

OPEN DOORS PROGRAM PROFILE

Fresh Start at Tacoma Community College

This profile was produced as part of the Community Partnerships for Reengagement Initiative to promote shared learning about promising youth reengagement practices and program models in the Open Doors system. In spring 2023, we collected data from six Open Doors sites (two in each pathway: GED-plus, high school diploma, and college) to develop profiles of programs with evidence of promising student outcomes. Information about this project and the methods used to develop this profile are provided at the end of this report.

Fresh Start is located on the campus of Tacoma Community College (TCC) with offices near other dual credit programs. The campus is in a suburban area of Tacoma and near major bus lines. This program began over 20 years ago, well before the start of Open Doors. At the time, it was one of the few programs in its region focused exclusively on serving local youth without a high school diploma.

Then as now, Fresh Start focused on reengaging young people in education pathways toward sustainable, living-wage careers. **College success courses have remained a core part of the program along with its focus on transition**

supports and providing ample resources during students' first quarter. Over time, Fresh Start has adopted a model of holistic support structured around student belonging and building confidence in the learning environment with avenues for student agency—all features for student retention and academic success. Introducing an expanded, multi-day orientation before classes begin has been an important shift for the program. Other significant and relatively recent changes include strong partnerships and flexible scheduling, which came about in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fresh Start aims to cultivate students' goals and provide an empowering environment. Staff members, students, and program alumni described this as **supporting students' goal orientation through trust and positive educational experiences.** At Fresh Start, students can earn a high school diploma while accumulating college credit.

Fresh Start at Tacoma Community College

- College pathway
- College partnership with four districts and multiple community agencies
- In person with online option
- In-person and virtual case management
- **236** students enrolled in 2020–21
- Average age at enrollment: **18**
- Average credits at enrollment: **9.26**

Partnership Structure and Roles

The Fresh Start program and its partnerships are designed around the outcomes of supporting students on a path that leads to a living-wage career and experiencing a supported entrance to the workforce. As a college-based Open Doors program, Fresh Start’s local K–12 districts are its primary partners. These organizational relationships, formalized through memoranda of understanding and data-sharing agreements, include Tacoma Public Schools, Federal Way Public Schools, Peninsula School District, and Clover Park School District. Tacoma Community College’s Gig Harbor site is also a close partner and primarily serves young people from the Peninsula School District.



When you have a healthy relationship with the school district, you can really try to work around some of that red tape ... Just recently I connected with a district person who can review international transcripts and give high school credit for those international transcripts.

Fresh Start staff member

In addition to its partnerships with school districts, Fresh Start benefits from its partnerships with community-based organizations and local alternative schools:

INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORTS

Northwest Education Access provides college transition support, quarter-by-quarter enrollment, financial aid (FAFSA, WASFA), and housing resources.

High School Plus is a high school completion option offered at TCC for adults 18 and up that allows students to earn high school credits through Adult Basic Education classes. Students under 21 are encouraged to join Fresh Start and can later join this program if they age out of Open Doors.

WRAPAROUND SERVICES

REACH Center in Tacoma is a connected network of basic needs support (e.g., transportation assistance, food banks, physical health, mental health, substance use disorder support, legal services)

CAREER AND JOB TRAINING

WorkForce Education at TCC provides several work-based programs and funding for low-income students enrolled in pre-college pathways (e.g., GED) to help them prepare for a degree or certificate. It is also available to students enrolled in professional technical training and those looking for specific job skills (e.g., computer skills).

Pulse Mentor program is a peer mentorship program run by TCC. Current and former Fresh Start students participate as both mentors and mentees.

Student Population

There is “no one stereotype of what a Fresh Start student is,” as a program staff member said. Students come from many backgrounds and life experiences, including those who have families or family members to support and young people who have been homeschooled or tried Running Start but need more support services. Overall, **Fresh Start students are from low-income households and are first-generation college students.** Fresh Start students tend to be aged 18 and older, with relatively few 16- and 17-year-olds in the program. **In interviews and focus groups, current students and alumni commonly expressed a readiness and willingness to try something different.**

Across six academic years of Fresh Start student data (2015–16 to 2020–21) most students (70%) were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. Among students, 47 percent identify as white, 19 percent as Latino/a/x, and 16 percent as Black or African American. One in seven Fresh Start students have experienced homelessness and nine percent have received special education services. Unlike most Open Doors programs, more students identify as female (56%) than male (see tables 1–5).

Tables 1–5. Average Student Characteristics (2015/16–2020/21), Fresh Start at Tacoma Community College Open Doors

TABLE 1

Gender	Percentage
Male	44%
Female	56%
Non-binary	0%

TABLE 2

Race	Percentage
White	47%
Latino/a/x	19%
Two or more races	10%
Black or African American	16%
American Indian or Alaska Native	2%
Asian	5%
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	2%
Race not provided	0%

TABLE 3

High school experiences and programs	Percentage
Free or reduced-price lunch	70%
Learning assistance program	19%
Experienced homelessness	14%
Special education	9%
504 plan	10%
English language learner	4%
Migrant education program	<1%

TABLE 4

Previous high school progress	
Cumulative high school grade point average at Open Doors enrollment	1.58
Cumulative high school credits earned at Open Doors enrollment	9.26

TABLE 5

	Age
Average age (first year in program)	18

Note: All data originally came from Comprehensive Education Data and Research System data files and are students' high school records.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Washington State Education Research and Data Center.

Program Design and Implementation

STAFFING STRUCTURE

Fresh Start works to provide a holistic support model. Staff members and students reflected on the importance of relationships and trust given many students' experiences with racism in the education system. Staff members noted that having similar life experiences and backgrounds is important for making initial connections with students.

- Full-time **program coordinator** (1 FTE) responsible for intake documentation, communication with students in K–12 districts, enrollment and placement exams (at TCC), and one-on-one interviews with retention specialists.
- **Peer-advocates.** A TCC student employed by Fresh Start who reports to the program coordinator, supports with intake, and manages the front desk and book-loan program.
- Two part-time **adjunct instructors** who are not fully employed by the program but teach every quarter's "first quarter cohort class" and have other positions and roles at the college.
- **Retention specialists** (3.5 FTE) provide case management and advising support. Full-time specialists have a student caseload of 65 students or less. The program's part-time retention specialist is one of the program's adjunct instructors.
- **Director of Dual Enrollment Programs** is the program director managing this Open Doors program at two campuses along with TCC's Running Start and College in the High School programs.

PROGRAM MODEL

Pre-program

Referral. Most students are identified by word-of-mouth, student-to-student, by comprehensive high school staff members, through self-referral, or via other dual credit programs housed in the college. The team also engages in outreach in the community and across the college.

Enrollment and onboarding

Enrollment and placement. Prospective students engage in a one-on-one interview with a retention specialist on their goals and resource needs, followed by a group orientation. Students take a placement test and are supported early on with course enrollment.

Program experience

Instruction. Most students learn in person, but Fresh Start offers online classes for unique student situations. Students take placement tests to determine English- and Math-level placement. All students also take an introductory college readiness course and an English course with Fresh Start instructors. Most remaining courses are offered by the college.

Case management. Students receive a minimum of two hours a month of case management and advising. The program offers many services on campus and several on- and off-site community-based organizations provide wraparound support.

Next steps support

Graduation planning. Instructional staff members and retention specialists provide individualized course planning aligned with students' college and career goals.

Transition support. Staff members support students with program navigation and enrollment. Northwest Education Access is a core partner providing transition, financial aid, and basic needs support as students move to and through two- or four-year college. While enrolled, students have access to paid job opportunities through partnerships and a couple of paid roles within the program. Students can also choose to pursue a **direct-transfer associate degree**.

Given the program's college focus, staff members reflected on the importance of discussing students' career interests during onboarding to anticipate the level of fit with program offerings. Having early and open conversations enables staff members to guide students to other opportunities (e.g., apprenticeship pathways) if not offered at TCC. These conversations also provide feedback about what future partnerships the program may need to establish.



A student might say, ‘Hey, I’m interested in being a mechanic,’ [but] if TCC doesn’t offer that program, it makes sense to direct them to a different Open Doors program that aligns with their goals. We’re transparent with students because it’s crucial for programs to work together. It’s really about getting the students to where they want to be.

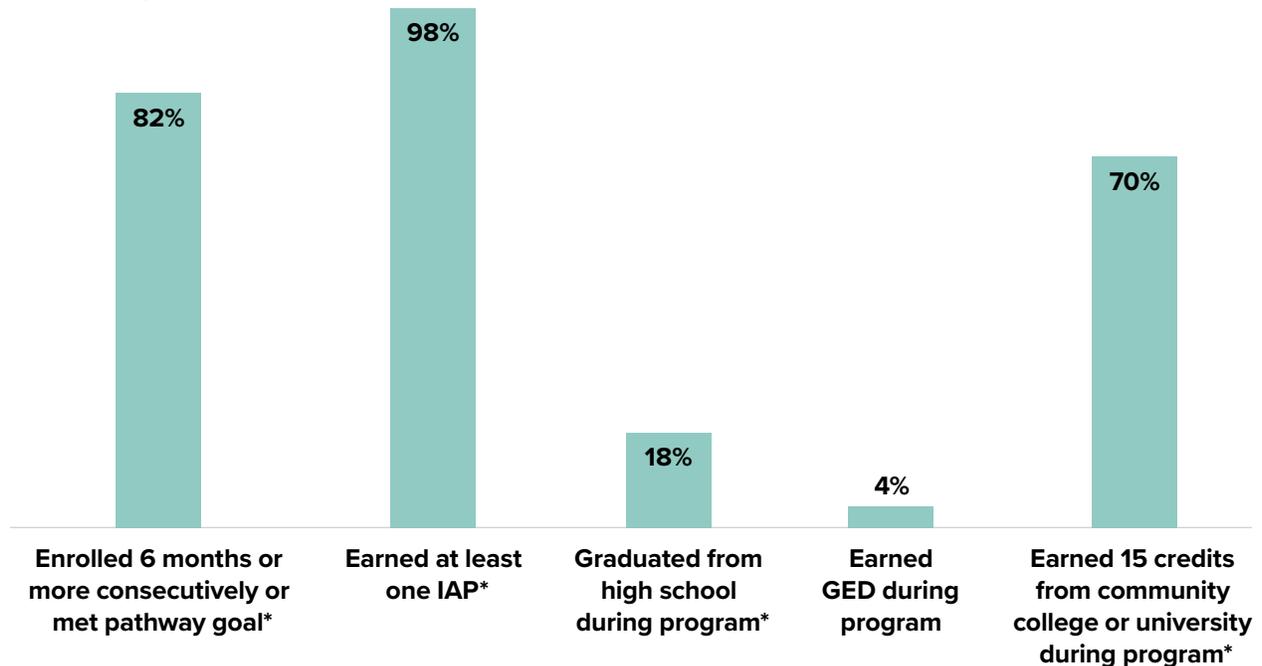
Fresh Start staff member

Student Progress and Outcomes

SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT AND ACADEMIC PROGRESS

When reflecting on program enrollment, students shared an initial expectation of stigma around joining Fresh Start, but all found a mature learning environment that provided a culture of trust, support, and flexibility. Across six academic years (2015–16 to 2020–21), on average, about 82 percent of students persisted in Fresh Start for six months or more—a higher rate compared with Open Doors college pathway programs statewide. Ninety-eight percent earned at least one indicator of academic progress, compared with 54 percent for college pathway programs statewide. Fresh Start also had a higher-than-average rate of students who earned a high school diploma (18%) and 70 percent earned 15 or more college credits while enrolled in the program (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Program outcomes, Fresh Start at Tacoma Community College Open Doors (2015–16 to 2020–21)



*Higher than the statewide average for the college pathway.

Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the Washington State Education Research and Data Center.

Fresh Start staff members and leadership shared how **flexibility in pathway offerings** became a strength during COVID-19. The pandemic-driven shift to virtual learning, as one staff member said, “taught us that some students really could thrive in a virtual setting.” Previously the program would rarely suggest an online learning option. These settings would be recommended only to highly connected students with strong grades and closer to completion.



... this program is so much more flexible than traditional high school because you get to take everything at your own pace. I’ve been taking about 10 credits per quarter because that’s what my brain is able to handle. I definitely cannot be a full-time student because that’s too much for me. But I’m glad that this program gives me the flexibility and even just the ability at all to take things at my own pace and not feel bad about it.

Fresh Start student¹

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING

Building strong, **long-term relationships** with students has been Fresh Start’s primary strategy. As the program director reflects, “... the most important thing when it comes to the success of the students, is having that stable figure in their lives, someone who’s checking in on them regularly, someone who’s helping support them, who’s in their corner.” Students and program alumni described a program culture that valued staff-student and student-to-student relationships. Some reflected on how the connected culture of the program improved during COVID-19 with social groups and unstructured spaces for students to connect and build friendships.



Fresh Start really fosters an inclusive and welcoming school culture. Even during the pandemic, they would have all-student meetings every month and they would have a bunch of people come into the meetings and talk about resources that we have.

Fresh Start student

FUTURE ORIENTATION AND CAREER AND COLLEGE SKILLS

Students also reflected on the journey of personal growth and milestones along the way that are critical in promoting a sense of agency and confidence.



I'm just proud of my self-dedication. Even though it hasn't been linear, I know that my journey is not linear. But I'm just proud of the confidence and dedication I put into myself.

Fresh Start student

Key Strategies

PROGRAM STRATEGIES



Outreach and relationship-building

- Promoting peer-to-peer spaces to support connection, friendships, and engagement.
- Growing strong relationships that last beyond graduation.



Case management and wraparound support

- Regular meetings to understand and respond to shifts in student needs.
- Strong community connections especially around basic needs and career navigation services.



Relevant and flexible learning opportunities that build on student experiences and strengths

- Offering a remote instruction option for some students as a way to meet students' learning and unique situational needs.
- Supporting a student-led pace.



Student voice and choice

- Program-wide **culture of learning** and improvement.
- Use of **student surveys, virtual groups**, and social activities to support student connections and engage student voice on service offerings.
- Access to **leadership opportunities** across the TCC campus such as campus-wide student governance. Recently, through student organizing, "we were able to get **priority course enrollment** at TCC for Fresh Start students," said a current Fresh Start student.

Partnership Strategies

BUILDING ORGANIZATIONAL TRUST ACROSS PARTNERSHIPS

Fresh Start has benefited from having established many formal partnerships that create a more holistic and seamless experience of support services for students. From basic needs to college navigation, the partnerships listed earlier have played a significant role in the success of this program. A foundation of organizational and interpersonal trust underlies these partnerships:



... those kinds of [trust-based] partnerships are just, they're life-changing for students and I really cannot say enough about [our partnership with a local district and an alternative school] and how supported I feel ... I just think that's huge.

Fresh Start staff member

AN ARRAY OF PARTNERSHIPS FOR IMPROVED PLACEMENT AND SEAMLESS SERVICE EXPERIENCE

In addition to partnerships with K-12 district and community-based organizations, staff members and students reflected on how establishing **partnerships (even informally) with other Open Doors** programs has also been key to Fresh Start's success, as students' interests may not always line up with its offerings or those of TCC. Staff members' awareness of and engagement in a broader landscape of services, coupled with giving students **lots of information up front based on their interests**, has been a core enrollment approach. The ability to share with students where they can enroll for technical pathways has been important. As one staff member shared: "We really do try as much as possible to give all the information to students so they can make an educated decision."

Other novel strategies include the ability to provide some partners with physical desk space. This improved support services and students' experience of unified programming. The program has also provided various embedded resources such as a food pantry, a student-run book loan program, and resource rooms on campus.

STUDENT INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Integrated data systems have been a critical tool for this site. CIVITAS at Tacoma Community College is an advising platform that pulls from the student information system and the Canvas instructional platform. Case managers and staff members have quick access to student information and course enrollment, which has enhanced the level of advising and course navigation support they can offer.

About this Project

The Community Partnerships for Reengagement Initiative (CPRI) is a collaboration between Education Northwest and Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to strengthen the capacity of the Open Doors system and to increase equitable education and workforce outcomes for youth. Our purpose is to use data to promote shared learning across the Open Doors system and nationally about promising youth reengagement practices and program models. This project is funded by the Ballmer Group and Kaiser Family Foundation.

Education Northwest worked closely with an advisory committee of local and national experts to identify practices and strategies that make a program effective and successful. We developed a statewide Open Doors Theory of Action in collaboration with the CPRI advisory committee, the Open Doors steering committee, and programs across the state. We also analyzed program and student data (2016–2021) to understand the short- and long-term outcomes for each program site and selected sites doing better than expected in meeting their pathway goal for students historically underserved in education. We also considered issues such as program size, location, provider type, and student characteristics in selecting sites that represent the diversity of program models and communities across the state.

In spring 2023, we collected data from six Open Doors sites (two in each pathway: GED-plus, high school diploma, and college) to develop profiles of programs with evidence of promising student outcomes.

For more information about the CPRI initiative or questions regarding the information presented in this memo, please contact Julie Petrokubi julie.petrokubi@ednw.org.

Methods

Education Northwest developed this program profile from artifact review and online interviews/focus groups with five Fresh Start staff members, one district partner, one direct service provider partner, and eight current and former students. Transcripts and session notes were qualitatively coded and analyzed. We analyzed quantitative program and student data (2016–2021) from the Washington State Education Research and Data Center to produce the student demographics and outcomes figures.

Thank you to the program team, district partners, and current/former students for taking the time to share your stories and perspectives about the Fresh Start program.

Recommended citation

Cooley, S., McLennan, D., Hodara M., & Fujita-Conrads, E. (2023). *Open Doors Program Profile: Fresh Start at Tacoma Community College*. Education Northwest.

Endnote

¹ Due to the small sample size and need to preserve anonymity, we do not distinguish between quotations of Open Doors students and alumni in this profile report.