



Creating economic opportunity through increased educational attainment in Mason County

A planning proposal to the Washington Regional Challenge Grant Program

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Partnership Name: Mason County Educational Opportunity Consortium
Point of Contact: Lori Blewett, Ph.D.
Fiscal Agent: The Evergreen State College

The Evergreen State College, an innovative public liberal arts college based in Olympia, emphasizes collaborative, interdisciplinary learning across significant differences. Evergreen is uniquely positioned to serve the postsecondary educational needs of Mason County and has the capacity to serve as the project coordinator and fiscal agent for project planning.

Pacific Mountain WorkForce Development Council (PacMtn), a nonprofit organization, is the recognized convener of regional workforce development efforts. The PacMtn Board of Directors, PacMtn Elected Official Consortium, and all staff are dedicated to the development of a workforce system that supports business, industry, and all levels of employers and job seekers.

Our Vision

All residents of Mason County, regardless of age or background, have access to the postsecondary opportunities they want and need to earn a living wage and build meaningful careers.

Our Goal

By bringing together workforce and economic development organizations, tribes, colleges and universities, schools, community organizations, and residents, the Mason County Educational Opportunity Consortium will develop an adaptive, responsive, system-wide network to increase credential attainment by adult learners.

1. Why these partners?

Mason County is rich in both resources and opportunities for economic development. A dedicated workforce with generations-long connections to place make it ripe for creation of a robust economy and flourishing region in which to live and work. Holding it back are limited relevant postsecondary offerings, systemic barriers to access, and a lack of adequate resources to support the success of students. We intend to change that. This one-year Regional Challenge Grant initiative will create a broad-based, collaborative, and sustainable partnership to increase the number of Mason County residents, especially adult learners, who earn postsecondary credentials. The two lead partners are The Evergreen State College, a public four-year liberal arts college based in Olympia, and Pacific Mountain Regional WorkForce Development Council (PacMtn), a nonprofit organization that is the recognized convener of regional workforce development efforts in Mason and four other counties. These organizations are ideally suited to lead this initiative.

With a campus just 20 minutes from Shelton, the seat of Mason County, Evergreen is uniquely situated to provide postsecondary opportunities, ranging from short-term certification programs through graduate degrees, to people of the region. Evergreen brings a robust package of capacities and strengths to co-lead and coordinate this project, including:

- Quality certificate, undergraduate, and graduate programs to support Mason County employer needs—including short-term stand alone and stackable certificates ideal for adult learners and opportunities for students to receive college credit for prior learning from experience.
- Long-time collaborations with state agencies (Corrections , DCYF, and others), federal agencies, tribal governments and enterprises, community-based organizations, schools, and other colleges and universities.
- Public service centers in business and entrepreneurship, climate action, and community-based learning and action—with opportunities for internships and other hands-on learning.
- 50 years of leadership in Native education and programs.
- Extensive experience serving returning adult, low-income, first-generation, and historically underserved learners in our region.
- A long-established presence in Mason County, including its federal Upward Bound program at Shelton High School and leadership of a Gates Foundation Limitless grant collaboration with Shelton Schools and Educational Services District 113.

PacMtn believes that inclusive community engagement is vital to building a local plan that represents our region. Throughout this project, PacMtn will co-lead the partnership to actively seek input from jobseekers, employers, and partners in the regional workforce system to better understand current challenges and opportunities in our region and potential strategies or solutions to address those challenges. PacMtn’s four-year Regional Strategic Workforce Plan—which includes Mason County and outlines priorities, objectives, and strategies—will be a guiding document during this planning year. It will provide a framework for decision-making, resource allocation, and collaboration among the partners in the Regional Challenge initiative.

2. Partnership structure

Evergreen and PacMtn have been collaborating with the Thurston County Chamber of Commerce to expand its workforce relevant curriculum for adult learners. This effort is fully relevant to the needs of Mason County employers and residents. With this history, the two organizations will launch the proposed Challenge initiative upon notification of award rather than waiting for funding availability. Evergreen will coordinate the administrative elements of the project and serve as fiscal agent. Three additional partners who represent a range of employers and employment interests in the region have also agreed to join the



initiative at the outset: Mason County’s Economic Development Council, Squaxin Island Tribe, and Skokomish Indian Tribe. Other stakeholders (e.g., labor organizations, employers, community-based organizations) will be recruited as partners during the one-year planning project. This partnership has two purposes during this planning year:

1. Build an effective, lasting, and adaptive partnership dedicated to improving credential attainment in the county.
2. Develop a five-year implementation plan for the partnership to a) provide the educational programs required to meet employer needs and b) remove the barriers Mason County residents face to enroll and attain credentials.

The first months of the project will emphasize the establishment of an effective partnership. Building trust and collaborative capacities among the partners will be key to developing a high-functioning, sustainable cross-sector team that can respond quickly to changing economic, educational, and workforce needs. Formal partnership structures will include an MOU, charter, group agreements, and schedules for meetings and asynchronous work, and milestones and responsibilities for deliverables. In the first year, with support from experts in building effective community coalitions, partners will engage in a thorough team-building process designed to: establish collective shared values, mission, and purpose; create and implement shared decision-making processes; identify and implement inclusive, sustained methods of gathering community and stakeholder input; establish clear organizational roles for sustaining the work in the coming years; and create a five-year plan to eliminate barriers to and increase attainment of postsecondary credentials.

The five-year plan we develop will rely heavily on a rich trove of existing data as well as new data and information gathered from stakeholders and the community and will include:

- Structures for partners to regularly and systemically collaborate and coordinate workforce development needs in the region.
- Up-to-date, data-informed assessments of education and student success needs with a plan for continuing review and revision.
- A staged plan to expand available education programs and design and launch new ones.
- A staged plan to build systemic, wraparound support services for student success.
- An ongoing evaluation plan that measures the impact of the initiative on workers and the economy and includes assessment of the partnership process and progress on deliverables.
- A plan to secure funding for sustained implementation.
- A plan to expand and replicate the initiative in adjoining counties in the region.

3. How we will learn and incorporate this learning into ongoing work

Each partner brings different expertise and capacities, and the partnership structure will maximize learning across these organizations through regular interactions and shared work and responsibilities for project deliverables. The partnership will also create mechanisms for ensuring ongoing, joint community engagement and information to inform the partnership’s work. To facilitate this learning and ensure decision making and program decisions are informed by it, the partnership will engage in several potential strategies:

- **Establish a joint committee dedicated to community needs assessment and response:** These groups, with representatives from the partner organizations and community stakeholders, will meet regularly to review community feedback, assess emerging needs, develop strategies for responding to needs, and make recommendations for project implementation.

- **Implement community surveys or other feedback mechanisms:** Together, Evergreen and PacMtn will develop and administer surveys or other mechanisms to gather insights into evolving workforce needs and priorities. With data gathered directly from community members, the partnership will help ensure that its initiatives are responsive to local contexts and concerns.
- **Engage in participatory action research:** If timing and circumstances allow, Evergreen can leverage its expertise in participatory action research to deepen community engagement and understand local needs. Collaborative research involving faculty, students, and community members will generate valuable insights and inform evidence-based interventions.
- **Use data analytics and evaluation:** Both organizations will collaborate to leverage data analytics and evaluation techniques to track community trends, monitor project impact, and identify areas for improvement. By analyzing quantitative and qualitative data together, the partnership can make informed decisions and adjust its strategies in real time.
- **Facilitate community workshops and forums:** Evergreen and PacMtn may also jointly organize community workshops, forums, and listening sessions to facilitate dialogue and collaboration around pressing issues. These events will serve as platforms for community members to voice concerns, share ideas, and co-create solutions in collaboration with the partner organizations.

4. Focal populations and the assets these learners and families bring to their educational journeys

This partnership will create opportunities, eliminate barriers, and provide wrap-around support for adult learners, especially Native American and other BIPOC community members. Any college age or adult learner 18 years and older, however, can benefit from opportunities this partnership creates. Both PacMtn and Evergreen have long histories of serving substantial numbers of adult learners in their education programs. (The average age of an Evergreen student is 29.4 years.) The partners know well the unique assets adult learners bring to their educational endeavors. For many, these include:

- Years of practical work experience.
- Strong economic motivations to advance their education and careers.
- Developed organizational and life skills.
- Better defined goals for their education than typical for many college-age students.
- Experience where they needed to learn independently and exercise personal agency and responsibility in jobs and other commitments.
- Longer life experience that lends maturity, understanding, and perspective to their studies and their learning communities.

Adult learners also often bring a strong commitment to their families and communities, which frequently heightens their motivation to learn so they can better contribute to the wellbeing of others. This is often especially true for BIPOC adult learners with strong family and community traditions.

5. Where the project's learners live

This project will serve Mason County (pop. 67,000), a place with great assets and considerable need. While predominantly white (86.9%), increasing numbers of Latinx residents (11.3%) live in the county (U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2021). The Skokomish and Squaxin Island tribes are two of the county's largest employers. Postsecondary attainment rates are much lower than state and national averages (see table), with significantly fewer residents holding bachelor's and graduate/professional degrees.



2021 County, state, and national educational attainment rates, 25-and-older

Highest attainment level	Mason County	Washington	U.S.
High school diploma/equivalency	31.4%	22.5%	27.3%
Some college, no degree	28.4%	24.0%	20.8%
Associate degree	10.1%	9.9%	8.3%
Bachelor's degree	12.4%	21.7%	19.1%
Graduate/professional degree	5.4%	12.7%	11.8%
Associate degree or higher	27.9%	44.3%	39.2%
Bachelor's degree or higher	17.8%	34.5%	30.9%

U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2021

Limited economic opportunities mirror lower educational attainment rates. The county has significantly higher unemployment (6.4%) than state (4.2%) and national (3.7%) averages (December 2023). According to Mason County Census Bureau data (American Community Survey 2022), 43.6% of Native Americans and 23.8% of Hispanic/Latino residents live in poverty, compared with only 7.1% of white residents.

The county is nonetheless rich in resources that, harnessed together, could drive significant economic opportunity. Abutting Oakland Bay and the lower elbow of Hood Canal, the county boasts natural beauty, waterfront, and large swaths of forested wilderness and wildlife. Visitors pass through the county enroute to the Olympic Peninsula, Olympic National Park, and many other attractions. Growing industries in tourism, gaming, seafood, and recreational opportunities are convincing many not merely to stop in Mason County but to make it their destination. The county occupies the ancestral lands of the Squaxin Island Tribe and Skokomish Indian Tribe, whose communities and seats of government are located within its borders and who bring rich arts and cultures and an abundance of tribal industries. One of the state's largest prisons and a major regional employer, Washington Corrections Center, is located just north of Shelton. Increasing educational attainment in the county would drive significant growth in economic opportunities within current county industries and attract new businesses to locate there.

6. Systemic barriers these learners and families encounter

Not surprisingly, as in rural communities across the United States, significant barriers keep many Mason County residents from advancing their educations. These include:

- Lower college attainment rates overall often reduce motivation in others to prepare for and pursue postsecondary programs.
- First-generation students cannot rely on family experience and knowledge and need additional support to navigate a complex educational system.
- Although several organizations and institutions offer postsecondary education opportunities in Mason County, those offerings are limited, and desirable fields of study are often outside easy driving distance or are unavailable through remote instruction.
- Higher levels of poverty and attendant occurrences of poor health often mean individuals must work more than full time or hold down more than one job to meet their family's basic needs, leaving no time for the pursuit of growth through education.
- Traditional in-person modes of instruction are frequently not practical for students who must work full time and care for family members, and asynchronous instruction is extremely limited.
- BIPOC students encounter numerous challenges such as the continued impacts of colonization, systemic racism, and cultural incongruence within mainstream academic settings—all of which negatively impact educational achievement, completion of credentials, and job placement.

7. Work to be undertaken during the grant period

By bringing together colleges and universities, workforce and economic development organizations, tribes, schools, community organizations, and residents, the Mason County Educational Opportunity Consortium will develop a system-wide network to increase credential attainment by adult learners. To accomplish this, the partners on this grant project will:

- Recruit key education, industry, and community organizations to the partnership.
- Analyze the gaps between regional employer needs, community needs, and educational attainment through data analysis and deep engagement with stakeholders.
- Outline new curricular strands for stackable credentials and degree completion paths that build on existing academic opportunities and align with community needs and workforce demand.
- Assess the current educational support structures for adult learners and determine what additional supports learners need to be successful.
- Identify systemic barriers to educational attainment and strategies to remove those barriers for adult learners.
- Align our initiative with other ongoing efforts that focus on postsecondary enrollment and success in K12 schools.
- Develop a five-year regional plan and funding proposal to sustain the broad-based partnership, which will implement a flexible, data- and community-informed, adaptive, systemic approach to increasing postsecondary attainment in Mason County. The plan will include delivery of both educational and support programs to maximize student success and job placement.

College academic leaders and grant-funded staff at Evergreen will administer this project and we plan to engage outside expertise for help with facilitating the partnership, gathering data and conducting needs analysis, and developing the proposed plan.

8. How our work will increase educational attainment for the identified learners in Mason County

This project will build a broad and lasting coalition dedicated to increasing educational attainment in Mason County. It gathers the right partners to assess the needs of Mason County employers and workers. PacMtn and Evergreen are already well positioned to lead this team of stakeholders. The coalition to be formed, with deep community engagement and input, will have the breadth and expertise to identify educational and student support needs in the region and the capacity to meet those needs through credential and degree programs at multiple levels and services to eliminate barriers and empower students to succeed. The plan we produce will be immediately actionable. As it unfolds, it will significantly increase the availability of a range of postsecondary programs aligned with the employment needs of Mason County. Mason County residents who participate in postsecondary programs will have local, available services to help them navigate the education system, gain skills and strategies for educational success, and access resources and referrals to meet non-educational needs. Finally, the consortium itself will be a lasting partnership that can respond with agility to changing educational needs in Mason County.

