

**The Council of State Governments
2010 Innovations Awards Application**

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State: Washington

Program Category: Human Resources/Education

1. **Program name:** Washington Career Bridge website
2. **Administering Agency:** Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board
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8. **Website:** www.CareerBridge.wa.gov
9. **Description:** Career Bridge is a new career and education planning tool that connects Washington residents with over 5,000 education and training programs and provides detailed performance results for those programs. Career Bridge gives citizens a “consumer report” on how many people graduated from a particular program, what they earned afterward, whether they found employment, and the field where they went to work, so citizens can make a wise decision before they invest their time or money.

10. How long has this program been operational? Career Bridge launched in March of 2009.

11. Why was the program created? Career Bridge was created so Washington residents could make informed decisions about their career plans and the education needed to reach their goals. This is the only site in the state where future students can see at a glance the cost of tuition, books, and other fees, the location and length of training, as well as the employment and earnings of program graduates, as they consider whether to pursue a particular career path. This one-stop career planning site is also used daily by Employment Security Department staff, community college counselors and other employment counselors as they work to help unemployed workers retrain for new careers. Career and technical education teachers and counselors are also using Career Bridge in high schools to help students make informed decisions about their next educational step and where it might lead them.

Integrated access means better consumer protection

Career Bridge brings together data from multiple sources, replacing two previous websites, while providing users better service and expanded information on everything from career exploration to program performance.

Background: Every state has an Eligible Training Provider list and sets performance standards for programs on the list, which in turn, are eligible to receive federal Workforce Investment Act dollars. Washington has a record of being rigorous in enforcing employment and earnings standards on ETP programs so that those who rely on these workforce dollars—such as workers retooling for new careers—get a good return on investment, as do taxpayers who are funding the training. Previously, Washington’s ETP list was available on a separate website in a much more basic format.

Career Bridge brings data into a user-friendly, secure format, so that any resident can readily see which program is on the ETP list and whether they can use their Workforce Investment Act dollars, with or without the help of time-pressed job counselors.

Previously, another website provided performance results of job training programs. This site contained valuable information that answered these questions: Did the graduates get a job when they were done? Did they go to work in the industry they trained for? How much were they paid? Did they complete the program they started?

This provided detailed insight into what happened to students who entered a particular program—whether at a public university, community college, or private, for-profit career school. This data had been collected to ensure programs on the Eligible Training Provider (ETP) list met specific performance standards. The information was located on a small web site called Job Training Results.

Because of the nature of these two sites, few knew about them and accessed them, with the exception of counselors at WorkSource, the state’s one-stop employment centers. The general public was largely unaware of this valuable resource, which charted the performance results of thousands of education and training programs statewide.

Career Bridge is not only drawing the public to this key information, and helping them make informed decisions, the site is also spurring greater accountability among education providers. Because the public can now readily compare and contrast performance among multiple programs, it’s up to training providers to fine tune their offerings, make improvements and, ultimately, provide better results.

Since Career Bridge launched last year, it has drawn as many as 17,500 visitors per month, and has caught the attention of other states, including California’s Economic Development Department (Labor Market Information Division), which wants to replicate it there. The Office of Management and the Budget in Washington, D.C., reported that they are using it as a model in

discussions centered on reauthorization of the federal Workforce Investment Act. Aaron Fichtner, Ph.D., Director of Research and Evaluation at the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University in New Jersey is including Career Bridge as part of a report about the Eligible Training Provider List, identifying Washington state “as one of a small number of states who have seriously implemented ETPL provisions.” But the site goes beyond performance results and the Eligible Training Provider list and offers other valuable career-planning tools, including online self assessment tests that match a person’s skills and abilities to a career, financial aid information to help residents pay for their education, links to job fairs—and most recently—apprenticeships. Some of these tools can make the difference between success and failure for Washington’s jobseekers, and those training for a new career.

For example, Career Bridge links to job demand/decline lists that show which occupations are growing—and which are shrinking—in a particular region of the state. By accessing this tool, Washingtonians know ahead of time if the career they’re interested in is hiring, before they ever set foot in a classroom, make a tuition payment or purchase a book.

Security breaches solved

In addition to protecting consumers, by providing solid data on program performance, the new Career Bridge website also helped solved longstanding security problems.

The old website was not secure and had to be taken offline because of security breaches where a hacker was able to inject SQL code into our database. Career Bridge was developed using programming methods, such as stored procedures, form input validation and secure logins, which prevent security problems.

12. Describe the specific activities and operations of the program in chronological order. When Washington residents enter Career Bridge they choose from among several options—from career advising that helps assess their skills and abilities, to financial assistance to pay for their education and training, to a comprehensive search that provides education options based on subject area, location and other factors from among over 5,000 education and training programs.

Here’s how a typical visit to the site goes.

Potential students start in the Explore Careers section of the web site. Once there, they take an online self-assessment test that helps them match their skills and abilities with a career, then click on a link that shows the demand for different occupations in their region of the state. They can also get resume-writing advice, interview tips and more in this part of the web site.

After this, they visit the Fund Your Training section. This helps them connect with federal financial aid information as well as state funding sources, including scholarships and grants specific to Washington students. This section of the site also helps connect students with loans, work study, tax credits and more.

After figuring out their interests and abilities and what they want to do for a career, discovering whether their chosen occupation is in demand in their corner of the state, and then finding some ways to pay for their education, potential students then go to the core of the Career Bridge site--Find Education and Training.

Career Bridge is built on a database that includes public two-year and four-year colleges and universities, and private, for-profit career schools. Potential students can search for a training program by entering a job title and clicking the Quick Training Search box. Dozens of programs will appear. Or they can refine their search and get more targeted results based on what they want to study, where they live and which schools they're interested in attending. The location search function alone provides options to fit different search styles—from a colorful, clickable state map, to a drop-down box of counties, to a zip code search.

Career Bridge generates a list of education and training programs based on the student's search criteria. From there, the student clicks on a particular program to find out costs, key contact people, occupations associated with the program, what these occupations pay and average annual openings, demographic details about previous students who took the program—and most importantly—employment results.

In other words, did those who took a particular program at a particular college get a job? If they did, what field was it in? What was the average pay for students completing the program? Ultimately, what kind of return on investment did they get? Career Bridge helps answer the question cash-strapped students have long asked, but rarely had answered: is this program worth their money and time?

13. Why is the program a new and creative approach or method? Career Bridge is the first “consumer reports” of its kind operating on a statewide level and encompassing thousands of education and training programs, both public and private, that goes beyond the ETP list. We're aware of no other state web site that provides this level of detail, across such a broad range of education programs. The state of California's Economic Development Department has approached us about replicating it there. Career Bridge is also user friendly and designed to be a one-stop career planning and training information site, whereas other states focus only on the ETP. Career Bridge also incorporates

labor market forecast data into the site's performance results as this data becomes available. This ensures site users know the state's projections for job growth in areas they are considering studying.

- 14. What were the program's start-up costs?** The total start-up cost was \$209,430. We hired a vendor to assist with writing the RFP for a web development acquisition, at a cost of \$6,000. The web design and development was done by a contractor for \$92,230. We also hired a project management consultant at a cost of \$27,000. Staff costs for the project amounted to approximately \$90,000, for staff already in place. There were some small expenditures (less than \$1,000) for software used by staff for website maintenance.
- 15. What are the program's annual operational costs?** \$160,000
- 16. How is the program funded?** General Fund-Federal (Workforce Investment Act)
- 17. Did this program require the passage of legislation, executive order or regulations?** No.
- 18. What equipment, technology or software are used to operate and administer this program?** The Career Bridge website is hosted with our state's Department of Information Services shared web services, in an MS Windows server environment with an MS SQL Server database. The site is a custom solution developed by a local vendor. It includes a secure backend administrative website, consisting of content management system for managing content pages and an administrative tool for managing school information. The front-end, public website consists of the content pages, the education and training search system and a secure training provider portal where school officials can log in and manage their information as it appears on the search results pages.
- 19. To the best of your knowledge, did this program originate in your state?** Yes. **Innovator's name, address, telephone, email:** Karen Pyle, PO Box 43105, Olympia, WA, 98504-3105. (360) 664-4622. kpyle@wtb.wa.gov
- 20. Are you aware of similar programs in other states?** Other states have developed, or purchased, websites that do some of the same things we do on Career Bridge—Users can search for postsecondary education and training in the state and find career planning tools and financial aid information. (Examples: www.vtcareergateway.org, www.iseek.org, www.cfnc.org). However, none of these sites provide performance information or labor market information.

Many states have also developed websites for the primary purpose of displaying the state's labor market data, including our own state (www.workforceexplorer.com). These sites often include career planning tools, and allow users to search for specific occupations and display labor market information and training information for each occupation. But, they are usually not very user friendly and do not include training program performance information.

Career Bridge offers future projections combined with past performance. It's this last piece that is so critical. Without knowing how programs have performed, citizens must rely on best guesses on whether an education program is worth their time and money. With Career Bridge, Washington residents have the information they need to make an informed decision on one of the most important investments they'll ever make: their education. At the same time, education programs are held more accountable for their results, which we believe will lead to higher quality and continuous improvement over time.

21. Has the program been fully implemented? The website is fully implemented, but we are continually adding more training providers and programs.

22. Briefly evaluate (pro and con) the program's effectiveness in addressing the defined problem[s] or issue[s]. Provide tangible examples.

Previously, the training program information, performance results and labor market data were on several separate websites that were difficult to navigate and had an outdated look and feel, resulting in low usage. The new website has combined all the information into one website. In less than six months time, the number of visitors to Career Bridge more than doubled from when the multiple web sites were in operation.

Training provider forms on the old website were not secure and not user-friendly. The new training provider portal requires a secure login in order for users to access the school and program information for editing and adding information.

The administrative burden for the agency, for managing all of the training provider and program information in the system, was very high which resulted in long delays in updating school and program information. The new administrative tools allow training provider users to make real-time updates to their information. And updates that must be approved by the agency are also processed quickly, often the same day they are received, which means that the public has up-to-date school and program information.

The old website did not meet accessibility guidelines for making web content accessible for people with disabilities. The new website is compliant with Web

Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 1.0), Priorities 1 and 2, with the exception of Checkpoint 6.3.

23. How has the program grown and/or changed since its inception? Since we launched Washington Career Bridge in March 2009, the number of education and training programs has increased from 4,500 to 5,000. Also, we have added approximately 50 new training providers to the Eligible Training Provider List, which provides more customer choice for those looking for retraining.

24. What limitations or obstacles might other states expect to encounter if they attempt to adopt this program? Data collection of student records and wage records for the performance analysis input data could be a challenge. Obtaining student data from private, for-profit career schools is difficult. Also, unlike many other state workforce investment boards, we are in a unique position of being an educational agency for the state, which allows us an exemption from student data restrictions in FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act). We have a good relationship with the state agency that administers unemployment insurance. We have a data sharing agreement with this agency.

Agency staff must also work hard to ensure that public community colleges and four-year universities update their school and program information that appears on Career Bridge—from financial aid and admissions contact people to a new business course. One of the real advantages of Career Bridge is that the information provided to the public is up-to-date. We work very closely with numerous educational institutions, large and small, public and private, to ensure Career Bridge information is both accurate, and timely.