

Washington State-defined Process for Ability to Benefit

Introduction

The Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (State Board) is governed by a nine-member, governor-appointed board responsible for administering the Community and Technical College Act and providing leadership and coordination for Washington state's system of 34 public community and technical colleges. The State Board supports and empowers the Washington state community and technical colleges to increase higher education opportunities and student participation through advocacy, resources, information, leadership and accountability.

The State Board's Education Division focuses on three mission areas: Academic transfer, Workforce education, and Basic Education for Adults. Basic Education for Adults administers funding received from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title II Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) along with appropriated state funding. Basic Education's mission is to provide research-proven instruction and college and career readiness pathways that allow adults to master academic and technical skills to attain their career and educational goals and successfully navigate education and employment opportunities. Basic Education believes that the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion strengthen the basic skills community and are critical to providing opportunities that support the success of underrepresented students, students of color, and low-income students in attaining a quality education that leads to self-sustaining employment.

According to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#), 550,889 of Washington state's residents age 18 and over are in need of a high school credential, or 7.35% of the state's population. Washington state's [2013 Roadmap](#) sets the attainment goal that by 2023, all adults in Washington, ages 25-44, will have a high school diploma, and at least 70 percent will have a postsecondary credential. These goals are supported by the State Board's "[Tipping Point](#)" research, which determined that the biggest earnings bumps for students occur when they earn a year of college credit and a workforce credential.

In response to the Tipping Point research, in which the State Board learned that only 4-6% of 35,000 pre-college students made it to the Tipping Point after five years of tracking, the State Board created the Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training or I-BEST model. I-BEST places adult education students directly into college credit-bearing career pathways that lead to high demand, living wage jobs. I-BEST challenges the traditional notion that students must move through a set sequence of basic education courses before they can start working on certificates and degrees. The combined teaching method at the heart of I-BEST allows students to work on college-level studies much more quickly than in traditional models, and the required navigational services connects students to resources and guides them to completion. The State Board approves all [professional-technical degree and certificate programs](#) prior to I-BEST implementation through a highly rigorous review and approval process. All I-BEST programs undergo a further [review process](#) in which colleges are required to integrate outcomes and meet other WIOA Integrated Education and Training (IET) requirements, including ensuring that completers will earn certificates and degrees that lead to high demand, living wage jobs.

Fifteen years after its original pilots, I-BEST is considered the [gold standard](#) nationwide for IET (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2016). Success rates for students in I-BEST programs are much higher than for students in traditional programs. The [Community College Research Center](#) out of Columbia University found that I-BEST students are three times more likely to earn college credit than traditional Adult Basic Education/English Language Acquisition students, and nine times more likely to earn a postsecondary credential (Wachen et al, 2012.) According to a [net impact study](#) done on the workforce development system in Washington state, I-BEST completers gain substantial labor market outcomes with a 12.3% increase in employment, a 65 hour quarterly increase in hours worked, and an average earnings increase of almost \$1000.00 per quarter (Hollenbeck et al, 2016.) As of 2019, no less than 91% of all I-BEST students earned at least six college credits compared to 17% of all Basic Education for Adults students (SBCTC Research dashboard.)

Of course, for students and employers, high school completion is still a desired goal. There are many ways to obtain a high school credential as an adult resident of Washington state. If a student earns a two-year degree from one of our thirty-four community and technical colleges in the state, they can merely check a box and [receive a high school diploma](#). They can also study for the GED. However, in Washington state two-thirds of our living wage jobs require a postsecondary credential – not necessarily a two-year degree – in addition to a high school credential. For these students, co-enrollment in our High School 21+ and I-BEST programs brings the Tipping Point within reach, moving students to and through postsecondary programs that lead to living wage work and a robust state economy. [High School 21+](#) is a competency-based high school completion program that results in a Washington state high school diploma. It awards credit for prior learning, military, training and work experience. Because it is competency-based, students can complete coursework through I-BEST and have that same coursework count toward the completion of a high school diploma, saving the student both time and money and accelerating Washington state toward its completion goals.

Washington state is a '[Guided Pathways](#)' state, whereby colleges are grouping courses together to form clear paths through college and into careers. Guided Pathways efforts focus on helping more of our students – especially low-income, first-generation students and students of color – earn credentials with labor market value to prepare them for entry into higher-paying, high-demand fields. Co-enrollment in I-BEST and High School 21+ is our foundational strategy for serving basic skills students in the guided pathways framework.

The final piece of pathway design is funding for students. Ability to Benefit provides eligible students with the funding they need to retain in their programs, complete, and enter/upskill in the workforce. Currently, students may be determined eligible for Ability to Benefit if, in addition to being enrolled in an eligible career pathway program, they:

- “Take an independently administered examination and...achieve a score, specified by the Secretary, demonstrating that such student can benefit from the education or training being offered.”
- Achieve “satisfactory completion of 6 credit hours or the equivalent coursework that are applicable toward a degree or certificate offered by the institution of higher education.” (HEA Sec. 484(d))

As the law states, part of demonstrating the effectiveness of an ATB-eligibility process dictates that the Secretary “take into account the cultural diversity, economic circumstances, and educational preparation of the populations served by the institutions.” In Washington state many of our residents in need of a high school and postsecondary credential struggle to pay out-of-pocket for the first six college credits, or have been out of school for many years and have difficulty passing an exam. These realities place the potential of Ability to Benefit out of reach for many students who would in fact benefit from and succeed with federal student aid.

Thankfully, the law permits students to demonstrate ability to benefit from federal student aid “in accordance with such process as the State shall prescribe.” In order to serve more students in eligible career pathway programs and thus boost individual and national economic growth, Washington state proposes a state-defined process for determining Ability to Benefit eligibility for students.

Process Highlights

The Governor supported, Washington State-defined Process for Ability to Benefit provides the following:

- A list of State Board institutions that will have an opportunity to take part in the State-defined Process.
- Calculations and reporting of the rate of success, as defined by the Department of Education, using established resources and reporting systems.
- Required services that will be provided to ATB students by the participating institutions, including but not limited to:
 - a) Orientation;
 - b) Assessment through means other than a single test;
 - c) Tutoring;
 - d) Career Goal Development;
 - e) Counseling;
 - f) Follow-up regarding student progress.
- Criteria for determining good candidates for enrollment in ATB and a summary of academic supports.
- Provisions for annually monitoring participating institutions, enforcing corrective actions with participating institutions to maintain state and federal compliance, and terminating participating institutions from ATB participation should there be continued non-compliance.

Potential Participating Institutions

1. Bates Technical College
2. Bellevue College
3. Bellingham Technical College
4. Big Bend Community College
5. Cascadia College
6. Centralia College
7. Clark College
8. Clover Park Technical College
9. Columbia Basin College

10. Edmonds Community College
11. Everett Community College
12. Grays Harbor College
13. Green River College
14. Highline College
15. Lake Washington Institute of Technology
16. Lower Columbia College
17. North Seattle College
18. Olympic College
19. Peninsula College
20. Pierce College – Fort Steilacoom
21. Pierce College – Puyallup
22. Renton Technical College
23. Seattle Central College
24. Shoreline Community College
25. Skagit Valley College
26. South Puget Sound Community College
27. South Seattle College
28. Spokane Community College
29. Spokane Falls Community College
30. Tacoma Community College
31. Walla Walla Community College
32. Wenatchee Valley College
33. Whatcom Community College
34. Yakima Valley College

Data Reporting

Washington state leverages its substantial data resources to pursue evidence-based policies at every level, and the keystone to these efforts is the State Board Data Warehouse. Among the many databases available in the warehouse is the Washington Adult Basic Education Reporting System, which provides stakeholders with both student baseline and progression data snapshots on a quarterly basis. This database becomes even more powerful when joined to enrollment, transcript, completion, and employment outcomes data sources in the warehouse. This enables the State Board to track longitudinal student outcomes from the day the student steps foot on campus to several quarters after exit. The database includes indicators for both High School 21+ and I-BEST, allowing the State Board to monitor co-enrolled student progress. State Board data is currently used to allocate performance-based funding, track the success of the Guided Pathways initiative, and monitor program performance each quarter, among other uses.

The State Board is currently designing a process whereby we will be able to track Ability to Benefit use statewide by quarter. As part of this data collection we will collect information on AtB students for the following metrics:

- Credits earned
- GPA

- Federal Educational Functioning Levels (Basic Skill levels) increased
- Diplomas, certificates & degrees earned
- Employment 2nd & 4th quarter after exit
- Median earnings

These would be broken down by demographics: gender, age, ethnicity, income, etc.

Required Services

Under the Washington State-defined Process for Ability to Benefit, participating colleges will provide each participating Ability to Benefit student with comprehensive services:

Student orientation

Students who co-enroll in I-BEST and High School 21+ undergo rigorous orientation. Upon entering the High School 21+ program, each student works with an advisor to assess what the student has already learned through life, work, school, or military experience. Together, they develop a plan to complete the rest of what the student needs in order to earn a degree. In I-BEST, each student is assigned a navigator. Navigators work with each student to make sure they meet eligibility requirements, have a solid understanding of the educational and career pathway, and have the needed support to complete enrollment and funding processes. Co-enrollment in these programs provides intense wraparound supportive services to each student that include information on academic standards and requirements as well as student rights.

Assessment through means other than a single test

High School 21+ and I-BEST use multiple measures for assessment. Through High School 21+, programs can use the High School Credit Option to measure and report educational gains by awarding required high school credits instead of testing. In I-BEST students are assessed on program outcomes and the College and Career Readiness Standards through integrated assessment instruments developed during the program design process. While CASAS scores can be used to assist in the initial process of co-enrolling students in I-BEST and High School 21+, and measure skills gains along the way, it is the documentation of real classroom learning through outcomes and standards assessment in both secondary and postsecondary credential programs that drive the demonstration of student success and progress within their eligible career pathway program.

Tutoring

One of the key advantages of the I-BEST model is the delivery of integrated outcomes instruction through team teaching. Team teaching places adult education instructors in the college course to teach alongside the professional-technical instructor. Through direct instruction in the college course as well as continued support in a “support” course, students receive just-in-time assistance with acquiring the basic skills needed to be successful in their eligible career pathway program. Navigators assist in connecting students to additional campus tutoring supports as needed.

Education and Career Goal Planning

Navigators and faculty jointly assist students in understanding career pathways and developing educational plans. All BEa students are required to be on a college/career pathway that leads to living wage work; navigational services in High School 21+ and I-BEST enhance this requirement with intensive wraparound supports that include short and long-term career goal setting. I-BEST programs are required

to have detailed maps of career pathways that include credentials needed and wage progression. After completion of their I-BEST pathway, students can either enter the workforce with skills and certifications needed for living wage work, or enroll in the next set of courses in their pathway that leads to degrees, including transfer and applied baccalaureate degrees.

Counseling

“Counseling” in the Washington state community and technical college system is done by navigators and advisors and includes wraparound supports related to pathway and course selection, retention and completion, coaching, access to financial and other community resources, and other services designed to support students in their work toward certificates and degrees leading to living wage employment. I-BEST and High School 21+ both provide these intensive supports.

Follow-up regarding student progress

Faculty and navigators both support students in understanding their assessments and progress to completion. I-BEST is college-level programming and students receive assessments and grading in the same manner as all college students. Navigators provide additional support and can connect students to tutoring and other services designed to support student learning.

Criteria and Program Design

The State Board proposes that students demonstrate the ‘ability to benefit’ when they co-enroll in Title-IV federal aid eligible I-BEST programs and High School 21+. Highlights of this process are as follows:

- Students must qualify for federally supported levels of basic skills education. CASAS is used to appraise and pre-test all basic education students at the start of the program and post-test students following the [WA state Basic Skills Assessment Policy](#). Students may also demonstrate skill gain through the awarding of high school credits, as approved by OCTAE and outlined in the WA state Basic Skills Assessment Policy.
- Students must meet all entrance requirements to enroll in I-BEST. Each I-BEST program sets their own entrance requirements. Many use ABE 4/ESL 5 WIOA Federal Educational Functioning Level (EFLs) designations as a baseline, but this varies by program. Some may have additional math, writing, and other assessments designed to ensure that students are a good fit for the program.
- Students and programs must continue to meet all other ATB eligibility requirements.

Monitoring

The State Board will annually monitor each of the participating institutions for compliance within the Washington State-defined Process for Ability to Benefit requirements and standards of service. ATB student completion rates must be within 95% of the completion rate of students who have a high school credential as per 34 CFR 668.156 (h).

The State Board will identify corrective action(s) if an institution is found to be noncompliant with the Washington State-defined Process for Ability to Benefit requirements, and the State Board may terminate an institution’s participation if the institution does not meet the goals established by the corrective action(s) as per 34 CFR 668.156 (d).

Questions

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