

Bi-State Metropolitan Forum

Building a Healthy Economy for Oregon and Washington

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Portland State University

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Pooling Our Assets: Higher Education and Workforce Training

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**INSTITUTE OF
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Background

The Portland-Vancouver metropolitan workforce is a regional asset. Workers commute throughout the region to find the best match for their interests and skills, and employers draw upon a local labor force that spans at least the six-county metropolitan region.

- According to the 2000 Census, 38% of residents commute to jobs outside their home county.
- Over 60,000 commuters a day cross the state border from Washington into Oregon, and over 10,000 commute from Oregon into Washington.
- A number of our key industry clusters, including semiconductors, metals, machinery, and transportation equipment, food processing, and distribution and logistics straddle the border.

These companies compete for talent in an environment where human capital needs are growing and shortages are becoming more apparent. Baby-boom retirements and other changes in demographics have slowed the expansion of the labor force that fueled the economy over the last forty years. Furthermore, while the number of workers with college educations increased dramatically over the past four decades, this trend has stagnated, despite the increasing need for education beyond high school. At least 70% of the new jobs created in the near future will require some post-secondary education or vocational training.

To meet this need, we must offer a diverse portfolio of education and training options to students and companies on both sides of the state border. The region's employers need workers immediately who have specific vocational skills. They need creative scientists whose innovations will form the basis of our future economy. They need talented managers that can commercialize innovations. They need creative talent that can market our products around the world. Each component of our educational portfolio must perform well to sustain our economy now while building its future.

Successes

Universities, community colleges, and workforce development boards in Washington and Oregon have already collaborated on a number of projects that have improved services to students, workers, and companies.

- Clark College has signed co-admission agreements with both Portland State University and Marylhurst University that allow students to enroll simultaneously. PSU will offer upper division classes on the Clark College campus.
- The Oregon Simulation Alliance is working across state borders to expand the use of simulation to expedite the training of healthcare workers.
- WSU-Vancouver and Portland State University have developed joint programs in the humanities, including a Master of Arts degree in History and a joint summer program in anthropology that focuses on excavation at the Fort Vancouver Historic Site.

- The Southwest Washington Workforce Development Council is collaborating with Work Systems Inc. and the Clackamas County Workforce Development Council to align standards and practices for helping employers meet workforce training needs. They have also collaborated on skills panels in high demand professions such as health care and freight/passenger transportation.
- The Utility Education and Training Alliance (UETA) has worked with community colleges in both states to develop and offer workforce training programs for the energy industry.
- The Northwest High Performance Enterprise Consortium, with over 70 member companies in Southwest Washington and Oregon, is supporting worker training in high performance practices to keep companies globally competitive.

Opportunities

We must build on these successes by recognizing opportunities for improving our human capital portfolio by collaborating across state lines. These opportunities include:

- Extend the Regional Higher Education Consortium to include institutions in Washington. This consortium currently includes PSU and the four regional community colleges in Oregon. Students within the consortium can apply once and access a single class schedule across all institutions. This improves service to students and provides opportunities to align degree programs and class offerings. Adding Clark College and WSU Vancouver to the Consortium would offer greater flexibility to students and highlight areas where additional resources can fill gaps between demand and supply.
- Pursue alignment in graduate education degree programs. Develop agreements among regional institutions that allow undergraduate students to automatically qualify for a master's degree program at a cooperating institution with a complementary graduate program. Possibly structured as 3+2 programs, these efforts can prevent duplication of programs while ensuring access for students.
- Work across the border through the Workforce Development Councils to match the needs of employers with the programs that best fit their needs, regardless of state affiliation. Develop "workforce response teams" that include workforce development boards, economic development practitioners, and training providers to respond to opportunities for expansion of employment in key clusters where workforce training is a critical decision factor for employers.
- Identify strategic investments in research areas that offer the opportunity for faculty to form teams to compete for research grants. In this era of interdisciplinary research, combining research assets can strengthen proposals and increase our success in gaining external funding. Investment areas include biofuels, smart energy technology, invasive species management, and sustainable food systems.

Challenges

Cooperation between states on higher education and training is difficult. Obvious but simple challenges include differences in academic calendars. The states also lack a shared technology infrastructure that could promote shared distance learning programs. More difficult challenges include differences between the education policies formulated in Olympia and Salem. An additional constraint is that federal funding must be spent within state borders. Each state has its own funding formula, and taxpayers may oppose funding that appears to benefit institutions or students from another state. We also must overcome the perception that we compete with each other for students, faculty, and external funding.