

Date: January 13, 2012
Subject: IRHE Report on Washington-- *State Policy Leadership Vacuum*

The Institute for Research on Higher Education (IRHE), housed in the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, has published the second in a planned series of five case study reports analyzing the relationship between state higher education policy and outcomes in governance and education (primarily degree attainment). The five state reports are based on the Institute's analysis of publicly available data and other published sources, as well as three to five days of interviews in each state. The [first report](#), released in November, analyzed Illinois, and [today's report](#) focuses on Washington State. Future case studies will address Georgia, Maryland and Texas. Together, the case studies comprise the State Review Project, which aims to identify how specific policy actions facilitate or hinder education attainment, a key measure in an economy that is [increasingly dependent](#) on a highly educated workforce.

While satisfactorily describing the key facts, long-term trends and potential future problems for higher education in Washington State, the report is somewhat unrealistic in its recommendations. It seems to assume that, absent any change in state funding trends, policymakers can dramatically alter educational attainment via structural changes in governance. Some of the key facts and trends highlighted in the report:

- Washington's high proportion of educated citizens (11th among states in percentage of population with an AA degree or higher), must be due in part to its ability to attract highly educated workers from elsewhere, because the state's production of BA degree per capita is below average.
- Demographics may exacerbate this trend as Washington's college aged population expands, especially among Hispanics, whose current college going rate is much lower than non-Hispanic peers.
- Although Washington lags behind the national average in high school graduation rates and in the proportion of young adults enrolled in higher education, its universities are among the most efficient in the nation, with a much higher than average six-year graduation rate (65% compared to 56%).
- Most college students in Washington (88%) are enrolled in a public institution, and 64% of those students are enrolled in a community college, well above the national average (48%).
- Washington has the largest community college system in the US (34 colleges), and those colleges are distributed more evenly in terms of geography and population than the six, four-year institutions and branch campuses.
- The Great Recession has exacerbated a trend of higher education cost-shifting with state funding cuts leading to steep tuition increases while the median income has been flat and, in some cases, fallen.
- Washington has one of the most generous financial aid programs in the country and has mostly maintained that commitment through the Great Recession thus far.

The report acknowledges the existence of a statewide plan with goals for increasing educational attainment in Washington, but observes a lack of any clear path created to achieving those goals. The authors note that the recent dissolution of the state's Higher Education Coordinating Board makes the possibility of a coordinated statewide policy effort even less likely, and lament the broken connection between state funding, tuition levels, and financial aid. As others stated in the [Seattle Times](#), the report fails to fully address the repercussions of the recent precipitous loss of state support (50% for the [University of Washington](#) over four years) and how that has and will likely continue to impede progress toward the attainment goals laid out in the state's Master Plan. The report also highlights recent tuition increases and new institutional tuition-setting authority as a problem for access and attainment without adequately

identifying the direct link between the loss of state funding and the increasing reliance on tuition revenue to just maintain the current level of access and quality offered by Washington's institutions.

The report also praises the upsides of the state's robust community college system, the fourth largest in the country, while overlooking some of the structural problems created by the unusually large system. The authors write that community college enrollment in Washington comprises 64 percent of total enrollment in public institutions compared to only 48 percent nationally. Given this, it should be no surprise that the percent of the population enrolled in four year institutions lags behind the national average. Although the report notes preferential budgetary treatment for community colleges, as well as the cost imposed on four-year institutions that must provide only the most costly portion of education (upper division, major coursework) for transfer students, it does not propose any changes to the community college system that would be necessary to expand enrollment in four year institutions, especially absent additional state investment.

Ultimately, there is widespread support in Washington for increasing educational attainment to meet the future needs of the economy and with almost 9 out of 10 students enrolled in a public institution the state will need to be integrally involved in achieving this goal alongside the institutions. Yet, as the report notes, Washington's policymakers and institutions have not yet agreed upon enough specific strategies to achieve this goal, which includes both increasing the number of high school graduates who enroll in higher education as well as increasing the portion of students who enroll and go on to complete a four year degree.

A paramount concern to institutions like the University of Washington is that many potential strategies for increasing student output in the absence of additional funding threaten to undermine the quality of the education provided (e.g. cutting requirements, forcing curricular standardization across institutions, scaling up untested online learning, increasing class sizes, and admitting students who are not adequately prepared to succeed). Additionally, some of the strategies listed in the report, like shifting the policy control from institution-centered to a statewide agency and vice versa, and various kinds of performance-based funding schemes, have been done and undone in many states without any clear benefit.

Because economic projections indicate strained state funding for higher education in the near and mid-term future, it is vital that the state and institutions adopt specific strategies to increase higher education participation and completion in Washington. But it is equally important that such strategies present a reasonable expectation of success based on the experiences of other states, and that they take into account the different missions of Washington's institutions. The institutions are currently working very hard with the Legislature on these very issues.

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