



Fixing the Broken Marketplace: A Statewide Look at Washington's Education-to-Career Pathways

October 21, 2026 AI Summary

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This webinar centered on findings from a major statewide research effort conducted by Washington STEM, HarrisX, and the Schultz Family Foundation. The study sought to understand why, despite significant investments in educational programs and workforce initiatives, too many young people still struggle to find clear pathways into family-sustaining careers.

A System Rich in Resources, Yet Difficult to Navigate

As Marie Groark of the Schultz Family Foundation explained, the foundation's work focuses on the critical transition from adolescence into adulthood. Over more than a decade, they repeatedly observed that young people were not necessarily failing because they lacked ambition or ability. Rather, they were navigating a landscape where employers, schools, colleges, families, and students often operated independently, with too little communication and coordination among them.

This observation led to the original national study, [*The Broken Marketplace*](#), and ultimately to a deeper examination of Washington's education-to-workforce ecosystem. The central question was straightforward: Why do so many promising opportunities exist alongside so much confusion and inequitable access?

According to Dritan Nesho, CEO of HarrisX, the researchers developed a "360-degree view" of Washington's school-to-career pipeline. The study included interviews, focus groups, and nearly 3,000 surveys involving young adults, parents, navigators such as counselors and advisors, and employers. Their goal was not only to understand what programs existed, but how people actually experienced them.

The findings revealed an unexpected paradox.

Washington already possesses a remarkably strong ecosystem of programs and supports. Students generally have access to dual enrollment opportunities, career and technical education, financial aid resources, apprenticeships, internships, and alternative

routes beyond traditional four-year colleges. Participants consistently rated the availability and quality of these opportunities highly.

Yet, awareness does not translate into participation.

Students and families often struggle to identify where to begin, determine which resources are trustworthy, understand eligibility requirements, or navigate application processes. The challenge is not a lack of programs. The challenge is access to those programs.

As Nesho summarized, Washington has built the infrastructure. What remains broken is the marketplace that connects people to it.

The Confidence Cliff After Graduation

One of the study's most striking findings was what researchers called the "post-high school confidence cliff." While students remain in school, they generally express confidence about their futures and the support systems around them. However, that confidence drops sharply once they leave the educational environment.

Students who had recently exited Washington's school system reported significantly lower confidence about career readiness than those still enrolled. Parents showed an even steeper decline in confidence after their children left school. The findings suggested that schools do a reasonably good job supporting students while they are enrolled, but the system struggles to sustain that support during the transition into workforce training, higher education, and careers.

For many graduates, the safety net appears to disappear precisely when decisions become most consequential.

This confidence gap reinforces a larger concern: students are often expected to navigate a highly complex educational and workforce ecosystem exactly when institutional guidance begins to fade.

Programs Work, But Too Few Students Reach Them

Researchers examined a wide range of initiatives, including Running Start, Advanced Placement, career fairs, internships, Career and Technical Education, and workforce development programs. While awareness levels were generally high, participation rates were dramatically lower.

In many cases, there was a four-to-one drop between awareness of a program and actual participation. Even among students who enrolled, many reported that the programs were less helpful than expected or that barriers reduced their effectiveness.

The pattern repeated so consistently that researchers concluded the issue was systemic rather than program-specific.

More than nine out of ten respondents identified at least one significant barrier preventing them from fully utilizing available opportunities. Those barriers ranged from confusing information and unclear eligibility requirements to logistical challenges and uncertainty about how programs related to their future goals.

For the research team, this was one of the clearest indicators that Washington's problem is not program creation. It is navigation.

The Critical Role of Trusted Adults

While technology and digital tools play an increasingly important role in information sharing, the study revealed something profoundly human at the center of successful career navigation.

Young adults consistently identified parents, counselors, advisors, teachers, and peers as their most trusted sources of guidance.

This finding became especially important as discussion turned toward artificial intelligence and digital advising systems. Although AI can help organize information and increase efficiency, researchers emphasized that students still rely heavily on personal relationships when making significant educational and career decisions.

According to Jenee Myers Twitchell, CEO of Washington STEM, AI can complement the work of educators and counselors, but it cannot replace them. Students need adults who understand both the opportunities available and the unique aspirations of each individual.

The study also highlighted a challenge for these adult navigators. Many counselors, teachers, and advisors receive little formal preparation regarding Washington's postsecondary pathways, workforce needs, or financial aid systems. As a result, they often rely on their own research and experience rather than a consistent statewide framework.

Financial Aid: A Hidden Opportunity

Another major theme involved financial aid.

Although Washington offers some of the most generous financial aid programs in the country, awareness remains surprisingly low. Many students and parents assume that college, apprenticeships, or workforce training are financially out of reach. Yet substantial

aid is available through programs such as the Washington College Grant and other state-supported initiatives.

Researchers found that confidence in understanding financial aid often exceeded actual knowledge. When participants were asked about specific programs, awareness levels dropped considerably.

This gap matters because financial aid knowledge directly influences educational decisions. Large portions of respondents reported that knowing college or training could be free or low-cost would significantly alter their plans. Some said it would completely change the educational path they envisioned.

The implication was clear: improving financial aid literacy could dramatically expand opportunity without creating any new financial assistance programs.

Employers Want to Help

The research also challenged a common assumption that employers are reluctant to engage with education systems.

In reality, employers expressed strong interest in internships, career-connected learning, workforce partnerships, mentoring, and other opportunities to help develop future talent.

However, employers frequently described the system as fragmented, difficult to navigate, and time-consuming. Many wanted a simpler structure with clearer entry points for involvement.

Ingrid Stegemoeller of the Partnership for Learning and the Washington Roundtable observed that employers often want to engage but do not know whom to contact. Educators similarly want partnerships but struggle to sustain them. What is missing, she shared, is a bridge between the two systems.

Trade associations, industry groups, and regional partnerships may provide that bridge, making it easier for businesses to participate without each school having to build employer relationships independently.

The Promise of Regional Pathways

A significant portion of the discussion focused on regional workforce alignment.

Washington STEM is working toward creating region-specific maps that connect local industries, educational programs, credentials, and career opportunities. Different regions have different workforce needs, and pathways must reflect those realities.

Whether a region's economy is driven by healthcare, manufacturing, aerospace, technology, or another sector, schools and workforce systems need better tools to help students understand viable opportunities close to home.

The vision is a coordinated system in which schools, colleges, employers, and community organizations work together around shared outcomes and transparent data.

Young People Confirm the Findings

The most compelling validation of the data came from student panelists Noé Lima-Ponce and Sogol Alamdar. Their experiences echoed many of the study's conclusions.

Noé described how a Teaching Academy course during high school transformed his understanding of a future career in education. The program allowed him to take college-level coursework while working in a dual-language elementary classroom. This combination of academic preparation and hands-on experience helped him connect his passions to a career pathway and ultimately led him to pursue education studies at the University of Washington.

Sogol shared a similar story. While considering post-graduation plans, she often felt overwhelmed by the sheer number of opportunities available. What ultimately made the difference was guidance from university counselors who helped connect her with a competitive international scholarship opportunity. That support gave her confidence and opened doors she might not have discovered alone.

Both students emphasized that the opportunities already exist. The problem is accessibility.

Students need help understanding how to use resources effectively, whether that means crafting a résumé, requesting recommendation letters, applying for scholarships, or making sense of internship opportunities. Even seemingly small obstacles can discourage participation and perpetuate inequities.

Most importantly, both students highlighted the transformative power of individual relationships. A counselor's recommendation, a teacher's encouragement, or an advisor's guidance can change the trajectory of a young person's life.

A Call for Coordination Rather Than Creation

As the webinar concluded, a powerful theme emerged.

Washington does not need to build an entirely new system.

The state already possesses many of the educational programs, financial aid initiatives, employer partnerships, and workforce development opportunities necessary to support young people. What is needed is greater alignment, better information, stronger navigation systems, and increased accountability for outcomes.

The report's recommendations focus on creating clearer pathways, strengthening the High School and Beyond Plan as a statewide navigation tool, developing regional outcomes dashboards, improving financial aid awareness, expanding professional development for educators, and building stronger partnerships between employers and educational institutions.

Ultimately, the research paints a hopeful picture. The foundation for success already exists. The challenge ahead is helping students, families, educators, and employers connect the pieces of a system that is rich with opportunity but too often difficult to navigate. By building those connections, Washington has the potential to transform a broken marketplace into a coherent pathway toward economic mobility and educational equity for every young person in the state.

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