



Breaking Through: Helping Low-Skilled Adults Enter and Succeed in College and Careers

Executive Summary

Around the country, innovative community colleges are playing a larger role in helping low-skilled adults gain the valuable skills and credentials that are the gateway to family-supporting careers. *Breaking Through* looks at *whether*—and *how*—these institutions can significantly improve the odds that low-income, low-skilled adults earn the college-level occupational and technical credentials that remain elusive for many Americans. The report is based on a literature review, site visits to innovative colleges and programs, interviews with practitioners and researchers, special sessions at national conferences, and a convening of practitioners who discussed their programs and reviewed preliminary research findings.

High-Leverage Strategies to Increase Access and Success

Exciting approaches at a number of community colleges show promise for helping larger numbers of low-skilled adults advance their education beyond high school. Innovative programs are setting new benchmarks for what is achievable and raising the bar for program performance and outcomes. For example:

- At the Community College of Denver, Certified Nursing Assistants at the lowest level of developmental math can gain the skills needed to enter a degree program leading to a Licensed Practical Nurse degree. The workforce development program takes 24 weeks, compared with 45 weeks in traditional developmental education.
- In Kentucky, the integration of Jefferson County’s adult education run by the K-12 school department with the community college’s developmental education program has enabled 77 percent of “dually enrolled” students to take college-level programs, compared to 30 to 35 percent nationally.

For low-skilled adults, successful approaches like these use four strategies to open up pathways from multiple entry points to a common goal: postsecondary credentials. Not every college or program implements all four, but JFF’s research suggests that impact is enhanced when these strategies are *integrated into a synergistic approach* to creating multiple paths that adults can navigate toward occupational or technical degrees.

Strategy One: Integrated Institutional Structures and Services. Innovative community colleges are integrating adult education, workforce development, developmental education, and non-credit programs to create multiple paths for students with low basic skills or pre-college skills to enter and succeed in occupational and technical degree programs.

To integrate programs and services, community colleges:

- Connect ABE and ESOL to workforce programming and mainstream college programs, with aligned course content and credentials;
- Integrate developmental and degree programs, using the content of credit-level courses as a context for improving skills, increasing the number of students who make it through gate-keeper courses, and improving motivation and persistence;



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www.ncwe.org/jffProject/index.aspx or
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For additional information, contact:
 Nan Poppe, NCWE, npoppe@pcc.edu, 503.788.6268
 Judith Taylor, JFF, jtaylor@jff.org, 617.728.4446

- Combine a range of public and private funding sources to expand access from multiple entry points to degree programs; and
- Create clear, easy-to-navigate transitions from non-credit to credit programs and from multiple entry, exit, and reentry points to the degree programs.

Strategy Two: Accelerated Learning. The longer it takes to learn skills and complete programs, the less likely an adult is to advance from one stage to the next. Innovative instructional practices and program designs accelerate advancement to meaningful learning gains and program completion.

While accelerating learning and improving completion rates in varying ways, these programs commonly improve student outcomes through three key strategies:

- Diagnostic assessments that create individualized, competency-based instruction focused on what each student needs to master;
- Short-term, intensive learning programs that enable adults to progress rapidly and complete programs more quickly; and
- Contextualized course content, using an occupational focus to help students learn more and faster.

Strategy Three: Labor Market Payoffs. Promising strategies directly link education to meaningful economic payoffs. Deeply rooted in local labor markets, these strategies are driven by employer needs and economic development priorities. The strategies:

- Focus on high-demand occupations, offering high wages and opportunities for advancement;
- Actively engage employers so that adults develop skills for real jobs; and
- Tie the acquisition of reading, writing, math and English skills to how broad occupations or career paths use those skills.

Strategy Four: Comprehensive Supports. To help low-income adults succeed in college even when struggling to support their families, innovative institutions are implementing various approaches to providing comprehensive supports: for example, career counseling, tutoring and other academic supports, personal case management, and learning communities. *Breaking Through* documents, through field research, how community colleges are organizing their own departments, as well as other providers, to support the creation of pathways connecting multiple programs. These supports:

- Are provided through the college and/or through partnerships with external organizations;
- Provide career guidance or job search support that link educational advancement to economic payoffs; and

- At their best, address the issues facing low-literacy adults attempting to advance educationally.

Promising State Policies. The primary concern of this study is institution-level strategies, but each field-based example illustrates the significant impact of state policy on the capacity of community colleges to promote advancement. Only a few states have policies that support transitions from adult education and workforce development to college, and from non-credit to credit programs; many states' policies inhibit such transitions.

Promoting and Accelerating Innovation

Innovative practices remain the exception rather than the rule, yet there is an opportunity to strengthen emerging approaches, spread them within institutions and to more colleges, and make them more sustainable.

JFF's research identified two populations of low-skilled adults who are most likely to benefit from these efforts. Initiatives should target: 1) adults with sixth- to eighth-grade-level skills, helping them move quickly to complete high school, develop pre-college skills, and benefit from developmental education; and 2) adults with eighth- to tenth-grade pre-college skills, helping them develop college-level skills and enter credit programs.

Moreover, the research points to the kinds of colleges best able to make sustainable progress: those that are already committed to developing and implementing innovative practices. It is extremely difficult to drive programmatic and institutional change externally.

Discussions with community college leaders and practitioners suggest placing a priority on and directing support to the following types of activity:

- R&D assistance for "early adopter" community colleges, in order to promote institutional integration, accelerated learning, connections to the labor market, and comprehensive student support, with all efforts systematically documenting individual outcomes;
- Peer learning among colleges receiving R&D assistance to promote the rapid exchange of knowledge about promising practices and avoid "reinventing the wheel";
- Broad peer learning and other awareness efforts among community colleges nationally to increase understanding of promising practices that support advancement for low-literacy adults;
- The strengthening of community college leadership committed to this agenda through leadership academies and related activities; and
- The identification and support of state policies that advance programmatic and institutional changes benefiting low-income adults.