

College Spark Washington marks 10 years of funding promising ideas that help low-income students earn a degree

SEATTLE – College Spark Washington is celebrating 10 years of supporting programs to help low-income students in Washington state prepare for college, get in and earn a college degree.

“Since 2005, College Spark has made more than \$45 million in grants throughout the state to community-based organizations, schools, colleges, education non-profits, public agencies and other organizations,” said Steven Pumphrey, Chair of the College Spark Board of Trustees. “Our grantees are helping ensure a student’s destiny is not decided by family income or background.”

Community Grants Program in Action

College Spark supports promising ideas through its Community Grants Program, which awards approximately \$1.4 million each year in grants of up to \$150,000. The annual, competitive statewide Community Grants Program focuses on building the effectiveness of grantees working with low-income students in middle school, high school and college by funding new and promising practices that help students be college-ready and transition successfully to college. More than \$15 million has been awarded to projects serving more than 55,000 students around the state.

One of the Community Grants grantees is the University of Washington’s Dream Project. An early supporter of this program, College Spark is currently funding an \$150,000 grant to help the Dream Project enhance its current work by strengthening the college readiness components of its curriculum, materials and training of mentors to help students avoid remediation, as well as improvements to its data management system to know more about which students are earning college-level credits in high school and course-taking in college at the top ten technical, community and four-year postsecondary institutions in which its participants enroll.

“The grant allowed the Dream Project to create and implement new curriculum and programming to support 300 more high school students in earning college-level math and/or English credits each year and 300 more students in placing out of developmental education when they enroll in postsecondary education,” said Jenée Myers Twitchell, Director at the University of Washington Dream Project. “We look forward to working with College Spark to learn how we can be even more effective helping students on their journey to earning a postsecondary degree.”

Supporting Promising Ideas and Initiatives

College Spark also supports major initiatives, including *Achieving The Dream: Community Colleges Count*, a national initiative to increase the success of underserved students, at 19 community colleges in Washington and its College Readiness Initiative that funded Navigation 101 and AVID, two programs aimed at helping students prepare for and succeed in college. The initiative served approximately 60,000 students, and both programs have been widely adopted throughout Washington.

College Spark also recently launched its College-Ready Math Initiative. One of the programs being funded through this initiative is Bridge to College transition courses being developed and refined by high school teachers and college faculty under the leadership of the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

High school seniors needing additional help to prepare for and be successful in college and avoid remediation now have the opportunity to take the Bridge to College transition courses in math and English Language Arts. Students who pass the courses with a B or better will be considered college-ready and eligible to enroll in credit-bearing college math at all participating Washington higher education institutions (currently the 34 community and technical colleges).

Lessons Learned Shaping Future Work

Despite the hard work of grantees and the schools and students they serve, the mission of College Spark is far from over. Gaps in college readiness, college access and college success between low-income students and their more affluent peers remain. Low-income students are far less likely to get a bachelor's degree than high-income peers.

College Spark learned that optional, out-of-class services don't close achievement gaps. Effective strategies need to be scalable to entire schools and districts. Persistent problems hold students down, such as low math achievement and overly harsh disciplinary policies that disproportionately keep low-income students and students of color out of the classroom. Districts need help using technology to tap data on attendance, discipline, and academic performance so educators can reach students with targeted interventions before they fall behind.

And just getting kids to college isn't enough. On campus, they need help identifying and navigating clear pathways to completion. Advising needs to reach students early and often. Support services need to be integrated into the classroom. And colleges should be encouraged to improve completion while closing achievement gaps.

Patience and persistence are essential. Grantees need deeper, longer commitments to develop interventions, test models, and assess results. Building capacity through professional development matters. Supporting evaluation costs and opportunities to share with peers leads to more effective programs and reaching more students.

"We've learned from this work and it's shaping how we move forward," said Christine McCabe, Executive Director at College Spark Washington. "College Spark will continue to work with its grantees and the schools and students they serve to help eliminate gaps in college readiness, college access and college success between low-income students and their more affluent peers."

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[College Spark Washington](#) funds programs across Washington state that help low-income students become college-ready and earn their degrees. Grantees include community-based organizations, K-12 schools and districts, community and technical colleges, four-year colleges and universities, educational nonprofits, and public agencies. College Spark began supporting access to higher education in 1978 and, since 2005, has awarded more than \$45 million to college readiness and degree completion programs throughout the state.