

WSAC Agency Budget Request—Increasing Postsecondary Enrollments

The following recommendations for the agency 2020 Supplemental budget builds on the progress we made in 2019, and requests modest investments to pilot initiatives to improve access to postsecondary education for high school graduates and returning adults.

2020 Proposals—Synopsis

The Workforce Education Investment Act (WEIA) appropriated funding for a wide variety of higher education priorities. Broadly speaking, the Act sought to increase college-going and educational attainment by focusing on affordability (e.g. Washington College Grant), access/enrollment (e.g. FAFSA completion initiative), and student supports (e.g. Guided Pathways). Our policy request this session seeks to build on this momentum by utilizing State Work Study to target K-12 students to boost college-going and FAFSA completion. It's a strategy that bridges the three policy foci of WEIA, and we know it works.

Second, we recommend requesting a small amount of state funding to direct towards pre-enrollment MicroGrants for returning adult students. A small pilot began in Spokane this year, and we know already that these grants eliminate key barriers to successfully re-engaging in postsecondary education and that there are more students that need help than our initial investment can serve.

- State Work Study—Near-Peer Mentoring Pilot Project: \$1,000,000
- MicroGrants—Returning Adult Pre-Enrollment Financial Support Pilot: \$500,000

State Work Study—Near-Peer Mentoring Pilot Project

What is the problem?

Near-peer mentoring is one of the most effective tools to increase college awareness and enrollment.¹ Institutions have models that do this, but scaling them up takes funding. State Work Study students could be ideal mentors, but employer match rates limit the number of students that can participate.

What is the context?

Our State Work Study program previously provided incentives to encourage job development in key policy areas like community service and mentoring, but they were eliminated in the Great Recession when program funding was reduced by 2/3. WWU's Compass to Campus started as a State Work Study-funded program, and has grown and had great success in many school districts in Whatcom and Skagit counties. We can do more of this if we re-start these innovation incentive projects.

How does this address Council priorities?

This request provides affordability for participating college students, as they earn money to pay for college costs, and it helps their earning potential after graduation by giving them real-world work

¹ Collier, Peter J. "Why Peer Mentoring Is an Effective Approach for Promoting College Student Access." *Metropolitan Universities* 28, no. 3 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.18060/21539>.

experience. It also helps boost enrollment by having college students support schools and districts with lower college-going and FAFSA-filing rates, in order to keep all students engaged in school and thinking about their future.

What is the proposal?

The request of \$1 million per year will fund about 300 student positions each year.

These students will work with secondary schools and districts near where they attend college and may be employed by institutions or nonprofit organizations. Funding will be allocated to campuses in a competitive process so that each recipient receives enough funding to make meaningful increases in capacity to serve high need K-12 schools and expand partnerships to support college-going work. This approach ensures that all students—the mentors and the mentees—benefit, and the funding follows innovative partnerships that are tailored to the region they operate in.

Through this small, targeted investment, we will learn more about the interventions that drive improvement in college-going rates, and we will support hundreds of current college students. By testing this approach in a variety of projects, we gain insight into the kinds of activities that resonate with K-12 students and schools, and which produce long-lasting impacts. The funding would be ongoing, so the projects could continue, and we would share best practices to help each improve.

MicroGrants—Establishing Partnerships to Support Adult Learners with Pre-Enrollment Finances

What is the problem?

Financial constraints and family obligations often lead college students to withdraw from or postpone their education. Returning adults often face small financial barriers associated with their previous educational experience or enrollment. And Washington adults with less education are more likely to experience periods of unemployment and have lower wages, leaving companies to recruit talent from elsewhere.² Finishing a postsecondary credential is a proven means to improve career earnings and employment outcomes.

What is the context?

In summer 2019, WSAC partnered with Greater Spokane Incorporated's Greater Minds initiative and Seattle College District's Working Adult Center and United Way of King County to test the MicroGrant to identify and evaluate financial barriers experienced by returning adults. The project was designed to evaluate whether solving pre-registration financial hurdles would increase the likelihood of student success. The community partners have navigators and have an opportunity to a) develop a trusting relationship with the prospective student; b) coordinate communications with institutions; and c) expedite payment to support the student's enrollment process.

Seattle will begin serving students in Fall of 2019 and is working with the Seattle Housing Authority and United Way of King County, which has agreed to cover those barriers WSAC is unable to fund. The community partners have provided interim reports to inform a statewide extension of the pilot.

² 2018. National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. *Increasing College Attainment: Variations in Returns to States and their Residents*.

While results are preliminary, information received from community partners, student applicants, and participating institutions reveal that indeed small dollar financial amounts owed are a significant barrier for many returning adults and demand for funds far outstripped the contracts provided to the partners. The MicroGrant helped students re-engage to complete their educational goals. Not only did the funding help those students, but led to policy reform at the participating institutions.

How does this address Council priorities?

In 2017, the Council included the development of a statewide adult reengagement framework as a priority in order to make meaningful progress toward the state's attainment goals. Through support from the Lumina Foundation and assistance from many partners across the state, the College and Career Compass has been developed and is expected to launch outreach to former students in fall of 2019. The MicroGrant was created through an in-depth examination of affordability concerns of adult learners.

What is the proposal?

A request of \$500,000 would permit an expansion of the MicroGrant pilot to 10 regional community partners and participating institutions across the state, serving about 100 adult learners.

Serving additional students would provide an opportunity for an expanded learning agenda to understand what the financial hurdles for returning adults are and whether covering small barriers will permit returning students to be successful.