factors that drive non-completion among adults who may aspire to pursue and complete a postsecondary credential.

The bureaucracy associated with applying to postsecondary educational institutions and state and federal aid systems, while supporting sound stewardship of resources, often acts as a set of interrelated barriers that inhibit access, retention, and completion, particularly among individuals with limited to no social capital or support system to navigate postsecondary education. In Washington, individuals eligible for need-based federal aid leave \$60 million per year on the table in unclaimed Pell Grant funds alone by not applying to aid for which they would otherwise be eligible; this does not count other forms of federal or state need-based aid that stack on top of Pell. Furthermore, Washington ranks 48th in the nation in terms of the immediate college-going rate of high school graduates. And many adult learners face geographic and physical access barriers that prevent them from pursuing postsecondary credentials; in addition to these barriers are considerations related to the scale and availability of hybrid or online programs, flexibility to pursue stackable short-term credentials, and their alignment with student interests and regional economic and workforce needs.

The convening participants articulated a broad vision that aligns with many established College Promise programs nationwide, but added to this vision by calling for a system that enables short-term and stackable credentials in a highly coordinated and intentional system of delivery that centers the student experience while minimizing bureaucratic hurdles. They also envisioned a comprehensive support system for high school students and adult learners seeking to enter or re-enter Washington's postsecondary educational systems. And they advocated for much more transparent, coordinated, and student-centered programs, services, resources, and policies. Ideas included:

- **Coordinated College in the High School Offerings.** Since the enactment of law that removed the fee as a barrier for Washington high school students to participate in the highly successful College in the High School Program, participants shared some current state hurdles that carry potentially negative implications as the program scales. One such example was that, since the fee was removed as a barrier, Washington's colleges and universities are not coordinated in their outreach to the state's high schools in their CiHS offerings, leading to confusion and bureaucracy when, for example, a student might have multiple transcripts from different higher education institutions for CiHS courses taken at their sponsoring high school. Participants called for either a centralized transcript or much tighter coordination between the institutions offering CiHS courses.
- **Centralized, Statewide Credential Tracking System.** Like the centralized database of high school credentials described above, the convening participants sought to remove administrative hurdles faced by the student in transferring their postsecondary credentials between institutions in Washington. They also saw the creation of a centralized, electronic transcript system to house industry-recognized credentials, micro- or short-term credentials, or other such degrees or certificates that an individual may possess throughout their lifespan. Such a system could remove financial and administrative barriers for students to apply and transfer within the state and provide efficiency for institutions to capture the educational histories of prospective and current learners.

- **Developing Statewide Standards for and Scaling Stackable Micro- and Short-Term Credentials.** The status of micro- and short-term credentials in Washington varies by institution. In addition, the engagement between institutions, regional workforce councils, the non-profit sector, and industry seems to warrant further attention and leadership by two- and four-year institutions for the purpose of developing consistent and mutually held standards of practice in the identification, development, and provision of in-demand short-term and micro-credentials. Attention should be given to regional workforce needs and demands and the routine coordination between the workforce agency, educational, non-profit, and industry ecosystem within a regional workforce geography. Institutions should be incentivized and funded to support the development and adoption of standards that reinforce quality, align with workforce needs, and center equity-mindedness in the development and delivery of short-term and micro-credentials. Attention should also be given to the opportunity for these credentials to stack into two- and four-year degree opportunities across institutions.

Adopting Statewide Framework for Prior Learning Assessment and Competency-Based Educational Frameworks. The Washington Student Achievement Council has developed a framework for prior learning assessment, but the adoption of this framework has varied across institutional contexts in the state. The convening participants called for a re-engagement of institution-level policy and practice related to the acceptance, review, awarding, application, and transfer of prior learning assessment credits within and between institutions. Such frameworks encourage adult learners, military-connected students, and working individuals with relevant experience to enter or re-enter the postsecondary educational pipeline with clarity and consistency on how their experiences will be applied toward a degree.

Further, competency-based educational frameworks also incentivize post-traditional learner access and attainment by building a closer alignment between the pace of their educational experience, the skills that an individual may have already developed proficiency through work or other activities, and their vocational interests and goals. Washington should invest in the development of competency-based curriculum that enables not only post-traditional learners, but also high school graduates immediately entering college, to pursue credentials that align core competencies with time flexibility that many of today's learners find valuable in balancing their competing responsibilities.

- **Incentivize and Invest in Innovative Industry, Higher Education, and Community Partnerships that Lead to Access and Learner Success.** Many of today's students, particularly those from post-traditional backgrounds, face competing barriers that delay or obstruct their ability to pursue a credential – at least without new or innovative partnerships and interventions to clear those barriers. In addition, today's learners desire the application of classroom knowledge into real-world experiences that lead to gainful employment and a sense of purpose and vocational fulfillment. Centralizing and coordinating learning experiences and community services so that educational relevance and barrier reduction can happen in tandem offers an efficient and effective solution to support educational access and attainment. Similar to the call for centralized support services that promote high school completion as described above, aligning social

services and educational opportunities within a particular service area can serve as a high-impact practice that reduces the burden on the learner to seek and receive the resources needed to reach the next phase or stage in their life and vocational journey; further, the coordination of services to include educational opportunities illuminates postsecondary opportunity as a viable option for someone – particularly someone whose support system has not created awareness of postsecondary education – that pursuing a trade or a short-term and/or two- or four-year credential would be in reach. Incentivizing and investing in the creation of coordinated and centralized services on a regional level can further elevate barrier reduction and the provision of holistic services that can minimize challenges learners face to achieving success.

Developing coordinated partnerships between industry, workforce agencies, school districts, higher education, and the non-profit sector should also lead to mutually beneficial partnerships that build on one another's strengths. The routine exploration of fully articulated transfer pathways that align school district, two-year, and four-year program opportunities based on input from industry and community entities transcend the traditional and unnecessary notions of competition and scarcity and create opportunity for all to thrive. Such partnerships also center the needs of the student in ways that reduce time to and cost of a degree.

- **Provide Comprehensive and Multilingual Student and Family Support Systems on a Statewide and Coordinated Scale.** Convening participants also shared a number of student support resources that institutions should offer to build student-centered educational access and success systems, and, especially given the significant multilingual communities living in Central Washington, giving attention to the need for these resources to be offered in a variety of languages.
 - The development and expansion of clear, guided K-16 pathways that provide awareness of the steps and stages involved in earning a college degree, including program-level data that can be disaggregated by postsecondary institution in the state.
 - Additional funding to support student basic needs such as housing, food, and mental health resources.
 - Create, streamline, and expand processes for students who stop out of a postsecondary educational program to re-enter higher education, maintaining a connection to that individual until such time as the learner opts out of such outreach.
 - Create and deliver a postsecondary information program for families and the support networks of students enrolled in a postsecondary educational program.
 - Scale the programs, resources, services, and activities at the core of programs like the College Assistance Migrant Program, GEAR UP, and summer bridge programming, among other such programs, to cover all students who may be eligible to receive these programs but for whom resources do not currently exist.
 - Adopt institutional practices to attract and retain faculty and staff who reflect the increasingly diverse student population served by postsecondary institutions in the state while upholding compliance with state law.

Workforce Entry and Re-Entry

In their seminal work on innovative ways of thinking about aligning educational pathways with workforce demand, Hillman and Weichman (2016) mapped the presence of educational deserts across the United States. They found that, nationwide, about 25 million adults live in an education desert, defined as a micro- or metropolitan statistical area in which zero colleges or universities are located nearby, or one community college is the only broad access institution in the area. Hillman and Weichman further observed that one in five Native or Indigenous adults live in an education desert, and one in ten Black or Latinx adults live in an education desert. In Washington, approximately 350,000 adults aged 18-49 live in an education desert.

Geographic access provides only one of many possible powerful examples of the barriers to overcome in supporting educational attainment goals that align with statewide workforce needs. Flexible and workforce-aligned program offerings, comprehensive and equity-centered support structures, and sufficient financial assistance offer other key considerations as described earlier in this report.

Like key themes described above, the convening participants encouraged the state to consider a variety of pathway and support innovations that enable Washingtonians to enter and re-enter the workforce. Participants reaffirmed the need for flexible program delivery through prior learning assessment and competency-based education. They called for grow-your own programs that support pathways into teacher prep programs. They encouraged state aid to be applied to college grads to pursue a second career and contribute to other workforce shortage areas. Participants encouraged more robust alignment between program offerings and engagement with industry to assure relevance and the tailoring of curriculum where appropriate and in alignment with the faculty role in delivering coursework and programs to respond to employer needs.

Summary

This brief summarized the ideas of key educational, community, and workforce stakeholders gathered for a workshop at Central Washington University on February 23, 2024. Collectively, the convening participants outlined a framework of key investments that begin in early childhood and extend through adulthood to support equity-centered learner access and success. The participants also acknowledged Washington as a national leader in education with a promising future to meet statewide workforce goals. Together, we believe our state is well-positioned to achieve our shared goal for at least 70 percent of adults aged 25-44 to possess a postsecondary credential. More importantly, we are eager to build on a strong foundation that assures a rich quality of life for the people, industries, and communities we serve.

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