



## ICW colleges smooth transitions between education sectors

**T**rends in higher education enrollment show students are increasingly attending multiple institutions, often resulting in lower student engagement and longer time to graduation. Policy makers and institutional administrators are considering this trend when developing transfer and college curricula policies.



Seattle University commuter students taking a break in a collegium.

Independent Colleges of Washington (ICW) member colleges are taking a proactive approach to smoothing transitions — from high school to college, community college to four year institution, or the work force back to school. This fall, the largest enrollment increase at ICW member colleges was transfer students, up by 11 percent since fall 2004. ICW colleges and universities are creating pathways for smooth transitions and education success.

### Partnerships expand programmatically and geographically

Since its opening in 1981, **Heritage University's** mission has been to expand access to individuals and communities that are educationally isolated. It continues to live up to that promise, adding new partnerships in fall 2005 with Centralia College and South Seattle Community College.

**“As a student at Yakima Valley Community College (YVCC) enrolled in student support services, I needed the extra advising and tutoring provided. I remember inquiring about transferring to Heritage at a transfer fair. Not long after that I was approached again by Heritage staff who actually remembered me. I'm now a junior at Heritage taking classes in Yakima and interning with student support services at YVCC. I love it! I hear back from professors immediately and have professors' home numbers. It just shows that Heritage cares about students.”**

—Gina Sullivan

In both cases, Heritage was invited to be a partner so that the community college could make available additional degrees. In fall 2006 Heritage will expand current programs at Big Bend Community College and Columbia Basin Community College to include a Bachelor of Social Work.

Meghan Soptich, Heritage University communications officer, commented, “They want to work with us because we have a reputation for being innovative and responsive to trends and needs in education... We're small enough to be able to respond quickly and effectively.”

Partnerships between Heritage University and community colleges streamline and simplify the

transfer process. In addition to academic advising at the community college by Heritage faculty and staff, students are able to receive Heritage credit for courses taught by Heritage faculty on the community college campuses.

Heritage has also created an admission agreement with three partners and is working on others. Students are able to apply to the community college and Heritage with a single application. Soptich concluded, “Creating pathways that cater to the needs of students is what Heritage is all about.”

### A space and place for transfer, commuter students

What began nine years ago as a single meeting space designed to foster community among **Seattle University** commuter students has become a nationally recognized program known for increasing retention rates, student engagement, and graduation success. The Collegia Program at Seattle U. assists off-campus, transfer, and non-traditional students, who often feel like outsiders in the university setting, according to Diane Schmitz, director of Commuter Student Services.

The program works. Recently, all freshmen participants in the Collegia Program returned to Seattle U. for their second year, leading to the creation of a collegium just for freshmen commuters. At Seattle U., all freshmen must live on campus unless they live with their parents. “Students living at home have specific needs,” Schmitz commented. “Giving them a place to study, interact with peers, faculty, and staff, make something to eat, or just take a nap really makes a difference in their college experience.”

There are now five collegia at Seattle U., each one catering to a slightly different commuter student demographic, including arts & science majors, science and engineering majors, business and nursing majors, non-traditional students, and freshmen. Collegia are homelike spaces staffed by fellow students.

The graduate and non-traditional student collegium, created in 2002, has been the most surprising to Schmitz. “We're bursting out the seams with this group!” The older students not only want to be more engaged in

“Having a place to study in peace has been an invaluable part of my education. As a 44-year-old with two kids, a dog, and a cat, the chances of me getting anything done at home were slim-to-none. I needed to be able to read at least one paragraph without being distracted. The collegium provided a peaceful way for me to start the day with coffee and a place to finish homework before picking up my kids.”

— Jenelle Tabor

the campus community, they often experience different challenges getting through college. Schmitz noted that at the quarterly non-traditional student lunches, there is almost always a student struggling because the stress of life and school is just too much. “The encouragement and support from peers and staff really alter a student’s educational experience and life.”

### New recruitment efforts show success

Transfer student enrollment at **Walla Walla College** is up nearly 25 percent compared to last fall. The engineering program has seen the largest increase, which is great news to Marlene Baerg, assistant professor and director of engineering recruitment, who has implemented several new recruitment efforts.

“We have a very strong engineering program and the capacity to accommodate up to 100 more students,” Baerg stated. “We’ve applied basic marketing strategies to academic recruiting and it seems to be working.”

The focus is to reach out to a larger audience, including transfer students from two year and four year colleges and to regional high school students. Baerg noted, “Students may decide as early as sixth grade if they want to pursue engineering. So in addition to visiting high schools, we’re also holding a LEGO robotics challenge for middle school students.”

Several factors make the Walla Walla College engineering program attractive — generous financial aid, personal attention, and a notable reputation among graduate schools and corporations for graduating students with “high technical acumen and good ethics,” according to a Boeing executive.

Two other incidents speak to the quality of the engineering program. A Walla Walla College engineering team won first place in a national competition including teams from Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Additionally, a Stanford University professor noted his top three Ph.D. candidates received their undergraduate education from Walla Walla College.

### Reaching out to adults with some college

**Gonzaga University’s** Bachelor of General Studies (BGS) degree is designed specifically for adults over age 25 who have some college credit. This year, 90 students are enrolled.

“Part of the university’s mission is to serve the community and the BGS program adheres to that in its outreach to adult learners,” Melissa Lowdon, BGS advisor, commented. As a graduate of and advisor for the BGS program, Lowdon knows first hand the opportunities created for students and is planning ways to increase access.

The BGS program currently has two tracks, each accommodating a slightly different audience. The traditional track is for adult learners who attend classes with the rest of

ICW colleges participate in a system-wide effort, **Washington State Coalition for Engineering Education**, co-chaired by Dr. George Simmons from Seattle University, to reach into high schools and encourage students to consider a career in engineering.

the student body. The majority of traditional-track students concentrate in elementary or secondary education certification, and after graduation pursue a master’s degree.

The second track is an accelerated format for working adults. Classes are offered online and on the weekends, enabling people from Washington, Idaho, and Oregon to finish a baccalaureate degree. Students must transfer a minimum of 55 semester credits to be eligible. Graduates of the accelerated track earn a BGS degree in organizational leadership, which often helps them advance in their careers. Lowdon

hopes to expand the accelerated BGS program to offer additional concentrations and to eventually offer the program entirely online.

### Campus-wide Student Alert Group is safety net for students

Transitioning into college can be difficult for students regardless of where they’re coming from. In an effort to assist students who are struggling, the **University of Puget Sound** developed the Student Alert Group (SAG), a cross-campus approach to identify students at risk of not succeeding.

The program assists in successful and safe transitions to college life. Freshmen and transfer students are paid particular attention by staff from various offices across campus. SAG meets weekly throughout the academic year to discuss students of concern because of academic, personal, social, or financial issues.

Members of SAG follow strict confidentiality agreements and safeguard all student information. Maggie Mittuch, associate vice president for Student Financial Services, commented, “Having staff involved from various student support services lets us more fully and holistically evaluate students of concern and decide on the best course of action. Sometimes

we’ll ask a resident director to check in with a student. Another time it might make the most sense to ask an associate dean to meet with the student. Other times the student might be encouraged to contact faculty or the Center for Writing and Learning.”

Over the last three years, the number of students referred to SAG has more than doubled due to increased faculty and staff awareness of the group. The retention rate at Puget Sound has increased significantly since the group began and the university has gained valuable information about student success. As a result, the university can better plan to help students improve and gain the most from their education.

*Invest in Washington... One student at a time.*