

# Executive Summary

Launched in 2011, the Accelerating Opportunity (AO) initiative aims to help students who have low basic skills to earn valued occupational credentials, obtain well-paying jobs, and sustain rewarding careers. The model focuses on students who score between the 6th- and 12th-grade level in basic skill areas but who are interested in earning technical credentials. In particular, AO is designed for adult education students who lack high school diplomas or the equivalent. AO encourages states to change the delivery of adult education for these students by allowing community and technical colleges to enroll them in for-credit career and technical education (CTE) courses at the same time as they earn their high school credentials, improve their basic academic skills, or build their English language abilities. The CTE programs in which students enroll are structured as credit-bearing college and career pathways with enhanced support services. Each pathway must incorporate integrated instruction, which combines basic skills and technical training that is contextualized for the occupation targeted. This approach not only makes CTE courses accessible for students with low basic skills but also is intended to enhance the quality of instruction by having an adult education instructor “team-teach” with the CTE instructor. AO is also designed to change how states and colleges coordinate with government, business, and community partners by reforming policy and practice to make it easier for students with low basic skills to access and succeed in postsecondary education and the workforce.

Four states—Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, and North Carolina—received grants to begin implementing the AO model in the 2012 spring semester and oversaw the development of career pathways in 33 community and technical colleges. A fifth state—Louisiana—began implementation in the 2012 fall semester at nine additional colleges. While North Carolina left the initiative in late 2012, the initiative evolved and expanded in the continuing four states over its first two years. Seven new colleges joined the initiative and one left, resulting in 40 participating colleges by the end of the second year (though this report includes data for the college that left, making the total 41 colleges). These 41 colleges reported enrolling 5,244 students across both years, with a 21 percent increase in enrollment from the first year to the second. The colleges also were able to expand their pathway offerings, increasing from 89 unique pathways in the first year to 120 in the second year. This growth in colleges, pathway offerings, and number of students served allowed states to improve their capacity to meet students’ educational and employment needs. As of the end of the second year of implementation, colleges had awarded 6,248 credentials and 35,514 credits to AO students. Employers hired 1,629 students (almost a third of those served), and 84 percent of students were hired into jobs related to their AO training. These numbers do not represent AO impacts, but they are promising outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

Jobs for the Future (JFF) manages the initiative and partners with the National College Transition Network, the National Council for Workforce Education, and the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges to provide states with technical assistance. A consortium of foundations, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, the University of Phoenix Foundation, and the Open Society Foundations, has provided funding for the AO initiative.

As a part of a rigorous evaluation of the AO initiative, this report documents and assesses the first two years of the AO initiative in the four states active in both years. This period covers the spring 2012 to fall 2013 semesters in Illinois, Kansas, and Kentucky, and the fall 2012 to summer 2014 semesters in Louisiana. The data presented in this report come from a survey of all AO colleges, site visits to the participating states, program documentation, and quarterly calls with AO states and colleges. A report on a spring 2014 survey of AO participants complements this report and is being released concurrently (**Spaulding and Martin-Caughey 2015**). Together, these reports offer lessons for other states and colleges considering the AO model.

## Findings

The first two years of the AO initiative represented a period of growth and change for the states and colleges, as they came to understand this new model for serving low-skilled adults and learned how to implement AO effectively in their state and colleges. The findings in this report focus on the development of the initiative in the second year and on changes from the first year of implementation. For consistency in these comparisons, the detailed findings are limited to the 34 colleges that participated in AO across both years.

### **Colleges Aligned Pathway Offerings and Supports to Respond to Local Context, Particularly to Employers**

During the first year of the initiative, AO colleges worked intensively to roll out pathways quickly and build the necessary infrastructure and supports to deliver integrated instruction and team teaching. For instance, in the first year, when selecting the occupational areas that pathways would target, many institutions prioritized institutional factors, such as the support of CTE faculty for the AO model or enrollment requirements for certain pathways. By the second year of the initiative, states and colleges

had more experience with the AO model and could be more strategic about how pathway offerings could match the needs of both students and local employers. Manufacturing and health care remained the most common occupational areas, at 35 and 33 percent, respectively, of career pathways. With guidance from AO state teams, some colleges discontinued pathways in occupational areas that did not lead students to family-sustaining wages, and some created new pathways that they thought would better address local needs.

## **Students Were Satisfied with AO**

Students in focus groups said AO had been a positive experience for them. Most students noted that they had received assistance with enrolling in AO college classes and that they continued to receive supports while enrolled in classes. They saw the team teacher as an especially valuable support. Participating students were also interested in the AO occupational areas, and a number of students had found employment in their field of study. Others discussed plans to continue studying to achieve higher credentials. Much more information about student experiences can be found in Spaulding and Martin-Caughey (2015), which reports on results of the participant survey fielded in spring 2014.

## **Integrated Instruction and Team Teaching Methods Continued to Vary, but AO Instructional Pairs Grew More Adept at Implementation**

During the first year of the initiative, colleges prioritized training the first teams of CTE and adult education faculty in integrated instruction, which includes contextualized instruction and team teaching methods. By the end of the first year, all colleges in these four states had begun team teaching, implementing diverse styles across colleges and classrooms. Some colleges struggled, however, to increase buy-in and support of team teaching from CTE faculty, who were hesitant to collaborate with an additional instructor in their classrooms. Both state and local AO program staff indicated that increasing buy-in for AO and team teaching among CTE faculty and staff was a major priority, not only to promote collaboration between adult education and CTE but also to scale the AO model in these and new colleges.

In the second year, colleges continued to bring new faculty into the initiative and train them in team teaching and integrated instructional approaches. Colleges and teaching pairs also continued to implement team teaching in varied styles. These styles range from the traditional team teaching method, where the CTE and adult education instructors share teaching duties with each focusing on his

or her area of expertise, to the monitoring method, where one teacher is responsible for instruction while the other circulates around the classroom monitoring student needs. Survey results showed a slight increase in the use of more egalitarian and collaborative methods in the second year, such as the traditional team teaching method or the complementary-supportive method, where one teacher teaches content and then turns the class over to the other teacher to work on follow-up activities or study skills. Relatedly, the site visits indicated that many CTE instructors who were initially skeptical of team teaching began to see the value of having a second instructor in the classroom and found ways to optimize their time together. In addition, it appeared in some colleges that the AO team teaching experience raised the overall awareness of the adult education program and its students among CTE faculty and administrators, and it improved the institutional relationship between adult education and CTE programs.

## **Navigators Were a Key Support Service for AO Students**

Comprehensive academic and social student supports to ensure that AO students are successful in the pathways program is a key aspect of the AO model. These provide extra help to AO participants, who often struggle to balance school, work, and family commitments. In the first year, colleges noted that more work was necessary to develop and provide access to comprehensive and consistent support services for AO students.

Based on the second-year site visits, the nature, intensity, and source of these services continued to vary across colleges. College staff widely recognized that a “navigator,” “success coach,” or “transition coordinator” outside the classroom was an important resource in connecting students to necessary services. In their survey responses, students echoed the sentiment that the navigation support was valuable; Spaulding and Martin-Caughey (2015) explore the student perceptions of support services in more detail. Colleges with a dedicated person in this role for AO were able to provide more individualized case management and tutoring services to participants than typically available to adult education or college students. Moreover, navigators were often instrumental in linking students to support services available both on campus and in the community. In places where coordinators or adult education instructors took on navigator responsibilities, state and college administrators expressed concerns about not having a dedicated navigator. Administrators were also concerned about the sustainability of funding for navigation after the AO grant ends.

## **Many Colleges Recruited Individuals with High School Diplomas or GEDs, Partly in Response to Eligibility Conditions on Federal Student Financial Aid**

The JFF staff and partners involved in designing and implementing AO, as well as AO grantee state leadership, anticipated that adult education students without high school credentials would be able to access federal financial aid (Pell grants) to pay for the program. Soon after the initiative started in 2012, the federal rules changed so these students could no longer qualify for federal financial aid through the Ability to Benefit provision. This meant that students enrolling into AO programs would need to pay for their own college tuition costs. This federal policy change heavily affected colleges' ability to recruit adult education students lacking high school credentials, who would have to find other ways to finance their participation in AO pathways.

In response, many AO colleges, particularly in Kentucky and Kansas, heavily recruited students who tested between 6th- and 12th-grade skill levels, already had high school credentials, and were already enrolled in the colleges' developmental education or CTE programs. In the first year, 77 percent of students enrolled in AO programs had high school credentials. In the second year, colleges continued to heavily enroll students with high school credentials; the share increased to 87 percent. During site visits, a common sentiment among stakeholders and college staff was that students who had completed high school or the equivalent but tested within the skills range to qualify for AO still have basic skills deficiencies and can benefit from the AO services. Students in focus groups who had high school credentials also expressed that they would not be as successful without AO structures.

## **States and Colleges Sought New Sources of Financial Support for Students Lacking a Diploma or GED**

Throughout the initiative, states and colleges have tried strategies to increase the number of adult education students enrolled in AO programs (i.e., those without a GED or high school credential). Each state took a slightly different approach, but all states focused on finding alternative ways to fund tuition for students lacking high school credentials. Institutional tuition waivers and Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funds were common funding resources across all states. These resources could be accessed by students with or without high school credentials, though it was sometimes easier for students with high school credentials to get WIA funds. Kansas came to an agreement with the state Department for Children and Families (DCF) to provide tuition for those eligible for cash assistance, and Louisiana approved legislative appropriations to support student tuition.

## **Colleges Struggled to Recruit Adult Education Students**

In spite of intentional efforts to overcome tuition funding challenges for students without high school credentials, second-year survey data indicate that the number of incoming students without high school credentials decreased from 23 percent to 13 percent. Louisiana saw a large decline in the proportion of students entering without high school credentials, from 79 percent to only 34 percent. Illinois had a relatively large proportion of entering students without high school credentials in the first year; by the second year, however, entering students were comparable with other states' students in secondary school completion. In Kansas and Kentucky, the proportion of AO entrants with secondary school credentials changed little in the second year and remained high, at 92 and 97 percent, respectively. Various stakeholders explained in interviews that they did not see this as a problem, believing that AO helps give students both with and without high school credentials the ability to succeed in college-level courses through the provision of additional supports, particularly team teaching.

## **Colleges Further Developed Internal Partnerships**

During the first year of implementation, engaging partners from different areas within the colleges proved crucial for the success of the AO model. In the first-year survey, 71 percent of colleges identified bridging “silos” within the college as a challenge. Almost all these colleges noted this challenge was somewhat or largely resolved in the second year; only 18 percent believed that silos remained a major challenge. Further, interviews with college and state stakeholders suggest that internal partnerships were developed or enhanced in the second implementation year. In particular, AO staff throughout the initiative reported important progress in strengthening the relationship between the CTE and adult education departments. Many college staff and administrators spoke about increased awareness throughout the college of the needs of adult education students. Many interviewees also noted strengthened relationships with admissions offices and financial aid departments and the importance of these partnerships in helping students access and stay enrolled in AO integrated career pathways. Several colleges instituted teams of high-level administrators to discuss issues related to AO students and structures. These teams may aid with the sustainability of the partnerships fostered by the initiative.

## **Colleges Developed and Expanded Partnerships with Employers**

In the first year, AO colleges' partnerships with employers were mostly in nascent stages, and the majority of stakeholders interviewed identified employer engagement as an area for improvement. The

second-year survey included additional questions to better capture college progress in this area. In the second year, 62 percent of the 34 colleges reported at least one employer relationship; among this 62 percent, each college averaged 5.3 employer partners, for a total of 111 employer partners. The top two roles for employers were hiring students (50 percent) and interacting with students by giving presentations on campus, providing mentors, or allowing for job shadowing (42 percent). Only 21 percent of employer partners provided work-based learning options, such as internships, to AO participants. While college staff and administrators used existing relationships and systems, such as CTE advisory boards, to reach out to employers about AO, determining how to engage them meaningfully continued to challenge colleges. Several colleges indicated that they intended to continue building employer relationships.

### **Colleges Served More Students with Fewer Resources**

AO colleges contributed nearly \$13.7 million in resources across all four states and both years to ensure that adults with low basic skills could complete career-oriented education and move into jobs with family-sustaining wages. During the first year of the initiative, the resources colleges spent on AO were mainly concentrated in start-up activities to develop pathways and garner support from relevant partners. Start-up efforts tended to consume a considerable amount of staff time, especially at the leadership level. More expensive personnel costs were a main start-up resource that contributed to overall higher expenditures in the first year.

In the second year, the average value of resources expended on running AO across the colleges decreased by 14 percent and the median value of resources declined 18 percent (from \$232,088 to \$191,000), even as the number of pathways, students, and outputs increased. Thus, across all states, the resources put toward each credit, credential, and pathway decreased from the first to the second implementation year. Although the primary resource expended continued to be staff time, survey results show that the proportion of time spent by leadership in the initiative decreased while the proportion of time spent by staff and faculty increased. This important shift suggests that the initiative has likely transitioned from the start-up period to a more established implementation period.

### **Three States Changed State Funding Policies to Support and Sustain AO**

Beyond efforts to support student costs for enrolling in AO, states repurposed or developed new funding policies to support the programmatic costs of AO implementation and to aid in its sustainability

after the end of the grant period. The Illinois Community and College Board modified policies to be able to use Perkins funds toward AO; these funds were previously mostly used by the K–12 system. Shortly after the second year, the Kansas legislature approved nearly \$14 million to support AO and career pathways, \$12 million for student tuition and \$1.9 million as incentive funds to colleges that transition adults without secondary school credentials into CTE. The Louisiana legislature created the Workforce and Innovation for a Stronger Economy (WISE) fund, which provides \$40,000,000 annually for collaboration between postsecondary institutions and workforce organizations in high-demand fields, directly benefiting AO programs. Moreover, the Louisiana Community and Technical College System procured \$1 million in funds from JP Morgan and \$4 million in matching funds from WISE, WIA rapid response funds, and WIA incentive funds to help support AO costs and to build up capacity to continue AO structures into the future.

### **All Four States Are Strategically Planning to Sustain AO after Grant Funding Ends**

In the second year, states initiated strategic planning efforts to understand, develop, and support opportunities to integrate AO work into future programs. In conducting this planning, state stakeholders have included AO colleges in processes in order to understand which elements of the initiative, such as team-teaching and navigator positions, have been most beneficial. In Illinois, the 2009 adult education strategic plan is due for a revision in fiscal year 2015, and the Illinois Community College Board staff reported that it intends to include integrated instruction, bridge programming, and more collaboration with CTE as centerpieces of the revised plan. Similar to Illinois, the Kansas Board of Regents considers the AO initiative a permanent part of state operations to move more young adults into the workforce. In addition to procuring new funding streams, the Kansas state team has convened work groups to plan for implementation of “AO-K 2.0” once the initial initiative funding ends. Kentucky’s cross-agency AO executive team has also formed a group of local- and state-level AO staff to determine what the program will look like after the grant ends. Finally, the Louisiana Community and Technical College System has identified the AO approaches of high-demand career pathways, co-enrollment, integrated instruction, and comprehensive support services as cornerstones of professional development and programming moving forward.

## Progress toward Meeting the Goals of Accelerating Opportunity in the Second Year

During the second year of the initiative, states and colleges focused on building upon their first-year efforts. They used the opportunity to reflect on and make strategic decisions about how the AO model matches the needs of their students, their individual institutions, and their local labor markets. The two-year goals in the AO theory of change (see appendix A) guide this analysis of progress throughout the two years of the AO. While states are planning to sustain the initiative, uncertainty remains around how the model will look, whom it will serve, and how it will be financed and sustained after the grant ends.

## Future Reports

The evaluation team will release a report on the impacts of AO on interim student academic outcomes in late 2015. Other future products include a final report on AO implementation, a report on AO student employment experiences based on a second-round participant survey, a quasi-experimental analysis of AO's impact on student earnings, and a cost-benefit analysis to determine how the social costs of AO compare to its benefits. A final brief will summarize high-level findings across all reports.