

# Adults Must Be College-Ready Too

## ABE-to-College Transition Project Inspires Lives

BLENDA J. WILSON

Most people think of “college readiness” as an issue for teenagers. I want you to hear the voices of adults whose lives have been changed by their enrollment in a set of innovative college readiness programs geared toward adults. These women and men have overcome obstacles between them and college that they believed were insurmountable—fear, inadequate academic preparation, lack of information about college and academia’s expectations, lack of confidence.

Until the 1970s, a high school diploma or its equivalent, the GED, was seen as terminal, sufficient preparation for a good job and a middle-class life. The economy has changed dramatically. Today, adults with only a high school education are seriously handicapped in the job market and are hard-pressed to take care of a family, have choices and keep a safe distance from the poverty line. New England’s economy will be handicapped unless we help those adults find their way into college.

About six years ago, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, in partnership with the New England Literacy Resource Center (NELRC), created a grant initiative to support adult basic education (ABE)-to-college programs.

The ABE-to-College Transition Project is designed to inspire and support adult GED recipients, many of whom have been out of school for a while, to pursue postsecondary education. The project creates a bridge to college for capable but underprepared adult learners. The women and men who have enrolled in ABE-to-college transition programs struggle with many barriers including academic preparation and challenging lives. It is a testament to their desire to achieve and create a better life for themselves and their families that they took the risk to prepare for college.

“A lot of these students have internalized a belief that that they are not worthy or capable,” says Reno James, the foundation vice president who manages the ABE-to-College Project. “They don’t just need to acquire skills; they need to believe that they can achieve.”

Consider the case of Carline Lesperance of Manchester, N.H., who had worked in a hospital office job for a few years in her 20s when she decided to go to college: *“It wasn’t easy to get a job with just a high school diploma, at least a good job, a job where you weren’t a peon. I had had it by then as a secretary. But I had always concentrated on what I couldn’t do, and that held me back.”*

Or listen to Katrina Jones of New Haven, Conn., a single mother of four who was living with her mother, when her

boss urged her to consider college: *“I was like, I don’t know if I’m as academic as I thought I should be.”*

For students like Lesperance and Jones, going to college is entirely different from going to high school. Jessica Spohn, director of the center’s College Transition Project notes that the difference between studying for a GED and studying for college is “the difference between learning to look for right and wrong answers, and learning to be creative, learning for problem solving, learning for critical thinking.”

Another barrier for these adults is lack of knowledge about college and its expectations. These smart and capable adults did not know how to navigate the college admissions process or tap available financial aid resources. They could be overwhelmed by the academic expectations and intimidated by the foreign vocabulary of college. *“What is a syllabus, and do you have to read everything on it the first week?”* For young people who enrolled in college-prep courses, or whose parents went to college, these expectations may not be daunting. But “second-chance” adults, even when they have the ability and the drive to succeed in college, need more help.

Insufficient academic preparation is another barrier for some GED recipients. New England’s adult learners often need help refreshing their English and math skills and reorienting themselves away from rote learning toward critical thinking. ABE-to-college transition programs also help students learn to handle stress better, manage their time and become familiar with the culture of higher education. *“I was very much uncertain if I could handle being in nursing school. I really struggled with math,”* explains Marcia Samuels of Randolph, Mass.

The ABE-to-College Transition Project is a five-year funding commitment by the foundation to 25 ABE programs, based on their meeting annual performance goals. Each program commits to meeting rigorous standards and implementing a program strategy with explicit annual goals for recruitment, program planning, educational counseling and graduation results. However, the programs retain sufficient flexibility to meet the unique needs of their students and the relationships they have developed with more than 40 participating postsecondary institutions. NELRC provides technical assistance to individual programs and convenes the cluster as a whole to encourage peer learning and program improvement.

Just by listening to the students, we know our investment has been worthwhile. Hear 42-year-old Yalem Yihdego of Cambridge, Mass., the mother of three

children: *"I don't know how I can express how much the bridge program teaches! How to take notes on a lecture, how to apply for financial aid, how to apply for college, how to write an essay, how to be confident!"* After graduating from the Cambridge Community Learning Center Bridge to College Program, she is pursuing a bachelor's degree in environmental science at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Listen to Corinna Eaton of Surry, Maine, who at age 29 enrolled in the Summer College Transitions Project, and is now getting her bachelor's degree in social studies at the University of Maine: *"They give you everything you need, all the things I didn't know when I started [and dropped out of] college the first time. Things you wouldn't think would be a big deal, like: how do you get books out of the library? How do you open an email account?"*

Marcia Samuels found a college-prep program for adults in Boston's Dorchester section called the Odwin (an acronym for Opening Doors Wider in Nursing) Learning Center. Even with that support, when working on math, *"There were days when I would cry,"* she says. Today, having graduated from the transition program, the 40-year-old maintains a 90 average in nursing school, while her son completes a master's degree at Howard University.

These adults tell us over and over again that because of their teachers' unyielding support, they aim much higher now. *"The teachers at Odwin were awesome. Awesome! They really cared for you. They went the extra mile, they were not ordinary teachers, they wanted you to learn,"* says Samuels. *"There is not a day that goes by that I don't say to myself: Thank you, Odwin, thank you!"*

Katrina Jones says the college-transition program at New Haven Advanced Adult Education gave her "the boost" she needed. *"The instructors were so supportive that it encouraged me to continue on. They taught me how to communicate better with people, how to ask questions, challenge myself, and not be afraid of not getting the right answers."* After graduating from the program, Jones entered Gateway Community College with the goal of becoming a case worker in the public schools. She is currently enrolled at Southern Connecticut State University and has raised her sights, aiming at a master's degree in psychology.

We have been inspired by the many examples of how an investment in the potential of one adult can change the aspirations and trajectory for the entire family, a housing project or even a community. These students exemplify the most moving examples of accomplishment and resolve that I have ever known. Katrina Jones, for example, completed the college transition program while working full time, caring for her mother through a heart attack and quadruple bypass, and successfully

running for election as a city alderwoman! And talk about role models—her 24-year-old daughter holds a full-time job at Wachovia Bank and is pursuing a bachelor's degree; her son has completed an associate degree; and her middle-school daughter is taking AP math classes in high school. Both Corinna Eaton and Carline Lesperance report that their college success encouraged their husbands to go to college as well—after first completing the transition program, of course.

An independent external assessment of the project by Julia Gittleman of Mendelsohn, Gittleman & Associates confirmed that these investments in New England's workforce have been remarkably successful. Of the 2,532 students who have enrolled in the past five years, 63 percent successfully completed the program, and fully 90 percent have applied to or enrolled in postsecondary education. The study also revealed that the majority of these students—half of whom had a nontraditional high school credential—were working more than 35 hours per week while enrolled in the program, demonstrating the students' remarkable level of motivation, discipline and purpose.

Most foundations hope their successful grant programs will be sustained beyond the period of their funding, but that is rarely guaranteed. We already have good indications, however, that the Nellie Mae Education Foundation's and the states' investment in the ABE-to-College Transition Project has catalyzed funding into the future. Massachusetts currently funds 10 college transition programs; the state of Connecticut is funding nine; and Maine is seeking support from a national foundation to support three programs next year. Meanwhile, 38 states and four countries have joined the newly formed National College Transition Network, which, with leadership from NELRC, aims to help create and support ABE transition programs throughout the country.

The project's success was made possible by the tremendously talented and devoted ABE educators who believed in these students and understood the contribution they could make to our region. We hope that the programs' success will inspire many other states to include adult learners in their plans for achieving higher standards of educational attainment and a more competitive workforce. Listen to one last ABE-to-College success story from Carline Lesperance: *"I'm a lot more intelligent than I thought I was. I have more energy than I thought I did. Growing up, my parents didn't know about college. Not that they told me not to, but they just didn't know how important it was. But I learned that not only the Huxtables can go to college; I can too."*

---

**Blenda J. Wilson** is president and CEO of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. Email: [bwilson@nmefd.org](mailto:bwilson@nmefd.org).