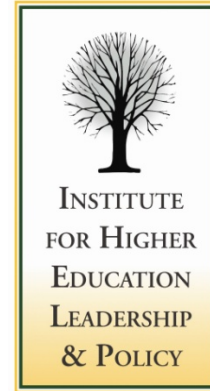




*CCRC's mission is to conduct research on the major issues affecting community colleges in the United States and to contribute to the development of practice and policy that expands access to higher education and promotes success for all students.*



**Washington State Student Achievement Initiative Policy Study  
Report to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and  
Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges  
Summary of First-Year Findings  
October 2010**

**Introduction**

The Community College Research Center (CCRC) is partnering with the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy (IHELP) on a three-year evaluation of the Washington Student Achievement Initiative (SAI) – an innovative policy that uses intermediate performance measures and incentive funding to encourage the state’s community and technical colleges to adopt practices that increase student progress and completion. The evaluation will ultimately address four main questions:

- 1) What is the effect of SAI on efforts by colleges to implement policies and practices intended to improve student outcomes?
- 2) What are the range and patterns of achievement point performance across colleges?
- 3) What distinguishes colleges that perform well according to the achievement point framework from those that do less well in terms of their practices aimed at improving student outcomes?
- 4) Is the Student Achievement Initiative policy sustainable and is it viable for adoption by other states?

This report summarizes findings from the first six months of evaluation activity and provides suggestions for next steps to the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC). The suggestions are summarized up front. The sections that follow present more detailed findings from the quantitative and qualitative components of the evaluation so far. The quantitative component involved an analysis of achievement point accumulation by colleges during the initial three-year performance funding period. The qualitative findings are based on a synthesis of over 200 interviews – some in person and some by phone – with faculty, staff, administrators, and students at 17 of the 34 WA public 2-year colleges, and over 30 interviews with policymakers in Washington, Ohio, Texas, and North Carolina. This first-year report

addresses the above research questions to the extent possible at this stage of SAI implementation. We report on the opinions about SAI and early actions taken by colleges in response to SAI, but it is premature to draw conclusions about the effects of SAI on college behavior.

## **Suggested Next Steps for the SBCTC**

As both the quantitative and qualitative findings that follow raise important issues for future consideration, we want to be sure to emphasize our admiration for what the Washington State community and technical colleges have done to this point. SAI is truly a trailblazing effort that has captured the attention of many other states. Like any such effort, it is bound to encounter difficulties and challenges. We appreciate the resolve and the skill that led to its implementation, despite numerous obstacles, and we offer our recommendations in the spirit of enhancing the ability of SAI to improve outcomes for students in Washington State and to contribute to the national agenda on college completion.

We have two general process-oriented suggestions for the State Board to consider as you plan for this upcoming year.

- 1. Re-engage with college leadership to consider the issues raised in our report and to improve the communication with colleges, and by college leaders with their faculty and staff, in the coming year.*

We were surprised to learn that awareness of SAI had not really penetrated very far across campuses, and that in many cases presidents had chosen to “wait and see” if SAI “has legs” before taking it on, usually expecting opposition from faculty. While for us and for the SBCTC, SAI has been around for some time now, many of those we interviewed in the colleges still see it as new. This may actually be an opportunity in the sense that the Board can communicate with key stakeholders at a formative stage. For the State Board staff and relatively few individuals at the colleges who are well-versed in SAI (mostly limited to top administrators, basic skills program staff, and to a lesser extent student services folks) it will be important to do some strategic outreach to respond to some of the more strongly-felt concerns. To the extent that some of the resistance stems from confusion—and there is a lot of confusion out there—improved communication can go a long way to smoothing the road ahead. Some of the key issues to engage college leaders about include:

- Trade-off between maintaining stability in the framework and identifying and weighing high priority changes for possible implementation at some appropriate time (this issue will be more fully informed after our quantitative analysis, planned for next spring, of the correlation between points produced and rates of student progression).
- Key design features in the funding component, i.e., both the amount of funding to be allocated by performance and whether it should be an add-on (as it is now) or a component of the front-end funding model.
- Sustainability of the incentive for *gains* in points (since consistently high-performing colleges will likely not receive awards commensurate with their performance).

- Clarification of the relationship of SAI to ongoing student success initiatives at the colleges, and the opportunities and limitations for using SAI data to enhance other efforts (see next recommendation).
  - Clarification of the Board’s long-term strategy for using SAI to ensure continued and, when possible, increased funding for college efforts to improve student success.
2. *Step up efforts to provide clear guidance and technical assistance to colleges, in consultation with IR staff and others, on how to use the SAI data and local college data to identify promising practices and improve programs and services.*

As we see it, SAI data are valuable for providing a global look across college mission areas for areas of relative strength and weakness. Such data can help colleges set strategic directions for curricular innovation and retention supports. SAI data can also be useful for college reporting to boards and other external stakeholders. But, by themselves, point-in-time data like the SAI metrics cannot be used to identify specific strategies for improving student success and evaluating their impact. For this, colleges need to analyze student cohort transcript data and other quantitative and qualitative data they collect and analyze locally. And they need to engage faculty and student services staff in the process of examining the data and changing practice as a result. As some colleges we studied have demonstrated, the SAI student progression framework can most definitely be used with student-level, cohort transcript data to track and evaluate particular interventions and identify the promising practices that the colleges hunger for.

We think it is vital that the Board staff work with WARP to clarify the most valuable uses for SAI quarterly data *and* to provide guidance and tools to help colleges use the SAI measurement framework in combination with student transcripts and other data to identify practices that accelerate rates of student progression and success. There are already precedents for this, including the efforts over the past several years of Israel Mendoza and his staff with members of the Basic Skills Council and selected WARP members to use data to improve outcomes for basic skills students. We believe there are opportunities for similar collaborations of Board staff and WARP with the transfer, workforce and student services councils to address other key challenges such as increasing the number of students who take and pass college-level math, improving retention of first-year students, and increasing the rate at which students enter and complete as quickly as possible a coherent program of study that leads to further education and career advancement.

## **Quantitative Findings**

Clive Belfield of Queens College CUNY analyzed the points accumulated by WA public 2-year colleges during the period from 2006-07 through 2008-09, on which the initial fall 2009 allocation of SAI performance funding was based. In addition to examining the change in total points (the basis on which colleges were awarded funding), Clive also looked at points by individual metric and points per student. He also explored the effect of individual student characteristics and college characteristics on these various performance indicators. Finally, he conducted a preliminary analysis of the correlation between change in total points and other possible indicators of college performance.

His main findings are summarized as follows.

### ***Total Points and Change in Points***

- At baseline (2006-07), the average points total per college was 8,684; by 2008-09 it was 10,365.
- Average points growth (19%) exceeded headcount enrollment growth (4%). Thus, about one-fifth of points growth is attributable to more students; the remaining four-fifths to more points per student. This might indicate that colleges improved their performance, although it might also have resulted at least in part from improved points accounting by the colleges.

### ***The Influence of College Size***

- College enrollment size and total points were very strongly correlated. Larger colleges produced more points and achieved larger points increases. Also, enrollment size is becoming more influential over time.
- The influence of college size is not tremendous, however: a college that has 1,000 more students gained on average 52 more points per year – which equated to \$1,612 based on the \$31 per point that was used in the initial round of performance funding.

### ***The Growing Influence of Basic Skills and College Readiness Points***

- The six metrics appear to be changing in importance. By 2009, basic skills and college readiness accounted for 48 percent of total points, up from 44 percent in 2006-07. These two metrics also accounted for over 60 percent (1,056 out of 1,681) of the additional points gained per college over the initial performance period.
- The quantitative measure (passing college-level math) accounted for a declining share of total points over the period, and although total quantitative points increased somewhat, five colleges experienced declines in these points.

### ***Effects of Student Characteristics***

- No simple model predicts points accumulation for a given student. Put differently, student characteristics such as age, full-time status, race or prior education do not strongly and clearly influence total points or change in points.
- Several student characteristics are significantly associated with points in one or more of the six metrics, but these wash out in the aggregate.

### ***Effects of College Characteristics***

- In addition to size, the only other college characteristic associated with change in points was the socio-economic status of the college's student body. Colleges serving a higher proportion of students from lower overall SES backgrounds were less likely to gain points. Specifically, for every one percentage point increase in the share of students in the

lowest SES quintile, colleges would earn an estimated 53 fewer points. This effect manifested itself in the basic skills area. More specifically, higher SES colleges were more likely to gain basic skills points. One explanation for this is that colleges that focus on serving higher SES students did not serve as many basic skills students at baseline, but increased their focus on these students during the initial SAI funding period. Another, perhaps more plausible explanation is that lower SES colleges may well serve more students who are extremely disadvantaged and may include low-skill immigrants and others with very low levels of literacy who face major barriers to success in college. This warrants further examination.

- No correlation was found between change in points and a range of other college characteristics, including the % of students on financial aid, the % of high school dropouts, the % of students under 20 or the % over 65, the % of full-time students, the % of males, and the % of students who are Asian or Hispanic or Black or another race.
- Thus, with the exception of basic skills students and SES, we found little evidence that colleges serving more at-risk students are being penalized by the SAI awards method. Moreover, we also found no correlation between change in points and the amount of overall spending per student. In the future we will examine the effects of particular sorts of expenditures.

### ***Correlation with Alternative Performance Measures***

- The change in total points per college indicator currently used to allocate SAI performance awards and percentage change in total points are moderately correlated with one another (Pearson coefficients of approximately 0.4).
- However, change in total points per college is *negatively* correlated with other measures of performance including total points per dollar of expenditure, total points per student and change in average points per student. There is also a negative correlation between change in total points and the size of institutional effects on changes in points per college that were estimated controlling for student characteristics and institutional fixed effects. This raises the question of whether the current measure of institutional performance is the most appropriate measure to use in the long term.

## **Qualitative Findings**

We observed wide variation in opinions about and response to SAI across the 17 colleges studied. We begin with a summary of the situation at what we perceived as the most positive college and the most negative college, without identifying the colleges. Contrasting the responses of the most positive college with that of the most negative one will help to give a sense of the range of response to the policy thus far from colleges.

At the college that expressed the most positive opinions about SAI we found that:

- Interviewees were among the best informed about SAI compared to respondents at the other 16 colleges studied, both in terms of the depth of understanding among administrators and the extent to which awareness of SAI extended across the campus.

- The president was extremely well informed and supportive.
- The clear message from the president to the campus community is: "We need to be deliberate about student achievement and momentum points will help us do that."
- The board of trustees is well-informed and the board chair wants more money devoted to SAI, although other board members do not all share that view.
- A retention committee was recreated as an SAI committee and has met regularly to analyze SAI data and develop strategies.
- SAI has been institutionalized in two ways: incorporation into the strategic plan and comingling (not earmarking) of SAI funds with general funds to enhance support for SAI-driven strategies.
- SAI data are used extensively, in combination with data from the college's data warehouse, to track achievement points earned by students in different interventions (e.g., learning communities).
- There is a strong belief that SAI has influenced the culture, conversation, and actions at the college and that it will have a long-term positive impact on student success.
- The positive impact of SAI is viewed as deriving jointly from the framework and the funding.
- Almost all respondents were favorable toward the framework, finding the measures appropriate, even if perhaps a bit too "front-loaded" (toward basic skills and college preparatory programs) and in need of later "tweaking." *"We could nitpick it to death but we need to jump in and get started."*
- The money was generally viewed as enabling some new initiatives but not as a central motivational factor; most said that more money would be helpful to get more attention to the student success agenda.

At the college that expressed the least positive opinions about SAI we found that:

- Administrative interviewees were moderately well-informed, with several claiming to be very well informed; we were told that the majority of the faculty and staff have little knowledge and understanding of SAI as there has been little focus on the initiative.
- No committee or specific activity has been organized to manage or monitor SAI, and SAI funds were added to the general campus budget.
- Views about the framework were very negative. Comments included that the framework does not account for important elements of success; that it accounts for some things that are not within the colleges' control; and that the research behind the choice of points was not convincing.  
There was considerable frustration trying to figure out how the points were calculated and how to use the data—frustrations that reportedly have discouraged college leaders from focusing on SAI.
- The college's inability to "replicate" how the State Board is calculating points was a widespread theme, to the point where even people on campus who did not know much about SAI had heard that message.
- Because of the replicability issue, the college has not found the data useful and has not used it. They also find the data not to be useful because it is not based on longitudinal tracking of student cohorts.

- Respondents were mostly negative about tying funding to achievement points – some said they were not opposed in principle, but did not favor the SAI approach. They were opposed to having to earn back money that was “rightfully theirs” due to the “skimming of funds” and, because they don’t understand how the points are calculated or earned, they were frustrated about what at least one respondent termed as a “random” process of trying to increase achievement points.
- Nearly all respondents felt that SAI has had no impact on the culture of the college or on actions taken to improve success. The college has an institutional effectiveness team that discusses performance measures and success strategies, but does not monitor SAI data. It has not implemented any SAI activities.

Both of these colleges were neither high- nor low-ranking colleges in terms of SAI point gains. In fact, the other two colleges that we identified as very positive and very negative, respectively, about SAI were similarly in the middle of the pack in terms of SAI point gain. This suggests that reaction to SAI is not necessarily a reaction to how a college's performance is evaluated by means of SAI metrics.

The majority of the other colleges fell somewhat between these two extremes in their assessments of, and responses to, SAI. Of the 17 colleges where we conducted interviews, views of respondents were mostly positive about SAI at 3 colleges, they were more mixed at 8 colleges, and generally negative at the remaining 6 colleges. We did find that among the 17 colleges we studied, those that fell into the top half of the 34 colleges in terms of point gain exhibited a more positive attitude toward SAI—both the framework and the funding—and felt that it had a greater impact on college behaviors. Immediately below we summarize the general consensus and then we provide more detail on a number of specific issues:

To summarize (and necessarily oversimplify) the general consensus view of SAI, we found that:

- There was little penetration of SAI across campus and almost none into the transfer and occupational mission areas of the colleges (most activity was in basic skills and student services).
- The basic concept behind SAI was well understood by those with whom we spoke and the framework was moderately well understood, but few knew much about the funding provisions of SAI.
- The framework was viewed positively as a way to focus attention on student success and provide a common institutional focus, although there were many concerns raised about it.
- The funding provisions were almost always viewed less positively within a college than was the framework, and almost always with some ambivalence.
- There was broad consensus that the dollars awarded in the initial round of funding were too small to make much of a difference—to some that was a good thing, to others that was a weakness.
- There was very little use of the SAI data and considerable concern about its validity and the inability to identify what campus actions account for increases or decreases in points.
- Nevertheless, SAI was felt to have potential to increase student success over the long-term.

- Colleges were hopeful that SAI would continue in some form, with many expecting some “tweaks” to the framework and most hoping that enhanced funding support from SAI could be found from new, rather than reallocated, resources.

### **Colleges’ Suggestions for Improving the SAI**

Amid the wide range of opinions and reactions, the majority of respondents indicated that they see potential in SAI and hope that it is continued in some form. A majority believed that the long-term impact of the framework would likely be greater than that of the funding, and felt that the impact of the framework would be durable even if the funding were discontinued. However, many respondents indicated that it was inevitable that some form of performance-based accountability and/or funding was coming. Some stated that the long-term impact would be stronger if SAI comes to be incorporated into colleges’ own strategic planning.

Most respondents were forthcoming with suggestions for improvement. Some suggested changes to the achievement point framework and metrics:

- Some felt that the framework is too front-loaded with too many opportunities to earn points in basic skills and developmental education compared to the rest of the mission areas; transfer is a core mission but it gets overshadowed in the framework.
- Related to this, many people suggested that there be points beyond 30 credits (before certificate or degree completion), that the 45 point mark be separated from the certificate so that transfer-bound students get points for reaching 45 credits, and that there be a point for completion of college English as there is for math.
- A few argued that points should be awarded for professional-technical students’ getting jobs.
- Some argued that points per student is a better measure of college performance than total points and would eliminate the advantage currently enjoyed by larger colleges.
- Some argued that point gains are not sustainable—a college cannot likely continue to improve at the same rate, or if a college sustains a high level of performance it gets nothing for it. Therefore they argued that colleges should be rewarded for their share of total points (or points per student) generated over a give time period.

Other suggestions had to do principally with communication across the system and approaches to funding:

- Many felt that the Board staff communicated well with the colleges about the initiative in the beginning, but that communication had subsided, and some see the future prospects of SAI tied to increased board communication and particularly its responsiveness to the colleges’ concerns about the SAI data.
- Some suggested that the Board staff communicate more formally, perhaps by preparing a manual on SAI, so that new members of a college community can learn about it directly from the source, rather than being dependent on second-hand information from campus colleagues.

- Nearly everyone would like to see more help from the Board staff to identify “best practices” (based clearly on data) and to facilitate conversations among colleges on best practices.
- As best practices are sought, many thought the Board should look at points per student rather than total point gains. One person pointed out that a college that has consistently done well in an area would be overlooked as an important source of best practice if point gains were the principal criterion.
- IR directors would like more help from the Board staff on using the data base – particularly the queries, but also help with analyzing data in ways that are most constructive for colleges.
- Many would like to see the Board push harder for new funds (as opposed to base reallocation) to expand SAI and some fear a potential divergence of interests between the Board and colleges on that issue, with the Board more willing to accede to the legislature’s demands for reallocation than colleges would like.
- Most colleges already have some form of reporting and benchmarking and it is not always clear to them how SAI fits in – i.e., does it replace, complement, etc. They would like to see some statewide conversations and assistance from the Board on this issue.
- Implicit in many of the frustrations expressed about the “top down” nature of SAI was the suggestion that the Board staff be more proactive moving forward in engaging broadly with the full range of college stakeholders, particularly with faculty, with some saying that any “real” change has to come through changes in the classroom, which won’t happen if faculty aren’t engaged.

There are some key issues that surfaced either directly or indirectly in our evaluation that the Board and the colleges will have to address:

- There is a high level of frustration among college IR staff regarding the SAI data. This is problematic for the Board because IR staff attitudes heavily influence attitudes toward SAI across campuses. Some of the frustration has to do with IR staff’s inability to “replicate” the results with their local data and their sense that some of the data errors they have identified have not been fully addressed or that it has taken too long to address them. These are more minor data concerns that we believe the Board staff can work through. Of much greater concern is IR staffs’ inability to connect the points analysis to college actions. There is a hunger across the system for promising practices. Currently, the SAI dataset is not helping to address this desire to improve practice because the colleges are not able to use the SAI data to identify what they did to achieve the points gains they achieved in the past and what they can do to improve their performance in the future. College IR staff and others at several colleges told us that they communicated with other colleges to find out what others did to achieve point gains and found that folks mostly have no idea. We believe that this has resulted from unintentional overselling of the value of the SAI database for improving practice.
- There is a lot of confusion about the design principle of comparing colleges only to themselves. Many people have not made the distinction between (1) self-comparison as the basis for computing “performance” and (2) head-to-head competition as the unavoidable basis for dividing a fixed pot of dollars to reward performance. The Board would be well-advised to communicate clearly about this.

- Another design principle – that SAI be funded with new money – has been violated due to budget circumstances. This is the cause of great consternation across the colleges and has planted some seeds of distrust (of the Board’s priorities and loyalties) that should be openly addressed. Some warned that increased “skimming” of base budgets will erode support among presidents.
- Colleges were well aware of the enrollment sensitivity of the achievement point formula and several respondents wondered if and how the SAI could survive in its current form when the rapid enrollment growth subsides. One respondent noted that the high enrollment growth may be masking a possible rift between basic skills/developmental education and the rest of the college. While enrollment growth is ensuring that all parts of the college can gain points, when enrollment growth slows or ceases, point growth may become more skewed toward basic skills, and that could become divisive.
- There may be a disconnect between the way that the majority of people at the colleges think of performance funding and the way that the legislature, external funders, and the Board are viewing it. Outside the colleges performance funding is discussed as a way to shift incentives from enrolling students to promoting progression and completion—i.e., as a change in motivation. Inside the colleges it is mostly seen as a source of funds to enable colleges to add a few activities to what they already do well. These are fundamentally different conceptions that may be best addressed by fundamentally different system designs. At the very least, there should be conversations across the system so that all parties understand the choices involved and their implications.
- Related to the performance funding issue, the Board is likely well aware that the popularity of SAI with the legislature and Governor presents the opportunity to use the program to get a budget increase for the colleges. But doing so could create tensions with the colleges, which are likely to oppose major increases in the portion of their funding allocated on the basis of achievement points – even if it is new money.

## **Future Directions for this Research**

We gathered a tremendous amount of information from the scores of respondents who were generous with their time and forthcoming with their opinions. While we have summarized a great deal of that here, the college-level detail provides a wealth of data that we plan to build on when we revisit the colleges (some in person and some by phone once again) in two years. We think it will be useful at that time not only to compare the full range of responses across the colleges but also to track changes over time within each college. Some of the specific things that would be useful to track within a college are:

- Have attitudes toward SAI changed? Has awareness of SAI grown, particularly among transfer and workforce faculty?
- Is there an apparent relationship between the change in attitude and changes in awareness, in data use, or change in points and ranking within the system?
- Have colleges changed how they allocate SAI money? Why? Are more colleges earmarking funds and communicating better about their use, or are more choosing to institutionalize the funds into the college budget?

- Has the amount and nature of use of the SAI data increased? Has use of other data increased?
- Are more efforts being undertaken to improve student achievement outside of basic skills and developmental education?
- Are colleges better able to identify effective practices that lead to increased achievement, as reflected in point gains?

We will, of course, track the trends across the colleges in the major issues that we raised in this report. We do anticipate one challenge in particular. Many respondents said that SAI is being integrated into college activities. This was often presented as a good feature of SAI—that it fit well with other student success efforts. But this could make it even harder to sort out the impact of SAI. We expect a need to modify the interview protocol accordingly because even this time we felt that the questions unrealistically expected interviewees to understand SAI as a separate initiative, and we assumed going in (perhaps incorrectly) that SAI was most influential in colleges where there was separate awareness and an identifiable response. We will need to give more thought to the benefits of institutionalization of SAI and to how one recognizes the value of something that has become institutionalized.

We also plan to follow up on the distinction that was raised in several colleges about whether SAI has risen to the level of a reform initiative, or if it is primarily a measurement system that can track the impact of success strategies that are coming from other sources and other motivations. To become widely viewed as a reform effort, we think that in addition to data reports, colleges will look for greater effort from Board staff to help colleges interpret the data, more guidance on how to use data to improve student outcomes, and more information on what practices and policies have been successful in raising achievement points. The extent to which SAI affects college funding may also be a factor in whether it is viewed as a significant reform effort. Understanding the impact of SAI funding two years from now will be a central theme of the evaluation.

Future quantitative research will examine in more depth the issue of the extent to which different measures of institutional performance yield different funding allocations. We will also explore whether early patterns of points performance are reinforced such that the points distribution becomes more uneven over time. In addition, a major focus of our analysis will be on how far students get and how fast they get there. Specifically, we will assess the extent to which change in total points (and other alternative measures) correlates with rates of progression, particularly for low-income young adult students—the Gates Postsecondary Success target population. Finally, we will develop a method for identifying higher and lower performing colleges for use in selecting sites for the field research planned for spring 2012.