

GONZAGA UNIVERSITY NEWS RELEASE

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GONZAGA UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INITIATIVE AIMS TO CURB RISING HIGH SCHOOL DROP-OUT RATE

Preliminary Findings Scheduled to be Released April 30

SPOKANE, Wash. – Thirty-nine percent of high school students in Spokane Public Schools drop out before graduation, stunting their potential for full attainment in multiple ways. If not addressed by the entire community, leaders fear the dropout problem may foreshadow potentially devastating impacts to the Inland Northwest.

Systemic problems like this can be more vexing than most school districts can handle and new thinking can be helpful. That is why 15 Spokane County leaders formed what has become [Priority Spokane](#) – which has included meetings with more than 115 concerned citizens and leaders from business, government, the nonprofit sector, health, education and foundations.

With direction from Eastern Washington University and [Inland Northwest Community Foundation](#) (INWCF), Priority Spokane aims to collaborate to improve the economic vitality, education, environment, health and community safety of Spokane County. Atop its priorities is educational attainment, which the group views as the No. 1 priority over economic attainment by more than a 2-to-1 margin.

Gonzaga University's School of Education won a \$43,000 research grant, co-funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Spokane-based INWCF to develop recommendations to solve this problem. Gonzaga's proposal was unanimously recommended by Priority Spokane advisers.

Jon Sunderland, dean of Gonzaga's School of Education, emphasized the collaborative nature of the project, and said the problem will be addressed in the crucial middle-school years. The search for solutions will follow a three-pronged approach: middle-school reform, dropout prevention and out-of-school initiatives.

“There is tremendous impact on the community correlated to high-school dropouts so this is a first-step grant to investigate these intervention models and identify those that seem to work,” said Sunderland. The research will examine costs to implement successful models and potential revenue sources for implementation.

“We will work closely with the community partners who funded this grant and with the schools to see what they are doing,” Sunderland said.

Mark Hurtubise, president & CEO of INWCF and a member of Priority Spokane, said everyone in the community has a stake in this effort.

“This is a community problem that requires a community solution,” Hurtubise said. “Together it is our moral responsibility to improve the middle-school experience so our youth can visualize and actively engage in opportunities for personal and professional success.”

The committee recommending Gonzaga was impressed with the proposal developed by lead investigator John Traynor, assistant professor of teacher-education, Hurtubise said. Supporting Traynor are Jonas Cox, associate professor and chair of teacher-education; Lecturer Susan Fischer; and Katie Kaiser, who coordinates Gonzaga's mentoring programs.

“It was not simply a proposal from one faculty member, but from President Thayne McCulloh and the School of Education. We believed we were awarding a grant to an entire university,” Hurtubise said. The research will identify steps that, when implemented, should improve high school graduation rates in three to five years, he said.

“There are best-practice models that already are in place throughout the world. We must find them and encourage their integration locally,” Hurtubise said. “If we do not do this, the shrinking pool of educated community members will sharply affect the economic vitality, health and safety of our region long term.”

Traynor said the research also will benefit Gonzaga students preparing to be teachers and is another way for Gonzaga to work for the common good. The first phase of the project will review research on evidence-based practices at the middle-school level that increase graduation rates, Traynor said.

“This phase will generate a list of best practices that we can use as an analytical lens through which to evaluate the local context and generate some recommendations as a result of this analysis,” Traynor said. “The second phase of research will engage in dialogue with the school district and the many community and government agencies who work with middle-level students so the resulting recommendations are relevant to our local context and therefore more likely to be strategies that can be implemented.”

Gonzaga is scheduled to provide written preliminary findings by April 30 and a final project report by June 30.

Individuals and businesses may donate to the project via the Priority Spokane Fund at the [INWCF Web site \(www.inwcf.org/give/becoming-a-donor/give-now\)](http://www.inwcf.org/give/becoming-a-donor/give-now).

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