

Breaking  
Through



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

## HELPING COLLEGES ADVANCE LOW-SKILLED ADULTS INTO CAREERS

Breaking Through promotes and strengthens the efforts of 41 community colleges in 22 states to help low-skilled adults prepare for and succeed in occupational and technical degree programs. Counteracting high attrition rates in Adult Basic Education and developmental education programs, Breaking Through colleges improve outcomes by focusing on strategies that create effective pathways through precollege and degree-level programs and result in college completion. The initiative is proving that low-skilled adults can advance through remediation and credential programs within a reasonable time and with reasonable success in the green economy. The initiative invests in 20 workforce partnerships across 6 diverse industry sectors in 8 metropolitan labor markets. It builds on JFF's approach of organizing employers and workforce resources into sectoral workforce partnerships to promote career advancement for lower-skilled workers.

### STRATEGIES TO SUCCESS

Breaking Through defines "low-skilled adults" as those performing below the eighth-grade level on reading and math tests. For the 35 to 50 million adults that fall into this category, low academic skills represent a serious barrier to finding family-supporting employment or entering technical training programs that lead to career advancement. Breaking Through students include those who dropped out of high school and those who have a high school credential or GED but whose skill levels in math and reading are below the eighth-grade level.

Breaking Through helps low-skilled adults acquire skills necessary to succeed in postsecondary education and attain credentials. It rests on four high-leverage strategies to develop career and college pathways for students to advance their studies or enter productive careers.

- **Accelerated learning.** Through the innovative use of assessment tools, restructured curricula, targeted instruction, contextualization, and other strategies—change delivery methods and content so that students can meet their goals faster.
- **Comprehensive support services.** Make academic, economic, and social support services easily accessible to students whose life challenges put them at risk of not completing their education.
- **Labor market payoffs.** Restructure both precollege and college-level instruction to connect course content with the workplace and to connect students with actual employers and workplaces.

- **Aligning programs for low-skilled adults.** Reorganize college programs and link them with external programs to provide students with a better understanding of how they can move into and through college, and to provide clear pathways that enable them to do so.

Breaking Through colleges use the four strategies as a framework for creating programs customized to local needs. Some colleges serve recently unemployed factory workers; others focus on entry into health care professions. Some colleges seek to develop programs for English language learners or GED students.

### RESULTS, 2006-2009

- **78 percent** of participants completed their Breaking Through programs and entered credit pathways in construction, nursing, nurse assistant certification, and manufacturing.
- **78 percent** of students who were unemployed before starting a Breaking Through career pathway program are employed—72 percent in their career pathway field.
- **47 percent** of the students who started in 2006 earned at least one certificate; 14 percent earned an Associate's degree in a high-demand field.
- **80 percent** of the initial group of students is employed; 97 percent of those employed are working in the field of their pathway program.

## THE BREAKING THROUGH COMPONENTS

**Expanding Awareness:** Breaking Through documents best practices at participating community colleges and collects evidence on how those practices make a difference in the lives of students. Many of these practices and outcomes are described in the Breaking Through Practice Guide, released in spring 2010. With outcomes indicating the framework's success, Breaking Through is scaling up to reach more colleges, more students, and more states. The initiative is reaching out to community college leaders, practitioners, and policymakers about the need to serve low-skilled adults, and it offers peer learning meetings to participating institutions.

**Scaling Up:** Seven colleges are exploring how they can scale up Breaking Through programs to reach more students by considering a number of innovative approaches, including partnerships with other organizations. The initiative is cataloguing these approaches for dissemination to the Breaking Through network.

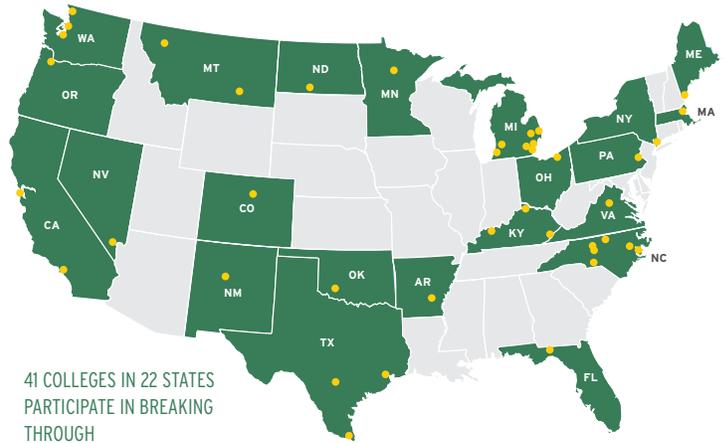
**State-Level College Networks:** Breaking Through is expanding its Michigan network, which focuses on connecting dislocated workers with innovative postsecondary programs. In North Carolina, a network funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Ready for College initiative focuses on innovative strategies to connect out-of-school youth to GED programs and college. With funding from the Walmart Foundation, this North Carolina network is expanding through grants to seven colleges. The Kentucky Community & Technical College System has established a statewide Breaking Through network, with an emphasis on peer learning and collaborative design.

**Tribal Colleges:** Breaking Through, collaborating with the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, is establishing programs at six tribal colleges. Breaking Through will provide technical assistance for the campuses and create a peer learning network among them.

**South Texas:** In the Rio Grande valley, South Texas College and community-based organizations are using the Breaking Through framework to develop career pathways for English language learners with low native-language literacy.

**State Policy:** Breaking Through identifies and disseminates information about state-level policies that support the advancement of low-skilled adults into and through college degree programs.

**Evaluation:** Third-party evaluators track outcomes for Breaking Through students and their institutions. At the same time, evaluators analyze the process of implementing Breaking Through projects to help understand the impact of policies and practices at colleges and in the initiative as a whole.



## PARTNERS

Breaking Through is a collaboration of Jobs for the Future and the National Council for Workforce Education.

## FUNDERS

The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation have supported programs that help low-skilled adults prepare for and succeed in community college occupational and technical degree programs. The Ford Foundation has supported state policy efforts. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funds data collection, documentation, and scale-up at five community colleges and peer learning activities across the initiative. The Walmart Foundation supports technical assistance to the tribal college network and the North Carolina state network.

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**Jobs for the Future** works with our partners to design and drive the adoption of education and career pathways leading from college readiness to career advancement for those struggling to succeed in today's economy.



## JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

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