

**Testimony Submitted to the  
US Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions**

*“Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act: Consumer Information and College Choice”*

**Testimony of Taleah Mitchell, former student, Seattle Central College  
Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges**

May 6, 2015

Chairman Alexander and honorable committee members, thank you for the opportunity to share information about my successful educational journey. I’d also like to thank Senator Murray from my home state of Washington for her steadfast support of Basic Education for Adults programs.

Thank you, also, for the federal financial aid that has given me the opportunity to move from low-income into college so that I can achieve my dreams in life. When I was younger, I could never have imagined sitting before a congressional committee in Washington, D.C. I’m honored and humbled.

My name is Taleah Mitchell. I’m one of the hundreds of thousands of students who have transformed their lives at a Washington state community or technical college. For me, the turning point was a Basic Education for Adults program called I-BEST (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training).

First, a little context on my background.

I’m a 27-year-old, nontraditional, first-generation student of Rroma descent. I grew up in San Francisco and went to public school through the fourth grade, when my formal education came to an end.

From the ages of 10 to 16, I studied quietly, learning to read and write.

Halfway through my 16th year, I learned I could study to receive a GED<sup>®</sup>. With this newfound knowledge, I found an organization called Literacy Chicago, an adult basic education organization. I passed the assessment test with flying colors and moved straight into GED<sup>®</sup> preparation classes.

After five months, I took the GED<sup>®</sup> test and scored in the top percentiles in all sections except for math. Instead of getting discouraged, I decided to study math in a different setting while beginning my college career. I took a college placement exam at Harold Washington College in Chicago and placed straight into non-math, college-level courses.

Because of my high marks, I was able to take remedial math courses in conjunction with my college classes. In 2006, I was given a Starlight Award from Literacy Chicago because of a commitment to literacy and efforts as a public relations intern at the organization.

But during my second semester at Harold Washington College, my family met with difficult times and I had to drop out of school to help run the family business full time.

A year after my college experience, I took the GED<sup>®</sup> test once again – this time in West Virginia – and passed all portions of the test.

However, my life was thrown into chaos once again when the family business collapsed and we bounced around from several different states. At each place, I found myself only able to work entry-level jobs that were beneath my capabilities and barely kept my family afloat.

The GED<sup>®</sup> program got me a job, but it did not get me a career or move me out of a cycle of living from job-to-job and paycheck-to-paycheck, with no hope of saving any money.

I was trapped in a cycle of economic insecurity with no way out.

My turning point was at the age of 25, when my family landed in Seattle. I wandered into a YWCA and saw a flyer for the I-BEST program through Seattle Central College.

I learned that I-BEST offered a clear path to an in-demand job, with a wide array of support services. A counselor explained that they'd be with me every step of the way, from start to finish and into a career. And that's exactly what happened. Advisors helped me apply for financial aid, look through course catalogs, plan schedules, find classes and manage my time.

The hallmark of I-BEST is that it puts two instructors in the same class at the same time: one teaches basic skills like reading, writing, math and English language, and the other teaches job skills. Students learn foundational skills at the same time they train for in-demand jobs.

The information sticks, because students can immediately apply what they've learned in a real-world setting. And, because it's a two-for-one approach, the classes can be completed in a shorter timeframe.

I earned a certificate in Business Information Technology. One of the final requirements was to have a working experience in the field of study. Interestingly, I served as a teaching assistant and as a math tutor in the same I-BEST class where I had been a student and in the very subject that I had struggled with earlier in my life. It was exciting to come full circle.

During my time at Seattle Central College, I got into honors society, became student body president and served on a scholarship board. I never lost passion for education or for my fellow nontraditional students.

Naturally, financial aid was a big factor for me. Advisors helped me weave together a financial aid package that included Basic Food and Employment Training – the Washington state version of the federal SNAP program – along with unemployment benefits, grants and financial aid. This gave me reassurance that the rug wouldn't be pulled out from under me, as it had so many times in the past.

Today, I have a career as an assistant manager with a leading Seattle-based employer and intend to continue my studies. While at Seattle Central, I was approached by Amherst and Smith colleges, but my father fell ill and I chose to stay in Seattle. I'm happy to say my brother has followed my footsteps and is currently attending Seattle Central College.

As I mentioned before, I am fortunate to sit before you as one of thousands of success stories made possible by Washington's community and technical college system.

### **Washington state's community and technical colleges**

The college I attended – Seattle Central College – is one of Washington state's 34 community and technical colleges. Altogether, they serve nearly 400,000 students each year. The college system dates back to 1967, when it was created by the state Legislature. In 1991, the Legislature added technical colleges to the system. The colleges are organized into 30 districts spread across mountains, cities, rivers, and islands touching every corner of the state.

Colleges work together to present the state Legislature with a single operating and capital budget request. When those budgets are passed, the state funding goes to the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, which then allocates funds to the colleges. This allows colleges to serve their individual communities while forming a powerful network to advance Washington's economy.

But the strength of this system is not only in its organization. It's also in its mission to open the doors to higher education for all residents of Washington state, regardless of their personal or academic backgrounds. For nontraditional students, they offer a second chance for a new life.

The education at these two-year colleges is practical, promising and purposeful. Colleges use innovative instruction models, work closely with local employers and labor representatives, and partner with universities to serve the unique needs of nontraditional, 21<sup>st</sup> century students.

The average Washington community or technical college student is 26 years old. Forty-three percent work, 28 percent are parents, and 42 percent are students of color<sup>1</sup>.

As you can see, the average student isn't what it used to be. We are adults that need supported, accelerated, real-world services that save us time and money.

The beauty of community and technical colleges is that programs are built and sustained locally to meet the economic and employment needs of the community. All of the job-training programs are led by customer advisory committees made up of community leaders, business and labor representatives, and college faculty and staff. These committees create and build curricula aligned with emerging industry demands and employers' needs.

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<sup>1</sup> SBCTC Fall Quarter Enrollment and Staffing Report

## College and career pathways

In Washington state, education is a continuum -- from early learning, through K-12 and college, and into a career. At the heart of the two-year college system is a college and career pathway model that allows students at any skill level or life stage the opportunity to earn a college credential and climb a career ladder. I-BEST is a perfect example.

In Washington state, the average annual income of the typical associate-degree graduate is 33 percent more than someone with a high school diploma alone. These income levels rise with each level of education earned and open greater possibilities for students and employers<sup>2</sup>.

The **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)** solidified the importance of a college and career pathway. As you know, states are now required to provide opportunities for employment, education and training needed for today's global economy. WIOA requires college Adult Basic Education programs to move students past the GED<sup>®</sup> level and into college or careers.

Connecting students to a college and career pathway has never been more important. By 2016, nearly three-fourths of available jobs in Washington state will require at least a postsecondary credential<sup>3</sup>. And, over the next 20 years, there simply won't be enough high school graduates to meet the higher education needs of Washington state's workforce. Our state will need to fill the gap with older adults – a faster growing population that is burgeoning in areas of the state with less educational attainment.<sup>4</sup>

I know from personal experience that Washington state's community and technical colleges are key to filling employment gaps with skilled workers because they did that for me. It's critical for underskilled, sometimes underemployed adults to have the same access to innovative, accelerated and meaningful educational and workforce training. And now they do.

In addition to WIOA, the **Washington State Basic Education Plan: *Pathways to College and Careers for Washington's Emerging Workforce*** is focused on getting students through college faster and into living wage jobs. Programs under this plan move people further and faster along well-defined pathways into college and careers. The plan builds upon the proven success of the I-BEST program in moving students rapidly towards industry-recognized credentials that lead to well paying, long-term careers. I'm an example of this program's success: from where I started, to where I am today, and where I'm going tomorrow.

Washington state's community and technical college adult education providers partner with regional agencies, organizations, institutions, and industry leaders to build, scale and maintain demand-driven career pathways to meet emerging employer needs. Certificates are marketable and stackable, meaning that each certificate builds on the other to lead to a longer-term certificate or associate degree. These pathways connect education, training, and support services in new ways that foster success for all individuals as intended under WIOA.

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<sup>2</sup> Washington State Student Achievement Council presentation to House Higher Education Committee, Jan. 14, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> 2013 Roadmap: A Plan to Increase Educational Attainment in Washington, by Washington Student Achievement Council.

<sup>4</sup> SBCTC research findings: "Washington State Population and Employment Data 2010-2030, Implications for Community and Technical Colleges."

## **Innovative programs**

Washington state's two-year colleges serve nearly six out of every 10 students in public higher education.<sup>5</sup> The community and technical college system focuses on three mission areas: basic skills, workforce and academic transfer. All three mission areas share the same goal: move every student through college and into a life-sustaining job.

## ***Basic skills***

Basic Education for Adults (BEdA) programs teach foundational skills such as reading, writing, math and English language, so adult students can move through college and into living wage jobs. Unlike other states, BEdA programs are contained in the state's two-year college system instead of the K-12 system. Programs are aligned with the WIOA principle of a college and career pathway that contains crucial milestones and goals for students to reach along the way. Community and technical colleges partner with community-based organizations to help serve the estimated 650,000 to 700,000 Washington adults who lack the basic skills necessary to be successful<sup>6</sup>.

Washington State BEdA programs:

- Serve adults at least 16 years old who have skills below a high school graduate or need English language skills;
- Include General Educational Development (GED<sup>®</sup>) and high school diploma programs;
- Use a team teaching approach such as I-BEST (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training);
- Integrate instruction with technology; and
- Teach employability or "soft skills" such as communication, time management, problem solving and decision making.

## ***High school completion***

Washington state's community and technical colleges not only open the door to college, they also help students finish a high-school level diploma or credential. Colleges offer GED<sup>®</sup> preparation and testing, as well as innovative programs like High School 21+, a competency-based diploma for adults 21 and over that awards credit for prior learning and military and work experience. These programs give all Washingtonians, regardless of age or skill level, the opportunity to complete high school and connect to a college and career pathway that's right for them.

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<sup>5</sup> 57% per Washington state Office of Financial Management 2013-14 Budget Driver Report.

<sup>6</sup> SBCTC, 2008-12 five-year; 2010-12 three-year American Community Survey estimates.

## ***I-BEST***

As I mentioned, the I-BEST program was my ticket to a new life. Nationally recognized, the program is modeled in more than 20 states including Tennessee, Oregon, Wyoming, Wisconsin and Massachusetts. It uses a team teaching approach that combines basic skills classes with job training classes to move students faster to completion and into living wage jobs. This combined teaching method allows students to begin college-level coursework immediately, so they don't have to move through a mandated sequence of basic skills classes first. Students save time and money and learn skills in ways applicable to their career goals.

In my case, dedicated instructors helped me brush up on basic skills as I simultaneously learned information technology skills.

I-BEST now serves nearly 4,000 students. Programs include healthcare, automotive, manufacturing, transportation, early childhood education, aeronautics and office technology. Students enrolled in I-BEST programs are:

- Three times more likely to earn college credits and nine times more likely to earn an industry-recognized credential than students in traditional programs who must complete basic skills classes before training for employment<sup>7</sup>.
- Earn an average of \$2,645 more in wages each year and receive twice the work hours per week (35 hours versus 15 hours) than similar adults who do not receive basic skills training in any form<sup>8</sup>.

## **Workforce**

Washington state's workforce system includes multiple state agencies, organizations and stakeholders that partner to provide real-time education and training that directly align with high-demand jobs. The two-year college system plays an important role in developing relevant curricula, job training programs for employers, and industry partnerships to keep pace with today's changing workforce demands. Washington state's community and technical colleges along with their former students contribute approximately \$11 billion to the state's economy each year<sup>9</sup>. I'm proud to be among them.

With statewide business and labor, Washington state's community and technical colleges offer a wide array of professional-technical programs in high-demand fields. These include agriculture, aerospace, business administration management, composites, nanotechnology, nursing, and welding.

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<sup>7</sup> SBCTC, "Educational Outcomes of I-BEST, WA State Community and Technical College System's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training Program," Community College Research Center, Columbia University, May 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, Workforce Training Results, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Economic Modeling Specialists, Inc., Economic Contribution of Washington's Community and Technical Colleges: Analysis of Investment Effectiveness and Economic Growth, 2011.

### ***Basic Food, Employment and Training***

As I mentioned, I benefitted greatly from the Washington State Basic Food, Employment and Training (BFET) program. The program provides training and job-search help for people who receive food assistance so that they can earn industry-recognized credentials and land living-wage jobs. Nearly 10,000 two-year college students are receiving BFET benefits with funding through the U.S. Department of Agriculture<sup>10</sup>. All 34 colleges participate across Washington state.

### ***Work-based learning***

Washington state's two-year college system offers a variety of work-based learning opportunities that benefit both students and employers. Work-based learning allows students to experience how the things they learn in the classroom are connected to real careers. Examples include apprenticeships, intern or externships, and work study.

Without a work-based learning option, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to obtain important skills needed to be successful in today's job market. These options are important for students starting in their careers or retraining for a new field.

### ***Academic transfer***

Washington state's two- and four-year colleges and universities have one of the strongest transfer systems in the country. This includes but is not limited to:

- **Common course numbering**, which makes it easier for students to transfer to different colleges within the two-year system;
- **Prior learning assessment**, which helps students start or continue college at the place that best fits their previous academic or workforce experience; and
- **Direct transfer agreements** and **major related pathways**, which allow students to transfer at the junior level or enter directly into a major.

Forty percent of all Washington public baccalaureate graduates started a two-year college. These transfer students graduate with similar GPAs as those who start as freshmen<sup>11</sup>.

### ***Serving students***

Washington state's two-year colleges serve students from all academic backgrounds, skill levels and work experiences. Their educational goals are as varied as the dreams that led them to enroll. Colleges use multiple tools and resources to reach students with these unique backgrounds. As I've mentioned, I am one of these students. I directly benefited from advising and career counseling, not to mention multiple financial aid options to help me pursue college.

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<sup>10</sup> SBCTC BFET program, 2014-15.

<sup>11</sup> SBCTC, "The Role of Transfer in the Attainment of Baccalaureate Degrees at Washington's Public Bachelor's Degree Institutions, Class of 2011", 2013.

### ***Proactive or intrusive advising***

Student advising is a priority of Washington state's community and technical colleges. Through proactive or intrusive advising, colleges:

- Purposefully intervene to motivate students;
- Build student trust through regular communication;
- Inform students of all available postsecondary options; and
- Work proactively to help students avoid difficulty.

Students excel when they are supported and understand that each step of their pathway counts. That's how I was able to finish my certificate and land a job in my current career field. My advisor at Seattle Central College helped me the entire time, from career counseling and class scheduling to writing resumes and pursuing work-based learning options.

I also received help understanding and applying for financial aid options, which made a huge difference.

### ***Financial aid***

Student debt is a critical issue in Washington state and across the nation. In 2013-14, 32,244 two-year college students borrowed an average of \$5,617 in student loans<sup>12</sup>. Nearly half of the students in eligible programs receive financial aid<sup>13</sup>.

While tuition at a Washington state two-year college seems like a bargain at approximately \$4,000 per year, it can pose significant challenges for students who don't have extra financial resources to cover college expenses. Students not only have to pay for tuition, but required textbooks and materials to complete coursework.

### ***State Need Grant***

In addition to receiving a federal Pell Grant, I also received the Washington State Need Grant to help cover the cost of my college education. For more than 40 years, the State Need Grant has been providing financial aid to disadvantaged students. Eligible students with a household income less than \$58,500 (for a family of four) are able to use the grant at two- and four-year higher education institutions as well as many accredited private or independent colleges, universities, and career schools in Washington state.

After the Great Recession, Washington, like many other states, experienced significant budget constraints. With approximately 32,000 eligible students not receiving State Need Grants due to lack of funds<sup>14</sup>, cost continues to be a barrier for many students in completing college and succeeding in today's job market.

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<sup>12</sup> Washington State Student Achievement Council, 2013-14.

<sup>13</sup> SBCTC, Academic Year Report, 2013-14.

<sup>14</sup> Washington State Student Achievement Council, 2013-14.

## Recommendations

As part of my testimony, I have a few recommendations for the committee to consider as discussions continue on national higher education policy.

- ***Remove cost barriers for students.***

With over \$1 trillion in loans<sup>15</sup>, student debt is a growing national crisis. The federal government is in a unique position to help students and higher education institutions with this problem. Removing cost barriers makes a big difference in access and affordability for nontraditional students.

Instead of creating new loan programs that may burden low-income students with more debt, consider increasing resources to grant programs, like Pell, that are already a proven success. Without the Pell Grant, I would have been unable to pursue college and obtain my current management position with a leading Seattle employer.

I also recommend providing financial support for college advisors to help students navigate the financial aid process and find scholarships. It's not an easy process, particularly when there's no one in your family who has been through it before.

- ***Centralize educational options for prospective students.***

A central federal portal that contains all relevant college information for prospective students could be helpful. However, some college completion calculations paint an incomplete picture of community and technical colleges. For example, as a nontraditional returning student, I wouldn't have been counted in the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard.

This type of portal can, however, provide better visibility for programs like I-BEST. This will help students and high school advisors make informed choices. I was fortunate to see a flyer at a YWCA, but the programs deserve greater visibility and students need to know about available opportunities.

- ***Support college and career pathways.***

As I mentioned, a clear career pathway and proactive advising model were critical for my success as a student. I encourage continued support for these pathways through legislation and funding to ensure all students have the opportunity to plug into college and ultimately, a career at any point in their lives.

For those without a high school diploma or credential, it is critical these prospective students have access to Ability to Benefit under the Pell Grant. This provides tuition assistance, allowing students to afford college, obtain an industry-recognized certificate or degree, and move into a living wage, high-demand job.

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<sup>15</sup> Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, 2013.

In closing, I would like to once again thank you for this tremendous opportunity. The future of our country lies within higher education and I appreciate your dedication to ensuring all Americans can step on this path at any time in their lives. My journey has led me from a difficult past into a much brighter future.