

Project Finish Line Executive Summary

Project Finish Line will unite seven community and technical colleges in the Road Map Project region through the Puget Sound Coalition for College and Career Readiness (Coalition). Over two years, these colleges will (1) implement direct interventions, and revise their policies and procedures, to improve their students' postsecondary credential completion and university transfer rates; and (2) form a professional Learning Community of expert advisors, key on-campus constituencies, and external partners. The Learning Community will coordinate and strengthen these colleges' "cultures of completion" to improve their students' credential completion and university transfer rates.

Institutional change requires a catalyst. The project will focus upon a direct intervention at four "principal" colleges who will employ Completion Coaches: Green River Community College (GRCC), and the Seattle College District's three campuses: North Seattle, Seattle Central, and South Seattle. Coaches will re-engage students who are close to finishing postsecondary credentials, but are either (1) currently enrolled students whose progress has stalled; or (2) recently enrolled students who can be re-engaged to finish their outstanding requirements. Coaches will prioritize services to underrepresented minority and low-income students identified by the Road Map Project and colleges' institutional data as experiencing opportunity gaps.

Completion Coaches have been successfully used at Walla Walla Community College (WWCC), winner of the 2013 Aspen Institute Prize for Community College Excellence. WWCC staff will provide expert mentorship to the four principal colleges. Compelling and useful evidence supporting this intervention exists at the national level: e.g., in the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC)'s July 2014 Signature Report, *Some College, No Degree: A National View of Students with Some Enrollment, but No Completion*.¹ Completion Coaches will strive to become financially self-sustaining by the end of the grant.

A productive Learning Community (LC) will include broad representation from all Coalition member institutions. With the support of an expert advisor, the LC will convene four-five regional gatherings that address topics related to postsecondary completion and institutional change. The LC will not only provide a discussion forum and resources for LC members to collectively impact student completion rates on a regional scale, it will also serve as a think-tank and test bed for additional practices to complement Completion Coaching.

Project Finish Line will integrate with and benefit from present initiatives in the Road Map Project region. These include the Coalition; the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's complementary grants to Green River and the Seattle College District; Achieving the Dream; expert consultation provided by Dr. Rob Johnstone of the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement (NCII); and the Road Map Project's High School to College and English Language Learners Work Groups. The project will be administered by the Puget Sound Educational Service District (PSESD). The PSESD is well qualified for this role, as it is a major stakeholder in these initiatives and is a regional clearinghouse for data and best practices.

The project will be rigorously evaluated to provide formative data for ongoing improvement during the grant. It will use summative evaluation to assess the project's outcomes and to identify findings and practices useful for other colleges seeking to improve their students' completion rates. Proposed funding to enhance colleges' data and evaluation infrastructures will both enable Completion Coaches to provide effective services and will generate valuable information for project

¹ Shapiro, Dundar, Yuan, Harrell, Wild, and Ziskin. (2014, July). *Some College, No Degree: A National View of Students with Some Enrollment, but No Completion* (Signature Report No. 7). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

evaluation. These enhancements will be standardized across participating colleges to enable comparison of their performance.

Project Need

By 2018, two in three jobs in Washington State are expected to require a postsecondary credential.² However, in recent years, community college completion rates have remained low and even declined slightly.³ The number of first-time, full-time students at Coalition member colleges who graduate within three years ranges from 25-61%, with a median completion rate of 26%. Nationally, only 23% of first-time, full-time community college students earn degrees within three years.⁴ Even if short-term certificates and university transfers without credentials are included, nearly half of community college students fail to complete their studies. Non-completers with some college education, but no credential, experience no real benefit in their wages or employability. The cost of subsidizing non-completers is the number one cause for taxpayers' low return on investment from funding community college attendance.⁵

Who are non-completers? Green River's institutional data⁶ demonstrates that non-completers are 7% more likely to be students of color and/or female. They are generally younger, compared to the overall student body. Over half of non-completers earn at least 90 credits. 76% percent of these credits are college-level and thus applicable toward completion.

The impact of low community college completion rates is disproportionately felt by low-income and underrepresented minority students. From 1992-2006, the proportion of community college students from the lowest two socioeconomic quartiles grew to outnumber the percentage of students from the highest two quartiles, reaching a 2:1 ratio today.⁷ During the same time period, minority attendance at community colleges grew from 27% to 42%, while remaining essentially flat at elite four-year universities.⁸

While the data characterize the diversity of potential completers and the need to tailor policies and practices for distinct subgroups of students, the largest proportion of these students were last enrolled in college before they turned 24. Data from the Road Map Project region underscores the need for institutional change in order to meet the Road Map Project's 2020 goal. E.g., 60% of the graduating class of 2012 enrolled in a two- or four-year college. Fewer than half (48%) persisted to their second year of college, a rate that has not changed over the past several years.⁹

² Washington Student Achievement Council, State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, & Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board. (2013, October). *A skilled and educated workforce: 2013 update*. Retrieved from <http://www.wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2013.11.16.Skills.Report.pdf>

³ Nodine, T., Venezia, A., & Bracco, K. (2011). *Changing course: A guide to increasing student completion in community colleges*. Retrieved from WestEd website: <http://www.wested.org/resources/changing-course-a-guide-to-increasing-student-completion-in-community-colleges/>

⁴ Klor de Alva, J., & Schneider, M. (2013, October). *What's the value of an associate's degree: The return on investment for graduates*. Retrieved from American Institutes for Research website: http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/Value_of_an_Associate_Degree_10.13.pdf

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ These data exclude international students and high school students in Running Start programs.

⁷ The Century Foundation Task Force on Preventing Community Colleges from Becoming Separate and Unequal. (2013, May). *Bridging the higher education divide: Strengthening community colleges and restoring the American dream*. New York, NY: The Century Foundation Press.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Road Map Project. (2013, December). *The Road Map Project: 2013 results report*. Retrieved from http://www.roadmapproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/2013-Results-Report_Reduced-File-Sz.pdf