



SKILL LINK INITIATIVE

INTRODUCTION

A comprehensive evaluation of the SkillUp Washington Skill Link Initiative is underway and will be released in 2017. This study will examine the long-term effect of Skill Link participation on student education and incomes.

Skill Link is also sharing our lessons “along the way” in a series of briefing papers. The **Career Engagement Strategies to Support the College and Career Success of Young Adults** paper attached to this document describes one of the promising strategies that Skill Link is piloting.

WHAT IS SKILL LINK?

SkillUp Washington piloted an ambitious three year initiative in 2011 to prepare young adults (18-29) to enter I-BEST or other career pathway programs. This target population includes low-income young adults; many have dropped out of high school or GED programs and experience multiple barriers to college participation.

Six Skill Link partnerships across Washington State, comprised of community college, workforce development council and community-based partners worked together to connect young adults to community, college education and employment resources.

The launch of Skill Link occurred during a time when concern over the future of many vulnerable young adults looms large. Two Washington State partners, the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (WSBCTC), and the Washington State Training

SKILL LINK SITES INCLUDE

Green River

- Green River Community College
- Seattle Education Access
- Seattle-King County WDC

Highline

- Highline Community College
- Multi-Service Center
- Seattle-King County WDC

Renton

- Renton Technical College
- Neighborhood House
- Seattle Education Access
- Seattle-King County WDC
- Renton Youth Source

Walla Walla

- Walla Walla Community College
- Blue Mountain Action Council
- Rural Resources

Clover Park

- Clover Park Technical College
- REACH Center
- Workforce Central

Lower Columbia

- Lower Columbia College
- Lower Columbia Community Action Program
- Goodwill's Longview Work Opportunity Center
- Southwest Washington WDC

and Education Coordinating Board (WSTECB), have been deeply engaged in Skill Link planning, implementation and evaluation efforts. These entities regard Skill Link as a foundational piece of a continuous pathway to college and career.

WHAT ARE SKILL LINK STRATEGIES?

Skill Link has taken a concerted “real world” approach that builds on the assets of young adults. Since its inception, the Skill Link model has maintained a strong focus on:

- Assessment-driven access to college preparation and Page access to resources.
- Strength-based approaches, which build on student motivation, resiliency and leadership skills.
- Course planning and tuition assistance.
- Contextualized math and reading instruction.
- Connecting peers to each other and to school and community resources.
- Navigator staff from community-based organizations working in partnership with community college instructors.

In addition to the above strategies, Skill Link’s model has evolved and begun to place a greater emphasis on:

- “Open” student cohorts, rather than “closed” cohorts at most sites.
- Recruiting current ABE/GED students interested in transitioning to college.
- Promoting student learning and affinity groups.
- Use of a life domain tool that helps students, navigators, and instructors mitigate barriers to education and employment such as childcare, housing, and transportation.
- Integration of career-pathway focused workforce development resources into every phase of the Skill Link model.

WHAT ARE INITIAL RESULTS OF SKILL LINK?

(Effective September 30, 2013)

- 296 students enrolled in Skill Link
 - 180 students demonstrating significant CASAS score gains (61%); 85% of those who post-tested demonstrated significant gains
 - 45 earning GEDs (self reported and preliminary)
 - 115 getting internships or jobs (self reported and preliminary)
 - 48 enrolled in college credit-bearing classes (preliminary)
- Promoting opportunities to build math skills to prospective students, as this area has been identified as a primary impediment to college by many students.
 - The strategic use of incentives, timed to reward the modest, short-term and incremental successes of students.
 - Post college enrollment transition supports.
 - Influencing the way other college partners, such as tutoring and advising centers, engage and serve the target population.
 - Promoting a regional focus in South King County, with an emphasis on employer engagement, cross-college referrals, and campus visits.

CAREER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE COLLEGE AND CAREER SUCCESS OF YOUNG ADULTS

Many young adults in King County and across the nation are unemployed or working in low wage jobs, raising significant concerns about the future of these young adults, and the overall economic health of the community.

Skill Link partners know that young adults want to succeed in school, work and life, and that many face serious challenges such as low basic skills, lack of transportation or childcare, that stand in the way of their preparing for or completing college or pursuing a family wage job.

Without guidance and a series of strategically timed supports many young adults run the risk of being stuck in low wage jobs, or of dropping out of the labor force –sometimes for so long that they don't get counted among the ranks of the unemployed.

WHY INTEGRATE AND EMBED ACADEMIC AND CAREER-FOCUSED INSTRUCTION AND SUPPORTS IN A GATEWAY TO COLLEGE PROGRAM?

Many young adults need income to live, and stay in school. Many also lack an awareness of the education and training needed to pursue different careers, or the connections to employers to make informed career choices or get a foot in the door.

Skill Link Navigators work with students to craft, update and realize the goals set on education and career plans. They tap the expertise and resources of the Workforce Development Council (WDC) and coordinate with training institution partners and Community College faculty and staff, and employers to help students achieve their goals and take full advantage of career development opportunities.

CORE FEATURES OF A CAREER ENGAGEMENT SYSTEM

- Career needs and interests assessment
- Integrated career and education plans
- Integrated academic/career-focused curriculum
- Navigator/Instructor/Workforce/Employer partnership
- Student career efficacy building strategies
- Integration of other Workforce partner resources
- Employer Engagement opportunities

WHAT DOES AN INTEGRATED CAREER ENGAGEMENT/GATEWAY TO COLLEGE SYSTEM LOOK LIKE?

Seven core career engagement strategies comprise the Skill Link Career Engagement System.

To work optimally this system requires that:

- **Career needs and interest assessments of students are conducted** by Navigators, in order to identify the career interests and experiences of students and to document any physical, legal, financial, housing or other obstacles that may influence student course and career aims.
- **Integrated career/education plans are developed** by Navigators, in partnership with students, and routinely updated to accommodate changes in student educational or career goals and labor market hiring opportunities. Activities include taking students on

tours to college campuses which feature student-selected career pathway certificates or degrees.

- **Career exploration activities are routinely and seamlessly woven into the curriculum**, and include classroom-based employer presentations and panels, mock interviews, employer job fairs, and visits to apprenticeship training programs and local employer site visits or other venues featuring the types of employment which students desire.
- **Navigators, instructors, workforce partners and employers communicate regularly** about the career choices and progress of students, and work with students to address obstacles, and celebrate successes.
- **Coaching to increase the career-self efficacy skills of students are provided**, to ensure that students learn how to independently use on-line job search engines, complete eye-catching resumes and competitive job applications, and interview for jobs.
- **Workforce partnerships are in place** with Workforce Investment Act, Food Stamp Employment and Training (FSET), Community College Career Services staff and other institutions which provide career training, tuition, hiring fairs, employer networking opportunities or other career exploration activities.
- **Employer engagement opportunities for students** include access to short-term survival jobs, job shadow, work experience, unpaid and paid internships, work-study and part or full-time employment in areas where students can build their core transferable skills, learn new skills, establish a work history, and/or begin to make an inroad to the career they hope to pursue after completing college.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Career Engagement system building efforts work best when:

- The role of the Workforce Investment Act Partner (WIA) is clearly defined, and the local WIA partner is committed to working with the lead college/CBO partner.
- The partnership among CBO, Community College and Workforce members has a clear plan for integrating academic, course exploration and work experience components, and for providing wraparound activities to young adults.
- The curriculum is logically linked to work experience and employer engagement activities and includes career preparation, work readiness and team-building skills.
- Employer engagement involves interaction between the students and the workforce, and includes work-based learning opportunities.
- Career guidance and academic counseling services incorporate up-to-date information on industry sectors and occupations, career pathways and hiring opportunities.

WHAT ARE THE RESULTS OF IMPLEMENTING A CAREER ENGAGEMENT SYSTEM?

- Students develop a clear understanding of the demands of different careers and the types of courses, certificates and degrees required to pursue these careers.
 - Students know the course and career path they want to pursue, and have a plan in place to access related training and employment.
 - Students make progress towards achieving education and career goals and receive timely and coordinated interventions and supports.
 - Students who need survival, work study or other subsidized employment can access these resources, increasing their ability to participate in and complete the program.
- Employers and students connect early on, often in the classroom setting, increasing employer connections to college faculty, curricula developers, and students, and company-based employer engagement opportunities.
 - The boundaries between college, workforce and employers are erased, leading to more relevant curriculum, strategic and timely sharing of resources, and employer engagement supports. One effective practice involves having the CBO Navigator in the classroom and in some cases, engages in teaching life skills.

Community Colleges play a vital role in building the academic and career readiness skills of students, but do not have the time to meet all of their career engagement and planning needs, or to continually cultivate the support of employers. The participation of workforce partners fills this gap, and increases student access to on and off campus employer engagement resources. As members of the same team, the Navigators, workforce partners and community college partners play an important and integrated role, ensuring that students maintain a dual college and career focus.

*Readers who are interested in learning more about Skill Link Career Engagement strategies are invited to review *The SkillUp Washington Guide and Tools for Navigators*, which contains examples of Career Development Tools and Employer Involvement Tools to document and guide the above work. Please contact Susan Crane, Executive Director of Skillup Washington at (206) 388-1660 and check out the Skill Link website at <http://www.skillupwa.org/> which includes a copy of the Navigator Guide.*