

POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

Using Research to Connect Apprenticeship and Higher Education

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Aligning systems to support learners

Washington state has two strong systems preparing learners for quality careers: registered apprenticeship and higher education. Yet these systems often operate separately. Apprentices can earn college-level credit through their training, but that learning doesn't always lead to credentials. State leaders saw an opportunity to better align these systems so apprentices could turn the learning they were already doing into certificates and degrees that support career advancement.

In 2022, the Washington State Legislature passed [Senate Bill 5764](#), directing the William D. Ruckelshaus Center (the Center) to facilitate a collaborative, evidence-informed process to strengthen degree pathways for registered apprentices. The Center convened a statewide coordinating committee that brought together a wide range of partners, including the community and technical college system, public universities, private and independent colleges, apprenticeship program sponsors, labor organizations, industry representatives, and state agencies.

With such diverse perspectives at the table, the committee faced the challenge of building shared understanding, balancing priorities, and identifying solutions that worked for all stakeholders. The Center worked with Education Northwest to bring research into committee discussions, providing evidence, data, and insights that helped members make informed decisions, center apprentices' experiences, and develop actionable recommendations.

Using research to build consensus and inform policy

From the outset, our researchers worked closely with the Center to understand the state context and committee needs. Together, we developed a research plan aligned with legislative priorities and adapted it as new questions arose. Over three years, our research helped the committee:

Understand the landscape

through a comprehensive literature review and analysis of state enrollment and outcomes data across apprenticeship and higher education systems.

Assess demand by

surveying over 600 current and former apprentices and conducting focus groups to hear directly from learners about their goals and experiences.

Identify promising

strategies by interviewing state leaders to develop case studies, and by reviewing policies and practices that strengthen credit pathways and credential attainment.

This embedded approach ensured that research was part of the discussion at every step, helping the committee make evidence-informed decisions in real time.

Toward evidence-based policy

Our research revealed a critical disconnect: while most apprentices in Washington state enroll in a community or technical college during their training, only a small share ultimately earn a credential. At the same time, apprentices expressed strong interest in certificates and degrees, noting how credentials would help ensure their earned college credits count, support career advancement, and increase long-term earnings. This evidence shifted the conversation from debating whether pathways were needed to focusing on how to design them effectively.

With this shared evidence base, the committee built consensus across sectors and decided to develop legislative recommendations to create clearer pathways for apprentices to earn credentials. Our findings directly informed strategies for designing these pathways and guided state leaders as they developed legislation to better connect apprenticeship and higher education.

This work demonstrates how research can be used in real time to guide policy and collaboration. By grounding decisions in evidence and centering learners' experiences, Washington state created stronger pathways for apprentices to earn meaningful credentials—offering a model that other states and organizations can adapt to align learning and career pathways.