

**Washington State Bridges to Opportunity Planning Grant  
Supported by the Ford Foundation**

**Community Focus Groups Summary  
September 2003**

**Kae R. Hutchison, Ph.D.**

---

**Background**

In March, 2003, five focus groups of representatives from community social service and educational agencies were held to provide input to the Washington State Bridges to Opportunity project, part of a national initiative supported by the Ford Foundation. The purpose was to gather feedback on a draft vision for service to low-income adults developed by the Washington State Bridges taskforce, and to identify barriers these participants saw their low-income clients experiencing when they attempt to use community and technical colleges to improve their life and work. The types of agencies invited included local offices of the Department of Social & Health Services (DSHS) and Employment Security, area K-12 districts, and county and community organizations (both public and faith-based) that cater to low-income clients, such as homeless shelters, domestic violence organizations, food banks, and the Salvation Army. (See Appendices for list of participating agencies, description of focus group process and draft vision.)

**Summary of Findings**

The participants of these five community groups believe that community colleges are a key resource for low-income people. They are pleased that the colleges are available as resources and frustrated because they feel there is much more that could be done, even within current resources.

The participants described a need for a much-improved financial aid system, including broader eligibility and more simple application and reporting processes. They expressed concern that some government agency policies, such as the WorkFirst emphasis on getting to work quickly, conflict with the goal of getting students the education they need for living-wage jobs.

Participants expressed concerns about the inadequate match between content and structuring of college offerings and the needs of low-income adults. The participants indicated that colleges should develop strong connections with employers in order to create realistic employment opportunities. They recommended a career ladder approach that allows students to take smaller, well-articulated steps towards higher-paying careers.

The participants reported that colleges need to create alternatives to their current once-a-quarter start, daily, daytime focus to create schedules that allow students to start more frequently during the year, to more easily work and attend school simultaneously and to minimize travel time and costs. Colleges should also seek funding that allows them to

---

schedule enough ESL to meet the community needs, which extend beyond current capacity.

The participants recommended that colleges better prepare high school counselors and community agency staff about the actual costs of going to college, and about the services and intake processes of the colleges, especially information about financial aid. They would like to see streamlined, easy-to-use college intake processes that accurately assess students' needs and prior learning, minimizing the coursework students need to take. The participants reported that some college staff and faculty treat low-income students less respectfully than other students and recommended that colleges seek ways to avoid stigmatizing low-income students.

The participants indicated that low-income students need a network of support that extends beyond the college, to ensure that personal needs such as child care, transportation and housing are met. They strongly encouraged colleges to work actively with community agencies to weave such a network, using the strengths of multiple organizations and avoiding duplication of services.

### **Focus Group Results**

There was considerable consistency in the barriers identified across all groups, as well as some difference in emphasis by community and also between the rural and urban groups. The responses were organized around the following themes for analysis:

- financial aid for students
- critical filter points (programs, scheduling & delivery, institutional access)
- student support (pre-college information, intake processes, college atmosphere, personal and family support)

#### Financial Aid for Students

Participants reported significant negative experiences with the current financial aid system. Their comments were focused on the students who pay tuition, as opposed to the students in Washington's community and technical colleges who are not required to pay tuition (primarily students in adult literacy courses). The participants' primary concern was eligibility rules that do not match the students who need aid. As examples, they cited restrictions that make it difficult to obtain financial aid for part-time students, students with families, young independent students, and students with substance abuse convictions.

Participants also reported that financial aid processes are unduly complex to navigate, making it difficult for students and for the social services agencies working with them to get the information they need. Participants felt that colleges should provide better information about the availability of financial support and the options for financial support.

Participants expressed a concern about the impact on students of the conflicting policies of different government agencies. Examples cited included welfare reform's focus on getting to work as quickly as possible versus the longer-term education required to obtain and hold living-wage jobs, and the welfare and financial aid regulations that make it difficult for low-income parents to attend school.

---

### Critical Filter Points: Programs, Scheduling & Delivery, Institutional Access

#### Programs

Participants were adamant about the need for colleges to partner with employers, in order to align programs with regional employment opportunities and to have program content that meets employer needs. They stated that basic work skills should be a component of all programs. Participants recommended that colleges develop a career ladder approach, allowing students to complete a piece at a time, beginning with short-term training options and including articulation to four-year degrees, making sure that students understand the full range of career possibilities when they begin.

#### Scheduling, Delivery and Institutional Access

The participants reported that colleges design schedules more to suit their own needs than those of clients. Participants expressed concern about two scheduling issues: frequency of entry points during the year and scheduling of courses during the day and week. They reported a need for more frequent entry options along with more open entry/exit programs, and shorter breaks between terms to improve continuity of learning. In regard to course scheduling during the week, participants stated that their clients would benefit from more evening and weekend classes, courses that meet fewer times in the week to reduce travel time, and more off-campus sites placed closer to where people live or work.

The participants reported that they see a gap between funding and need. Colleges receive insufficient funding to offer the number of sections needed in some high-demand occupational programs and in ESL.

### Student Support: General College Information, Intake Processes, College Atmosphere, Personal and Family Support

#### General College Information

Participants reported a general lack of knowledge in the community about the programs and resources available at community and technical colleges. They recommended that colleges collaborate with K-12 schools to reach students at a younger age and make sure that good information is available to counselors and students, in order to ensure that students understand the potential of college and also what they must do to be prepared for college-level work.

#### Intake Processes

Participants noted that the college entrance process is complex, fragmented and difficult for students to navigate. They expressed concern that students are not always appropriately assessed to ensure a good match with the programs they choose or have recommended to them. They also advised colleges to let the students' interests and abilities guide their program recommendations, rather than available seats.

---

### College Atmosphere

Participants reported that colleges, like much of society, tend to judge people based on their differences, including the difference of being poor. College staff are sometimes insensitive to ways in which they stigmatize those who are poor. As an example, they cited a financial aid office that is rude to welfare students. Participants described a need for college staff and faculty to be competently prepared to respond sensitively and respectfully to students with many types of differences, including economic background.

### Personal and Family Support

In addition to the financial and collegiate support needed by low-income students, participants noted several other areas of students' lives that need support in order for them to attend and to be able to focus on their studies. The most frequently cited need was for childcare, and a particular need was that childcare be available both during the times that students attend school and over breaks. Participants noted that students also have needs for:

- Transportation to get to college, especially in more rural areas
- Affordable housing
- A consistent person to guide them through the educational system ("mentor" or "navigator," college or external person)

These agencies recognized that colleges are not equipped to provide all of these types of services. The participants were anxious to partner with colleges, to identify the strengths and resources of each organization for better use of financial and human resources, and to better prepare their agency staff to guide current and potential students. They noted that many community organizations have strong links to low-income populations and can serve as a bridge to the colleges. Participants emphasized that college staff and faculty should be sufficiently trained to recognize the student's issues and to refer them to appropriate services when needed.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks go to the Ford Foundation for its support of the Washington Bridges to Opportunity Initiative, which provided the funding for this project. Thanks also to:

- Tomás Ybarra, for his assistance in conducting the focus groups;
  - College and community agency staff who helped identify participants;
  - The participants who shared their time and expertise;
  - Bridges taskforce members who helped review the data.
-

**Appendix A – Focus Group Participants**

Organization	Community
Casa Latina	Seattle
Casey Family Programs	Seattle
Central Area Motivation Program (CAMP)	Seattle
Employment Security/ WorkFirst	Seattle
Employment Security/ WorkSource	Bellevue, Seattle
HopeLink	Bellevue, Bothell
Literacy Council of Seattle	Seattle
Refugee Women's Alliance	Seattle
Sea-Mar Community Health Centers	Seattle
Welfare Rights Organizing Coalition	Seattle
Yesler Community Center	Seattle
YWCA of Seattle	Seattle
Ahana Business	Spokane
Avista Utilities	Spokane
Career Path Services	Spokane
Community Health Association of Spokane	Spokane
Department of Social & Health Services	Spokane
Eastern Washington Center for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing	Spokane
Educational Service District 101	Spokane
Employment Security/ WorkFirst	Spokane
Goodwill Industries	Spokane
HUD	Spokane
Humanix	Spokane
Spokane Housing Authority	Spokane
Spokane Neighborhood Action Program (SNAP)	Spokane (several area offices)
Spokane Regional Health District	Spokane County
TINCAN	Spokane
Volunteers of America	Spokane
YFA Connections	Spokane
Centro Latino	Tacoma
Eagle Lodge	Tacoma
Employment Readiness Program, U.S. Army, Ft. Lewis	Fort Lewis
Metropolitan Development Council	Tacoma
Pierce County Community Action	Olympia
Pierce County Employment Security/ WorkFirst	Tacoma
Tacoma Community House	Tacoma
Tacoma Housing Authority	Tacoma
Tacoma Pierce County Employment & Training Consortium	Tacoma
Tacoma Private Industry Council/ WorkSource	Tacoma
Tacoma School District	Tacoma
University of Washington Tacoma	Tacoma
Washington Women Education & Employment	Tacoma

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Community</b>
Community leader	Wapato
Grupo Mexico	Yakima
Hispanic Chamber	Yakima
Nuestra Casa	Sunnyside
OIC of Washington	Yakima
Providence Healthy Communities Alliance	Yakima
Rural Community Development Resources	Yakima
The Salvation Army	Grandview
Tri-County Workforce Development Council	Yakima
Triumph Treatment Services	Yakima
Wapato Gear Up (Higher Education Coordinating Board)	Wapato
Yakima Valley Farm Worker Clinic	Toppenish
Commissioner, Okanogan County	Okanogan
Dept. of Social & Health Services	Omak
Okanogan County Community Action	Okanogan
Okanogan County Housing Authority	Okanogan
Okanogan County WorkSource	Omak
Okanogan Family Planning	Okanogan
Omak School District/ Heritage College	Omak
Oroville School District	Oroville
The Support Center	Omak
Tonasket School District	Tonasket

---

## **Appendix B Community Focus Group Process**

Focus group representatives were identified by contacting the area community college(s), city governments and agencies. Area contacts were told the reason for the meeting and asked to supply the names and phone numbers of people in agencies serving low-income clients who would have knowledge of the experience of people seeking college services. Community college representatives were not included as participants although in some cases, a local college employee who was on the taskforce was present as an observer.

Each group met for one and a half hours over a working lunch or refreshments. Following a brief overview of the project and why they were asked to participate, they worked in a combination of small and large groups to identify barriers faced by students as they access, take classes, change programs and exit community colleges, as well as the barriers that prevent people from coming at all. Secondly, they provided feedback on a list of vision themes developed by the statewide taskforce guiding the project.

Three of the focus groups were held in the urban centers of Seattle, Tacoma and Spokane. Two pulled representatives from more rural areas of the state: one in the semi-rural area of Yakima, with representatives from both Yakima and the smaller towns in the Yakima Valley; the other in the rural community of Omak.

After all focus groups were concluded, the Bridges taskforce was provided a copy of the comments from all groups, organized by theme and by focus group, so that similarities and differences between focus groups could be seen. Review of these data informed the final vision statement drafted by the taskforce and the policies it identified as representing key barriers for low-income students.

---

**Appendix B: Sample Community Meeting Agenda**

**Remember sign-in sheets**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Activity</b>
11:30	Gather, pick up lunch and get seated (start overview at 11:40)
11:40	Welcome/ Review agenda – 10 min Brief overview The challenge The charge Activities so far Activities coming How today fits in
11:50	Introductions – 20 min. Name, organization, role
12:10	Barriers – 20 min Work in same groups of 4-5 (get desserts on way to group) Identify barriers Faced by students as they come, take classes, leave Faced by students as they move from one program to another Things that prevent people from coming at all
12:30	Report out (20 min) Collect barriers (one per group, round robin)
12:50	Feedback on vision themes - 15 min  Work in groups of 4-5 (26 people in 6-7 groups, no two from same organization) Answer: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Are these the right things?</li> <li>▪ What are we missing?</li> <li>▪ Your top two priorities</li> </ul>
1:05	Report out – 10 min (5 groups, 2 min each) A. Wrong things, Missing things (catch on flip chart) B. Top priorities (tally on flip chart or overhead)  Summarize – 5 min
1:20	Summary of day's work Next steps/followup

## **Appendix B System Vision for Low-Income Adults**

### **Draft 1 Vision Themes**

1. Help low-income adults make maximal use of education and training, in particular the community and technical colleges, to move from poverty to self-sufficiency and full participation in society
    - Identify this as key mission
    - Build services around this population and goal, with low-income students as “norm” not exception
  2. Make whole institution responsible, not just segments of it
    - Reduce silo mentalities, increase knowledge & collaboration
  3. Long-term focus – education over a lifetime, at many stages
    - Career ladder approach, with expectation of combining and interspersing employment and education
    - Create career ladders within key programs and between levels of education (ESL to Basic Skills to Developmental to Prof/Tech and/or Transfer)
    - Raise aspirations; help people learn about pathways and next steps
    - Educate leaders & funders about need for continuing access, and access of sufficient length to achieve education that helps people sustain higher wages
  4. Address all student needs including financial support, childcare and transportation (perhaps through partners, but ensure all support is there)
    - Pooled financial aid from different sources, invisible to student
    - Be sure financial support is sufficient (replace lost wages, adequate subsistence)
    - Remove systemic barriers that prevent/punish people from helping themselves
  5. Stabilize, streamline and coordinate funding streams and accountabilities
    - Make sure accountabilities drive the behaviors we want
    - State Board for Community & Technical College (SBCTC) channeled funds & accountabilities should work together
    - Emphasize long-term funding commitment to sustain programs rather than short-term pilot projects that disappear when special funding leaves
  6. Focus on educational models that capture and sustain student interest
    - Engaging content and methodology
    - Strong retention efforts in beginning (1<sup>st</sup> two quarters)
    - Focus on quality of service, not quantity (increased face-to-face services)
  7. Make sure our institutions are welcoming
    - Culturally competent faculty and staff
    - Be sure low-income people are culturally respected and not treated differently
  8. Don't try to do it all---or all at once
    - Build good partnerships with agencies & CBO's to meet non-educational needs
    - Work for small wins
    - Stay the course, over years if necessary
-