***Findings from Community Summit Conversations***

As part of the Southwest Washington Community Summit on College Access, Washington State University Vancouver and The Thomas S. Foley Institute’s *Initiative for Public Deliberation* conducted a deliberative exercise wherein participants were asked to provide their thoughts on the affordability of a college education, how to improve the campus learning environment, and how to better prepare future students for success in higher education.

One hundred and twenty-five individuals gathered for the deliberative exercise, divided evenly among 19 tables. Not all topics were discussed in detail at every table leading to the variety of ratios presented below. Some topics were discussed by 80 participants, others by 50 or 60. The following is a summary of the main themes from the Community Summit, unique findings, and concluding thoughts.

*How to improve affordability*

1. **Freeze or decrease the cost of tuition for community colleges and universities**

Proponents:

* 37 of 59 (63 percent) supported a tuition freeze or decrease
* Reducing tuition costs would lower the barrier to access for lower-income citizens
* Potential negative consequences of a freeze or decrease should not deter colleges and universities from working to make college more affordable

Concerns:

* 22 of 59 (37 percent) opposed a tuition freeze or decrease
* Reducing tuition would likely increase enrollment, thus increasing demand for additional classes and services with little tuition-based funding to support them
* Potential decrease in overall quality of education due to larger classes, decreased support services

1. **Incentivize local and state employers to offset or reimburse the cost of tuition through an internship or mentorship program**

Proponents:

* + Nearly unanimous support among participants: 87 of 88 (99 percent)
  + Businesses could provide a financial match to assist with college costs
  + Increase the number of internships across all disciplines where students can work for a business or corporation associated with their field of study while completing their degree in exchange for the business helping offset those students’ tuition costs
  + Provide tax incentives for businesses that partner with higher education internship programs; supporters of this idea offered that a modest tax hike to offset these business incentives would be acceptable
  + 59 of 63 (94 percent) who endorsed a strong campus internship program agreed that experiential learning from off-campus, workplace internships must be highly prioritized
  + 47 participants also emphasized the importance of matching students with on- and off-campus mentors

Concerns:

* + 1 of 88 (1 percent) participant felt that financial pressure from institutions of higher education may damage businesses’ profit margins

1. **Increasing the availability and size of state and federal grants as well as lower interest loans**

Proponents:

* + 54 of 59 (92 percent) participants who discussed the availability of grants agreed that if more state and/or federal grants were made available, more citizens would be encouraged to pursue a college degree
  + Paying higher taxes was seen as generally acceptable if the funds would allow more people to access higher education
  + Two table groups suggested the availability of grants and loans should be expanded to assist middle-income families as well
  + Two table groups mentioned the necessity of including financial literacy training or guidance to those seeking loans

Concerns:

* 5 of 59 (8 percent) opposed increasing the availability and size of state and federal grants
  + Increased taxes was perceived as a barrier

1. **Reduce affiliated costs such as institutional service fees, course textbooks, and parking permits**

Proponents:

* + 33 of 42 (79 percent) support reduced affiliated costs
  + A reduction in the cost and number of textbooks required per course was recommended
  + Offering more online or open source textbook options for courses was recommended
  + Increasing the availability of low-cost textbook rentals was recommended
  + Proponents recommended offsetting the cost of transportation to campus through reduced-cost parking permits or increasing the availability of public transportation

Concerns:

* + 9 of 42 (21 percent) opposed reduced affiliated costs
  + The primary concern was that a reduction in institutional fees would reduce student services support

1. **Improve campus learning environment**

Proponents:

* + 61 of 65 (93 percent) support an improved learning environment
  + More academic advisors, peer and faculty mentors are needed
  + Provide a dedicated skill center
  + Increase the presence of on-campus healthcare services
  + Provide extended, low-cost daycare
  + Expand the distribution of information on services available
  + Provide more flexible course scheduling
  + 55 of 61 (90 percent) in support expressed the need to provide more flexibility in course delivery mechanisms including online or hybrid courses, courses offered in the evening and on weekends, and courses offered in other languages such as Spanish and Russian
  + 36 participants agreed that greater outreach to non-traditional students is a high priority

1. **Improve college readiness for future students**

Proponents:

* + This topic received the most attention from participants
  + Provide necessary information about college as an option earlier and more frequently
  + 59 of 68 (87 percent) participants stressed the necessity of partnership between institutions of higher education and K-12 institutions to improve college readiness
  + Provide fieldtrips for K-12 students to showcase college campuses
  + Emphasize programs such as the College-Bound Scholarship and Running Start
  + Parents are the primary factor in encouraging children to pursue college

Concerns:

* + 8 of 75 (11 percent) participants suggest that college faculty and administrators should not tell parents how to plan their child’s future

1. **Voices not present:** Parents and current college students (especially low-income students, students representative of protected minority classes, and students who have served in the military)

Participants recognize that serious change can only occur through the establishment of important partnerships and working together toward a common cause. All participants value equal access to institutions and public spaces, which is why the discussions on improving the campus learning environment for nontraditional students were of prime importance. Participants also embrace the value of cultural diversity; institutions of higher education must have external support to mirror that value and encourage a learning environment that is not only affordable, but works to prevent the perpetuation of bias or the exclusion of any group from obtaining a college degree.

*Special thanks*

Co-sponsors of Southwest Washington Community Summit on College Access include: City of Vancouver, Clark College, Columbia River Economic Development Council, Community Foundation for Southwest Washington, Evergreen Public Schools, Instructional Technologies, Lower Columbia College, Port of Portland, Providence Health and Services, SEH America, Smith-Root, Southwest Washington Workforce Development Council, Vancouver Energy, Vancouver Public Schools, Washington State University Vancouver, Waste Connections, WSU Vancouver College of Education