

# TURN UP THE HEET!

Reflections On Washington's Six Years Of Investment And Innovation In  
The Health Care Workforce

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Since 2008, Washington State has invested more than \$11 million dollars in Hospital Employee Education and Training (HEET) projects to advance health care workers' careers. Here, we step back from the day-to-day operation and programs and take a broader view of HEET. With the perspective provided by multiple projects and partners on the ground, HEET adds up to much more than a simple count of students trained. At its core, the innovation of HEET is the partnership of labor, management, and education. Most of the impressive educational and student support strategies that have come from HEET are generated, forged, leveraged, and supported in that partnership. HEET has profoundly transformed workers lives. HEET has transformed systems as well, with innovations cascading out to change education and workforce development throughout the state. This paper takes stock of the overall meaning and impact of six years of HEET based on review of existing annual evaluations and retrospective interviews with dozens of leaders, stakeholders, and implementers of HEET projects.

**HEET's most essential and unique feature is the partnership at its center.** Labor, management, and education come together to develop projects that help the diverse health care workforce gain the skills they need to move into more advanced roles. The partnership is *essential* in that HEET explicitly requires active participation of labor, management, and education. HEET partners meet regularly to design, implement, monitor, and, when needed, to revise the project. The partnership is *unique* in that it drives innovation through shared ownership. Rather than simply funneling money to existing programs and ways of doing things, HEET supports a partnership charged with developing new solutions. As a result, the program has generated transformative strategies beyond the boundaries of current systems.

HEET partnerships provide the foundation for programmatic innovation and success. New strategies to train workers – **changing course time or location, customizing content or developing new modes of delivery, altering entrance requirements and student supports**, to name just a few – grow from that base. In HEET partnerships, colleges have designed tools and strategies tailored to the needs of workers in the health care industry. And they have been able to count on the partnership of labor and management to make changes within worksites that support success as well.



In 2008, the Washington State Legislature created the Hospital Employee Education and Training Program (HEET). The competitive grants fund labor, management, and college partnerships to develop, expand, and evaluate programs so health care workers can advance their careers. By providing a new partnership infrastructure for innovation, HEET has changed what is possible for workers, industry, and the educational system. With cascading impact, HEET is a policy model with important lessons for both the state and nation.



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*At its best, HEET creates new ways of working that take root inside systems, improving opportunities for workers in the program, but also altering the ways that colleges, labor, and management approach the very issues of education, training and advancement.*

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HEET creates a partnership with a dynamic practice, shared resources for innovation, and the interests of all parties at its core, allowing HEET's impact to spread far beyond the boundaries of its projects. Programs gain new insight into industry demand and changes. Management and union leaders build stronger ties and a history of problem solving that increases the capacity to proactively respond to new challenges. Colleges see working adults in new ways, focusing on the unique capacities and constraints these students face, and build programming with them in mind.

Over the course of six years, with roughly \$2 million invested each year, more than 21 projects have received support. Some 16 colleges have engaged in the work, building new partnerships with dozens of employers and unions across the state. While some partnerships lasted for only a year, some projects and partnerships have evolved across the entire period. Six colleges have participated in HEET at least four of the six years possible. The product of these partnerships – changes to assessment and entry-standards, integration of basic and occupational skills, worksite delivery of education, scheduling of work and training so workers can engage in both, case management and personal support, cohorts of co-workers moving through classes, greater use of simulations at all levels – are impressive.

HEET has built the skills of hundreds of health care workers. More than 800 students have enrolled in some 1200 classes since the first HEET grant. Workers have moved from the entry-level to nursing positions across the course of the grant. The full-time equivalents (FTEs) in the community college system averaged 65 per year. HEET students are overwhelmingly female, substantially more racially diverse than the state population, and many are well-into their work and family lives (the median age of HEET students is around 38). **Half of these workers never completed education past high school, for them, the impact of HEET has been particularly profound.**

HEET training has changed workers' lives, workplace culture, and the views of educators in the process. One employer reported a culture change in management, union, and workforce conception of training as a result of HEET: "The workers are now more focused on learning." He noted a shifting view on the part of the colleges as well: **"We consistently challenged the picture of who can be a successful nurse."** HEET evaluations, which demonstrated strong student performance in spite of real and presumed challenges helped make the change possible.

HEET students did as well as or better than non-HEET students in 28 of 33 unique courses where comparative data was available. HEET funding allowed workers across the state to successfully move into and up through health care career and preparatory programs.

To be sure, there are improvements that can be made. HEET projects are often complex and don't always work as planned. Relationships fray or are undermined by pressures of time and competing priorities, innovations misfire, and labor market conditions change. But the essence of the program and its multi-faceted results remain strong in spite of these challenges. **HEET has done important work in Washington State, for health care workers clearly, but just as importantly, for their employers, their unions, and community and technical colleges.**

HEET offers answers to some of the nation's most critical workforce and health care policy questions regarding industry leadership and changes in education and the best educational approaches for working adults. HEET projects respond to key national health care policy issues as well. Whether it is the need to increase the diversity of the health care workforce or to help current workers adapt to the rapidly changing training and certification standards in the health care field, HEET has helped create solutions.

## ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF HEET

**HEET is founded on three essential elements of program design:**

- 1. Industry - meaning both labor and employer - engagement, leadership, and investment in a partnership with community and technical colleges**
- 2. Building the skills of current health care workers**
- 3. Investing in capacity for innovation in education to apply directly to these workers**

We discuss each element in greater detail next.

## PERSPECTIVES

*"The HEET program gave people the chance to advance their careers while helping us fill needed positions. It was a win-win for everyone."*

- Health Care Employer

## INDUSTRY ENGAGEMENT, LEADERSHIP, AND INVESTMENT IN A PARTNERSHIP WITH COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGES

Since its inception in 2008 when The Washington State Hospital Association and SEIU Healthcare 1199NW proposed and lobbied for the program, HEET's very foundation has been industry engagement and leadership. Concerned about projected occupational shortages and seeking to increase the diversity of the patient care workforce, industry leaders supported HEET to develop the unrealized potential of so many current hospital workers in entry-level jobs. In doing so, they created a new way of working with the state's technical and community colleges for training.

**The importance of industry engagement – from both hospitals and unions – cannot be overstated.** To design training that meets workers where they are – literally and figuratively – requires access, information, and support on the job that even the best educators cannot secure. Education must have partners and allies inside a hospital for this training to work. Student/workers need the support of administrators, supervisors and co-workers, especially when their training occurs on work time. And for those healthcare workers with changing shifts, scheduling must be flexible and healthcare institution's operations must be engaged to support access to post-secondary education. Shared investment in student success means that all partners monitor and support the student, providing early intervention when problems emerge, and working as a team to provide service and support in classes and on the job. Partnership can thus establish a more complete infrastructure for the working student's success. Projects across the country seek to secure industry commitment and leadership.

**Too often, however, “industry engagement” is demonstrated by sign-off on a letter of support. HEET's requirement is more meaningful.** Labor and management are key contributors to and supporters of the development and ongoing work of projects. The serious investment of time, the commitment to the partnership, the mutual team-based approach to planning and supporting projects all demonstrate the essential, and more complete, meaning of HEET's “industry engagement.”

## PERSPECTIVES

*"It all goes back to the partnerships. HEET put labor, management, and the college meeting together once a month or more. Standing alone none of us could be nearly as effective as if we stood together."*

- Community College Administrator

## PERSPECTIVES

*"All in all, I couldn't have asked for a better opportunity, not just in the timing for my coursework completion, but more importantly to renew my confidence. I consider myself very lucky to have found this class."*

- HEET Student

### BUILDING THE SKILLS OF CURRENT HEALTH CARE WORKERS

The second essential element of HEET is the focus on building the skills of the incumbent health care workforce, a priority of industry leaders from the very inception of the program. HEET provides a resource to help health care workers realize greater potential within the industry, to answer the desire for advancement, and to help build a pipeline from the typically more diverse entry-level and service occupations in health care into the higher levels of patient care which desperately need that diversity. HEET seizes on and builds the potential of the pool of workers already committed to the industry, familiar with its institutions, and with clarity about the content of the jobs for which they are training.

The partnership of industry and education is focused then on working adults, and that helps customize the education precisely to the issues, capacities, and needs of incumbent health care workers. Educators can tailor their work to reach these workers, building on their shared experience and understanding of hospitals/clinics, and with a clearer understanding of both the capacities and challenges of these worker/students. In many cases, educators can further rely on and leverage the strengths of a cohort of coworkers that provides mutual support and motivation as students move through the program.

The vast majority of the workforce of tomorrow is already at work today, and improving the income of low-wage adults requires getting relevant training “to work” for working people. Numerous initiatives, public and private, have focused on this very issue, seeking to make training accessible and relevant to working adults. HEET experience suggests that efforts could be strengthened with an **industry focus in course design, greater engagement of labor and management in program development, and the systematic support of incumbent workers that formal partnerships with labor help secure.**

## PERSPECTIVES

*"This program opens doors in the most profound way to people who wouldn't have had opportunity before. HEET is good policy."*

- SEIU Healthcare 1199NW Leader

### CAPACITY AND RESOURCES FOR INNOVATION

HEET investments do not simply support the partnerships or fund incumbent worker training in existing programs. Rather, and critically, they also provide those partnerships with resources for educational innovation. The partnership at the core of the HEET project provides the context for the innovation, and the needs of incumbent workers become the drivers for innovation. But from there, HEET opens up the opportunity to seek the best ways to make education work for students. HEET provides an invigorating opportunity for educators – who sometimes feel hamstrung by current practice – to try new models and reach new students.

The range of education innovation demonstrated by HEET projects is remarkable. Location, timing, and methods of delivery of classes have all been consistent areas of work. Strategies for wrap-around supports and guidance have been developed and refined. Assessment systems, which too often keep capable students out of programs, have been altered. Basic skill delivery has been rethought. Practical ways to assess and validate prior learning and skills have been developed.

With HEET, and the focus on current health care workers, each program is designed to move a targeted group of workers successfully through a specific course, credential, or skill set. Assessment, which is often used as a means to limit or constrain the pool of students, must then be reconceived as a way to support students' entry into programs. The experience of working adults, too often undervalued by the formal educational system, has become an asset to be considered alongside GPA or prior academic record. By starting with very specific students, educators must see, build on, and connect to the strengths of those students. Educators consistently reported the welcome change that this approach to education provided. And the strong grades and completion rates of HEET students (often better than results posted by non-HEET students) suggests that **this approach doesn't "lower standards" as some feared, but actually extends opportunity to capable students.**

## LESSONS OF HEET

The three essential elements of HEET – real industry engagement and partnerships, incumbent workers, and educational innovation – are the foundation of the program. These essentials are instructive in the national dialogue on workforce training. The partnerships have generated a broad range of lessons in the field. Review of evaluations and interviews with stakeholders provide a number of principles that HEET also has yielded. These include:

- **Support educational innovation, not just outputs**
- **Support the development of strong partnerships between industry (including labor and management) and education**
- **Require real industry input in program design; with employer and worker needs carrying equal weight**
- **Leverage private funding with public resources**
- **Maintain support over time; multiple funding cycles allow partnerships to refine, redesign, and mature**
- **Support ongoing evaluation to improve programs and disseminate lessons learned**

## CONCLUSION

From HEET’s inception, the health care industry – labor and management – has been united behind this funding to help advance workers and diversify the patient care workforce. But instead of just setting up a funding stream to train workers, HEET has created new partnerships of labor, management, and education; and these partnerships have found new solutions. Putting the partnership at the center of the project fundamentally reorients all the parties. “We turned the question around,” said one community college program director. **Instead of figuring out how to market existing programs, they asked what industry needed.** And instead of sticking rigidly to entrance requirements that stood as a barrier to health care workers, colleges found ways to reach working students and provide education that met their unique needs.

By starting with a new partnership and new questions, HEET has created a new way of doing business in the state. For workers, the results have been profound. Each of the partners – labor, management, and colleges – report transformative change as well. These sorts of reforms – from credit for skills learned on-the-job to training linked directly to industry needs – are at the very center of national priorities for workforce development. The practice innovations and policies on which they are founded deserve support and attention within the state and beyond its borders.

## ABOUT THIS PAPER

TURN UP THE HEET! Reflections On Washington's Six Years Of Investment And Innovation In The Health Care Workforce

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Full report available at [www.cows.org](http://www.cows.org).

## ABOUT H-CAP

H-CAP is a national organization of SEIU unions and healthcare employers who are partnering on workforce education and training. Its related organization, H-CAP Education Association, comprises 15 labor/management and labor-based training organizations (that include over 700 employers and more than 400,000 workers). Both organizations are strongly committed to providing workplace skills and career pathways to their members/employees and bringing greater diversity into the healthcare professions. H-CAP works with its partners to disseminate best practices across the network, develop solutions to emerging issues, and create a more cohesive approach to policy issues. The organization also provides curriculum development, program development, research, and evaluation services to collaborating partners.

## ABOUT COWS

Based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, COWS is a national think-and-do tank that promotes "high road" solutions to social problems. These treat shared growth and opportunity, environmental sustainability, and resilient democratic institutions as necessary and achievable complements in human development. COWS is nonpartisan but values-based. We seek a world of equal opportunity and security for all.

