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## Building Bridges: CWU and WSAC Partnership

### Context

To achieve our goal of 70 percent postsecondary credential attainment for adults from ages 25 to 44, a better understanding of student attributes that predict enrollment and retention is essential. The Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) collaborated with Central Washington University (CWU), which enrolls a significant number of first-generation college going students and is an emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), in a [study](#) that took a deep-dive into student-level data for those who were offered admissions at CWU. One of the key findings was that students living within 50 miles of commuting distance from CWU are substantially more likely to enroll and be retained.

Building on the research findings, CWU and WSAC partnered with CWU students, school district personnel, community-based organization representatives, administrators from other institutions of higher education, and the confederate tribes and bands of the Yakama Nation in a two-day design thinking workshop facilitated by SOVA Solutions last fall.

### Goals

The goals of the workshop were to:

- Increase regional collaboration among community organizations, school districts, higher education institutions, and WSAC,
- Identify challenges to accessing postsecondary education in the region with the stakeholders,
- Ideate on strategies informed by research and lived experience to ease the pathway from high school to postsecondary opportunities, and
- Focus on increasing access to financial aid and leveraging the guaranteed admissions program.

### Key Opportunities

The design thinking framework allowed participants to ideate possible solutions focused on increasing postsecondary enrollment in the region. The participants empathized with those who are impacted most by putting themselves in students' shoes or by listening to students and other stakeholders. That led to identifying and defining challenges in the high school to postsecondary transition process. From there, participants looked for innovative solutions to solve those challenges. The following are solutions identified by participants.

**Making financial aid information more accessible:**

- Create a central repository of financial aid resources available locally with contact information of local experts.
- Create targeted resources to support students and families filing FAFSA and WASFA. Increase access to federal grants such as GEAR UP and TRiO.
- Increase capacity at high schools by providing more postsecondary advisors and peer/near-peer mentors focused on the secondary to postsecondary transition.
- Provide financial aid information in multiple languages and access to support personnel outside of business hours.
- Resource community-based organizations that are entrusted to assist students and families through the financial aid process.

**Reducing uncertainty around postsecondary education costs and admissions:**

- Create frequent, consistent, and simple communication through preferred modes.
- Combine information on financial aid and admissions and share it with students beginning in 10th grade.
- Provide information and access to resources that support other postsecondary education expenses such as housing, food, and transportation.
- Eliminate application fees for students accepted through the guaranteed admissions program.
- Award micro credentials and create meaningful CTE pathways, so students can stack credits.
- Provide clarity on the transferability of credits.
- Set up data-sharing capabilities between high schools and postsecondary institutions.

**Increasing a sense of belonging in students:**

- Send relevant communication home preferably in the student's home language.
- Assist students in helping them identify their interests and goals. Support them in choosing the optimal pathway (apprenticeships, certifications, 2- or 4-year degrees).
- Provide flexible schedules to allow students to balance school, work, and home responsibilities.
- Create targeted engagement strategies for students who take a gap year.
- Personalize communication and connect students with an ambassador to help with matriculation.
- Provide scholarship opportunities and align those with the admissions process.
- Communicate each student's accomplishments with the family.

**Next Steps**

The emphasis on reducing uncertainty around postsecondary education costs and admissions resonated with WSAC and CWU. With Washington having the most generous state financial aid program (Washington College Grant) that is an entitlement for eligible students and with CWU participating in the Guaranteed Admissions Program, a natural next step is to build on this community partnership to determine effective messaging strategies that aligns guaranteed financial aid with guaranteed admissions to target populations.