

# THE BREAKING THROUGH PRACTICE GUIDE

Providing Comprehensive  
Support Services

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>3.3</b>
<b>ASSESSMENTS &amp; INTAKE</b>	<b>3.6</b>
Academic Content	3.6
Academic Learning Styles and Learning Disorders	3.6
Aptitudes and Strengths Assessments	3.6
Assessing Internal and External Factors	3.7
<b>CONNECTING STUDENTS WITH ACADEMIC AND NONACADEMIC SUPPORTS</b>	<b>3.7</b>
Vignette: Tacoma Community College, Washington	3.8
Connecting Students with Existing Services at <i>Breaking Through</i> Colleges	3.9
Partnering with External Organizations	3.9
Providing Essential Support Services In-house	3.10
<b>PROVIDING ADVISORS OR COACHES</b>	<b>3.12</b>
Providing Mentoring and Advising at <i>Breaking Through</i> Colleges	3.13
<b>TRAINING COLLEGE STAFF</b>	<b>3.15</b>
Development of the <i>Breaking Through</i> Advisor Training Program	3.15
Vignette: Forsyth Technical Community College, North Carolina	3.19
<b>SCALING UP SUPPORT SERVICES: CASE STUDY OF PORTLAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE</b>	<b>3.20</b>
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<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>3.22</b>

# PROVIDING COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT SERVICES

## Introduction

*Breaking Through* targets adult learners, older and younger, with reading and math skills below the eighth-grade level. Many colleges seek to facilitate the education and training of these adult learners by offering flexible course schedules, including holding classes in the evening and on the weekends. Yet the research conducted by *Breaking Through* in 2004 documented that many life challenges cluster with low literacy: poverty and related issues (e.g., problems with transportation, housing, elder care); negative experiences with formal education; limited knowledge about and experience in the labor market; and high levels of involvement with the criminal justice system (Liebowitz & Taylor 2004). The challenge facing *Breaking Through* students is not simply to find classes offered at convenient times or master technical skills; they often lack the basic literacy skills needed to do college-level studies. Beyond academics, low-income, low-skilled working adults have to overcome multiple institutional and individual barriers to attain educational success. Challenges such as unstable housing, child care needs, domestic violence or other unsafe living situations, and poor mental health can all impede educational progress.

These significant life challenges can deter the students targeted by *Breaking Through* from enrolling in college, and derail them from progressing. Support services to address these challenges are essential for high-need students, yet they are rarely available to students in remedial programs. Even services that are available tend to be passive—that is, students must seek them out. In addition, support staff—and college staff in general—are often ill equipped to respond to the crises faced by these students. The high-leverage strategy proposed by *Breaking Through* is to provide comprehensive support services by:

- > Connecting students with a wide array of academic and nonacademic supports;
- > Providing students with proactive support; and
- > Training coaches and other college staff to work with low-income, low-skilled adults.

Support services are essential in any effort to bring “nontraditional” students into the mainstream of higher education and onto pathways to credential attainment and career advancement. Perhaps the first formal recognition of this came with Title IV of the groundbreaking Higher Education Act of 1965, aimed at encouraging low-income students and minorities to enroll in college. Under this act, efforts to provide additional assistance focused initially on financial aid. Congress later expanded the concept of assistance in its 1968 reauthorization of the act, which established the TRIO program that included tutoring, counseling, remedial instruction, and other student support services.

Since then, the goal of TRIO programs has been to enable students “to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to post-baccalaureate programs” (U.S. Department of Education 2009). However, these supports have been primarily geared toward “traditional” students—those entering college from the K-12 pipeline—although exceptions have been added over the years (e.g., for veterans returning from military service to postsecondary education) (Association for Equality and Excellence in Education, 2009).

## The Diversity of Community College Students

The demographics of community college enrollments have shifted to include increasing numbers of "nontraditional" students, including older, minority, and employed students. In this context, innovations spurred by *Breaking Through* will become increasingly important in the coming years.

**Age:** Community college students are older than traditional college students.

The average age of community college students is 29.

- 57 percent are 22 or older.
- 16 percent are 40 or older.

**Balancing Work & School:** Community college students work more hours and attend school less than traditional college students.

- 59 percent of students attend part-time.
- 27 percent of full-time students work full-time.
- 50 percent of part-time students work full-time.

**Income:** Community college students have lower incomes than traditional college students.

- 46 percent of independent students have an annual income less than \$25,000.
- 33 percent of the students in the lowest independent income bracket are single parents.

**Students of Color:** Community colleges serve a large percentage of all undergraduate students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds, including:

- 46 percent of all African-American undergraduates
- 55 percent of all Hispanic undergraduates
- 46 percent of all Asian/Pacific Islander undergraduates
- 55 percent of Native-American undergraduates

Source: American Association of Community Colleges 2009. Income data is from the National Center for Education Statistics (Provasnik & Planty 2008).

Research on student persistence has examined the factors leading to dropping out of college and how support services can reduce dropout rates. Vincent Tinto, a pioneer in the study of the causes of student attrition, demonstrated in the 1970s that nontraditional students, especially minorities, had the highest attrition rates, which he attributed to a lack of engagement between the college and the student, especially in the crucial first year.

(Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). Several important innovations grew out of Tinto's work: learning communities or cohorts as a mechanism to engage and support students; increased attention to providing supports in the first year; and the tracking of progress in this area through the annual Community College Survey of Student Engagement, a project of the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin (Choy 2002).

The Array of Services Encompassed by the Term "Student Supports"	
Academic Supports	Tutoring (one-on-one, group tutoring, drop-in centers) On-line and computer-based tutorial/skill development programs College success courses; study skill courses Study groups Academic-resource labs, where students can access computers, reference books, on-line resources, career-exploration tools, and more Testing and accommodations for learning disabilities Academic advising to help with course selection and choosing a major Career counseling to help students choose a career field and search for jobs
Nonacademic Supports	Learning communities in which a group of students take classes together and engage in activities together Coaching/case management/counseling in which an assigned coach or staff person provides intensive support to help students work through crises and life challenges Referral services to outside social service agencies, health services, housing assistance, etc. Peer mentoring programs
Material and Financial Resources	Emergency funds for short-term crises (e.g., loss of housing, medical emergencies) Subsidies for books, transportation, supplies Child care Food or clothing

While most research on student persistence has focused on traditional students, and in particular on those at four-year colleges, John Bean and Barbara Metzner argued that for the nontraditional student external barriers—including the many life issues related to poverty—may be more likely to lead to dropping out (Bailey & Alfonso 2005). Recently, various researchers have argued that if community colleges are to improve retention, they must focus on the many barriers to persistence that nontraditional low-income students face (Bailey & Alfonso 2005; Krodel et al. 2009). For these students, limited access to the external support systems that many middle-class students take for granted (supportive relationships, financial stability, and familiarity with the college environment) can easily disrupt their educational progress (Krodel et al. 2009). Comprehensive support services at the community college can give students access to these support systems, which are critical to their academic success (Community College Survey of Student Engagement 2008; Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy 2008).

Essential to the provision of these services are mechanisms by which the colleges assess the various academic, social, or financial barriers that might prevent academic progress for each student. Some colleges utilize written surveys; others utilize program staff or coaches. Most colleges combine the two approaches. For example, at Central New Mexico Community College, the achievement coach works with students to complete a questionnaire that captures detailed information on their educational goals, current supports, and life challenges that might impede these goals.

While an initial comprehensive assessment is important, *Breaking Through* colleges have learned that a student's multiple barriers to education are a moving target. They evolve throughout the semester, sometimes requiring much more attention than anyone could have originally imagined. Thus, paying attention to new needs as they develop and helping students learn to address these barriers are critical components of the supportive services offered by these colleges.



**Tip:** Find or develop quality assessment tools that measure students' academic skills and learning styles as well as individual barriers and attitudes toward education. When possible, interview students in person. This helps them form a relationship with staff right away.

## Assessments & Intake

To direct students to the most appropriate courses, programs, and services, support-services staff need to be able to assess students in four broad areas, whether informally or formally, through a tool or metric. Assessments can be conducted during the enrollment or intake period, but many colleges also conduct ongoing assessments of students.

### ACADEMIC CONTENT

This is the most common type of assessment used by colleges; it is used to determine what courses students are prepared to take. There are a few nationally recognized assessments, such as ACCUPLACER and COMPASS. A number of colleges use these assessments to find out if students need to take developmental education courses before starting for-credit coursework, and if so, at what level they need to start. For students in Adult Education, colleges often use the Test of Adult Base Education (TABE) to assess skill level.

### ACADEMIC LEARNING STYLES AND LEARNING DISORDERS

This type of assessment can help faculty and staff understand what instructional approaches will work best with students. Assessments of learning style help instructors know whether students are visual, auditory, or other types of learners, which can help in customizing content. Low-skilled adults entering community colleges may have undiagnosed learning disabilities; these types of assessments can test for dyslexia or other disabilities that require a different instructional approach or additional support services.

### APTITUDES AND STRENGTHS ASSESSMENTS

Advisors who are helping students choose a career path may use a variety of assessments to gauge students' interests, strengths, and basic aptitudes. These range from general questions about attitudes and preferences (e.g., working alone versus on a team, moving around versus sitting at a desk) to specific questions about job activities (e.g., working with cars, taking patients' blood, entering information in a computer). These assessments can help students choose career training paths that will be good fits for them, which in turn makes it more likely that they will succeed in their career pathway.

## ASSESSING INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS

Support staff taking a comprehensive approach to working with adult students may also want to assess the internal and external barriers to students' success. For example, it is helpful to know if students have jobs, children to care for, stable housing, and consistent access to transportation. It is also helpful to know of any internal barriers that students may be struggling with, such as mental illness, abusive relationships, low levels of confidence, or high levels of stress.

## Connecting Students with Academic and Nonacademic Supports

With growing numbers of low-skilled adults entering education and training programs, effective support services are essential if community colleges are to increase student retention and degree completion. Since the 1960s community colleges have expanded the resources available to provide supports to students, including those in developmental education, even though federal funding has been limited and state funding variable or nonexistent. According to researchers at MDRC, "Outside the community colleges themselves, dollars to support improvements in student services are extremely limited and are targeted only to certain subsets of the student population" (Purnell et. al. 2004). Few colleges offer all the supports listed on page 6, and many of the supports that are available target specific groups. Because of these limitations, colleges vary dramatically in terms of the supports they offer, and to whom.

Not only is funding scarce, but support services, to the extent that community colleges make them available, are almost always reserved for students in the for-credit side of a college (Liebowitz & Taylor 2004). The services are thus inaccessible to the large population of low-skilled adults who are enrolled in adult education and noncredit workforce programs. In some states, the K-12 systems run ABE programs, which are not connected with any college-based supports. Even when adult education is offered by colleges—either because the community college system administers WIA Title II or because the college itself is a contracted provider of services—students rarely are considered "college students." Therefore, low-skilled adult students (and students in noncredit workforce programs, in general) rarely have access to services for "regular" college students—not just support services but also email accounts, library cards, or college-sponsored events. (Some of these students can use services provided in their own departments.)

Some colleges have found that the support services they offered to developmental education students—generally the only low-skilled group to qualify for on-campus supports—were not designed for students with profound academic deficiencies. As one college reported to *Breaking Through* researchers in 2008, "Administrative and academic counseling supports are designed with a traditional college student in mind." These supports focus on academics, through tutoring and drop-in learning centers. While important, they cannot address the major life challenges many students face.

Many *Breaking Through* colleges have focused on improving the support services offered to students in remedial programs. The strategies, although varied, generally fall into three categories:

- > Connecting students with campus services previously unavailable to nontraditional students;
- > Partnering with external entities for the provision of support services; and
- > Creating essential supports in-house for the *Breaking Through* target population.

# Tacoma Community College, Washington

## INTEGRATING ADULT BASIC EDUCATION INTO THE COLLEGE

Tacoma Community College's *Breaking Through* efforts integrate with Washington State's I-BEST program. In the I-BEST program, instruction is accelerated by placing two instructors, one remedial and one technical, in the same classroom to concurrently teach academic and technical skills. Through TCC's participation in *Breaking Through*, it recognized the importance of providing comprehensive support services. Because of TCC's efforts, basic skills students in the I-BEST program now have access to a wide range of supports, including a support-services specialist who provides intensive, intrusive advising and also serves as a single point of contact for campus-based resources.

Before 2007, however, a number of barriers lessened students' access to support services:

- The basic skills office was hard to find and felt separate from the rest of the campus. Basic skills students did not see themselves as part of the college, and they were unlikely to seek out campus-based support services.
- Support staff at the college assumed that basic skills students did not qualify for support services because they did not pay tuition.
- The assessment center had little connection to the basic skills office. Many students who were referred to basic skills after taking the entrance test never bothered to go to the office; instead, they gave up on enrolling altogether.

During campus remodeling in 2007, TCC staff saw an opportunity to physically integrate the basic skills department with support services. Integration was pitched and adopted quickly as a cost-saving measure: basic skills could share material and labor costs with support services and assessments. Now the basic skills offices are located in the same building as other campus advisors, financial aid services, and other supports.

Basic skills lost three classrooms in this process, but that was beneficial: now students take classes in the same buildings as for-credit students, and they feel much more connected to the college.

Tacoma's approach to providing access to supports hinges on improving the connections between basic skills and the for-credit side of the college:

- Get involved with committees and campus initiatives: At TCC, this level of interaction highlighted what students in basic skills/I-BEST were accomplishing.
- Clarify for support staff on the for-credit side what services could and should be available to noncredit students.

Build relationships with staff from all campus services: TCC felt that having a support-services specialist or success coach serving in this capacity was ideal. It gives students a single point of contact with the campus resources they may need.

Help basic skills students understand what services they can access. At TCC, having the basic skills offices in the same building as support offices sends a signal to students that those services are also available for them.

TCC's remodeling improved the connection between basic skills and the rest of the college, and it increased student access to supports, but the support-services specialist is still essential. Intrusive support throughout the program helps keep students on track.

Start the session with an orientation that covers student expectations and available resources. Hold cohort meetings at least once a semester.

Advise students before, during, and after the program.

Keep in touch with faculty; have them alert the program staff to any student issues they notice.

Have an open-door policy.

Even though colleges and basic skills programs rarely have the chance to do strategic remodeling, the process that Tacoma engaged in can be used to build general support for programs.

Be part of committees, talk about your program and your students whenever possible, and share evidence of success.

Show how your initiative will benefit the rest of the college, whether by saving costs or by increasing overall revenue.

Find out what assumptions are made about serving your students, and dispel any myths.

## CONNECTING STUDENTS WITH EXISTING SERVICES AT *BREAKING THROUGH* COLLEGES

Many *Breaking Through* colleges make on-campus services available to noncredit, ABE, and developmental education students. The colleges seek to ensure that existing resources are available for their students and that students are aware of and connected with those resources.

**Cuyahoga Community College's** *Breaking Through* director works directly with *Breaking Through* students to help them secure resources within or outside the college. Program staff automatically refer students to counseling and student affairs and make sure that these departments know which *Breaking Through* students are utilizing their services. Cuyahoga's counseling department offers a variety of workshops, advertising them online and in print. Students in all programs must attend 20 hours of workshops, and staff have the instructor sign off students on the attendance list.



**Tip:** Stress the importance of the intake process, which includes assessing students, discussing their goals, and finding out what life challenges they face.

**Lake Michigan College** connects students who are TANF recipients in their noncredit career pathways programs with the campus's TRIO programs, which provide tutoring, guidance, and other supports. The Educational Opportunity Center can help students 19 and older who are not currently enrolled in college-level courses to fill out applications, complete financial aid forms, and register for courses at a college of their choice. Instructors and staff in the noncredit programs make referrals. TRIO staff also conduct "lunch and learn" sessions with program participants.

**Portland Community College** program staff ensure that students have regular access to tutoring either by helping them navigate the drop-in tutoring centers or by setting up one-on-one tutoring sessions. PCC has funding available specifically for providing access to tutors who work with students on building academic or study skills, using computers as needed when students require extra help.

## PARTNERING WITH EXTERNAL ORGANIZATIONS

Some colleges have found that strong external partnerships are essential for providing students with necessary academic, social, and material supports. In some cases, community-based organizations provide services that are beyond the capacity of the college, such as bilingual case management and job placement services.

**North Shore Community College** has a longstanding partnership with the North Shore Community Action Program and Operation Bootstrap. These organizations serve many of the cities in the college's service area and often serve as a pipeline to the college. They can advise students on issues such as housing or child care and often have more expertise in these areas than does the college. Teachers and advisors at the college refer students to the agencies. While there is no formal process for evaluating the benefits of the partnerships, students do report back that the services were helpful. North Shore Community Action also partnered with the college to apply for a grant from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation to help students who have received their GED transition to postsecondary training programs through contextualized developmental coursework in health and human services. For this program, which can serve 15 GED graduates each session, the college provides the curriculum and academic support (through ALEKS, a Web-based math program), while NSCAP hires staff and provides advising and support services.

**Southeast Arkansas College** partners with the Southern Good Faith Fund, a local community-based organization, to provide a variety of support services for *Breaking Through* students, with a focus on increasing financial stability. Qualifying students (eligibility for many of these programs is income based) get access to career and financial counseling and can take financial literacy classes, set up Individual Development Accounts (matched savings funds), and get help preparing tax returns. The college and the CBO share responsibility and ownership for student retention and developed well-established roles and responsibilities from the outset of their partnership. Students can access these services on their own, but the college often refers them to the fund. The college follows up with students to find out if the services they accessed were helpful; in most cases they are. The credit counseling helped two SEARK students keep their homes, and the free tax assistance helped many students get their refunds without having to pay the exorbitant lending fees often associated with rapid-refund services.

**Davidson County Community College** has a strong and long-standing partnership with its local Workforce Investment Board. For eligible students, Workforce Investment Act funds pay for books and tuition (which the college bills to the WIB), along with paying for child care and transportation, which are provided directly to the students. The local One-Stop Career Center is also a source of part-time work for many students.

## PROVIDING ESSENTIAL SUPPORT SERVICES IN-HOUSE

Many *Breaking Through* colleges decided that it made sense to create their own services, going beyond providing access to existing programs. In some cases, the college did not currently offer the services; in others, external providers could not give the college's students access to the services they needed. For example, if a learning center were open only during the day or focused on higher-level coursework, a *Breaking Through* program might create a learning center with evening hours and additional supports for program students. In other cases, programs created learning communities—which are typically reserved for first-time, full-time students—specifically for students in remedial programs. In addition, some programs found it essential to develop material supports, such as emergency funds or food pantries, for their noncredit students.

**Community College of Denver** has adopted a learning communities approach for students in its FastStart@CCD accelerated developmental education program. These learning communities integrate academic, social, and career supports through formal and informal learning activities, including experiential learning opportunities. Students are encouraged to learn collaboratively and to help one another. Faculty members are critical in supporting and nurturing this community of students because of the demands of an accelerated program. During the intake interview, a case manager assesses the student's motivation and ability to succeed in this type of learning format. FastStart instructors attend group study times with their students throughout the semester, and the students can receive additional instruction and support from both their instructors and their peers.

**LaGuardia Community College's** GED Bridge Program creates learning communities by using a cohort model in offering GED instruction and postsecondary transitional services and counseling. In the classroom, students learn to collaborate and rely on their peers as they work in small groups and pairs to complete academic assignments and college knowledge activities. Once they see the benefits of collaboration, many students choose to form study groups, a practice they continue to utilize in credit-level courses. Programmatically, a team of academic counselors offers individual postsecondary educational counseling through a range of activities, including in-class seminars, and on topics such as career planning and college knowledge. The college advisor counsels students explicitly about learning communities, and the students generally choose to enroll in a learning community if it fits their schedules. LaGuardia Community College offers learning communities for students majoring in three academic areas: allied health, liberal arts, and business and technology.

**North Shore Community College** enrolls cohorts of older, working adults in its Child Development Associate certificate program. Many of these students are English language learners who speak the same native language and have similar career goals, which can give them a source of support. The members of a cohort group generally stay together for all their coursework, but the program is flexible enough to accommodate students who need to stop out for a semester or take additional remedial courses. Because students are most often Spanish speakers returning to school after many years, their common challenges provide an immediate bond that facilitates the building of a peer support network. Students who speak the same native language can also provide one another with informal language and literacy support.

**Dorcas Place**, in conjunction with the Community College of Rhode Island, operates a Learning Resource Center for students in its community-based developmental education classes. The center is easily accessible for students who live or work in the neighborhood. In addition, two mobile labs can be moved to any room at Dorcas Place, giving students access to the center's resources even if the regular computer lab is occupied. The portable labs can also be split up and used by different classes simultaneously, allowing for greater flexibility in their use for student support.

**Owensboro Community & Technical College's** Workforce Solutions division (its customized workforce-training unit) offers students one-on-one service, going beyond what the college enrollment center can offer. Because Owensboro's workforce-training programs are articulated to credit-level programs and offer college credit, students are eligible for federal financial aid; to see that students get the financial supports they need, staff help workforce development students complete the applications for federal financial aid or local Workforce Investment Board funding. The college's foundation can also provide emergency funds for transportation, health, and child care needs to assist these students in workforce-training courses. At SkillTrain, Owensboro's adult education center, workforce-training students can access Web-based courses and tutorials (e.g., KeyTrain) that address their specific learning needs.

At **Davidson County Community College**, on-campus tutoring is reserved for credit-level students. However, a VISTA volunteer helped the adult education department organize other VISTA volunteers engaged by the college, many of whom are interested in pursuing education careers, to tutor students in lower-level classes. Volunteers tutor up to 20 hours per week during class instruction time. They focus on content areas where they have some expertise and comfort; however, all volunteer tutors receive training from the Adult Education department on teaching strategies. About 25 to 30 students receive tutoring each semester; those needing tutoring are identified by their teachers and, if the student agrees, are paired for one-on-one instruction.

**Central New Mexico Community College** purchases books for its *Breaking Through* students. Many of these students are on TANF or coming out of incarceration and unable to afford books. Outreach efforts through the Achievement Center, coaches, and student word-of-mouth emphasized this benefit of *Breaking Through* program and facilitated recruitment. While purchasing books is a common practice for students in specific grant-funded programs at CNM, other adult education students also have access to books the school owns. Coenrollment in the Annie E. Casey Foundation-funded Centers for Working Families also allows students to benefit from emergency scholarship dollars (e.g., emergency stipends, food vouchers, transportation subsidies, child care) to be used for unplanned expenses. (*For more information about the Center for Working Families, see: [www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/FamilyEconomicSuccess/CentersforWorkingFamilies.aspx](http://www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/FamilyEconomicSuccess/CentersforWorkingFamilies.aspx).*)

## Providing Advisors or Coaches

A number of colleges that applied to participate in *Breaking Through* noted that the strategy of increasing the availability or intensity of support services was necessary but insufficient. Based on their experience with the students whom *Breaking Through* targets, they reported that responsibility for student success had to be assigned to one or more college staff members. As one college reported, "You don't always know a student has a problem until it is too late. The student wants to drop out and doesn't realize the options."

Many participating colleges felt that "intrusive" advising would be essential because of the serious mismatch between the personal skills and experiences of low-skilled adults and the design of the modern college. As Nan Poppe, campus president at Portland Community College, argued in 2004:

*Our college is like a smorgasbord: we offer a huge number of options to students; look how thick our course catalogue is. We assume that our students have clear goals and know how to use the catalogue to find the courses they need and enroll in them in the proper order to reach their goals. In fact, many of our students don't have clear goals, don't understand what's in the catalogue, and don't know that they should seek help to figure all this out. We need a more intrusive form of advising that doesn't sit back and wait for students to seek it out.*

Poppe and her colleagues at a number of other *Breaking Through* colleges were responding to a movement in higher education toward the more intrusive, proactive approach to advising (NACADA Clearinghouse 2009). Over time, a variety of titles for this role have emerged at *Breaking Through* colleges: achievement coach, success coach, peer mentor. Regardless of the name, the staff members' responsibilities draw upon two traditional roles: mentoring and case management.

The idea of a mentor is as old as Homer's epics: when Odysseus left for the Trojan War, he placed his son Telemachus in the care of Mentor. Modern interest in the concept coalesced in the 1970s, when scholars interested in developing better doctors or business managers proposed purposeful mentoring, sponsored by professional groups such as medical associations or business firms (Barondess 1995). Concurrently, Albert Bandura, in developing his social learning theory, suggested that people learn from modeled behavior, and the emerging field of "youth development" was discovering the importance of positive role models (Abbot 2009; Benard 1995). Researchers and practitioners drew on growing evidence of the benefits of mentoring to see if adult mentors could steer wayward young people toward better lives. The value of mentoring was brought home by evaluations of the Quantum Opportunities Program for at-risk youth in the mid-1990s. They found strong positive outcomes for the program and identified one major contributing factor: the provision of "caring adults for sustained periods of time," whose role included encouragement, visits, follow-up, and "doing everything they could to keep [young people] in the program" (American Youth Policy Forum 1994; 1997).

Strategies for adapting the mentoring role to adults followed, especially in connection with programs designed to help recipients of public assistance navigate the world of employment. In recent years, adult mentoring programs have been developed for TANF recipients, participants in literacy programs and selected business enterprises, and people leaving prison. (*For more information on how mentoring strategies have been applied to varied types of adult populations, see: Bauldry, et. al. 2009; Braddix 2000; Sherman et. al. 2000; Adult Student Advocacy Program 2009; Mentor 2009.*)

Case management is often seen as an alternative way to creating a structured, supportive relationship. The role of case manager has a long history in the profession of social work, shaped by formal postsecondary education programs and departments. Case managers are represented by a national organization, the National Association of Social Workers, and their work is guided by agreed-upon standard practices and procedures. The core mission of the social worker—"to develop and maintain a therapeutic relationship with a client"—resembles the vision of the caring and dedicated mentor and, as such, provides a model for *Breaking Through* colleges seeking effective approaches to working with students who have multiple challenges to succeed in postsecondary education (Case Management Standards Work Group 1992).

Colleges drew on the ideas of both the mentor and the case manager to shape the role they established for the success coach or *Breaking Through* advisor. While the names and job descriptions have varied from college to college, the overarching goal is the same: to have someone focused on helping students to surmount many barriers. Coaches can assess students' goals, needs, and challenges, and they can create learning plans that are tailored to students' unique needs. Coaches are "intrusive": rather than wait for students to seek them out, they check in with students proactively. In addition, they act as liaisons to employers and to services on and off campus. A number of colleges chose to create advising or coaching positions as part of the *Breaking Through* initiative.



**Tip:** Ensure that advisors are proactive in connecting students with available support services; don't assume that students will connect on their own.

## PROVIDING MENTORING AND ADVISING AT *BREAKING THROUGH* COLLEGES

At **Central New Mexico Community College**, an achievement coach housed in the School of Adult and General Education gets to know *Breaking Through* students from the outset and supports them in meeting academic and life challenges. Achievement coaches help students address any barriers that may be keeping them from reaching their academic goals; they provide a variety of services, ranging from recruitment and intake to helping students transition into credit-level coursework. They are involved with the recruitment process: they do presentations at TANF sites and the local One-Stop Career Centers, as well as in developmental education classes. They work with students on registration, enrollment, and assessing needs. They ask students to fill out questionnaires about external needs (e.g., transportation, child care, housing) that could hinder their educational progress. The coaches also help students to utilize a printed and online brochure and to access resources in the community. Accessing an achievement coach's services is voluntary; some students see a coach just once, while others may meet with their coaches every week.

In addition to supporting students while they are in the *Breaking Through* program, achievement coaches help with the transition into higher-level courses. They work with each student to create a plan based on his or her occupational and educational objectives. While students can access other achievement coaches once they are at the college level, they often return to the *Breaking Through* coaches with whom they have developed a relationship. Nonetheless, all achievement coaches receive training to help students obtain the same services no matter whom they contact. For example, coaches help adult education and developmental education students access the financial counseling, community referrals, legal services, and planning for academic success available through the Casey Foundation-funded Center for Working Families, which is fully integrated into CNM's Achievement Center, a "one-stop shop" of student supports.

At **Owensboro Community & Technical College**, a success coach housed in the Workforce Solutions division works with small learning cohorts of adult education students, dislocated workers, and incumbent workers seeking further training. This full-time staff person provides academic and life coaching assistance, helps students with navigating college functions, mentors students, tracks their program progression, and intervenes when crises emerge. The counselor also identifies and addresses institutional roadblocks that might impede student success.

In Owensboro's nursing program, the success coach helps students solve or mitigate the impact of crises in their lives. One important role is to help students explore and analyze all of their options so that they can persist in school. The coach also understands the hospital, the nursing program, and the goals of *Breaking Through* and can act as a liaison between departments and intervene with supervisors.

In assisting workers dislocated by the recession, Owensboro has realized that these students need help in both coming to terms with being out of work and navigating college bureaucracies. Success coaches guide these students on appropriate career pathways, review funding options, fill out required forms, and help them transition into short-term, credentialed academic programming.

**Portland Community College**, with a focus on expanding student services campuswide, has used *Breaking Through* as an opportunity to pilot "intensive and intrusive" advising. Half-time advisors at each of four campuses work with students to provide supports, such as regularly checking with students to help them overcome barriers to persistence and aiding them in developing career and education plans. Advisors also work closely with students to address specific academic needs, such as math or English as a second language. (*For more on Portland's work in advising, see "Scaling Up" on page 21.*)

At **Tacoma Community College**, a full-time student-support specialist is the primary contact and source of support for students in the I-BEST program. This person connects with staff from all of the college's student-service areas, including admissions, financial aid, counseling, advising, and any other departments students might need to access.

The student-support specialist meets with each student at least twice a semester for educational planning and comprehensive advising. Instructors also alert the specialist if they notice any issues with students in class.

**Cuyahoga Community College's** career support specialist plays the role of case manager. Because her work and the college's *Breaking Through* program both focus on health care, the specialist assists with job placement as well. She is connected with many local employers and represents the community college at Workforce Investment Board meetings.

Full-time college employees also act as volunteer mentors for *Breaking Through* students. Each mentor works with up to seven students, connecting with them every two weeks. Mentors have a calendar with check-in points, associated topics, and items they should discuss. For example, during midterm exams, a mentor might talk with students about preparing for the tests and make sure they are not overwhelmed.

A counselor at **South Piedmont Community College** provides a "ready-for-college" seminar on career assessments, financial aid, and other campus resources. The counselor also serves as the liaison that connects students in ABE or human resource development (continuing education) with further education and training.



**Tip:** Take time to find the right person for the achievement/success coach role—someone with training, strong academic qualifications, and good interpersonal skills, as well as knowledge about community and workforce resources and the ability to connect students with those resources as needed.

## Training College Staff

A significant development for *Breaking Through* came early in the demonstration phase as the new *Breaking Through* advisors and coaches, many of whom were hired through their institutions' academic advisor classification, confronted and were often overwhelmed by the variety and depth of their students' life challenges. This led the colleges and the initiative leaders to rethink the role of advisor and to consider a significant investment in preparing advisors for the complex tasks awaiting them.

The advisors and their colleagues identified a range of characteristic challenges their students were encountering, such as:

- > Students could not hand in homework because they had been evicted from their homes and were sleeping in their cars.
- > Students were skipping class to attend parole hearings.
- > Students were not attending class because a child or parent had been diagnosed with a serious illness and there was no one else to take care of them.

The frequency and magnitude of such problems led to two major program-design dilemmas. First, most advisors had no idea how to help with certain situations (e.g., finding emergency housing, locating resources for families in need, or dealing with the criminal justice system). Second, the approaches they improvised—loaning students money, personally searching for emergency shelter, driving them to parole appointments, and more—were leading to stress and burnout for themselves.

### DEVELOPMENT OF THE *BREAKING THROUGH* ADVISOR TRAINING PROGRAM

Portland Community College found the challenge of advisor training particularly acute: the college had designed its entire *Breaking Through* demonstration around the advisor model. The college had hired “MOTT (Moving on Towards Tomorrow) advisors” to support *Breaking Through* students at each of its four campuses. As one program manager commented, “Our advisors know a lot about which courses students have to take to obtain our certificates and degrees—but that wasn’t what our MOTT students needed to know. Our advisors had no idea how to address the issues raised by our MOTT students.”

Program leaders at Portland Community College decided to invest in a solution described at a *Breaking Through* peer learning meeting: training in case management. At the peer learning meeting, Gloria Hatcher-Mays talked about her work with the Seattle Jobs Initiative, where she had developed a “Case Management, Best Practices, and Standards” manual for case managers at community-based organizations. Portland Community College staff recognized that their own colleagues could benefit from the guide in assisting low-income students, and the college used a portion of its *Breaking Through* funding to hire Hatcher-Mays to collaborate with PCC counselor Catherine Sills on adapting the case management guide, producing *The Advisor Training Manual: A Curriculum for Helping Today’s Community College Students Succeed*.

Portland Community College played a major role not only in developing but also in testing the revised manual and its encapsulated curriculum that serves as the “textbook.” At the same time, the *Breaking Through* team at Jobs for the Future found that other community colleges felt a similar need to better prepare their success coaches and advisors. *Breaking Through* committed funding to make the manual and training applicable and available to all community colleges. This version was tested through training sessions for *Breaking Through* colleges, and a number of *Breaking Through* colleges now use it.

The resulting *Breaking Through Advisor Training Program* is based on a “train-the-trainer” model. Interested colleges each send one staff member to a customized workshop series, organized by *Breaking Through*. Each workshop focuses on how to meet schools’ and students’ specific needs and how to train advisors most efficiently. The workshops generally target a college’s advising supervisor, department chair, or dean—a person who knows the campus and students well. The leader who attends uses the information, along with an accompanying toolkit, to train college advisors, teachers, and others at home who could benefit. *Breaking Through* also provides post-workshop support. By helping advisors do their jobs better, the training alleviates some of the stress and pressures they face on a daily basis and enables them to help more students succeed.

The training comprises of three seminars, each of which consists of three to five modules. The modular format allows each institution to choose the material that is most applicable to its needs; there is a recommended order for presenting the modules, but facilitators can adapt the material as appropriate to their audiences and time limitations. It is also recommended that facilitators use guest speakers for a number of topics where expert information is beneficial. The final section of the manual contains all the resource materials needed to conduct the training—PowerPoint slides, case studies, role plays, worksheets, and supplemental reading lists. See page 3.17 for an outline of the training modules and sample page.

The training program is designed to benefit anyone working with low-income, low-skilled populations. It builds upon skills that staff already possess, giving them practical information, tools, and resources for working with nontraditional students. They also learn specific strategies, such as helping students identify reasonable goals and designing step-by-step plans to meet them. One of the important lessons in the training is the importance of building students’ abilities to solve their own problems. Rather than allowing their students to become dependent on them, coaches must build students’ resilience and independence.

Participants at *Breaking Through* advisor-training seminars have included a range of community college personnel, from vice presidents to instructors to academic advisors. Some participants attend because they plan to lead training sessions upon returning to their college; others are interested in learning how to work with their own students better. In evaluations, most have said they welcome the clear framework for understanding the needs of low-income, low-skilled adults.

See the *Supplemental Materials* for more information on how to access the Community College Adviser Training Package.



**Tip:** Train support-services staff in strategies for building students’ abilities to solve their own problems. This will help students move from dependency to responsibility.

## Recommended Order for the Training

### SEMINAR A. STUDENT NEEDS AND REFERRALS

#### **Module 1: Changing Student Profiles**

This module provides an introduction to an institution's changing student demographics and the resulting impact on student retention, the students the institution serves, and the challenges faced by community college staff.

#### **Module 2: Defining Advising Roles**

This module focuses on the variety of roles played by those who provide advising to students. It addresses the commonalities in their work, leading to the creation of a generic definition of the advising role that is applicable for all job titles and categories.

#### **Module 3: Barriers to Student Success**

Key topics focus on the various barriers faced by changing student populations. Topics may include homelessness, domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health, and others. One or more field experts serve as guest speakers.

#### **Module 4: Poverty and its Effects**

This module explores how the culture of poverty affects academic success and provides strategies for use in advising low-income students. A field expert serves as guest speaker.

### SEMINAR B. ADVISOR TOOL KIT

#### **Module 1: Cultural Competence**

This module explores cultural differences and effective approaches in working with a diverse student population. A field expert serves as guest speaker.

#### **Module 2: Effective Communication**

This module presents communication styles and practical communication skills that will help in understanding how to develop rapport and work effectively with students.

#### **Module 3: Boundaries/Accountability**

Participants enhance their understanding of personal boundaries and individual accountability in student advising relationships.

#### **Module 4: Motivating Students**

This module presents an introduction to the theory of motivational interviewing, as well as tools to motivate students toward a plan of action. A field expert serves as guest speaker.

#### **Module 5: Self-Care**

Facilitators and participants collaborate on a workshop that focuses on the issues of alleviating job stress and avoiding burnout.

### SEMINAR C: PARTNERSHIPS

#### **Module 1: Student Needs Assessment**

This module focuses on the elements and tools necessary to conduct a comprehensive student needs assessment. It is designed for staff and faculty who may see a student only once or as part of an ongoing caseload.

#### **Module 2: Student Action Plan**

This module provides a method for creating a student action plan to facilitate student success. It is designed primarily for faculty and staff who carry an ongoing student caseload.

#### **Module 3: Documentation**

Participants review the purposes of documenting contacts with students and learn guidelines for writing notes with thoroughness and clarity.

#### **Module 4: Financial Literacy for Low-Income Students**

This module provides an overview of financial barriers for low-income students who are not receiving federal aid and explores how economic issues affect retention. It includes information about financial resources available locally.

## SESSION BREAKDOWN

### Module 4: Financial Literacy for Low-Income Students 3–4 hours

Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify and address nonacademic financial barriers to student success</li><li>• Learn about off-campus resources available to meet a variety of student financial needs</li></ul>
Facilitator Role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Brief introduction of topic</li><li>• Introduction of guest speaker*</li><li>• Summarize the module, relating it to previous and future modules</li></ul> <p>* Guest speakers will be knowledgeable individuals from the local area. They will provide presentation, activities, and materials. The facilitator might wish to collaborate with the speaker.</p>
 Presentations/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <u>Icebreaker</u></li></ul>
 Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Get from guest speaker</li></ul>
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• PowerPoints: To be determined by facilitator; include LCD projector, screen, and laptop if necessary</li><li>• White board, easel Post-it pads, markers, table tents</li></ul>
Handouts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Get from expert</li><li>• <u>Module Evaluation Form</u></li><li>• Resources: <i>List of Community Resources for Financial Help, Energy Assistance, Community Clinics, Food Vouchers/Banks, Housing, etc.</i></li><li>• <u>Reading List</u></li></ul>
Setup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tables in U format, with front table for facilitator; PowerPoint projection capability</li><li>• Easel sheets and markers at front of room</li><li>• Table tents and markers on participant tables</li></ul>

### Facilitator Wrap-up

- Summarize main points
- Check in with agenda items
- Preview next modules to be presented
- Have participants complete evaluation forms

# Forsyth Technical Community College, North Carolina

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR ALL STAFF

Forsyth Technical Community College's *Breaking Through* goal was to better support continuing education students as they moved from noncredit coursework to for-credit, college-level work. *Breaking Through* students were already part of the college but needed better advising as they transitioned to college.

Forsyth started with a model to create a for-credit curriculum under a Title III grant. However, it needed to take additional steps to make the program effective for students on the college's noncredit side. To improve retention and success rates, program staff realized that it would be essential to transform the way all personnel interact with students.

- Expand the definition of "advisors":** Continuing education staff were not used to seeing themselves as advisors. The college had to build the understanding among staff that students could look to everyone they would encounter as a source of advice.
- Provide training to all staff on working with low-income, low-skilled, nontraditional students:** The *Breaking Through* Advisor Training was a valuable tool in providing professional development to college and continuing education staff. Rather than just train official advisors, Forsyth built all staff members' capacity to advise students.
- Use data to track success:** Forsyth's data system allows it to track students from point of entry, through transitions, to point of exit. The college uses that data to assess the effectiveness of its initiatives, including increased student supports, and to make improvements accordingly.

The increased focus on student advising began in 2007. By 2009, campuswide buy-in and support for the *Breaking Through* initiative had made it likely the effort would be sustained beyond the initial grant.

Forsyth suggests that program developers begin with their end goal in mind. If you know where you want to go, these key steps will help you get there:

- Gain buy-in on both sides of the college:** It is essential for this type of initiative to work. College leadership support is also essential. For example, the support of the vice president was critical when Forsyth asked faculty members to expand their role from teacher to advisor.
- Develop working groups to help with implementation:** College leaders can help identify the right people for these groups. A mix of faculty and staff from the credit and noncredit sides of the college is important.
- Position key people, knowledgeable about *Breaking Through* and working in various roles, to talk with college colleagues:** Conversations take place both formally and informally, on both the credit and noncredit sides, and at varied administrative levels. Be on college committees, and take the time to sell your ideas.
- Provide professional development, such as advisor training, to staff at all levels, including vice presidents from the for-credit and noncredit sides:** This increases awareness of the needs of the target population and creates ongoing support for the initiative.
- Combine funding sources to achieve common goals:** Continuing education staff collaborate with Title III-funded staff on the for-credit side to adapt one another's training ideas.

## Scaling Up Support Services: Case Study of Portland Community College

Portland Community College has invested significant resources in scaling up its *Breaking Through* demonstration project, which provided intensive support services in order to increase the number of developmental education students completing remediation and entering college-level courses. The core of PCC's scale-up is to assign a case manager to meet regularly with each developmental education student and to provide a college-success course for free. The goal is to make supports much more prescriptive and intensive throughout the college, because most students who need them do not seek them out on their own.

PCC designed its *Breaking Through* initiative, known as the MOTT (Moving On Towards Tomorrow) program, for students whose entrance tests showed a need for remedial coursework in both reading and math. For the first time, the college required such students to enroll in developmental education. The college also required remedial students to take the college-success course, in a group with similar students, and to receive ongoing case management to help with personal crises. Tutoring and other academic supports were available as well.

It worked. The 329 students who participated in *Breaking Through* generally persisted in college longer, completed more remedial courses, and earned more college credits than those who did not receive the program's intensive, front-loaded services. For example, 50 percent MOTT of students in 2006 and 2007, who all began the program with deficiencies in both reading and math, continued their enrollment from one fall to the next; the figure was 38 percent for new students in for-credit courses. Over the four terms included in the evaluation, a higher percentage of MOTT students completed one or more developmental courses than other entering noncredit students. MOTT students also had higher GPAs on average compared to non-MOTT noncredit students.

Portland Community College began to scale up *Breaking Through* practices in 2008 by making developmental education mandatory for all new students needing any amount of remediation. The idea is to communicate the importance of basic skills for each individual's future success. Previously, the college had left it up to students to choose whether to enroll in developmental courses, presuming that adults should make their own decisions. But the students who most needed remediation were not taking, or sticking with, developmental classes and later would drop out altogether. In the scaling-up phase, PCC hopes to reach all students who test into developmental education courses.

The college now assigns an advisor/case manager to each student. The advisors help students address personal problems and ensure that they are on track to start college-level courses within a reasonable time frame. Students must attend a certain number of appointments per year, and they cannot register for the next semester without meeting first with their advisors. The college provides tutoring and other services as needed.

Nan Poppe, president of the Extended Learning Campus at PCC, has spearheaded the expansion of support services for low-skilled adults. She says the college had to make tough choices about how much of its own money to spend on the program after the *Breaking Through* demonstration project ended in 2008. The PCC Executive Cabinet decided to allocate about \$450,000 in permanent funding to augment the student-services budget and to pay for mandatory advising—a huge sum in difficult economic times. PCC invested the funding in providing specialized advisors for all developmental education students and in making the college-success classes free to all. The college has accommodated everyone who wants to enroll, although financial constraints may limit the program in the future. PCC is also receiving \$40,000 per year for three years from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation to scale up this effort and document its outcomes.

According to Poppe, her colleagues were invested in the program based on the evidence of success: the *Breaking Through* demonstration tracked student outcomes, analyzed the data, and made adjustments on an ongoing basis. When college leaders saw that more students continued their enrollment after receiving support services, they knew this meant that more students would succeed—and that the college would retain more students. Improving the rate of transition from developmental education to for-credit programs is one of the key goals of the program. “It’s really important to make sure they get into developmental education,” Poppe says, “but also to help them get out” quickly and successfully.

Owing to budget limitations, Portland Community College has scaled back its initial scale-up of *Breaking Through* practices. It would have been prohibitively expensive to extend the broad range of supports from the demonstration project to accommodate all students referred to two developmental education classes. Instead, PCC is using its resources to support a much larger number of students but cutting back on the services available. For example, *Breaking Through* offered a tuition-free course on college study skills, along with a free college-success course. Now the college offers only the college-success course free, hoping students will then value this type of supplemental instruction enough to pay for the study-skills course.

It has been a challenging time to bring about a seismic philosophic shift on campus, but Poppe says it has been worth the effort. “We’ve been able to make some really significant institutional changes,” she says. “We’re early into it. . . . But generally now, the majority of people, whether it’s the administration or the faculty, are feeling pretty good about it.”

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