



LESSONS LEARNED FROM ACCELERATING OPPORTUNITY

By Randall Wilson | Lessons Learned Series



Accelerating Opportunity is a national initiative of Jobs for the Future to enable adults with low basic skills to acquire valued postsecondary credentials and rewarding careers. It offers pathways to economic opportunity for those left behind in the nation’s recovering economy, through integrated instruction in basic skills and career and technical education; team teaching; accelerated learning; and structured career pathways, bolstered by comprehensive student support services. Based on four years of designing and managing Accelerating Opportunity, Jobs for the Future and our partners have uncovered critical lessons for replicating and scaling this promising initiative for adult learners.

1. The Accelerating Opportunity model can be taken to scale with modest investments.

The initiative commenced implementation in January 2012 in four states and 33 affiliated community colleges. Today, seven states are implementing 194 integrated pathways in 85 colleges. While AO states were required to provide at least 25% matches for grant funds, many contributed a greater amount to augment local budgets and establish momentum for building pathways, and incentivize scaling.

States and colleges are also realizing economies of scale as they get programs up and running. After making initial investments in pathway development, AO colleges discovered that they needed fewer staff and other resources to operate Accelerating Opportunity in the second year, leading to lower costs per AO credit,

credential, and pathway. Between the first and second year of AO, the average value of resources used in all states declined by 14%. The average value of resources expended per credit fell by 48%; for credentials, 39%; and per pathway, 27% (Anderson et al. 2015).

AO states and colleges have also found, in some cases, that the model is easier to fund, implement, and scale when the student cohort is mixed, rather than employing separate cohorts of AO students vs. traditional students.

2. Establishing scale and sustainability requires effort from the start.

This means putting in place the policies needed, and the authority and capacity to carry them out. But even more importantly, it means sending the message that integrated pathways is not just one more “boutique” approach—it is the way

the system is moving in advancing low-skilled adult learners. AO states have consistently expressed this message in the way they talk about the initiative with colleges, partners, and other stakeholders.

3. State context matters more than state governance of adult education. By itself, the governance of Adult Basic Education in a state's community college system does not guarantee the success and scaling of integrated pathways. More critical is the quality and direction of state leadership, and the presence of programs and initiatives that complement AO's mission, both statewide and within the colleges.

4. Accelerating Opportunity is “all about partnerships.” Partnerships are an essential building block for AO, which is designed to align complementary resources and skill sets and bridge the “silos” of adult and career and technical education. A key role of AO's national team was the facilitation of partnership development and the capacity to maintain them. At both the state and local level, tapping into the expertise of a broad base of stakeholders fostered shared ownership and momentum for change. Such partnerships enable AO states and colleges to leverage resources, such as funding and recruitment sources, while coordinating services and aligning multiple policies and initiatives. At the state level, partnerships assisted in leveraging and braiding funding; making policy changes to facilitate funding and adult education reforms; aiding access to data; and drawing on cross-agency expertise and resources. For colleges, partnerships with community-based agencies and the public workforce system enabled AO students to access needed supports and help obtain employment.

AO colleges also established partnerships with area employers, a critical stakeholder in ensuring that pathways are responsive to labor market needs and result in rewarding career outcomes. The level and intensity of employer engagement varied, but hopeful signs emerged: over one in three AO students were placed into some form of work-based learning opportunity, such as internships, apprenticeships, or clinicals. Moreover, 86% of all students hired by employers in years 1 and 2 of the program were placed in jobs related to their credential field.

5. Support services must be more than optional. Students enrolled in Accelerating Opportunity experience persistent academic, financial, and personal barriers to succeeding in college and careers. For this reason, comprehensive supports that respond to

each of these barriers in a coordinated manner are as central to the integrated pathway model as team teaching. Of special importance are “navigators” or “success coaches” who help students link to support services on campus or in their community. But too often, support services are peripheral in community colleges, including in many reform initiatives, rather than being seen as a central component of the educational model. In AO, for example, students were not fully aware of supports available. Students surveyed reported that their campuses focused more on academic supports than on services to help them balance school, work, and family commitments (Spaulding & Martin-Caughey 2015). AO experience demonstrates that for initiatives focused on underprepared populations, the provision of support services must be a required component of the model, and a primary focus of college implementation activities.

6. Technical assistance is of greatest value directed to ground-level practitioners. Accelerating Opportunity is undergirded by a robust program of technical assistance (TA) and coaching, which is provided by JFF and our initiative partners (the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges in Washington State, the National College Transition Network at World Education, and the National Council for Workforce Education) with deep expertise in adult learning, workforce education, and systems change at both the state and institutional level. But TA is only effective if it reaches the right people at the right time. For an initiative like Accelerating Opportunity, that means providing coaching and professional development to not only state systems staff, but to the colleges and implementation team members, such as instructors, staff, and partners and providing TA institutes and other peer learning resources from the start of the initiative. JFF initially delivered TA at the state level, but found that more progress could be made by ensuring college-level coordinators understood the model and their role. As a result, JFF and our partners conducted in-person site visits in nearly every state with almost every college. These site visits were instrumental for ensuring that the colleges were on the right track. The visits were largely conducted in the second year of the initiative, but this experience drives home the need for localized TA from the start.

7. Pathways need to be more numerous, longer, and part of a college-wide conversation. AO colleges were initially charged with developing a minimum of

two pathways in different industries, although over time some colleges developed as many as five. By encouraging or requiring colleges to adopt additional pathways, colleges can aid in taking the initiative to scale, while offering diverse options with labor market value to more students.

Providing students with a full range of options also means extending the pathways beyond the initial credential. In the AO model, the initial phase of the pathway must offer a minimum of 12 credits and at least one credential of value in the labor market. While some AO pathways were structured to offer multiple credentials and “stopping out” points, many terminated with a single credential, such as Certified Nursing Assistant. Recent research demonstrates that the earnings benefits of a single certificate or similar credential (short of an Associate’s degree) may be limited (Xu & Trimble 2014; Dadgar & Trimble 2014). While it can be challenging for AO participants to delay entering full time employment, there are clear benefits, both economic and educational, for offering a longer, structured pathway with multiple stopping points and additional options for earning credits and credentials. Colleges must also make an effort to encourage students to continue on past the first credential, and make it easier for student to return to their education even after stopping out.

Efforts to extend the pathway all the way through the Associate’s degree illustrate how the pathway design conversation at the college must go beyond the initiative proper, and incite a full discussion of pathways across academic departments, student supports, and administration. Integrated pathways need to be aligned with a school’s strategic plan, and inform college governance conversations at the highest levels, including those of trustees.

8. Team teaching is highly challenging but powerful—for students, faculty, and the college as a whole.

The model of integrating basic skills and technical instruction was adopted in varying ways across AO colleges, and at times met with initial resistance, with some CTE faculty reluctant to adopt new methods or expand their classes to embrace adult education students. Over time, CTE instructors have embraced the potential of team teaching to increase their programs’ capacity to reach students. Faculty saw their students grow in their classrooms, while also benefitting from supplemental instruction in basic skills and increased attention from instructors. Moreover, team teaching’s effects have extended

beyond student learning, to encourage broader integration and change within the college. In many cases, CTE instructors weren’t aware that Adult Basic Education programs existed on their campuses prior to Accelerating Opportunity; now they see how adult education serves as a resource for students. Conversely, ABE instructors are now getting invited into conversations about how to improve basic skills across the campus, including developmental education. Multiple CTE instructors have shared that their experience in AO has made them better teachers overall—one noted that now she does less traditional lecturing, and more group/project work; another mentioned that she thinks it’s made her an all-around better teacher. Some instructors also believed that it takes a full-time instructor to manage such classes effectively. Additionally, AO students also voiced how critically important the team teacher was in their success and wanted even more team teaching time.

9. Culture shift is possible and transformative.

Implementing AO increased the visibility of adult education students to faculty and staff, by breaking down silos between ABE and CTE, and bringing this population out of the shadows in the college. It also changed the way low skilled students see themselves—as college students, with IDs and access to college services that were once inaccessible, and as capable of success in passing exams, completing courses, and ultimately, attaining credentials with career potential. Sixty percent of AO students surveyed expressed a desire to pursue additional credentials beyond their initial one; 27% wished to attain an Associate’s degree, while 23% aimed for a Bachelor’s (Spaulding & Martin-Caughey 2015).

Faculty who once viewed these students as “the ones who couldn’t make it in ‘real college’” became their champions in dispelling stereotypes and myths, while communicating the message that AO “is something that works and is exciting” according to instructors interviewed by JFF. Visiting other CTE students and teachers, and asking them to sell the concept to others, has helped in breaking down stigmas and skepticism.

10. Setting a high bar brings results. “Non-negotiable” program elements, including high expectations for enrolling students in structured pathways, were integral to the design and outcomes of Accelerating Opportunity. States were expected to produce 3600 credentials over 3 years, and they were continually pushed to maintain fidelity to the

AO model, including team teaching and labor market alignment. Another integral element was demanding an extensive Memoranda of Understanding. These elements helped build a structure for accountability in AO states, but also sent a message that integrated pathways represents a compelling model with a strong, pre-existing evidence base. It is vital that these expectations are in turn communicated effectively from the state to the college level, especially in areas such as pathway design and the population to be served by the initiative. If strong expectations are to be realized, staff roles, program capacities, and procedures need to be codified and delivered at all levels—especially in cases of succession or when scaling to new colleges or industry sectors. There must also be budgeting for dedicated staff at both state and colleges, with sufficient time allocated to coordination, planning, and building relationships.

11. Support is needed for rigorous, independent evaluation, while ensuring that states can track needed data in “real time.” Independent evaluation is a core investment for integrated pathway initiatives, including AO: to gather evidence of an initiative’s progress and success, and to offer formative feedback during the implementation process to allow course corrections and improvement. To ensure effective evaluation, states must have data systems, routines, and staffing to support both evaluation and ongoing program review and improvement. They also need strong data sharing agreements—with evaluators, and with partner state-level agencies, to make available data on student characteristics, and educational and employment outcomes. Under these conditions, there can be considerable lags in making evaluation data and findings available to key stakeholders, in college and state system leadership, legislatures, and the education and workforce field. To provide critical data in the interim, states need to purchase or develop

data and analytics capability, allowing colleges to capture and employ data for building the AO case and supporting continuous improvement.

12. Credit is a key motivator for students. As critical as team teaching, support coaching, and professional development are to successful pathways, a program can’t succeed unless it can recruit and retain students. Students already carrying a challenging course load are reluctant to add supplemental basic skills instruction or courses for college and career readiness that do not offer college credit. Even offering as little as a single credit for participating in such classes can have a notable impact on student participation and motivation.

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Jobs for the Future works with our partners to design and drive the adoption of education and career pathways leading from college readiness to career advancement for those struggling to succeed in today’s economy. Across the country, we work to improve the pathways leading from high school to college to family-supporting careers. Our work aligns education and training to ensure that employers have access to a skilled workforce.



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