

Ten-Year Roadmap Policy Options

Challenge Area:

Institutional Capacity and Student Success

Planning Activity:

Strategic development and assessment of the skills, knowledge, and experience students will need to succeed after graduation

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Executive Summary

Washington higher education institutions seek to produce graduates with the essential knowledge, proficiencies, and adaptive skills that are vital for success in a modern democratic society and evolving economy. In relation to this issue, the Council is interested in identifying the challenges institutions face in achieving this goal and exploring potential state-level policies that could assist institutions in meeting those challenges.

Current Processes Established to Ensure Student Learning in Washington

A number of mechanisms are currently employed at Washington higher education institutions to assess and improve institutional effectiveness with respect to student learning outcomes:

- Programs and majors are designed by experienced faculty, in collaboration with professional advisory boards, and continuously adjusted to incorporate ongoing changes and new emerging areas of specialization that might require new skills.
- Institutions have offices responsible for working with individual departments or colleges on assessment of student learning in an ongoing process of continuous program refinement.
- The regional accrediting agency enforces high standards for institutional performance with respect to assessment of student learning outcomes.
- Feedback mechanisms have been established that provide valuable input from current students and alumni about their college and postgraduate experiences.

Major Challenges for Institutions

The state's higher education institutions are actively engaged in the assessment of student learning outcomes and in establishing processes for the progressive improvement of academic programs. However, they still face obstacles in fully aligning student learning with employment opportunities that state-level policy assistance could address.

The primary challenges institutions face include:

1. Obtaining detailed and targeted employer feedback on the skills and knowledge they are seeking in college graduates.
2. Lack of resources for creating more student opportunities for work-integrated learning.
3. A need for improved cross-institutional coordination for aligning academic programs, student learning, and employer needs.

Policy Options for Recommended Action

In order to aid institutions in meeting these challenges, the following policy options have been identified for consideration by the Council:

- ***Identifying Key Skills for Postgraduate Success and Improving Cross-Institutional Coordination***
 - Establish a taskforce to review and recommend mechanisms for cross-institutional coordination and employer feedback.
 - Develop an annual statewide Career Pathways Conference, involving the business community and educators from all sectors, focused on academic alignment with employment opportunities.
 - Adapt or implement cross-institutional coordinating systems pioneered in other states.

- ***Assessing Student Learning and Informing Students of the Core Skills They Will Need***
 - Support institutional initiatives to improve educational assessment and alignment with foundational career skills.
 - Expand student opportunities for work-integrated learning, emphasizing work study and paid internships, and develop a centralized web site for coordination.

Context of the Ten-Year Roadmap

Increasing educational attainment is vital to the well-being of Washington residents and to the health of our state's economy. To this end, the Washington Student Achievement Council is working to propose goals and strategies for increasing educational attainment through a Ten-Year Roadmap and a two-year Strategic Action Plan.

The Council's Strategic Action Plan, adopted in November 2012, identifies five critical challenges to be addressed in the Roadmap. The five challenge areas are:

1. **Student Readiness** (with four planning activities: Early Learning; Outreach and Support; Alignment; Remedial Postsecondary Education)
2. **Affordability**
3. **Institutional Capacity and Student Success** (with two planning activities: Meeting Increased Demand; Assessment of Student Skills and Knowledge)
4. **Capturing the Potential of Technology**
5. **Stable and Accountable Funding**

To inform the Council's work of creating the first Roadmap, workgroups comprising lead Washington Student Achievement Council Members, Council staff, and external workgroup members were formed to research, discuss, and develop issue briefings and policy recommendations for each of these five critical challenge areas.

The Challenge Areas are complex and interrelated. While the Roadmap will recommend actions for each of the Challenge Areas, these recommendations will be integrated into a cohesive plan.

Introduction

The purpose of this report on student success and the assessment of student skills and knowledge is to build upon the work of the previous Issue Briefing¹ and provide the Council with an array of policy options for consideration in preparing the Ten-year Roadmap to raise educational attainment in Washington State.

Policy Issue

Washington higher education institutions seek to produce graduates with the essential knowledge, proficiencies, and adaptive skills that are vital for success in a modern democratic society and evolving economy. In relation to this issue, the Council is interested in identifying the challenges that institutions face in achieving that goal and exploring potential state-level policies that could assist institutions in meeting those challenges.

We broadly characterize this key set of knowledge and proficiencies as *foundational career skills*. Here, the word “career” is not meant to refer narrowly only to occupational or professional concerns. The meaning here is more expansive, as in a person’s course or progress through life. In this sense, foundational career skills encompass those that are essential for further education, civic engagement, and responsible citizenship in a modern democracy, as well as those crucial to success in the workplace.

Efforts of the Student Success Workgroup

A workgroup was assembled to support the efforts of the Council in examining this issue and developing a range of policy options for consideration. In addition to Council members and staff, the workgroup drew from key sectors in the state. The group included representatives from the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, Council of Presidents, Independent Colleges of Washington, Northwest Career Colleges Federation, Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, State Board of Education, Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, Faculty Association of Community and Technical Colleges, Employment Security Department, and Washington STEM. The members of the workgroup are listed in the acknowledgements section at the end of this report.

The workgroup met three times during the months of February and March, 2013. The dialogue during the initial meeting was open-structured and garnered a diverse range of perspectives and insights into various aspects of the issue. Based in part upon the insights gained in these early discussions, a draft issue briefing was prepared, which formed the organizing focus for dialogue in subsequent meetings.

The issue briefing established the context for a panel discussion that was assembled for the Council meeting held on March 26, 2013. Panelists included representatives from the public two-year, public four-year, and independent college sectors, who presented an overview of current student learning assessment practices. The panel included Tim Stokes, President of South Puget Sound Community College; Catherine Riordan, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Western Washington University; and Robert Duniway, Assistant Vice President for University Planning and Director of Institutional Research at Seattle University.

Critical questions

The workgroup considered a range of fundamental questions associated with the policy issue:

- **Identifying the key skills for postgraduate success:** How do institutions determine the knowledge and skills students will need to possess and demonstrate to meet the needs of employers in Washington? What mechanisms are used to forecast the needs of the future?
- **Coordinating across institutions:** How could the state best support efforts to facilitate employer feedback and provide effective cross-institutional coordination to ensure alignment between postsecondary degree programs, student learning, and the needs of employers in the state?
- **Assessing student learning:** Do institutions have sufficient resources and policies to systematically align courses and programs with the foundational career skills and technical proficiencies that graduates will need for success in a modern, evolving society?
- **Informing students of the skills they will need to succeed:** How are students informed of the range of skills, foundational as well as occupation specific, which will be crucial to their success after graduation?

Current mechanisms for student learning assessment

In considering these questions, the workgroup identified a number of mechanisms currently employed at Washington higher education institutions to assess and improve institutional effectiveness with respect to student learning outcomes:

- Programs and majors are designed by experienced faculty, in collaboration with professional advisory boards, and continuously adjusted to incorporate ongoing changes and new emerging areas of specialization that might require new skills.
- Institutions have offices responsible for working with individual departments or colleges on assessment of student learning in an ongoing process of continuous program refinement.
- The regional accrediting agency enforces high standards for institutional performance with respect to assessment of student learning outcomes.
- Feedback mechanisms have been established that provide valuable input from current students and alumni about their college and postgraduate experiences.

Primary challenges

The state's higher education institutions are actively engaged in the assessment of student learning outcomes and in establishing processes for the progressive improvement of academic programs. However, fully aligning student learning with employment opportunities remains difficult. Institutions face a number of obstacles that state-level policy assistance could address.

The primary challenges institutions face include: 1) obtaining detailed and targeted employer feedback on the skills and knowledge they are seeking in college graduates; 2) lack of resources for creating more student opportunities for work-integrated learning; and 3) a need for improved cross-institutional coordination for aligning academic programs, student learning, and employer needs.

Policy Options for Recommended Action

In light of these challenges, a number of policy options have been developed for Council consideration. The options are intended to address the needs associated with each of the critical questions outlined above. In acknowledgment of the potential for these policies and actions to address more than one issue, they are grouped together under two broad categories.

Although there was broad agreement on many of the proposals, the contributors to this report did not uniformly support each policy option. The report reflects a diversity of input, empowering the Council to consider and prioritize policy options for inclusion in the Ten-Year Roadmap.

Identifying Key Skills for Postgraduate Success and Improving Cross-Institutional Coordination

- **Establish a taskforce to review and recommend mechanisms for cross-institutional coordination and employer feedback.**

Potential Advantages: Currently, the state lacks an effective, comprehensive system for obtaining detailed employer feedback on the skills and knowledge they are seeking in college graduates.

There also is a need for obtaining targeted information that reflects employers' views regarding the skills, knowledge, and work-readiness of the graduates of individual colleges and universities in the state. A taskforce would be convened to examine this issue and make recommendations on the most efficient mechanism, or combination of methods, to pursue.

The following are some of the alternatives that might be considered:

- **Expand and refine the use of employer surveys.**

Potential Advantages: This is an area in which the Council could play a key role in providing improved means of collecting aggregated data that institutions do not have the resources to obtain individually. The refined use of these surveys could help 1) better identify needed skills and 2) obtain more detailed and targeted employer feedback. Options include:

- Expanding and fine-tuning the employer survey mechanism that is currently administered by the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board. The survey could be broadened to include a range of questions designed to measure employer needs, as well as employer perceptions of the skills and knowledge of recent graduates, at all levels. Currently, this tool is primarily directed at gathering information about employer experiences with applicants and new employees who have completed vocational certificate programs or associate degrees. The survey range could be increased to provide a more comprehensive outlook.
- Developing a separate survey mechanism, managed by the Washington Student Achievement Council, specifically designed to provide targeted information that complements rather than duplicates the current efforts of the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board.

- **Develop a comprehensive system for coordinating employer feedback.**

Potential Advantages: In addition to incorporating new tools and existing surveys, a comprehensive system could effectively utilize a range of separate resources for employer feedback that are currently available. These resources include mechanisms for employer feedback from:

- Industry skill panels. Industry skill panels are public/private partnerships of business, labor and education that work to improve the skills of workers in industries vital to Washington's economy.
- Centers of Excellence. The Washington State Centers of Excellence are coordinated statewide education and training programs in high demand fields that are guided by industry representatives.
- College career centers. All colleges and universities have career centers that assist students and alumni prepare for life after graduation. They could provide additional opportunities for structuring employer feedback mechanisms.

- **Expand use of data from the biennial Skilled and Educated Workforce and Regional Needs Assessment reports.**

Potential Advantages: The data sets compiled in the course of preparing the biennial reports on the state's education and workforce needs, produced by the Washington Student Achievement Council in collaboration with the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board and the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, could be leveraged to gain further insight into the alignment of higher education programs and employer needs.

The results of this report are currently used to identify gaps between degree production rates and projected employer needs in high demand programs. The scope and use of these data could be further expanded to target resources for institutional needs and fine-tune the alignment between the educational and employment sectors.

The Regional Needs Assessment reports could be leveraged to gain insights into skills gaps at the local community level. In the past, reports on regional needs have provided insights that are not captured in the Skilled and Educated Workforce reports, which have a statewide emphasis. These reports, however, have been produced only periodically. This reporting should become regularized.

The Regional Needs Assessment, if produced biennially in alternating years with the Skilled and Educated Workforce reports, could provide a more balanced picture of distinct needs in the different areas of the state. In addition, the Council could work with partners at the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, the Workforce Board, and the Employment Security Department to collect data on varying needs in the more localized sub-regions.

- **Develop a new annual statewide conference, drawing on the business community and educators from all sectors, focused on career pathways and academic alignment with employer needs.**

Potential Advantages: This would be an annual one- or two-day conference, modeled on the Assessment, Teaching, and Learning Conference (ATL),² which is currently administered by the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. This new conference, however, would have a distinct focus. It would be inclusive of all sectors and focus on alignment between academic programs and employment opportunities in the state. In this way it would be complementary to the ATL rather than duplicative.

It would offer a relatively low-cost alternative for statewide cross-institutional coordination. The Washington Student Achievement Council would manage this conference in collaboration with the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board. Business and industry representatives would be invited as well as educators from all postsecondary sectors. Sessions in this forum would be thematically linked and could include discussions of best practices in student learning assessment, faculty development, career pathways, development of programs in emerging fields, and aligning established programs with evolving employer opportunities.

- **Expand the focus of the annual Assessment, Teaching, and Learning Conference to include Washington industry and employer feedback.**

Potential Advantages: The scope of the Assessment, Teaching, and Learning Conference (ATL) could be expanded. The ATL community includes educators, administrators, and institutional researchers from the two-year and four-year institutions in Washington. The conference, hosted annually by the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, engages campus leadership from institutions across the state in discussions of best practices for ongoing improvement of teaching and learning through assessment and faculty development. By expanding this conference to include employer participation, an established forum could be leveraged to address the issue of alignment between postsecondary degree programs, student learning, and employer needs.

- **Adapt cross-institutional coordinating systems that have proven effective in other states**

Potential Advantages: Such systems can improve alignment between postsecondary degree programs, student learning, and employer needs. Washington could either: 1) learn from such organizations and, on this basis, develop a home-grown system for coordination or 2) contract with an organization and adopt an established system.

The following are some of the existing mechanisms and resources from which the Council could draw:

- **Tuning USA** - Tuning USA³ is a comprehensive mechanism of inter-institutional collaboration for identifying what students should know, understand, and be able to do in a chosen discipline at the completion of a degree or professional program. The overall goal is to make these learning outcomes readily understood by students, faculty, family, employers, and other stakeholders.

Tuning is an initiative that originally started in Europe in 2000. The phenomenon subsequently spread to Latin America in 2005, to the United States in 2009, and is currently in the planning or implementation stage in Russia, Australia, and Japan. In the U.S., the program is funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

The process is faculty-driven and focused on defining key areas of competency, identifying learning outcomes, and scaling competencies and outcomes to varying degree levels. Tuning is designed to proceed under the fundamental premises that: 1) curricula should not be standardized; 2) faculty must control the discipline; and 3) academic autonomy and flexibility should be preserved. Thus far, the following states have begun to implement the Tuning process: Indiana, Minnesota, Utah, Texas, and Kentucky.

- **Workforce Strategy Center** - The Workforce Strategy Center (WSC)⁴ is a resource that could be employed to improve the alignment of student learning in the state with employer needs and employment opportunities. This center, based in Rhode Island, is a national consulting think tank that advises education and workforce policy makers in the development of strategies to help students and workers succeed and regional economies grow. Their activities include the following:

- **Job Ready:** Job Ready is a tool that provides a means of assessing the alignment of the content of an academic course or program with the job skills required for employment in local businesses or industries.⁵

This tool is designed to aid in the prioritization of courses that could be improved through fine tuning or that might need more detailed review and revision. Inputs include curriculum details uploaded by faculty, work order and job opening information uploaded by local businesses and industries, and occupational demand projections. This data is then translated into a common skills language and aggregated into a labor market value index that shows to what extent a course or program develops the skills that students will need to compete for jobs in a particular labor market.

- **Career Pathways Systems:** The Workforce Strategy Center also works with state leaders to better align education policies with employer demand, in part through the development of effective connections and feedback mechanisms. For example, the WSC has consulted in the development of *the Virginia Career Pathways Initiative*⁶ and *the Minnesota Career Pathways Initiative*.⁷

- **Jobs for the Future**

Jobs for the Future (JFF) is another organization that consults with states and communities to develop systems for coordinating education and career pathways aligned with employer needs. Based in Boston and Washington, D.C., JFF is currently assisting 39 states and 100 communities across the nation.

An example of JFF's efforts to build education and career pathways is the Pathways to Prosperity Network. The Pathways to Prosperity Network, is a collaboration of states, Jobs for the Future, and the Pathways to Prosperity Project at Harvard Graduate School of Education. Its focus is on increasing the numbers of students who complete high school and attain a postsecondary credential with currency in the labor market.

Each participating state is engaging educators and employers in building a system of career pathways from high school through community college. Such pathways are intended to launch young people into initial careers, while leaving open the prospect of further education.

Assessing Student Learning and Informing Students of the Core Skills They Will Need to Succeed

- **Support institutional initiatives to improve educational assessment and alignment with foundational career skills**

Potential Advantages: Institutions currently assess student achievement based on identified course, program, and degree learning outcomes, which may include the foundational intellectual skills most often cited and valued by employers. However, in order to facilitate continual improvement in this process, the Council will seek funding to develop a grant program that would support pilot initiatives to advance student learning in these areas.

Funded initiatives would focus on improving student acquisition of foundational intellectual skills that are essential for further education, career advancement and responsible civic engagement in a modern democratic society. These intellectual and practical skills would include those recognized by the Association of American Colleges and Universities as essential twenty-first-century learning outcomes: critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative and information literacy, collaboration, and problem solving.

- **Increase student opportunities for Work-Integrated Learning**

Potential Advantages: Students gain valuable work experience and insight into the key skills they will need for postgraduate success. In developing this option, a focus should be placed on:

- **Work Study.** Increased state funding to expand student work study opportunities would assist students in a number of ways. Work study programs help students gain valuable work experience, often in jobs related to their academic and career goals, while earning money for college expenses. Program funding for work study was reduced by approximately 66 percent between 2009-11 and 2011-13, with a current appropriation of \$7.8 million.

The number of students participating in the program has declined from 8,500 in 2009-10 to about 5,500 in 2011-12. Restoring funding for the program could reverse this downward trend, increasing opportunities for students to gain insight into the key skills they will need in their fields and real work experience for developing those skills.

- **Internships.** Increased opportunities for paid student internships should also be supported.
- **Web-based system for coordinating work-integrated learning opportunities.** To facilitate and expand opportunities for student internships and other forms of work-integrated learning, the Council could develop a web-based coordinating system, in collaboration with the Workforce Board. This would be a centralized site for students from all sectors. It would include a comprehensive, continuously updated listing of openings, which students could then search for those that fit with their background and career ambitions.

Internships and other forms of work-integrated learning provide valuable opportunities for students to gain insight into the skills they will need for their careers and key work experience in which to develop those skills. In creating this web site, Council staff could draw on their experience in developing and successfully implementing *theWashBoard.org* — a web-based scholarship matching clearinghouse for Washington residents and students attending college in Washington.⁸

Next Steps

Following the Council’s consideration and discussion of the above policy options at its May 2013 meeting, Council staff will prepare a framework for Roadmap Recommendations for this planning area. The framework for Roadmap Recommendations will include a delineation of specific strategic actions, each of which will be described by the following factors:

1. Expected Outcome of the Action
2. Action Time Period
3. Outcome Time Period
4. Metrics for Measuring Outcomes
5. Legislative Action Needed
6. Fiscal Impact

The framework for Roadmap Recommendations will be developed in close consultation with the Council members and workgroup members working on this planning area during the summer months. The framework will be used by the Council at its October retreat to help shape the Ten-Year Roadmap.

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Sources

¹ The Institutional Capacity and Student Success Issue Briefing was presented to the Council on March 26, 2013.¹ A copy of the report is available through the following link: [www.wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/SkillsKnowledge-IssueBriefing.pdf#search="skills and knowledge issue brief"](http://www.wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/SkillsKnowledge-IssueBriefing.pdf#search='skills and knowledge issue brief').

² Information about this conference is available at the following website: http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/e_assessment.aspx.

³ Institute for Evidence-Based Change. (2012). *Tuning American Higher Education: The Process*. Retrieved Feb. 26, 2013 from <http://tuningusa.org/TuningUSA/tuningusa.publicwebsite/50/50a9739e-b440-418d-8580-e06713232bc2.pdf>.

⁴ Additional information about the Workforce Strategy Center can be found at <http://www.workforcestrategy.org/>.

⁵ Additional information about the JobReady tool can be found at <http://www.workforcestrategy.org/smart-tools/curriculum-alignment.html>.

⁶ Goldberg, M. and Alssid, J. (2012) "Taking Root: The Virginia Career Pathways System." Workforce Strategy Center. Retrieved Feb. 26, 2013 from <http://www.vccs.edu/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=FAv9OKLwlgA%3d&tabid=76>.

⁷ Goldberg, M. and Alssid, J. (2012) "Policy Brief: Minnesota Workforce Funding." Workforce Strategy Center. Retrieved Feb. 26, 2013 from http://www.workforcestrategy.org/images/pdfs/publications/minnesota_workforce_funding_2012-10-16.pdf.

⁸ More information about this program is available at: <https://fortress.wa.gov/hecb/thewashboard/AboutUs.aspx>.