Washington State Student Achievement Initiative Policy Study: Final Report

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Abstract

In 2007, the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) launched a performance reporting and funding policy called the Student Achievement Initiative (SAI) both to improve public accountability by more accurately describing what students achieve from enrolling in community colleges and to provide incentives to colleges through financial rewards for increasing student success. This report presents findings from a three-year evaluation of the initiative that was designed to assess how and to what extent the SAI model of performance funding encourages colleges to track trends in student achievement and improve student outcomes. The quantitative component of the evaluation was an analysis of "achievement point" accumulation by colleges over the period 2007 to 2011. The qualitative component was based on a synthesis of approximately 250 interviews with faculty, staff, and administrators at 20 of Washington State's 34 community and technical colleges that took place in spring 2012.

Key broad findings include:

- The SAI is viewed as one force among others pushing the colleges to improve student success. The funding is not a significant factor motivating the colleges, largely because the amount (less than one percent of the system's total operating budget) is too small to have much impact.

- On average, the colleges increased their point total by 31 percent between 2007 and 2011, with the relative positions of the colleges remaining stable. Although there was evidence of some gains in momentum (i.e., forward progress) for students who were already accumulating credits and making progress, overall student momentum does not seem to have changed much during the period in which the SAI has been in effect, even as aggregate achievement points have increased.

- While larger colleges earn more awards than smaller colleges, there is little evidence that colleges serving more at-risk, low-income students are penalized by the SAI awards method. Consistent with the SAI's goals, the basic skills metric appears to have encouraged enrollment from traditionally underserved groups.

- The intermediate milestone framework is viewed as a helpful way to focus collective efforts on student progression and publicly account for college performance. In order to understand the impact of strategies for improving student outcomes, however, colleges have found they need to use longitudinal cohort data in conjunction with the cross-sectional SAI metrics. The funding mechanism has proved problematic and unpopular, as SAI funding has come from reallocated base funds rather than as additional funds as originally intended.

1. Introduction

In 2007, the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) launched a performance reporting and funding policy called the Student Achievement Initiative (SAI). The purpose of the SAI is both to improve public accountability by more accurately describing what students achieve from enrolling in community colleges and to provide incentives to colleges through financial rewards for increasing the levels of achievement attained by their students. A set of principles, developed by a task force, served to guide the specific design and implementation of the initiative (see Box 1).

Box 1
Principles for the Student Achievement Initiative

Overall Principles

- The initiative leads to improved educational attainment for students, specifically the goal of reaching the "tipping point" and beyond.
- The initiative allows colleges sufficient flexibility to improve student achievement according to their local needs.
- The initiative results in the identification and implementation of successful practices to improve student achievement system-wide.

Principles for Measurement

- Performance measures recognize students in all mission areas and reflect the needs of the diverse communities served by colleges.
- Performance measures must measure incremental gains in students' educational progress irrespective of mission area.
- Measures are simple, understandable, and reliable and valid points in students' educational progress.
- Measures focus on student achievement improvements that can be influenced by colleges.

Principles for Funding

- Colleges are rewarded for improvements in student achievement.
- Funding is structured so that colleges compete against themselves for continuous improvement rather than competing with each other.
- Funding is stable and predictable, and cumulative over time.
- Incentive funding rewards student success and becomes a resource for adopting and expanding practices leading to further success.
- New funds provide the greatest incentive.

The initiative makes use of a framework for tracking the number of "achievement points" attained by students enrolled in the state's 34 public two-year colleges. Colleges earn points when students achieve one or more educational milestones, which are organized along a continuum from remedial programs (including adult basic education and pre-college developmental education) up through the completion of credentials and training programs. Colleges receive funding for increases in total achievement points attained by students in a given year compared to the prior year. Colleges earn achievement points for milestone attainment in four areas, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Student Achievement Initiative Achievement Points

Milestone Area	Achievement Points
Building toward college-level skills	• Basic skills gains—increase in skill level based on a standardized test • Passing a pre-college writing or math course that would qualify student to advance to the next level
First-year retention and progress	• Earning 15 quarter credits of college-level coursework • Earning 30 quarter credits of college-level coursework
Completing college-level math	• Passing a math course required for either technical or academic associate degree
Completions	• Completing a degree, occupational certificate, or apprenticeship training

Funding for increased points is determined by the amount of dollars available to fund the initiative and the total point gains achieved across the system. The SAI funding mechanism does not affect the formula by which the bulk of the system's budget is allocated to colleges. SAI funding is provided as a financial reward in addition to the amount each college receives through the system's basic funding mechanism. Once earned, a college's reward is added to its base budget. However, due to budget reductions imposed on the college system nearly every year since the inception of the SAI, college base budgets have been reduced to form the new pool of SAI funds each year. Consequently, SAI funds earned in one year have not in fact increased college base budgets in subsequent years, as was the original intention. The SAI has continued to offer

the chance for colleges to earn funds on top of base funding, but these funds have been on top of a shrinking base budget. To date, annual SAI funding has constituted less than one percent of the system's total operating budget.

The Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teacher's College, Columbia University, in partnership with the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy (IHELP) at Sacramento State University, conducted a three-year evaluation to assess the implications of the SAI performance funding policy for state community college performance incentive policies nationwide. The study, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, was designed to assess how and to what extent the SAI model of performance funding encourages colleges to improve student outcomes, and to track trends in student achievement during the implementation period. Findings from the study are intended to inform the SBCTC, as it considers revisions to the initiative,[1] and to guide efforts by other states to develop more effective funding mechanisms for community colleges.

The research questions framing the study were:

1) To what extent does the prospect of performance funding and the availability of performance data motivate colleges to implement policies and practices intended to improve student outcomes?

2) What is the range of performance in Washington's community and technical colleges according to the achievement point measures, and what are the trends in college performance over time?

3) What distinguishes colleges that perform well according to the SAI framework from those that do less well?

4) Is the SAI sustainable?

In spring 2010, CCRC analyzed the points accumulated by the colleges during the two-year period from 2006–07 through 2008–09. The analysis examined the change in

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[1] In 2011, the Washington Association of Community and Technical Colleges (WACTC), the organization of community and technical college presidents that develops policy recommendations to the SBCTC and to the system, formed the Student Achievement Advisory Committee to advise WACTC in making its recommendations to the State Board on changes to the SAI metrics and funding mechanism. Final recommendations have not been presented to the SBCTC as of the writing of this report.

total points, points by individual metric, and points per student, and it also explored the effect of individual student characteristics and college characteristics on these various performance indicators.

In addition, CCRC–IHELP researchers conducted interviews with personnel at 17 of the 34 Washington State community and technical colleges. The 17 colleges were the same colleges that were involved in the formative evaluation CCRC conducted of the SAI during the 2007–08 "learning year," before performance funding was provided to colleges (Jenkins, Ellwein, & Boswell, 2009). In both 2008 and 2010, interviews were conducted at eight colleges through site visits and at nine colleges via telephone. The 17 colleges were chosen to be representative of the 34 Washington State community and technical colleges in terms of size and location (i.e., urban, suburban, or rural). Technical colleges as well as comprehensive community colleges were included. The 2010 research produced an internal report for the SBCTC as well as a published policy brief (Shulock & Jenkins, 2011) that discussed the three overriding issues that the SBCTC and the state's two-year colleges have been addressing over the last several years as they continue to implement the initiative: designing a valid measurement system, designing an effective performance funding system, and fostering conditions at the colleges to use the data to improve performance.

This report revisits the four general research questions about the operation and sustainability of the Student Achievement Initiative based on more recent research. As in our earlier research, the analysis included a quantitative and a qualitative component. The quantitative component was an analysis of achievement point accumulation by colleges over the period 2007 to 2011. It was intended to address research questions (2) and (3) by analyzing patterns of achievement point gain across the colleges and identifying any correlations between achievement points and college characteristics. The quantitative analysis also considered the robustness of the specific measurement system by analyzing whether alternative measures of performance would have yielded different funding allocations. Finally, it examined whether, as achievement points have increased over time, there is evidence that more students are progressing further toward completion of postsecondary credentials, i.e., whether individual student momentum has increased since the SAI was implemented.

The qualitative component was a synthesis of approximately 250 interviews with faculty, staff, and administrators at 20 of the 34 colleges, through site visits to eight colleges and phone interviews at the other 12, conducted in spring 2012. The 20 colleges were the original 17 revisited and three colleges added to ensure inclusion of the highest performers, in terms of increase in total points and increase in points per student. The qualitative research in this final year of the three-year study addressed research questions (1), (3), and (4) by examining awareness of and opinions about SAI metrics and funding, the use of SAI data, and the impact that the SAI has had on colleges' understanding of, and efforts to increase, student achievement.

The remainder of this report will present the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative components of the research. It begins with an overall summary of findings, followed by sections that address— integrating the qualitative and quantitative findings—each of the four overall research questions. A concluding section summarizes our findings with respect to the original design principles and discusses how well those principles have been followed and how well they have served the goal of the initiative.

2. Summary of Findings

Research Question 1

To what extent does the prospect of performance funding and the availability of performance data motivate colleges to implement policies and practices intended to improve student outcomes?

After five years of implementation of the SAI, overall awareness of the initiative across the colleges is low, although in many cases low awareness can signal institutionalization of broader student success efforts. Knowledge of the initiative is still mostly limited to administrators and those faculty and staff who serve on committees overseeing activities related to student success or who receive SAI funds for related projects. A culture of evidence, in which colleges are using data and research for decisions on how to improve student outcomes, is developing across the colleges, but it is in the early stages at most of them and is only partly attributable to the SAI, with other initiatives and new accreditation requirements having a substantial impact. Most

respondents across the colleges acknowledge a change in culture in recent years, with an increased focus on student success. The SAI is seen as just one of many forces pushing colleges to improve student success. SAI funding is not a significant factor motivating the colleges, largely because the amount is too small to have much impact. Moreover, due to cuts in state funding that have occurred since the SAI was initiated, the funding has not been a "bonus" based on new money, as originally envisioned, but rather has been a reallocation of the overall system base budget, which declined substantially during this period. Most respondents view SAI dollars as a source of funding for small-scale projects rather than as motivation for the college as a whole to change in systemic ways to improve student success.

Research Question 2

What is the range of performance in Washington's community and technical colleges according to the achievement point measures, and what are the trends in college performance over time?

On average, the colleges increased their point total by 31 percent between the baseline year (2007) and 2011. Based on our quantitative analyses, while several colleges lost points in any given year over the 2007–2011 period of SAI implementation, no college lost points in total since the baseline year. Within any given year, there was significant variation in point growth, but the relative positions of the colleges remained stable. Colleges with high totals in the baseline year also had high totals in 2011. This applied to points growth as well. The proportion of points earned from each metric did not change much over time, with colleges accumulating approximately two thirds of their points evenly across three metrics: basic skills, college readiness, and 15 credits. The remaining points were accumulated via the other three metrics: 30 credits, quantitative reasoning, and degree completion. Although there was evidence of some gains in momentum for students who were already accumulating credits and making progress, overall student momentum does not seem to have changed much during the period in which the SAI has been in effect.

Research Question 3

What distinguishes colleges that perform well according to the SAI framework from those that do less well?

College enrollment size and total points earned are correlated, and enrollment size became a modestly more influential factor over time. Consistent with the SAI's aim to encourage colleges to serve all students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the basic skills metric appears to have encouraged enrollment from traditionally underserved groups. The characteristics of a college's students—such as age, full-time enrollment status, race, or prior education—do not strongly influence total points or the change in points. There is little evidence that colleges serving more at-risk, low-income students are penalized by the SAI awards method. Based on the qualitative analysis of the interviews, it does not appear that colleges that perform well on SAI metrics are any more engaged in the implementation of SAI than colleges that perform less well; that is to say, SAI-related activities are not a distinguishing factor in performance. The relative performance of the colleges based on an absolute change in points—the metric by which funding is currently allocated to colleges—differs from that if the funding mechanism were based on other metrics of effectiveness and efficiency, including points per student and expenditures per point.

Research Question 4

Is the SAI Sustainable?

As in 2010, we found more support among the colleges for the SAI framework and its metrics than for the funding mechanism. Support for the intermediate milestones of student progression represented in the SAI metrics seems to be somewhat higher than in 2010. The intermediate milestones are generally recognized as important things to measure and are seen as a helpful way to focus collective efforts on student progression, although many administrators and institutional researchers believe that to inform efforts to improve student success they need to be measured longitudinally rather than in cross-section, as is done for the funding allocation. Attitudes about the SAI funding mechanism are negative overall and have worsened over the last two years as SAI funding has come from reallocated base funds rather than as additional funds provided to the college system

as originally intended. The colleges generally expect the SAI—or some form of performance funding—to continue, given the national focus on accountability and college completion, and most are supportive of that vision of the future. And even though its independent impact is hard to isolate amid a larger collection of activities, most respondents seem to believe that the SAI, in the long run, will prove to have been a significant factor in increasing the focus on student achievement.

3. Detailed Findings on Research Questions

Research Question 1

To what extent does the prospect of performance funding and the availability of performance data motivate colleges to implement policies and practices intended to improve student outcomes?

To address this question, we asked interviewees a series of questions about the level of awareness and understanding of the SAI on campus, about its impact on the development of a culture of evidence and on college actions to improve student success, about the motivational effect of the funding, and about the level of collaboration among the colleges on issues of student progress and success.

Awareness and understanding of the SAI. Despite being in its fifth full year of implementation, the SAI is not very well known across the colleges. We found little evidence indicating a spread of knowledge about the SAI since 2010. Substantive knowledge of the initiative is still mostly limited to top administrators down to the dean level; institutional researchers; faculty in basic skills, developmental education, and math; and faculty and staff that serve on committees overseeing activities related to student success. Others may have heard the name "SAI" or be familiar with the notion of "momentum points" or the "tipping point,"[2] but few know any details about the initiative or how their college has performed.

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[2] These concepts arose from the research that led to the creation and implementation of the SAI. See Leinbach and Jenkins (2008) and Jenkins (2008).

Local boards of trustees are more aware of the SAI than in 2010, which seems to be the result at least in part of the Governance Institutes on Student Success held the past two summers (see Box 2). Also, more colleges have incorporated SAI points, or measures similar to the SAI metrics, into their own performance monitoring reports and accreditation core themes than was the case in 2010, which has helped increase awareness of the initiative among local boards. Awareness of the SAI also seems to be up somewhat in the colleges that are new to the Achieving the Dream initiative (ATD; see Box 3). This seems to be related to that fact that the SAI metrics are being

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Box 2
Governance Institute on Student Success (GISS)

In 2011 and 2012, trustees and presidents from across the Washington State community and technical college system participated in institutes run by the Governance Institute for Student Success (GISS). A joint project between the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) and the Community College Leadership Program of The University of Texas at Austin, GISS institutes are designed to help boards of trustees and presidents develop the leadership tools they need to improve student success and completion. As part of the institutes, trustees and presidents examine data on students from their own institutions.

For the June 2012 institute, members of the Research and Planning Commission (which is made up of institutional researchers from Washington two-year colleges) working with State Board staff, developed and ran for each college, using the SAI dataset, analyses of rates of quantitative course completion, completion of 30 college-level credits, and "tipping point" completion for cohorts of key student subgroups. This was a promising development since it produced for each college analyses that are more useful for benchmarking progress and completion outcomes for new student cohorts than are the cross-sectional SAI points measures used to award funding to colleges.

Together with Achieving the Dream, the GISS has helped to increase understanding among college leaders of the value of longitudinal cohort analysis.

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used to monitor the performance of ATD-related activities as required by College Spark, which is providing funding for Washington colleges to participate in ATD.

In general, there appears to be more awareness of an increased focus on student success and outcomes across the colleges, and of related activities and efforts. However, most of those interviewed do not attribute the increased focus to the SAI, believing that it reflects larger forces including the national completion agenda and an increased focus on student success among policymakers and funders in general and by the ATD initiative in particular.

We heard several explanations for the continuing low level of awareness and understanding of the SAI outside of central administration and basic skills:

- The SAI is simply a low priority in many colleges in the context of budget cuts, increased workloads, and increased enrollments. The SAI gets lost in the midst of what are seen as larger and more immediate issues and priorities.

- The ATD initiative overshadows the SAI in colleges that participate in it, because ATD allows colleges to focus on their own priorities, helps colleges examine student progression using longitudinal cohort data, and brings in coaches who provide help on understanding and making use of data.

- The "need to know" about the SAI is seen as low for most people on campus, related to at least some leaders' assessment that it is possible (and maybe preferable) to get people to focus on student success, and even work to increase student achievement based on the points represented by SAI milestones, without their having to know much, if anything, about the SAI. Leaders also minimize focus on the SAI out

of concern about possible "initiative overload" and related resistance from campus stakeholders.

- Low awareness of the SAI among faculty is also related to a perception that the SAI is far removed from classroom activities and curricular issues. Faculty who do not receive SAI funding for special projects tend to see the SAI as not relevant to what they do.

Box 4 contains selected quotations from our interviews about awareness and understanding of the SAI, reflecting views we heard from multiple respondents.

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Box 4
Selected Quotations on Awareness of the SAI

It doesn't seem like this initiative has really trickled down very much… I didn't hear anything about it as a faculty member. [Faculty/Division Chair, Business and Social Sciences]

Around the campus there are so few people who understand SAI. I almost feel like I am starting at ground zero every single time I talk about it. [Institutional Research Director]

We don't talk about SAI, and I can guarantee that most people don't even know what SAI is. [President]

We have to articulate that information [about the SAI] to faculty and staff, and it is hard to do that unless you are one of the people on that statewide committee who really knows what the discussion and the intent is. [Dean, Workforce Education]

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Impact on developing a culture of evidence. The SAI is designed not only to motivate colleges to improve performance but also to provide them with data they can use to identify opportunities for improvement. In our field research, we perceived a disconnect between what people said in the interviews and what appeared to be the norms of practice at their colleges. Many respondents said that their colleges were developing a culture of evidence, likely reflecting the common wisdom in the postsecondary education arena that colleges should move toward data-driven decision making. But when pressed, few people could provide substantive examples. Our overall conclusion is that a culture of evidence is developing, but it is still in the early stages in most colleges. Use of data is still often limited to institutional top administrators, institutional researchers, and a few

"power users" on campus. Purposeful distribution of data is often limited to administrators and deans and to committees specifically working on issues of student success. There is no widespread use of data across the faculty at the 17 colleges we studied, although somewhat more use of data was reported for basic skills faculty, primarily related to federal reporting requirements. There continues to be much more use of traditional performance measures like course completion rates and graduation rates than of measures of intermediate progress like those included in the SAI.

Where a culture of evidence is developing, it is only partly attributable to the SAI. ATD and other initiatives, as well as new accreditation requirements, were noted as having a greater influence on the use of data for planning and decision making. The GISS is widely recognized for introducing many college trustees to the value of tracking the progress of cohorts and key student subgroups within those cohorts. GISS analyses include intermediate measures of student progress that are also used in computing SAI achievement points, such as passing a college-level math course or earning 15 credits.

The GISS measures are applied to cohorts of entering students to evaluate the forward progress (or "momentum") of those particular students over time. This is in contrast to how the measures are used in the SAI, where colleges are awarded points for all enrolled students who reached those milestones during a particular year, irrespective of when particular students started or their momentum. SAI points as they are calculated under the initiative are not seen as useful by themselves, but colleges are beginning to use the SAI measures to track student success efforts by adapting them for longitudinal cohort analysis. In many cases, those aware of SAI data simply expect that the annual points will reflect what colleges do, rather than drive what they do. That is, it is assumed that the points "follow" from colleges' general efforts to improve student success rather than being useful for designing or evaluating new strategies.

A handful of colleges indicated that they do analyze the SAI points data, breaking down the points by demographic groups and/or program areas, but most colleges indicated that they simply review the points data provided by the State Board, without much additional analysis. Colleges that do work with the data often convert the total points to points per student, which they find more meaningful. The conversion removes the influence of enrollment size and changes in enrollment and is a better reflection of a

college's success with individual students. SAI data related to basic skills and developmental education are used the most. Colleges see those data as more useful because activities to affect them can be attributed to particular units within the college (though we heard some criticism of the validity of CASAS test results, which are the basis of the basic skills points). Other SAI points, like earning 15 or 30 credits and certificate/degree completion, are more difficult to assign to particular units, giving faculty in other areas little reason to "own" the data.

Some colleges noted that they have incorporated the SAI points into their broader performance management systems as additional measures or indicators of effectiveness in their annual fact books, institutional effectiveness scorecards, accreditation reports, or related documents. Also, several noted that measures similar to the SAI metrics (but applied to student cohorts tracked longitudinally) have been incorporated into grant proposals as additional measures of student outcomes, and may have increased colleges' competitiveness for such grants. As already noted, College Spark intentionally requires colleges with second-round ATD grants to use such intermediate milestone measures.

Box 5 contains selected quotations about SAI data and their impact on developing a culture of evidence.

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Box 5
Selected Quotations on the Utility of SAI Data

For us, this was a dataset that we didn't have access to before because we didn't have the capability. [President]

Cohort-based ATD data drives everything. Everybody speaks that language, everybody understands Achieving the Dream. But nobody understands SAI because that is not how we measure ourselves. [President]

The SAI data just don't tell the story that we need to know in order to make good decisions. They are just a snapshot. [Dean, Basic Skills]

All we are looking for is the ability to apply student outcome data to decision making. As long as it is just outcomes thrown in a bucket, there is no way to make those connections. The cohort-based data overcomes that shortcoming. [VP, Instruction and Student Services]

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Impact on college actions. Most colleges find it difficult to assess the independent impact of the SAI on their programs and activities. Most respondents across the colleges acknowledge a change in culture with an increased focus on student success in recent years, but most think that the SAI is only one (and not the primary one) of many forces pushing colleges to improve student success. Many can point to some general effects of the SAI, including providing a common language for discussing student progress and success. The SAI is frequently seen as having encouraged conversations across silos within a college, such as between student services and instruction or basic skills and college-level programs. It has encouraged a helpful focus on the student pathway and on transitions (e.g., basic skills to college programs, developmental education to college-level courses).

In those colleges where the SAI money is allocated via grants for specific projects related to student success, the SAI is seen as encouraging innovation by providing funding for pilot efforts and professional development. Some college faculty spoke favorably about administrative support for innovations using SAI funds, including a greater acceptance that not all attempts at innovation will be successful. In providing examples of college actions related to student success, people often cited other influences including ATD, Title V grants,[3] or other grant programs. Examples of specific actions *attributed at least in part to the SAI* included:

- Changing post-testing procedures in basic skills to better capture skill gains (and points)

- Redesigning basic skills programs to make them more structured like college-level courses, with attendance policies and grades

- Implementing accelerated approaches to developmental education (e.g., modular approaches to pre-college math, reducing the number of levels of pre-college English)

- Changing data processing/coding procedures (e.g., making a change in the numbering of courses that integrate math into technical coursework to get points for college-level math completion)

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[3] Title V is a grant program of the U.S. Department of Education aimed at colleges designated as Hispanic-serving institutions. See http://www2.ed.gov/programs/idueshsi/index.html

- Better aligning curriculum or implementing new practices to better support student transitions from ABE to developmental education and college programs (e.g., introducing bridge courses or a transition coordinator staff position)

- Increasing the focus on early supports for new students, including mandatory orientation and mandatory student success courses for particular groups of students.

Box 6 contains selected quotations about the impact of the SAI on college actions:

Box 6
Selected Quotations on the Impact of the SAI on College Actions

As far as driving institutional and classroom decisions about what to do with students, much more of that depends on what we have been able to generate ourselves rather than looking at SAI data. [President]

SAI is merely something else that pushes us along, but we don't derive instructive detail from it. [President]

SAI gives you an opportunity to start that conversation about just how hard it is for students to make a level gain in basic skills. That represents considerable effort. It allows for a more nuanced conversation about how—even though the majority of basic skills students don't transition to college—we are still adding value in the communities where we provide this service to people. [Dean Basic Skills]

I don't think the points are telling the whole story. I don't know how, if you are not using cohort-based data, you can tell what the heck is going on. I don't believe that any college in the system is doing anything that moves those (SAI) numbers. I think it is demographics and the economy. [President]

For the overall conversation (about student achievement), SAI is another tool. We have so many tools to determine if a student is achieving what they set out to do, and it is a tool to measure that. [IR Director]

Motivational effect of funding. The SAI funding is not seen as much of a motivating factor for colleges, for several reasons:

- The primary reason cited is that the amount is small.

- The colleges have suffered substantial cuts in state funding despite sharp increases in enrollment. Concerns over how to make large cuts

while maintaining staffing and educational quality have overshadowed attention to what could be done to earn back a small share of base budget funding through the SAI.

- Colleges cannot tell why their points go up or down, making it difficult to know what they would do differently if they were motivated to do so.

- Funding is awarded "after the fact," making it difficult to do any budget planning based on the money. Colleges, therefore, tend to assume they will not receive any SAI money rather than plan for any specific uses of it.

- Some faculty and staff feel burned out and overworked due to budget cuts, and are defensive that they have always cared about student achievement and did not need SAI funding to encourage that.

Where any colleges seemed to be motivated by the funding, despite the small amount, it reflected an assumption that the SAI will represent a larger share of funding in the future.

Box 7 contains selected quotations about the motivational effect of SAI funding:

Box 7
Selected Quotations on the Motivational Effect of SAI Funding

The intent of SAI is good and it is moving in the right direction; I just don't think we've put enough money behind it to really make significant change…. We still focus on student success and completion, so it's not like we're not doing that, but SAI would have more effect if there was more money behind it. [President]

The incentive is so small that you could really say, "Oh forget about it; we don't need that $75,000 when you look at the big picture." But everyone knows that it's the right thing to do. That's why people work so hard—because it's the right thing to do, not because of the financial reward. [VP, Student Affairs]

We don't even build it into our budget. We consider it a cut, and if it comes back to us we put it in the bank for a rainy day or an emergency. It's not predictable, it's not dependable, and it makes no sense. There is no logical way to know if you are going to get money from one year to the next. [President]

It is mysterious … something you see at the end of the year and then are glad there is not a lot of money involved. [Division Chair, Math/Science]

Collaboration among colleges. In the interviews we inquired about colleges' perceptions of the assistance provided to them by the State Board and about whether the colleges are sharing strategies related to the SAI. In general, the SBCTC is seen as having provided good support in initially introducing and explaining the SAI, giving updates at various statewide meetings, and providing the SAI data to colleges (despite occasional concerns about timeliness of the data). However, colleges often noted that the State Board has not provided enough support on how to understand and make use of the SAI data and has not facilitated the sharing of effective practices across the colleges. Members of the Research and Planning Commission did acknowledge the State Board's efforts to work with them to develop longitudinal cohort measures based on SAI metrics for the GISS.

There is not a lot of sharing going on among the colleges in terms of strategies related to the SAI. What sharing that does occur is carried out informally rather than through any formal process or setting, for example, through phone calls or in side conversations at statewide meetings. The SAI is discussed in various WACTC[4] commissions and councils, but discussion is mostly limited to general information and updates. Those forums have not been a source of detailed engagement in the SAI. The informal sharing of strategies that sometimes occurs across colleges is more generally related to student success rather than to the SAI specifically. Colleges are aware of which colleges are top performers in the SAI, and many report asking those colleges for help, but they also note that the inability of colleges to pinpoint the causes of point gains limits the value of sharing SAI strategies.

The SAI is not seen as having affected the general level of collaboration across the colleges in the system. Many interviewees emphasized that the colleges are a fairly collaborative group that is willing to share, and the SAI has not done anything to reduce the willingness to collaborate. Some people thought that shifting a higher share of the base to fund the SAI in the future could increase the competitiveness among colleges.

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[4] The Washington Association of Community and Technical Colleges (WACTC) is an organization of the presidents of the 34 colleges that develops policy recommendations for the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

Others disagreed, citing the strength of the collaborative culture among the Washington State two-year colleges.

Research Question 2

What is the range of performance in Washington's community and technical colleges according to the achievement point measures, and what are the trends in college performance over time?

Our quantitative analyses examined the patterns of performance in earning achievement points at the 34 community and technical colleges during the period from 2006–07 (AY 2007) through 2010–11 (AY 2011). They are based on detailed analysis conducted by CCRC (Belfield, 2012). Here we summarize the key findings on trends in the points earned by college, including the types of points earned. In addition, we examine whether there is a correlation between college performance and student "momentum"—that is, whether students in colleges that achieve greater points growth are progressing at a faster rate than students in colleges that do not do as well by the SAI metrics.

Trends in points per college.

Changes in total points. In the baseline year (academic year 2007), the average point total per college was 8,684 points. By 2009, the average rose to 10,365; by 2010, it was 11,598; and in 2011, it dropped slightly to 11,465. The college with the largest change in performance gained 7,556 points; the college that gained the least increased its total by 287 points. So, although several colleges lost points in any given year, no college lost points in total since the baseline year.

Within any given year, there was significant variation in point growth. For example, in 2007–09, the total points generated by one college grew by considerably more than the point totals for any other college (+54 percent versus the next highest of +37 percent); four colleges grew by less than 10 percent. Over time, the gaps in point growth between colleges widened. From baseline to 2011, the point total for the college that had the highest growth rate increased by 78 percent; all colleges gained points, but three gained less than 10 percent. At the same time, the relative positions of the colleges

remained stable. Colleges with high totals in the baseline year also had high totals in 2011. This was a strong relationship and applied to points growth as well.

Earlier analysis by CCRC suggested that between 2007 and 2009, the spread of total points among colleges was narrowing. In 2007, the college with the most points had 5.7 times as many total points as the one with the fewest; by 2009, the ratio of most to least points fell to 4.4. By 2011, this ratio rose again to 5.1. It is notable that most of the divergence among colleges in points and points growth took place primarily at the extremes, involving a few colleges.

Changes in points by metric. Figure 1 shows how SAI points were distributed across each metric. At baseline, colleges were accumulating approximately two thirds of their points evenly across three metrics: basic skills, college readiness, and 15 credits. The remaining points were accumulated via the other three metrics: 30 credits, quantitative reasoning, and degree completion. These proportions did not change much over time; in 2011, the proportion of points from each metric was almost exactly the same as in 2007. Until 2010, there appeared to be a trend toward increases in basic skills and college readiness points, but this was not sustained into 2011.

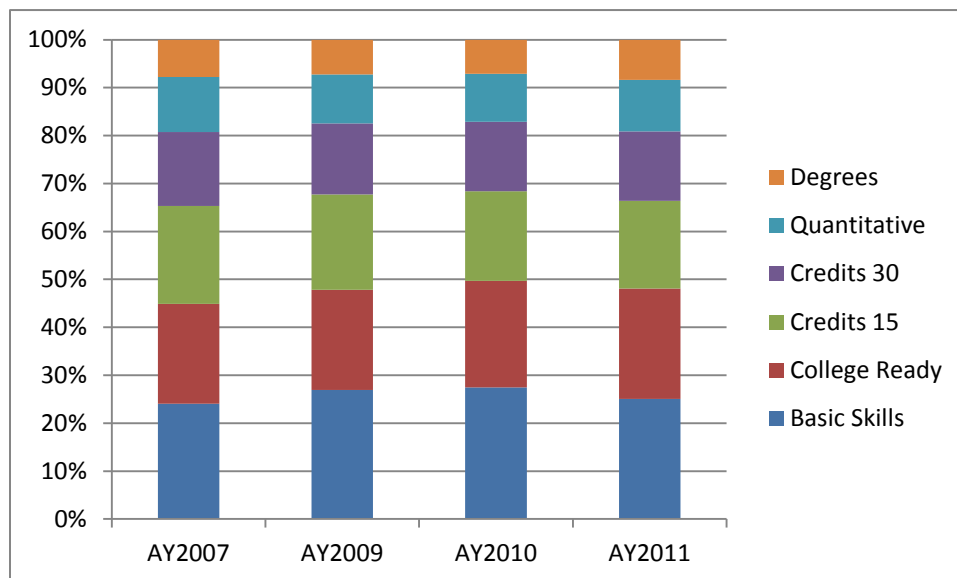**Figure 1**
Points by Metric over Time

Table 1 reports the average points per college by metric. In the baseline year, the average college had 2,087 points from basic skills; by 2011, the average rose 38 percent to 2,872. Points from all other metrics increased. In fact, the average college saw college readiness and degree completion points rise the fastest between baseline and 2011, at +46 percent and +42 percent respectively. This suggests that achievement has risen. The slight decrease in total points between 2010 and 2011 was almost entirely a result of a decrease in basic skills points.

However, this broad analysis masks within-college variations. For each metric, some colleges lost points and others experienced significant growth (as much as 50 percent per year). In any given year, one third of colleges lost points in basic skills, 15 credits, and quantitative reasoning; for the other metrics, one in five colleges lost points in any given year. Thus, in any year, colleges could easily lose points in a particular category.

Table 1
Points by Metric: Average Per College

Metric	Baseline AY 2007	AY 2009	AY 2010	AY 2011	% Change 07–09	% Change 09–10	% Change 10–11	% Change 07–11
Basic skills	2,087	2,788	3,183	2,872	34	14	−10	38
College readiness	1,811	2,166	2,580	2,641	20	19	2	46
15 credits	1,777	2,063	2,172	2,100	16	5	−3	18
30 credits	1,335	1,538	1,680	1,662	15	9	−1	24
Quantitative reasoning	1,000	1,059	1,161	1,229	6	10	6	23
Degree completion	674	751	822	961	11	9	17	43
Average per college	**8,684**	**10,365**	**11,598**	**11,465**	**19**	**12**	**−1**	**31**

Overall, there are more opportunities for colleges to earn basic skills and pre-college points. In contrast, the growth in points for the accumulation of 15 or 30 college credits was less dramatic. This disparity makes sense because the basic skills and college readiness metrics require students to improve their scores on a basic skills test or progress through a sequence of remedial courses rather than take and pass a college-level math

course or accumulate college credits that count toward completion of a credential. A few colleges did increase their degree completion points. On this metric, only one college accumulated fewer points in 2011 than at baseline, with a 4 percent decrease. Overall, these trends have led to shifts in how some colleges accumulate points, though the ultimate effect is not dramatic. Colleges that grew faster tended to start from a lower base, so they converged to the average.

Evidence of increases in student momentum. An overarching goal of the Student Achievement Initiative is to motivate and guide colleges to undertake changes in practice that lead to improved student outcomes. Indeed, the first principle is that the initiative should lead to improved educational attainment for students, with a specific goal of reaching the "tipping point" (of at least one year of college credits and a certificate) and beyond. In the years since the SAI began, the State Board and colleges have discussed how to increase student "momentum," that is, how to help more students progress further and to do so faster. We analyzed the data from the SAI to see if there is evidence that student momentum has increased since the SAI was established.

To do this, we examined the progression of students along a pathway. Students with no prior college enter with no points. If they are assessed to be academically unprepared for college-level work, they could first earn basic skills or college-readiness points. Those who enter college ready or who progress from remedial instruction can earn points by earning 15 and then 30 college credits or by passing a college-level math course. Students at the end of the pathway get points by earning a credential or completing an apprenticeship program. "Momentum" refers to students' progress along this pathway of points.

To measure student momentum, we tracked the progress of each student from one year into the following year to see how many points were accumulated. We disaggregated these analyses for subgroups of students categorized as basic skills, transfer, or workforce students, following definitions used by the SBCTC to classify students by the type of program in which they are enrolled. The tracks are based on each student's status in the first year. It is possible to see, for example, how many of the college-ready students in 2007 completed 15 credits in 2008. Rates of progress can then be compared across years to see if colleges are generating more momentum along a pathway for a given set of

college-ready students. As noted above, the pathway of progression in points is: none, basic skills, college readiness, 15 credits, 30 credits, quantitative reasoning, and completion. Basic skills students can earn any category of points. Transfer students and workforce students typically do not earn basic skills points but can earn college readiness points if they enroll in and complete college remedial or "developmental" courses. Figures 2 through 4 illustrate momentum patterns for students from 2009 to 2010 based on how many points and what types they started with in 2009.

Figure 2 shows that half of students who started with no points in 2009 (50 percent of students in that year) had not earned any points by the end of 2010. In fact, looking over three years, few basic skills students went on to earn any college-level points. Most of these students who did not earn points in either year were not enrolled in 2010; this is one way that students can lack momentum. This was especially true of basic skills students. Regardless of the category they started in, very few students who accumulated no points in the first year went on to accumulate any points over three years.

As is evident from Figure 3, students who started 2009 with college readiness points—indicating that they had previously taken and made some progress in adult basic skills or developmental courses—made more progress. Over 20 percent of transfer students who began with college readiness points, more than 25 percent of basic skills students, and nearly 35 percent of workforce students attained at least one additional achievement point between 2009 and 2010. Interestingly, other analysis not shown here indicates that the momentum of students in either transfer or workforce programs did not seem to depend on whether students first took pre-college remedial courses or entered directly into college-level programs.

Students who started 2009 with 15 college credits progressed even further (Figure 4). At least a third of basic skills students who began with at least 15 credits and over 40 percent of transfer and workforce students progressed along the pathway between 2009 and 2010. Generally students who were further along the pathway exhibited greater momentum.
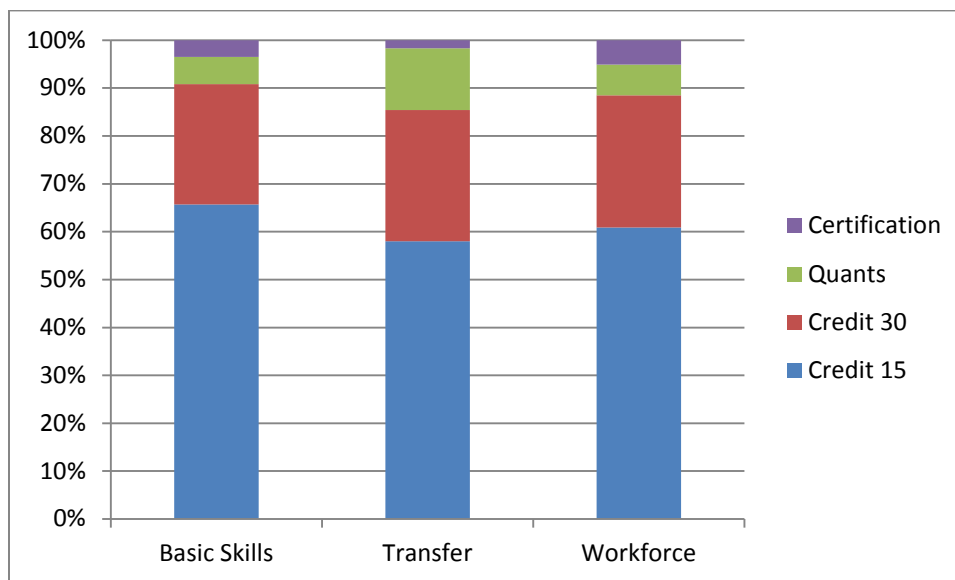
Figure 2
Distribution of Points by end of 2010 for
Cohort of Students Who Started Zero Points in 2009
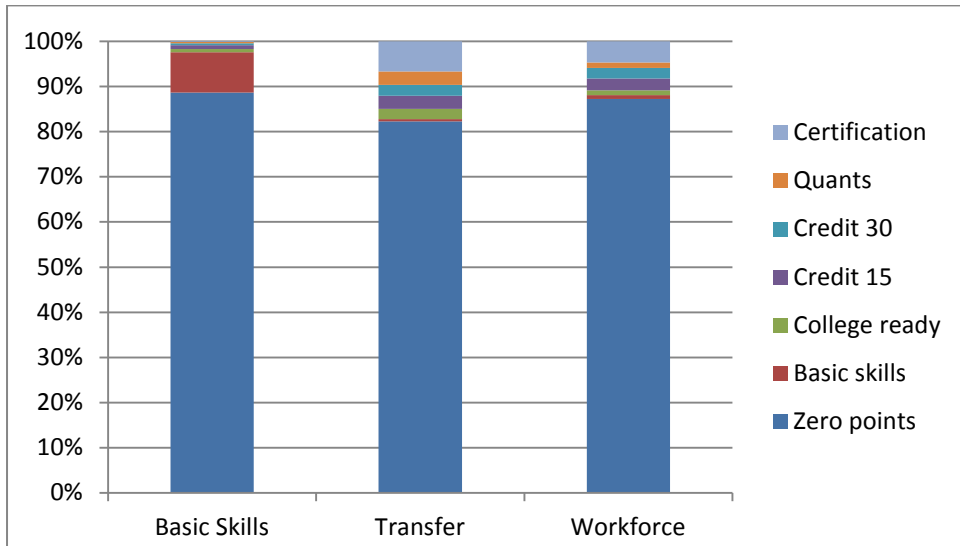
Figure 3
Distribution of Points by End of 2010 for Cohort of Students
Who Started with College Readiness Points in 2009
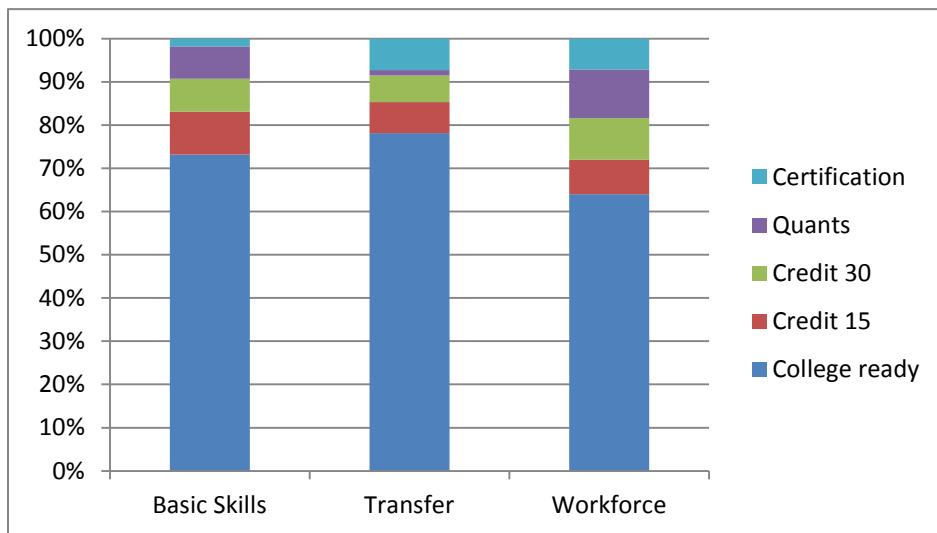
Figure 4
Distribution of Points at End of 2010 for Cohort of Students
Who Started with 15 Credit Points in 2009

Not surprisingly, attrition rates were much lower for students who already had points. However, since these students represent less than 40 percent of all students, it is difficult for an improvement in their momentum to significantly increase the total points a college can obtain. Since half of students did not accumulate any points and few basic skills students go on to earn college-level points, despite some gains in momentum for students who were already accumulating credits and making progress, overall student momentum does not seem to have changed much during the period in which the SAI was introduced. Put another way, improvements in momentum by the smaller number of students who were already making progress had a small effect on points accumulation overall. Looking back at Figure 1, the proportion of points that are accumulated toward the beginning of the pathway—basic skills or college readiness points—remained stable. If colleges were increasing momentum, a greater proportion of their points in later years would have been gained from the metrics that take place later in students' academic pathways (e.g., 30 credits and degree completion).

Ironically, colleges that retain more students may actually find it harder to accumulate points for those students beyond their first year—simply because there are fewer points for students to earn beyond the first year. Given the large numbers of

students who earn no points, colleges may be more likely to improve student momentum if they focus on the gains that can be made among students when they first enter the institution. This would suggest efforts to improve student attachment in their first year.

Research Question 3

What distinguishes colleges that perform well according to the SAI framework from those that do less well?

To examine the factors that distinguish colleges that perform well according to the SAI framework from those that do less well, we analyzed factors such as college and student characteristics that correlate with points increases. Based on our fieldwork, we examined if there is a correlation between responses about the SAI and college performance—that is, were high-performing colleges more engaged in implementing the SAI, or did they have different views about the policy than low-performing colleges? In addition to looking at the determinants of and responses to institutional performance on the SAI, we compared college performance according to change in total points from a prior year—the metric used to award funding under the current policy—with other alternative performance metrics, such as points per student, to see if different metrics would result in a different funding allocation.

Correlates of college performance.

Effects of student characteristics. If the SAI is working as intended, the characteristics of a college's students should have little or no influence on college performance. That is, the SAI policy should not pressure colleges to serve students they would not otherwise seek to serve based on their missions. To assess this, we examined the correlation between a wide range of student characteristics and college performance according to the SAI measures.

Our analysis found that many of the student characteristics we examined were correlated with SAI performance. For example, full-time students generated more points than part-time students. This is not surprising since full-time students generally make faster progress than part-timers Students on financial aid also tended to accumulate more points. This is also not surprising because to receive financial aid students must be pursuing a credential, whereas some students not on financial aid may just be taking a

few courses and not intending to pursue a credential. Students under 20 were much more likely to earn points compared to other age groups, and students over 65 were much less likely. Among full-time students, males, high school dropouts, and Black students were less likely to accumulate points. Both high school dropouts and high school graduates were more likely to gain points as part-time students. Again, none of these findings are surprising.

While most of the student characteristics we examined had a statistically significant association with points accumulation, the apparent effects of these characteristics were small, explaining between 2 and 10 percent of the variation in points. Moreover, there was considerable variation in effects across the individual measures; that is, different characteristics affected different measures differently. The result was that in the aggregate, no particular characteristic affected points overall in a substantial way. Thus, no particular college had an easier way to accumulate total points based on the characteristics of the students it serves. In particular, there is little evidence that colleges serving more at-risk, low-income students are penalized by the SAI awards method.

Not surprisingly, colleges serving more disadvantaged students were more likely to earn basic skills points. Put differently, the basic skills points do seem to reward colleges for serving disadvantaged students. This is consistent with the SAI's aim to encourage colleges to serve students across mission areas, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. For these colleges, however, the gains in basic skills points were counterbalanced by lower points accumulation in the college-level metrics. Serving disadvantaged students in basic skills programs did not give colleges an advantage in terms of the overall SAI points.

Influence of college size. Both total points per college and change in total points were strongly related to size of enrollment, or headcount. This relationship holds even after controlling for the composition of the student body in terms of socioeconomic status, age, full-time/part-time enrollment, disability, race, and prior education. The points–headcount relationship was reasonably consistent across all three years we analyzed. Larger colleges saw greater increases in total points. A college with 1,000 more students in the 2007 baseline year would have accumulated 165 points more than the average college by 2011. According to State Board staff, this is consistent with the

original design of the SAI: Larger colleges were expected to be able to obtain bigger awards on the premise that they would require more resources to make changes. The influence of size has increased over time, but the trend is not dramatic. Few other student body characteristics were positively associated with total points or points growth in a consistent way. Thus, point totals were not driven by characteristics of the colleges, such as the composition of the student body. This conclusion holds generally for each of the six metrics.

Relationship between college performance and responses about the SAI. Based on the qualitative analysis of the interviews, it does not appear that colleges that perform well on SAI metrics are any more engaged in the implementation of SAI than colleges that perform less well. SAI-related activities are thus not a distinguishing factor in performance. We looked for any general patterns relative to performance by comparing the group of higher performing colleges among those interviewed (those with an increase in points of more than 4,000 from 2007 to 2011) to the group of lower performing colleges (point increases of less than 2,000). There is not much difference between high and low performers in the level of awareness; in both groups, the SAI is primarily known among administrators down to the dean level and faculty/staff who serve on relevant committees. Neither group of colleges reported that the SAI had much direct impact on their activities. Where activities were cited as being at least in part attributable to the SAI, they tended to be in the area of basic skills and developmental education at both sets of colleges.

The one area with some detectable differences between higher and lower performing colleges was in attitudes about the SAI, with attitudes appearing to be somewhat more negative in the lower performing colleges. While most of the lower performing colleges noted that the SAI measures represent important milestones and can focus conversations on student progress, they more often noted concerns including issues with the timeliness and reliability of the data, sensitivity of the metrics to enrollment changes, the cross-sectional (as opposed to longitudinal) nature of the measures, and the lack of applicability to some unique characteristic of their college structure or student population (e.g., primarily transfer-seeking students or those intending to take only a few courses to upgrade job skills). Negative opinions about aspects of the funding mechanism

were common to both groups of colleges, but were more pronounced in the lower performing colleges. While high performers may have been happier with the outcomes, they were uniformly quick to acknowledge that they did not truly understand why they had scored relatively well in point gains.

Alternative measures of "achievement." The SAI is explicitly intended not to rank colleges, and in general ordinal ranking is often not the best way to understand differences between colleges (Jenkins & Cho, 2012). The SAI rewards colleges based on their improvement against their own historical baselines, not against the performances of other colleges. It is a funding system, not an ordering system. Still, performance systems should be robust—they should be insensitive to variations in how they are calculated. Moreover, the SAI does allocate funds based on colleges' relative performance. Some colleges receive more funds than others. Thus, the allocation system of the SAI will be more credible if it reflects a valid measure of relative performance. Colleges that receive more funds using the SAI measure of achievement should also receive more funds based on an alternative, equally plausible measure.

To examine this we compared the rankings of colleges over time using the SAI measure and using alternative measures of "achievement." (The alternative measures do not alter the specific metrics by which students generate points for colleges; rather they are alternatives to the way that those points are ultimately combined to produce a measure of college achievement.) There are multiple ways that colleges' relative performance within the Washington State system could be measured. In this analysis we compared the SAI measure—which is change in total points compared to a baseline year—to three other measures: points per student (captured both in terms of headcount and FTE), change in points per student, and expenditures per point. Points per student is a measure of effectiveness, since it examines the points earned by colleges independent of their size. In our interviews with colleges we found that some colleges recognized this and were converting the SAI points to points per student as a measure of their effectiveness. We examined points per student in a given year as well as changes in points per student from a baseline year. The third alternative measure—expenditures per point—is a measure of the efficiency with which colleges invest their resources in order to achieve points. This is admittedly a rough measure, given that the data used for

expenditures are drawn from IPEDS and are sometimes criticized as inaccurate by college finance experts.

As in a prior analysis (Belfield, 2012), in this more recent comparison, using the 2009 and 2010 data (the latest available), we found that the ranking systems based on absolute change in points yields a different ordering of colleges than rankings based on any of the other three measures. Some of the colleges that are ranked very low based on absolute change in total points are ranked high when the ranks are based on any one of the three alternative measures. The correlations between the SAI measure and the other three are negative. This suggests that the SAI measure is measuring something different than the other measures. We can assume therefore that the factors associated with improving performance on the SAI measure are likely different than those associated with improving performance on the alternative three measures.

Research Question 4

Is the SAI sustainable?

To address this question, we asked interviewees about their attitudes toward the SAI policy and changes in those attitudes over time, about the degree of institutionalization of the SAI within the colleges, and about their perceptions of the future prospects of the SAI.

Attitudes about the SAI. There are two kinds of attitudes about the initiative that are important in our study—attitudes about the framework of metrics on which the points are based, and attitudes about the funding mechanism by which rewards are allocated to colleges. As in our 2010 research, we found more support for the framework and its metrics than for the funding.

Support for the intermediate milestones represented in the SAI metrics seems to be somewhat higher than in 2010. They are generally recognized as important things to measure and are seen as a helpful way to focus collective efforts on student progression. The higher support is likely related to the measures being integrated into other initiatives and student success efforts at the colleges (such as ATD) and their being used to measure the impact of those actions. It is important to note however that the colleges are generally applying measures similar to the SAI metrics to longitudinal cohorts of students. The fact

that the measures were based on research providing evidence of their importance continues to be widely appreciated across the colleges.

The framework's focus on underprepared students is widely believed to have increased the visibility and priority of the basic skills mission of the colleges and to have focused attention on the importance of transition from Adult Basic Education (ABE) to college-level programs. Basic skills faculty and administrators in several colleges pointed out that the SAI's point structure may have helped insulate basic skills departments from worse budget cuts, given that basic skills students pay no tuition, by allowing their departments to generate some funding for colleges. However, an example from one college demonstrates that the SAI's focus on basic skills did not have that effect on all campuses. The college chose to cut selected basic skills programs in order to avoid cuts in college credit programs, despite recognizing that the outcome would be a loss in SAI points. The loss in points resulted in the college receiving no SAI funding for the year, but administrators noted that the loss in SAI funds was substantially less than what they would have lost in tuition and other revenue by cutting credit programs. Moreover, the college made clear that the cuts it made to its basic skills program did not reflect a lack of commitment to that mission. In fact, the college decided to close some satellite basic skills centers located throughout its service region, which generally had poor outcomes, and to strengthen its on-campus basic skills instruction.

We heard fewer concerns about the specific metrics adopted by the SAI than we did in 2010, possibly due to awareness that the SBCTC was in the process of considering some changes to the measures during our interview process. Also, respondents seemed to be more focused on the bigger picture (i.e., the value of tracking student progression) and to be less concerned with the details of specific metrics. On the other hand, we more often heard general concerns about the SAI approach to using the metrics and data including:

- The cross-sectional nature of the data severely limits its value for identifying strategies to improve student progression or tracking the effects of such strategies.

- It is difficult to understand why SAI points go up or down because the points cannot be connected to particular college actions.

- The requirement to demonstrate year-to-year improvements to receive funding disadvantages colleges that were higher performing to begin with; conversely, the SAI can provide larger rewards to colleges with poor initial performance.

- The major impact of enrollment on points limits the extent to which the SAI is really funding "performance" in improving student success.

- Coding differences and data anomalies across colleges also have a large impact on SAI points (e.g., how courses are coded can affect whether points are earned for completion of a college-level math course, as in the case of a course that integrates the teaching of college-level math skills into a technical course that is not coded as a "math" course).

While attitudes about the SAI framework and metrics, overall, continue to be largely positive and even somewhat improved, attitudes about the funding mechanism are negative overall and have worsened over the last two years. The most frequent concern we heard about the funding was about the "skimming" of base funds to create the SAI funding pool, which is viewed as reneging on the initial idea that the SAI be funded with "new money," although the SBCTC is not typically blamed for this development.

Despite the negative opinions about the SAI funding mechanism, we found more support for the general concept of performance funding than in 2010. Some of that is resigned support because people believe performance funding in some form is here to stay, and they want to make it work. Many of those voicing these sentiments understand that performance funding is popular with the legislature and governor and that the SAI may be protecting the system from even larger budget cuts. But some respondents expressed more active support for performance funding, arguing that "money talks" and that more money allocated based on performance would be more effective. We heard two very different perspectives on why more money is better. Some respondents suggested that more money would buy more projects and pilot programs, a perspective generally held at colleges that allocate SAI funds through targeted "mini-grants" or special allocations, as well as among recipients of such funds. Others noted that it would simply be a stronger motivation if a larger share of the total budget for the college system was based on performance. However, some of those who argued that allocating more of the budget based on performance would likely provide a stronger motivator for change were

also nervous at the prospect, fearing that lower performing colleges could lose funding and thus have fewer resources with which to improve.

Box 7 contains selected quotations about attitudes toward the SAI metrics framework and funding.

Box 7
Selected Quotations on Attitudes About SAI Metrics and Funding

The language has been helpful, the idea of "moving the needle" [on student achievement]. Those kinds of things have become the normal discussion and language in all our discussions…[whereas] it seemed like all of the discussions back in the day used to be about FTE and generating FTE. Now all the discussion is about retention, completion, progression. It has flipped that, and I think it was a good effort. [President]

Fundamentally, it is a relatively simple methodology to ostensibly measure some very complex variables. That alone should raise several flags. [VP, Institutional Effectiveness]

We were given an opportunity to show our value and keep our jobs. [Dean, Basic Skills]

It doesn't measure our primary goal of putting people to work. [Faculty Union Leader]

This was going to be used initially as a way of allocating new funding, and we would be measured only against ourselves. But now that it has become the basis for reallocating existing funds, I continue to have very strong and persistent worries about using this as a funding mechanism. I don't think it necessarily promoted the kind of behavior that we want. [President]

Really large colleges have an advantage over small colleges. It was not supposed to be an enterprise that pitted resources of one college against another. That is one of the disappointments. The size of the institution does make a difference because of the larger numbers in each of these measures. For this to happen during the worst economic times that we have ever faced in higher education, and every college tried to respond to those budget cuts as fit their abilities. [President]

As we look at the landscape around us, many of the states are moving toward some percentage of funding based on student success. SAI has provided us with a framework with some data points that are comparable with other colleges, so it gives us a way to benchmark our progress. [President]

Management and institutionalization of the SAI. In about a quarter of the 20 colleges where we conducted interviews, some initial effort was made to have a separate SAI committee or task force to oversee efforts related to the initiative. Most of those colleges integrated it with related initiatives overseen by "retention" or "institutional

effectiveness" or ATD committees and administrators. In about half of the colleges, some effort was made to incorporate attention to the SAI into existing committees or structures from the beginning, and that remains the case. As noted, the SAI has been intentionally incorporated into the ATD expansion for the newest round of colleges funded by College Spark. In the remaining colleges (about one quarter) there was never any concerted attention devoted to management or implementation of the SAI, and it remains largely marginalized, with senior administrators and IR directors dealing with the SAI only to comply with State Board directives or to participate in system-wide discussions.

Some colleges have added SAI points or cohort-based measures similar to the SAI metrics to their strategic or institutional effectiveness plans and have built them into accreditation core themes and campus enrollment management plans. There have been no major changes since 2010 on who is involved—it is still very limited to top administration and faculty/staff in selected units. There continues to be a mix of approaches to the use of SAI funds. About a third of colleges we interviewed put the funds in their base budgets, and the rest use the funds for small grants and targeted projects that they see as related to student achievement. In summary, there has not been much change in the scope and scale of involvement in or management of the SAI at the colleges, although the initiative has been somewhat more integrated into planning, institutional effectiveness, and accountability processes in some colleges.

Future prospects for SAI. Opinions are mixed about whether the SAI is likely to have much impact on improving student success, with few seeing an independent impact but most believing that the SAI is one factor among others contributing to more focus on student success. Many appreciate that the SAI provides some new metrics related to student success and think that that could help to improve outcomes over time, particularly if converted to longitudinal cohort measures. Most colleges expect the SAI to continue, or at least for some version of performance funding to continue. The national attention the initiative has generated and the commitment of the State Board and Washington's legislature are seen as important factors supporting its continuation. The initiative's survival through recent budget cuts is seen as evidence of that commitment.

Acceptance that some funds should be awarded to colleges based on student progress and outcomes is fairly widespread, and many favor some more money to that

end. But many express concern about it becoming a large share of funding on the grounds that so much about students' challenges and reasons for not persisting is beyond the control of colleges. Many colleges have heard that some changes to the metrics are currently being considered by the State Board and are likely to occur, though specifics are not widely known. Those familiar with the details of the recommended changes are generally supportive of them.

Some of the more common suggestions respondents offered for improving SAI include:

- Emphasize the use of student progression metrics in cohort data, rather than cross sectional data, to better allow for connection to changes in college activities/efforts

- Use points per student rather than total points

- Measure changes in "momentum" from one year to the next

- Measure progress within a specified period of time to award points, like completion of 15 or 30 credits within one year of entry

- Measure progress and award points within specific groups of students (e.g., those seeking a degree, those beginning in developmental education)

- Incorporate additional credit accumulation points beyond 30 credits

- Award points for transfer and transfer readiness

- Award points for short-term certificates

- Measure and award points for workforce outcomes for CTE students, like finding a job or a better job, or increasing wages (though measurement challenges were acknowledged)

- Provide colleges with more help in interpreting the data and analyzing what strategies work to increase student success.

Box 8 contains selected quotations about the future prospects for the SAI.

Box 8
Selected Quotations on Future Prospects for the SAI

A lot of people are resigned to the fact that performance funding is our future…We want this to be a tool that helps us and doesn't hurt us. [VP, Student Affairs]

The state board loves it, the public seems to think it is a good idea, our legislators think it is wonderful, so I think we will have something like it for a long time. It is part of the fabric of higher ed. [President]

We have slipped into trying to please everyone. It feels like it may be getting watered down a bit because we are trying to please various constituents. If student achievement is about progression, then why are we continuing to look at things that do not move students toward completion [regarding statewide advisory group's efforts to revise SAI]? [Administrator]

4. Conclusion

The Student Achievement Initiative has garnered much attention, and the State Board much admiration, in part for how thoughtfully the program was developed and designed. The process began with a broadly representative group developing principles that then served to guide the more specific design and implementation of the initiative. At this five-year point of implementation, as the State Board is reviewing the past experience and considering some modifications to the initiative, it is appropriate to conclude with our reflections about how the SAI has played out with respect to the initial twelve design principles.

Overall Principles

Overall Principles

- The initiative leads to improved educational attainment for students, specifically the goal of reaching the "tipping point" and beyond.
- The initiative allows colleges sufficient flexibility to improve student achievement according to their local needs.
- The initiative results in the identification and implementation of successful practices to improve student achievement system-wide.

Student achievement, as measured by the achievement point metrics, has increased significantly since the advent of the initiative. However, our analysis has revealed that individual student momentum, or the progression of students toward the tipping point and beyond, has not increased overall in parallel with achievement points. While we find some evidence of increased momentum among students who were already making progress in college-level programs, about half of students in any given year do not accumulate any points, and very few adult basic skills students go on to earn any college-level points. Total points and change in total points are both correlated with college size, meaning that larger colleges earned more awards, a trend that increased somewhat during the first five years of the initiative. This finding illustrates an important issue related to the initial design of the SAI: A cross sectional measure of points earned collectively by all students enrolled in a particular year is quite different from measures of student progression over time. There was widespread acknowledgement that if

colleges are to identify and measure the impact of strategies for improving student outcomes, they need to use longitudinal cohort data rather cross-sectional "snapshots."

As implemented, the SAI has honored the design principle of allowing colleges flexibility to improve student achievement according to their local needs. There have been no prescribed activities, as colleges may decide which area(s) of the progression framework they want to focus on and how they will try to improve student success. However, the other side of the flexibility coin is that many faculty and staff are seeking more guidance in the identification of successful practices. We heard in nearly every set of interviews that it has not been possible to understand what actions have led to increases in SAI points. This uncertainty has limited the identification and sharing of effective practices.

Principles for Measurement

> **Principles for Measurement**
>
> - Performance measures recognize students in all mission areas and reflect the needs of the diverse communities served by colleges.
>
> - Performance measures must measure incremental gains in students' educational progress irrespective of mission area.
>
> - Measures are simple, understandable, reliable and valid points in students' educational progress.
>
> - Measures focus on student achievement improvements that can be influenced by colleges.

This set of design principles has been quite well satisfied in the implementation of the SAI. We found strong support for most of the metrics and an appreciation that they were largely valid measures derived from research.[5] Interviewees recognize that there is a tradeoff between simplicity and full accommodation of all aspects of the mission that are felt to be important, but there was a growing sense over the course of our three-year evaluation that the "back end" of the progression framework could be better rewarded as there are considerably more opportunities to earn points in the pre-college portion of the point framework than in the later stages of student progression. At the same time, we did hear from some faculty who teach transfer and higher level courses that the means by

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[5] CCRC's research findings, used in part to inform the SAI metrics, were based on longitudinal data tracking cohorts of students, not on analyses of cross-sectional data.

which they could influence gains in college-level achievement points were far less clear to them than how pre-college points can be increased. Overall, however, the SAI has faithfully adhered to the measurement design principles.

Principles for Incentive Funding

Principles for Funding

- Colleges are rewarded for improvements in student achievement.
- Funding is structured so that colleges compete against themselves for continuous improvement rather than competing with each other.
- Funding is stable and predictable, and cumulative over time.
- Incentive funding rewards student success and becomes a resource for adopting and expanding practices leading to further success.
- New funds provide the greatest incentive.

This set of design principles has proved more challenging during the implementation of the SAI, for a number of reasons. Most significantly, the reductions in state support to the system resulted in the reallocation of base funding to sustain the initiative instead of the "new funds" that were envisioned. This violated not only the design principles but the trust of many across the colleges who expressed strong resentment about receiving "rewards" that could be less than the amount taken from their base allocation to put toward SAI awards.

Contributing to the challenge with these principles were some initial misconceptions and, we believe, shortcomings in the principles themselves. New funds are certainly more politically palatable to colleges than reallocated funds, but it is not clear that they provide the greatest incentive. An incentive funding system designed at the outset to add incrementally to an incentive fund in part by reallocating from the system's base budget might have provided strong incentives for systemic change. But having conditioned the colleges to expect only new money and to expect to use those funds "as a resource for adopting and expanding practices" seems to have created a strong expectation that SAI dollars were to be used to fund specific projects or activities rather than to create more fundamental shifts in institutional priorities toward student achievement. When these funds had to be used instead of offset (sometimes only

partially) the reductions made to base budgets, colleges found it increasingly difficult to support the new activities they associated with the Student Achievement Initiative.

A second area of some confusion concerns the principle about colleges competing against only themselves. Clearly the computation of year-to-year point gains was consistent with the principle, but when it came to ranking the colleges according to these year-to-year gains and, more significantly, when it came to redistributing funds via SAI point gains, colleges found themselves in competition with one another. Even in better fiscal times there is a fixed amount of funds to allocate based on the relative performance of colleges, so the original principle, while understandable in a system that justifiably prides itself on collaboration, likely introduced some unrealistic expectations.

The final product of this three-year research project will be a policy brief in which we revisit, with the benefit of two more years of quantitative and qualitative data, the key issues that the State Board has been facing in the design and implementation of the Student Achievement Initiative. The Board continues to face difficult decisions about how to define, measure, and reward success as it works with its colleges to reconfigure the initiative to adjust to new, starker fiscal conditions. Other states have already learned much from the State Board about how to engage thoughtfully with constituent colleges in designing performance funding systems. The Board will shortly make some significant changes to the SAI measurement and funding systems, based on careful review of available data. This should yield more lessons for states that are striving to improve student achievement in a resource-constrained environment.

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