Building Pathways to Success for Low-Skill Adult Students: Lessons for Community College Policy and Practice From a Longitudinal Student Tracking Study

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According to the U.S. Census (2000), 42 percent of adults in the United States between the ages of 25 and 64 have no more than a high school education (authors’ calculations). Unfortunately, however, most new jobs and the vast majority of jobs that pay wages sufficient to support a family require at least some education beyond high school (Carnevale & Derochers, 2003), and low educational attainment is associated with high rates of unemployment and poverty.

Community colleges are an important entry point to postsecondary education for adults with no previous college education or even a high school diploma. In Fall 2002, for example, adults between the ages of 25 and 64 represented 35 percent of full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollments at two-year public colleges, compared with only 15 percent of FTE undergraduate enrollments at four-year public institutions (authors’ calculations, based on U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Moreover, more than two-thirds of the community college students who entered postsecondary education at age 25 or older were low income (authors’ calculations based on “Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study” [BPS:96/01], 2003) The potential of community colleges to serve as a “pathway” for low-skill adults to college and career-path employment, therefore, is evident. Across the nation, several major projects are underway whose goal is to develop policies and practices supportive of this role. Funded by national foundations, these initiatives include the Ford Foundation’s Bridges to Opportunity initiative and the National Governor’s Association’s Pathways to Advancement project, funded by Lumina Foundation for Education.

Despite this interest, relatively little is known about the unique experiences and the educational and employment outcomes of adults who enter community college with limited education. We do know that their experiences and outcomes differ from those of traditional college-aged students. Compared with community college students who enrolled soon after high school (at ages 18-24), those who start later (at ages 25-64) are more likely to earn a certificate and less likely to earn an associate degree. The late starters are also far less likely to transfer to a four-year institution and earn a bachelor’s degree. Indeed, among students who entered a community college for the first time in 1995-96, 60% of older first-time students did not earn any credential or transfer to a baccalaureate program after six years, compared with 40 percent of younger, first-time students (authors’ calculations, based on BPS:96/01, 2003).

This Brief summarizes findings from a new study that seeks to fill information gaps about older community college students. Researchers used student record information from the Washington State Community and Technical College System to examine the educational experience and attainment as well as the employment and earnings of a sample of adult students, five years after first enrolling. The students in the sample were age 25 or older with, at most, a high school education. The study was conducted by staff at the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), with assistance from the Community College Research Center, as part of Ford’s Bridges to Opportunity initiative. Its goal was to provide educators throughout Washington’s community and technical college system with a detailed profile of their low-skill adult students, who make up about one-third of the approximately 300,000 students served by the system annually. The study also sought to identify the critical points where adult students drop out or fail to advance to the next level in order to help SBCTC staff stimulate thinking among educators throughout the system about how to bridge those gaps and thereby facilitate student advancement.

Study Sample

The study’s data source was the system that the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges uses to track students in its 34 colleges. The database contains complete transcript information on every student who enrolls in college-credit or non-credit courses.

The study sample consisted of two SBCTC cohorts: first-time college students who were adults age 25 or older with a high school education or less and who started in 1996-97 or in 1997-98.
included in the cohorts were 18- to 24-year-old, first-
time students who lacked a high school diploma or
GED. These younger students were included because
by not graduating from high school and enrolling at a
community college, they had in effect entered the
adult labor market, whether or not they were
employed. The sample included students who
enrolled in college-credit (including college remedial
or “developmental”) or adult basic skills programs,
which include adult basic education (ABE), English as
a second language (ESL), and GED preparation. In
Washington State, adult basic skills programs are
provided through the community and technical
colleges. Together the two cohorts totaled 34,956
students, or about one-third of all students who
entered a community or technical college for the first
time in Washington State in the two baseline years.

Females comprised the largest share of the
student sample, reflecting a common pattern among
students in community colleges. Whites made up
more than half of the sample, and Latinos one-
quarter. Students between the ages of 25 and 29
comprised the largest group. Over 70 percent had
children; nearly one-quarter were single parents. Most
of the students were working or seeking work. A little
more than one-third were not in the labor force. The
majority of the low-skill adults were low income.

The starting education level of the students also
varied. Nearly one-third enrolled in an ESL program.
Slightly more than one-third did not have a high
school diploma and enrolled in adult basic education
or GED programs. Approximately one-third of the
students already had either a diploma or a GED.

Three-quarters of the high school diploma
holders, and nearly 80 percent of GED holders,
enrolled in occupational degree programs, reflecting
the high interest of adult students in occupational
programs. Forty percent of the students with a high
school diploma or GED also took at least one
developmental course. The majority of both GED and
diploma holders who enrolled in academic transfer
programs had to take at least one remedial course.

Study Findings

For both cohorts we used the transcript
information in the SBCTC student database to track
the educational progress of the different subgroups
(defined in terms of the students’ starting education
levels) five years after they entered a community or
technical college. We used Unemployment Insurance
wage record data from the Washington State
Employment Security Department to examine the
annual earnings of students five years after they
started.

Student Educational Attainment and Earnings
after Five Years

Only 13 percent of the students who started in
ESL programs went on to earn at least some college
credits. Less than one-third (30 percent) of adult
basic education (ABE/GED) students made the
transition to college-level courses. Only four to six
percent of either group ended up getting 45 or more
college credits or earning a certificate or degree
within five years. (Washington’s community and
technical colleges are on the quarter system, so 45
credits is equivalent to two full-time semesters of
coursework, or 30 credits in semester systems.)

Nearly 30 percent of the students who started
with a GED, and 35 percent of those who started with
a high school diploma, earned at least 45 credits or a
credential in five years. Fourteen percent of the
students who started with a GED, and 18 percent of
students who started with a high school diploma,
earned an advanced certificate or an associate
degree in five years.

Not surprisingly, the higher students’ educational
attainment after five years, the higher the wages they
earned on average. Compared with students who
earned fewer than ten college credits, those who took
at least one year’s worth of college-credit courses
and earned a credential had an average annual
earnings advantage: $7,000 for students who started
in ESL; $8,500 for those who started in ABE or GED;
and $2,700 and $1,700 for those entering with a GED
or high school diploma, respectively.

These findings are consistent with previous
research on the economic returns to a sub-
baccalaureate education. These studies show that
earning an occupational certificate (equivalent to two
semesters of full-time study) provides individuals with
a significant earnings advantage compared with
individuals with just some college but no degree,
although the magnitude of the advantage varies by
student gender and field of study (Bailey, Kienzl, &
Marcotte, in press; Grubb, 2002; Kienzl, 2004). These
studies have also found that the wage gains
associated with postsecondary education of less than
a year are negligible.

Advancement Beyond English as a
Second Language and Adult Basic Education

Only one percent of ESL students who started
with less than a high school education earned a GED
or high school diploma in five years. In all, 12 percent
went beyond ESL and enrolled in college-credit
courses. Of these, two-thirds had a high school
credential when they started in ESL. A much larger
group of ESL students continued in ESL; 14 percent
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A number of factors seem to be associated with a greater likelihood that students who start in ESL or ABE/GED will go on to succeed in college-level courses. A higher percentage of students who succeeded in earning a credential or completing at least 45 credits received financial aid than did students who did not do either. In addition, students who took developmental education after taking ESL or ABE/GED were more likely to earn a credential or at least 45 credits than were those who did not. Students who expected upfront that they would attend college a year or longer were more successful than were students who did not know upon enrollment how long they would attend or those for whom information on their expectations for college was not available.

Although financial aid and developmental education were associated with higher chances of success, many students who went beyond ESL or ABE/GED did not receive these supports. Only about 23 percent of students who transitioned from ESL, and 35 percent of those who transitioned from ABE, received financial aid when they enrolled in college-level courses. Only 28 percent of ESL students who transitioned, and 33 percent of transitioning ABE students, enrolled in developmental courses. Moreover, less then one-third of ESL and ABE/GED students expected to attend college for a year or more. About half (54 percent) of ESL students, and 47 percent of ABE/GED students, did not have clear plans or their intent was not ascertained.

Implications For Policy And Practice

This study of students in the Washington State Community and Technical College System finds evidence that attending college for at least one year and earning a credential provides a substantial boost in earnings for adults with a high school diploma or less who enter higher education through a community college. These findings are consistent with studies that have used nationally representative samples of community college students.

Short-term training, such as the type often provided to welfare recipients seeking to enter the workforce, may help individuals get into the labor market, but it usually does not help them advance beyond low-paying jobs. Neither does an adult basic skills education by itself nor a limited number of college-level courses provide much benefit in terms of either employment or earnings. Another recent study of Washington State community college students (Hollenbeck & Huang, 2003) found that adult basic skills programs had no impact on wages and had only a modest impact on average rates of employment in the long term (but not the short term). In contrast, individuals who went through community college occupational degree programs were eight percent more likely to be employed, and they earned over $4,400 per year more on average than did similar individuals in Washington’s labor force who did not enroll in any training program. Only individuals who took basic skills courses concurrently with vocational training enjoyed a significant benefit in average rates of employment and quarterly earnings.

Another study (Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board [WTECB], 2004), drawing on occupational forecasts by Washington State’s Employment Security Department, shows that not only do workers with at least a year of college and a credential earn substantially more than do those with just some or no college, but that they are in higher demand among employers, at least in Washington State.

The findings from all of these studies of Washington State indicate that community and technical colleges should consider making at least one year of college-level courses and earning a credential a minimum goal for the many low-skill adults they serve. While hundreds of low-skill adult students in our sample were able to achieve this threshold level of attainment in five years, many more did not. Eight out of ten students in ABE or ESL were able to make modest skill gains, at best earning a GED, but did not advance to college-level courses. Seven out of ten students who had a GED and took college-credit courses left with less (and often a lot less) than a year of college credit and no credential. This is also true for the more than two out of three students who had a high school diploma and took college courses.

To enable low-skill adults to achieve the threshold level of one year of college plus a credential or more, community colleges in Washington State and elsewhere should rethink their programs and services. For example, the study summarized here found that there are students—the 69 percent of ABE and ESL students who make the transition to college-level work with a high school diploma or GED in hand—who are eligible to receive financial aid and developmental education. These supports would make it two to three times more likely that they would earn a credential, but, at best, only one-third of these students receive them. Therefore, it would be useful for basic skills and developmental education faculty to work together to encourage students to take advantage of developmental courses and to work with counseling and student services staff to ensure that eligible students apply for financial aid.

In addition, support should be given to the far larger group of students who have or earn a high school diploma or GED but never go beyond basic skills in community college. More aggressive efforts to educate them about their college education opportunities, combined with “bridge programs” that ease their transition to college, might increase their enrollment and success in college-level programs.

Finally, since short-term training that is focused on getting low-skilled adults a job generally does not result in earnings gains over time when students do not continue their education, colleges could help students avoid dead-end starts by ensuring that
short-term training options lead to real educational attainment in the long term.

A commuter transit system that is run on the schedule of working adults and that can accommodate on-and-off traffic, but still makes connections to long-term destinations, may be an apt metaphor for an education system effective in serving low-skill adults. Such a system would provide a clear map of the educational pathways that students can follow to advance in their jobs and pursue further education, indicating where they can “stop out” of education for a time and reenter as they are able. The system would give students a lot of guidance and support so they do not get lost as they leave and re-enter college, and would allow adults to go farther and faster than they do in the conventional college system.

Rethinking existing community college programs to create more of an educational transit system has to be done collaboratively, involving faculty and staff from across the academic and administrative divisions or “silos” that characterize most community colleges and higher education institutions generally. The Washington State Community and Technical College System is taking steps to break down those silos by sharing the results of this study widely among its faculty, staff, and administrators. Member colleges interested in improving outcomes for low-skill adult students have been invited to organize teams from across their various divisions—basic skills, academic transfer (where developmental education is typically housed), workforce education, and student services—to reflect on the state-level data from this study and on similar data from their own colleges. The aim is to encourage these cross-divisional teams to eliminate roadblocks to advancement and create pathways to educational and economic success for their many low-skill adult students.

References


This Brief was developed at the Community College Research Center (CCRC), Teachers College, Columbia University. It was drawn from a longer report entitled Building Pathways to Success for Low-Skill Adult Students: Lessons for Community College Policy and Practice from a Statewide Longitudinal Tracking Study, which may be ordered from CCRC. Funding for this research was generously provided by the Ford Foundation through grants to the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges for the Bridges to Opportunity initiative and to the Community College Research Center for research on the role of community colleges in improving access and attainment by low-income and minority students.

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