

Testimony Submitted to the US Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions College Affordability

**Testimony of Charlie Earl, Executive Director,
Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges**

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Good morning! Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi, and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to join you today. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the innovative ways we're keeping college affordable at Washington's community and technical colleges. I thank Senator Murray for her steadfast support of higher education and workforce development in Washington and nationally.

My name is Charlie Earl, and I'm the executive director of the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. I feel honored not only to be here with you at our nation's capitol, but to represent a community and technical college system that is building careers and reinvigorating the economy in "the other Washington."

I'll provide some background information about Washington's community and technical college system and then share three strategies that help keep our community and technical colleges affordable.

We have 34 community and technical colleges in Washington. Our colleges help fuel our economy by providing the training programs that residents need to land good jobs, and current and future employers need to thrive. We join forces with local employers to offer programs in aerospace, alternative energy, business services, hospitality, health care and sustainable agriculture – critical areas of growth for our state. We discontinue programs that have become less relevant for the workforce. The colleges keep a laser-sharp focus on where jobs are now, and where they're going to be in the future. And we move students and resources to the necessary skills and knowledge.

Like community colleges across the nation, we have an open door admission policy that assures that every person who can benefit from higher education has the opportunity to enroll. We strive to get students where they need to be regardless of their circumstances -- whether they are preparing for a 4-year university, retraining for new careers, or trying to raise their literacy or English skills.

The avenues to education are varied, but they lead to a common destination: a good career and a life enriched with knowledge and skills.

Our colleges serve a predominantly working class and low-income student population – over half of our students work and go to school, more than a third are parents, and the median age is 26. For many of our students, all it takes is an expensive textbook....a slight tuition increase...an unexpected car repair....or a medical bill to put them over the edge financially and force them to drop out, drastically reducing their chances of earning a living wage in the future. We work hard to keep them in school.

Which brings us to the issue of affordability.

Compared to other states, our tuition is average and our financial aid investments are among the highest in the country, which makes a community and technical college education affordable for Washingtonians.

Washington ranks 9th in the country in the number of Pell grant recipients who also receive state financial aid, and 4th in the country in how much state money those students receive.

In-state students who attend a community or technical college full-time in Washington State pay \$3,542 per year. We've held tuition close to the national average despite deep budget cuts. This has been a tough task. Ten years ago (in 2002), the state paid 78% of the cost of enrollment for community and technical college students; today that number has slipped to 63%.

Our tuition remains a fraction of the amount charged at 4-year institutions. Students who go to a community or technical college for the first two years of their bachelor's degrees save tens of thousands of dollars in tuition. In fact, 38 percent of students who graduate with a bachelor's degree in Washington started off in a community or technical college.

We have a strong transfer system with state universities. Proportionality agreements with each public university ensure that the number of slots for transfer students grows at the same rate as slots for university freshmen.

Our system also waives tuition to help the least skilled, lowest income students catch up on the skills they missed in high school, and transition to college-level programs. Our "Adult Basic Education" students only pay \$25 per term. We also waive part of the tuition for apprenticeship programs, parenting education, and military veterans.

In addition to our tuition policies, we keep college affordable for our students in three other ways.

- 1) Providing a strong network of financial aid,
- 2) Moving students further and faster through college, and
- 3) Keeping student expenses down.

Our first strategy is to provide strong financial aid for lower-income students.

Nearly half – 47% – of the students in our system received some form of financial aid in the 2010-2011 school year, including state and federal aid. Our state's largest program is the state need grant, which supplements federal financial aid for low-income students. In the 2011-2012 school year, 29,000 community and technical college students will receive state need grants of up to \$3,256. State need grants can be used on a wider range of expenses than federal Pell grants, so they play an important role in rounding-out aid for our students.

Historically, our state has placed more money into the need grant program when tuition rises, although the program is now under stress because of additional proposed budget cuts.

The opportunity grant is a special program that provides funding for low-income community and technical college students to train for high wage, high demand careers.

Unemployed adults can get a jump-start on worker retraining by getting grants that help pay for costs until traditional financial aid kicks in. In the second year of the recession, our worker retraining enrollments jumped from 6,000 to 12,000 full-time students, and the Legislature gave our system a special appropriation to meet that demand. Today, 45% of our students are enrolled in workforce training.

Washington state also offers work-study programs and academic-based scholarships. We are one of the few states to offer “college bound” scholarships for low-income 8th-graders who promise to finish high school, stay out of trouble, and keep up with their grades.

Last year, Governor Christine Gregoire forged public-private partnerships with local industries to provide scholarships for students to complete degrees in high demand fields like science, technology, engineering and math.

Our second strategy uses statewide programs to move students further and faster through college.

Simply enrolling students in school is not the true measure of success – it’s what students achieve and what they can do with their educations that count. We’ve launched a performance-based funding system that tracks student achievement in key academic milestones. Colleges receive financial rewards for the increased academic performance of their students. Since we started tracking data in 2007, we’ve seen a 42 percent increase in certificates and degrees – not simply because more students are enrolling in the system, but because more students are reaching important academic milestones and building momentum to finish.

The program is called the “Student Achievement Initiative” and it is being duplicated in other states now. Colleges use their award money to reinvest in successful practices that improve academic achievement.

We also offer a popular dual-credit program that is appropriately named “Running Start.” Running Start allows high school juniors and seniors to attend tuition-free classes at community colleges. The students not only earn credit toward high school graduation, they also earn credit toward an associate degree or a bachelor’s degree. Last year (2010-2011), 19,000 high school students – or roughly 10 percent of the state’s junior and senior class – earned on average two full quarters of college credit, saving families across the state \$41 million in college tuition.

These types of dual-credit programs are consistent with the Governor Gregoire’s “Washington Learns” plan, which calls for a seamless education system from kindergarten through graduate school.

Students who are not yet ready for college-level classes – either because they didn’t finish high school or don’t speak English – can come up to speed quickly by attending an Integrated Basic Education Training (IBEST) program. This nationally-recognized program pairs basic skills instruction with workforce training. For example, a student might learn basic math skills while working in an automotive class. Students don’t have to wait until they’re done with basic-skills classes before they start their job-training. It’s basically a “two for one” deal that keeps students motivated and moving through the system more efficiently – and saves them money.

Our IBEST students are nine times more likely to earn a college credential than those who go through basic skills first and then enter workforce training. We are working with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation on a national dissemination project of our IBEST model.

Our third strategy is to keep costs down for students.

Many of our community and college students live on the edge financially, so we work to help cut their expenses using technology.

For example, textbooks alone can cost students more than \$1,200 per year, so we’ve developed an online, open course library. Faculty and staff teams are redesigning 81 of the highest enrolled courses with open digital content and with open textbooks that cost students \$30 or less per course. Already, students are saving \$1.3 million in textbook costs this year, just from the lead faculty who designed the first 42 open courses. These savings already exceed the original \$1.2 million investment from the state and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Our students could save up to \$43 million per year statewide if open textbooks are adopted for all sections of these 81 courses.

Our system also manages the Northwest eTutoring Consortium, which has 38 member institutions in six northwest states. Students have free access to tutoring seven days a week, 50 weeks per year – this is above and beyond the kind of coverage provided in most face-to-face tutoring sessions. The consortium is the largest online, free-for-students tutoring site in the northwest.

E-learning is another way our students save money. About 25% of our students take classes completely or partially online, saving time and travel expenses.

In closing, I would like to thank you again for this opportunity to speak to the committee on behalf of Washington’s 34 community and technical colleges. We share your goal of providing the highest quality education at the most affordable cost. We achieve that goal every day – in many ways – across our state. And in doing so, we enrich our citizens, our communities, and our economy.