Executive Summary

This final implementation report shares findings from the first three years of Accelerating Opportunity (AO), an initiative launched in 2011 that aimed to help adults with low basic skills earn valued occupational credentials, obtain well-paying jobs, and sustain rewarding careers. The report documents the accomplishments of AO over this period and provides an in-depth description of the process and lessons that emerged from the effort. These findings may be of particular interest to state policymakers and colleges planning for the implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which provides new opportunities for career pathway development within states and colleges.

The AO model focused on students who scored between the 6th- and 12th-grade level in basic skill areas but who expressed interest in earning technical credentials. In particular, AO was designed for adult education students who lacked high school diplomas or the equivalent. AO encouraged states to change the delivery of adult education for these students by allowing community and technical colleges to enroll them in for-credit career and technical education (CTE) courses at the same time as they earned their high school credentials, improved their basic academic skills, or built their English language abilities. Colleges structured the CTE programs in which students enrolled as credit-bearing, integrated college and career pathways with enhanced support services. Each pathway was required to incorporate integrated instruction, which combined basic skills and technical training that was contextualized for the occupation targeted. Specifically, AO required colleges to implement "team teaching," where an adult education instructor co-teaches with a CTE instructor in the same classroom. This approach intended not only to make CTE courses accessible for students with low basic skills but also to enhance the quality of instruction. AO was also designed to change how states and colleges coordinated with government, business, and community partners by reforming policy and practice to make it easier for students with low basic skills to access and succeed in postsecondary education and the workforce.

A consortium of foundations, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, the University of Phoenix Foundation, and the Open Society Foundations, provided funding for AO. Jobs for the Future (JFF) managed and provided technical assistance for the initiative in partnership with the National College Transition Network, the National Council for Workforce Education, and the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

This final implementation report describes the first three years of AO implementation in four states that were part of the evaluation for all three years of the initial implementation period (three additional affiliate

states implemented AO but were not included in the evaluation). It covers January 2012 through the end of calendar year 2014 in Illinois, Kansas, and Kentucky and from fall 2012 through summer 2015 in Louisiana. The data presented in this report come from a survey administered in each of the three years of all AO colleges that were part of the evaluation, two rounds of site visits to the participating state offices and two colleges per state (eight visits total), program documentation, and quarterly calls with AO states and colleges over three years of implementation. This report also includes data from two web-based surveys of current and former AO participants that focused on student experiences in the program (see Spaulding and Martin-Caughey 2015).

This report is part of a comprehensive evaluation of the AO initiative that Urban Institute conducted with its partners the Aspen Institute and the George Washington University. The evaluation includes an implementation study, an impact study, and a cost-benefit analysis. The evaluation team will release summative reports for the quasi-experimental impact study and cost-benefit analysis by early 2017.

Accelerating Opportunity over Three Years

During its first three years, the AO initiative grew as states and colleges increased their efforts to help low-skilled adults obtain credits and credentials and attain employment. Based on annual data from a college survey, these states expanded the AO model to all or a large proportion of colleges within their respective states. Ultimately, 54 AO colleges in the four evaluation states enrolled 8,287 students over the first three years of the AO effort.[1] These colleges implemented 154 integrated career pathways. The most common pathways were in manufacturing (39 percent of pathways offered) and health occupations (32 percent).

Major Accomplishments

The students enrolled in AO pathway programs earned 56,757 credits and 11,283 credentials, 78 percent of the 14,400 credentials initially targeted for the three-year AO initiative (3,600 credentials per state), according to annual college survey data. In addition to supporting acquisition of credits and credentials, the AO initiative helped students connect to the labor market. According to the college surveys, over one-third (35 percent) of AO students engaged in work-based learning, such as internships, during their enrollment in AO coursework; 37 percent entered employment in any job; and 30 percent found a job related to the occupational area of their pathway within the first three years. These figures do not indicate the impacts of

AO on student labor market and educational outcomes, which would require a comparison of outcomes to similar non-AO students. Information on impacts will appear in a later report.

The evaluation team also found that AO students expressed great satisfaction with the AO initiative. During focus groups and in response to student survey questions, students noted that college courses and credentials might not have been a viable option for them had they not had access to AO. Students identified specific components of the AO model—including individualized supports, team teaching, and tutoring services—as critical for helping them succeed in postsecondary institutions and attain employment.

Financing and Resources Expended

States had flexibility about how they allocated the grant money across colleges, and they asked colleges participating in AO to make major changes with relatively few resources. Colleges received funding from the state AO grant ranging from $8,800 to $140,000 in the first year, with the average at about $52,000 per college. The amounts were similar for the original colleges in subsequent years. States and colleges complemented AO grant resources by combining AO funds with other institutional resources and grants, such as Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grants and the Health Profession Opportunity Grants.

On average, colleges used about $233,000 in resources for AO in the first year. By the third year, the resources used for AO per college had decreased to about $227,000, even as the number of students served and credits and credentials awarded increased. These estimated figures represent the value of the extra resources used beyond what the colleges would have invested if AO did not exist. The majority of these extra resources were dedicated for AO personnel, such as additional teachers for team-teaching instruction or AO-specific coaches and navigators who provided support services. Some of these resources also represent the value of the time spent by deans and other college leadership personnel to support the roll-out of AO. Most colleges did not write a check for the entire amount of the resources used; colleges redirected some portion of the resources captured in this analysis from other potential uses.

The data reported from the college and student surveys and site visits demonstrate that the AO initiative had promising outcomes over the course of three years and that colleges achieved these outcomes more efficiently over time. The next section describes some of the lessons learned over the course of the three-year implementation period.

Implementing the AO Model: Lessons for the Field

The implementation of the AO model required states and colleges to adapt existing structures and systems to meet the initiative's overall goal of increasing the ability of students with low basic skills to earn valued occupational credentials and enter well-paying careers. These lessons from AO implementation may be valuable to other state policymakers and colleges interested in pursuing similar efforts.

Strong State Executive-Level Leadership and Ongoing Support Bolster College Efforts

The implementation of AO represented a major shift in how state administrators, college staff, and faculty perceived low-skilled adults in community and technical college systems. It challenged long-held assumptions regarding how likely these students were to succeed in CTE programs. The leadership and ongoing support of state executive agencies were critical for the design and implementation of the AO model at the college level. Each of the four states had state-level AO teams to manage the initiative, led by the state's community and technical college board or system. State partnerships between higher education executive leadership and adult education leadership, workforce agencies, and health and human services departments were valuable in facilitating the policy changes and cooperation needed for AO implementation. These state management teams coordinated the effort across colleges, helped college leadership navigate policy barriers, and provided professional development and technical assistance to help colleges deliver the AO model.

State Policy Can Support Student Success

AO state teams recognized that formal policies were critical for ensuring that adults with low basic skills and adult education students could enroll in and complete postsecondary coursework successfully. Therefore, state teams engaged multiple stakeholders to build policy support for AO. This policy work covered multiple areas, including changing assessment practices for low-skilled students, aligning curricula to allow for acceleration, developing new funding models to support integrated instruction strategies, and improving capabilities for data collection and tracking student outcomes. Each state undertook unique strategies in their efforts to realign resources and change or develop new policies or systems. In all states, this work was invaluable in facilitating college-level efforts to enroll AO students in integrated career pathways. In all four states, preexisting infrastructure promoted the AO initiative's successful implementation because JFF only awarded AO grants to states in which the postsecondary system governed adult education.

One challenge that required a state response was the elimination of the Pell grant's "Ability to Benefit" provision in 2012, which meant that students without high school credentials could not qualify for federal financial aid. This provision was reinstated in 2015, toward the end of the AO effort—too late for colleges to use Pell grants to support tuition for AO students. Instead, some state teams strategized with AO colleges to find tuition resources for students without high school credentials: three states (Illinois, Kansas, and Louisiana) forged relationships with the state workforce system, one (Kansas) developed a formal agreement with the state department of human services, and another (Louisiana) revised its tuition waiver policy for students without high school credentials. Despite these efforts to support tuition for students without high school credentials, most students whom the colleges recruited into AO had completed high school or equivalent before enrollment. State and college administrators emphasized that students who possessed high school credentials but still had basic skill needs could also benefit from the AO model.

Both College Institutional Factors and Labor-Market Demand Influence Pathway Selection

The AO model emphasizes that pathways should be in high-demand or high-growth occupational areas, based on local labor-market information. Although local labor-market demand played a role in college decisions on pathway selection and implementation, most colleges initially prioritized institutional factors over demand. Institutional factors included the college's capacity to provide the pathway (e.g., equipment and faculty availability), preexisting relationships between adult education and certain CTE programs, prerequisites for the occupational field, and student interest in a particular occupation.

Colleges took unique approaches to integrated career pathway design and implementation; there was no "one size fits all" solution. One common approach was for colleges to implement AO initially with CTE departments that were more open to exploring integrated instruction methods. The approach of choosing "friendly" CTE departments allowed colleges to start AO implementation quickly and build evidence of success. The early evidence then helped colleges convince administrators and faculty in other occupational areas to try AO. Over time, states required colleges to consider labor-market demand more explicitly in developing new pathways, since this is a critical component of the career pathways model.

Team Teaching Is Considered Effective, but It Requires Higher Investments

Many college faculty and administrators were initially concerned about the team-teaching model prescribed by AO, but many were convinced of its benefits by the end of the grant period. CTE faculty at first expressed

concerns about the specific role of an adult education instructor in the CTE classroom, but those who engaged in team teaching became more positive about the approach over time. Some even discussed wanting to incorporate an adult education instructor into non-AO classes. Students were also enthusiastic about the model and expressed that they would like more exposure to team-taught classes. Often, the adult education instructor contributed to instructional delivery; students shared that the adult education instructor also served an important supportive staff member.

College leadership expressed initial uncertainty about the cost-effectiveness of the team teaching approach. Some college leaders, many of whom were concerned about the higher costs of team teaching and its ability to serve students with low basic skills, became convinced that team teaching was a worthwhile investment moving forward because of its positive reception by faculty and students. Others planned to integrate the benefits of team teaching while reducing costs by implementing team teaching for one or two semesters, thereby giving CTE instructors a chance to learn how to incorporate basic skills content into their courses, and then moving forward without the second instructor. Alternatively, some colleges began to emphasize separate but contextualized basic skills instruction in lieu of team teaching.

College Internal Partnerships Are Fundamental but Time Intensive

Internal college partnerships among various departments—including adult education, CTE departments, college admissions, financial aid, and student support services—proved critical for AO success. These partnerships supported the co-enrollment of adult education students in college courses, increased the type and amount of instructional resources available, and facilitated students' transition to employment. College staff noted that these productive partnerships took time to develop. One of the first stages in developing these partnerships was to inform other staff and faculty at the college about the AO model and encourage them to buy into the idea that students with low basic skills could succeed in CTE programs. This early foundational work set the context for a positive culture shift toward higher confidence in the capabilities of low-skilled students.

External Partners Provide Needed Support, but Deep Employer Engagement Is Challenging

Throughout the implementation period, colleges leveraged external partnerships in various ways. Local workforce systems helped with recruitment and sometimes provided tuition support for students who did not qualify for Pell grants. Community-based organizations often provided individualized case management

and access to resources, such as child care or transportation vouchers. In some cases, community-based organizations also provided adult education services.

Colleges engaged employers as a part of AO, but creating and sustaining meaningful relationships with employers was challenging in many cases. Of the colleges involved in AO for all three years, the number with employer partners increased from 55 percent in the first year to 70 percent in the third year. Additionally, 82 percent of the original AO colleges indicated that they had an employer partner in at least one year. However, colleges still have work to do in deepening those partnerships. For instance, only 32 percent of colleges indicated that employers had assisted with pathway design. During site visits, college staff often cited employer engagement as an area for improvement. Colleges with strong CTE engagement in the AO effort were better positioned to leverage existing college relationships with employers through CTE employer advisory boards and instructor connections to industry, but engaging employers in a systematic way was often a new area for adult education departments working on AO.

Individualized Supports Are Helpful for Student Success, but Difficult to Sustain in the Long Term

Comprehensive support services—academic, career, and personal—are integral to the AO model. Common support services included tutoring or other academic support, career planning, college navigation support, job search assistance and job placement, and case management. Staff and students expressed that the individualized attention that AO staff gave to their students was the most important factor in student success. AO students received this support from adult education instructors in the classroom or from navigators who connected them to needed services inside or outside the college. Staff discussed how individualized support is particularly important for low-skilled adult students, since many of these students have a history of academic struggles and often juggle job and family responsibilities. According to student survey results, over 90 percent of those who received individual support or advice from an AO navigator or faculty member were satisfied or very satisfied with the support and advice they had received. College leadership, however, worried about their ability to scale and sustain individualized support services, given the costs, and have explored new funding sources that can be tapped for this purpose.

States and Colleges Plan to Sustain Aspects of AO, but There Is More to Learn

Even with the substantial resource investments required for implementation and the challenges in developing pathways, support structures, partnerships, and policies to support the model, many of the states and colleges report that they found the investments worthwhile. Legislative bodies in Kansas and Louisiana appropriated funds to support AO, partially based on early indicators of program success. Kentucky and Louisiana scaled up AO or AO-like efforts to all community and technical colleges. Across all four states, no colleges categorically rejected continuing aspects of AO, and 82 percent identified specific aspects of the model they would carry on after the grant period. In a survey, students expressed that the team-teaching approach—the aspect of the intervention that was arguably most costly—was the most beneficial and that they wanted more of it.

The forthcoming impact report will draw upon administrative data systems to examine the impacts of AO on student outcomes. Additionally, a forthcoming cost–benefit analysis will incorporate more complete cost data and show benefits accrued to states, colleges, and students. In the meantime, it appears that many AO leaders, staff, and students ended the grant period feeling that the intervention had positive effects on low-skilled students and was worth the time and resource investment.