

Sue Monahan, PhD
Associate Provost for Academic Effectiveness
Western Oregon University
Statement to the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Committee
December 14, 2017

Willamette Promise started with a question: How do we serve more students with accelerated credit, while containing costs and ensuring quality? In Assessment-Based Learning, we have found a “sweet spot”: a lower cost of accelerated credit for students and the state, while also expanding access and ensuring quality.

From its inception, Willamette Promise has been transparent about course goals, content and our credit-granting procedures. We have answered the questions we have been asked. We have issued invitations to observe our Professional Learning Communities. We have solved so-called technical problems – how to:

- **Deliver at scale:** At present we offer courses in 50 school districts and awarded credit to almost 2000 students in 2016-17.
- **Expand access to previously underserved students and schools:** The Assessment-Based model allows more schools to participate in accelerated learning and more students the opportunity to demonstrate college-level learning and earn college credits.
- **Help students see themselves as college material:** Our registration timeline allows students to learn that they can achieve college-level outcomes even if they start the school year not expecting this of themselves.
- **Ensure quality by focusing on student outcomes:** We ensure the quality of our credits through intentional norming to college-level standards, cross scoring of student work, professional development for our teachers, and regular review of whether teachers award credit appropriately based on student outcomes.
- **Remain affordable for students and financially viable for schools and universities:** The scale of our work means that we are able to limit student costs to \$30 per year for as many college credits a student earns; our program is appealing to schools which have proven willing to invest in these opportunities for students and the supports we offer teachers; and Western Oregon University’s faculty are able to provide direct oversight and professional development to the teachers in their subject areas.
- **Save the state money:** The state pays only for earned credits.

Preliminary research by HECC shows that our students, as compared with non-Willamette Promise students, have comparable or higher GPAs and credit loads in their first term at OSU, UO and WOU. Thus far, our students do at least as well in college as non-Willamette Promise students.

Cost containment, expanded access, quality assurance: As policy makers know, it is very difficult to achieve these competing priorities simultaneously. Willamette Promise found a way, but it required innovation: Thinking and organizing in new and different ways including

verifying student learning outcomes, having faculty and teachers work side-by-side, providing robust support and professional development for teachers, helping students see when they have achieved college-level outcomes, and building an effective regional cross-sector consortium that can remove barriers from students.

Sometimes, however, there is a price paid for being different – an “innovation tax.” Our innovation tax takes the form of Oregon’s requirement for a special notation on transcripts. The notation is a direct result of HECC-approved Accelerated Learning Standards approved in July of 2016. The special notation is not otherwise required, except to be eligible for the modest state reimbursement of credits awarded.

And, as it turns out, some have used that mark to treat Willamette Promise credits differently from campus-based WOU credits.

The word “stigma” is unpleasant, but the special notation is a stigma – a mark that has led to discriminatory treatment of previously underserved students. Our students are paying the innovation tax. And as long as the special notation is required, those students will remain under- and inequitably served.

We ask that HECC treat Assessment Based Learning just like all other accelerated credits that meet Oregon state standards. That means either no special notation or, alternatively, special notation for all accelerated credit.

I want to be clear. WOU does not expect HECC to direct any institution to accept Willamette Promise credits. That is outside the jurisdiction of this body. However, it is within the purview of HECC to establish accelerated learning standards that increase access, ensure quality and constrain costs.

Thank you for your consideration of the Willamette Promise’s request to amend the Assessment-Based Learning Standards to temporarily suspend the special notation as we conduct further research on student outcomes and improve transferability of credits state-wide.