

Partnership Name: Western Washington Guaranteed Transfer Admission Partnership

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Fiscal Agent: Western Washington University

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?

The proposed partnership will bring together the higher education institutions of Whatcom and Skagit counties to enhance and expand opportunities for degree attainment across the region. The proposed partnership will be led by Western Washington University (WWU) and will include Bellingham Technical College (BTC), Northwest Indian College (NWIC), Skagit Valley College (SVC), and Whatcom Community College (WCC), in addition to our community partner organization Futures Northwest. These organizations are all based in the region, share a commitment to increasing educational attainment, and are coming together to strengthen degree pathways for post-secondary students. This partnership will leverage and expand the existing relationships between these organizations and will serve as a pilot for this model of partnership which in the future could be further extended into adjacent regions.

2. How is or will the partnership be structured?

WWU will take lead in coordinating the proposed partnership, including interfacing with WSAC, connecting with partner colleges, managing agreements, overseeing implementation and staffing, and serving as the fiscal agent. BTC, NWIC, SVC, and WCC will collaborate in developing and promoting degree pathways, providing space for partnership staff to provide on-site services, and sharing relevant data. Futures Northwest will collaborate in coordinating with partnership staff and promoting opportunities to prospective students during high school outreach events.

WWU will ensure there is consistent communication with the leadership of each partner organization, in addition to managing project staff who will regularly provide services on the campus of each partner college. In leading the partnership, WWU will regularly discuss and seek approval from partner colleges in any decisions which impact those organizations. Each partner college will be an equal contributor in identifying and establishing relevant degree paths for each institution and in promoting opportunities to students. Through data sharing agreements, partner colleges will provide data to WWU to analyze the impacts of the proposed project and to identify opportunities for expanding access and eliminating achievement gaps. Findings will be shared with partner organizations and aggregate results will be analyzed and reported on an annual basis to ensure effective assessment and ongoing process improvement of the project. If the partnership is successful in expanding opportunities and increasing completion rates for students, it is anticipated that additional partners may be recruited in the future, as the proposed model is scalable across regions.

The primary contacts for the initial partnership are listed for each organization in the chart below.

| Organization | Primary Contact(s) |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Bellingham Technical College | Michele Waltz (Vice President of Student Services) Heidi Ypma (Vice President of Instruction) |
| Futures Northwest | Ashley DeLatour (Executive Director of Programs) Megan Wingo (Executive Director of Operations) |
| Northwest Indian College | Victoria Retasket (Dean of Student Life) |
| Skagit Valley College | Darren Greeno (Vice President of Academic Affairs) Claire Peinado (Vice President of Student Services) |
| Western Washington University | Melynda Huskey (Vice President of Enrollment and Student Services) Shelli Soto (Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management) |
| Whatcom Community College | Kerri Holferty (Interim Vice President for Student Services) Steven Thomas (Interim Vice President for Instruction) |

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?

The organizations identified for the proposed partnership are already learning from each other through our initial exploratory conversations, and this learning will continually deepen through ongoing discussions between key staff at partner colleges to identify eligible degree pathways, establish transfer agreements, promote transfer pathways, engage in early outreach and advising, support students in navigating these pathways, and develop communications strategies that promote retention, completion, and continuation to bachelor degree programs. Additionally, continuous assessment will be critical to understanding the effectiveness of the project and services provided. To this end, the partnership will develop a robust assessment plan with key performance metrics for the project, and data sharing agreements will be established between WWU and partner organizations in order to analyze access rates, enrollment and retention impacts, equity gaps, and completion rates for students navigating degree pathways developed through this project.

In addition to learning between partners through collaborative discussions and quantitative analysis, it is anticipated that partner organizations will learn significantly from qualitative data collected directly from program participants. WWU will administer an annual survey to each student navigating the degree pathways developed through this project, including those still completing their initial transfer coursework (in partnership with each college) as well as those who have already transferred, with customized items based on where students are at in the pathway. This will allow us to learn from students about how well the pathway programs are meeting their needs, any challenges they have encountered in navigating these pathways, and any other concerns they may have related to the pathway programs.

Lessons learned through collaboration and insights gained from analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data will be continually applied to improve process and programs across the partnership, especially where equity gaps have been identified. Through these continuous assessment and program improvement efforts our partnership aspires to increase enrollments at all participating colleges, increase transfer rates, increase transfer graduation rates, and ensure equitable outcomes from learners of all abilities and backgrounds.

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?

This project will focus on defining, promoting, and supporting degree pathways for students at partner colleges to complete an associate degree and transfer to WWU to earn a baccalaureate degree. Therefore, the focal population consists of students currently or previously enrolled at BTC, NWIC, SVC, and WCC who are interested in transferring to WWU. Enrollment data from WWU shows that transfer students differ from traditional students in key demographics. As detailed in the chart below, transfer students are more likely to be older, to be first-generation students, to enroll part-time, and to be eligible for Pell Grant (a marker of low-income status). These demographic differences are significant because internal data at WWU have indicated that a number of these demographic factors are correlated with a lower likelihood of academic persistence. In a 2021 analysis, it was determined that first-generation students are 2.6% less likely to be retained in their first year at WWU, Pell Grant recipients are 4.3% less likely to be retained, and part-time students are 13.5% less likely to be retained.

| WWU Enrollment Demographics (Fall 2023) | | |
|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| | <i>New First-Year Students</i> | <i>New Transfer Students</i> |
| Ages 18-24 | 98.4% | 82.3% |
| Ages 25-39 | 0.3% | 14.2% |
| Ages 40+ | 0.0% | 3.4% |
| First-Generation | 24.2% | 33.7% |
| Full-Time | 97.7% | 91.9% |
| Part-Time | 2.3% | 8.1% |
| Pell-Eligible | 21.9% | 28.9% |
| Students of Color | 29.8% | 26.3% |
| Non-Resident | 16.1% | 11.1% |

Recognizing and addressing the needs of these sub-populations to ensure equitable outcomes for transfer students is a critical goal of the proposed project. However, it is equally critical to recognize the strengths that these students bring to their educational journeys. For instance, numerous studies of first-generation students have found that these students tend to be more motivated, responsible, engaged, and committed than continuing-generation students. One [national study](#) of more than 750,000 students found that first-generation students exceeded continuing-generation students in measures of educational commitment, academic self-efficacy, academic engagement, and campus engagement. We also know from internal data at WWU that number of credit hours transferred to WWU and higher age at enrollment (other key demographic differences for transfer students) are both correlated with a higher likelihood of academic persistence.

In addition to these academic and non-academic characteristics, this focal population also brings critical perspective and feedback which will be collected regularly and carefully reviewed to inform program improvements. WWU surveys all incoming transfer students each fall quarter, directly engaging with the focal population to understand their experiences, challenges, and strengths. Findings from recent years will inform the initial planning and implementation of the proposed project. Once the project has been implemented, surveys instruments will be updated to collect specific feedback related to the degree pathways developed through the proposed project, in order to hear directly from program participants about their experiences navigating those pathways. Feedback received from participants will be carefully considered in consultation with partners throughout the ongoing implementation process, ensuring the student voice is represented in planning and assessment processes, and supporting continuous improvement of the programs and services offered to support these dynamic learners.

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

It is anticipated that the focal population served by this partnership will primarily live in Whatcom and Skagit Counties, with additional participants residing in Island, San Juan, Snohomish, and other surrounding counties. While comprehensive data from partner colleges are not currently available (but will be made available through the data sharing agreements proposed for this program), it is the case that for Whatcom Community College (which has the largest enrollment of the associate degree-granting partner colleges), approximately 90% of enrolled students are Whatcom County residents.

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

All of the colleges involved in this partnership know all too well from countless student anecdotes how challenging it can be to navigate the transfer admission process. From confusion around policies, to a lack of clarity around program options and uncertainty regarding admissions, to limited availability of support services, transfer students face a variety of systemic barriers in navigating their degree pathways. These barriers are compounded for students who face additional barriers due to systemic barriers, and this is especially the case for first-generation students – who account for one-third of transfer students to WWU. In focus groups and surveys of first-generation students at WWU, our two most consistent findings are that first-generation students are impacted by a limited understanding of college expectations, services, and systems, and would benefit significantly from improved access to information and increased outreach regarding campus resources. Likewise, a [recent meta-analysis](#) of studies on transfer students found that the top institutional barrier to their success was unclear or incomplete information about credit transfer.

The proposed project is intended to minimize the systemic barriers encountered by learners in our focal population by developing clear policies, defining clear program options, providing certainty around the admissions process, and providing expanded support to participants throughout the process. Our outreach and advising efforts will be supported by degree pathway tools and personalized services to allow students to get answers to their questions, plan ahead, know what to expect, and make the most of their time and resources in pursuing their educational goals.

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

Through this partnership, WWU proposes to expand its current [Guaranteed Transfer Admission policy](#) to students who complete eligible AA/AAS-DTA, AA/AAS-DTA/MRP, and AS-T degrees at BTC, NWIC, SVC, and WCC. The partnership formation process will involve establishing a memorandum of understanding and data sharing agreement between WWU and each partner college; defining pathways and developing resources for eligible degree programs; developing and implementing an outreach and marketing plan; and providing services to an initial cohort of students accepted through the new program. It is anticipated that RCG funds will be used to hire a full-time project staff to coordinate the partnership formation process and to provide direct support services to students, including through providing direct services on-site at each partner campus and through directly supporting outreach at local high schools.

The Guaranteed Transfer Admission (GTA) program will be marketed extensively and will be the subject of focused outreach efforts, which will be conducted in partnership with Futures Northwest, a community organization based in Whatcom County which supports students in pursuing and achieving their college and career ambitions. In addition to marketing and outreach conducted by WWU and partner colleges, which will involve both general and targeted communications to prospective students, Futures Northwest will promote the GTA program at its financial aid and career exploration workshops, which are conducted quarterly on-site at high schools across Skagit and Whatcom Counties. These workshops have tremendous reach in the community – during the 2022-2023 academic year, a total of 70 sessions were conducted at 20 regional high schools, reaching over 1,200 unique students – and the GTA project staff person will regularly attend these workshops to provide direct support to aspiring transfer students.

It is worth noting that this partnership is explicitly focused on supporting adult learners in credential completion, and therefore aligns well with WSAC’s 2024 funding vision. With funding from the RCG, the following deliverables are anticipated through the partnership formation process:

- A memorandum of understanding and data sharing agreement will be finalized between WWU and each partner college (staff from WWU and each partner college will collaborate to identify eligible programs and degree pathways for each agreement);
- Degree pathway resources will be developed to provide relevant information and degree planning tools for eligible programs and pathways;
- A marketing and outreach plan will be developed and implemented to promote the GTA program and recruit an initial cohort of students for admission to WWU;
- An assessment plan will be developed and implemented to support collection and analysis of relevant data to establish baselines, define goals, examine program performance, identify inequities among subpopulations, and inform program improvements; and
- A long-term implementation and staffing plan will be developed to continue (and expand) the program beyond the initial partnership formation phase.

Ultimately, this partnership is proposing a program which is intended to address some of the most significant barriers encountered by students – especially students from historically marginalized subpopulations – in planning, preparing for, and moving through the transfer admissions process, to increase educational attainment for students across the region, and with the potential to serve as a model for implementing such programs at a broader scale.

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

The proposed GTA program will allow high school graduates across the region to plan ahead for a reliable bachelor's degree pathway, supporting informed enrollment decisions, minimizing credit loss, and decreasing time to degree. The program is anticipated to improve partner college retention and associate degree completion through early outreach and advising – providing students with clear next steps and personalized support in course and degree planning. The program is also expected to increase baccalaureate degree completion through making degree pathways more accessible and minimizing institutional barriers. Ultimately, increased educational attainment will result in improved career opportunities and lifetime earnings potential for students who complete degree pathways.

A [recent study](#) found that nationally only one-third of students who started at community colleges transferred to four-year universities, with less than one-sixth earning a bachelor's degree within six years, with even lower for historically marginalized student groups. It has been demonstrated that [guaranteed admission can increase the enrollment and success of transfer students](#). Strengthening degree pathways and eliminating institutional barriers are critical steps in improving outcomes for transfer students, who are often overlooked in educational attainment initiatives. The Western Washington GTA Program represents an exciting opportunity to build strong regional partnerships to support these important outcomes and to contribute to educational attainment in Washington State.