Connecting the Dots: 
The Leadership Imperative for the New Century

By Hilary Pennington
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On October 11, 2001, Hilary Pennington delivered the keynote address at the 2001 Workforce Strategies Conference held in Walla Walla, Washington. An edited transcript appears below.

Pennington addressed a need that is central to the ongoing health of our democracy: creating highways of opportunity so that no matter where people start in the education system—whether in adult basic education, an ESL program, a GED program, or having completed traditional high school—they are on a road leading to family-supporting jobs. Achieving this goal, she says, will require integrating the now-separate silos of the K-12 and higher education, economic development, and workforce development into one system focused on the kinds of postsecondary education and credentials that the labor market rewards.

It is a pleasure to be here with you today. This is the first time I’ve been on an airplane since September 11th, when I was sitting on the runway at Boston’s Logan Airport at 9:00 a.m. waiting to take off before a panicked pilot came on the loudspeaker to say we weren’t going anywhere. Like all of you, I’ve been struggling to assimilate how different the world that we are in now is than the world we thought we were in before September 11th. I’ve also been trying to understand how the issues of workforce development you are here to discuss will be affected by the challenges we are facing in our country as we respond to terrorism, go to war, and confront an economic downturn.

I have had the opportunity to see the work this state has done since the late 1980s and the kind of consistent leadership and innovation that you have shown across the interrelated fields of workforce development, economic development, and education reform. And I really believe that the work you do, in many, many ways, is even more important now than it was before September 11th. That work will, of course, play a key role in reviving the state’s economy and in ensuring its long-term economic vitality. But what you do is also central to something more important, and that is the ongoing health of our democracy. The United States is fundamentally a society based on the promise of opportunity, and a basic part of the contract for a healthy democracy is that people feel they have a meaningful way to move forward toward better opportunity in their lives. So your work is incredibly central, and I hope to be able to help inform it today.

The United States is fundamentally a society based on the promise of opportunity, and a basic part of the contract for a healthy democracy is that people feel they have a meaningful way to move forward toward better opportunity in their lives.
What I’m going to argue is probably no surprise, which is that:

- Improving skills, productivity, and the career options for Washington State’s current and future workers is a critical priority.

- Doing so effectively will require leaders from all the sectors that you represent—education, workforce development, economic development—to work across systems that are now poorly connected to connect the dots in a much more aggressive and assertive way than even you have done heretofore.

- Finally, you should focus on two critically important goals and objectives that run through your work already but need to be ever more central as you move forward. The first is the issue of accelerating advancement, by which I mean not only helping people get farther in terms of jobs, income, education, and their life chances but helping them do it faster than ever before. The second challenge is to narrow the gaps that plague this country and challenge this state, particularly by decreasing disparities in income and disparities by race and racial achievement in education.

I’m going to talk a little more about why I believe those things are so critical and how to address them, but first I want to take a minute to describe who I am and where I come from as I approach this work. Almost 20 years ago, I co-founded Jobs for the Future, which we like to think of as a sort of R&D “lab” for the kinds of initiatives you are embarked on here. We focus on developing and scaling up strategies for helping low-income youth and adults accelerate their career and educational advancement. For example, we have just launched our first non-profit joint venture, a company called Origin that is helping low-income workers get career ladder jobs in information technology. And, we’re working with the National Association of Manufacturers and employer associations like the Chambers of Commerce to build cross-company career ladders in several cities around the United States—skill ladders that will help workers who may not be able to advance as far as they want in one firm to move to another firm in a regional economy—an example of how collective action by employers can build regional economic strength.

We are also designing and administering for the MetLife Foundation a national award for excellence in community colleges. We will recognize two institutions that have excelled at putting the academic part of the institution together with the workforce development part, building internal policies and pathways that help people advance in their education and careers. Finally, we are working on high school reform and youth transitions to identify and replicate highly productive learning environments for young people.

On a personal note, my own life experience has given me a strong commitment to these issues. I grew up in St. Louis as the very fortunate child of a woman who found herself a widow with three children under the age of three and went back to work. She has been a lifetime inspiration for me in what it means to combine work and learning. My youngest sister has learning disabilities, and when she was a teenager my mother essentially designed one of the very first school-to-work programs for her. My sister had been in the special education district of St. Louis, Missouri, before people with special learning needs were mainstreamed into the schools, and my mother got her out of that district and put her in the Children’s Hospital in St. Louis in a kind of work-based learning apprenticeship. There is not that great a difference between my intelligence and my sister’s, yet I am here today talking to you as an “expert” on the new economy, and my
sister works, after 14 years, for $7 an hour as a nursing aide in a nursing home. A lot of what motivates me is a passion to try to build the kinds of systems in this country that will make better education and career progression available for all different kinds of people, no matter where they start from and no matter what their learning needs are.

To turn to the focus for today: if, as I am arguing, our collective goal should be to accelerate advancement and narrow the gaps in our society, especially in education achievement and income, how do you best achieve that? A growing body of research and practice would suggest there are two key things you could do.

The first is to do as you’ve already begun to do in this state, and that is to reorient your public systems for employment and training so that they help people get jobs that allow them to support their families, meaning jobs that pay $25,000 to $40,000 a year and not minimum wage. Achieving this will require radical changes in how our public systems are structured, the kinds of partnerships that they forge with employers, and their ability to make a real value-added difference to the sectoral strategies of different industries that must compete in a world economy.

The second challenge is to focus on postsecondary attainment, not necessarily for four-year degrees or graduate degrees but for the kinds of two-year associate degrees and certificates that are being increasingly rewarded in the labor market. Here, I would suggest that the priority should be on low-income and minority children so that those who start most at risk in our society would get the most intensive supports and interventions, allowing them to complete some kind of first postsecondary credential by the time they’re age 26, rather than much later—if at all, as is now the case.

You heard this morning about Washington’s changing demography and how important young people who come from different racial groups are to the future of this state. Our system has served them very badly up until now, and we need to get much better, fast, at meeting their needs.

I’d like to share with you a few more statistics in this regard. These come from the work of Princeton economist Marta Tienda, who has done a longitudinal study of a nationally representative cohort of young people, looking at how they have done in postsecondary attainment, beginning in 1980. What she found is that if you are born to a family whose income is less than $25,000 a year or if you are black or Hispanic, only 4 percent to 6 percent of you will ever complete a four-year baccalaureate degree. That is a national disgrace. And it is also a threat to the functioning of our economy and our democracy.

An additional focus needs to be on incumbent workers, particularly those who have no more than a high school degree. Sixty percent of the 110 million workers in the United States lack any kind of postsecondary credential. Almost one-third of American workers (31 percent) have only a high school diploma; one worker in ten lacks even that. So we’re not talking about small numbers of people, and we’re not talking about a small challenge. If you step back and think about it, this is the essential business we should be
about: accelerating advancement and creating highways of opportunity so that no matter where someone starts—whether in adult basic education, an ESL program, a GED program, or having completed traditional high school, they are on a road that leads them—at some point in their life, the sooner the better—to completing a postsecondary credential, including things like apprenticeships, in which you in Washington are a national leader.

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How do we achieve this? One of the things we have to understand is how different the people who are in these systems are than those whom we built the systems to serve. We have built our education and training systems on the assumption of a linear progression: you go through elementary and secondary school, then you go on for postsecondary education, and then you start to work. That is not, in fact, how people behave in the labor market today. It’s much more of a swirl than a linear progression. For example, fewer than 20 percent of people in our institutions of higher education fit the traditional profile of residential students between the ages of 18 and 24. From 15 to 20 percent of the students in community colleges today already have a baccalaureate degree and are back for some kind of ongoing training. One study by the U.S. Department of Education shows that half of the people enrolled in postsecondary education in 1989 had enrolled in more than one postsecondary institution by 1994, and you’ve got to imagine that that kind of behavior must be even more dramatic now than it was when the study was done.

So, in reality, we have a pattern of people moving in and out of institutions, sometimes enrolling in them simultaneously, often transferring among them. But we don’t have a system that makes this mobility or forward progression easy. One of the key challenges to overcome is the way our education and training system is organized. Despite multiple efforts to create more partnerships like those this conference represents, we still have not done a good enough job of integrating the separate silos of our K-12, higher education, and workforce development systems into one system. The challenge we face is doing that kind of integration in a climate where the public is going to expect a lot more for less money.

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Let me give you four examples of what moving in an effective direction would look like. It’s not just a question of working across these silos but doing it much faster, and doing it at some kind of scale that is meaningful. That’s what I’m going to try to emphasize with these examples.

The first one, in New York City, is the College Now Program. This is a partnership between the City University of New York, which includes two-year and four-year
institutions, and New York City’s public high schools. The partnership is designed to improve the transition between school and postsecondary education for young people. It recognizes the challenges we face when half of the young people who leave high school and enter postsecondary school never complete a degree. One-third of students, and this is a national statistic, never go on after they complete their freshman year. And 30 percent of high school students nationally who enter postsecondary education need some kind of remediation. That number is 58 percent in New York City.

New York has done a number of important things. Starting at the state level, it has moved in a direction that says all young people need to take the state Regents Exam in order to qualify for leaving high school. And New York has aligned the exit exams in math and English so that if you get a score of 75, then CUNY—every institution in the CUNY system—will automatically accept that as evidence that you, as a student, don’t need remediation, and they’ll put you into credit-bearing courses. New York is the only state in the country that has a state department of education and a state board of education that oversees all education levels, pre-K through graduate, including all work-related certification programs, museums, and libraries. So, they have a framework that makes moving in a coordinated way easier than in some states, which have to work across different jurisdictions and governance groups.

New York State also decided, as a public policy, that it will eliminate all remedial programs, at the postsecondary level, within five years. And rather than waiting for that to work somehow, they’ve decided to be aggressive about the transition period. College Now is an example of that. The CUNY system gives its placement exams for credit-bearing courses in the CUNY system to eleventh graders. If you are an eleventh grader and you take those exams and you pass, then you can immediately enter a dual-enrollment program where you can start to take credit-bearing courses in any CUNY institution. You leave your high school years much further along, reducing the time and money you’re going to spend getting your postsecondary degree. And if you’re an eleventh grader who takes those exams and fails, you know it at the beginning of eleventh grade, not when you’ve left twelfth grade. And you are immediately eligible to start taking what they call developmental or remedial education courses, not just in your high school—which may not have very good resources and obviously hasn’t been doing very well by you so far—but at the college level through the CUNY system.

This started in 1983 as a pilot program, and in many states it would have stayed that way. But it was exceptional leaders—the leadership of two individuals, the head of the CUNY system and the head of New York City Public Schools—who decided that they wanted to take this to scale, and fast. They made a conscious decision to expand College Now. It had taken them from 1983 until 2000 to get from one participating college to six. In the year 2000, they announced a goal: in one year, to get from 6 colleges to 17, from 60 high schools to 150, and to serve 25,000 students in New York City. A year later, all 17 campuses of postsecondary institutions are participating, and all 161 high schools in the city. They are reaching 13,000 students. And they’ve got 11,000 New York City high school students registered for dual-credit courses. There’s some double-counting in that, but a large number of students are being reached by this program.

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reaching 13,000 students, and 11,000 New York City high school students are registered for dual-credit courses.

That’s one example of what can happen when you have the vision and intent to accelerate young people’s advancement and take away the institutional barriers that make it hard. It’s an example that shows it’s the job of leadership to accomplish this, not of the entrepreneurial young person to figure out how to do it for him or herself. And it shows that you can figure out how to do this at a large scale, and really rapidly, if you’re willing to put your resources there.

The second example is a sectoral strategy for trying to help very-low-income people get jobs that pay $25,000 to $40,000 a year, one of the other goals that I set out for you. This grows out of a very innovative program called the Private Industry Partnership, run by a community-based organization called Wildcat, by coincidence again based in New York City. PIP was started by an entrepreneur who looked at the financial services district in Wall Street and said, “Why is it that our people can’t get those jobs?” He decided that he would go and talk to the companies that have those jobs, Citigroup, JP Morgan, and others, and ask them, “What would I have to do in order to qualify my people to work in your companies?”

What he decided was that his real competition was temp firms—staffing firms—that could give employers large numbers of workers for their entry-level data jobs. The companies had a mental model that the only person who could do these jobs was someone who already had a college degree, and people with college degrees hated those jobs, so turnover was very, very high. He was able to say, “Take a chance on me. I’m going to use public-sector money in order to be able to undercut the prices these temp firms offer you by subsidizing the beginning wages of the workers. And I’m going to give you people that are highly qualified but without your having to pay the kinds of placement fees you do to the temp firms. But I want you to create a work-based learning program for me.”

What PIP does is take people who start with very poor levels of education and income and put them in a 12-week, classroom-based training program that emphasizes basic skills and navigational skills much more than traditional job training programs tend to do. Then they move into a 12-week apprenticeship-like experience at the company, while still receiving support from community-based organizations that can help them work out tensions they may encounter with their supervisor or problems with transportation or daycare. They work the real hours at the real job they are aspiring toward, but PIP has made the company promise before the program even begins that they will hire a certain number of people from it. So the opportunity is real.

Let me give you statistics on how rapidly Wildcat has improved its performance through adopting a strategy like the one PIP represents. In 1995 as an agency it had a 65 percent placement rate—respectable, not terrible. Its graduates went into jobs that paid them $14,000 a year, and 55 percent were still employed after six months. Since implementing this new kind of approach to employment and training, the PIP has had an 85 percent placement rate; graduates enter jobs that pay an average of $28,000 a year, and they have a 90 percent retention rate after five years. So that’s another example of turning traditional models on their heads and saying we’re going to do it in a different way because we have an objective of helping accelerate people’s advancement in the
labor market. Together with Jobs for the Future, the entrepreneur who started the PIP program has launched Origin, the new joint venture I mentioned earlier, to replicate this success around the country. The business model for the expansion relies on the PIP’s relationships with large, multi-site employers like Citigroup and Sprint, and thus represents a different, more ‘demand-oriented’ approach to scaling up an innovative program that has worked well in one place.

The third example is a bad example. I’m going to beat up on New England, where I’m from. I’m sure that this is not the case for you here in Washington, but I am from a state, Massachusetts, in which the total net growth in our labor force over the last decade has been from immigrants. If immigrants were not coming into our state, we would have lost workers. They are the state’s future. Yet across New England, our adult basic education programs and our ESL programs meet only 3 percent of the need for their services. And the level of intensity of intervention that is available to people is about half of what it should be. The statistics say it takes about 150 hours of instruction in adult basic education or ESL to be able to advance one level, but only a tiny fraction of people in the system are getting an intervention that comes anywhere near that 150 hours. And there’s virtually no alignment between that system and employers’ work-based programs or between ESL and the postsecondary system. Instead of seeing our ABE and ESL systems as feeders into community colleges and then up into four-year degrees and onward, we treat them as totally separate systems, separately financed. And we do the same with our GED programs for young people who drop out of high school.

Across New England, our adult basic education programs and ESL programs meet only 3 percent of the need for their services. And there’s virtually no alignment between that system and employers’ work-based programs or between ESL and the postsecondary system.

That is a critical area for innovation for the future. I don’t know of any state that is doing that work and doing it really well. I’d be happy to be told otherwise, but I think it’s a critical part of the equation.

The learning needs of working adults, particularly working adults who try to go back to school part-time, are another part of this challenge. The FutureWorks Company has just done a national study looking at the degree to which adult workers have any ability to access federal or state financial aid for being part-time students. Sixty-one million American adults out of a workforce of 110 million were engaged over the last year in some kind of work-related education, but most of them were taking fewer than seven hours a week of classes. Fewer than half of those who go part-time received any kind of financial assistance whatsoever, and part-time low-income students received virtually nothing.

This is, I think, a problem that in many ways needs to be addressed first and foremost at the federal level, but a lot could happen at the state level as well, if we really felt that part of what we were about was trying to help working people, whether they’re working poor or not, have a much easier time going back to school and getting the kind of incremental skill development that they need to get ahead.
Let me close with a final example, looking at a parallel system that has been evolving even as we spend our time focused on improving our K-12 education system, our community colleges, and our workforce development system. That is employer-provided training and how employers are creating in many ways their own systems, even as they stay engaged with us to make the systems we work with better.

In 1984, there were about 400 corporate universities in the United States. Today, there are 2,000. These are companies that are basically deciding they want to design and deliver training to their workers in a way they feel is going to work best. They work in very rapidly changing markets that place a premium on speed and performance, and they have a very low tolerance for what they call just-in-case education and for traditional, instructor-dominated teaching. And they are looking at the same research over the last two decades on how people actually learn that we look at, but instead of keeping a traditional, instructor-dominated style of teaching, like I’m lecturing at you, they are changing how it is they approach the delivery of learning.

In 1984, there were about 400 corporate universities in the United States. Today, there are 2,000. These companies work in very rapidly changing markets that place a premium on speed and performance, and they have a very low tolerance for what they call just-in-case education and for traditional, instructor-dominated teaching.

They are using technology to drive toward ever-more-effective learning at lower cost. And they are finding that the learning gains associated with technology are higher and faster. Learners can advance at their own pace: the technology can assess what a learner already knows about a subject, then customize the coursework for that person. For example, a recently developed set of assessments is being pilot-tested in some companies. The assessments ask a bunch of questions about what you already know about a subject, but it’s a smart test—like we have the ability to do with our standardized tests if we would just spend the money on it—and if you demonstrate that you already know the subject, then the test automatically routes you to a next, more complicated level. The employers have an objective: if you already know the stuff, they don’t want you to repeat it. And if they can give you some kind of a credential or a certificate that shows that you already know it, why should you pay money and time to sit in classes that don’t recognize that you already bring a strong amount of knowledge to the subject?

This assessment is also designed to ask questions in a way that gets at what your learning style is. At the end, having done this assessment and taken you as far as you could go through the testing, it will design a customized learning package for you. If you are an “experiential learner,” it will have you out doing things, hands on, getting a chance to apply your knowledge, and you don’t have as much time spent in lecture courses in the company.

Companies are also finding that there are a lot of benefits in terms of costs, because using technology in this way reduces the need for people to travel to workshops at a centralized location, and it shrinks the time it takes to cover the content and get to a required level of student performance. Studies of these programs show that learning time is shortened by 50 percent over previous corporate training programs. People’s retention of what they’ve learned is increased by 80 percent, and the costs are cut in
half. Hewlett-Packard has used this approach to eliminate 90 percent of its former classroom training. Apple Computer has reduced its classroom training by 75 percent.

These developments are already here. This is a world that is happening, and it is, increasingly, also a world that is beginning to be experimented with in our institutions of higher education. As of last year, there were about 1,500 virtual universities, whether they're collaborations between existing community colleges and four-year colleges or newly created kinds of distance learning institutions. When you compare that to the number of higher education institutions there are in the country today—3,400—it's a huge increase in capacity. And it means that learners are finally getting access to choices that give them things that higher education and our workforce development system traditionally have resisted: something that's customized, something that's convenient, something that doesn't cost a lot of money, and something where it's easy for you to tell, as a learner, whether you're getting your money's worth in terms of what it is you've learned and whether you've progressed to a higher level of competence.

As of last year, there were about 1,500 virtual universities. Learners are finally getting access to choices that give them things that higher education and our workforce development system traditionally have resisted: learning that is customized, convenient, doesn't cost a lot of money, and where it's easy for you as a learner to tell whether you're getting your money's worth.

I lay this out to say that in many ways this private-sector system—which is growing up parallel to but conceivably could be in partnership with the systems that we all are working to change and improve—is a sign of what is to come for the new economy. It is a sign of why it is urgent for all of us to get out there and learn what they know, what they're doing, how they're doing it, why they're doing it, and how we can incorporate some of those kinds of practices and philosophies into our systems.

To summarize the ways in which they would describe these systems for themselves, this is what a vice president at Cisco Systems says: the goal is to achieve the learner’s maximum learning and advancement with the minimal amount of seat time. To eliminate waste and accelerate learning to the highest possible level, they want their students to receive training or learning when and where they need it and to be able to stop at any point in the lesson and tune back in again when they're ready. They want it based on the most powerful principles of individualized learning, using smart tutors, apprenticeships, and simulations in which the system can learn what the learner knows, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and then customize education to help accelerate and improve learning. It allows accurate assessment based on the learner’s prior knowledge and the customization of future content to build on and not repeat what the learner knows already. And it provides competency-based, continuous assessment and feedback and competency-based certification in which the learner, not the institution, controls the pace.

That, I think, is the future toward which we increasingly need to move.

To conclude, I would challenge all of you who do such incredible work, and do it so well, to set a goal for yourselves, that within this next five-year period you will:
• Double the numbers of people who leave your publicly funded workforce development programs and enter jobs that pay $25,000 to $40,000 a year;

• Double the numbers of young people, especially minorities and low-income people, who complete some form of postsecondary credential by the time they’re 26 years old; and

• Organize yourselves as the leaders and innovators so that you are able to achieve these kinds of stretch goals.

It’s obvious that you already have a lot of the practices and a lot of the know-how that it’s going to take to get there. It will require leadership and working across the silos. Those of you in this room who are employers have a critical role to play, not only in participating so that people in the public systems know what you need and can respond to it better, but also in providing the sustained leadership, as I think you have done over the years, over good times and bad times and different political administrations, in saying that this is an essential building block for the vitality of this state—and in keeping, in a sense, the combination of both pressure on public institutions and support for the innovators and the change agents who work in the public sector, many of whom are here in this room, who need the recognition, leadership, and permission that the private sector uniquely can give them.

Employers have a critical role to play, not only in participating so that people in the public systems know what you need and can respond to it better, but also in providing sustained leadership—over the years and over good times and bad times and different political administrations.

It will require an open mind and a constant seeking for how to do it better, whether it’s within the boundaries of this state or outside this state or this country. And it will require ruthless stealing of whatever you can find that works that you can make our own. Washington State is ahead of the rest of the country—there are others who are catching up to you, but you are ahead. And as we’ve heard throughout the course of the day, the need is very great. You need to get a bigger impact for your efforts, and we, the rest of the country, need the kind of leadership that you provide and the sense of what’s possible for other states to follow.

As you do go forward for this work, it’s important to remember that authentic leadership means that you have the legitimacy to speak for those whose interests you represent: the learners and the workers who are in your systems who come to you for opportunity.

One of the startling things in my 20 years in this field is how little public constituency we’ve really built for continuous education and life-long learning. If those statistics you heard today didn’t say that there should be a public constituency demanding more resources and better performance from our life-long learning system, we all have to ask ourselves what is that about? What is it about the ways in which we interact with these learners that they don’t affiliate to our systems with the kind of loyalty and demand for more that would mean we had a well-financed and functioning system and market for continuous life-long learning?
On a final note, the important thing to remember is that as much as workforce development is about job training, it is first and foremost about individual growth and aspiration. A piece of building the public constituency for our work is always to understand that we’re engaging with people around these most central things.

As much as workforce development is about job training, it is first and foremost about individual growth and aspiration. A piece of building the public constituency for our work is to understand that we’re engaging with people around these most central things.

I want to close very quickly with a quote from a New York Times column by Thomas Friedman. He was actually writing about the terrorist attacks in New York City, but he was writing having come from the PTA meeting at his daughter’s eighth grade school. In many ways what he writes about America is true for all of you and the work that you do. And what he writes about the PTA meetings is what one should write about meetings like this and the ones that you will have as you go back to work. And he says: “It occurred to me how much the Islamic terrorists who just hit America do not understand about America. Their constant refrain is that America is a country with wealth and power but no values. The Islamic terrorists think our wealth and power is unrelated to anything in the soul of this country, that we are basically a godless nation. Indeed, the enemies of God. And if you are an enemy of God you deserve to die. These terrorists believe that wealth and power can be achieved only by giving up your values because they look at places such as Saudi Arabia and see that many of the wealthy and powerful there live lives disconnected from their faith. Of course, what this view of America completely misses is that American power and wealth flow directly from a deep spiritual source, a spirit of respect for the individual, a spirit of tolerance for differences of faith or politics, a respect for freedom of thought as the necessary foundation for all creativity, and a spirit of unity that encompasses all kinds of differences. Only a society with a deep spiritual energy that welcomes immigrants and worships freedom could constantly renew itself and its sources of power and wealth. So our strength actually lies in the slightly dilapidated gym of Eastern Middle School on Parent-Teacher night and in thousands of such schools across the land. That is where you’ll find the spirit that built the Twin Towers and can build them over again any time we please.”

That is the spirit you all represent. It’s an inspiration to be with you today as you think about how to improve the performance of your systems, and I applaud your work. Thank you.