

The Wisconsin HOPE Lab
Harvesting Opportunities for Postsecondary Education

Supported by the Great Lakes Higher Education Guaranty Corporation
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The Need

Participation in Wisconsin postsecondary education is growing but students from low-income households, students of color, and students who are the first in their families to attend college are still being left behind. Ensuring that these students fulfill their potential requires finding new and effective ways to level the playing field, minimizing barriers to college completion by identifying replicable and sustainable interventions.

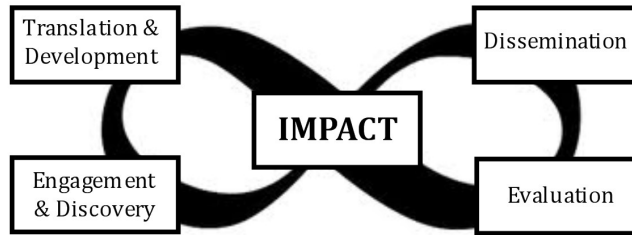
The search for solutions is underway in the state but we currently lack a laboratory to help identify new problems and opportunities, develop appropriate interventions and evaluate them, and share knowledge with policymakers and practitioners in a timely fashion. In a state and a nation of increasing inequality, the need for such a lab is greater than ever.

The Concept

The Wisconsin HOPE Lab will be the nation's first laboratory for translational research aimed at improving equitable outcomes in postsecondary education. It will help to make findings from basic science useful for practical applications that enhance college attainment and human well being throughout the state, and in turn, the nation. Projects in the Lab will range from exploratory, descriptive research aimed at identifying under-examined problems and identifying potential areas for intervention, to intervention development and experimental evaluation, to the translation of data into usable knowledge. The multidisciplinary and multi-skilled members of the Lab will actively engage with industry leaders and travel to real-world settings so that they can align their research agendas with the truly difficult problems in need of rapid change.

Activities

Work in the Laboratory will focus on four areas, spanning from basic research to active dissemination. Activities will occur in all areas at all times, in order to ensure that the research process is informed by practice, iterative in its search for answers, and aligned with current policy discussions so that interventions are practical and can be put to use in the near-term.



Engagement and Discovery activities will include interactive workshops with practitioners and students held in the field to identify problems and opportunities; site visits to schools and community-based organizations; small focused workshops and conferences on specific topics and agendas; and the conduct of basic, descriptive research aimed at clarifying the challenges that might be addressed through intervention. Initial engagement and discovery activities will focus on:

- The use of educational credentials by Wisconsin business owners
- Potential linkages between technical colleges and the probationary system for non-violent offenders

Translation and Development activities will occur when discovery leads to the need for intervention development. In this process we will work closely with practitioners to test potential approaches and begin to evaluate them with initial quasi-experimental or small-scale experimental research. The identification of key implementation challenges and cost-evaluations will occur at this stage as well. Initial translation and development activities will likely include:

- Effective approaches to addressing food and housing insecurity among 2-year college students
- The use of summer bridge programs for students transitioning to technical college
- Development of a call center aimed at increasing student retention at comprehensive universities
- An experimental pilot of an educational technology platform aimed at increasing study skills and academic success among low-income and first-generation students
- An experimental pilot of an informational letter aimed at increasing students' understanding of the meaning of financial aid

Gift funds will be used to initiate these activities and grant funds will be used to continue them.

Evaluation will take place for the most promising interventions, using methods meeting the standards of the What Works Clearinghouse. All evaluations will utilize external resources from granting agencies.

Dissemination is an ongoing activity that will involve bringing news to the field regarding new discoveries, ongoing developments, and the results of evaluation. Perhaps even more importantly, we will facilitate additional engagement with dissemination activities geared at bringing wider audiences into discussion and debate. A podcast series will be recorded in which top researchers and policy experts will engage with Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab in conversations. An annual report including three essays will share the Lab's latest thinking on the "State of Postsecondary Education in Wisconsin." A Lab blog will share the latest news and commentary on higher education, featuring local stories, facts and figures, and welcoming submissions from communities across the state. Partners at UW-Madison (WISCAPE and CFS) and in Washington DC (Center for Higher Education Reform at the American Enterprise Institute) will aid in sharing information from the HOPE Lab widely.

Timeline

The HOPE Lab will begin its work in September 2013, with an official launch in Spring 2014 when it is fully operational and has content for the website (including podcasts and a blog). Engagement activities will begin in summer 2014, and translation, development and evaluation no later than fall 2014.

Funding

The HOPE Lab is supported by a \$2.5 million gift from Great Lakes, and has an annual operational budget of \$500,000 a year for five years. The gift may be renewed, contingent on performance.