

Our state's most urgent need: educate more people to higher levels

Washington needs more people with higher levels of education and skill to sustain our prosperity, our democracy, and our diverse and innovative culture. To achieve this goal, we can no longer simply wait for people to enroll in our colleges; we must reach out to all those who can benefit from further education, and help them succeed at learning.

Community and technical colleges are at the center of this challenge. Our open door policy meets people wherever they are on their educational journey, whether they are high school dropouts, new immigrants, high school graduates seeking a college degree or job skills, or mid-career professionals retraining for new opportunities.

Fuller use of information technology is key to making education more accessible and user-friendly for every kind of learner. But we are late to recognize the educational impact and potential of the Internet, late to take advantage of the shift to open, student-centered, web-based applications, and late to listen to what our students and faculty are telling us about what they need to thrive in the 21st century.

Even though we are ahead of many other states in our use of online learning, we are far behind the level of technological sophistication of today's workplaces, and far behind in mobilizing technologies that could help increase student learning, provide friendlier, faster student services, and improve administrative efficiency, data analysis, and accountability.

One, single-minded goal: to mobilize technology to increase student success

This plan addresses all of these deficits. But while most strategic plans have many goals, this plan has only one: *to mobilize technology to increase student success*. It lays out clear principles, strategies, and action steps that will transform our use of technology for the benefit of all learners and the faculty who teach them.

These principles, strategies and action steps are the result of an 18-month analysis conducted by the Technology Transformation Task Force of the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. The Task Force conducted extensive surveys, focus groups and interviews with students, faculty, staff, and education and information technology experts and educators from across the country and around the world. It also analyzed the community and technical college system's successes and mistakes in the deployment of information technology during the past 25 years. We are now implementing what we can with existing resources and seeking funds for additional needed investment.

Five strategies for transformation

Strategy I: Create a single, system-wide suite of online teaching and learning tools that provides all Washington students with easy access to “anywhere, anytime” learning.

Strategy II: Create a seamless P-20 system for personalized online student services including: recruitment, retention, advising, course catalogue, transfer, and financial aid management.

Strategy III: Create a system of lifelong learning and change management for faculty, staff and college leadership.

Strategy IV: Use data to drive continuous improvement in both student success and administrative efficiency.

Strategy V: Treat information technology as a centrally funded, baseline service in the system budget.

The Task Force’s work dealt with three major areas of technology deployment: student learning, student services, and administration. In all three areas, the Task Force found a need for greater uniformity across the 34 colleges in the system and with our partners in the broader P-20 education system.

Today’s patchwork of programs often requires students to learn multiple online learning programs and use multiple passwords. Not all colleges use WashingtonOnline, the system-wide platform for online learning, because they must pay to do so. The result is a constriction in the number of online courses that are available to students throughout the state. Students also must pay an extra fee to take an online class. This plan proposes to end both fees and to fund online learning not as a special add-on, but part of the baseline of expected service.

This plan also recommends a shift from locally-developed software and hosting services. Today, the private sector and public, open source communities have developed applications and hosting services for online learning, student services, and administration that include automatic updates that continue to add functionality. We will not try to do what others can do better, faster, and for less money. We will shift our best and brightest IT staff from software developers to integration experts who tie together best-of-breed applications.

But the biggest shift called for in this plan is cultural. In the end, catching up with today’s information technologies is not about technology itself; it is about a new world of open, online sharing where everyone has the power to create and disseminate their ideas, courses and textbooks and to re-mix and use others’ work. It is about simultaneous collaboration with peers across the hall and around the world. To be a part of this world – and to help create it – both our students and our faculty need new tools, new competencies, and an education system that is organized to support the fullest possible use of the vast new learning resources available at their fingertips.