

**United Way of Thurston County**  
**Education to Financial Stability Task Force**  
**Application Point of Contact:** Chris Wells  
**Fiscal Agent:** United Way of Thurston County

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Applicants must submit the [Letter of Interest Submission Form](#) and upload to the form a Letter of Interest as a PDF attachment **no later than February 16, 2024 by 11:59PM Pacific Time**. To ensure formatting aligns with the below guidelines, we encourage applicants to make use of this Letter of Interest template.

A Letter of Interest must adhere to the following guidelines:

- No more than five pages in total length, excluding the cover page
- Cover page identifies:
  - o Partnership name (If applicable)
  - o Application point of contact
  - o Name of the organization that will act as fiscal agent
- All bolded questions are numbered and answered serially (see pgs. 6-8 in the Request for Letters of Interest)
- Responses are single spaced in Times New Roman 11-point font

**Note:** All LOIs submitted to WSAC will be publicly available on the WSAC website in advance of the recommendations made to Council (est. May 2024).

**1. Why are the partner organizations that are or will be included in this work the ones that came together to address educational attainment through place-based work in your region?**

Every member of our task force has a shared priority of improving post-secondary attainment, and we know that our collaboration in that effort is essential to achieving our goal of ensuring that all students in Washington State graduate high school and go on to complete a post-secondary degree or credential.

Task force members were selected specifically to ensure a collective, coordinated approach that included multiple sectors, perspectives, and disciplines with a mutual interest in improving education outcomes. We understand that investing in strategies that improve post-secondary outcomes is also an investment in economic development, infrastructure, optimal health outcomes, economic mobility, public safety, justice, workforce development, improved well-being and mental health for everyone, and vibrant, sustainable communities and economies that serve all people.

**2. How is or will the partnership be structured?**

United Way of Thurston County (UWTC) established the partnership in 2019 as part of a multi-pronged strategy with a focus on high school to post-secondary education as a tool for economic development and poverty reduction. Poor post-secondary enrollment and completion rates in Thurston County and Washington State were identified as a significant indicator of the long-term success and economic mobility of people who do not pursue education beyond high school. UWTC is the backbone organization of the partnership, as well as the fiscal agent. We have engaged a project manager/data analyst to coordinate our work, and we support the administrative expenses of the task force and its initiatives, as well as the data gathering, analysis, and reporting of our work.

The task force is currently chaired by David Schaffert, CEO of the Thurston County Chamber of Commerce. Active members include K-12, CTE, and higher education leaders, business, skilled trades, justice, and workforce and economic development professionals. Meetings are held monthly to review new or updated data, report on progress, and to continue developing complementary initiatives to expand and improve our impact. We utilize [Results-Based Accountability](#) as our framework, which enables us to take a disciplined, data-driven approach to achieving our goals, and allows us to be nimble and responsive as we progress.

**3. How have or will the partner organizations learn from each other and the communities served, and how does or will the partnership incorporate this learning into ongoing work?**

We receive regular feedback from students and families served, as well as reporting from the individuals (our Navigators, described below) leading the work, our K-12 partners and South Puget Sound Community College. As one student put it: “It was nice to be able to have that really deep conversation - and not having anyone else I could really talk to about those things - with an adult I could relate to. It helped me figure out the direction I wanted to go.”

Another student said: “Masa (her career and resource navigator) has been really helpful in making me feel confident on my college journey. I didn’t know what I wanted to do after I graduated. He helped me understand what was available to me and how to access that, and he reassured me that there was a community of people like me that will make me feel welcome and will be there for me. He did a really good job in letting me know that I had chosen a good path in what I was going after, and that there were more options later as well.”

And, finally, here is what Juan had to say: “I felt so much pressure, but I really didn’t know what I wanted to do, so I just pushed away the thought of college. And then I got help from my navigator. She helped me apply for financial aid - I never knew how to do it. I had been pretty much left on my own because my parents are immigrants and don’t speak English, so I had to sort of figure it out for myself. I didn’t know how to get these financial aid opportunities, or even how to apply for college. Since I got that help, it’s made me look forward to going to college and getting involved in college life. It really used to scare me, but now I’m looking forward to the future and what I could do for myself. I’m really thankful. And I can say for sure that I’m happy for my future and not scared and tense. I’m hopeful.”

In addition to the feedback we receive from students and their families, we also continuously monitor our performance indicators and have ongoing learning and conversation with our task force partners, who help inform our thinking and strategies, and share information and subject matter expertise to improve the ongoing development of our work product.

**4. Who are the focal population(s) in your partnership’s work, and what assets do learners and families in these populations bring to their educational journeys?**

Our navigators are available to serve all high school students, with a particular focus on students who are first generation, LGBTQ+, low-income, BIPOC, rural, have disabilities, or who speak English as a second language. Each student brings their own culture, heritage, and values, and, often, strong family and community support. They also possess a willingness to persevere in the face of significant adversity.

**5. What is the geographic region where the focal population(s) that would be served by this investment live?**

Currently, we are serving Thurston County students, but many of our task force partners serve larger geographic areas within our five-county region. Our immediate goal is to expand our initiative to every school district in Thurston County, with hopes to further develop the work and expand into a broader regional effort.

**6. What are some of the systemic barriers that learners and families in your focal population(s) encounter?**

The career and resource navigators currently embedded in the high schools have helped us better understand the challenges many students encounter. Among them: parent distrust or fear of sharing data with government, which prevents them from completing the FAFSA or WASFA; inability to understand or access the FAFSA application; language and cultural barriers/incompatibility; inability to access or imagine high-demand, family-wage career pathway opportunities; need to begin work immediately to support family; lack of understanding about how to navigate post-secondary systems: recruitment, enrollment, schedules, course progression, balancing school and work, transportation, essential materials, etc.; lack of awareness about post-secondary requirements; and lack of mentorship, overall. Additionally, there is not enough capacity in the schools to help students fully develop their high school and beyond plans as a meaningful exercise and tool to map out their next steps after graduation.

**7. What work do you propose undertaking during the granting period?**

In late 2021, we launched a pilot program, placing Career and Resource Navigators in selected high schools, to provide guidance and mentorship to students to help them understand the many career opportunities and pathways available to them beyond high school, assist with developing their high school and beyond plans, and to work directly with students and their families to successfully complete the FAFSA. We started with two navigators serving the four high schools in the North Thurston and

Yelm school districts. We now have four navigators serving North Thurston, Yelm, Olympia, and Tumwater school districts. In order to provide the most attentive, comprehensive services to students, it is imperative that we hire additional navigators, enabling us to serve all high schools in Thurston County at scale. Ideally, we will be able to fund a total of 6-7 navigators, which will cover all the high schools and increase the capacity of each navigator, allowing them to focus on a more manageable student population. Additionally, we would like to hire at least one full-time case manager on campus at the college to provide mentorship, resources, and support to students once they have enrolled, to enable them to complete their degree or credential. We will be measuring our progress by collecting data on four primary indicators: FAFSA completion rates, post-secondary enrollment, fall-to-fall retention, and program/credential completion. We will also be developing an advocacy agenda, to promote systemic change through additional partnerships, incorporating our learnings into future education policy.

**8. How will this proposed work contribute to increasing educational attainment for the focal population(s) in your region?**

By focusing on this model of direct, personalized engagement between our navigators and students, and leveraging other existing assets and systems within and across high schools and post-secondary institutions, we will improve students' high school and beyond planning, significantly increase FAFSA completion rates – and post-secondary enrollment rates as a byproduct of that increased FAFSA support, and provide additional mentoring, case management, student mentorship and support once enrolled, to improve degree/credentialing completion.