



Breaking Through:

Helping Low-Skilled Adults Enter and Succeed in College and Careers

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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 gatekeeper courses, and improving motivation and persistence;
- 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.

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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.



Preface:

Why Adult and Basic Education Matter to Workforce Educators in Community Colleges

These are challenging times for community college workforce educators. On the one hand, the community college continues to grow and develop as one of the most important parts of American higher education. Over half of the students entering higher education credit programs start in community college. Moreover, our institutions are beginning to be well known by the public. A recent national poll of 600 adults showed strong public support for community colleges to become the institutions of higher educational opportunity for all Americans. Eighty-one percent of the respondents knew or were related to someone who attended a community college.

At the same time, there is great uncertainty about the specific mission and role of workforce education within the community college environment. There are debates within the community college movement over the importance of non-credit instruction, the role within workforce education of the “new vocational occupations” (information technology, health care, teaching), and the linkage of liberal arts and critical thinking skills to technical skills. In a real sense, specific issues of mission and focus become even more critical as all education becomes concerned with workforce education.

Our debates over the future of workforce education occur within an extraordinary context. The growing inequality of American society, coupled with the increasing significance of formal education for economic success, is driving large numbers of low-income students to our institutions. In addition, globalization trends are increasing the number of new immigrants who are still mastering English. The challenge facing these individuals is not simply to master technical skills; they often lack the basic literacy skills needed to do college-level studies. Nor is it sufficient to tell these students to continue or restart their education in the traditional linear fashion of developing foundation skills and then moving into postsecondary education. Many of these students need to take literacy and basic skills training as part of their technical training. Many will learn English best within the context of technical education.

The learning demands of these low-income students and their families are the next major challenge for

workforce educators. We believe that community college workforce education can play a major role in raising the college participation and completion rates for low-income students and their families. Indeed, the experiences of allied health and nursing programs at community colleges indicate that when students have the prospect of obtaining a good, stable job, they often master basic math and science concepts far more quickly than students from higher-income, better-educated backgrounds. The promise of a better economic future is a great motivator.

The task of creating technical programs for low-income students will not be easy. Community colleges face fresh challenges in attempting to serve the needs of low-income working adults, most of whom seek basic education and literacy skills.

Some of the solutions to these dilemmas can be found within our own organizations, including the National Council for Workforce Education. While many community colleges possess extensive basic education and ESOL programs, these are often disconnected from the rest of the institution and staffed by people who are uninvolved in the college’s central activities. As *Breaking Through* indicates, though, some colleges are taking a different approach, linking adult basic education not just to GED or ESOL programs but to the offerings that motivate low-wage workers to attend community college in the first place: those that prepare students for success in the workplace. We have joined with Jobs for the Future in this initial study so we can begin to detail some of the features of these programs.

Here are some success stories. Northern Virginia Community College has collaborated with local medical providers to connect adults who have low literacy skills to allied health degree programs. The Community College of Denver took a struggling job training program for entry-level health care workers, redesigned the curriculum, and produced college-ready workers in less than six months. Tacoma Community College integrated its ESOL and early childhood programs to help students earn credits toward a degree in child care. All these innovations benefit low-wage workers by helping them increase their wages and upward mobility.

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Common to these stories are several important design elements:

- Credit and non-credit programs are connected so that adults can move seamlessly into college.
- The curriculum is contextual and relates directly to specific occupational fields.
- Support services do not stop at a specific literacy level but instead focus on helping students enter degree programs.
- There is attention to the “hand offs” within an institution as students move from one part of the college to another.
- Knowledge is organized in shorter “chunks,” with degrees and credentials of value granted early in the process.
- Attention is paid to the financial conditions of students and their families as the institutions seek ways to overcome the biases of traditional student aid and other student service issues.

Basic and adult education programs, including most ESOL programs, should become a feeder system for community college occupational programs. Those individuals who work in the adult education programs of our institutions are part of workforce education. Indeed, an organization such as the National Council

for Workforce Education might aid in fostering an institutional respect for these activities within the instructional units. Many of the most promising initiatives are coming from the heroic efforts of a few talented and dedicated individuals whose work will vanish without an organizational presence. We believe they can and should be members of organizations such as NCWE. And we believe this study conducted by Jobs for the Future in partnership with NCWE will help us recognize our common interests and aid in uniting our work.

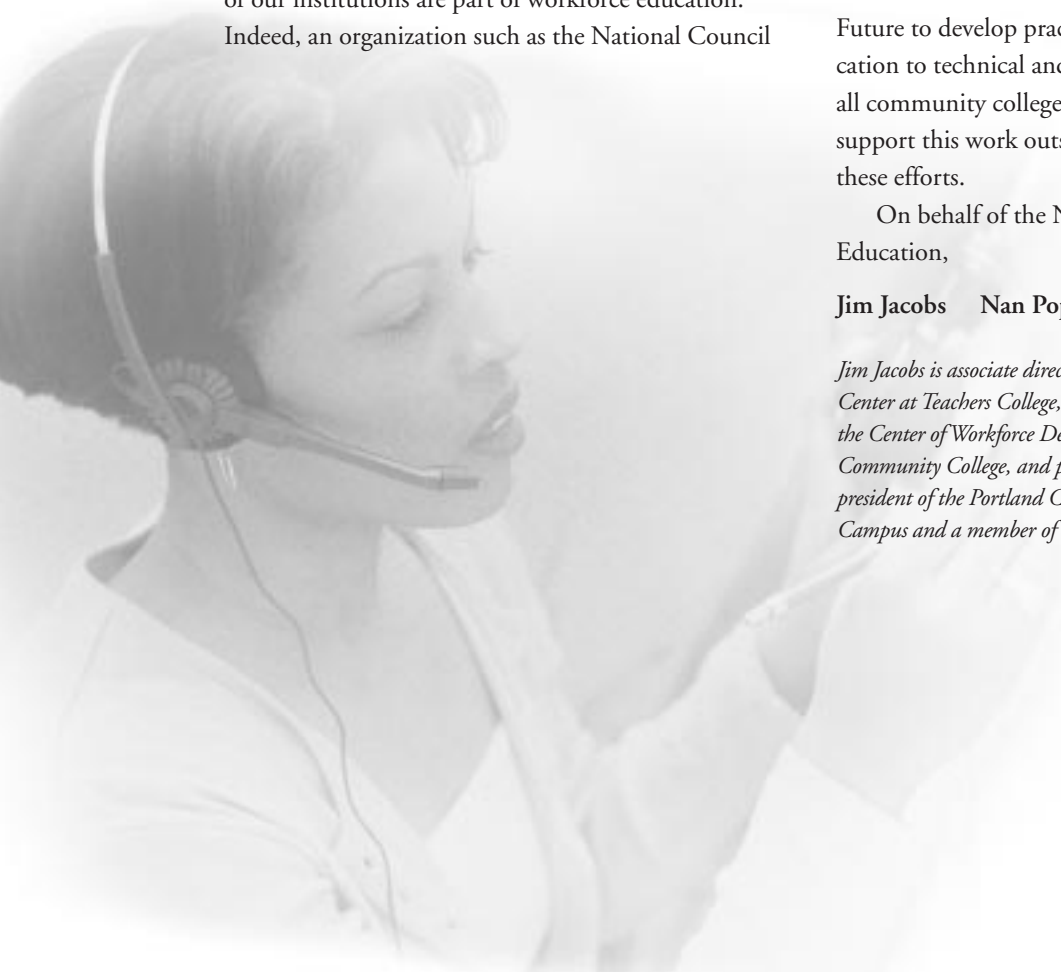
There are justifiable concerns about the cost and complexity of these programs, yet they offer a huge opportunity—for both students and colleges. The connection between adult education and college workforce development is precisely what policymakers consider important for the future, as evidenced by the many state governments that are placing adult education programs within their community college structures.

Such programs are central to the mission of community colleges. Now we must rise to the challenge of making them central to our organizations. The National Council for Workforce Education sees this as an important area for our future efforts. *Breaking Through* is only the first step. In the coming year, the NCWE will continue our partnership with Jobs for the Future to develop practical projects that link adult education to technical and occupational training. We urge all community college practitioners, and those who support this work outside of the colleges, to join us in these efforts.

On behalf of the National Council for Workforce Education,

Jim Jacobs Nan Poppe

Jim Jacobs is associate director of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University, the director of the Center of Workforce Development and Policy at Macomb Community College, and president of NCWE. Nan Poppe is president of the Portland Community College Extended Learning Campus and a member of the NCWE Executive Board



Introduction

In today's economy, postsecondary credentials are the difference between family self-sufficiency and not being able to make ends meet. Yet half of all adults in the United States have only a high school credential or less; 20 percent have not graduated from high school.¹ That so many adults lack both the skills and the credentials they need to get good jobs and support a family is an immense challenge for individuals and the nation.

Around the country, innovative community colleges are taking steps to play a larger role in helping low-skilled adults gain the skills and credentials that are a threshold for most family-supporting careers.

Breaking Through looks at whether and how community colleges can significantly improve the odds that low-income, low-skilled adults with a high school education or less can earn college-level occupational and technical credentials. It focuses on promising strategies that community colleges are using, internally and through partnerships, to create pathways that enable low-income, low-skilled adults to gain occupational and technical credentials. It looks at the challenges that community colleges face in developing and implementing promising strategies and practices. And it examines the opportunities for, and barriers to, bringing promising strategies to greater scale.

The study addresses the intertwined concerns of the National Council for Workforce Education, Jobs for the Future, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. With an institution focus, NCWE asked JFF to identify strategies and practices that community colleges can use to increase the number of under-prepared students who enter and succeed in occupational and technical degree programs. With a population focus, the Mott Foundation, which funded this research, is interested in strategies and practices for helping low-income, working-age adults attain postsecondary skills and credentials, leading ultimately to economic gains.

The analysis in *Breaking Through* is based on an intensive review of research literature coupled with a field investigation of transitions: 1) from adult education and other basic skills programs to General Educational Development credentials; 2) from GEDs and workforce programs into community colleges; and 3) from developmental education into and through college-level degree programs.² The research focused on the barriers that low-income, low-skilled adults face at

every stage of education and career advancement, what actually happens to low-skilled adults in basic skills and community college programs, and strategies to overcome these barriers and achieve better outcomes.

Field research built on community college networks and connections available through NCWE and prior work by Jobs for the Future to identify innovative programs and colleges for further study. The findings are based on site visits to innovative community colleges and adult education programs; phone interviews with highly regarded practitioners and researchers in the fields of adult literacy, developmental education and workforce development; interviews and special interest sessions conducted at national conferences; and a convening of twelve practitioners in these fields who discussed their own programs and reviewed and commented on preliminary findings from the research. Nineteen sites were selected for visits, based on referrals from the research process and from experts in community college adult education practice.

Breaking Through can be used by community college leaders at the institutional level and by program leaders and practitioners in adult education, workforce development, developmental education, non-credit continuing education, and occupational and technical credit programs. It provides a guide to developing, sustaining, and expanding strategies that create pathways for low-skilled adults from multiple entry points to occupational/technical certificates and degrees. The report can also be used by adult education state and program leaders, by state workforce and economic development leaders, and by local workforce boards to develop and implement changes that expand opportunities for education and economic advancement.

The emphasis of the research was the institution, looking at what colleges can do and how well they can do it. Nevertheless, state policies can play an important role in enhancing or stifling the development and implementation of strategies for helping low-skilled adults advance toward postsecondary credentials and family-supporting careers. The findings of this report can inform state officials and policymakers as they seek to encourage promising strategies, remove obstacles to those strategies, and strengthen the connections between promising state policies and community college practice.



Part I.

The Scope of the Problem

An occupational or technical Associate’s degree is the gateway to family-supporting career employment. Men who have attained an occupational Associate’s degree earn 30 percent more than high school graduates with similar backgrounds; women with occupational credentials earn 47 percent more. The earnings advantage from occupational Associate’s degrees is significantly greater than the gains from one year of community college, from advanced certificates, or from academic Associate’s degrees (Silverberg et al. 2004).

This valuable credential is elusive for too many Americans. Almost 90 million adults over age 25 have a high school diploma or less and no postsecondary education: 36 million adults did not graduate from high school and 52 million have a high school credential but no further education. The problem is most serious for African-American and Latino adults (see Chart 1). More than one quarter of African-American adults and nearly half of all Latino adults did not graduate from high school, compared to 15 percent of white adults. Almost 60 percent of African-American and 70 percent of Latino adults have a high school credential or less, compared to 45 percent of white adults.

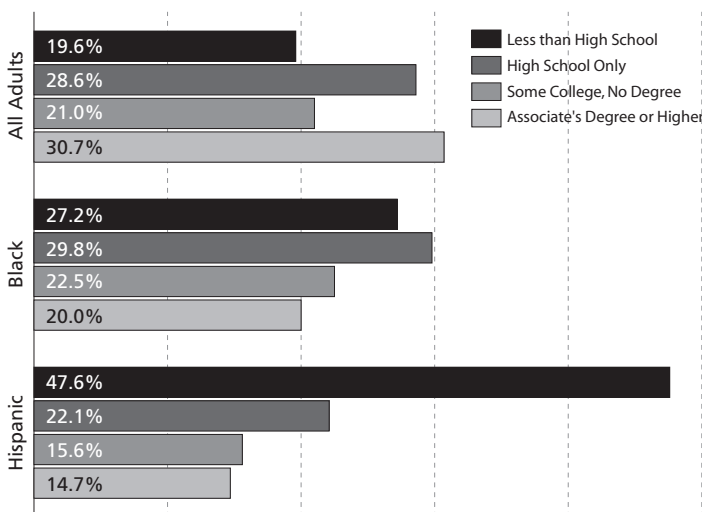
It is estimated that a total of about 65 million 18- to 64-year-old adults—42 percent of all working-age adults—lack the skills needed to succeed in postsecondary education and the modern workplace. These include nearly 7 million adults with limited English proficiency, 23 million adults who did not graduate from high school, and 34 million high school graduates who lack the basic skills needed in the modern workplace (Comings, Reder, and Sum 2001).

The Pursuit of Economic Advancement

This is not to suggest that these individuals do not seek to advance: more than 17 million adults with a high school credential or less participate in formal education or training. Almost 3 million are in adult education, more than 4.5 million in part-time postsecondary education, and almost 10 million in work-related education (see Chart 2). It’s important to note that enrollments in ABE/ESOL, programs that are often the exclusive focus of research in this area, make up less than 20 percent of the total enrollment.

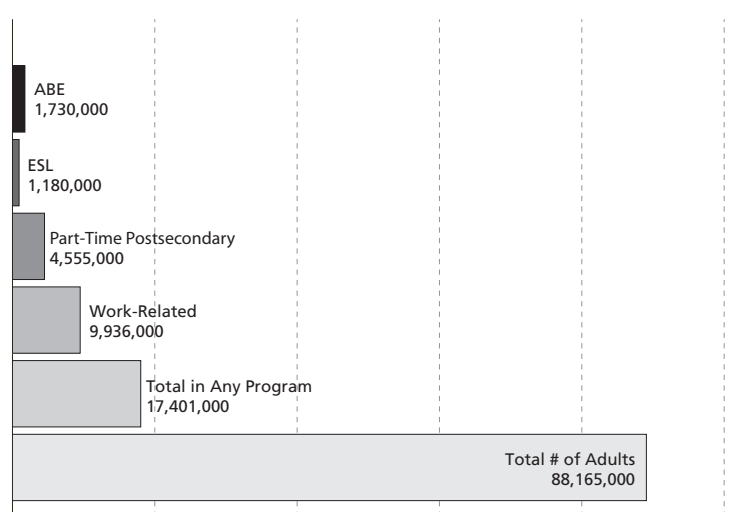
Unfortunately, though, very few participants in any of these programs manage to move up. There are major

CHART 1
Educational Attainment by Race and Ethnicity, Adults 25 and Older



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, P148A-D. Sex by Educational Attainment for the Population 25 Years and Over. Data Set: Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF3), Sample Data. Accessed at <http://factfinder.census.gov>

CHART 2
Participation in Education and Training by Adults with a High School Credential or Less



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Table 359, accessed at <http://www.nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d02/tables/dt359.asp>; and Table 359, accessed at <http://www.nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d02/tables/dt360.asp>

leakages at every point in the pipeline from these programs to credit-level degree programs in community college.

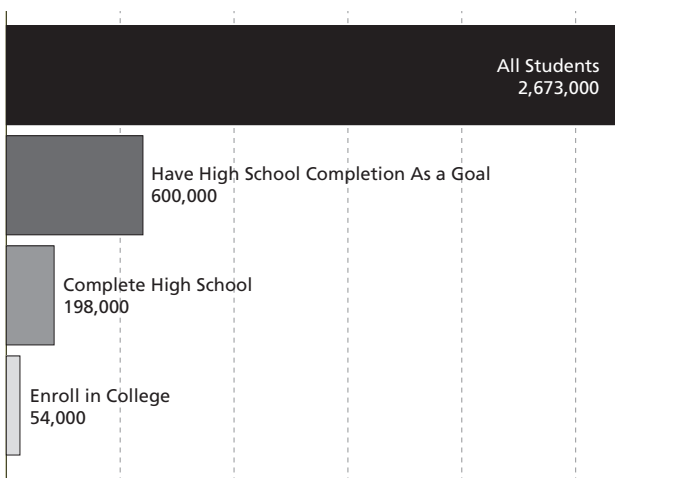
Transitions from Low Basic Skills to High School Completion

As an example of the leakage, the GED system is primarily an alternative route to high school completion for recent dropouts with higher cognitive skills rather than functioning as a pipeline for low-skilled older adults. While the terms “adult education” and “GED prep” are often used interchangeably, in reality only 30 percent of GED recipients come through the adult education system; 70 percent prepare for the tests in other ways. About 40 percent of GED recipients are 19 or younger, two-thirds are 24 or younger, and nearly 80 percent are younger than 30.³ Half of all GED credentials issued each year are earned by dropouts within two years of what would have been their high school graduation. GED recipients spend an average of only 30 hours preparing for the tests, meaning that the process does little to improve academic skills.

In one adult education program serving 600 students—a well-run program serving a high proportion of low-skilled adults (half of the students read at a sixth-grade level or less)—only 15 to 20 students earn a GED credential each year. These numbers are typical. Nationally, only 7 percent of students in federal- and state-funded WIA Title II adult education programs earned a GED in the year after program participation, and only 2 percent entered college (see Chart 3) (U.S. Department of Education 2002).⁴

CHART 3

Title II System High School Completion and Postsecondary Outcomes, 2000-2001



Source: U.S. Department of Education 2002

Transitions from High School Completion to College Enrollment

The primary economic value of a GED credential lies in providing access to college and eligibility for financial aid. Taking skill level and prior education into account, there is little difference between the earnings of high school dropouts and those who earn a GED and stop their education at that point (Boesel, Absalam, and Smith 1998).

However, very few people who earn GEDs enroll in college and far fewer get a college credential: although 65 percent of people who take GED tests say they are doing so in order to go to college, 30 to 35 percent of GED recipients actually enter college, 10 to 15 percent finish one year of college, and only 4 percent earn an Associate's degree (see Chart 4) (Reder 1998).

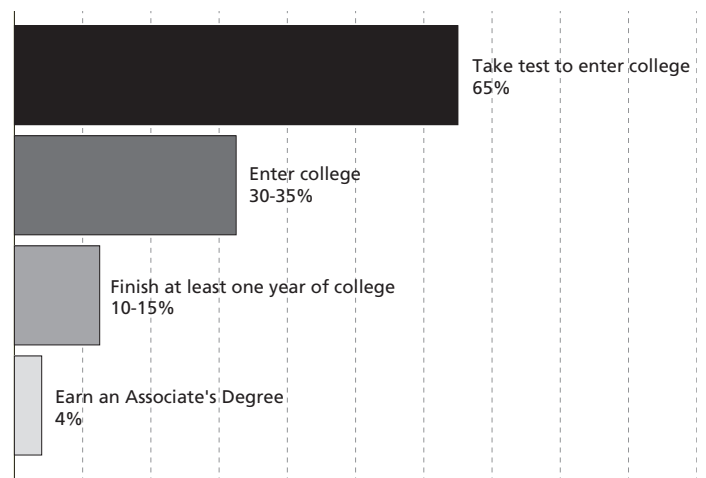
Most GED recipients, along with many high school graduates who enter postsecondary education, are not prepared to succeed in credit-level degree programs. About 40 to 50 percent of all students who enter community college must take at least one developmental education course. In urban community colleges that serve low-income, low-skilled adults, as many as 70 to 80 percent of students take developmental courses.

From College Enrollment to a Degree

While occupational degree programs represent a major gateway to jobs paying family-supporting wages, many community college students do not make it into or through degree programs. Half of all entering students do not complete their first year of community college. Developmental education does help many students with

CHART 4

Postsecondary Outcomes of GED Recipients



Source: Reder 1998

pre-college skills enter and succeed in credit-level programs, but for many others it is a formidable barrier blocking the way into credit-level degree programs.⁵ One study found that only a quarter of students who took three developmental courses had completed all three courses five years later; only 4 percent had graduated; 78 percent had left without a credential (Grubb 2001).

Traditional degree programs are not designed to reflect the realities of life for low-skilled working adults, many of them with families. While Associate's degrees are frequently referred to as "two-year degrees," it takes an average five to six years to earn them. Many community college students are adults who can only attend part-time and in spurts. Overall, 68 percent of community college occupational students complete less than a year's worth of courses in five years (Silverberg et al. 2004).

Institutional and Individual Barriers to College Success

Low-income, low-skilled working adults have to overcome difficult barriers in order to complete high school, enter college, and make the transition from pre-college skills into and through credit-level degree programs. It is not easy for working adults to balance education with work and family obligations. Low-income adults also face institutional barriers caused by lack of access to affordable housing, health care, child care, and transportation. These obstacles are compounded by the fragmented, disconnected, and difficult to access nature of the education, training, and support services they need.

These barriers weaken persistence at every level. While many GED recipients have the cognitive skills to succeed in postsecondary education, the risk factors linked to dropping out of high school remain serious barriers to success in adult education, workforce development, and community college (Boesel, Absalam, and Smith 1998):

- Despite high cognitive skills, many GED recipients did not do well academically in high school and need help in developing academic "survival skills."
- GED recipients have, on average, about four of the seven risk factors that are predictors of postsecondary attrition for non-traditional students; high school graduates with regular diplomas average about one risk factor.⁶
- GED completers who enter college have significantly lower incomes than other high school graduates. GED recipients in college come from families that average near the bottom third in socio-economic status, while high school graduates with regular diplomas rank almost twice as high.

- The socioeconomic status of GED recipients who attend college is similar to that of high school graduates in developmental education. This indicates that high school graduates who are not prepared for college face many of the same barriers as postsecondary students with GED credentials.

Fragmented and Unconnected Education Programs

Although community colleges offer many of the adult education, workforce development, social support, and developmental education services that low-skilled adults need, they are often unconnected and fragmented, even though such programs serve many of the same people:

- ABE and ESOL programs in community colleges are often disconnected from workforce programs and the rest of the college.
- Developmental education and occupational degree programs are often separate and sequential rather than integrated. Developmental programs frequently focus on traditional academic skills needed for introductory English and math courses, rather than on the reading, writing, and math skills students need for careers.
- Much of the work-related education and training offered by community colleges does not result in college credit; students cannot build on the courses they have completed toward a college degree.
- Advising and academic and social supports often fail to reach adult education and workforce development students.
- With the exception of occupational programs, community college programs at every level are too rarely linked to labor market skills or to direct economic payoffs.
- Education is often organized around long-term programs, rather than meaningful short-term credentials or economic payoffs. Adult education students who do not get a GED and community college students who do not get a degree often get no credentials even after spending years in education programs.

Adult education, workforce development, and developmental education practitioners often see themselves as part of separate and unrelated fields, rather than viewing their role as preparing students for the next level of education and career advancement or as serving as stepping stones to technical credentials. In many cases, the academic mission of community colleges does not recognize the importance or legitimacy

of integrating workplace competencies into the curriculum, and the staff of adult education programs do not believe that helping students improve occupational skills should be part of their mission. In turn, many workforce programs do not see the importance of improving basic reading, writing, mathematics, or English language skills. It is as if elementary school, middle school, and high school were operated by different agencies, used different funding streams, the exit competencies of each level were unrelated to the entry competencies of the next level, and each saw its mission only in terms of completing its level.

The Barrier of Time

It takes strong motivation and great persistence to make the sacrifices necessary to stay on track. Most working adult students attend educational programs part-time and in spurts. Low-income, low-skilled adults may have to juggle classes with work and family obligations; many study late at night after their children are asleep. It takes years to make the transition from low basic skills to high school completion and college entry, and more time to advance from developmental education into credit-level degree programs. The time it takes even to see progress, let alone complete programs, has a negative effect on motivation and persistence:

- Half of the adults who enroll in adult education classes drop out before 35 hours or 10 weeks, and only 10 percent of ABE and 25 percent of ESOL students attend classes continuously for a year (Comings, Parella, and Soricone 1999).
- Nearly 70 percent of occupational students finish less than a year's worth of community college over five years (Silverberg et al. 2004).

Weak Connections to Employment and Economic Payoffs

Low-income, low-skilled adults regard education as a path to economic opportunity. While they may spend years pursuing a high school diploma or a college degree, they need short-term economic payoffs that help them get better jobs and higher pay.

Many community college students come from schools with weak advising programs, which provide little understanding of the education and skills needed to achieve occupational goals. Lack of compelling goals weakens persistence in adult education (Comings, Parella, and Soricone 1999). At several community colleges, JFF found that more than 40 percent of the students lack a career path or major and see no connection

between degree programs and career opportunities.

Strong connections to employment and career ladder advancement linked to skill development show promise in increasing the persistence and success of low-income, low-skilled adults in achieving occupational and technical credentials. However, because of the community college's multiple missions and the priorities established by different institutions, many education programs are not designed to meet labor market needs, do not ensure that students learn skills valued by employers offering high wages, and do not directly connect education milestones to meaningful credentials, articulated career ladders, and economic payoffs.

The development of career pathways, in turn, is a significant challenge. It requires community colleges to, for example: build strong partnerships with employers driven by labor market skill needs, develop new competency-based curriculum, piecing funding together from multiple unconnected funding streams, and gain the support of leaders and practitioners from multiple programs.

Dropping Out and Stopping Out

Many working adults are one step away from a crisis that can force them to drop out or stop out of education programs. This is especially true of single parents and families where both parents work. Many of these students are in jobs with high turnover; they have unstable child care arrangements and inadequate health care; they live in increasingly expensive rental housing; and they rely on old cars or inadequate public transit.

As a result, almost half of the students who leave adult education do so because of non-instructional factors, such as the loss of child care, a job change, personal or family illness, a change in housing, or transportation challenges (Comings, Parella, and Soricone 1999). JFF's phone survey of Portland Community College students who completed developmental courses but did not advance to the next level found that financial aid and health problems were the key reasons for leaving.

Programs that incorporate academic and personal support services as an essential component of student success can improve retention and persistence for non-traditional adult students. However, almost all colleges that choose to provide supportive services to non-traditional students must support them with "soft" funds rather than as part of the core college budget. When soft funding runs out, colleges face difficult choices about institutionalizing effective programs.



Part II.

Synergistic, High-Leverage Strategies to Increase Access and Success

Despite the many challenges, some community colleges have reorganized programs and services to become more responsive to, and successful with, low-skill, low-income adults. At a number of community colleges across the country, JFF's research found exciting approaches that show promise for helping larger numbers of low-skilled adults with a high school education. Community colleges are setting new benchmarks for what is achievable and raising the bar for program performance and outcomes.

- The Community College of Denver Social Services GED lab enables welfare recipients with seventh-grade skills who attend an average of 15 hours a week to earn a GED in four months rather than several years. Its CNA-to-LPN workforce development program enables working adults at the lowest developmental math level to gain the skills needed to enter the LPN degree program in 24 weeks; it takes 45 weeks in traditional developmental education.
- The integrated adult and developmental education program at Kentucky's Mayo Campus of the Big Sandy Community and Technical College District enables 85 percent of adult education students to enroll in credit-level programs; the vast majority of GED recipients nationally have to take one or more developmental courses. Moreover, 90 percent of adult/developmental education students who enroll in credit courses graduate, compared to 15 percent nationally (Chisman 2004).

Programs like these, and the strategies and practices on which they are based, show promise for significantly increasing the number of adults who advance from low skills and low incomes to postsecondary credentials and family-supporting jobs. They are achieving results by developing new approaches to basic skills education that blur the traditional boundaries between adult education, workforce development, developmental education, and occupational and technical postsecondary education.

Successful programs are based on four synergistic strategies that are designed to reduce the barriers that low-skilled adults face and that open up pathways from multiple entry points to the common goal of postsecondary credentials:

1. **Integrating institutional structures and services** to establish links among programs and create pathways that low-income, low-skilled students can navigate to gain postsecondary skills and credentials;
2. **Accelerating learning** to help students learn more, learn faster, and complete programs more quickly;
3. **Providing labor market payoffs** to help students gain intermediate credentials valued by employers, get a first or better job, and advance up career ladders as they gain skills and credentials; and
4. **Providing comprehensive supports** to help students develop education and career plans that provide compelling motivation to continue their education and to provide academic and social supports that help students persist through difficult transition points.

While many of these strategies and practices have been identified in previous research, all too often the research has been focused on one discipline only (such as ABE or workforce education), masking the extent to which these practices are needed in all the separate disciplines. Moreover, much less is known about *how* to evolve and implement these practices, the obstacles they face, and the strategies they use to overcome those barriers. JFF's field research has begun to identify some important lessons about how creative leaders and practitioners are developing these approaches and the obstacles they have to overcome.

We believe that the field would benefit tremendously from further research and development to gain a deeper understanding of how promising approaches are developed, sustained, and spread to other parts of the college. This could play an important role in promoting the development and implementation of these approaches and in accelerating the learning curve both within and across colleges.

JFF also found promising strategies in a wide range of developmental stages and scale. We found promising start-up programs operating in a single department with a creative leader, serving a small number of students, and focusing on a narrow range of populations in a small number of career paths. We also found institutions that are further along in the developmental

process. They have, over a period of years, improved program quality, adopted promising strategies in a larger number of programs in different parts of the institution, and taken important steps toward institutionalizing innovative practices.

It is unusual to find a college that is implementing all four strategies. However, the research suggests that the impact of these strategies will be enhanced when they are *integrated into a synergistic approach* to creating multiple paths that adults can navigate across multiple programs toward occupational/technical degree programs.

Accelerated learning can strengthen persistence and improves the odds of success in adult education and developmental education. The time it takes to develop skills and complete programs is a major barrier to persistence and success for working adults who attend part-time and in spurts. Regardless of whatever other strategies are used, it appears that the faster adults can learn and the more quickly they can complete programs and see progress, the more likely they are to stay on course.

Labor market payoffs and clear connections to gaining labor market skills also appear to strengthen persistence and increase the likelihood of success, regardless of other strategies. Students can see tangible, meaningful results from their efforts and have concrete goals for further education. The ability to gain credentials valued by employers and get higher pay at key milestones can transform work into an asset rather than a barrier.

Of the four strategies, *comprehensive services* are almost always implemented along with other strategies. The day-to-day challenges of life for low-income working adults make it difficult for them to participate in education programs and are a major reason why many students stop out or drop out. Comprehensive advising and support services can strengthen persistence by helping students deal with forces in their lives that pull them away from continuing their education.

These innovative practices remain the exception rather than the rule. In many cases, they emerge in small programs with soft funding and operate outside the traditional adult education, workforce development, or developmental education systems. This provides a level of autonomy from policies, regulations, and traditional practices that is conducive to developing innovative strategies, but it also raises important questions about whether and how innovative strategies can spread to other parts of the college and affect mainstream institutional practice.

Strategy One: Integrate Institutional Structures and Services

To serve students with low basic or pre-college skills, some community colleges are redesigning internal structures in order to integrate adult education, workforce development, developmental education, and non-credit programs and create multiple paths leading into and through occupational and technical degree programs. Some colleges are moving toward integration on an institutional level, while others pursue integration at the program level among some, but not all, departments. In either case, according to Nan Poppe, president of the Portland Community College Extended Learning Campus, the goal is for all programs to provide access to career pathways, with no student engaged in education that does not lead to a degree.

Integration represents a mindset that is driven by the needs of students rather than program or departmental boundaries. It requires a shift, for example, from gauging the effectiveness of developmental education not only by skill development and completion rates but also by the number of students who make rapid and successful transitions into credit-level degree programs. Thus, the process of developing an integrated adult/developmental education system at Jefferson Community College was based on challenging discussions between practitioners in both fields. It led, as an interviewee told JFF, to a shared belief that “it took awhile, but we realized that their students were our students.”

Field research found community colleges that are integrating their programs and services to create pathways to occupational and technical degree programs. They do this by:

- Connecting ABE and ESOL to workforce programming and mainstream college programs and aligning course content and credentials;
- Integrating developmental and degree programs to align content, using the content of credit-level courses as a context for improving skills, increasing the number of students who make it through gatekeeper courses, and improving motivation and persistence;
- Combining a broad range of public and private funding sources to expand access from multiple entry points to degree programs;
- Creating clear, easy-to-navigate transitions from non-credit to credit programs; and

- Providing road maps that students can use to chart a course to occupational degree programs from multiple entry, exit, and reentry points.

While JFF found promising examples of integrated structures and systems that make a real difference for low-skilled adults, we also found barriers that make it difficult to build smooth transitions between traditionally separate programs that have different missions and goals. For example, leaders and practitioners in adult education, workforce development, non-credit programs, and developmental education often identify with their fields or disciplines, rather than see their niches as a continuum of stepping stones that help students advance from multiple entry points to credit-level degree programs. They may see conflicting missions between adult education and workforce development, adult education and developmental education, credit and non-credit programs, and academic and occupational programs. They may be divided by issues of program autonomy and competition for resources. While a strong leadership commitment makes it easier to institute structural changes, it is far more difficult to forge meaningful integration among program leaders and practitioners.

In many cases, federal and state policies and regulations can pose serious obstacles to integration. For example, some regional directors of the WIA Title II (adult education) program do not allow adult education funds to be used for career pathway programs. And some state adult education and workforce development directors are more interested in protecting their turf than in aligning their programs. Conversely, the research found several examples of state policies that encourage integration within community colleges and between community colleges and programs beyond their walls.

Within this context of barriers and incentives, services integration is taking place at different levels in a number of community colleges across the United States. The following examples are selected from the sites visited for this research.

Portland Community College and Mt. Hood Community College: Career Pathways for Low-Skill Adults

Portland Community College (PCC) in partnership with Mt. Hood Community College is integrating a broad range of programs and funding streams to create modularized career pathways from adult education and workforce development programs to credit-level occu-

pational/technical degree programs. These pathways meet the needs of working adult students who can only attend in spurts and often have to “stop out.” They provide multiple entry, exit, and reentry points into and through a broad range of programs that are directly linked to jobs and specific employment outcomes.

The program targets jobs critical to the local economy and create educational stepping stones to better jobs and postsecondary certificates and degrees. This requires ongoing analysis of the local labor market, as well as strong partnerships with employers, in order to identify skill needs and develop modules linked to meaningful credentials and economic outcomes. The career pathways trainings provide a 30-hour career curriculum, peer learning, community support, and job search and placement assistance that offer a supportive foundation for student success.

Modularized career pathways break degree programs into manageable “chunks” of courses that are driven by employer skill needs. The modules are directly linked to credentials valued by employers and to specific career ladder payoffs. This enables working adult students to achieve short-term economic goals while working toward a degree, avoiding the need to develop and seek approval for new curricula.

Nine professional technical career pathways provide short-term occupational training that prepare low-literacy adults for jobs and mainstream postsecondary education. In addition, four “bridge” pathway trainings serve non-native English speakers.⁷ The 13 career pathway trainings serve 225 to 250 people annually, and approximately 200 students enter internships each year. Two new professional technical and one new “bridge” pathway are under development.

The career pathways recruit students from One Stop Career Centers, TANF programs, GED classes, and ESOL classes. This multiple pipeline design is supported by Oregon’s governance structure, which houses workforce development, adult basic skills (ABE/GED/ESOL), and community colleges in one state agency.

Cohorts of participants enter through a one-term or two-term career pathways training, with internships provided for most trainings. Staffing and infrastructure are funded through WIA by the local Workforce Investment Board. The career pathways training teams serve as brokers with academic departments and coordinators to the 13 training cohorts, work with other departments to develop new trainings, and provide career planning, curriculum, internship coordination, and job development and placement services. Students

enrolled in the professional technical career pathways trainings can use financial aid to complete other modules because the modules are part of existing college certificate and degree programs (Kazis and Liebowitz 2003). GED completers can enter through the promise of 19 free college credits, which they can use to complete the first module of a pathway (but only in a single semester).

The development of integrated pathways is supported by a core of creative leaders, many of whom have been at PCC for many years and have worked in a broad range of adult education, workforce, non-credit, and developmental programs. They share a strong commitment to integrating these programs with one another and with the college's credit-level side. Several who began as program leaders now serve in key positions at PCC and are mentoring a new generation of programmatic leadership.

The college faces several barriers to extending modularized career pathways to other occupations and sectors. The development of pathways began with faculty who were most interested in moving to a competency-based modularized approach, and new pathways are still being developed by faculty who want to do it. Getting faculty who are not supportive to adopt a modularized pathways approach could present new obstacles. Similarly, pathways have been developed only where there are strong relationships with employers.

The career pathways approach reflects an understanding that a college has to go beyond a single encounter with students to multiple encounters, because so many working adults stop out and return multiple times. Many students who achieve certificates linked to better jobs achieve their goals and do not return to continue toward a degree. Like other colleges designing curricula and certification to meet the needs of working adults, PCC and MHCC face the challenge of how to get students to come back after achieving short-term goals. To do this, PCC is developing a Web-based system of access to the college through which students will be able to post their personal academic plans and goals, see their progress, and decide what to do next. The college plans to use the system to stay more connected to students who have stopped out and to send customized emails to targeted groups of students, such as developmental students who completed a course but did not continue on.

Jefferson Community College: Integrating Developmental Education with an Independent ABE System

A partnership in Kentucky between Jefferson Community College and the adult education system based in the public school district has made major strides toward an integrated adult/developmental education system, with the common mission of strengthening adult transitions from basic skills and literacy programs into college. This demonstrates how much can be achieved when state and local leaders agree on a goal and collaborate to make it happen.

At the heart of the partnership is an agreement that anyone who enrolls in Jefferson Community College with a COMPASS⁸ score below a cutoff point is assigned to the adult education program; students with scores that are higher, but still below the college minimum, enroll in developmental education. Such students are “dually enrolled”—and therefore help both systems meet their annual enrollment targets. They are taught by teachers from the adult education system, but the program is taught at the college campus, and students have college IDs, email addresses, and other college perks.

The curriculum is designed to promote college success. For example, the curriculum includes researching/report writing because the academic dean felt strongly this is a key skill for college; it was missing in traditional ABE. And it is free, because it is adult education rather than college developmental education.

A real effort is made to create a supportive environment: counselors support students from the point where they learn their COMPASS scores, through program enrollment and beyond. It took time for the support program to gel—for one thing, ABE and the college used different computer systems—but progress has been steady. A total of 2,830 students had been “dually enrolled” through August 2004; 77 percent have gone on to take credit classes. Overall, the college increased its enrollment of GED grads by 9 percent between 2003 and 2004.

Ironically, several years ago, Jefferson County might have stood as an example of why the “transitions” task is so difficult. The public school system and the community college were jousting over the right to run the adult education program. Leadership changes at the college, along with some incentives and technical assistance from the state, changed that. Today, leaders of both systems have signed a memorandum of understanding setting out their respective responsibilities,

and they meet regularly to review goals and strategies. As one teacher said, “It took awhile, but we realized that their students were our students.”

Supportive state policies have provided a crucial impetus to the integration of adult education and developmental education. While adult education and community colleges are governed by separate agencies, Kentucky provides strong incentives for an integrated approach to creating smooth transitions from one system to the other. State incentives and performance measures drive both systems to operate in ways that go beyond their traditional boundaries to promote economic development, provide customized workforce education, and improve transitions to postsecondary education (Chisman 2004).

Kentucky’s policies spring from a series of legislative reforms aimed at improving economic strength through education, driven by the state’s low ranking in education outcomes, economic strength, and living standards for adults with low skills. Data from one recent report show why commitment is so high in Kentucky: in 2003, for example, 83 percent of GED exam takers reported incomes under \$10,000 (Newberry and Scoskie 2004).

Kentucky’s 1998 Postsecondary Reform Act is designed to help low-income adults with low skills, such as those taking the GED tests, and to reduce the large skills shortage that hinders economic development. The act sets several performance targets, with incentives for community colleges and adult education programs to collaboratively develop innovative approaches to meet those targets. Performance benchmarks include increasing the number of Kentuckians who are ready for college, increasing transitions from adult basic education to postsecondary education, raising enrollments in college, and increasing advancement through the system. Statewide, adult education enrollments have quadrupled in the past four years; the college-going rate of GED recipients has almost doubled (King and King-Simms 2004).

Tacoma Community College: Merging ABE/ESOL with Technical Training

Tacoma Community College in Washington recently integrated its ABE, ESOL, and workforce programs to create pathways from low literacy into degree programs in several occupational areas. The changes started over a year ago, when the opening of a deanship coincided with state efforts to connect adult literacy programs to job training. The State Board of Community and

Technical Colleges had convened the state Council of Workforce Educators and the Council of Adult Basic Educators together and brought in speakers from around the country to explain what they had done to connect education and technical training.

Subsequently, the board sponsored regional meetings of the same people and made small grants to support innovation.

When the deanship opened up at Tacoma, college leaders saw an opportunity to be more deliberate in following the state’s guidance by reconfiguring the position to combine basic skills ABE and ESOL with workforce training. A state grant helped support the creation of the new Department of Workforce Education. The new Dean of Workforce Education and the director of adult education have developed a model for pathways that integrates contextualized ABE or ESOL with technical training in career paths. These are designed as the first stage in advancement from basic skills to newly created certificates linked to higher wages and articulated to degree programs.

Tacoma has implemented the models in early childhood education. Low-paid assistants with limited English speaking ability have been recruited from local child care centers—with the full support of their employers. They enter a program that integrates the curricula of ESOL and introductory early childhood education in an intensive, team-taught course. At the completion of the program, graduates receive nine hours of credit toward a two-year degree and a certificate that entitles them to higher wages at local child care centers. The instructors, who originally were reluctant, now are its champions.

The program provides counseling about degree programs, helps students with the application and financial aid processes, and provides job placement and educational planning support. Classes are held in the evening so students can work during the day. Students spend three hours each week on occupational content, nine hours on ESOL support, and ten hours in a practicum or work experience.

A major start-up cost was the development of an integrated ESOL and occupational curriculum based on the competencies required for a Childhood Development Associate certificate and articulated to credit-level degree programs. Another challenge was the cost of team teaching: double that of having one teacher per course.

Currently, Tacoma is implementing the model in health care. The idea is to link entry-level nurse assis-

tants, including those with very limited English, to higher-skilled and paying jobs.

San Jacinto College North: Restructuring the College to Support Low-Skill Adults

In 1996, a new leadership team at San Jacinto North College saw the lack of coordination among its technical, academic, continuing education, and student services divisions as a key problem. Since then, SJC� has focused on integrating all parts of the college to support student success. Every program plan now must include a Student Success Initiative, with such elements as learning communities, supplemental instruction, or tutoring.

A large proportion of GED recipients and ESOL students enter SJC� through continuing education. In the past, few made the transition from this level into credit programs. To change this, the college developed linked courses in which continuing education and credit-level students take the same course with the same curriculum. If continuing education students decide to enter credit-level programs, they can petition to get credit for their work in the linked courses. This innovation required agreement from credit-level faculty, which was made possible by the president's strong commitment. SJC� had 38 linked classes by 2001, and almost all technical courses are taught as linked classes.

The college also has built a strong partnership with adult education provided by the Harris County Department of Education. The key is a division of labor: the college focuses on advanced classes, and the school district operates beginning classes. The college and the county share resources and students. The college makes a special effort to recruit GED graduates, and county programs refer former students to SJC�. State adult education benchmarks—for the number of students who get GEDs and the number of GED graduates who enter postsecondary education—encourage the collaboration. The president of San Jacinto College North speaks at every county GED graduation ceremony, encouraging graduates to see their new diploma as the first step toward postsecondary education. The college has tables outside the ceremony to help students fill out application and financial aid forms. SJC� sends a recruitment letter to every GED recipient.

About 40 percent of SJC� students enter without a career path or major. Career counselors help them develop a clear idea about why they are there. Enrolling students who have not decided on a major go to the counseling center for testing and career evaluation. The

fall-to-spring retention rate for undeclared majors who participated in career counseling has increased from 48 percent to 83 percent, addressing a major cause of first-year attrition.⁹ The impact of career counseling is enhanced by locating educational advising within the academic and technical programs to better help students navigate a course to certificates and degrees that would enable them to achieve their career goals.

Many SJC� programs are modular—in part because the state prefers that approach. Students earn certificates for completing modules, which they can accumulate for a degree. Students can enter and exit education as their circumstances permit.

After the college identified improvement of developmental education as a cornerstone of institutional improvement, it reorganized that program using a Higher Education Act Title V grant. Faculty received professional development on effective adult education instructional practices; SJC� also created computer-assisted learning labs and established a math and reading learning community. As a result, the number of students entering college-level courses from the developmental program has more than doubled since 1996. SJC�'s developmental program was the first in the nation to be certified in reading, writing, and math by the National Association of Developmental Education.

Strategy Two: Accelerated Learning

A major barrier to persistence and success is the time it takes working adults—who attend part-time, attend in spurts, and face serious barriers to persistence—to progress from basic skills to pre-college skills, from pre-college skills to college readiness, and from college readiness to degrees. The longer it takes to learn skills and complete programs, the less likely it is that an adult will advance from one stage to the next.

JFF found innovative adult education programs and community college basic skills programs that are implementing instructional practices and program designs that accelerate the advancement of adults to meaningful learning gains and credentials. New approaches to teaching basic skills go outside the traditional practices of adult education, workforce development, and developmental education.

While accelerating learning and program completion in different ways, these programs use three key strategies to improve performance and student outcomes:

- Diagnostic assessments are a foundation for individualized, competency-based instruction that focuses on

what each student needs to master and spends as little time as possible on what students already know.

- Short-term intensive learning programs enable adults to make rapid progress and complete programs more quickly. This strengthens persistence by enabling students to see progress, and it meets the needs of working adults who attend in spurts.
- Course content is contextualized, usually with an occupational focus to help students learn more and faster. This helps students see the meaning of what they are learning and how that moves them closer to their goals. It also is effective for many adults for whom traditional high school instructional practices were not effective.

There are several barriers to accelerating learning. Some states, for example, set requirements for seat time in formal classes that must use the same curriculum for all students, precluding individualized diagnosis and instruction. States that establish sharp boundaries between adult education and workforce development create barriers to contextualized learning strategies, as do state and federal funding policies that prohibit the use of adult education funds for integrated career pathways. At a program level, funds are scarce for developing contextualized curricula and computer-assisted assessment in basic skills.

For all these reasons, many accelerated learning programs operate outside the traditional adult education, workforce development, and developmental education systems. Often they are found in innovative, basic skills programs that use soft funding to adopt an integrated approach to learning basic academic and occupational skills.

Owensboro Community and Technical College: Adult Learning Center Helps Low-Skill Adults Qualify for Local Jobs

At Owensboro Community and Technical College in Kentucky, supportive state policies with funds attached and a strongly committed college president have combined to create an adult learning system that enables hundreds of local adults to learn literacy and job skills at an accelerated pace. As noted above, Kentucky's uniquely coherent approach directs the adult basic education system and the community and technical college system to collaborate to advance skills and prepare a workforce that attracts and retains businesses. At Owensboro, the college president takes that mandate to heart and is committed to ensuring that even the low-

est-literacy members of the community benefit.

The first step was to merge the workforce and economic development unit with adult basic education. The new department's leadership has, in turn, established an attractive and welcoming adult learning center that is individualized, self-paced, and diagnostic (students only study the material they need to learn). The assessment system, which is computer-based, is the same one that virtually all the town's major businesses use to assess candidates for new hires and promotions. Any resident whose literacy skills fall short of those needed in a desired job has free access to the adult learning center, which can quickly design a self-paced program centered on the skills needed for the desired job and, later on, certify to the employer that the job seeker has attained those skills.

Because literacy is linked directly to getting a job, motivation to commence and complete literacy programs is high. Because the adult education program is individualized, motivated individuals never have to wait: there are no waiting lists. Because the state has paid for the computerized system, including its costly testing program, residents pay nothing.¹⁰ Local businesses are happy because they get meaningful help from the college in improving the skills of their workforce.

Adult Education in Kansas City, Missouri: "Mini-Courses" Enable ABE Students to Advance Quickly

The director of the adult literacy program of Kansas City, Missouri, has held this post for over ten years, creating a precious opportunity for continuity in programming. From the outset, she has taken a "continuous improvement" approach, so that staff are on the lookout for problems with an eye toward solutions. This orientation, which never accepts the status quo as good enough, resulted in Kansas City's accelerated learning strategy.

Over a year ago, the Goals Committee—charged with improving the adult literacy program's overall achievement levels—identified poor retention as a problem. The committee reviewed applicants' TABE scores and found two things. First, there was a serious drop-off problem among applicants with low scores; they never showed up for class or, if they did, persistence rates were low. Second, a finer analysis of the data showed certain common problems, such as very poor performance in fractions. The committee concluded that applicants would be more likely to enroll and persist if they were told, "Our testing has identified some subjects you need to focus on to succeed and get your

GED.” Further, because there were no extra funds, the committee asked the program’s best teachers if they would volunteer to prepare special “mini-courses” in the topics identified by the TABE analysis as presenting special barriers to applicants: fractions, decimals and percents, proportions, essay writing, and algebra.

Each eight-hour mini-course is held for two hours a day, twice a week, for two weeks, and the classes are offered at convenient times. The teacher/developers feel that the mini-courses enable them to pinpoint learning gaps preventing students from progressing. The fractions teacher, for example, said his students rated that topic up with scorpions among their greatest fears; he designed the first part of his curriculum to overcome that fear.

While the program lacks the financial resources for a formal evaluation, it does give pre- and post-program tests to participants. (“We test these students to death,” one staff person said). Initial results have been favorable. For one group taking the fractions mini-course, all seven students progressed (from 9 to 10.5 in grade equivalency, at one end of the range, from 2.3 to 3.7 at the other end.) In another group, five of seven students improved—two of them close to doubling their scores. Overall, some students advanced to GED qualifying levels as a result of taking one or more mini-courses.

The Goals Committee reviews new data as part of its commitment to continuous improvement, but in the absence of a more formal evaluation, the Kansas City ABE program cannot explain why some students do not benefit, while most do and some dramatically. Based on feedback from students and teachers, the program has authorized several other mini-courses, including grammar and geometry.

Community College of Denver: Speeding Up the Acquisition of Basic Skills

An intensive social services GED lab for welfare recipients at the Community College of Denver makes it possible for students with seventh-grade skills to earn a credential in four months rather than several years. The program provides individualized learning based on an assessment of what each student needs to learn in order to pass each GED test, with a concurrent focus on test-taking and critical-thinking skills. Half of the day is spent in classes, with intensive mini-classes in key skills and small group discussion, and half is devoted to independent study. The results reflect instructional practices that enable students to learn faster, as well as an intensive program design in which students attend an average of 15 hours a week.

Strategy Three: Labor Market Payoffs

Strategies that link skills and credentials to specific economic outcomes are critical to the persistence and success of low-income working adults who often “stop out” and may, or may not, return when their lives make it possible. Because it takes so long to advance from low skills to occupational/technical credentials, it is important for adults to get better jobs and higher pay as they reach key interim milestones.

JFF’s field research found promising strategies that directly link education to meaningful economic payoffs. These strategies are deeply rooted in local labor markets, and they target high-demand high-skill occupations that pay high wages and provide opportunities for advancement. Organized around strong partnerships with employers, they are driven by employer skill needs and local economic development priorities. These strategies are most effective in occupations, industries, or sectors where clear career ladders link incremental skill levels and credentials to specific types of jobs.

Effective partnerships serve dual customers: employers who need a skilled workforce and employees who need education and training directly linked to well-defined career ladders. The goal is education that prepares adults for jobs in the local economy and provides credentials valued by employers and industry sectors. These promising strategies:

- Focus on high-demand occupations with high wages and opportunities for advancement;
- Actively engage employers so that adults develop skills for available jobs, employer needs are met, education is linked to career ladder advancement, and students earn credentials valued in the labor market; and
- Tie reading, writing, math and English skill development to the ways those skills are used in broad occupations or career paths.

The research identified innovative basic skills programs that provide ladders to existing occupational degree programs. Some take sectoral programs to a higher level by extending education and career ladders to career jobs requiring postsecondary skills and credentials. Some create education and career ladder pathways that extend all the way from entry-level jobs requiring low basic skills to professional and technical positions requiring occupational or technical college credentials.

In some cases, partnerships are initiated by community colleges, in other cases by intermediaries, economic or workforce development agencies, employers, or

employer organizations. Regardless of how they start, they must be driven by employer and labor market skill needs, employers must be deeply invested based on their own interests, community colleges have to provide education and training tailored to employer needs, and there is need for structures to build and maintain effective collaboration among employers, colleges, and adults, who may be both students and employees.

A number of conditions provide incentives and support for the development of programs that are strongly linked to the local labor market and offer economic payoffs, including:

- Strong employer need for skilled workers up to the level requiring occupational/technical skills and credentials;
- Skills shortages in occupations or sectors with well-defined career ladders that link credentials and skills to higher pay and job promotions;
- Large employers and/or effective business organizations or intermediaries, especially in sectors dominated by small to mid-sized businesses;
- Relationships between community colleges and employers or business organizations, most often developed in customized training and continuing education;
- State or local policies and political support that provide flexibility in using adult education and workforce development funds, create interagency collaboration and integrated funding streams, and provide the flexibility to develop integrated basic skills programs that teach academic and occupational skills in a contextualized way; and
- A level of internal integration within community colleges or through partnerships among adult education, workforce development, developmental education, and credit-level occupational/technical credit programs in order to provide a coordinated continuum of education and training from basic skills to credit-level degree programs.

Genesis Health Care Systems, WorkSource, Inc., and Community College Consortia: Regional Partnerships

Genesis Health Care Systems, the largest extended care provider in Massachusetts, and WorkSource, Inc., a labor market intermediary, are partnering with a consortium of community colleges to operate a career advancement program designed to help entry-level workers in CNA, housekeeping, and dietary positions

move on tracks toward LPN and RN jobs in two parts of the state. This program is made possible by the state's Extended Care Career Ladder Initiative, designed to meet an acute nursing shortage in the long-term care industry and provide interagency funding for career ladder pathways.

The partnership provides intensive career counseling and case management to incumbent employees and facilitates access to education and training. The "Campus on a Campus," on site at Genesis's Agawam facility, provides a range of education and training, including an LPN degree program. Employees meet with career counselors to set career advancement goals and begin to map an education plan to reach those goals. Regional partnerships with community colleges in Western Massachusetts and in the city of Lowell meet employer and worker needs with a variety of education and training offerings:

- GED, ESOL, and basic literacy programs for employees who are held back by limited ability to communicate or lack of high school credentials;
- Pre-college courses, including developmental education, for workers who are ready to advance in health care careers but need preparation to qualify for college-level courses;
- College-level pre-nursing courses that are prerequisites for entry into LPN or RN programs;
- Skills training that helps workers take the next career step, such as CNA training for service employees or geriatric nursing assistant specialist training for CNAs; and
- An onsite evening and weekend LPN program that enables Genesis CNAs to combine work and study.

Community College of Denver: A Pathway to Nursing

The Community College of Denver has created a dual-customer, CNA-to-LPN career ladder program funded by the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development. The program enables incumbent CNAs to advance from the lowest development skill level into an LPN degree program in half the time required in traditional developmental education programs. Students at the lowest developmental math level can gain the skills needed to enter the LPN degree program in only 24 weeks. Students with higher developmental skills can enter the LPN program in only 8 to 16 weeks.

The program improves upon traditional developmental education by providing:

- A meaningful and tangible goal, getting into the LPN program;
- A direct bridge to an LPN program;
- Intensive, accelerated learning that cuts the time needed to attain college-level skills almost in half;
- Contextualized learning that uses health care as a context for learning reading, writing, and math skills;
- A cohort model to provide strong peer support; and Pervasive case management.

CNA workers are highly motivated to participate because they see the basic skills bridge program as the first step in a college nursing program leading to a significant economic payoff. The direct link to economic development and employer skill needs has made it possible to use workforce development funds to pay for the bridge program and employer tuition reimbursement to pay for the LPN degree program.

This program has strong political and employer support, as well as flexible workforce development funding targeted to advancement into a community college degree program. Strong employer commitment, driven by a serious LPN shortage, includes tuition reimbursement for participation in the LPN degree program and release time for classes. Local political support is matched by the college president's strong commitment to success. In addition, there are well-defined, highly visible performance measures for the number of students who: complete the bridge program, enter the LPN program, and attain, in the longer term, LPN credentials. The innovative approach to integrated and contextualized basic skills instruction is driven by the limitation of workforce development funding to 24 weeks; the college is committed to developing new strategies that would accelerate learning to meet this time frame.

The Community College of Denver also operates the Essential Skills Program, which began as a welfare-to-work program. This employment-driven basics skills program contextualizes ABE, ESOL, and GED preparation: broad career paths—such as business services, early childhood education, and information technology—are the context for learning basic academic and occupational skills. The program is directly linked to the labor market through strong employer partnerships that provide internships and recognize Essential Skills Certificates for entry-level employment. About 70 percent of the students complete the program, 86 percent of graduates become employed, and there is 84 percent employment retention after one year.

While the program focuses students on developing basic skills and getting a first job, intensive career counseling highlights the importance of postsecondary education and credentials for jobs that can support a family. About 25 percent continue into postsecondary education, with the highest percentage in the early childhood track, which has the clearest career ladder with wage increases linked to education increments.

NVCC Medical Education Campus: Access to a Wide Array of Health Careers for Low-Income Adults

The Medical Education Campus (MEC), one of the six campuses in the Northern Virginia Community College system, has established a pathway for lower-literacy adults into allied health certificate and degree programs. Development of the MEC, a 122,000 square foot, state-of-the-art facility that opened in 2003, grew out of the system's longstanding commitment to economic development through workforce development, combined with severe labor shortages in certain health care occupations. The system's vision—a full campus dedicated to medical education—came to fruition quickly in part because of the efforts of the Northern Virginia Health Care Workforce Alliance. The mission of this consortium of leaders in the private sector, business, government, community, education, and health care is to establish a long-term, business-driven strategy to address northern Virginia's shortage of health care workers. It also helped that a former president of the community college system became the Commonwealth's Secretary of Education. The resulting full-service campus offers general education courses as well as a wide array of nursing and allied health clinical courses.

NVCC's strength in economic development is equaled by its commitment to serving its diverse constituencies. In health care, this translates into a dual mission for the MEC: to provide medical services to the region's residents and to train health care professionals and paraprofessionals. MEC's Clinical Network, consisting of four community-based clinics in Northern Virginia and the Primary Care Clinic at the MEC Medical Mall, provides both care and clinical practice. It has the capacity to serve 10,000 ambulatory care patients per year at a minimal cost to the patients, many of whom are indigent. Students learn through working at the clinical sites; their training is evaluated both on clinical skills and their ability to interact with patients in a culturally and linguistically sensitive manner. The MEC's Medical Mall provides primary care,

dental, and vision care clinics, and, in the near future, a pharmacy, physical therapy, cardiopulmonary rehabilitation, and laboratory and diagnostic services.

Low-income residents have access to the MEC's extraordinary training resources and employer connections through the Health Careers Opportunity Program. The HCOP provides academic preparation and social supports specifically aimed to prepare adults with moderate literacy skills to enter health careers. The eight-week summer program combines an academic review, early intervention in cognitive social development, and service learning opportunities. Students who complete the program are guaranteed seats in one of the Allied Health training programs.

A series of certificates (e.g., dental assisting, medical coding) articulates to degree programs (dental hygiene, health information technology, radiography). The center has a systematic process for applying non-credit work to credit for degree programs. This helps students with non-credit certificates advance into degree programs.

Strategy Four: Comprehensive Supports

While there is little rigorous data about student outcomes, research suggests that career counseling, advising, academic and social supports, and case management improve the persistence and success of low-income, low-skilled adults in community colleges. According to Elaine Baker, Community College of Denver's Director of Workforce Initiatives, "Support services and case management are not frills; they are central to student success." Comprehensive academic and social supports are an essential component in virtually all promising programs.

Many community college students do not understand how what they learn leads to better jobs, and they frequently cannot articulate reasons to succeed in college. Without goals, low-skilled working adults have little motivation to make the sacrifices necessary to stay on course for the time it takes to complete high school and get a postsecondary degree. Academic and career counseling strengthen motivation and persistence by helping students develop compelling goals leading to a better life.

Many low-income working adults, especially when they have families, drop out or stop out of adult education, workforce development, developmental education, or credit-level degree programs without achieving their goals. Comprehensive student support services can help students deal with child care, health care, housing, work, and transportation emergencies.

Academic support services can make it possible for adults who are not adequately prepared for college to overcome the skills gap and succeed.

Colleges rely largely on soft funding and partnerships with community-based organizations to provide these supports. Many of the programs—often funded by federal TRIO programs, Title III, Title V, Perkins Act, or foundation resources—show dramatic improvements in retention, persistence, and academic performance.

Funding remains a huge challenge, limiting capacity to provide academic and social support services. Community colleges face barriers in finding resources to develop and implement programs and to continue operating a program after soft funding ends. In some colleges, though, the development or grants office is linked directly to strategic institutional priorities, and the identification of resources for support services is a central focus.

Many different kinds of support programs have significant impacts on retention, persistence, and academic success. Given the limited resources available for support services, selecting the most cost effective strategies is extremely important. A key question, which needs to be answered by further research and demonstration, is whether it is more effective to provide an array of services to a smaller number of students or the reverse—for example, to provide career counseling for some students and academic supports for others.

Another key question is whether it is more effective for community colleges to deliver support services themselves or to partner with others to do it. Some colleges have partnered with community-based organizations and public agencies as a way to expand access to the support services that low-income adults need. These partnerships demonstrate the power and impact of leveraging services available in the community.

Capital IDEA and Austin Community College: Partnering with a Community-Based Organization to Support Students

The partnership between Austin Community College and the workforce intermediary Capital IDEA provides long-term counseling, education, and support services, opening up access to high-demand, high-skill careers that require postsecondary credentials. The program is designed to enable all students to attend college full-time, recognizing that part-time students are more likely to drop out. This partnership, which is based on extremely strong community and political support, brings substantial new resources to the college.

Community-based organizing has also driven institutional change within the college to more effectively serve low-income, low-skill adults.

The program pays for tuition, fees, books, child care, case management, emergency assistance, and transportation. It also provides counseling, mentoring, tutoring, and job search and post-placement support. Throughout the program, participants meet weekly with their peers and a career counselor, with a focus on case management, mutual support, counseling, study skills, financial management, parenting skills, and problem solving and critical thinking skills. These meetings are a primary strategy to support retention and persistence.

Program graduates who entered employment in 2003 were earning an average of \$30,084 a year, almost triple their average pre-program earnings of \$11,617. Participants also graduate at nearly twice the rate of Austin Community College students who do not receive the supports the program provides.

St. Philips College: Combining Funds from Many Sources to Support Students

St. Philips College, a campus of the Alamo County Community College system in San Antonio, Texas, enjoys the distinction of being the only community college in the country that is both historically black and historically Hispanic-serving. The Southwest Campus offers technical training in four industry clusters: allied construction, drafting and design, multi-modal transportation, and repair and manufacturing.

As a result of its historic mission, the college is committed to serving low-income and non-traditional students. Recognizing that these students face a wide range of challenges to persisting in postsecondary education, St. Philips' Equity Center, housed in the career development office, provides an extensive array of services. St. Philips has pulled together foundation, corporate, and public resources (especially WIA, Title III, and TANF funds); it uses them to offer a broad array of student services: child care funding and information, low-cost child care, bus tickets and textbook loans, an emergency food bank, a clothes closet, counseling, information and referral, financial aid resources, a student resource guide, support groups, a resource library, and mental health information. The college has also developed a guide for faculty and staff on working with students in distress.

St. Philips has an extensive diagnostic and disability testing capacity, as well as related services.¹¹ Quite

unusually, it has also developed a customized set of services for learning disabled students. According to Student Services, this is very helpful for older adult workers, who are often not aware when they qualify for academic supports. Special services available to these students include class notes, extended testing, and large print books.

Community College of Baltimore County: Intensive Counseling Support for ABE Students

The Community College of Baltimore County's support for adults in literacy programs extends back five years, when the county commissioners transferred responsibility for adult education from the public school system to the college. The commissioners' goal was to connect low-literacy adults to training in skills important to the county economy. Five years later, literacy classes are still offered in high schools and at libraries, but increasing numbers of classes take place on the college campus. The director of the program, who was recruited from a neighboring ABE program, says, "Frankly, it took me a little while to learn the 'back of the house' operations that enable this program to function effectively in a college environment."

The director is fortunate that the college's leadership is deeply committed to providing postsecondary education to the county's disadvantaged and minority students. For example, the chancellor helped obtain a grant to close the gap between whites and minorities in developmental education and views adult literacy as an important bridge to postsecondary education for low-income students. Perhaps equally fortuitous, the program inherited a 501(c)3 dedicated to raising funds for Baltimore County adult education students; its success—along with resources contributed by the college—has enabled the program to offer a generous array of supports.

From the perspective of the Lifelong Learning Department, which houses the adult literacy program, support for adult education students starts with a college identity and connections to college. A college identity gives participants higher status than the ABE label, and college connections give participants a flavor of college life in a non-threatening environment. One example: students receive tickets to college-sponsored cultural events.

Equally important is counseling support, which is rarely available to students in traditional ABE/GED classes. "A phalanx of counselors," as one official put it, is available to students in the program. One of the

counselors' responsibilities is following up with students who miss class. The support becomes more intensive as students move into GED prep classes. The support structure was designed several years ago, when the college obtained a grant to research TRIO programs for promising practices that could be integrated into GED. The result is a transformation of traditional GED instruction (teachers in classes) into a dual structure: in the new GED Prep, traditional teachers teach "preparedness," and guidance counselors teach "awareness," with the latter responsible for one out of five classes.

The change process to the new structure was not always smooth sailing. Early on, the counselors tried contacting students individually, but that didn't work. Then they tried getting classroom time by volunteering to help the instructors. Eventually, the current structure evolved, and the counselors' domain (support, information, career and college counseling) is now recognized as valid GED prep.

Wayne County Community College: ABE as a College Feeder Program

Wayne County Community College in Detroit has a strong, clear mission. Founded in 1968 as a response to the Detroit riots, it has a number of key administrators who started working at the college not long after; they

feel keenly the mission of extending postsecondary education to the region's disadvantaged.

The mission can be seen in action in the adult education department. While the college is not the administrator of ABE for Detroit (the public school system is), it has developed a fairly large department using discretionary grants and college funds. The college views the department as a "feeder" for its degree programs and supports the program generously to ensure well-prepared college students. All students in the ABE/GED program are enrolled in the college. "Once a student is enrolled on the campus, we hope to keep them on the road to postsecondary education completion, and we do everything we can to keep them moving," said the vice chancellor whose department houses adult education. Last year, of 55 GED grads from the program, 45 enrolled in the college. (The program has a waiting list of 5,000.)

The college works hard to understand its ABE students and their needs. For example, it will offer a new workshop this year on budgeting; this course will be built around the recognition that, for example, many of the participants receive food stamps. In fact, the ABE program offers an extraordinary array of helpful workshops, all of them developed from the observation of student needs: stress management, test taking, note taking, and critical thinking. Program officials believe this approach is vital to building students' confidence, and that confidence is a key factor in success. They note, for example, that most of the ABE students are terrified of tests (including the GED test) and freeze up without preparation in test taking.

Wayne County Community College designed the program's instructional approach to be as comprehensive as possible: computer-assisted instruction based on individualized diagnostics, drill and practice, regular classrooms, and peer tutoring. The instructors are mostly tenured faculty (including the chair of the finance department), fostering the program-to-college connection.

Finally, students receive support in a traditional sense. Through a partnership with the Wayne State School of Social Work, interns help adult education students "navigate systems"—from obtaining housing to finding child care. Career guidance and employment connections are equally important, including a career education class, a formal skills assessment, special career days, and even a job fair.





Part III.

Promising State Policies

Breaking Through focuses on institution-level strategies that can create pathways for low-skilled adults to postsecondary skills and credentials. However, it is clear that state policies, which vary greatly, can have a significant impact on a community college's capacity to promote advancement.

While a systematic analysis of state policies is beyond the scope of this report, JFF's research identified policies that can support or impede promising institutional strategies to enable low-skilled adults to gain postsecondary skills and credentials.¹²

Governance and Mission

The governance of community colleges, adult education, and workforce development, and the relationships among them, vary widely. In some states, strong central boards govern community colleges. State incentives—in the form of policies, funding mechanisms, and performance measures—can play an important role in driving and supporting institutional change. In states that do not consider advancement for low-skilled adults a core community college mission, strong central governance can impede institutional strategies that help low-skilled adults gain postsecondary skills and credentials. In many states, community college governance is decentralized: local boards of trustees largely control the colleges. This autonomy permits colleges that have an institutional commitment to advancement to develop innovative strategies, but it does not provide incentives for other colleges to follow that path.

How states define the mission of community colleges is an important question. Community colleges are comprehensive institutions that provide a broad range of academic transfer, basic skills, developmental, workforce, occupational, and non-credit programs. States balance these multiple missions in different ways. Several states – Kentucky, North Carolina, Washington, and Oregon—make community colleges a major focus of state economic development and workforce skill development strategies. This emphasis provides incentives for community colleges in those states to expand services to low-literacy adults.

Governance of adult education affects the capacity to create articulated pathways from low basic skills to

community college occupational/technical degree programs. Adult education is governed by the K-12 departments of education in thirty-two states, by the department of higher education in thirteen states, and by the department of labor in five states (Morest 2004).

The role of community colleges in providing adult education services varies. More than half of adult education students are enrolled in community colleges in 11 states, while community colleges serve less than one-quarter of adult education students in 19 states (Morest 2004). State differences in governance and the level of adult education services provided by community colleges affect capacity to create internal transitions from adult education to college through institutional change or the need to create integrated transitions through partnerships with other adult education providers.

States vary widely in the extent to which they have systems and structures to integrate adult education, workforce development, and community colleges at the state and local levels. In some states, community colleges are a primary provider of adult education and workforce development. Oregon, for example, has integrated the community college and workforce development systems into a unified Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development. While adult education is governed separately, community colleges are the primary provider of adult education and workforce development. This creates institutional potential for community colleges to develop internal pathways from their adult education and workforce development programs to developmental education and credit-level degree programs.

Kentucky promotes integration in a very different way. Community colleges and adult education are governed separately, but state policies strongly encourage them to collaborate in promoting transitions to postsecondary education. State policies support smooth transitions to college through a division of labor: adult education and developmental education programs work in concert to help low-skilled adults enter college and develop the skills to succeed in credit-level programs. Kentucky is using incentives and performance measures to promote interagency collaboration among separately governed community college, adult education, and

workforce development systems (Chisman 2004).

Massachusetts has taken a programmatic approach to transitions from adult education to community college. It provides funding for college transition programs organized around partnerships between community colleges and school district or community-based adult education providers. The state is building interagency collaboration to strengthen economic and workforce development, with community colleges playing a major role. As a central component of these efforts, interagency funding for regional employer-focused career ladder programs comes from two programs: Building Essential Skills through Training, and the Extended Care Career Ladder Initiative. Partnerships provide education and career ladder pathways from entry-level work and basic skills to professional career jobs and community college degrees in a number of occupations and sectors that are directly linked to wage increases and promotions.

Funding Policies

The levels of funding for community colleges, and regulations around that funding, have major implications for the capacity to open up pathways for low-skilled adults to credit-level occupational/technical degree programs. Funding policies send a strong message to community colleges about priorities and direction.¹³

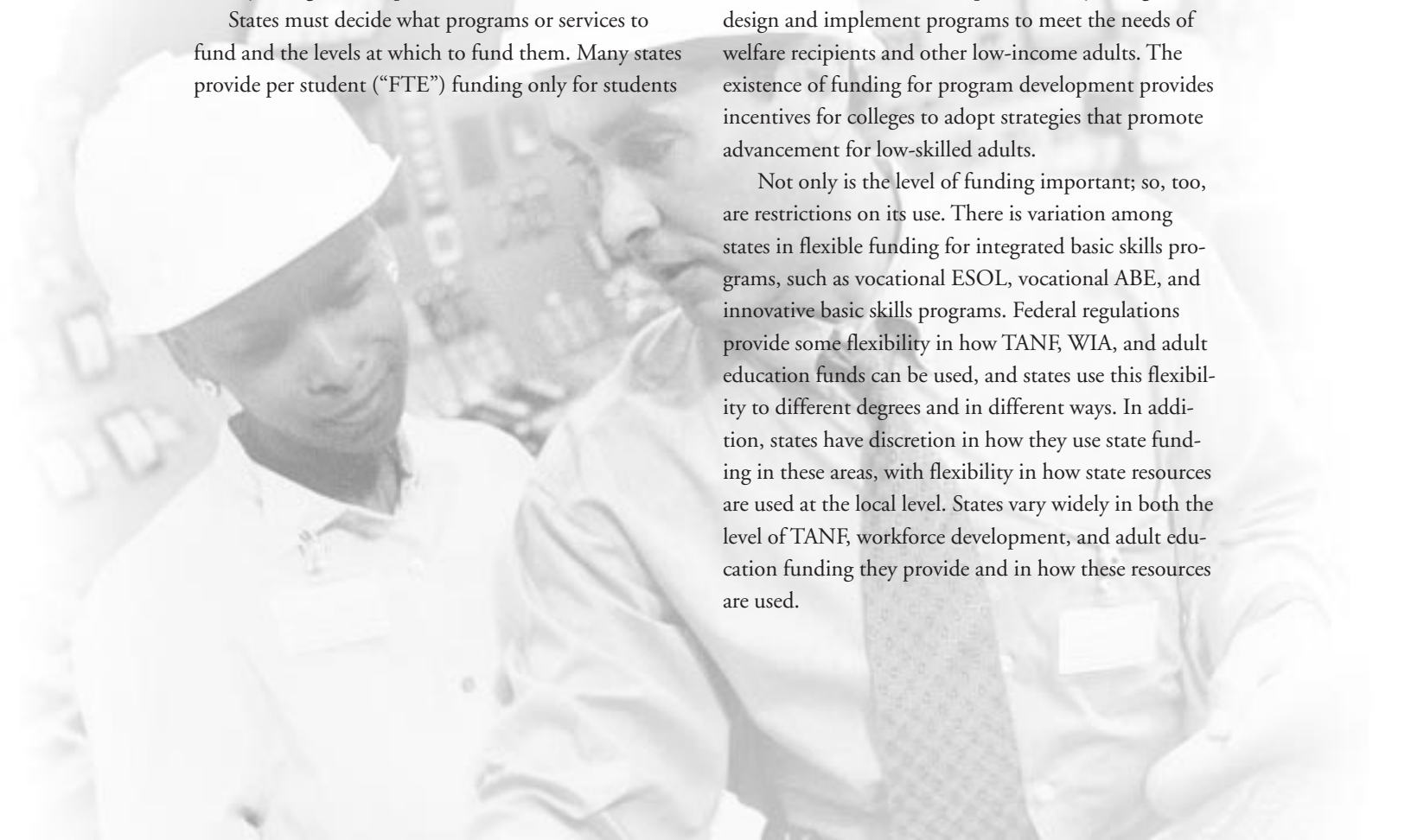
States must decide what programs or services to fund and the levels at which to fund them. Many states provide per student (“FTE”) funding only for students

in credit-level programs. Some states treat developmental education as a credit-level program for funding purposes, even though credits cannot be used for graduation, while other states provide no FTE funding for developmental education. Oregon, California, and North Carolina provide FTE funding for all non-credit programs, but most states do not fund non-credit continuing education programs.

The capacity of community colleges to create pathways from low skills into and through college degrees is shaped to a large extent by the level of funding they receive for students in non-credit and developmental courses. Funding structures can provide strong incentives for colleges to provide services that promote advancement for low-skilled adults, but they can also provide strong disincentives to do so. The varying level of FTE funding for programs is especially important because some programs have higher per student costs. In some cases, states provide higher FTE funding for programs with higher costs, but often they provide lower FTE funding for occupational programs and other programs that have higher per student costs.

Lack of start-up funding for program design, curriculum development, and partnership building is a major obstacle to developing and implementing innovative programs. Washington and California have allocated TANF resources to help community colleges design and implement programs to meet the needs of welfare recipients and other low-income adults. The existence of funding for program development provides incentives for colleges to adopt strategies that promote advancement for low-skilled adults.

Not only is the level of funding important; so, too, are restrictions on its use. There is variation among states in flexible funding for integrated basic skills programs, such as vocational ESOL, vocational ABE, and innovative basic skills programs. Federal regulations provide some flexibility in how TANF, WIA, and adult education funds can be used, and states use this flexibility to different degrees and in different ways. In addition, states have discretion in how they use state funding in these areas, with flexibility in how state resources are used at the local level. States vary widely in both the level of TANF, workforce development, and adult education funding they provide and in how these resources are used.





Part IV.

The Road Ahead: Opportunities and Challenges

JFF's research found evidence of promising strategies and approaches in a number of community colleges. However, promising approaches are far from the norm. They are being implemented by a minority of community colleges and often exist within a small number of programs or departments within the institution. They are emerging approaches that need further development, support, diffusion, and study.

There is an opportunity to strengthen these approaches, spread them more broadly within individual institutions and to a larger number of colleges, and make them sustainable. It will not be easy; there are significant barriers to improvement.

The research identified two populations of low-skilled adults who are most likely to benefit from, and who should be targeted by, these efforts: 1) adults with sixth- to eighth-grade-level skills who can move quickly to complete high school and develop pre-college skills that enable them to benefit from developmental education; and 2) adults with eighth- to tenth-grade pre-college skills who can develop college-level skills and enter credit programs. While adults with skills below sixth grade have significant educational needs, it would take them so long to reach the eighth-grade level that very few would benefit from programs designed to increase access to postsecondary degree programs.

JFF's research further suggests that efforts should focus on colleges that offer fertile ground for making progress that can be sustained when program funding ends or creative leaders leave. It is extremely difficult to drive programmatic and institutional change from the outside. Therefore, scale-up efforts should focus on community colleges that are developing and implementing innovative practices, and where there is a demonstrated institutional commitment to strategies that accelerate the advancement of low-skilled adults, an infrastructure of programmatic leaders, and supportive policies and political environment.

A Long-Term Commitment

Some institutions have been developing, expanding, and improving promising strategies for a number of years. Portland Community College and Community

College of Denver have been growing innovative strategies and programs, adopting them in multiple parts of the college for multiple populations, improving program performance and outcomes, developing spinoffs, making innovative programs more sustainable, and taking steps to incorporate promising approaches into mainstream institutional practice. For example, PCC's modularized career pathways evolved out of a workforce development training program for dislocated and unemployed adults. CCD's Integrated Advising System, which serves 3,000 students, grew from an educational case management strategy developed in a branch campus for the vocational training of welfare recipients.

These colleges provide important lessons. Portland, Denver, and other community colleges show the potential for small, innovative practices developed in adult education, workforce development, and non-credit programs to grow in scale and affect mainstream institutional practice. Both colleges have maintained a clear and consistent focus on improving success for low-skilled adults over the course of a decade. The priorities for institutional improvement were key criteria in the selection process for new presidents, and there is a strong leadership infrastructure at the program and department levels. Moreover, innovative leaders have risen to positions of greater responsibility and are mentoring a new generation of program innovators.

On the other hand, some colleges studied are in the early stages of innovative strategies, often in small programs or in single departments. They have made institutional commitments to going further in developing, implementing, and expanding these approaches. These colleges, too, provide important lessons, for the start-up phase and for creating conditions favorable to continued progress.

In some cases, state policies support and facilitate the development and implementation of promising approaches and institutional commitments to moving in this direction. For example, some states offer free college tuition, usually one semester, for GED completers. These institutions suggest how state policymakers and college leadership can collaborate to deepen the implementation of promising strategies in colleges that

have already adopted them and to increase the number of colleges that respond to the incentives that state policies provide.

Unfortunately, most states make no effort to support transitions across programs, and some state policies create disincentives to making connections. Thirty-two states place governance of the adult basic education system (WIA Title II) in their K-12 public education systems, virtually ensuring that adults in those states who seek educational advancement have to negotiate passages between two systems to enter postsecondary education. Many financing policies inhibit connections as well. For example, Virginia requires community colleges that offer ABE programs to match grant funds, making ABE a potentially costly undertaking (Morest 2004).

Barriers to Further Progress

Practitioners revealed much about the challenges they face in spreading promising approaches to other parts of their colleges and to other populations—challenges to increasing their scale, making them sustainable, and incorporating them into mainstream institutional practice.

Most of the promising new approaches for improving basic skills go beyond traditional adult education, workforce development, and developmental education practices by developing new ways to integrate academic and occupational learning. They are often started in modest programs with soft funding, where they find the autonomy to do new things in new ways. Yet even as they have autonomy within their own program, they often face institutional and policy barriers, both to expanding promising approaches to different populations in different parts of the college and to continuing programs after their funding runs out. Recent budget deficits and funding reductions for community colleges make it even harder to institutionalize innovative programs into core budgets. With resources scarce, colleges make tough decisions about what to cut, and resistance to cutting existing programs is usually fierce.

Perseverance in the face of these and other problems is invariably the result of strong leadership. San Jacinto College North in Houston, Texas, is a case in point. About eight years ago, SJC� faced up to the fact that its community had changed drastically—now largely Hispanic and African-American, with a dysfunctional public schools system and high dropout rates. The college brought in new leaders committed to serving this community and charged them with overseeing

thoroughgoing change. Using the comprehensive planning needed to apply for a Title V Hispanic-Serving Institution grant, SJC� revamped developmental education, transitions from non-credit to credit programs, and student support services. Since then, enrollments of students of color have increased; transition rates from developmental education into credit courses have improved, as have transition rates from adult education to the college; and the retention, persistence, and graduation rates of first-generation college-goers and students of color have gone up.

The Community College of Denver provides another example. For over a decade, it has been building the leadership necessary to shepherd and sustain institutional change. In 1990, CCD set goals to increase its enrollment of students of color and eliminate the gap in performance and outcomes between students of color and white students. With strong commitment from its board of trustees and a core of committed program leaders, the college has stayed on course to fulfill these goals through several presidents. Commitment to these goals has been a criterion in the presidential selection process. The graduation rate of students of color increased from 20 percent in 1987 to 50 percent in 2002.

However, the development of multiple paths to credit-level degree programs requires an all-too-rare level of integrated leadership. Incorporating innovative instructional approaches from small programs into mainstream adult education, workforce development, and developmental education programs requires support from leaders and faculty in each of those departments, which often operate in separate divisions under different leaders. Changing basic skills and pre-college programs toward a more individualized, contextualized, and accelerated approach would require buy-in from each of these departments for doing things in a fundamentally new way.

Federal and state adult education policies can also hinder the development of innovative basic skills approaches. State regulations that require minimum seat time can be a serious obstacle to innovative basic skills approaches. The same is true of requirements to teach the same curriculum to all students in formal classes or to maintain the separation of the adult education curriculum from workplace skills.

Institutional and state policies often pose barriers to the integration of non-credit and credit programs. This is especially true where the transition to four-year colleges is the primary focus of the credit side, whether

due to college or state priorities. A lengthy and difficult approval process within the college and, in many cases, at the state level is often required to change credit courses or create new ones. It takes strong leadership from the president and leadership by credit-level deans and faculty to overcome these barriers and build transitions from non-credit to credit programs.

Inertia to change can be a barrier to spreading and increasing the scale of innovative approaches, especially in the absence of performance measures and incentives for doing so. Without accountability for how long it takes students to develop skills or complete programs, adult education and developmental education have no incentive to adopt accelerated strategies that can dramatically speed up the time it takes to get a GED or gain skills needed to enter credit-level degree programs. There is little reason for programs to change unless higher benchmarks, developed in innovative programs, are translated into performance measures that can only be met through more effective approaches.

JFF found many committed and creative practitioners, but for the most part they are not connected to one another, and they work independently, often recreating the same wheels. In some cases, it might be possible to shorten program development time and improve performance outcomes by enabling innovative practitioners to build on one another's work.

Promoting and Accelerating Innovation

Based on JFF's research and discussions with community college leaders and practitioners, we see an important opportunity to help the kind of innovations highlighted in this report to spread, become more sustainable, and reach significant numbers of adults in many more institutions. We believe that such efforts should focus on deepening and broadening work in the field and on identifying how and where state policies can promote the kind of institutional and system change we found.

Here are some of the ways additional public and private investments can promote and support innovation:

- Provide more compelling documentation that these kinds of approaches make it possible to achieve substantially higher outcomes, and demonstrate this in different kinds of institutions and for different populations.
- Spread promising strategies more widely within institutions to serve a greater number of students and more populations in a broader range of programs and departments.
- Make promising approaches and programs more sustainable when grants and other forms of soft funding end or when creative leaders leave.
- Provide greater awareness in the field of how colleges are developing, implementing, expanding, and sustaining promising approaches, as well as the obstacles they face and the programmatic and institutional change strategies that help them overcome these barriers.
- Take steps to incorporate promising strategies that improve mainstream adult education, developmental education, non-credit workforce programs, student advising and support services, and occupational/technical credit programs.
- Increase the number of colleges that adopt promising approaches for advancement of low-skilled adults, especially within states where policies provide incentives for community colleges to move in this direction.
- Identify high-leverage areas in order to focus priorities for institutional change and increase knowledge about the cost effectiveness of strategies and practices.
- Develop data categories and tracking systems for cross-college use that would enable funders and policymakers to assess the effectiveness of supportive policies and investments.

Our discussions with community college leaders and practitioners indicate that further progress toward these activities can be promoted through:

- *R&D support to “early adopter” community colleges that have demonstrated commitment and capacity*, in order to promote institutional integration, accelerated learning, connections to the labor market, and comprehensive supports, with all efforts including the systematic documentation of individual outcomes;
- *Peer learning among colleges* receiving this support to promote the rapid exchange of knowledge about promising practices and avoid “reinventing the wheel”;
- *Broader peer learning* and other awareness efforts to the field of community colleges to increase understanding of promising practices that support advancement for low-literacy adults;
- *Strengthening and expanding community college leadership committed to this agenda* through leadership academies and related activities; and

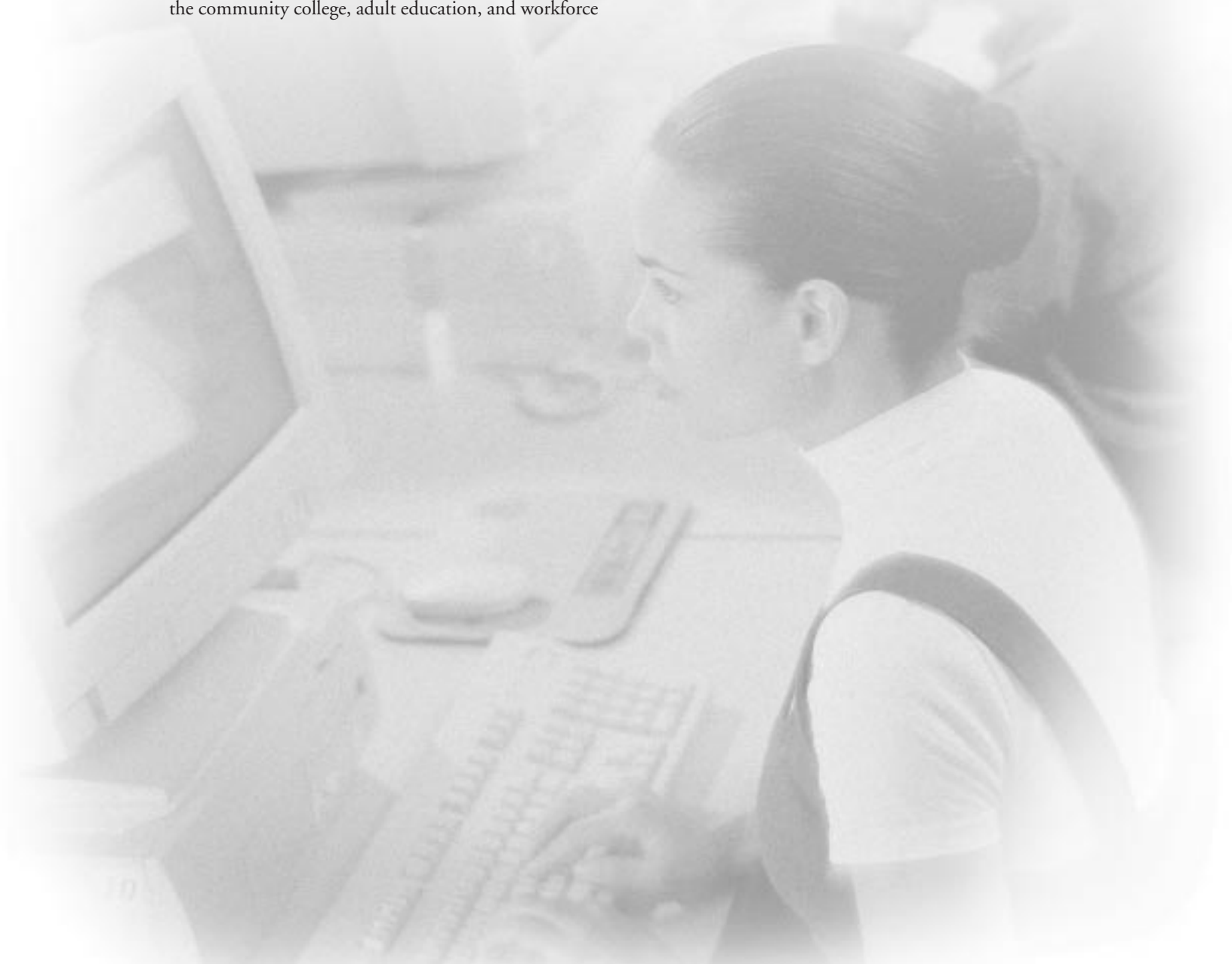
- *Identifying and supporting state policies that advance programmatic and institutional changes benefiting low-income adults.*

Peer learning would be most effective if it includes a mix of institutions at different stages of development, synergy, scale, and institutionalization: colleges that are well along in adopting promising strategies and institutional change, as well as those in the next tier of colleges that want to go beyond what they now do. Peer learning among colleges engaged in institutional change can provide an opportunity for innovative leaders and practitioners to build on the collective experience of colleges that are moving in a similar direction, and to shorten the learning curve for program development, scale-up, and institutionalization.

Strategic support for broader peer learning, such as a learning institute, could play a valuable role in making the best approaches more visible and influential in the community college, adult education, and workforce

development fields. This could help increase the number of institutions that adopt promising approaches and build a constituency and enthusiasm for developing and scaling up effective approaches to helping low-skilled working adults advance.

There is also value in strategic investments that support state policy analysis and advocacy. While JFF's research focused on the institution level, state policies can enhance or impede the capacity of community colleges to adopt and scale up promising strategies. Expanding the development, scale-up, and institutionalization of promising strategies requires knowing more about how and where state policies can promote promising institutional changes, in particular for improving transitions from adult education and workforce development to college, transitions from non-credit to credit programs, and the development of career pathways from multiple entry points to credit-level degree programs.



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Endnotes

- ¹ See U.S. Census Bureau, P148A-D. Sex by Educational Attainment for the Population 25 Years and Over. Data Set: Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF3) - Sample Data. Accessed at <http://factfinder.census.gov>
- ² We use the term “adult education” to describe adult basic education (ABE) and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) programs. The term “other basic skills programs” denotes innovative programs that integrate adult education and workforce development practices. The term “developmental education” describes remedial programs for college students who do not have the skills required for credit-level study.
- ³ *ACE News*, July 2002, “GED Exam Surpasses One Million Adult Test Takers in 2001,” accessed at http://www.acenet.edu/news/press_release/2002/07/july/ged_release.html.
- ⁴ Title II programs only provide data for outcomes for one year following participation.
- ⁵ “Pre-college skills” describes reading, writing, and mathematics skills between the eighth-grade and tenth-grade levels, as measured on college placement tests. “Basic skills” described a broad range of skills below the eighth-grade level as measured on college placement tests.
- ⁶ Risk factors of nontraditional students are delayed enrollment and older age, part-time enrollment, full-time employment, lack of parental financial support, being a single parent, having dependent children, and having an alternative high school credential.
- ⁷ The professional technical career pathways are: accounting/bookkeeping, office skills, CNC operator, criminal justice, medical coding, medical lab, emergency communicator, phlebotomy, and HVAC. The bridge pathways are office skills, health care, customer service, and food service.
- ⁸ JCCC and many other colleges use COMPASS tests to determine whether students are academically prepared to enter degree-level courses. There are a variety of such tests; some of them are available nationally, and others are used exclusively in a state or other jurisdiction.
- ⁹ The grant that supports career counseling is running out; the college is looking for ways to incorporate it into the budget.
- ¹⁰ Owensboro’s system is based primarily on WorkKeys—instructional, job profiling, and skills assessment. The Plato system is also used, especially in the Developmental Education Department; college leaders hope to use Plato to build bridges to the adult education unit. While most residents use the adult learning center for free, some pay a nominal fee due to rules attached to various funding sources.
- ¹¹ The college has, for example, experienced an increasing enrollment of deaf students.
- ¹² Several national initiatives are addressing state policy issues related to community colleges and low-wage works. JFF is one of seven national partners in *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count*, a multi-year initiative launched by Lumina Foundation for Education. Twenty-seven community colleges in five states are participating in this effort to enhance the academic success of low-income and minority students. *Achieving the Dream* addresses a national imperative: increasing success for the growing number of students for whom community colleges are the point of entry into higher education, particularly low-income students and students of color. *Pathways to Advancement*, a project of the National Governors Association and FutureWorks, is designed to help states expand postsecondary access and attainment for low-income working adults. The project is a 28-month program of research, development, and demonstration with teams of officials from five to six states. It assists those states in changing policies and practices of higher education financing, program and accreditation requirements, and student financial aid to support larger numbers of low-income working adults in attending college and pursuing postsecondary credentials. The project is funded by Lumina Foundation. *Bridges to Opportunity*, launched by the Ford Foundation, is a grant-making initiative designed to promote state policies that enhance the capacity of community colleges to improve educational and economic opportunities for low-income adults. The foundation awarded planning grants to teams in six states that convened groups of such stakeholders and engaged them in planning and advocating for more supportive policies in each state. It has now funded the six states to implement the plans they have developed over the next two years.
- ¹³ For more information on funding, see Jenkins and Boswell (2002).

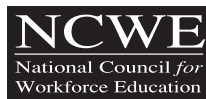
About the Authors

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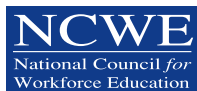
Jobs for the Future seeks to accelerate the educational and economic advancement of youth and adults struggling in today's economy. JFF partners with leaders in education, business, government, and communities around the nation to: strengthen opportunities for youth to succeed in postsecondary learning and high-skill careers; increase opportunities for low-income individuals to move into family-supporting careers; and meet the growing economic demand for knowledgeable and skilled workers.



The National Council for Workforce Education is a private, nonprofit, professional organization committed to promoting excellence and growth in occupational education at the postsecondary level. NCWE, an affiliate council of the American Association of Community Colleges, provides a national forum for administrators and faculty in occupational, vocational, technical, and career education as well as representatives of business, labor, military, and government, to affect and direct the future role of two-year colleges in work-related education.



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