The First Year of Accelerating Opportunity

Executive Summary

Launched in 2011, the Accelerating Opportunity (AO) initiative aims to increase the ability of students with low basic skills to earn valued occupational credentials, obtain well-paying jobs, and sustain rewarding careers. AO encourages states to change the delivery of adult education for students interested in learning career skills by enrolling them in for-credit career and technical education courses at local community colleges as they improve their basic education and English language abilities. The initiative promotes and supports the development of career and college pathways that incorporate contextualized and integrated instruction, team teaching between adult education and college instructors, and enhanced support services at community colleges. AO is also designed to change how states and colleges coordinate with government, business, and community partners and reform policy and practice to fundamentally change how students with low basic skills 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. In the first year of implementation, these 42 colleges enrolled nearly 2,600 students and built capacity to provide team teaching with college and adult education instructors, offer comprehensive support services, and develop and strengthen partnerships to support the sustainability and scaling of AO.

As a part of a rigorous evaluation of the AO initiative, this first report assesses the implementation of the initiative during its first year, which consists of the spring, summer, and fall semesters of 2012 in the original four states and the fall 2012, spring 2013, and summer 2013 semesters in Louisiana. The data presented in this report come from a survey of all AO colleges, site visits to the five states, grant documents, and quarterly calls with AO states and colleges. This report provides key findings from the early implementation that have helped the AO initiative develop strategies for its continuation and offers lessons for other states and colleges considering the AO model.

Summary of Findings

During the first year, the five states and 42 colleges began intensive efforts to implement the key features of the AO model; as of the end of the year, they were still in various stages of development. The states and colleges began by prioritizing the creation of career pathway programs designed for students with low basic skills and then the recruitment of students for these pathways. Through this process, they found that it was challenging to align pathways with local labor market needs and student interests. Initial pathways were implemented quickly, and the fields in which they were constructed had to conform to the college's existing capacity to offer high-quality programs that could meet AO requirements and effectively serve the low-skilled target population. In addition, the colleges valued the availability of student supports, but struggled to put these supports into place concurrently with the initial pathway structures.

Colleges that were able to integrate support services early on did so by leveraging partnerships with their local workforce agencies and community-based organizations and by implementing braided funding strategies that could tie AO to supports being established for other related initiatives. In addition, shifting the culture within community colleges and perceptions about low-skill students proved difficult; shifts began when career and technical education (CTE) faculty members became familiar and comfortable with teaching adult education students and collaborating with adult education instructors. Finally, states actively supported AO implementation at the colleges by initiating policy changes, providing professional development for colleges, developing state-level partnerships, and creating financing strategies. As colleges continue to engage in this work, states will need to prioritize policy alignment and financial sustainability efforts—particularly around team teaching and support services—to be able to successfully scale and institutionalize the model.

Key Findings

States and Colleges Primarily Focused on Building AO Pathways during the First Year

States and colleges primarily focused on developing their pathway programs during the first year, especially in the first semester, rather than on recruitment. By the third semester, however, they began to increase their enrollment numbers and fill more available slots for AO. All but two colleges in the initiative developed at least two integrated career pathways by the end of the first year of implementation. Several pathways were offered to more than one cohort of students. Eighteen ambitious colleges developed three or more pathways. Although the pathways varied in length—number of hours and weeks of instruction—they were designed with the ability to earn stackable credentials in mind. During the first year, colleges across all states reported awarding 2,641 credentials and 13,382.5 credits to AO students. Now that colleges and states have established pathways and have more experience with the model, the numbers for the second year should be considerably higher.[1]

Many AO Students Expressed Satisfaction with Their Pathway Program

AO students who participated in focus groups during the first year site visits described their experiences in the program as mostly positive. This level of satisfaction can also be inferred from the perceived success of word-of-mouth recruitment. Moreover, many students who participated in the focus groups were planning to continue their postsecondary education after completing a pathway, and several students had jobs related to their field of study or were pursuing job opportunities. Still, AO students can be engaged more effectively, since many students and staff interviewed reported a lack of awareness about the array of support services available.

Institutional Factors Played an Important Role in the Selection of AO Pathways

Thirty percent of the 112 pathways developed during the first year of implementation were in manufacturing; 28 percent were in health care. Other industry areas include maintenance, information technology, culinary arts, construction, agriculture, and public safety. Many colleges weighed institutional factors in addition to labor market information when selecting which pathways to offer. For example, several colleges selected pathways in CTE departments that were willing to work on the AO initiative and with adult education students. Some colleges did not offer certain pathways because the CTE programs had eligibility requirements (test scores or course prerequisites) that most AO recruits were unlikely to meet. Some college coordinators were also concerned about having high-enough student demand for particular pathways. Finally, several colleges used existing resources and structures, developing pathways that were already in place through other grant programs and adding AO elements. As colleges

continue to scale AO and build or expand pathways, it will be important to understand how colleges choose pathways in specific industries and occupations.

Attitudes toward and Opportunities for Adult Education Students Were Beginning to Change

A key part of the AO model is to shift attitudes about adult education students and their ability to successfully complete college programs. State and college staff reported that they made progress changing attitudes toward adult education students on campuses. Faculty, staff, and students responses generally reflected willingness to open doors for adult education students. Some students also reported that they had begun to identify themselves as college students, rather than GED or ESL students. Still, some additional work is required to increase support for AO among CTE staff and faculty, especially as states and colleges expand the AO model within colleges and to new colleges.

AO Instructors Used a Mix of Team-Teaching Approaches

Team teaching is an important aspect of the AO model. The model encourages an approach to teaching where both instructors are viewed as equally important contributors in the classroom, even as their roles may differ within a single lesson or throughout a course. However, this equity was not always achieved in AO classrooms in the first year. According to survey results, the most common strategy practiced was the "complementary-supportive" method of team teaching, with 89 percent of colleges implementing this approach. When using this method, adult education instructors attend CTE classes, help students in a teacher's aide role when needed, and often provide a supplemental basic skills class that contextualizes the CTE content for students. About three-quarters (76 percent) of colleges used the "monitoring" teacher model of team teaching, in which one teacher is responsible for instructing the entire class and the other teacher circulates through the room, watching and monitoring student understanding and behavior, an approach that does not support more equitable roles for the instructors. Fewer than two-thirds (59 percent) of the colleges reported using "traditional" team teaching where the instructors actively share the instruction of the content and skills in the same classroom at the same time with the same group of students and each teacher performs a different but equally important instructional task. Both state and local AO program staff noted that increasing buy-in for AO and team teaching among CTE faculty and staff is a major priority, especially in order to promote more collaborative work between adult education and CTE faculty and scale the AO model in the colleges.

Creating a Consistent and Comprehensive Network of Support Services Is Still a Work-in-Progress

A key part of the AO model is to provide "comprehensive academic and social student supports (e.g., tutoring, child care, transportation, access to public benefits, subsidized jobs)" to ensure that AO students are successful in the pathway programs.[2] Based on the survey and site visits, AO students had access to an array of academic support services at the college that included tutoring, advising, and help with financial aid forms. In most colleges, students had access to AO college coordinators, coaches, and navigators, which helped students find needed academic, career, and personal supports. From these support staff, AO students received more individualized case management and tutoring services than was typically available to adult education or college students. Some colleges also reached out to partners to provide services such as child care or transportation that were not available in house. In addition, some college staff and students reported not being aware of the range of services available to students. Thus, as of the end of the first year, there was more work to be done to get colleges to develop and provide access to support services for AO students consistently. Strengthening support services was and continues to be an important policy lever for all states.

The Loss of Pell's Ability to Benefit Shifted Most Colleges' Recruitment Strategies

The biggest recruitment challenge colleges faced was the loss of Pell Ability to Benefit (AtB). This change prevented students without a secondary school credential from receiving federal financial aid. AO was designed to use AtB as a key funding strategy for students; AO grants were not intended to pay for tuition or other college costs. The AtB policy change reshaped the initiative in some states and colleges with few financial aid options, shifting recruitment more toward students that had basic skill needs but who already had high school diplomas or GEDs. The change in recruitment strategy toward those with existing secondary school credentials also stems from the ambitious goal that each state award 3,600 credentials to AO students within the three-year grant period. As a result, 60 percent of AO students had a high school credential at enrollment, according to survey data, and nearly as many students came from existing CTE programs in the college as from internal adult education programs. A key concern is that this shift toward serving students that already have high school credentials lessens the focus on adult education students that typically have difficulty ever accessing college. To serve multiple target populations and achieve the goals of the initiative, states and colleges committed at the end of the first year to redouble their efforts to recruit adult education students and find alternative funding sources for AO students, especially those who do not qualify for Pell grants.

Almost All Colleges Had Connections with Workforce Agencies, but Many Were Still Trying to Develop Greater Employer Engagement

By the end of the first year of implementation, colleges had made progress in developing and expanding partnerships. Colleges engaged workforce agencies and local CBOs to help recruit and refer students, provide instruction and support services (including tuition and wraparound services), and connect students to job opportunities. Most colleges also formed internal partnerships—between adult education and CTE, for example—that facilitated the implementation of AO and helped gain buy-in for the model across departments. Some states helped create state-level partnerships with the workforce system that define how the colleges worked with their local workforce system. Partnerships with employers were still being formed and strengthened at the end of the first year.

Though First-Year Resources Used for AO Varied across States and Colleges, Most Resources Went to Staffing

The cost of implementing AO is of great interest for states and colleges participating in the initiative, as well as for other states and colleges seeking effective models for underprepared students and understanding of the resources needed. Resources used for the first year of AO mainly went toward the college staff and administrators needed to get the pathways up and running and for adult education and CTE instructors to create and operate AO courses. The additional (incremental) cost of the resources used for the AO courses, besides the instructors, was reduced if colleges embedded AO in current CTE courses or replaced CTE courses entirely with AO. The average value of resources invested in AO across the colleges was $228,410 and ranged from about $179,000 to about $267,000. Overall, these amounts are not outside reasonable expectations for first-year investments into this type of initiative. And the economic costs, or real resources used, do not necessarily represent money directly expended. That is, most colleges did not "write a check" for the entire amount of the resources used. Some of the resources captured in this evaluation were redirected from other potential uses. The value of resources invested by the colleges rose with the number of pathways offered and students served. Colleges funded AO through a mix of grant funds and the reallocation of existing resources, as well as in-kind contributions from within and outside their institutions.

Most state and college staff interviewed described the first year as resource and time intensive. Of particular concern across all states were the resources used for team teaching and additional

student supports. However, as of the end of the first year, states and college staff expected to realize economies of scale as implementation of AO moves from start-up to a "steady state" and colleges serve more students per pathway. It remains to be seen how the benefits of AO compare with the additional costs of implementing the model, especially when considering the benefits to students who become employed because of AO. A full cost-benefit analysis answering this question will be available in late 2016 as part of the final evaluation report. Many state and college staff interviewed indicated that they were waiting to see the impact of AO relative to the cost in order to decide how the AO model should be sustained after the grant ends.

States Supported AO Implementation by Building on Existing Infrastructure and Relationships

All states recognize AO's ambitious goals of transforming how adult and workforce education is framed and delivered. The primary way that the states supported colleges as they implemented AO was by building on existing programs and infrastructure. For example, states were able to integrate AO's focus on adult education reform and college access within their own statewide goals to increase postsecondary degree completion. In addition, all states had experience with initiatives that supported the development of career pathways. Illinois used knowledge from developing bridge programs in Shifting Gears to support AO, while North Carolina aligned its Basic Skills Plus program with AO. Kansas was able to strengthen a relationship between the Kansas Board of Regents and the state workforce agency that had started during a previous career pathway initiative. Kentucky used the momentum from its work with Breaking Through to bring together three state agencies to lead AO.[3] Finally, Louisiana was working to make tenets of AO central to its new WorkReadyU workforce education initiative.

States Changed and Aligned Policy but Were Still Working to Address Challenges, Especially around Financing AO

The AO state teams strived to help colleges succeed in implementing AO according to the model, especially through technical assistance, professional development, and general oversight. Part of the state leadership efforts included ensuring the sustainability and scalability of AO by working to align current policies or pursue new policies to support the initiative. Specifically, state offices undertook state curricular alignment, the development of new state funding models, data systems improvements, and active support for reinstating AtB. Federal and state budgetary cuts constrained early policy victories, such as Kansas and Illinois's efforts to include funding formulas for AO. Program implementation was also challenged by budget constraints, as many state leaders and college administrators struggled to help colleges address the costs of tuition and integrated instruction and try to develop strong financing strategies to support AO over the long run. Even with these challenges, the states seemed to leverage this new model to engage state leaders and college partners in a policy review process in order to improve opportunities for adults with low basic skills.

Progress toward Meeting the Goals of Accelerating Opportunity

As the key findings demonstrate, the states and colleges made important progress in implementing AO during the first year. Each state's progress was measured against the AO Theory of Change, which is provided in the appendix of this report. It is important to recognize that the goals of AO span four years, and the states and colleges had only taken the first steps toward them in the period covered by this report. This early progress was apparent in most states, especially since nearly all colleges implemented two pathways, enrolled nearly 2,600 students, and began to see attitudes changes toward adult education students; several states also got some early policy wins. However, state and college staff alike indicated places where more progress was needed to scale AO, including better funding strategies, more comprehensive

access to support services, better employer partnerships, improved team teaching, and better use of data for management and promoting the AO model. Based on continuing discussions with the states and colleges since this initial data collection, they are addressing these issues and working hard to achieve these goals.

Looking Forward

AO is changing and growing. Around the end of the first year, North Carolina left the initiative, but Louisiana, Georgia, and Mississippi were added to the implementation phase. Louisiana also became an evaluation state and is included in this and future reports.

As an important part of the implementation evaluation, this report offers initial documentation of the AO model and focuses on the first year of implementation by the states and colleges. It also is designed to provide early findings to assist states and colleges as they continue developing and improving their AO programs. Future reports will examine implementation of AO during the remainder the grant period and will continue to track the progress of AO states and colleges in achieving the goals of the initiative. The evaluation will also report on the impact that AO had on students' educational and employment outcomes and on the benefits and costs of the AO model in the AO states. Complete findings from the implementation, impact, and cost studies will be released in separate reports in 2016.