

Better Together:

Realigning Pre-College Skills Development Programs to Achieve Greater Academic Success for Adult Learners

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

States seeking to be economically competitive increasingly confront the challenge of high numbers of lower-skilled working adults whose proficiencies do not match the requirements of the high-skilled businesses and industries they are trying to recruit and retain. In addition, lower-skilled workers seeking family-supporting careers must strive to increase their skills and often must attain a postsecondary credential. Community college occupational and technical degree programs provide a nexus to address the convergence of these two goals. Yet the critical challenge remains: how can states help working adults bolster pre-collegiate skills that restrain them from taking full advantage of these college credit-level career and technical programs? *Better Together* offers examples of a better way to meet this challenge through the alignment of two distinct systems for strengthening pre-collegiate skills: adult education and developmental education.



Better Together is part of a series of policy reports from *Breaking Through*, a multi-year initiative of Jobs for the Future and the National Council for Workforce Education. *Breaking Through* is funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation, and the Ford Foundation. The Ford Foundation has funded research and analysis on state policies that can support institutional strategies to help low-skilled adults enter and succeed in college and careers.

To download *Better Together* and other *Breaking Through* policy reports, go to: www.breakingthroughcc.org, www.jff.org, or www.ncwe.org.

Rationale for Alignment

Adult education is a joint program of the state and federal governments to increase the educational proficiency of adult learners. Developmental education, housed within postsecondary institutions, is designed to help college students with pre-collegiate skills. Both programs serve populations with similar needs and characteristics and help them increase their skills and thus enhance their career opportunities.

All states have adult education programs and, within postsecondary institutions, developmental education programs, creating the potential for states to build on existing capacity. However, given different funding streams, governance structures, service delivery mechanisms, and the educational focus of their particular target populations, a key challenge is that these programs are often parallel and not integrated. The result is an inefficient use of state and federal public resources, duplication of services, and uncoordinated outcomes in terms of helping adult learners transition to college-credit academic work.

Aligning these programs—not merging them—creates more efficient distribution of scarce public resources to both, while allowing each to focus on its own areas of comparative strength to achieve greater academic success for adult learners. Adult education programs can concentrate on adult learners who are in community college and have very-low skills or multiple skill deficiencies. Developmental education can address adult learners who have skill deficiencies in only one area and whose skill levels are higher.

Three Innovative Alignment Efforts

Through alignment, three partnerships between adult basic education and developmental education programs have tapped into the particular assets of both programs to support

adult learners with lower skill levels. All are drawn from innovative community college practices identified by *Breaking Through*, a multiyear initiative of Jobs for the Future and the National Council for Workforce Education. *Breaking Through* is helping community colleges identify and develop institutional strategies that can enable low-skilled adult students to enter into and succeed in occupational and technical degree programs at community colleges.

In Louisville, Kentucky, Jefferson Community and Technical College and Jefferson County Public Schools Adult and Continuing Education have observed increases in positive student outcomes as a result of its Education Enrichment Services program. Students test into higher-level developmental or college-level courses; over 80 percent of students in the 2005-06 cohort skipped one or more developmental courses as a result of the program. The retention rate for these students has also increased, with a cumulative retention rate of 72 percent. In addition, students are saving money: in the 2006-07 fiscal year, students in the program saved over \$450,000 in tuition for developmental education courses they did not need to take.

In Lexington, North Carolina, the Achieving College/Career Entry—ACE—program at Davidson County Community College trains its advisers to ensure that they are positive and encouraging as they explain to students why they are being referred to adult education. Instructors have observed that students place into upper-level developmental education courses; some students, with additional review, place directly into college-level courses. ACE students are noted as completing their pre-college skills development with a more critically defined goal for themselves, a stronger work ethic (especially in math), and a better understanding of the relevance of basic skills to the academic rigor required in their chosen occupational paths. The development of the program has also increased collaboration between adult education and community college faculty.

In Portland, Oregon, students in the Adult Basic Skills Program at Portland Community College subsequently test into higher-level developmental education or college-level courses. Students also incur significantly lower costs for their pre-college skills development and gain access to the support services that help to ensure their success. In addition, the Adult Basic Skills Program is strengthening the connections between adult basic education and developmental education programs on the four PCC campuses, providing opportunities for additional collaboration to promote student achievement.

Recommendations for State Policymakers

Kentucky, North Carolina, and Oregon have all forged a strong focus on the issues surrounding remediation, as their economies have undergone significant restructuring from a lower-skilled, high-wage industrial concentration to higher-skilled, high-wage sectors. Their aligned programs resulted from institutional innovation, supported by several state policies and actions, such as establishing state-level administration and coordination, greater performance accountability, and more flexibility in local college decision making.

Better Together offers several recommendations to help these states expand their programs and to assist other states that desire to integrate similar strategies into their pre-college skills development approaches:

- ***Incorporate Pre-College Skills Development into State Policy Goals:*** Link the need for aligning adult education and community colleges at the state level to the necessity of increasing the skills of lower-skilled adults to accomplish the state's high-priority economic development agenda.
- ***Coordinate the Administration of Pre-College Skills Development Programs to Promote Alignment:*** Invest authority for and coordination of alignment in a high-level state entity. States can further promote coordination by allowing dual enrollment so adult education and community college programs can share credit and revenue, and allowing flexibility in local decision-making on key policy issues.
- ***Improve Performance Measurement and Data Tracking to Emphasize Results:*** Develop specific performance measures to promote alignment and transitions, with an emphasis on program quality, and enhance tracking systems to collect data about student progress, transitions, and outcomes.
- ***Strengthen the Capacity of Pre-College Programs to Implement an Aligned Approach:*** Build out from the areas of greatest capacity, and develop a pedagogical "community of practice" that includes adult education and developmental education instructors.