

Overcoming Obstacles, Optimizing Opportunities: *State Policies to Increase Postsecondary Attainment for Low-Skilled Adults*

Just as American businesses need workers with higher skills to compete in a global economy, workers need higher skills to get ahead. This convergence presents an opportunity for states to work with community colleges and other key partners to help business and industry compete and entry-level workers advance to higher-paying jobs. However, many adults entering community colleges lack college-level reading, writing, and math skills, so they must enroll in remedial courses, where progress is slow and attrition high. Others, especially those who lack a high school diploma or GED, never make it as far as the doors of the college.

This is the backdrop for *Breaking Through*, a multi-year initiative of Jobs for the Future and the National Council for Workforce Education. *Breaking Through* assists the efforts of community colleges to identify and develop institutional strategies that can help low-skilled adults enter into and succeed in occupational and technical degree programs at community colleges, with a focus on adults with education at or below eighth-grade levels. JFF also researched ways to support these institutional strategies in state policy. This *Overview* introduces a series of *Breaking Through* reports

that provide insight into state policies that can be most influential in helping low-skilled adults enter and succeed in college and careers.

Specifically, harnessing the power of the community colleges to address the issues of economic growth and individual prosperity requires state policymakers to take on these key tasks:

1 Create a shared vision of the state's economic future among key stakeholders in education, workforce development, and economic development—a vision that includes the reasons why increasing the number of adults with postsecondary credentials is crucial.

To engage the right stakeholders, state leaders must forge a shared vision of the state's economic future and the role of colleges and of individuals in achieving it. Building this vision often starts with an overarching theme that helps distill complex economic realities into a shared understanding of the key workforce problems facing the state. As important as defining the key problems is conveying a clear message about what must be done, and this entails devising a vision and investing resources, often financial, in achieving it.

One of the most important tasks for states in this area is to convince adults, especially those with lower skills and incomes, that it is both feasible and desirable to go back to school. States media campaigns can underscore the value of postsecondary credentials and the availability of financial aid and other supports to make college possible for adults. States also can help colleges connect to employers to make the benefits of postsecondary education tangible and direct—for example, by guaranteeing pay raises to incumbent workers who complete certain credentials.

2 Set measurable goals for achieving that vision, including increasing postsecondary access for lower-skilled adults, and ensure that funding flows in ways that support progress toward those goals.

Setting measurable goals and aligning funding with those goals is essential for translating the shared vision into actual changes in services and outcomes at the community college level. In general, the services most often used by lower-skilled



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To download *Overcoming Obstacles, Optimizing Opportunities* and other *Breaking Through* policy reports, go to: www.breakingthroughcc.org, www.jff.org, or www.ncwe.org.

adults—adult education, English as a Second Language, college remediation, and occupational training—are systematically underfunded relative to their costs, which creates a disincentive for colleges to expand them and also affects quality.

States can revise funding allocations to better reflect the costs of educating lower-skilled adults and encourage community colleges to focus on outcomes important for goals around economic growth and helping lower-skilled adults advance in the workforce. State funding formulas should give at least equal weight to remediation and weigh formula funding for occupational programs in ways that recognize their true costs.

States can creatively use federal and state categorical funds to help lower-skilled adults earn postsecondary credentials. In addition, they should look beyond higher education institution funding to the full array of federal and state funds invested in economic development, workforce development, and work supports.

3 Track individual outcomes across workforce education services and into the labor market, in order to identify trouble spots and document successful approaches with an especially close look at outcomes for lower-skilled students.

Helping more lower-skilled adults obtain marketable postsecondary credentials depends upon being able to see where and how individuals are falling through the cracks in the workforce education system. States should establish data-sharing agreements across adult education, training, and postsecondary agencies to allow tracking of individual outcomes along the education pathway and into the labor market. Legal and technical barriers can make it challenging to create data-sharing capacity, yet states can place a high priority on the task and aim to overcome barriers while protecting individual privacy.

4 Help community colleges connect in a broader, more strategic way with local employers, in order to link their needs to for-credit college offerings and to help lower-skilled adults get good jobs in demand in the local labor market.

Improved adult access to postsecondary education does not translate automatically into either worker advancement or more competitive businesses. State policy can increase the odds of success by analyzing labor markets to help identify promising sectors and occupations, and by fostering regional worker training partnerships among community colleges, employers, business associations, and community organizations. Such regional partnerships can help link, on the one hand, employers who are willing to invest in workers' skills and can offer family-supporting jobs with, on the other hand, community colleges that can provide certificates and degrees linked to those opportunities.

5 Overhaul the content and delivery of adult basic education, English as a Second Language, and college remediation, in order to accelerate progress and connect these services closely to occupational pathways in the colleges.

Lower-skilled adults—especially those with skill levels lower than eighth grade in the *Breaking Through* population—need remediation through the adult basic education/ESL and/or college developmental education systems.

States policies can seek to ensure that developmental education does not become a black hole from which too many students never emerge. Students with occupational goals should receive contextualized, accelerated developmental education; there is growing evidence that this increases retention by making the basic skills relevant to their occupational goals and speeding up time to completion. To help students advance from developmental education into for-credit coursework, states can highlight transition rates and then focus energy on improving transitions—for example, by building more robust bridges from developmental education to workforce education.

States can also encourage credit-bearing occupational programs to enroll lower-skilled adults by promoting strong connections from pre-college courses and sequences to programs and divisions that serve this population. Articulation agreements are insufficient by themselves: transitions need to be as seamless and automatic as possible for the student.

6 Create and expand more flexible and comprehensive financial aid strategies and more personalized career and academic counseling and support, in order to support postsecondary access and success for lower-income adults.

States should broaden access to need-based financial aid programs for lower-skilled adults enrolled in programs tied to certificates and degrees. Policies promoting such goals include allowing less-than-half-time students and those without a GED or high school diploma to be eligible for financial aid, using aid for developmental education and non-credit occupational programs (if articulated to certificates and degrees), and allowing aid to be used for fractional credit or short modules.

States should allow certificate and degree-seeking students to combine state need-based aid with federal Pell Grants, up to the total cost of attendance (regardless of enrollment status), including room and board, child care, and other necessary supports. States can also provide aid year-round and offer cash incentives to promote persistence, and they can explore performance-based financial aid or scholarships for low-skilled adults. States should dedicate funding for on-campus child care programs, and institutions should ensure that care is available during non-traditional hours. In addition, states can use federal work-study dollars to provide on-campus jobs, potentially related to the student's area of study, to make it easier for students to combine work and school, while providing students opportunities to integrate work and learning.