



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 **Building a Sustainable On Ramp to College System for 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

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

Technical Colleges (WSBCTC), and the Washington State Training 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.

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)
- Integration of career-pathway focused workforce development resources into every phase of the Skill Link model.
 - 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.

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE ON RAMP TO COLLEGE SYSTEM FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Young adults are a complex, large, yet mostly unrecognized constituency in need of education, employment and other life supports. Some blend into the landscape of persons working intermittently in low wage jobs. Others utilize the resources of multiple service systems, and many have cycled through, but not completed one or more GED college programs. The cost on service systems, society and the economy is high when these young people do not receive the support they need to move forward, and gain market-able skills.

How can we make sure that this happens?

EXAMPLES OF “OPPORTUNITY POINTS” WHERE YOUNG ADULTS COULD BE ENGAGED IN ON RAMP TO COLLEGE PROGRAMS

K-16 EDUCATION SYSTEM

- High school dropouts, soon after they exit high school
- High school graduates who exit high school with academic skills too low to enter college credit-bearing classes
- GED students interested in pursuing post-secondary education
- GED graduates who exit with academic skills too low to enter college credit-bearing classes
- ABE/ESL students interested in pursuing post-secondary education

WHERE ARE THE CRITICAL TRANSITION “OPPORTUNITY POINTS” WHERE YOUNG ADULTS COULD BE READILY ENGAGED IN ON RAMP TO COLLEGE PROGRAMS?

Interviews with Skill Link students, workforce, community college and CBO partners revealed that there are critical “opportunity points” in the lives of young adults, where they would have greatly benefited from engagement in an on ramp to college program. Looking back to their past, students often expressed regret that they had not received the right kind of services at the right time to build their academic and career skills, and get their lives back on track.

The “opportunity points” they identified were connected to K-16, Criminal Justice, Emergency Assistance, Health/Medical Assistance, Homeless/Housing, Public Assistance, and Public Health systems – making one wonder- what would happen if, for example, a young adult exited juvenile services, lost their employment, or received food stamps were routinely given an opportunity to enroll in an on ramp to college program. Would their life trajectories change?

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF YOUNG ADULTS RECEIVED JUST IN TIME “OPPORTUNITY POINT” ON RAMP TO COLLEGE INTERVENTIONS?

Over time interviews with 35 Skill Link students reveals that by recruiting and providing just in time on ramp to college and career supports, young adults reliance on and utilization of the above service systems becomes more strategic and intentional, and their lives become more stable and productive. Long-term results of these interventions likely include reductions in recidivism, unemployment and homelessness.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

YOUNG ADULTS EXITING

- Juvenile justice systems
- Correction-related group homes
- Adult correctional system
- Diversion/drug court programs

HEALTH/MEDICAL ASSISTANCE

YOUNG ADULTS EXITING

- Chemical dependency programs
- Mental health facilities

HOMELESS/HOUSING SYSTEM

YOUNG ADULTS WHO ARE:

- Living on the street/couch surfing/residing in precarious situations
- Using the shelter/emergency housing system resources
- Evicted from public housing/housing choice voucher housing
- Residing in time-limited housing
- Living in Housing Choice Voucher/Public Housing
- On wait lists for public housing/housing choice voucher/time-limited housing

By connecting young adults to on ramp to college programs at the critical opportunity points listed in the left hand column, system partners will have access to:

- On ramp to college and career supports for their clients;
- Data necessary to track changes in the recidivism, service utilization and next step college and career engagement experiences of youth and young adults who exit these “opportunity points”; and
- Return on investment data to make a case for re-purposing, aligning and leveraging their funds and service systems to include articulation to on ramp services.

HOW DO WE LEVERAGE AND BRIDGE EXISTING SYSTEMS TO CREATE A SUSTAINABLE ON RAMP TO COLLEGE MODEL?

Some examples of how a sustainable system is being built are presented below:

- The WSBCTC is adopting on ramps to IBEST programs using existing ABE/ESL resources. Students in these classes are being engaged in next step credit bearing classes and building their marketable work skills.
- The three partner model of Skill Link increased the connections among community based organizations, workforce development councils and community and technical colleges, paving the way for these partners to more strategically leverage and align their resources. Partners also learned from one another as SkillUp held cross site meetings and continually shared lessons learned.
- The three partner model created a unified voice in support of on ramp programs that cut across multiple funders and funding streams. The partners began to look collectively beyond their own systems and brainstormed, for example, how to identify more stable and affordable housing options for young adults, recognizing that the absence of this resource limits the performance of young adults in all of their service systems.

UNEMPLOYMENT SYSTEM

YOUNG ADULTS WHO ARE:

- Unemployed
- Losing their unemployment benefits but still unemployed

PUBLIC ASSISTANCE/ EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE SYSTEMS

YOUNG ADULTS WHO ARE:

- Exiting TANF or other time-limited income subsidies without sufficient training or education to get above minimum wage jobs.
- Exiting foster care and not enrolled in the Independent Living Program
- Exiting TANF and entering jobs that pay minimum wage
- Receiving food stamps

- On ramp partners are more aware of and likely to integrate their work with providers who access state dropout prevention (Open Doors 1418) and Food Stamp Employment Training (FSET) resources for youth because the on ramp model is regarded as a viable referral and service partner that stretches the resources of those initiatives. Sustainability depends on all entities looking for how they can efficiently and effectively glue together these efforts in ways that are transparent to young adults and is easy to navigate.

All of the above service systems stand to gain from engaging their clients in on ramp to college programs that offer a full range of academic, career and social supports. The institutions associated with the above “opportunity points” receive their funding from multiple funding sources. As mentioned above, they are all potential sustainability partners for programs like Skill Link. Moreover, they are prime advocates and sponsors for legislation, such as those funding current Washington State foster care and drop out retrieval services that could potentially bring additional funding to young adults. A concerted effort looking at strategies to pool resources to ensure that they are applied to on ramp to college programs could reduce the burden these systems face. Skill Up is looking for ways to champion this effort and to generate support for building a sustainable opportunity system. We invite readers to send their sustainability ideas and join us in this work.

Readers who are interested in sharing their sustainability strategies, or want to learn more about Skill Link and/or their partner sustainability strategies are invited contact Susan Crane, Executive Director of Skillup Washington at (206) 388-1660 and check out the Skill Link website at <http://www.skillupwa.org/>.