

# THE BREAKING THROUGH PRACTICE GUIDE

Aligning Programs  
for Low-Skilled Adults

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# ALIGNING PROGRAMS FOR LOW-SKILLED ADULTS

## Introduction

The *Breaking Through* report of 2004 identified the profound lack of connections between programs housed in a typical community college as a crucial barrier to the educational and economic advancement of people with low skills (Liebowitz & Taylor 2004). While there is wide variation among the nation's community colleges, most colleges have separate divisions for credit-bearing academic programs, noncredit workforce programs, and developmental education; some have an adult education division.

*Breaking Through's* research into the particular programs revealed myriad structural problems—divergent missions; differing funding streams, with differing and often incompatible goals, performance measures, and testing and tracking systems; program staff unfamiliar with the needs of employers and modern higher education (standards for entry and the preparation needed for entry-level courses); and, all too often, significant gaps between the exit standards of one program and the entry standards of the program into which it leads (Liebowitz & Taylor 2004).

The nature of this disconnection differs significantly even among the three programs typically serving as entry points to postsecondary education for low-skilled adults (both older and younger). In the case of adult education and noncredit workforce training, the problem stems in large part from the fact that neither program was intended to connect its students to postsecondary education. Developmental education was instituted precisely to prepare people for college-level work, but persistence and transition rates are very low.

Deeper information emerged during the course of *Breaking Through*:

- > Adult education programs often do not view postsecondary education as an important goal for their students and do not provide instructional content that adequately prepares students for college-entrance exams and college-level work.
- > Noncredit workforce programs often provide technical instruction that matches some or all of a school's "for-credit" courses and programs, but lack mechanisms for demonstrating students' mastery of essential content to for-credit instructors and departments.
- > The content and goals of developmental education programs do not connect with students' goals of advancing to better jobs and careers.

These structural problems go a long way toward explaining the poor transition rates from lower-level programs to higher-level programs and the poor success rates in the higher-level programs. As one college official explained, echoing what the research found to be a common opinion, "I've been working in this field for many years, and I can hardly figure out what the route into college for a low-wage worker would be in my area. How would a person with low skills and little familiarity with public institutions figure it out?"

The *Breaking Through* report proposed this high-leverage strategy in response: Restructure programs for precollege students so that they align with college-level programs.

To a certain extent, this recommendation reflects research attributing higher success rates at some proprietary technical colleges—compared with those at public community colleges—to purposeful structuring and sequencing of courses in order to minimize potentially bewildering choices and focus students on clearly charted paths (Bailey, Badway, & Gumport 2001). At Portland Community College, the design of the college career-pathways program is drawn in part from these features of proprietary schools. (See *the Breaking Through Practice Guide: Labor Market Payoffs for more information on Portland Community College’s career-pathways design.*)

In particular:

- > Adult education programs should promote students’ college aspirations and ensure that content aligns with college tests and skill needs.
- > Noncredit workforce programs should link students with college-level programming through strategies (e.g., articulation agreements) that align competencies in noncredit and credit programs.
- > Developmental education programs should consider different programming for students with strong career goals (e.g., adding content that connects with students’ goals and the college’s professional/technical programs).

## Align Adult Education Programs with College

“Adult education” refers here to programs that many people call Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education, GED, and ESL. It is what usually comes to mind when considering programs whose mission is to help adults needing remediation to improve their literacy skills. ABE is formally the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), Title II of the Workforce Investment Act. In most states, many service sites are accessible to people living in low-income areas. In addition, these programs, supported through a combination of federal and state funds, are offered to individuals at no cost.

However, those who enroll in adult education programs face many challenges advancing to postsecondary education. For one, the capacity of programs generally falls far below need (Adult Education State Directors 2006). The waiting lists are usually long, mainly because the federal government and most states woefully underfund the program. As a result, instructor preparation and professional development are neglected, and program innovation has a low priority (Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy 2008).

Not surprisingly, adult education programs do a poor job of advancing students into postsecondary education. Washington, one of the few states with longitudinal data and the only one to analyze it, has found that only 4 percent of English as a Second Language students and 6 percent of adult education students advanced to attaining either degrees or certificates. Researchers David Prince and Davis Jenkins (2005) have found that students who can earn at least one year of college credit and a credential reach a crucial “tipping point” to substantial income increases.

This poor track record is due in part to the historical evolution of adult education, which was never conceived or designed to prepare students for postsecondary education. While the federal and state governments have long been involved in adult education, a formal federal role was not established until President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty in the mid-1960s. Title II B of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 created the first adult basic education program as a state grant. Today, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 funds and ABE consist primarily of grants to states with required match. The current version of WIA administered by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education of the U.S. Department of Education.

### The Federal and State Investment in Adult Education

In 2005, the most recent program year for which data are available, the nation's adult education system, as defined by the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act, enrolled 2,677,119 people; 43 percent were in English-literacy classes. The total federal expenditure was \$559,602,889. The state share of total expenditures varied widely, ranging from 25 percent in Mississippi, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Texas to 90 percent in Florida. Overall, the federal investment was 26 percent of total expenditures (U.S. Department of Education 2005).

As the federal role evolved, so too did definitions and testing mechanisms, and adult education became a compressed version of primary and secondary education for people who did not have a high school diploma. The Test of Adult Basic Education—TABE—was for many years the instrument used to identify, place, and track the progress of adults needing remediation. More recently, as it became clear that English is not the first language for many adults seeking literacy classes, “English as a second language” was added to the federal adult education program. ESL students now represent more than half of the 2.7 million people enrolled across the nation (U.S. Department of Education 2005). (*For more information, see “History of the Adult Education Act,” prepared by Gary Eyre for the National Adult Education Professional Development Consortium, Inc. at [www.naepdc.org/issues/AEAHistory.htm](http://www.naepdc.org/issues/AEAHistory.htm).)*

Many adult educators—and people in the population at large—have long assumed that the GED is an appropriate and sufficient terminal credential for students in such programs. However, according to the National Commission on Adult Literacy, the GED no longer functions as a portal to postsecondary education. Few GED candidates actually enroll in higher education, and 85 percent of those who do must take at least one remedial course (Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy 2008).

Why is the record so dismal? Four main barriers to creating clear pathways from adult education into postsecondary education emerged during the *Breaking Through* demonstration phase:

- > The pervasive belief that the GED is sufficient as the final goal and credential of adult education students;
- > The delivery, in many locations, of adult education by entities with little or no connection with higher education in general or with the particular postsecondary educational institutions of the area;
- > The large and growing gap between the content and skills tested by the GED and those required for college entrance and success; and
- > The need to support students during the transition from adult education to college.

*Breaking Through* colleges have taken up the challenge of transitioning more ABE students to college. Recognizing that most GED completers require further remediation to be college ready, they have sought to eliminate or significantly reduce the time that students spend in developmental education. They have developed four strategies that promote clear pathways from adult education to postsecondary credentials:

- > Connect adult education staff with key college departments.
- > Change the culture of adult education programs so that both students and teachers consider postsecondary education an important and attainable goal.
- > Ensure that students receive instruction that bridges the adult education/college skills gap.
- > Support students as they transition to college.

## REFOCUS ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND STUDENTS ON COLLEGE—NOT THE GED—AS THE END GOAL

The goal of transitioning significantly higher percentages of adult education students to higher education will not be achieved as long as instructors, adult students, and adults who are considering adult education believe that the GED is a final goal and credential. Changing this belief involves reversing long-standing habits of mind among instructors, managers, and colleagues in other parts of the college.

Most *Breaking Through* colleges have relied on a combination of approaches to refocus adult education students and programs on college as the end goal rather than the GED: presenting college as an integral goal of adult education when recruiting students; finding ways to help adult education participants envision themselves as college students; and emphasizing the importance of postsecondary credentials for obtaining family-supporting jobs. This is powerful leverage: 34 percent of people who enroll in adult education say they want a better job (Strawn 2007).

Many *Breaking Through* colleges have also structured supports to aid students in successful transitions. Many have adopted formal support efforts to ease the transition for students from adult education into college.

**Pamlico Community College** in eastern North Carolina puts the college emphasis up front, when it recruits students. It created a staff position charged with recruiting and hired a local educator whose passion is to increase postsecondary attainment in the region. He stresses college-going as an important goal when he talks with potential students. Inside the program, which like the college is small, instructors begin working early with any student expressing interest in college, helping each to create a customized education plan.

Transition planning for college-bound adult education students goes into high gear when they pass their next-to-last GED test. The coach in basic skills introduces new students to the deans of all the college departments and tells them, “I know this is overwhelming, so I’m your contact. Here’s my cell phone number.” Planning at this stage includes such activities as reviewing and selecting college courses, touring classes and the entire



**Tip:** “Identity” is a strong influence. Many *Breaking Through* colleges have found that helping their adult students identify as college students improves their chances of enrolling in college. LaGuardia Community College offers “College for a Day” opportunities, and South Piedmont Community College in North Carolina issues college-student ID cards to basic skills students.

campus, preparing for the college entrance exam, and preparing financial aid applications. GED completers are scheduled into summer classes because the department has learned, as one staff member reports, “to not let time go by—it’s too easy to lose them.”

**Pitt Community College’s** Ready for College program uses case management to increase transition rates from adult education into college. The coach conducts self-awareness sessions on college-readiness skills (e.g., personal responsibility, study skills, managing time and stress) and organizes monthly career workshops on college services, career opportunities, financial planning, and other topics. The college also offers monthly “Courageous Conversations”—free workshops on topics such as services available from the college, financial planning for college, and career opportunities opened up by college.

The achievement coach stays with Ready for College students through the first year of college. When students get close to being ready to take the GED tests, she reminds them that college, not the GED, is the goal. Working with a half-time counselor, she assists students on all aspects of applying for college and for financial aid. For the first year after students enter college, she offers support and navigation assistance as well as access to the array of college- and community-based services.



**Tip:** Empower case managers to help students mediate conflicts with faculty, and to alert you when there is a seemingly intractable situation, as well as to resolve students’ personal barriers.

## CONNECT ADULT EDUCATORS WITH KEY COLLEGE DEPARTMENTS

A major reason for the disconnection of adult education from higher education is the administrative separation between the two areas, starting at the highest level. In three-quarters of the states, accounting for 76 percent of enrollments, adult education is administered not by the higher education system but by K-12 departments (thirty-two states) or departments of labor (five states) (Tyler 2005).

Moreover, the administration or delivery of adult education by a community college does not imply a higher level of understanding or connection. Even when adult education classes are physically located in the heart of the college campus, instructors and administrators rarely collaborate, and they often lack a good understanding of one another’s work.

As a result, *Breaking Through* colleges have taken steps to connect adult education with the postsecondary parts of the college—practices that can be adopted by any provider.

At **LaGuardia Community College**, the Adult and Continuing Education department has invested in developing “GED to Career” Bridge Programs for in health care and business. The goal are to improve the rate of successful transitions to college and to create a platform for the rigorous level of learning required for success in college. These programs provide GED students with contextualized instruction nine hours per week for fourteen weeks (a total of approximately one hundred hours). Students have the option of attending in the morning or evening, and they can access the computer lab, drop-in tutoring, and various assessments.



**Tip:** Get support from college leadership and involve key players in a program-advisory role as you attempt to link your program to the college.

Staff of the GED to Career Bridge Program work closely with other college staff in the admissions, financial aid, career-development, and academic counseling offices to better understand the systems that students must navigate once they graduate from the program. Staff in the health care bridge program also attend meetings of the college's Allied Health Committee, where they gain a better understanding of opportunities for their students in the health field and develop relationships with faculty who will work with the program graduates when they enter college. Additionally, adult education staff work closely with faculty in the academic and vocational training divisions to contextualize the GED curricula. (See *the Breaking Through Practice Guide: Accelerating the Pace of Learning* chapter.)

These close working relationships not only help adult education staff members better understand the administrative systems and supports their students will face in college; they also help the college staff and faculty become more familiar with the adult education staff, programs, and students. It is a two-way street. This increased familiarity helps college faculty and administrative staff better understand the needs, strengths, and weaknesses of students entering from adult education. This is especially important given that 20 percent of entering freshman at LaGuardia come from the GED program—President Mellow often notes that GED is the largest feeder “school” at LaGuardia.

When **Davidson County Community College** reorganized itself in 2000-01, guided by the then-president's vision of “one college for all students,” it identified the Basic Skills (as North Carolina terms adult education) Department as an important pipeline for credit-level programs. The Basic Skills Department is housed within the college's Academic Division, which helps to promote collaboration between their faculty members. Additionally, the Basic Skills director sits on the college management team, further promoting collaboration.

At the program level, the Basic Skills Department increasingly sees its contextualized curricula as key to better transition-to-college rates. Based on regional labor market data and employer input, it developed the curricula in occupational and industry areas identified as having a high demand for labor and high placement rates. Basic Skills Department faculty work closely with academic faculty to contextualize materials using the textbooks from first-year courses in appropriate program areas.



**Tip:** Formalize agreements with college leaders in writing. Memoranda of Understanding that spell out the college's commitment are especially useful. So also are articulation agreements that enable both parties (in a program and in the college) to specify what they are expecting the other party to do.

## REVISE INSTRUCTION TO BRIDGE THE ADULT EDUCATION/COLLEGE SKILLS GAP

Practitioners in adult education have long suggested that there is a significant gap between the level of skills needed to pass the GED tests and the level needed to succeed in college. While little reliable research is available on the topic, input from *Breaking Through* programs points to at least two dimensions of the skills gap: that involving college-entrance exams, and that involving the skills needed to succeed in college.

Some facets of the gap are easy to define. For example, most college programs require the ability to conduct formal research and to write research papers, but this is not part of adult education curriculum and not tested by the GED. In other areas, there is little reliable information but some speculation—for example, that most college-entrance exams test for proficiency in areas of mathematics beyond those taught in adult education.



# North Shore Community College, Massachusetts

## BUILDING PATHWAYS FOR NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS

North Shore Community College's *Breaking Through* initiative had a specific population in mind: low-skilled child care workers who were non-native English speakers. The college created a Child Development Associate (CDA) track for non-native speakers that could lead into the college's Associate's degree program in early-childhood education, ideally without the need to enroll in developmental education. To accomplish the college's goals, NSCC worked with a variety of internal and external partners:

✓ *Create a collegewide team that includes faculty and leadership from a number of departments:* The team included representatives from developmental education, early-childhood education, student support services, transition programs, and noncredit departments.

✓ *Include partners from outside the college on the team:* NSCC collaborated with community-based organizations and the local Workforce Investment Board. CBOs brought valuable experience working with lower-skilled, low-income students.

✓ *Work with employers to build support for the pathway program.*

While the college is currently collecting and analyzing data on program participants, it already reports increased professionalism among participants working in the field, as well as increased recognition of the importance of training. It is also finding that the success of the program is in part attributable to the sense of prestige that comes with being part of a national initiative, which has created a buzz about the work.

NSCC is extending *Breaking Through* practices into other programs throughout the college, including developmental education. To make the transition from ESL/CDA to for-credit courses easier for students, it has modified the early-childhood education program.

✓ *Allow for multiple student entry points:* At NSCC, there are entry options for students who are nearly college ready but need some bilingual support, as well as for those who need more remediation and English up front.

✓ *Create opportunities for stackable certificates:* The benefit of the CDA credential is that the credits can count toward the first semester of the Associate's degree.

✓ *Map out the pathway for students:* The map clearly indicates entry and exit points, as well as intermediary credentials that lead to employment.

In Massachusetts, most WIA-funded ESL classes are run by CBOs. North Shore Community College recognized a need to better align the curriculum provided at local CBOs with the requirements for enrolling and succeeding in community college coursework. The college now provides professional development to ESL providers to achieve alignment and consistency across programs.

Two key lessons emerged from North Shore Community College's *Breaking Through* initiative:

✓ *Targeting specific groups can lead to a greater awareness throughout the college and community of their needs:* NSCC's initiative led to a broad focus on the barriers facing non-native English speakers and an effort to align the college curricula with that for ESL classes taught at a community-based organization.

✓ *Relationships with community-based organizations can be mutually beneficial:* NSCC provided professional development to CBO staff, while the CBO provided students with additional supports.

## Confirming a Serious Skill Gap between Adult Education and College

The Lexile Framework® for Reading was introduced by MetaMetrics in 1997 to establish a common metric for assessing a reader's level of proficiency and a text's level of difficulty. According to MetaMetrics, a gap of 200 points between an individual's reading level and a text's level of difficulty indicates that the individual will comprehend 50 percent or less of the material in the text. In 2007, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) commissioned MetaMetrics to assess "readability measures" indicated by passing scores on college entrance exams and the texts used in the state's community and four-year colleges. According to the research, a passing score on the GED reading test indicates a level of 1060 Lexiles. "Readiness" for the THECB is 1170 Lexiles. However, 75 percent of college texts had Lexile levels between 1130 and 1450 (Smith & Koons 2008).

Practitioners have few tools they can use to help them identify the skills their students will need in order to both pass college tests and succeed in college. As a result, they generally develop "bridge" curricula on a one-by-one basis. Some programs enable students to take the college's admissions exam for practice so they can identify areas of weakness requiring further instruction.

**LaGuardia Community College's** GED Bridge programs are designed to simulate the college experience. The GED curriculum mirrors the first-year curricula of programs in the college's academic division, and students are expected to do rigorous work. They are required to read extensively and to develop their academic writing skills by writing comparative or persuasive essays, interview-based narratives, and mini-research papers. Just as college-level students are expected to study outside the classroom, GED students are expected to spend one hour preparing for every hour in class.

GED faculty devote a significant amount of time revising the curriculum to align with college-level expectations (as well to contextualize it). The program coordinator and instructors meet weekly, and instructors spend about 10 hours per week developing course materials—and they spend even more time at the beginning of the program. GED faculty are comprehensive in their approach to designing rigorous GED



**Tip:** Make sure students are well aware of the benefits of intensive remediation - these students are willing to put in extra hours if they can see how it is going to help them.

**Table 1. Unit Objective in LaGuardia Community College's GED Bridge Program**

General Unit Overview	GED	College	Career
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students estimate measurements using the scale of a map.</li> <li>• Students conjecture and estimate the area of a circle with a one mile radius from their maps.</li> <li>• In groups, students measure a city block with surveying tools.</li> <li>• Students create population-to-business and business-to-city block ratios.</li> <li>• Students use math to identify community needs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calculating area and perimeter</li> <li>• Using radius of a circle in calculations</li> <li>• Calculating percent and percent of change over time</li> <li>• Interpreting visual and numerical data from a map, charts, and tables</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using inductive and deductive reasoning skills</li> <li>• Supporting an argument with data</li> <li>• Using scientific thinking to make observations and question patterns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thinking like an entrepreneur</li> <li>• Working with a team to solve a problem</li> <li>• Using math to strengthen persuasive writing</li> <li>• Appreciating the link between necessity and invention</li> </ul>

## Dorcas Place: How an Independent Program Built Bridges to College

Dorcas Place Adult and Family Learning Center in Providence, Rhode Island is the only noncollege lead partner in *Breaking Through*. How it built pathways to the Community College of Rhode Island is an example for the country's many noncollege-based adult education providers. It is also, as former executive director Brenda Dann-Messier (now assistant U.S. secretary of vocational and adult education) says, a lesson in approaching the challenge of connecting students with college incrementally. Dorcas Place has built on the lessons it has learned at each stage, which is especially important for organizations with ambitious missions and tight budgets.

Dorcas Place launched the Bridge to College/Transitions model several years ago, with funding from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. The Bridge to College took an "aspirational" approach: to promote the goal of postsecondary attainment, it sought to change its own culture and the mind-set of the students. At first, Dorcas Place mainly supplied GED students with information about college, such as on financial aid and admission policies. Recognizing that information alone would connect few clients to college, it added counseling staff to support students' planning around college and career goals. When this still did not pull students into college and help them to stay there, the next step was to obtain funds to pay tuition for the first college class. Dorcas Place also arranged to cluster its students into learning communities—at first with Dorcas Place students, and later with other students—to make it feel more like college. The agency also identified three areas of study that students could try out to see how they would do and how faculty would treat them: it gave them "a taste of college."

Even so, the students were not prepared to succeed in college. Too many began college in developmental education, where they did not earn college credit, even as they used up part of their eligibility for Pell Grants, which are limited in how long students can use them (only up to 150 percent of the advertised length of the program).

In response, Dorcas Place is piloting a Developmental Education Institute to address academic deficiencies and to test whether providing developmental education in the community can eliminate low-skilled adult students' placement into developmental education at the community college. Thus far, most of the students are succeeding in the institute.

Dorcas Place is also aligning its curriculum with college-level classes at the Community College of Rhode Island. Alignment will seek to reduce or eliminate students' need for developmental education. As a first step, college faculty members are providing professional development for ABE instructors at Dorcas Place.

curricula that align not only with college standards but also with the skills students will need in their careers. They have created grids that systemically align the objectives of each unit with standards expected in the GED program, in college-level courses, and in jobs, and they use these grids to develop lesson plans and curricula. Program staff emphasize that extensive interaction with college instructors is essential for developing the "college" content (see *Table 1, on page 10*).

**Pitt Community College** provides supplemental instruction focused on subjects and skills that will be needed to succeed in college or to pass the admissions test. For example, one of the English instructors in basic skills taught the for-credit freshman English course in order to better understand the academic requirements her

students will need to succeed in the class. As a result of this experience, she revised the writing assignments in the developmental education course to better prepare students for college-level work. Additionally, developmental math instructors meet once a year with academic math faculty and remain in touch year round. The college has two developmental math levels—one leads to a math course for the technical programs and the other into college algebra. Developmental education faculty revise the curricula as needed so that these courses align with college-level work.

## Align Noncredit Courses and Programs with Academic Courses and Programs

In recent years, college-based, noncredit workforce programs have emerged in response to several forces: demand by local employers for training that would keep their workers and hence their firms competitive; demand from public agencies seeking training for individuals with an identified need (e.g., workers recently laid off by a major employer); and individuals who seek credentials that can be gained quickly (e.g., real-estate licenses). Most noncredit workforce units deliver a mix of trainings offered to incumbent workers at the request of employers, trainings offered in response to requests from public entities, and courses paid for by student fees. The mix varies from college to college, as does the skill level of students.

These departments develop their courses outside higher education's accreditation structure, which sets standards for hiring faculty, course content, and other areas of college structure and offerings. State legislatures use a college's accreditation to determine whether it can receive public funding. The noncredit part of the college is not covered by the accreditation process or standards.

On the one hand, the lack of accreditation standards confers flexibility: workforce departments are exempt from standards governing such areas as hiring, course content, and course schedules. Partly because they are not funded through the college's formula based on full-time equivalency enrollments, many such departments become highly entrepreneurial in seeking revenue-generating training opportunities. However, this lack of accreditation also creates a significant barrier for students seeking to advance. As Macomb Community College president Jim Jacobs, who codirects the national *Breaking Through* initiative, has noted, noncredit students invest their time and energy in learning new skills, but they cannot parlay that investment into the certificates and degrees offered by the for-credit side of the house (Jacobs & Teahen 1997).

The challenges presented by the divide between noncredit and credit divisions in colleges will increase as postsecondary, noncredit education becomes more common. In fact, many community colleges now enroll more noncredit than credit students (Van Noy et. al. 2008).

The main challenge to connecting noncredit students with the credit side of the college is the lack of recognized mechanisms for assessing the skills and competencies imparted by noncredit courses in ways that enable comparisons with for-credit courses. For-credit departments want assurances that noncredit courses meet their standards for prerequisites or degree fulfillment.

*Breaking Through* colleges have pursued answers to these challenges. In particular, Mott Community College and Owensboro Community & Technical College have developed replicable processes for assessing the skills and competencies imparted by noncredit courses in ways that enable comparison with for-credit courses.

## ASSESS SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES IN NONCREDIT COURSES TO DOCUMENT HOW THEY CAN ALIGN WITH—AND SOMETIMES EARN—CREDIT

**Mott Community College's** Workforce Development division has adopted a few innovative ways of connecting noncredit and credit programs. First, it has established and published career pathways that connect a series of educational programs—both noncredit and credit—to provide a seamless career-advancement pathway for students. Faculty and staff have created pathways in four areas, and more are under development: business, management, marketing and technology; engineering/manufacturing and industrial technology; human services and public administration; and health sciences. All of the pathways include integrated work experience and support services, which enables working students to combine work and school more easily.

Second, the Workforce Development division has established “articulation agreements” for certain courses between the college’s noncredit workforce division and its for-credit academic division. By formally assessing the skills and competencies students gain in the noncredit courses, the college can demonstrate that at least some of the courses are equivalent to those on its “credit side” and are worthy of academic credit.

Another approach to the articulation-agreement process was to revisit some of the courses in the for-credit academic programs to see if they could be delivered in a nontraditional format by the noncredit workforce division (e.g., accelerated, intensive courses geared to students working full-time jobs and enabling them to earn credentials more quickly). As the workforce division is not bound by rules and regulations dictated by the accreditation process, it has more flexibility in designing courses. Cleverly, the workforce division then worked out an articulation agreement with the academic division to grant academic credit to course completers.

Third, the Workforce Development division blends some of its vocational programs with credit and noncredit courses. In this way, students earn both some college credit and industry-recognized credentials. For example, the Level One Welding Technician Program consists of fifteen-weeks of full-time education. Students take eight classes for a total of 510 contact hours. Completers earn eleven hours of college credit and a Level One certificate from the American Welding Society.

It has taken the staff in the Workforce Development division many years to implement these innovations. Staff carefully cultivated champions both within and outside the college (e.g., the director of the local Workforce Investment Board) to help make the case for the changes and to implement them. For example, when Mott Community College’s new vice president of academic affairs heard how enthusiastically the director of MichiganWorks! (the local Workforce Investment Board) supported the Workforce Development division’s career pathways, she reached out to partner more closely with the division. And when the dean of health sciences was facing a long waiting list for the credit-bearing Certified Nurse Assistant program, she turned to the Workforce Development division to develop a noncredit version that would mirror the credit program. *(For additional detail, see the Breaking Through Practice Guide: Labor Market Payoffs.)*



**Tip:** Cultivate champions for nontraditional programs from both within the college and outside the college. Sometimes strong supporters outside the college can have significant influence in building support for your programs inside the college.

# Pamlico Community College, North Carolina

## CREATING COMPREHENSIVE INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Pamlico Community College embraced *Breaking Through* as an opportunity to develop institutional-level innovations, using career pathways in health care as a starting point. Recognizing that students needed more than a GED to achieve a labor market payoff, and that few students were transitioning to college, the director of basic skills and the dean of noncredit education both wanted to ease transitions and clarify pathways. Health care was seen as an ideal pathway with which to start.

- ✓ *Start with high-demand occupations:* Pamlico recognized many employment options for students within the health care professions.

- ✓ *Look at the courses already offered at the college:* Pamlico already had implemented some elements of the health care pathway on both the for-credit and noncredit sides of the college.

Pamlico facilitated these efforts by hiring a staff person, who previously had taught EMT courses, to be in charge of health care courses on both the credit and noncredit sides. He expanded the number of certificates available to students, as well as the days and times courses were offered, to create more options for students.

- ✓ *Identify one department or administrator in charge of both the for-credit and noncredit elements of a pathway:* This makes it easier to connect and align courses to improve the pathway as a whole.

- ✓ *Think about labor market payoffs in terms of a portfolio of skills:* With new certificate options available on both the credit and noncredit sides, students can earn a degree along with various certificates that signify specific skills sets, thus and improve their employability.

- ✓ *Ensure that students have information on the different skills sets they can build, how to access them, and how they relate to specific jobs.*

Pamlico supplemented its *Breaking Through* efforts with a new counselor position and hired a former GED instructor who had a good understanding of the needs of basic skills students. The college recommends that programs:

- ✓ Use counselors to create bridges from basic skills to the credit side of the college and to connect students to program instructors and college counselors.

- ✓ Counsel GED students on their options in the credit side of the college, stressing the benefits of continuing to postsecondary education.

The innovations developed through *Breaking Through* have led to institutional changes, including reorganization. Even though Pamlico is small, different departments were not accustomed to working together. Today, the noncredit and for-credit divisions are being integrated, and a vice president for instruction will oversee this integration. This level of change requires buy-in across the college, especially at the leadership level.

- ✓ Start with two people: an ally from administration and one passionate person to get the ball rolling.

- ✓ Find ways to collaborate with people from several divisions within the college.

- ✓ Assess how the initiative fits with what the college is already doing. There may be overlap between projects.

- ✓ Use the *Breaking Through* strategies as part of high-level strategic planning.

- ✓ Find opportunities for peer learning or visits to other *Breaking Through* colleges.

**Owensboro Community & Technical College**, as part of the Kentucky Community & Technical College System, has access to an important tool to support career-pathways progression. The statewide system developed a comprehensive course catalog that serves as a guide for academic program and services available at each of its 16 colleges. Using an “embedded credentials” approach, programs are clearly outlined and courses aligned to a sequence that leads to a variety of credentials and degrees. OCTC offers three types of credential: certificates, diplomas, and Associate’s degrees (including Associate in Arts, Associate in Science, and Associate in Applied Science). *(To view the on-line version of the Kentucky Community & Technical College System catalog, go to <http://legacy.kctcs.edu/catalog>.)*

The catalog presents a clear succession of courses and certifications from beginning through advanced levels. For example, a “welder helper” certificate is considered an introductory or entry-level, short-term credential in OCTC’s Welding Technology program because it has no prerequisite courses for entry. This certificate leads to advanced certificates, a diploma (less than a two-year degree), and then a degree. Students in OCTC’s “Quick Jobs” career-pathways option can enter the welder helper certificate program without any postsecondary experience and a TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education) score of 9. This gives students, particularly those hesitant to take academic classes, the chance to experience college and gain an industry-recognized certificate in a short amount of time. As a result, OCTC is confident that sequenced credentials provide career-pathways opportunities that lead to valuable labor-market payoffs.

## Align Developmental Education with Technical Education

Developmental education has the same general goal as adult education: provide academic remediation to students with weak skills. However, only developmental education explicitly focuses on college preparation. Also, while federal funding and requirements promote some consistency across adult education programs, developmental education has evolved at the local and state level with state and local funding, with a great deal of variation among programs and states.

One distinction between students in adult education and those in developmental education is that adult students in developmental education generally have a high school credential (GED or diploma). That is because a high school credential is required for Pell Grants, the major form of federal financial aid for community college students, and Pell Grants can be used to pay for developmental education. A surprisingly high percentage of students test into the lowest level of developmental education—33 percent in math, for instance—which is the equivalent of “adult basic education” (Bailey 2009).

### The Investment in Developmental Education

The annual cost of developmental education is \$1.9 to \$2.3 billion at community colleges and \$500 million at four-year colleges. Reports from various states cite expenditures of tens or hundreds of millions of dollars annually. The Community College Research Center estimates that nearly 60 percent of community college students take at least one developmental education class (Bailey 2009).

Students are referred to developmental education on the basis of their scores on college-entrance exams. Scores below the college’s minimum result in a referral (either mandatory or voluntary) to developmental education. Colleges generally provide a developmental education sequence of two or three courses, from low-to high-level content in reading, writing, and math.

Data from *Achieving the Dream*, a national initiative to help more community college students succeed, bear out suspicions about the track record of development education (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho 2008):

*Our results indicate that only 3 to 4 out of 10 students who are referred to remediation actually complete the entire sequence to which they are referred. Most students exit in the beginning of their developmental sequence—almost half fail to complete the first course in their sequence. The results also show that more students exit their developmental sequences because they did not enroll in the first or a subsequent course than because they failed a course in which they were enrolled.*

For students who place into the lowest levels of developmental education, only 16 percent progress through the sequence into credit-level coursework (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho 2008). Through *Achieving the Dream* and other initiatives, significant resources are being brought to bear on developmental education. *Achieving the Dream* is particularly concerned with student groups that traditionally have faced significant barriers to success, including students of color and low-income students. The initiative aims to scale up high-impact state- and system-level policies that increase student success, both by creating incentives and by removing barriers. An emphasis on data collection has allowed participating states to track outcomes and learn what works.

In six states, the Developmental Education Initiative is building on momentum created by *Achieving the Dream*. These states are focusing on specific policy levers, such as redesigning courses and sequences and aligning with K-12 curricula, which are expected to improve outcomes for students testing into developmental education. (For more information on *Achieving the Dream* and the *Developmental Education Initiative*, see [www.achievingthedream.org](http://www.achievingthedream.org) and <http://www.deionline.org>.)

For many adult students, especially those with low skill levels and families to support, the typical developmental education curriculum, is daunting. *Breaking Through*, with its goal of occupational or technical certificates and degrees and a focus on adults with low academic skills, was developed to appeal to these students. Its pathway innovations have two distinguishing characteristics. First is the career identity of the developmental education portion of the pathway. Related to the career identity is the name that “brands” it. At many colleges, giving specialized developmental programs their own identity can eliminate much of the stigma associated with remedial education. Both characteristics are part of the essential career-pathways practice in this area: link the content of and success in developmental education to college matriculation.

## ACCELERATE DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

**Southeast Arkansas College's** innovative career pathway for Licensed Practical Nursing starts with an intensive, contextualized developmental education semester. The focus on developmental education resulted from an analysis of data on SEARK's students: nearly 95 percent of entering students needed remediation. An LPN pathway fit the bill for a program that would advance them past developmental education quickly.

Students move through the pathway in cohorts, starting with Fast Track, a contextualized developmental education course explicitly focused on LPN preparation. The course is compressed into one semester and has succeeded with students who enter testing as low as the fourth grade. It is immediately followed by a one-year, accelerated, interdisciplinary Practical Nursing Track that is delivered in eight-week modules. The special name for the developmental education portion—Fast Track—distinguishes it from the school's regular developmental education classes and likely confers a special status on the students who are in it.



While Fast Track’s intensive “boot camp” approach motivates many students, it has the potential to leave behind those who drop out due to unexpected life challenges. However, the college has adopted two options for students who are falling behind: they can continue in the accelerated program by joining the next cohort behind them, or they can drop back to traditionally paced courses.

SEARK has served three cohorts of about fifteen students each in its Fast Track developmental education program, with a 96 percent completion rate for each cohort (compared to 63 percent or less in the traditional developmental education courses). Everyone in the first cohort and 80 percent of the second cohort have passed the National Council Licensure Exam for Practical Nurses (NCLEX-PN).

**Owensboro Community & Technical College**, with its Community Economic Development Unit in the lead, extended its *Breaking Through* model with a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. It has developed a workplace-based model designed to enable entry-level health care workers at Owensboro Medical Health System to earn an Associate’s Degree in Nursing in three years. Under OCTC’s agreement with the health system, the program has enrolled frontline workers referred by their supervisors, and all continue to work full time while studying.

Prior to *Breaking Through* a large percentage of the participants entered requiring significant remediation, but success rates were not high in the college’s regular developmental education program. Nursing instructors were convinced that developmental coursework failed to provide students with skills needed in their profession, especially math skills.

The result was a special developmental education track—OCTC@OMHS—organized around cohorts. The college delivers the program at the work site, contextualized it for nursing. As one program staffer says, “We needed to make the instruction relevant for students—remember, they are working full time as well as going to school—and to be sure that they learned the math and reading skills they needed to succeed in the nursing program.”

Students move directly from the intensive developmental education component to nursing.

In the college’s traditional nursing program, 45 percent of the students leave after the first year. But 75 percent of OCTC@OMHS students are on track to complete their RN credential.



**Tip:** Provide students with a clear career plan that spells out courses to take and in what sequence, career goals, and barriers to be reduced - these are especially useful for students who need to navigate through institutions that haven’t yet created clear pathways.

## CUSTOMIZE DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION FOR TECHNICAL INSTRUCTION

Some leading-edge community college models integrate developmental education into content courses as a way of streamlining both types of education (e.g., the Washington State I-BEST model). However, many colleges have pointed out that the idea of creating special developmental education courses integrating remedial with technical instruction sounds impossibly complex. Typical community colleges offer a dozen or more technical programs: how could the college offer a specialized developmental education course for each one?

One possibility is to consider Davidson County Community College’s strategy for customizing. The program has developed a centralized set of instructional materials for each of the region’s five high-priority industries and occupations. These materials are taken from texts used in the college’s entry-level for-credit courses for each industry area. The program has keyed these materials to remedial content/objectives, such as fractions and writing

paragraphs. Instructors can use this “library” of contextualized materials to customize lessons for individual students or groups of students interested in different industry areas. In this way, DCCC can continue to offer regular technical education courses, while at the same time provide customized contextualized remedial education within the courses.

## ALLOW GREATER FLEXIBILITY IN TAKING THE COLLEGE-ENTRANCE EXAM

Some *Breaking Through* colleges have experimented with allowing more flexibility in when or if students take the college-entrance exam. In some cases, the colleges have recognized that students might be able to succeed in some technical or academic courses without going through developmental education. In others, they recognize that the blanket cutoff score on a placement test students take when entering a college might not be appropriate for all programs the college offers and that a more nuanced approach would be more appropriate.

At **North Shore Community College**, students who seek to enroll in the English as a Second Language/Child Development Associate (CDA) degree pathway but cannot pass the college-entrance exam can still enroll in the first CDA course and delay taking the entrance exam. The entry-level course includes content that instructors know students must have in order to pass the college’s test. A student who passes the test at the end of the course can receive college credit for the course. This allows the student to get started with a program while preparing to pass the entrance exam. North Shore Community College has found that this approach also builds the student’s confidence, while the college maintains its standards.

At **Washtenaw Community College**, a professional-services instructor in the Adult Transitions Program analyzed the specific reading, writing, and math skills required in entry-level classes for nine occupational programs at the college (e.g., Fundamentals of Welding, Construction I, Auto Body Repair/Automotive Refinishing). Staff created a booklet that summarizes the entry-level skill requirements for each program’s entry-level class.

By understanding the specific skills required for entry into specific programs, the Adult Transitions Program can make the case for allowing students to enter into technical programs for which they have the basic skill levels, even if they fall below the college’s placement test cutoff score. Moreover, the analysis and the booklet give counselors and advisors a tool for helping students interested in the programs assess if they are ready to enter them. They also help developmental education instructors aid students in targeting their basic skills development, and they help outside agencies better understand the entry-level requirements of various programs and hence better advise their clients. Since the program released the booklet, several other Michigan community colleges have shown interest in replicating this practice.

## Scaling Up a Contextualized Developmental Education Strategy: Case Study of Southeast Arkansas College

Southeast Arkansas College is scaling up successful practices it developed as a partner in *Breaking Through*. The goal of these practices is to move students quickly through clear pathways of remediation and postsecondary education and into well-paying jobs. SEARK is doing this by extending a number of practices it developed with its *Breaking Through* demonstration funding to the entire Licensed Practical Nursing and Allied Health program, as well as into a second occupational area: Early Childhood Development.

SEARK's *Breaking Through* program grew out of the economic realities of southeast Arkansas. Jobs that pay family-supporting wages are not plentiful, and many that do exist require postsecondary education. However, 95 percent of the students enrolling at the college require remediation. Some have never read a magazine or a book.

SEARK's experimental LPN program addressed remediation needs quickly and innovatively, in a completely retooled, contextualized developmental education program delivered to a series of three cohorts, one starting each year of the demonstration. Completion rates were 96 percent, compared with 63 percent in traditional developmental education. Each cohort then moved immediately into an intensive, accelerated Practical Nursing track that had built-in labor market payoffs. As a result, students had job options throughout their education, at the end, and even afterward. Everyone in the first cohort and 80 percent of the second cohort passed their nursing exam (the NCLEX-PN).

SEARK is studying the "lessons learned" from this demonstration and extending the new practices into other parts of the college. A reorganization has placed developmental education together with all credit-level programs under one vice president for academic affairs. Based on the *Breaking Through* demonstration, several changes have taken place:

- > General-education instructors now also serve as developmental education instructors, improving their understanding of the full continuum of students SEARK is serving.
- > Instructors have become more involved in support services as they learn about how these can help meet the needs of their students.
- > Academic instructors in developmental education learn more about professional content areas (and vice versa) through the paired-instructor approach.
- > The college is fostering interdepartmental collaboration (e.g., aligning reading and writing with the content subject matter).

In addition, the college is implementing promising practices from *Breaking Through* more widely. Most important is a revamping of developmental education so it is now contextualized for all allied health students, including nursing students.

SEARK is also contextualizing and accelerating developmental education for early-childhood education and incorporating a "clinical" experience so students can get applied learning or work-based learning. The college is developing its own child care facility, which will be operational in the next year and will be used as a clinical site. Furthermore, the accelerated and integrated approach is being applied in upcoming general-education "honors" courses, starting with Sociology in fall 2009 and Biology/Ethics in spring 2010.

The Fast Track program is also helping the college "retool" reading across the board. And building on the Fast Track program approach, the college is utilizing more "block" scheduling for training. For example, Evergreen, a local paper company, pays for training its staff for an entire day in this block format.

Finally, SEARK has scaled up a number of *Breaking Through* strategies for student success, making them accessible to all students. These strategies include tours in particular industry sectors and mandatory orientation. Strategies for Student Success, a college-success course developed for *Breaking Through* students, is now mandatory, and it incorporates the Career Readiness Certificate.

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