

**Formative Evaluation of the  
Student Achievement Initiative “Learning Year”**

**Report to the  
Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges  
and  
College Spark Washington**

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Launch of the Student Achievement Initiative**

In September 2007, the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) officially launched the Student Achievement Initiative, a system-wide policy to reward colleges for improvements in student achievement. Developed by a task force comprised of State Board members, college trustees, presidents, and faculty representatives, the policy emphasizes three overarching principles: 1) the initiative should lead to improved educational attainments for students and, in particular, should be aimed at boosting those educational attainments shown by research to be correlated with the earning of higher future wages by students; 2) the initiative should allow colleges sufficient flexibility to improve student achievement according to their local needs; 3) the initiative should result in the identification and implementation of successful practices to improve student achievement system-wide.

Under the initiative, Washington's community and technical colleges will receive financial rewards for increasing the rate at which they accrue "achievement points." Achievement points are generated when students achieve key attainments in four categories. Colleges earn points when students 1) achieve gains in adult basic skills and pre-college remedial courses; 2) complete a college-level math course; 3) earn college credits; or 4) complete a certificate, degree, or apprenticeship training program.

The SBCTC staff chose the 2006-07 academic year as the baseline year for measuring the performance of colleges using the achievement point categories. The first "performance year" will be the 2008-09 academic year. In that year and in subsequent years, the performance of colleges will be assessed by comparing the total number of achievement points they generate in a given year with their baseline year point totals. The State Board is requesting \$7 million from the legislature for the initiative during the 2009-11 biennium.

The State Board designated the 2007-08 academic year as the initiative's "learning year." The learning year was designed to enable colleges to better understand their performance across the achievement point categories and to begin developing strategies for improving student attainments in achievement point categories. Each of the state's 34 community and technical colleges received an allocation of approximately \$51,000 in fall 2007 as start-up funding. Throughout the learning year, the State Board staff sought to raise awareness and understanding of the initiative, help colleges learn how to use data on their achievement point performance to identify areas for improvement, and promote sharing of student success strategies across campuses.

## The Initiative in Comparative Context

Performance funding assumes that financial rewards will serve to change institutional behavior. By choosing measures to gauge college performance, policymakers can both motivate colleges to improve their performance and encourage them to prioritize their efforts according to particular goals or outcomes.

In 1978 Tennessee was the first state to adopt a set of performance measures that specifically provided higher education institutions with financial incentives for improving student outcomes. Higher education performance funding reached peak popularity in 2001, when 19 states had implemented such policies. Several other states have experimented with performance funding over the years, but most now have performance reporting without attaching funds. It should be noted that more than a decade ago Washington State implemented a short-lived performance funding system for the postsecondary sector, which had minimal input or buy-in from the state's colleges and universities.

Although the present initiative for Washington State community and technical college shares some important characteristics with earlier performance funding efforts that have taken place across the country, it also has some distinctive features. These include the following:

- Rather than using a set of performance measures dictated by legislation or external policymakers, the initiative's measures were recommended by a diverse task force of college representatives and were informed by research (conducted by the SBCTC and the Community College Research Center) on student progression that sought to identify key educational attainments associated with the increased probability of college and labor market success.
- By rewarding colleges for increasing the rate of *intermediate* educational attainments (in addition to completing credentials) in a broad continuum of mission areas, including adult basic skills and college remedial education, the initiative seeks to focus colleges' attention on the progression of all students, regardless of where they begin.
- Unlike measures such as job placement rates, which are dependent on the economy and other factors, the task force chose performance measures that were more likely to be within a college's control.
- The achievement point data supplied to the colleges is intended to enable them not only to measure their performance, but to identify areas for improvement and success and to evaluate the effectiveness of efforts made to improve student success.
- Colleges are not compared with one another to earn financial rewards, but rather are measured against their own historical performance.

The Washington State Board's efforts to design a set of student-focused performance indicators for community colleges has generated substantial interest from other states. The success or failure of the Student Achievement Initiative to support improved student outcomes will be watched closely.

## **Formative Evaluation: Scope and Methods**

Researchers from the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College, Columbia University, conducted an independent qualitative review of the Student Achievement Initiative during the 2007-08 learning year. The purpose of this formative evaluation was to assess the extent of awareness and understanding of the initiative among college personnel, examine the initial responses to it by the colleges, and identify opportunities for and potential barriers to the further development of the initiative.

The CCRC research team conducted extensive interviews with college personnel through site visits to eight colleges during spring 2008 and conducted phone interviews with college personnel at an additional nine colleges through September 2008. The research team interviewed college trustees, presidents, vice presidents of instruction and student services, institutional research personnel, faculty, and student services staff. In all, we interviewed over 240 individuals connected with the 17 colleges.

A second round of in-person and telephone interviews was conducted by CCRC in early fall 2008 with key internal and external stakeholders and with policymakers to better understand the policy context within which the Student Achievement Initiative was conceived and is now being implemented. Among those interviewed were members of the State Board, executive staff from the SBCTC, staff and board members from the Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, a senior analyst from the governor's Government Management Accountability and Performance (GMAP) office, and a state senator who has been a leader in issues related to higher education accountability.

## **Formative Evaluation: Summary of Findings**

- *Colleges strongly supported the initiative's goals and the principles of the achievement point framework*

Among those we interviewed at 17 of the state's 34 community and technical colleges, there was widespread support for the initiative's goal of focusing attention and resources on helping all students, including those who start in basic skills and college remedial programs, to successfully progress through their educational programs. There was also strong support for the focus on increasing student progression across intermediate levels of achievement. The faculty, student support staff, and administrators we interviewed generally agreed that this incremental progression framework is much more relevant to their work with students than accountability measures the state has used in the past, which were based primarily on final outcomes. Virtually everyone who was familiar with the research the State Board staff conducted to inform the development of the overall framework and the specific performance measures had high regard for it.

- *Awareness of the initiative was limited among the colleges' rank and file*

While State Board staff did much to try to build awareness of the initiative among the colleges, at the colleges in this study familiarity with the initiative is mostly limited to college leadership, senior administrators, and a small number of college personnel involved in initiative efforts at the colleges.

Several colleges were waiting for a better understanding of their performance on the complete 2007-08 data before expanding communication about the initiative to faculty and staff. Senior administrators at several colleges said that, having had to respond to numerous State Board initiatives in recent years, they are reluctant to engage campus-wide constituencies in another external directive until they are assured it is likely to gain support from the state legislature.

The lack of awareness and clarity about the initiative should not be too surprising, however. The initiative was developed and is being implemented on a relatively short timeline, and the colleges were still in the first "learning year" of the initiative during our interviews. Still, college personnel at several colleges suggested that clear and transparent communication about the initiative would allay some of the uncertainty and anxiety surrounding the effort and help build support for it.

- *Colleges grappled with their performance data throughout the learning year*

There was considerable uncertainty among the colleges about exactly how student progression is measured using the achievement point framework. Most colleges struggled throughout the learning year to understand the details of the performance measures. At the time of our interviews, most colleges were still in the process of understanding how their baseline year achievement point totals were calculated. The lack of institutional research capacity hampered several colleges' ability to analyze the data for a more thorough understanding of their college's performance. Even colleges with greater IR capacity were having difficulty making sense of the data and figuring out how to use the information to monitor student progression and evaluate efforts to improve student outcomes.

- *Most colleges had not yet used an analysis of their performance data to plan new strategies to improve student achievement*

Because of these difficulties with the achievement point data, most colleges had not begun to use the Student Achievement Initiative database to develop strategies for increasing student success. Only a handful was planning new strategies to improve their achievement point performance. Most were relying instead on student success activities previously in place at their colleges. While college personnel were optimistic that these existing activities would help to increase student attainment of achievement points, most such efforts were small in scale. College leaders have not yet engaged faculty and staff to figure out what changes in policy and practices are needed to increase the rate at which students attain achievement points on a substantial scale.

- *At many colleges, student services staff led efforts in response to the initiative*

Many interviewees we spoke to could not, or at least did not, distinguish between ongoing efforts to support student retention and success at their college and activities planned in response to the Student Achievement Initiative. At least half of the colleges in our study gave primary responsibility for responding to the initiative to their student services division. One reason is that at most of the colleges where we conducted interviews, student services divisions have primary responsibility for efforts to improve student retention and success, so it made sense for them to take the lead on this new effort. Student services personnel were enthusiastic about what they saw as an increased emphasis on student persistence by their colleges. Most indicated that their existing student retention efforts would help to improve their college's performance on the achievement point measures of the Student Achievement Initiative.

- *Several colleges focused their initial efforts on basic skills and developmental education*

Several colleges focused their initial work on the initiative on basic skills and developmental education. There were several reasons for this. First, actions of the SBCTC staff responsible for basic skills helped raise awareness of the initiative among basic skills programs directors. Second, there was a widespread perception that colleges could earn more points in the basic skills achievement category than in those related to passing college-level math, completing college credits, or earning credentials. Third, most of the colleges had begun efforts to improve outcomes in basic skills and developmental education before the advent of the Student Achievement Initiative. Interviewees said that the initiative provided additional incentive to strengthen those efforts. College administrators said that there has been a growing recognition in recent years that too few students progress through the various levels of basic skills or developmental education to advance to college-level coursework. And finally, persons involved with basic skills programs were often perceived to be more receptive to the initiative because they are accustomed to being held accountable for student performance. Basic skills directors and instructors at several colleges suggested that existing state and federal performance requirements had given them experience in tracking the progress and outcomes of their students.

- *Some colleges were planning to implement measures with a likely one-time effect*

Some colleges were planning to implement measures that would likely have a one-time effect on increasing achievement point attainments by their students. Among the approaches proposed were these: conducting "degree audits" or transcript reviews to identify students who achieved the required credits for a certificate or degree but never received one; eliminating certificate or diploma fees and creating academic certificate programs; documenting more rigorously CASAS testing results for basic skills students; and increasing credit requirements for certain shorter occupational certificate programs so they will qualify for achievement points.

- *Several colleges were beginning to link the initiative to strategic planning and accreditation activities.*

Some college administrators were beginning to align the initiative's performance measures with their strategic planning and re-accreditation activities. Six colleges had begun early efforts to



incorporate the initiative into their internal strategic planning processes. College personnel at at least eight colleges discussed how the initiative's focus on documented student progression supported their institution's re-accreditation efforts.

- ***Colleges were concerned that use of the achievement point framework and the incentive funding model may produce unintended effects and place some colleges at a disadvantage***

While there was general support for the principles of the initiative's achievement point framework and the model for rewarding achievement point gains, many interviewees voiced a number of concerns. Some interviewees felt that, in practice, their use might unintentionally alter their college's priorities. For example, some faculty and administrators from career-technical and academic transfer programs expressed concern that the initiative's heavy focus on basic skills and lack of performance measures for job placements and baccalaureate transfers could draw resources away from their areas.

Interviewees frequently suggested that use of the framework and the incentive model might disadvantage certain kinds of colleges, including 1) institutions with a strong academic transfer mission, because the potential for generating the most achievement points is found in the basic skills area; 2) institutions without capacity for significant enrollment growth, because colleges generally might be able to accrue achievement points by increasing enrollments rather than by improving rates of student progression; 3) high performing colleges, which may have less room to improve; and 4) institutions serving a high proportion of disadvantaged students, because it would be difficult for such institutions, who need to provide lots of costly wrap-around services, to earn as many points as colleges with easier-to-serve students.

Some colleges were also anxious about how their performance would compare to other colleges (apart from the issue of funding). Concerns were also raised about the potential for "gaming" the system (by, for example, focusing efforts on increased enrollment rather than improved student progression). Interviewees at five colleges noted that, in practice, incentive funding could lead to a lowering of academic standards, and a few interviewees felt that its use could discourage colleges from sharing effective practices.

- ***College presidents emphasized that, in order to be effective in improving college performance, the initiative must bring new funding to colleges, over and above base budget funding***

The potential of significant funding tied to institutional performance has generated concern and anxiety across the colleges, particularly among presidents. Most presidents we interviewed seem to agree that the amount currently being sought by the State Board from the legislature — \$7 million for the biennium, or about \$100,000 per year per college — is large enough to motivate colleges to make changes in the way they operate, particularly because the funds would be added to their base budgets. Presidents we interviewed were unanimous in the view that to be effective in improving college performance, the initiative must bring new funding to the table over and above base budget funding. College leaders feared a situation where there would be no new funds to support performance funding and that colleges would instead be forced to earn some portion of their base budget funding based on the achievement point measures. Presidents argued

that this would lead to unhealthy competition among the colleges and would significantly reduce support for the initiative from the colleges. Although there were exceptions, most state-level observers we interviewed seemed to agree that funding above and beyond the base budget funding is essential for the initiative to be effective and sustainable.

- *While state policymakers indicated strong support for the initiative’s model of performance accountability and improvement, there is limited awareness of the initiative and no strong champions for it among state legislators. The looming fiscal crisis further threatens the SBCTC’s legislative request for new funding to support the initiative.*

The state-level stakeholders we interviewed were very enthusiastic about the initiative’s performance measurement model. Indeed, there are strong synergies between the initiative and the governor’s push for more outcome-oriented and accountable state programs. Because accountability pressures across state agencies are not likely to abate, state-level policymakers felt that the Student Achievement Initiative could give the community and technical colleges an advantage as they compete with other sectors for scarce state resources.

The Higher Education Coordinating Board seems committed to advocating with the legislature for the SBCTC’s request for new funding to support the initiative. However, state-level stakeholders indicated that the initiative is not well known and lacks strong champions among legislators.

The State Board’s request to the legislature is threatened by the looming fiscal crisis facing Washington State and the country more generally. A decision by the legislature not to fully fund the initiative could affect future college support. At this point, however, the State Board seems intent on moving ahead with the request.

## **Conclusion**

The State Board developed a performance measurement system as a practical means of encouraging Washington State community and technical colleges to improve their outcomes over time toward system goals and demonstrating the efficient use of public resources with more attention paid to data and accountability. The Board realized that buy-in from the colleges themselves was essential to such a plan.

The evaluation we carried out during the initiative’s “learning year” shows that there is strong support among the colleges for the initiative’s goals and for the principles behind the initiative’s performance measurement model. Yet awareness of and knowledge about the initiative is still weak among many of the rank and file at most colleges. This should not be too surprising, however, given that the initiative is new and still evolving. Likewise, the problems that colleges are experiencing in understanding and using the performance data from the initiative database are not necessarily unexpected. Nevertheless, the need for greater clarity about the database will have to be addressed before the data will be disseminated to wider audiences within colleges and used extensively to identify strategies for improving student success.

While the colleges show general support for the initiative, they are concerned that in practice it may produce unintended consequences in the way that colleges respond to it. Furthermore, there is a general concern that some colleges may be placed at a disadvantage by the achievement point measures. And college presidents in particular are concerned that funds that colleges will receive for improved performance may be taken from their base budget funding.

This fall the State Board plans to move forward with its request to the legislature for new funding for the initiative, but the Student Achievement Initiative is not well-known among state legislators. What is more, the state faces a looming budget crisis. This increases the importance for the State Board to develop a clear and compelling message and a strategic communications plan to educate policy makers about the initiative and its potential benefits for students and the state.

While legislators may not support the initiative at the level requested by the State Board, they might be willing to provide more modest funding and allow the Board to extend the learning period for the initiative through the biennium as the state weathers the economic downturn. Given the fact that colleges are just beginning to analyze their data and consider changes in practices that would improve student achievement, extending the learning period would give the Board and the colleges a chance to deepen awareness and support of the initiative among faculty and staff, use the data to identify areas of weakness, and implement and evaluate strategies for improving student achievement. This would also increase the opportunity to examine to what extent and in what ways colleges change their practices in response to the initiative. Finally, given the widespread interest in the initiative by other states and funders nationally, the State Board may well be able to raise private foundation funds to supplement state funding of the initiative during such a period of further experimentation and evaluation.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

### A. The Student Achievement Initiative

In 2006, the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) directed its staff to develop a proposal for a system-wide policy to reward colleges for improvements in student achievement. In response, the SBCTC staff convened a policy task force comprised of State Board members, college trustees, presidents, and faculty representatives. The task force was charged with developing the principles and goals of the policy and for recommending a design to the State Board. The task force solicited feedback from college personnel at the 34 community and technical colleges across the state and received advice from national higher education experts on measuring student achievement, designing funding incentives, and sustaining performance funding. A system-wide advisory committee comprised of representatives from each of the community and technical college commissions and councils assisted in the design of the performance measures and provided input to the task force.

In September 2007, the SBCTC officially adopted the task force's proposal and launched the Student Achievement Initiative (Resolution 07-09-29). The policy outlined in the task force's proposal and adopted by the State Board included three overarching principles:

- The initiative should lead to improved educational attainment for students; the specific goal should be for students to reach the “tipping point”<sup>1</sup> and beyond.
- The initiative should allow colleges sufficient flexibility to improve student achievement according to their local needs.
- The initiative should result in the identification and implementation of successful practices to improve student achievement system-wide.

Under the new initiative, Washington's community and technical colleges will receive financial rewards for increasing the rate at which their students attain “achievement points”<sup>2</sup> in four categories. Colleges accrue points when students: 1) achieve gains in adult basic skills and pre-college remedial courses; 2) complete a college-level math course; 3) earn college credits; and 4) complete a certificate, degree, or apprenticeship training program.<sup>3</sup>

The SBCTC staff chose the 2006-07 academic year as the baseline year for measuring the performance of colleges using the achievement point categories. The first “performance year”

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<sup>1</sup> This term refers to a 2005 State Board study that found that, five years after they first enrolled, community college students who reached the “tipping point” of at least two semesters of credits and a credential earned had substantially higher earnings than did students who did not make it that far. David Prince of the State Board and Davis Jenkins of the CCRC co-authored the study, which can be downloaded at: <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?uid=288>.

<sup>2</sup> The SBCTC staff changed the terminology from “momentum points” to “achievement points” in spring 2008.

<sup>3</sup> The Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College, Columbia University assisted the State Board research staff to empirically test the achievement point measures.

will be the 2008-09 academic year. In that year and in subsequent years, the performance of colleges will be assessed by comparing the total number of achievement points they generate in a given year with their baseline year point totals. The State Board set aside \$500,000 to be allocated to colleges in October 2009 for performance improvements in the 2008-09 academic year, with the funds to become part of the colleges' base budgets. The State Board is requesting \$7 million from the legislature for the initiative during the 2009-11 biennium.

The State Board designated the 2007-08 academic year as a "learning year." The learning year was designed to enable colleges to better understand their performance across the achievement point categories and begin developing strategies for improving student attainment of achievement points. Each of the state's 34 community and technical colleges received an allocation of approximately \$51,000 in fall 2007 as start-up funding. Throughout the learning year, the State Board staff sought to raise awareness and understanding of the initiative, help colleges learn how to use data on their achievement point performance to identify areas for improvement, and promote sharing of student success strategies across campuses.

## **B. Formative Evaluation of the Student Achievement Initiative "Learning Year"**

This report presents findings from an independent qualitative review of the Student Achievement Initiative conducted by the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College, Columbia University, during the 2007-08 learning year.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this formative evaluation was to assess the extent of awareness and understanding of the initiative among college personnel, examine the initial responses to it by the colleges, and identify opportunities for and potential barriers to the further development of the initiative. Funding for this work was provided by College Spark Washington and by the Ford Foundation as part of the Bridges to Opportunity initiative and Lumina Foundation for Education as part of Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count.

The CCRC research team conducted extensive interviews with college personnel through site visits to eight colleges during spring 2008 and conducted phone interviews with college personnel at an additional nine colleges through September 2008. These colleges were chosen to provide balanced representation of Washington State community and technical colleges in terms of size, urbanicity, and region of the state. The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol to ensure that similar questions were asked at every college. The team interviewed persons in comparable positions at the colleges, including college trustees, presidents, vice presidents of instruction and student services, institutional research personnel, faculty, and student services staff. On-site and telephone interviews were conducted either individually or in small groups and lasted approximately one hour. In all, we interviewed over 240 individuals connected with the 17 colleges. Respondents were assured that their comments would be kept confidential.

A second round of in-person and telephone interviews was conducted by CCRC in early fall 2008 with key internal and external stakeholders and with policymakers to better understand the policy context within which the Student Achievement Initiative was conceived and is now being

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<sup>4</sup> CCRC is also planning to conduct a quantitative analysis of the initiative's impact and effectiveness over the next four years.

implemented. Among those interviewed were members of the State Board, executive staff from the SBCTC, staff and board members from the Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, a senior analyst from the governor’s Government Management Accountability and Performance (GMAP) office, and a state senator who has been a leader in issues related to higher education accountability.

### **C. Organization of the Report**

This report presents findings and themes that have emerged through an analysis of data from the interviews with college personnel, policymakers, and other stakeholders. The report is organized as follows. Chapter 2 describes the policy context in which the Student Achievement Initiative was conceived and examines how the initiative is different from higher education performance funding schemes adopted in other states. Chapter 3 describes how college personnel were informed about the initiative, their level of understanding of it, and what they saw as its origins and purposes. Chapter 4 examines how the colleges organized their early efforts to implement the initiative during the learning year. Chapter 5 examines the views of college personnel on the initiative’s performance measurement model. Chapter 6 examines how college personnel viewed the initiative’s approach to incentive funding. Chapter 7 describes the views of higher education policymakers on the initiative as a whole. Chapter 8 presents our conclusions based on the findings and an assessment of the prospects for the future development of the initiative.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Background: The Policy Context for the Initiative**

This chapter explores the policy context in which the Student Achievement Initiative was conceived.

#### **A. Performance Funding: A Tool to Ensure Responsiveness to State Priorities**

Nationwide, state higher education policymakers concerned with improving educational outcomes for students are usually eager to find ways to hold colleges and universities accountable for student success and improving their performance over time. Yet, whether elected legislators or appointed state board members, policymakers have few levers they can use to influence institutional behaviors. Regulation and finance are the main tools they have at their disposal to shape how public colleges and universities respond to pressing state priorities. Linking institutional funding to policy goals through performance funding is one specific way that policymakers have sought to induce colleges to improve outcomes.

Performance funding assumes that financial rewards will serve to change institutional behavior. By choosing measures to gauge college performance, policymakers can both motivate colleges to improve their performance and encourage them to prioritize their efforts according to particular goals or outcomes.

In 1978 Tennessee was the first state to adopt a set of performance measures that specifically provided higher education institutions with financial incentives for improving student outcomes. Higher education performance funding reached peak popularity in 2001, when 19 states had implemented such policies. Several other states have experimented with performance funding over the years, but most now have performance reporting without attaching funds.

A review of the research literature reveals the following lessons learned from states that have experimented with performance funding for colleges and universities.

- Performance measures should reflect state priorities; at the same time, they should be designed to accommodate the multiple missions of higher education institutions.
- Performance funding should be sufficient to encourage institutions to improve, but not so much that it leads to budget instability.
- Funding should be stable and predictable — frequently changing funding levels hampers colleges' ability to do budget planning and can erode their support over time.
- Colleges prefer that performance funding come from “new money” over and above base budget funds; yet a separate performance fund budget item is susceptible to cuts when state budgets are tight.

- States should avoid a “zero-sum game” situation where colleges compete with one another for a fixed amount of funds and where one college can lose funding to others.
- Colleges should be allowed to use performance funds as they see fit to improve student outcomes; putting “strings” on such funding can have unexpected consequences.
- Higher education policymakers should involve educators in defining performance measures.
- Performance incentive programs should be routinely reviewed to ensure that success is continually redefined as the state’s needs change.

Research has thus far failed to provide definitive evidence that performance funding actually leads to improved institutional performance and improved student outcomes. One reason for this is that it is difficult to isolate the effects of specific policies on the performance of large and complex systems. Another reason is that in many states short attention spans on the part of a changing political leadership result in performance funding policies that are not in place long enough to demonstrate any lasting effects.

## **B. Past Experience with Performance Funding in Washington**

The current Student Achievement Initiative is not the first effort on the part of Washington State policymakers to tie institutional funding more closely to outcomes. More than a decade ago a postsecondary performance funding system was championed by the Republican chair of the House Appropriations Committee in the legislature. According to higher education leaders who were in key roles at the time, the system was punitive, with institutions facing one percent budget cuts if they did not meet performance measures developed with minimal input or buy-in from the state’s colleges and universities. Republicans lost control of the legislature in the next election, and when the new Democratic leadership showed no interest, performance funding was abandoned.

The demise of that earlier performance funding initiative did not mean that policymakers in the state had abandoned their interests in accountability, however. Upon her election in 2004, Washington Governor Chris Gregoire established the Government Management Accountability and Performance (GMAP) program. According to its website,<sup>5</sup> the office was created “because the governor believes ‘It’s not enough just to set priorities.’ Every state agency, every program, and every employee must be accountable for producing results citizens expect. That’s why she is changing the culture of state government from one that focuses on programs and processes, to one that regularly measures results, improves performance, and identifies and solves problems.”

Legislative leaders have also proposed a series of performance reporting systems that encourage higher education institutions to be more accountable for addressing state priorities. Washington’s community and technical colleges are currently required to report their performance on measures including job placement and baccalaureate transfer rates. A key Democratic legislator we

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.accountability.wa.gov/>



interviewed observed, “It’s important to measure accomplishments rather than efforts. How we do business in government now is a measure of effort, but the issue is not effort but results!”

### **C. Origins of the Student Achievement Initiative**

The current Student Achievement Initiative grew out of the involvement of the SBCTC in the Ford Foundation-funded Bridges to Opportunity Initiative, an effort involving Washington and five other states, the aim of which is to promote state policies that improve outcomes for underprepared adult students. Under the Bridges initiative, the Washington community and technical college system became increasingly focused on how to improve colleges’ capacity to serve underprepared students.

In early 2006, as a result of a shift in their leadership, the State Board members launched a process of developing a new strategic plan for the system. As part of the Board’s discussions on strategic directions, there were substantial debates about the Board’s role generally within the system, and specifically about how it might promote improved institutional effectiveness over time. Recognizing that budget policy is the State Board’s main source of leverage with the colleges, members reasoned that if they wanted to improve colleges’ efficiency and effectiveness, this could best be accomplished by changing the incentives that exist in the budget process. The link between finance and educational practice often gets lost in the desire of state policymakers to respect local control and the role of institutional trustees who have the responsibility to ensure that the colleges they represent are meeting the educational needs of their communities. But the Board also believed that it had a responsibility to ensure that the colleges improve their outcomes over time, demonstrating the efficient use of public resources with more attention paid to documenting outcomes and performance improvements.

For one State Board member, it came down to pushing back against the fixation on counting FTEs (full-time equivalents), a measure of the numbers of students enrolling, and instead focusing more attention on how many students were finishing and meeting their educational goals.

We would go through FTE allocation formulas, and I thought it was disingenuous. Yes, it’s easy to count, easy to tell one story to the legislature for finance, and a wonderful marketing device. But it’s disingenuous if we don’t look at quality and whether people can meet their goals and objectives at our institutions. For me, it’s more important to have achieving schools rather than FTE-driven schools. At some point you have to have a more articulated game plan with the outcome being student achievement.

Under the leadership of newly hired SBCTC executive director Charlie Earl, subsequent staff discussions on issues raised by the Board led to the conclusion on the part of the SBCTC leadership that what was needed conceptually was “something grand that would focus on student achievement and that would incorporate a measurement system with built-in incentives for colleges.” The staff also acknowledged that it is difficult to change institutional behaviors and that to influence college outcomes, enough money needed to be on the table to get the attention of college leaders.

## D. Distinctive Features of the Initiative

Although the Student Achievement Initiative of the Washington community and technical college system shares some important characteristics with earlier performance funding efforts across the country, it also has some distinctive features. These include the following:

- Rather than a set of performance measures dictated by legislation or external policymakers, the initiative's measures were recommended by a task force of State Board members, college presidents and trustees and faculty union leaders, and reviewed by an advisory group broadly representative of the states community and technical colleges and functional areas within these colleges.
- The selection of performance measures by the task force was informed by research on student progression patterns conducted by the SBCTC staff and the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College, Columbia University, which sought to identify "leakage points" where students in different types of programs tend to struggle as well as "achievement points" associated with an increased probability of success for students who attain them.<sup>6</sup>
- The initiative's achievement point measures reflect the broad continuum of mission areas within the community college system, including a strong emphasis on achievement at the adult basic skills and college remedial (or "developmental") levels.
- By rewarding colleges for increasing the rate of intermediate educational attainments by students starting at all program levels, including the most basic ones, the initiative seeks to focus colleges' attention on student progression and to encourage them to adopt policies and practices that increase and accelerate the rate at which all students move toward program completion, regardless of where they begin.
- The achievement point data supplied to the colleges is intended to enable them not only to measure their performance, but to identify areas for improvement and success and evaluate the effectiveness of efforts to improve student progression. Thus, the achievement point framework is designed as a tool colleges can use for performance improvement, not just for accountability.
- Whereas other state performance systems report on outcomes annually, the State Board staff provides colleges with quarterly data on their achievement point performance, so that colleges can monitor their progress throughout the year and get quicker feedback on the impact of changes in policy and practice.

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<sup>6</sup> For details on the background research by CCRC, see D. Timothy Leinbach and Davis Jenkins, *Using longitudinal data to increase community college student success: A guide to measuring milestone and momentum point attainment*, CCRC Research Tools No. 2 (New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University), January 2008, which can be downloaded at: <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?uid=570>.

- The task force chose to focus on measures that were more likely to be within a college's control, as opposed to measures such as job placement rates, which are subject to economic changes, and baccalaureate transfer rates, which depend on student choices and other factors community and technical colleges cannot influence.
- Colleges have considerable flexibility in where to focus their student achievement improvement efforts.
- Colleges do not compete with on another for performance funds, but rather are measured against their own historical performance.
- Funds generated through improved performance are intended to be added to colleges' base budget funding so that program innovations can be sustained over time.

Many states use non-recurring, one-time revenue streams to support their performance funding models. The Washington State Board is seeking to convince the legislature to provide recurring funding for the initiative on a scale that will provide sufficient incentive for colleges to change.

The Washington State Board's efforts to design a set of student-focused performance indicators for community colleges has generated substantial interest from other states. The success or failure of the Student Achievement Initiative to support improved student outcomes will be watched closely.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Colleges' Awareness and Understanding of the Initiative**

This chapter describes how college personnel were informed about the initiative, their level of understanding of it, and what they saw as its origins and goals.

#### **A. How College Personnel Learned About the Initiative**

##### ***Student Achievement Initiative policy task force and advisory committee***

As mentioned, the State Board staff solicited input on the design of the initiative through both a policy task force made up of college presidents, trustees, and faculty leaders as well as a 33-member advisory committee comprised of representatives from a broad range of functional areas at the colleges. Both the task force and the advisory committee members served to channel information about the initiative back to campus constituencies.

##### ***Research reports on the use of the initiative database***

In September 2007, SBCTC staff distributed an overview of the initiative with data and analysis of the achievement points generated by each college during the 2006-07 baseline year.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the 2007-08 learning year, SBCTC research staff provided colleges with quarterly reports on the number of achievement points attained by each college's current students compared to the baseline year. The SBCTC staff also released three additional research reports analyzing achievement point attainment patterns by basic skills students,<sup>8</sup> transfer students,<sup>9</sup> and students who received Opportunity Grant financial aid,<sup>10</sup> respectively. The reports were intended to provide guidance to the colleges on strategies for analyzing their own data and for assessing the effects on student achievement of particular programs and policies. Our interviews suggest, however, that while some senior administrators and institutional researchers had seen these research reports, they were not widely known or read by college personnel more generally.

##### ***ITV meetings***

The State Board staff organized a series of four statewide ITV, or interactive television, sessions on the initiative during the 2007-08 learning year. The purpose of these sessions was to inform the colleges about the use of the initiative's database and to facilitate sharing of strategies colleges were using, or planning to use, to increase student achievement. The ITV sessions also gave colleges a chance to bring together a group of college personnel to begin sharing student success strategies. Teams from all 34 colleges participated in these session.

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<sup>7</sup> *Meeting Washington State's Needs for an Educated Citizenry and Vital Economy: An Initiative for Measuring Colleges and Awarding Funds for Improving Student Achievement*, (SBCTC Research Report No. 07-1).

<sup>8</sup> *Increasing Student Achievement for Basic Skills Students*, (SBCTC Research Report No. 08-1).

<sup>9</sup> *Transfer student college-level momentum points* (SBCTC Research Report No. 08-03).

<sup>10</sup> *Opportunity Grants: A Progress Report on the Postsecondary Opportunity Program*, (SBCTC Report No. 08-4).

During the initial ITV sessions in fall 2007, State Board staff gave an overview of the initiative and the baseline year data. While some college respondents said these early ITV sessions were helpful in understanding the initiative and learning how other colleges were approaching the initiative, most of those we interviewed suggested that the ITV format was not conducive to achieving the goals of these sessions. Most respondents indicated that they and their colleagues left the ITV sessions confused and that participants did not speak up although many clearly did not understand the details of the initiative. Instead of the ITV sessions, several college personnel said they would like to have had more interactive gatherings that brought college personnel and SBCTC staff together to discuss their particular questions and concerns about the initiative.

The winter and spring ITV sessions were designed to advance a key objective of the initiative: the system-wide sharing among colleges of effective strategies to improve student achievement. While college personnel were optimistic that the initiative would facilitate the sharing of effective strategies, some expressed a lack of confidence in the quality of the evidence to support what were referred to in the ITV sessions as “best practices.” For example, one college president said she was not impressed with the practices presented during a spring ITV session. She said,

Some of the “best practices” I didn’t find particularly impressive.... When I hear “best practices” I assume there’s some data. Nobody seemed to have that. They said “we don’t have data yet, but it feels like we’re getting some good success.” And maybe that’s enough, but at what point does it become a “best practice”?

State Board staff also convened a two-hour ITV session in late spring 2008 that was dedicated to technical issues related to the state system data warehouse. While the session was not directly related to the Student Achievement Initiative, institutional research personnel described the workshop as very helpful in understanding the initiative’s database.

### ***SBCTC staff presentations at statewide council and committee meetings and at colleges***

State Board staff made presentations at meetings of the system-wide commissions and councils, including the instruction commission, the student services commission, and the council for basic skills. Staff members also visited several colleges to discuss the initiative and respond to questions and concerns from college personnel. These presentations and face-to-face meetings at colleges were viewed as extremely helpful in communicating the goals of the initiative and in being responsive to questions and concerns.

### ***College-level working groups***

College personnel engaged in activities related the initiative on their campuses provided a potentially valuable source of information about it. Colleges organized fairly consistent, broad-based teams of administrators, faculty, and staff to participate in the ITV sessions, and several colleges had working groups of college personnel with responsibility for overseeing their institution’s work on the initiative. The members of these groups were often a key source of information about the initiative for their colleagues and for college personnel in their functional areas or departments in particular. At several of the colleges, senior college administrators said

they sought to disseminate information about the initiative college-wide through email or in discussions about the initiative at all-campus events.

## **B. Level of Awareness and Understanding of the Initiative among College Personnel**

College personnel across the state described the purpose of the initiative in language similar to that used by the Student Achievement Initiative task force and adopted by the State Board. Those we interviewed generally understood that a central purpose of the initiative is to help all students, including those unprepared for college-level work, to successfully progress through an educational program. There was, however, a wide range of awareness and understanding about the specific details of the initiative. College presidents, other high-level administrators, and institutional research directors were generally well-informed about the initiative, but few faculty and staff had a clear understanding of how it worked. Even among those who were somewhat well informed about the initiative, there was a great deal of uncertainty and even confusion about the details.

### ***Presidents and senior administrators***

The presidents had fairly detailed knowledge of the initiative, including an understanding of both the achievement point categories and the proposed funding scheme. The promise of additional funds through the initiative, combined with the fact that each college's performance would be publicly reported, focused presidents' attention on the initiative. Most college presidents we interviewed had seen their college's 2006-07 baseline performance data and had an idea of where their colleges would focus their resources to earn achievement points. However, most presidents we interviewed said they did not see the quarterly updates of their college's data that were provided by the State Board staff throughout the learning year.

Most vice presidents of student services were also fairly well-informed about the design of the initiative. As detailed in the next chapter, student services divisions at a majority of the colleges led the response to the initiative, and the initiative's start-up funds were often used in support of student services. Vice presidents of instruction, along with deans and department chairs, were generally less knowledgeable than were their colleagues in student services. The majority of senior administrators had seen their college's 2006-07 baseline year data, but few, if any, had looked at the college's quarterly performance data.

### ***College trustees***

Awareness and understanding of the initiative by college boards of trustees varied. While a few of the trustees interviewed had almost no knowledge of the initiative, the majority understood its broad goals and design. Several trustees had detailed knowledge of the initiative's achievement point categories and how funding would be linked to performance. One such trustee praised the efforts of the State Board staff, beginning with the early stages of the development of the initiative, to keep trustees informed:

I have to give our State Board [staff] lots of kudos. They have been tremendously helpful in disseminating the information to each individual trustee. We get email correspondence on an individual basis with short memorandums. If you have a question, call this person. If you have a comment, call this person. It's been that way from the beginning. This wasn't something where a task force met and no information was shared until the recommendations were made.

### ***Institutional research personnel***

The directors of institutional research (IR) and their staff generally had detailed understanding of the initiative. In particular, IR directors and staff often had the most knowledge about how points are earned across the achievement point categories and about their own college's performance.

IR staff members at almost all of the colleges were responsible for understanding how points were accrued and for keeping senior administrators informed about their college's performance. At the time of our interviews, however, most IR directors were struggling to understand the intricacies of the database being supplied to the colleges by the State Board as part of the initiative. One IR director described frustration at having to re-code the data so that the college would be properly credited for achievement point gains by its students, saying,

For some people it's as clear as mud how they [State Board staff] are counting things, and so we are all struggling with that. This quarter we spent quite a bit of time re-coding students who were not properly coded...so we could accurately count them. We will continue to do that.

Institutional researchers from across the state have established a state-wide working group and electronic mailing list to facilitate discussion and sharing about the initiative's database.

### ***Faculty and student support services staff***

Beyond a small group of instructors and student support staff directly involved in related activities at their colleges, there was not broad awareness of the initiative among other faculty and student support services staff at most of the colleges in our study. Student services staff generally had a more detailed understanding of the initiative than did most faculty. The majority of faculty members we interviewed had only a limited understanding of the initiative; only a few had any detailed knowledge or had seen their college's 2006-07 baseline year performance data. The description of faculty awareness by a vice president of instruction was typical:

With our faculty we've told them that this initiative is happening.... Faculty know that something is happening, but that is the extent of it.... The faculty have had it explained to them, but if you talked to them, they couldn't explain it back.

Many respondents — both faculty and student support services staff — could not, or at least did not, distinguish between ongoing efforts to promote student retention and success at their college and activities planned in response to the Student Achievement Initiative. Some said internal,

ongoing student success initiatives such as Achieving the Dream and Title III activities were much more visible.

Interviews with college personnel suggested several possible reasons for the general lack of knowledge about the initiative among faculty and staff. First, at a few colleges, senior administrators had made concerted efforts to inform faculty and staff about the initiative, including by email, through department and faculty meetings, and at all-college events. Yet, administrators we interviewed reported that college personnel, and faculty in particular, generally had not paid attention to the initiative because it had not yet directly affected their work. Several administrators stressed that the colleges were still in the “learning year” of the initiative. They expected awareness and understanding of the initiative to increase over time.

Second, the common lack of strong connections between basic skills and college-level faculty, as well as between student services and academic programs, seemed to reduce communication about the initiative at many colleges. As discussed in the next chapter, most of the colleges focused their initial efforts in student services and basic skills during the learning year. As a result, personnel with the greatest understanding of the initiative were primarily working in those areas. Because basic skills has historically operated at the margins of many colleges, awareness and interest in the initiative among basic skills instructors had not spread to college-level faculty at at least some colleges in our study.

Third, college administrators at a few colleges purposefully limited communication about the initiative to faculty and staff. Some college administrators said they did not want to distract attention and energy from existing student success efforts by touting a new external directive from the State Board. At some colleges, presidents and senior administrators were taking a “wait and see” approach to the initiative. The uncertainty about the availability of future reward money to support the initiative led some college personnel to conclude that the initiative may be short-lived. These college administrators expressed a reluctance to involve faculty in a temporary initiative that could well be resisted by faculty.

At other colleges, senior administrators reported that they themselves did not fully understand the specifics of the initiative, particularly about how the achievement points were derived. Many college administrators also questioned the accuracy of their achievement point counts. They were reluctant therefore to try to inform faculty and staff about the initiative. At one of the smaller colleges, the vice president of instruction provided only limited information about the initiative because of perceived underreporting of the college’s baseline achievement points:

I have brought it [Student Achievement Initiative] up with faculty about where it’s going..., but I haven’t shared it all with them. When you give data to faculty and you know it is wrong, it creates more challenges than if we wait until it gets cleaned up and then you move forward.

The following table summarizes our assessment of the overall level of awareness and understanding of the Student Achievement Initiative at the 17 colleges where we conducted interviews. At a majority of the colleges, awareness of the initiative was limited. Several colleges



were taking steps to inform faculty and staff about the initiative and garner support for it. At no college was there widespread understanding about the details of the initiative.

<b>Awareness and Understanding of the Initiative</b>	<b>Number of Colleges</b>
<i>Minimal</i> – Little or no awareness	0
<i>Limited</i> – Some administrators aware and knowledgeable; limited faculty and staff awareness	10
<i>Moderate</i> – Administrators generally aware and knowledgeable; concerted efforts to inform faculty/staff about initiative details	7
<i>Extensive</i> – Administrators, faculty, and staff across the college are familiar with initiative and at least some specifics	0

***Need for continued communication about the initiative***

Several respondents praised the substantial efforts by SBCTC staff to inform college personnel about the initiative. State Board staff members were seen as very responsive to questions from college personnel. Yet, it is clear that many rank-and-file members within colleges have not heard about the initiative. Among those who were aware of the initiative, there was a great deal of uncertainty and even confusion about the details, particularly around how future funds would be allocated to colleges.

At the majority of colleges, interviewees indicated that they welcomed or needed additional communication and guidance from State Board staff. College trustees and presidents said that they wanted additional information about the initiative, both for their own understanding and for informing a broader audience in their colleges and districts. College personnel said that the printed communication and reports from SBCTC staff were generally too long and technical and therefore of limited use to most faculty and staff in understanding the initiative. College leaders described a pressing need for a summary document that succinctly communicates in “talking points” language how achievement points are determined and how incentive funding will be allocated.<sup>11</sup> One long-serving president who was generally supportive of the initiative described the issue this way:

I like it [the Student Achievement Initiative] because it looks at the full scope of what we do. But it’s an incredibly complicated scheme. For someone like me who needs to paraphrase and generalize, it’s been very difficult to come up with a succinct, executive summary of what it’s about.

An institutional researcher at one college who is well-regarded across the state emphasized the need for better communication around the achievement point data in particular.

I think if they had spent more time with institutional researchers — getting them in tune with the data, familiar with the data system, how it was set up, and really giving us the tools — I think we could have done more than we have in a year. A year is still not enough, especially if you want to get momentum at a community

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<sup>11</sup> There is a two-page “FAQ” document on the SBCTC website, but none of those we interviewed mentioned it.

college [and] get people involved and understanding. [It is difficult] trying to explain what the points mean.... [Faculty and staff] don't care about the points, but they need to care about the points.

The lack of awareness and clarity about the initiative should not be surprising. The initiative was developed and is being implemented on a relatively short timeline, and the colleges were still in the first “learning year” of the initiative during our interviews. Awareness and understanding of the initiative — in terms of both the achievement point performance indicators and the funding process — will likely increase with time. Still, college personnel at several colleges suggested that clear and transparent communication about the initiative would allay some of the uncertainty and anxiety surrounding the effort and help build support for it.

### **C. Understanding of the Origins and Goals of the Initiative**

#### *State Board seen as the primary driver*

Interviewees at all 17 of the colleges where we conducted interviews viewed the State Board as the primary driver of the initiative. College personnel described the initiative as part of a larger trend in which the State Board has assumed a more active role in system governance. College presidents and senior administrators said that there has recently been a shift in the State Board's relationship with the colleges, with a gradual but noticeable decrease of college autonomy. Many college leaders and senior administrators seemed to view the Student Achievement Initiative in this context — as one of a number of recent directives coming from the State Board. The director of basic skills at one college described the tension between the colleges and the State Board this way:

In the past the State Board has not played as strong a central role as it is right now in something like this. In the past the State Board might have said something, the presidents may have taken it as a suggestion, spent a lot of time thinking it over, and then come back with a counter proposal. In this situation, this was set up by the State Board, and I think the State Board's position is, “No, you don't understand. We are telling you this is something you all are going to do.” And so the colleges have been slower to respond.”

A few college respondents — particularly trustees and college presidents — mentioned that turnover on the Board in the last couple years brought new members with an interest in measuring educational outcomes. The president of one institution described the State Board's emphasis on using incentives to drive institutional behavior, saying, “I think it [the Student Achievement Initiative] was coming directly from the State Board itself. I think they are a business-oriented board, an achievement-oriented board, a board that appreciates the use of incentives.”

Some college respondents said they believe that the initiative represents a strategy by the State Board for achieving the 10-year strategic goals it recently established for the system, particularly the two related to strengthening state and local economies by meeting the demands for a well

educated and trained workforce, and increasing educational attainment among all residents across the state.

### ***Response to growing pressure from policymakers for increased accountability***

A wide range of college personnel — from trustees to counselors — said that calls for educational accountability have been growing in recent years from several sources —including state and federal governments and accreditation agencies — and that accountability will likely be a feature of the higher education landscape for the foreseeable future. Some college personnel indicated that accountability is a priority across all areas of state government, and a few specifically referenced Governor Gregoire’s Government Management Accountability and Performance (GMAP) program mentioned earlier. An instructional dean at one of the colleges described the legislature’s interest in measuring the quality of state services this way:

Our legislature has been pretty keen on measurable results in all kinds of categories, and higher education is not an exception to that. We have a lot of people around the legislative table [who] are saying, “show us what you are doing for the resources we are investing in you.” This is exactly the kind of thing we will probably see more of, not less.

Interviewees at 12 colleges suggested that the Student Achievement Initiative was created in response to accountability pressures from the state legislature. Several college leaders indicated that the state legislature is looking for reliable and quantifiable data on college performance and described the Student Achievement Initiative as an attempt by the State Board to develop a performance accountability system for the system before the legislature imposed its own. One president called the initiative a “pre-emptive strike” by the State Board:

We know that this is probably a good move from the State Board point of view, to define us before someone from the outside comes and defines us. I think you are in a better position if you can go to the legislature and say, “you don’t need to worry about it [accountability]. We already have it in place and here it is.

College trustees, presidents, and senior administrators often held different views than faculty and staff on the meaning of accountability vis-à-vis the initiative. College leaders and senior administrators were more likely to view the initiative as a means to secure additional future funding by providing quantifiable evidence of improvements in student achievement. Faculty and staff were less likely to understand the initiative in terms of an incentive for performance improvement, and more likely to frame the purpose of the initiative in terms of providing an external assessment of their work. As a result, faculty and staff generally had a more negative view of accountability pressures than did college trustees and presidents.

### ***Influence of research by State Board staff on the initiative’s design***

Interviewees at all but one of the 17 of the colleges we studied mentioned the influence on the initiative’s design of the State Board staff’s research on student progression and outcomes. According to a vice president of student services,

The State Board's involvement in the [Ford Foundation-funded] Bridges project — that's where it first came from. The State Board did some research within the Bridges project and they started talking about these [achievement] points where students make progress. When the Bridges project ended, then this new concept of [achievement] points began.

There was widespread respect for the State Board's research on student progression and achievement, even among college respondents with reservations about the initiative overall. For example, one faculty member who opposed tying funding to institutional performance nonetheless commented on the quality of the research used to design the achievement point framework, saying simply, "You can't argue with the research."

### ***Input by college personnel into the design of the initiative***

While those we interviewed at colleges generally agreed that the impetus for the initiative came from the State Board (and some viewed the initiative in terms of a "top-down" mandate), several highlighted the input that college representatives had in the design of the initiative. Specifically, respondents mentioned the representation of college presidents on the task force that recommended the design to the Board as well as of colleagues who served on the system-wide advisory committee. At almost half the 17 colleges in our study, presidents spoke positively about the role that they or their colleagues had in shaping the initiative and the design of the incentive funding mechanism in particular.

A few college administrators said the efforts of the State Board and State Board staff to solicit feedback from the colleges as they developed the Student Achievement Initiative were a welcome contrast to the state's previous performance funding scheme enacted in the late 1990s. According to one administrator, unlike the earlier policy, which was conceived by one powerful state legislator with little input from the Board or the colleges, this one was designed with broad input from the colleges.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Colleges' Initial Approach to the Initiative**

During the 2007-08 learning year, colleges were expected to become familiar with their achievement point data and begin to develop and share strategies to improve student achievement. This chapter explores colleges' initial approach to the Student Achievement Initiative and describes the progress they made and the challenges they encountered during the learning year.

#### **A. Organization of Implementation Efforts**

Seven of the 17 colleges included in our study established a new committee or working group to plan and coordinate activities related to the initiative. The other ten colleges delegated oversight of the initiative either to standing committees with responsibility for student success or to semi-structured groups of individuals involved with strategic planning, enrollment management, or student success at their institutions. These committees and working groups included senior administrators from instruction and student services, as well as student services staff, institutional researchers, and faculty members, most often from basic skills or developmental education.

Representatives from these new or existing groups participated in the ITV sessions and, at four colleges, met frequently throughout the year to discuss the initiative. At most colleges, however, the level of engagement with the initiative by these groups was modest. For example the leader of a working group at one college said that most of her group had participated in the ITV sessions, but they had met just one other time during the year to review the college's baseline data.

#### ***Focus on student services***

Nine of the 17 colleges in our study gave primary responsibility for responding to the initiative to their student services division. Colleges tended to house their initiative activities within student services for at least two reasons. First, college personnel at several colleges said that the initiative's \$51,000 start-up funds were targeted to serve 50 "TRIO-like" students, a reference to the federal outreach and support programs that serve low-income students, first generation students, and those with disabilities. (Several college personnel said that, at the beginning of the learning year, they did not understand that these funds, originally called "persistence funds" by the State Board, were even part of the Student Achievement Initiative.) The language of the legislation allocating the funds for the initiative to the SBCTC included the term "TRIO-like," which was then conveyed to the colleges by SBCTC staff. Since oversight of TRIO programs is generally the responsibility of student services divisions, some colleges decided to assign the Student Achievement Initiative to those divisions as well.

Second, at most of the colleges where we conducted interviews, student services divisions have primary responsibility for efforts to improve student retention, so it made sense for them to take

the lead on this new effort concerned with student progression. Student services personnel were enthusiastic about what they saw as an increased emphasis on student persistence by their colleges. Most indicated that their existing student retention efforts would help to improve their college's performance on the achievement point measures of the Student Achievement Initiative.

## **B. Use of the Student Achievement Initiative Database**

While senior administrators and institutional research staff at most colleges recognized the potential of the initiative database to track student progress over time and monitor the impact of efforts to improve student progression and success, few colleges had actually begun to use the database for these purposes during the learning year. Interviews with IR directors and other college personnel revealed that most colleges had performed only a cursory analysis of their performance using the achievement points. Senior college administrators in student services and instruction had generally seen their college's 2006-07 baseline year data, but only a few had looked at their performance data beyond the 2006-07 year. Few faculty or staff had seen any data on their college's performance.

The following table summarizes our assessment of the extent to which the initiative database is being used across the 17 colleges where we conducted interviews.

<b>Use of the Database</b>	<b>Number of Colleges</b>
<i>Minimal</i> – Review by IR staff only	1
<i>Limited</i> – IR staff and some senior administrators have seen baseline data; IR staff have identified coding and other issues; some effort has been made to identify areas of success and areas for improvement	12
<i>Moderate</i> – IR staff has good grasp of college's data; college has begun to use data to identify areas of success and areas for improvement	4
<i>Extensive</i> – Administrators and IR staff have analyzed the college's data; faculty and staff have been involved in examining and using information from the database to design improvement strategies	0

In attempting to use the achievement point data, colleges encountered a number of problems, which are described below.

### ***Uncertainty about the definitions, accuracy, and integrity of the data***

Colleges reported that they struggled throughout the learning year to understand the Student Achievement Initiative database. Several colleges had difficulty figuring out how the State Board staff calculated the achievement point totals for their colleges in the 2006-07 baseline year. IR personnel and administrators often questioned whether the data provided an accurate measure of their college's performance. Several colleges argued that their achievement point totals were underreported due to the miscoding of students and courses. IR personnel said that the SBCTC

staff was revising the 2006-07 baseline year data based on consultation with the colleges, and many colleges were waiting until the revised 2006-07 baseline year data were finalized before conducting more extensive analysis of the data or sharing information about their college's performance with a broader college audience. While questions were occasionally raised about the accuracy of the database, college respondents typically expressed great confidence in the competence and objectivity of the State Board staff responsible for designing and managing the achievement point database.

### ***Inadequate IR capacity***

How much progress colleges made with analyzing their achievement point data largely depended on their institutional research (IR) capacity. At several colleges, institutional research has not been a priority, so in those cases there was a shortage of staff with the time or skills to rigorously analyze the achievement point data. The vice president of instruction at a college with a small IR staff said,

[The State Board research staff] needs to give us the packaged report that they have so that we can duplicate it on our campus. Every college is coming up with different queries to try to get out this information themselves. My colleagues at other colleges are also having problems. We have a common dataset, but we aren't all pulling data out the same way.

Even at colleges with larger IR departments, college personnel suggested that the achievement point database does not provide enough information to pinpoint areas of weakness, let alone design improvement strategies or track the progress of ongoing student retention efforts. As a result, colleges have to use their own data to do such analyses, and there is wide variation in the capacity of colleges to do so.

### ***Additional guidance needed***

Several IR directors said that, while they appreciated the SBCTC staff's help in understanding how the college's achievement point data were derived, they needed additional training and assistance both to be confident in the integrity of the data and to understand their college's performance.

As mentioned, the statewide council of institutional researchers convened a working group to discuss data issues related to the initiative. Also, the spring 2008 ITV session for IR personnel was described as a big help in understanding the data. IR personnel recommended additional training sessions led by SBCTC staff for IR staff and other potential "power users" as well as additional sample queries generated by SBCTC staff that colleges could use to conduct preliminary analysis of the data.

The need for greater clarity around the Student Achievement Initiative database will have to be addressed before the data will be used more extensively. As indicated earlier, administrators at a few colleges said that they were reluctant to disseminate analyses to a wider college audience until they had a better grasp on the data.

### C. Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement

A central aim of the Student Achievement Initiative is to motivate colleges to identify and implement strategies for increasing the rate of student achievement. The following table summarizes our assessment of progress across the 17 colleges in developing strategies for improving student outcomes using the initiative's database.

<b>Development of Success Strategies Using Initiative Data</b>	<b>Number of Colleges</b>
<i>Minimal</i> – Little or none	3
<i>Limited</i> – College has begun to think about how it might use initiative database to develop strategies for increasing achievement, but currently relying on existing strategies	10
<i>Moderate</i> – College has begun preliminary analysis of the initiative database to evaluate existing strategies and develop new ones; piloting of new strategies likely in 2008-09	4
<i>Extensive</i> – College makes extensive use of initiative database to develop and evaluate student success strategies	0

As is evident from the table, during the learning year, most colleges were not yet at the stage of implementing new programs and services to increase the rate of achievement point attainment by their students; instead they were relying on existing student retention and efforts to do so.

At the same time, all 17 of the colleges in our sample already had student success efforts underway. Some had received or were applying for federal Title III grants that focused on student retention and success. Some were using institutional funds from the state's Opportunity Grants financial aid program to provide wrap-around support services to better retain economically disadvantaged students who received these financial aid grants. A few colleges were participating in Achieving the Dream, a national initiative focused on improving retention and completion of traditionally underrepresented students.

#### *Use of initiative “start-up” funds*

One college reported that it put the \$51,000 in start-up funds from the initiative into its general operating budget. Another spent the funds for institutional research support. However, the other 15 used the start-up funding mainly to support staff salaries or provide operational funding for existing student success efforts. A list of the ways the colleges we studied spent their start-up funds is presented in the box below.



## **Uses of Student Achievement Initiative Start-Up Funds by Colleges During the Learning Year**

### **Instruction**

- Release time for faculty to develop developmental math success strategies (1 college)
- Support for additional developmental math course offerings (1 college)
- Enhanced learning and support with counselors working closely with instructors in the classroom — based on a model for teaching students with disabilities (1 college)
- Contribution to innovation fund providing “mini-grants” to faculty with proposals for ways to improve student success (1 college)

### **Tutoring**

- Support for tutoring center (1 college)
- Tutoring support (1 college)
- Support for on-line tutoring service (1 college)

### **Assessment**

- Staff support to implement improved documentation of CASAS testing results for basic skills students (3 colleges)

### **Advising**

- Salary support for student achievement coordinator to facilitate student transitions from pre-college to college-level coursework (2 colleges)
- Supplemental case management for at-risk students (1 college)
- Peer mentoring support for underrepresented students (1 college)
- Salary support for persistence advisor/specialist (1 college)
- Support for MAPS: Mentoring and Advising for Persistence and Success (1 college)
- Support for TRIO Upward Bound program (1 college)
- Salary support for financial aid counselor (1 college)
- Support for new student success center providing “one-stop” advising, admissions, registration, and financial aid services (1 college)
- Redesign of advising program for first-year students (1 college)

### **Career Advising**

- Support for career advising during orientation (1 college)
- Support for career exploration program to assist former high-school drop-outs with career advising (1 college)
- Salary support for career advisor for first-year students (1 college)

### **Other**

- Supplement math textbook scholarship fund for low-income students (1 college)

### *Focus on basic skills and developmental education*

Some colleges focused their initial work on the initiative on basic skills and developmental education. There were several reasons for this.

To begin with, SBCTC staff responsible for basic skills made a concerted effort to inform the Council for Basic Skills of the initiative, which helped raise awareness among basic skills programs directors. The director of basic skills at one college where basic skills was a focus of the initiative described how he had first heard about the initiative from a State Board staff presentation at a Council for Basic Skills meeting the previous year: “Initially, I was more aware of the [Student Achievement Initiative] than most of the other players at the college. I was in a good position to put forward the suggestion for basic skills [to be a focus of the college’s work on the initiative] and got approval for it.”

There was a widespread perception that colleges could earn more points in the basic skills achievement category than in those related to passing college-level math, completing college credits, or earning credentials. A dean at the same college as the director of basic skills cited just above explained why it made sense to emphasize basic skills:

The Student Achievement Initiative gives more points proportionally for students who are making small steps early on [at the basic skills end] than [for students] at the upper end of the progression.... This puts more explicit focus on a category of students who have not been a priority and have not been tracked as well as they should be.

At least 9 of the 17 colleges had begun efforts to improve outcomes in basic skills and developmental education before the advent of the Student Achievement Initiative. Interviewees said that the initiative provided additional impetus to strengthen those efforts. Several college administrators said that there has been a growing recognition in recent years that too few students progress through the various levels of basic skills or of developmental education and advance to college-level coursework. A vice president of instruction described the incentive that the initiative provided her college to better understand and address the barriers to success confronting basic skills students:

It is interesting to track our basic skills students as to how they are progressing — not only through basic skills but on to pre-college and college-level work. We know our rates are low, and why is that? This [Student Achievement Initiative] does give us an incentive to get a better handle on that.

Basic skills programs were often perceived to be more receptive to the initiative because they are accustomed to being held accountable for student performance. Basic skills directors and instructors at several colleges suggested that existing state and federal performance requirements had given them experience tracking the progress and outcomes of their students. One director of basic skills at a college that had centered most of its Student Achievement Initiative activities in basic skills said that he and his colleagues were well-positioned to respond to the initiative.

“There is a lot of buy-in from the basic skills area of colleges because we have been exposed to performance measures, collecting data, and having outcomes measured.”

### ***Planned efforts***

At least 9 of the 17 colleges were planning to implement new measures in the coming year to increase achievement point attainment by their students. Among the specific approaches proposed were:

- Conducting “degree audits” or transcript reviews to identify students who achieved the required credits for a certificate or degree but never received one;
- Improving documentation of CASAS testing results for basic skills students;
- Eliminating certificate or diploma fees; creating academic certificate programs;
- Increasing credit requirements for certain shorter occupational certificate programs so they will qualify for achievement points.

Note that most of these efforts are likely to result in one-time gains in achievement points for the colleges in question.

College administrators had also begun aligning the initiative’s performance measures with their strategic planning and re-accreditation activities. Six colleges had begun early efforts to incorporate the initiative into their internal strategic planning processes. College personnel at eight colleges discussed how the initiative’s focus on documented student progression was very consistent with their institution’s efforts and strategies for re-accreditation.

### **D. Factors Affecting Colleges’ Receptiveness to the Initiative**

Not surprisingly, the interviews with college personnel revealed variation across the colleges in both the level of receptiveness to the Student Achievement Initiative and the extent to which colleges had begun the process of planning and implementing responses to it. Several factors seemed to affect a college’s response to the introduction of the Student Achievement Initiative.

#### ***Enrollment trends***

The CCRC research team heard widespread concern about stagnating or declining student enrollment numbers across the state. Leaders at several colleges said that the Student Achievement Initiative has the potential to help ameliorate the effects of lower student enrollments because colleges could accrue additional funds not directly attached to FTEs, and successful student retention efforts implemented under the initiative would lead to increased student enrollment.

### ***Leadership support for the initiative***

Not surprisingly, colleges where the leadership was noticeably supportive of the initiative seem to have made the most progress in building support for it among college stakeholders.

### ***Perceived/expected faculty resistance***

Administrators at several colleges suggested they would welcome assistance from SBCTC staff on how to effectively communicate the initiative to a broader college audience. Some college administrators suggested they had purposefully not tried to build awareness because of perceived or expected pushback against the initiative from the faculty. Leaders at some colleges wanted to be sure the initiative was seen by faculty and staff as fitting into the existing goals and processes by which the college measures performance rather than as an external state mandate.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Colleges' Views on the Initiative's Performance Measurement Model**

To identify appropriate measures of student achievement for Washington's community and technical colleges, the State Board staff reviewed research on community college student progression and outcomes. In partnership with the Community College Research Center, the State Board staff also analyzed their own system-wide data on student "momentum" to identify intermediate education attainments associated with a higher probability of success for students starting at different program levels. This research was reviewed by the advisory committee, which then presented its findings to the Student Achievement Initiative policy task force. The achievement point performance measures recommended by the task force and adopted by the State Board reflect four principles:

- Performance measures recognize students in all mission areas and reflect the needs of the diverse communities served by colleges.
- Performance measures measure incremental gains in students' educational progress irrespective of mission area.
- Measures represent simple, understandable, reliable and valid attainments in students' educational progress.
- Measures focus on student achievement improvements that can be influenced by colleges.

This chapter examines the views of college personnel on the initiative's performance measurement model. It describes the aspects that those we interviewed said they like about the model as well as their concerns about it.

#### **A. Support for the Initiative's Performance Measurement Model**

Most of those we interviewed viewed the achievement point framework favorably. The following are some of specific aspects that were frequently mentioned in a positive light.

##### ***Increased focus on student success***

Several interviewees reported that the initiative has helped to draw attention to student success efforts at their college. College personnel at 12 colleges indicated that the initiative has led to increased dialogue about barriers students face and about strategies for helping students overcome those barriers.

##### ***Means of measuring program effectiveness and student success***

Many of those we interviewed applauded the fact that the Student Achievement Initiative provides both an incentive and a means for colleges to measure the effectiveness of efforts to

promote student retention and success. Some basic skills and career-technical administrators and faculty reported that their departments had a lot of experience tracking their students, but most college personnel we interviewed said that they had not done an adequate job in the past of monitoring student outcomes and evaluating the effectiveness of their programs and services.

While many interviewees questioned the accuracy of their baseline year achievement point totals, few voiced concern about the validity of the performance measure categories. As mentioned, college personnel generally expressed widespread respect for the quality of the “tipping point” study and other research used by the State Board in developing the achievement point performance measurement framework.

As discussed in the previous chapter, senior administrators at some colleges discussed plans to use the achievement points to set goals as part of their strategic planning efforts. Other interviewees described how the achievement measures would benefit their college’s re-accreditation efforts, specifically by providing a means of documenting and continually improving student progression.

### ***Measures recognize students in all mission areas and focus on student achievement within colleges’ control***

A particular strength of the model in the eyes of many interviewees is that it measures students’ progression from basic skills through completion of degrees. Several pointed out the contrast with previous performance measurement systems, which did not give any credit to colleges for helping students attain intermediate achievements and which included outcome measures, such as baccalaureate transfer rates and job placement rates, that are to some extent beyond the control of colleges. A director of institutional effectiveness put it this way:

We’ve had other accountability measures in the past. I view the Student Achievement Initiative as doing a better job of measuring what the colleges are accomplishing. The last set we had for a decade only measures outcomes — whether they transferred or got jobs. If a student attended for two quarters and left, the college couldn’t count them as an outcome. In the Student Achievement Initiative, if a student comes and moves forward in their college career, we get some points for what they did here.

### ***Increased attention to basic skills and developmental education***

The initiative has brought increased attention to basic skills and developmental education, particularly developmental math. Colleges across the state viewed basic skills as an area where they could make substantial achievement point gains. While recent system-wide initiatives such as I-BEST had already increased attention to the need to increase the rate at which students transition from basic skills to college, the initiative was seen as further encouraging that trend. Similarly, college personnel discussed a statewide recognition that progression through developmental and into college-level math remains a significant challenge for students, and that the Student Achievement Initiative provides an additional incentive for colleges to help students take and pass math courses.

### *Increased investment in student services*

Several student services administrators said that the Student Achievement Initiative has highlighted the importance of their work in the eyes of their college's leadership. Specifically, the initiative has helped to draw attention to the importance of "wrap-around" services to increase student retention and completion. A few student services personnel discussed how the Student Achievement Initiative, as a high-profile initiative of the State Board, had already led their college administration to steer internal college funds (in addition to Student Achievement Initiative start-up funds) to their divisions.

### **B. Concerns about the Model**

Despite considerable support for the initiative's performance measurement model, our interviews with college personnel did reveal concerns about it. Most of these centered on whether the performance measures would change colleges' priorities and if some colleges would be disadvantaged compared to other colleges.

#### *Could alter college priorities with unforeseen consequences*

At nine colleges, some of those we interviewed suggested that the performance measures may not be entirely consistent with their college's mission or best reflect the needs of their particular students. These respondents mostly expressed a general concern that a State Board initiative would not reflect their college's priorities. A few college personnel were more specific. For example, while most of those we interviewed welcomed the focus on basic skills and developmental math, a few respondents felt this might lead to an inappropriate shift of institutional focus and resources away from college-level coursework to remedial instruction. A faculty member who teaches college-level math expressed the concern this way:

I think there is concern among faculty teaching pre-calculus and calculus or other college-level courses. I mean how much do we fund developmental education at the community college, and when you start transferring those resources into developmental education? Does that mean we will be losing our calculus classes? Do you cut back on literature courses and offer more sections of developmental education? I mean, are we a college at that point?

Similarly, some college personnel raised concerns about what might "get left off the table" as their colleges invest resources to gain achievement points. While most of those we interviewed supported the focus of progression within the college, some, particularly those at technical colleges and transfer-oriented community colleges, felt that the initiative's achievement framework is too limited and should include job placement and transfer measures. According to a dean at one of these colleges,

There is no credit for students who transfer, which is really one of our big [areas of focus]. The workforce folks, we don't just want them to have degrees or

certificates, we want them to get a job. So, some of those end points are missing for me.

### ***Certain kinds of colleges could be unfairly disadvantaged***

Again, while most indicated support for the overall design of the achievement point framework, interviewees frequently expressed anxiety that their college might be disadvantaged by it. These respondents suggested that institutional performance across the achievement point categories could be influenced by student demographics and other institutional characteristics. Colleges feared to be at a possible disadvantage included:

- *Colleges serving more at-risk students.* Some of those we interviewed pointed out that since underprepared students often require costly wrap-around services to help them succeed, colleges serving higher proportions of these students might find it more difficult to earn points than those with more students who are prepared for college.
- *Institutions with an academic transfer mission/focus.* College personnel at 6 of the 17 colleges were concerned that the initiative might disadvantage institutions with a focus on academic transfer, since the highest potential for earning points seems to be in the basic skills and developmental areas.
- *Institutions without capacity for significant enrollment growth.* Although the initiative is intended to improve student retention and completion, interviewees at several colleges pointed out that colleges could earn points by increasing enrollment rather than improving the rate at which students progress and succeed. This would put institutions whose local student markets do not offer potential for enrollment growth at a disadvantage over those in areas with growing demand.
- *High performing colleges.* At 7 colleges, interviewees said they were concerned that high performing institutions have less room to improve, resulting in a reduced potential for earning achievement points compared to lower performing colleges.

It should be noted that these anxieties were expressed before colleges had a chance to see their performance during the learning year. Most colleges were taking a wait-and-see attitude until the first year performance numbers became available.



## **Chapter 6**

### **Colleges' Views on the Initiative's Incentive Funding Model**

The Student Achievement Initiative policy adopted by the State Board outlined five *Principles for Incentive Funding*:

- Colleges are rewarded for improvements in student achievement.
- Funding is structured so that colleges compete against themselves for continuous improvement rather than competing with each other.
- Funding is stable and predictable, and cumulative over time.
- Incentive funding rewards student success and becomes a resource for adopting and expanding practices leading to further success.
- New funds provide the greatest incentive.

This chapter presents the views of college personnel on the incentive funding component of the initiative.

#### **A. Source of Additional Funding**

College personnel frequently said their institutions were under-funded by the state legislature. A few presidents and senior administrators said the initiative, by providing quantifiable evidence of student achievement, could serve as a useful means of securing additional money from the legislature. One president was hopeful that the initiative would provide a source of funding for the college that is not based on growth in enrollment.

It's a way to work with the legislature to get funding for something other than growth FTEs. Just talking about quality doesn't do it — we've tried that in the past — but we didn't quantify it. Go in there with accountability and say: "Here is what you are going to buy with this money in terms of student achievement. Give us this amount of money and we will increase student success and quantify it using the achievement points.

The fact that the financial rewards would be permanent additions to their colleges' base budgets was particularly appealing to college leaders that supported the initiative's funding mechanism.

#### **B. Concerns about Incentive Funding**

While the current amount of funding attached to the Student Achievement Initiative is small in relation to the overall system-wide budget, the initiative nonetheless represents a potentially

dramatic shift in the way community and technical colleges in Washington are funded. College personnel across the state are accustomed to a funding model based largely on student enrollments for base-budget funding and categorical grant programs for supplemental funding. While the colleges already have numerous student retention efforts in place, they currently have little financial incentive to improve student outcomes. Perhaps it is not surprising then that our interviews with college personnel across the state revealed substantial uncertainty and anxiety around the new performance funding model. These concerns are summarized below.

### ***Could lead to lowering of academic standards***

At several colleges, faculty and academic administrators we interviewed suggested that, with funding at stake, there was the potential for inappropriate pressure on instructors to lower their academic standards so that more students pass so their colleges can gain points. For example, the vice president of instruction at one college cautioned that “the downside is if you don’t do this systematically and methodically it’s going to be perceived that we are pushing faculty to change their standards ... so students will get the green-light to pass on.” Several interviewees argued that the funding for achievement point gains might have a similar negative effect as that of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), the state’s test for K-12 education, which has encouraged teachers to “teach to the test.”

### ***Might encourage unfair comparisons and discourage sharing of effective practices***

One of the Student Achievement Initiative goals is to increase the sharing of best practices for student success across the state. Several college personnel indicated that the Washington State community and technical college system has a strong culture of sharing ideas, and predicted that the initiative will likely serve to encourage these efforts. Several college respondents said that they supported the initiative because they were persuaded by the State Board that colleges are competing only against their own past performance, not against other colleges. According to one college dean,

The plan was designed to compete with yourself. That’s the message we have received the from State Board, at least coming through the data folks. This is not about comparing ourselves to other colleges. We are competing against ourselves and how we do over time.

However, respondents at at least 8 colleges expressed concern that attaching funding to the initiative will encourage unhealthy competition among the colleges. Some interviewees argued that because the data will be publicly reported, colleges will be concerned about how their institution ranks compared to others, even apart from the issue of whether or not funding is attached. For example, a vice president at one college said the initiative was partly about “bragging rights” and argued that competition would exist even without the incentive funding:

They [college presidents] are the most competitive 34 people you can have in the room. The biggest laughing point for me is when you hear that this isn’t about competition among the colleges. That sounds good but ... they do compete. If we

have a drop in [achievement] points, the president will be in here jumping up and down on my desk wanting to know why.

Some interviewees expressed concern that colleges may be unfairly compared with one another without taking into account factors, such as differences in student characteristics, that might account for differences in institutional performance. A few college respondents, including one president, predicted that as colleges seek to improve their achievement point totals, they will be less likely to share effective practices with other institutions, particularly with those in their enrollment catchment areas.

### ***Creates potential for “gaming” of the system***

At almost half of the colleges, interviewees expressed the concern that colleges may be able to increase achievement points without really improving student success by “gaming” the system. Respondents said that some gaming already occurs under the current funding system. Pressure to game the system would increase if substantial funding were attached to the initiative. Those who raised this concern were reluctant to provide specific examples of how gaming might occur. However, several interviewees said that colleges could increase their achievement point totals by focusing on increasing student enrollment, rather than improving student progression and achievement. This would of course not further the goals of the initiative, and it might lead to increased competition for enrollments, particularly in areas where there are lots of postsecondary options.

### ***Could devolve into unhealthy competition for base-budget funding***

Several college presidents and senior administrators expressed concern about where the initiative funding would come from and how it would be allocated. In particular, they feared that the initiative may evolve in such a way that funding would come from colleges’ base budgets, a situation that would promote “unhealthy competition” as colleges would be forced to “win back” funds that could go to better performing colleges. The college leaders we interviewed were unanimous in their belief that to provide the right incentives to colleges, funding for the initiative must continue to involve new money above the base-budget, FTE-generated funds. One college trustee said that whether the initiative is “a lever or a hammer” depends on whether the legislature provides new funds for the initiative or uses it to allocate base funding.

### ***Creates uncertainty about future funding***

Several college leaders expressed concern that the initiative might not be adequately funded by the legislature in future years. Some cited the experience of Washington’s earlier, short-lived performance funding system (1998-99). Both supporters and critics of the current initiative expressed concern and skepticism about the stability of its future funding.

Other presidents and college leaders warned that support for the initiative may be threatened because it did not come out of the legislature and as a result lacks legislative champions. One long-serving college president worried that the college achievement data may be viewed as “self-serving,” since the measures were not designed by educators:

My fear with this one is that I don't see it as direct response to any request from the legislature. So how successful we will be in using this to create that confidence among legislators in what we do — I just don't know where this will go.

### ***Does not make up for unfunded FTEs***

While the leaders we interviewed welcomed the opportunity to earn additional funds to use toward student success activities, even those with a favorable view of the initiative indicated that they would prefer “fully-funded FTEs” to the incentive system model. They argued that FTEs were currently not fully funded by the state, so any additional funding the legislature was willing to spend on community and technical college education should be allocated to FTE funding.

### **C. Views on the Amount of Funding Needed to Encourage Change**

Some college personnel we interviewed felt that, in instituting the Student Achievement Initiative, the State Board overlooked the substantial efforts already taking place at their institutions to improve student success. Faculty and student services staff in particular stressed their personal and professional commitment as educators working at community colleges to helping students succeed. A few said they were offended by the implication that they would be more motivated to help students if their colleges were rewarded financially.

Still, many respondents, including most college leaders, acknowledged that colleges would change the way they operate if given sufficient incentives. Every college leader we interviewed said that the \$500,000 to be allocated to colleges for performance during the current academic year (2008-09) is not enough to attract much attention to the initiative, let alone provide incentive to alter institutional behavior. However, most of the college presidents we interviewed indicated that the \$7 million that the SBCTC has requested for the initiative in its biennial budget for 2009-11 (\$3.5 million per year, or approximately \$100,000 per college) would provide sufficient incentive for colleges to make substantial changes in policy and practice in order to improve their performance, particularly since these funds would be added to colleges' base-budget funding. Again, college leaders were adamant that the allocation of new funds, rather than the reallocation of base budget funds, was essential for the long-term sustainability of the initiative.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Higher Education Policymakers' Views of the Initiative**

To date, efforts to promote the Student Achievement Initiative have been primarily targeted at stakeholders within the community college system. Ultimately, however, the goal is to secure ongoing state appropriations for performance funding. This will require political support from such external players as the Higher Education Coordinating (HEC) Board, the governor's office, and of course, the legislature itself. To get some perspective on the initiative's prospects for support among state policy makers, we interviewed several of them, all of whom were familiar with the initiative. These included staff from the governor's office, a key legislator, and board and staff members from the HEC Board, as well as SBCTC system trustees and executive staff.

#### **A. Views of the Initiative among External State Policy Makers**

The state-level policy makers we interviewed were generally enthusiastic about it. An analyst from the Government Management Accountability and Performance (GMAP) office said that Governor Chris Gregoire is closely following the initiative.

We have all the measures of this Student Achievement Initiative on our performance measure dashboard. We will be looking at those measures and work[ing] with the State Board for insight as to why certain results are occurring. The governor's interest is focused on what is happening to students. The funding is really a bonus from our point of view. The idea of focusing on real outcomes for people is different than how we typically operate programs in government.

A legislator who has followed the initiative observed: "With ideas like the Student Achievement Initiative out of the State Board, even without the details, I wanted to do it. It gets at what I'm trying to push, which is, how to measure what we want with the outcome we want [and] how do you provide rewards with additional flexibility."

A member of the Higher Education Coordinating Board praised the power of an accountability model that uses research-based indicators of student progress. This HEC Board member was particularly pleased that the initiative encourages colleges to reflect on their own data and improve in relation to their own historical performance, taking into account their distinctive mix of students, goals and strengths. "You get out of the competitive 'I'm better than the college down the road' mode.... It's done in a way that institutions improve their own statistics and don't get into the excuses game. I think it has great potential and power!" The board member argued that the initiative's approach to funding represents a significant improvement over traditional FTE-based budgeting because it provides incentives to colleges not only to get students in the door but to ensure that they leave with a credential.

Beyond the few state-level policy makers who are closely following the development of the initiative, the level of awareness of the Student Achievement Initiative among state policy makers is limited, according to persons we interviewed. The SBCTC has just begun to educate

legislators beyond a few with an interest in community and technical colleges, and the initiative currently lacks a strong legislative advocate.

A staff member from the HEC Board observed that one of the challenges for the initiative is that once one gets beyond a broad understanding of its principles and overall design, the details of the achievement points and how the funding will be allocated are complicated. This person and other respondents encouraged the State Board to develop a succinct explanation of the initiative's mechanics or accept that it is too complicated for most audiences and simply provide reassurance that the details are available to those who really want them.

## **B. State Board Views on the Initiative**

There seems to be a strong sense of unity among State Board members about the direction they have set for the initiative. In interviews, State Board members described their commitment to create clearer and more seamless pathways through college programs to increase student success. They discussed how the Student Achievement Initiative in particular, while acknowledging the importance of student access to college, emphasizes increasing rates of completion among students who have enrolled. It thus serves to increase colleges' focus on outcomes, not just enrollments. As one member observed, "We've got a nice new elegant measurement system and ... for the first time in this state we are going to pay for some results, as opposed to putting money on the table at the front end."

Another board member echoed those comments, saying:

If we can switch from FTE [enrollment funding] to achievement, I think that we as an organization are better served to represent to taxpayers and the legislature and local communities that people going through are getting valuable skills that will enhance our community and the tax base. I think I would be much more comfortable saying we have 10% fewer FTEs, but a 20% increase in students meeting their goals. That to me is a stronger argument than "we have more butts in seats, but aren't sure about outcomes."

A senior executive from the State Board office observed that there has been a significant shift on the part of the State Board in terms of how it views its role compared to the past. "The Board has made it clear that they want to be at the front end of the policy process, not just voting up and down at the end." While the Board is conscious of the potential for pushback, particularly from college leaders and faculty groups, and they acknowledge that change in large bureaucratic systems is threatening. But they seem resolute in their commitment to the initiative. As one board member observed,

If you don't live on the edge, you're taking up too much room! .... If we are as good as we say we are, we should go out and prove it. We sell people this mantra that we are good ... that we change students' lives, that we can help the economy. If we can't, then we should know it.

### **C. Funding the Initiative in a Challenging Fiscal Environment**

According to officials at the Higher Education Coordinating Board, SBCTC Executive Director Charlie Earl has been very strategic in introducing the new initiative, being careful not to get too far ahead of his board or the college presidents. A year ago he laid the groundwork for this year's budget request by presenting information about the initiative in meetings with the HEC Board, the governor, her cabinet, and key legislative leaders. As mentioned, the State Board is requesting \$7 million for the biennium to support the initiative.

Now, however, projections of a multi-billion dollar shortfall in state revenue have made the prospects for funding of the initiative uncertain. An analyst in the governor's office was guardedly optimistic about the initiative's chances of getting a positive reception from the legislature, despite the challenging fiscal environment. He suggested that the initiative demonstrates the State Board's commitment to accountability for student outcomes, which will benefit the community and technical college system as it competes with other state agencies for limited resources.

My personal opinion is that these types of initiatives are more important in recessions and in times of tight money, because they demonstrate commitment to performance beyond money...The governor and I suspect that the legislature will look much more favorably on a system that is documenting its performance than one that is saying, "trust us."

Other state policy makers, however, echoed concerns we heard at several of the colleges about future funding of the initiative. A legislator who is familiar with the initiative raised questions about its prospects for support in light of the downturn in the economy and projected budget deficits. This legislator argued that the lack of a strong base of legislative champions does not bode well for the State Board's biennial budget request for the initiative.

The possibility of a re-allocation of the colleges' base budgets was a particular concern of a few state policy makers. One state policy maker and long-time observer of the community and technical college system said that local boards and college presidents are very protective of their budgets and face significant pressures from faculty groups and local communities to secure a stable stream of income for their colleges. If, because of the shortfalls, base budgets were reallocated to fund the new initiative, he predicted that it would increase the likelihood of resistance. The only solution to prevent this from happening, in his opinion, would be to reduce the pot of incentive money. He acknowledged, however, that this might well mean that the system would be less likely to get the desired behavior changes at the colleges. "You need to get \$2 or \$2.5 million [per year] to get people's attention." He went on to observe that while the relatively long development period was important for creating buy-in from the colleges, the downside is that the Board is seeking continuing funding for the initiative in a time when there is no money.

A staff member from the HEC Board observed, "If I were in [SBCTC Executive Director Charlie Earl] Charlie's shoes, I would be very nervous right now. You take it to the legislature and the one outcome could be that they like it, and then say we are taking seven million out of your

current budget, which we may be cutting because of the fiscal environment, and use that seven million. That is every president's worst nightmare about how this is going to work — that it will come out of their hide.”

State Board members we interviewed said they and their colleagues remain firmly committed to the goals of the initiative, despite the uncertainty about funding. One State Board member was so enthusiastic about the initiative that he suggested that they proceed with it regardless of whether the legislature provides new funding. “Even if we get no money, this should be our priority.... If there is not an additional funding stream I would say that we take it out of the base of whatever it is we have.” This Board member argued that it is hard to imagine how either the State Board or professional educators could disagree with a focus aligned toward student achievement. “You don't need more money to do that.”

Yet, board members generally agreed that the absence of new legislative funding for the initiative would create challenges for the State Board as it proceeds with the initiative. One board member said: “Our goal has always been to go after new money for this as an incentive to the colleges.... I hate to lose it. It's a big decision that we will have to make.” One senior Board staff person said that the colleges will be involved in the decision on how to proceed should the legislature not approve the funding request. “The Board will have a process. It will listen to everyone around the system and then make the decision as to whether or not to go forward. Commensurate with the process will be the developing of options and alternatives. It won't be a ramrod.”



## **Chapter 8 Conclusion**

Higher education performance funding policies hold the promise of spurring colleges and universities to adopt new policies and practices that lead to improved student outcomes. Such policies, it is hoped, will help to better align institutional efforts with state goals and lead to a better return on the public's investment. Yet, despite high expectations, most higher education performance funding measures in the U.S. have been short-lived, undergone frequent changes, and involved relatively small amounts of money. In general, the expected benefits of performance funding have not been realized.

By tying state funds directly to institutional performance, the Student Achievement Initiative is consistent with prior performance funding systems that have been implemented across the country. The initiative does, however, differ from performance funding policies in other states in at least one key respect: rather than just rewarding colleges for successful degree completion and other "final" outcomes, the Student Achievement Initiative rewards colleges for increasing the rate at which students, starting from remedial levels, progress incrementally toward completing credentials.

### ***Colleges support the initiative's goals and the principles of the achievement point framework***

Among those we interviewed at 17 of the state's 34 community and technical colleges, there was widespread support for the initiative's goal of focusing attention and resources on helping all students, including those who start in basic skills and college remedial programs, to successfully progress through their educational programs. There was also strong support for the focus on increasing student progression across intermediate levels of achievement. The faculty, student support staff, and administrators we interviewed generally agreed that this incremental progression framework is much more relevant to their work with students than accountability measures based only on final outcomes. Virtually everyone who was familiar with the research the State Board staff conducted to inform the development of the overall framework and the specific performance measures had high regard for it.

### ***Colleges spent most of the learning year grappling with the performance data***

While college personnel generally supported the initiative's student progression framework, there was considerable uncertainty about exactly how student progression is measured. Most colleges struggled throughout the learning year to understand the details of the achievement point performance measures. At the time of our interviews, most colleges were still in the process of understanding how their baseline year achievement point totals were calculated. The lack of institutional research capacity hampered several colleges' ability to analyze the data for a more thorough understanding of their college's performance. Even colleges with greater IR capacity were having difficulty making sense of the data and figuring out how to use the information to monitor student progression and evaluate efforts to improve student outcomes.

As a result, most colleges had not begun to use the Student Achievement Initiative database to develop strategies for increasing student success. Only a handful was planning new strategies to improve their achievement point performance. Most were relying instead on student success activities previously in place at their colleges. While college personnel were optimistic that these existing activities would help to increase student attainment of achievement points, most such efforts were small in scale. College leaders have not yet engaged faculty and staff to figure out what changes in policy and practices are needed to increase the rate at which students attain achievement points on a substantial scale.

### ***Colleges are anxious about how the achievement point framework will work in practice***

The lack of clarity about how exactly how the initiative measures student progression has led to anxiety among college personnel over how they will rank relative to other colleges. There is indeed considerable uncertainty about how the measurement framework will work in practice — whether, for example, it might disadvantage colleges that serve larger numbers of disadvantaged students, which are more expensive to serve, or whether it might disadvantage colleges that have traditionally performed well and may therefore have less room for improvement.

### ***Awareness of the initiative is limited among the colleges' rank and file***

A greater level of understanding of the initiative and, in particular, of how college performance is measured across the student achievement categories will be required to bring about more broad-based involvement of faculty and staff in efforts to improve student achievement. While State Board staff did much to try to build awareness of the initiative among the colleges, at the colleges in this study familiarity with the initiative is mostly limited to college leadership, senior administrators, and a small number of college personnel involved in initiative efforts at the colleges. Several colleges were waiting for a better understanding of their performance on the complete 2007-08 data before expanding communication about the initiative to faculty and staff. Senior administrators at several colleges said that, having had to respond to numerous State Board initiatives in recent years, they are reluctant to engage campus-wide constituencies in another external directive until they are assured it is likely to gain support from the state legislature.

The lack of awareness and clarity about the initiative should not be too surprising, however. The initiative was developed and is being implemented on a relatively short timeline, and the colleges were still in the first “learning year” of the initiative during our interviews. Still, college personnel at several colleges suggested that clear and transparent communication about the initiative would allay some of the uncertainty and anxiety surrounding the effort and help build support for it.

### ***Tying funding to performance raises the stakes***

The potential of significant funding tied to institutional performance has also generated anxiety across the colleges, particularly among presidents. Most presidents we interviewed seem to agree that the amount currently being sought by the State Board from the legislature — \$7 million for the biennium, or about \$100,000 per year per college — is large enough to motivate colleges to

make substantial changes in the way they operate, particularly because the funds would be added to their base budgets. Presidents we interviewed were unanimous in the view that to be effective in improving college performance, the initiative must bring new funding to the table over and above base budget funding. College leaders feared a situation where there would be no new funds to support performance funding and where colleges would instead be forced to earn some portion of their base budget funding based on the achievement point measures. Presidents argued that this would lead to unhealthy competition among the colleges and would probably kill support for the initiative from the colleges. Although there were exceptions, most state-level observers we interviewed seemed to agree that funding above and beyond the base budget funding is essential for the initiative to be effective and sustainable.

***Some state policymakers strongly support the initiative, but legislative support is uncertain***

The state-level stakeholders we interviewed are very enthusiastic about the initiative's model of performance accountability and improvement. An analyst from the Governor's office suggested that the initiative represents a refreshing effort on the part of educational institutions to document for policymakers, taxpayers, and the public how well they are serving students. There are strong synergies between the initiative and the governor's push for more outcome-oriented and accountable state programs. Among the state-level policymakers we interviewed, there was a consensus that accountability pressures across state agencies are not likely to abate, and that the Student Achievement Initiative could give the community and technical colleges an advantage as they compete with other sectors for scarce state resources.

The Higher Education Coordinating Board seems committed to advocating with the legislature for the SBCTC's request for new funding to support the initiative. However, state-level stakeholders indicated that the initiative is not well known among legislators and lacks strong champions in the legislature.

***Fiscal woes threaten state funding for the initiative***

The State Board's request to the legislature is threatened by the looming fiscal crisis facing Washington State and the country more generally. A decision by the legislature not to fully fund the initiative could affect future college support. College leaders clearly oppose the idea of using the initiative's performance measurement framework to determine base budget funding. At this point, however, the State Board seems intent on moving ahead with the request. Particularly given the state's budget woes, it is essential that the Board develop a clear and compelling message and a strategic communications plan to educate policy makers about the initiative and its potential benefits for students and the state.

While legislators may not support the initiative at the level requested by the State Board, they might be willing to provide more modest funding and allow the Board to extend the learning period for the initiative through the biennium as the state weathers the economic downturn. Given the fact that colleges are just beginning to analyze their data and consider changes in practices that would improve student achievement, extending the learning period would give the Board and the colleges a chance to deepen awareness and support of the initiative among faculty and staff, use the data to identify areas of weakness, and implement and evaluate strategies for

improving student achievement. This would also increase the opportunity to examine to what extent and in what ways colleges change their practices in response to the initiative. Finally, given the widespread interest in the initiative by other states and funders nationally, the State Board may well be able to raise private foundation funds to supplement state funding of the initiative during such a period of further experimentation and evaluation.