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# Airport University – Next Steps for Promoting the Education and Advancement Efforts of Incumbent Workers at Sea-Tac Airport, July 2008

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## BACKGROUND

**Port Jobs** has worked since 1993 to develop strategies, partnerships, and research that benefit job seekers, employers, and incumbent workers in the port-related economy. In early 2000 Port Jobs opened the **Airport Jobs Center** to meet the dual needs of job seekers and Sea-Tac Airport employers. Because entry-level airport jobs pay low wages, Port Jobs identified additional resources for career path development. This led to a partnership between South Seattle Community College and Port Jobs and the launching of **Airport University** in 2003. This skill-building and college credit-bearing academic program helps students access education so they can move ahead in their jobs. Classes are located onsite at Sea-Tac Airport, and are offered at times when shift-workers can attend.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

Research for this report included:

- A comprehensive literature review. (See *Sources* at the end of this document);
- A review of Airport University demographic, course enrollment, and completion data for 765 students;
- End of class interviews with 120 Airport University students, all of whom were incumbent workers at the airport;
- Placement data for 1,243 individuals who got jobs through Airport Jobs in 2007; and
- Interviews with six airport jobs employers representing food service, retail, ground service, security, and airlines to identify entry points and career path opportunities.

## KEY FINDINGS

- As of June 2008, 765 students have enrolled in and successfully completed Airport University classes. These students are an ethnically diverse population, which includes refugees, immigrants, and English language learners. Only 12% of the students were Caucasian, with the majority being African, Asian and Pacific Islander.
- In order to address the needs identified by employers and workers, three types of courses were offered: job skills (such as security badging preparation classes and job readiness classes), academic (including computer and leadership classes), and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Students in academic courses earned transferable college credits.
- A separate component of Airport University has been a small scholarship fund which allows low-wage airport workers to take classes on college campuses. The maximum award is \$450. As of June 2008, 84 scholarships had been awarded. Scholarship recipients worked at 46 different airport companies. Most recipients used their scholarships at area community and technical colleges.
- Some students took more than one course, resulting in 944 course completions. The majority of class completions were in job skills (731, or 77%), followed by academic courses (196, or 21%) and English as a Second Language (17, or 2%).
- Airport University students were in three broad and often overlapping categories: new entrants to the labor force, persons who needed English language instruction, and workers who wanted to take academic courses

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in order to build skills for their current or prospective jobs.

- Airport University acted as a pathway to additional education for many students. Of the 196 students who completed one academic class, 38 (25%) took at least one more, 11 (7%) completed two courses during the same quarter, 28 (18%) completed classes in two different quarters, and 9 (5%) completed classes in three different quarters. Also, there was clear progression in the computer classes: 21 students who took Keyboarding I went on to complete a more advanced computer class. Of the 765 students who took Airport University classes, 18 (12%) also received Airport University scholarships, which enabled them to take additional classes at local colleges and universities.
- Post-class interviews with 120 students, representing many different ethnic groups, showed that at least one-third received some assistance from their employers that allowed them to attend class. Such assistance included split or switched shifts, time off work, and time to work on assignments during work hours. One employer compensated a worker for attending a course. In addition, virtually all airport employers engaged in other strategies to promote Airport University classes and many placed flyers in employee payroll envelopes.
- The Airport University career planning resources were insufficient to help incumbent workers engage in long term educational and career planning. To be most effective, students need access to career planning assistance in order to select courses that are most likely to support their career progression needs and the needs of the local economy.
- Airport University student and employer comments suggest a need for additional classes that align with higher paying supervisory, business, and hospitality tracks.

Efforts to involve employers in Airport University classes as mentors, instructors and pathway facilitators are underway and should be expanded.

***Student interviews and employer comments also revealed the following barriers to advancement for many of the incumbent workers enrolled in the program.***

### **Limited Basic Skills**

Many low-wage workers at Sea-Tac Airport are unable to advance due to limited basic skills which may include reading, writing, and/or computational skills. Many of these low-wage workers are recent immigrants with limited English language proficiency. In some instances, these workers also have limited native language literacy. This has significant implications for success in education at the post-secondary level. According to the “Tipping Point” research<sup>1</sup>:

- Only 13% of Washington State community and technical college students who started in ESL programs went on to earn college credits.
- Only 30% of Adult Basic Education/General Equivalency Degree (ABE/GED) students made the transition to a college level course.
- Only 4 to 6 % of all students in these programs obtained 45 or more college credits or earned a certificate or degree within five years.
- Just 1% of ESL students who started at a community college with less than a high school education earned a GED or high school diploma within five years.

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<sup>1</sup> “Building Pathways to Success for Low-Skill Adult Students: Lessons for Community College Policy and Practices from a Longitudinal Student Tracking Study”. Please see Sources at the end of this document for more information.

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## Limited Available Time for Post-Secondary Education

In addition to having limited basic skills and low levels of advancement into more advanced skills training, many low-wage workers work unusual hours and/or have more than one job. Others have extensive family obligations that further impair their ability to participate in additional training.

Role identification research has focused on how people see themselves --e.g. as worker, or student -- often focusing on the competing nature of these roles. Many Airport University students/incumbent workers see themselves first as family members, often citing a daunting set of family responsibilities that influence their career trajectories. Few have the option of attending post-secondary classes on a full-time basis. And, because many have low basic skills and limited time for school, attainment of two-year credentials can take a number of years, as documented in the “Tipping Point” research. The development of career advancement systems that can accommodate these realities and self-identification perspectives are needed and point to a different set of resources and career advisory supports for such students.

## Lack of Financial Support for School

Because these workers are not able to attend school full-time they have far fewer financial aid options, even though they earn too little to pay for their own educations. Additionally, as underscored in the interviews with Airport University students, private employer investment in training of low-wage workers is limited. The limited availability of financial aid for part-time students is of particular concern since one of the key factors associated with advancement of students beyond ESL and ABE/GED according to the “Tipping Point” research was access to financial aid.

## STEPS THAT HAVE BEEN TAKEN TO ADDRESS CAREER ADVANCEMENT NEEDS

The Washington State Legislature and Governor Christine Gregoire have achieved consensus and made considerable investments in a number of programs designed to address these unmet needs. These investments include:

- **I-BEST (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training)** – which pairs adult basic skills and literacy instructors with professional technical instructors to deliver occupational training curricula. The focus of I-BEST is to concurrently provide students with literacy education and the technical skills needed for employment.
- **State Need Grants** – which help students making up to 70% of the state’s median family income pursue degrees, refine skills, and retrain for jobs. Grant awards vary based on income and the type of institution (e.g., community college versus public university) that the student is attending.
- **Opportunity Grants** – which cover full-time tuition and mandatory fees for financially eligible students to help them complete apprenticeships or two- or four-year degrees. The goal of the Opportunity Grant is to help low-income adults reach the educational tipping point and beyond, allowing the least prepared individuals to complete 45 credits, receive a credential, and increase job skills and knowledge through career pathways.

These programs have significantly improved access to additional postsecondary education and training options for low-income students. Additional policy and funding recommendations are outlined below. These could be implemented to further increases in skills among low-wage workers at Sea-Tac Airport while reducing the skills gaps faced by their employers. These recommendations could be applied to other sites with high concentrations of low-wage workers.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL CAREER AND TRAINING ENHANCEMENTS AT AIRPORT UNIVERSITY

There is a need for:

- Programs that provide foundation skills (literacy, computer, etc.) for a wide range of industry clusters and occupations that are readily accessible to low-wage workers at or near the workplace during non-working hours.
- An array of programs that accelerate learning, such as I-BEST. Additionally, expanded options for low-wage workers with the lowest levels of English language proficiency are needed, including bilingual learning for cohorts who share the same native language.
- Disaggregate I-BEST courses to provide access to workers who are able to take only one class per quarter.
- Financial aid to students who can attend only one class per quarter over the course of several years.
- “Modular,” portable, industry-recognized course offerings that lead to certificates and/or degrees. This would also help low-wage workers obtain middle-skill jobs that respond to the specific needs of airport employers and the local economy.
- Specialized long-term education/career planning services, which respond to the needs of the whole family.

## ALIGNMENT WITH RESEARCH FINDINGS

These recommendations, which are drawn from the experiences of Airport University students, align with findings from:

- Washington’s Workforce and Economic Development Strategy as described in *The Next Washington, Growing Jobs and Income in a Global Economy: 2007-2017*. One of the

key assumptions of this strategy is that, **“Education is the single most important economic investment that can be made. Investments in education — particularly early childhood education and lifelong learning — have significant economic implications, far into the future, and they are key to helping low-income families gain ground economically.”**

- Furthermore, they support recommendations made in recent MDRC, Aspen Institute, and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation publications by promoting investments in education, modular and stackable certificates, scholarships, and specialized supports.
- These recommendations also align with the following strategy from *Washington Learns — World Class, Learner-Focused, Seamless Education*: **“We must significantly expand opportunities for more Washingtonians to access college and workforce training, especially in degree and certificate programs in high demand by our economy...Opportunities to gain skills and upgrade skills are vital for thousands of Washington workers facing difficult economic transitions and for employers who must stay competitive in a constantly changing economy.”**
- They also support the Prosperity Partnership’s finding that the Central Puget Sound region is home to a broad array of industry clusters. Among these are the Logistics and International Trade and the Tourism cluster. The latter includes more than 5,000 hospitality, culinary, and recreational establishments. It is also the largest cluster of employers in the region, generating an estimated \$760 million in state and local tax revenues.

Finally, and most importantly, these recommendations, if implemented, will enhance the skills of low-wage workers at Sea-Tac Airport while addressing the needs of their employers and enhancing the prosperity of both.

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