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Washington State Board for Community and
Technical Colleges

Building Pathways to Success for Low-Skill Adult Students: Lessons for Community College Policy and Practice from a Longitudinal Student Tracking Study (*The “Tipping Point” Research*)

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According to the U.S. Census (2000), 42 percent of adults in the United States between the ages of 25 and 64 have no more than a high school education (authors' calculations). Unfortunately, however, most new jobs and the vast majority of jobs that pay wages sufficient to support a family require at least some education beyond high school (Carnevale & Derochers, 2003), and low educational attainment is associated with high rates of unemployment and poverty.

Community colleges are an important entry point to postsecondary education for adults with no previous college education or even a high school diploma. In fall 2002, for example, adults between the ages of 25 and 64 represented 35 percent of fulltime equivalent (FTE) enrollments at two-year public colleges, compared with only 15 percent of FTE undergraduate enrollments at four-year public institutions (authors' calculations, based on U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Moreover, more than two-thirds of the community college students who entered postsecondary education at age 25 or older were low income (authors' calculations based on “Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study” [BPS:96/01], 2003). The potential of community colleges to serve as a “pathway” for lowskill adults to college and career-path employment, therefore, is evident. Across the nation, several major projects are underway whose goal is to develop policies and practices supportive of this role. Funded by national foundations, these initiatives include the Ford Foundation's Bridges to Opportunity initiative and the National Governor's Association's Pathways to Advancement project, funded by Lumina Foundation for Education.



For Information on Enrollment and Outcome Information Contact:

David Prince, Senior Manager, Research & Analysis

Phone: 360-704-4347; Email: dprince@sbctc.ctc.edu

Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges

P O Box 42495, Olympia WA 98504-2495

TDD 800-833-6388

Davis Jenkins, Senior Research Associate

Community College Research Center and

Research Professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago

Email: davis@uic.edu

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Despite this interest, relatively little is known about the unique experiences and the educational and employment outcomes of adults who enter community college with limited education. We do know that their experiences and outcomes differ from those of traditional college-aged students. Compared with community college students who enrolled soon after high school (at ages 18-24), those who start later (at ages 25-64) are more likely to earn a certificate and less likely to earn an associate degree. The late starters are also far less likely to transfer to a four-year institution and earn a bachelor's degree. Indeed, among students who entered a community college for the first time in 1995-96, 60 percent of older first-time students did not earn any credential or transfer to a baccalaureate program after six years, compared with 40 percent of younger, first-time students (authors' calculations, based on BPS:96/01, 2003).

This Brief summarizes findings from a new study that seeks to fill information gaps about older community college students. Researchers used student record information from the Washington State Community and Technical College system to examine the educational experience and attainment as well as the employment and earnings of a sample of adult students, five years after first enrolling. The students in the sample were age 25 or older with, at most, a high school education. The study was conducted by staff at the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), with assistance from the Community College Research Center, as part of Ford's Bridges to Opportunity initiative. Its goal was to provide educators throughout Washington's community and technical college system with a detailed profile of their low-skill adult students, who make up about one-third of the approximately 300,000 students served by the system annually. The study also sought to identify the critical points where adult students drop out or fail to advance to the next level in order to help SBCTC staff stimulate thinking among educators throughout the system about how to bridge those gaps and thereby facilitate student advancement.

Study Sample

The study's data source was the system that the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges uses to track students in its 34 colleges. The database contains complete transcript information on every student who enrolls in college credit or non-credit courses.

The study sample consisted of two SBCTC cohorts: first-time college students who were adults age 25 or older with a high school education or less and who started in 1996-97 or in 1997-98. Also included in the cohorts were 18- to 24-year-old, first time students who lacked a high school diploma or GED. These younger students were included because by not graduating from high school and enrolling at a community college, they had in effect entered the adult labor market, whether or not they were employed. The sample included students who enrolled in college-credit (including college remedial or "developmental") or adult basic skills programs, which include adult basic education (ABE), English as a second language (ESL), and GED preparation. In Washington State, adult basic skills programs are provided through the community and technical colleges. Together the two cohorts totaled 34,956 students, or about one-third of all students who entered a community or technical college for the first time in Washington State in the two baseline years.

Females comprised the largest share of the student sample, reflecting a common pattern among students in community colleges. Whites made up more than half of the sample, and Latinos one-quarter. Students between the ages of 25 and 29 comprised the largest group. Over 70 percent had children; nearly one-quarter were single parents. Most of the students were working or seeking work. A little more than one-third were not in the labor force. The majority of the low-skill adults were low income.

The starting education level of the students also varied. Nearly one-third enrolled in an ESL program. Slightly more than one-third did not have a high school diploma and enrolled in adult basic education or GED programs. Approximately one-third of the students already had either a diploma or a GED.

Three-quarters of the high school diploma holders, and nearly 80 percent of GED holders, enrolled in occupational degree programs, reflecting the high interest of adult students in occupational programs. Forty percent of the students with a high school diploma or GED also took at least one developmental course. The majority of both GED and diploma holders who enrolled in academic transfer programs had to take at least one remedial course.

Study Findings

For both cohorts we used the transcript information in the SBCTC student database to track the educational progress of the different subgroups (defined in terms of the students' starting education levels) five years after they entered a community or technical college. We used Unemployment Insurance wage record data from the Washington State Employment Security Department to examine the annual earnings of students five years after they started.

Student Educational Attainment and Earnings after Five Years

Only 13 percent of the students who started in ESL programs went on to earn at least some college credits. Less than one-third (30 percent) of adult basic education (ABE/GED) students made the transition to college-level courses. Only four to six percent of either group ended up getting 45 or more college credits or earning a certificate or degree within five years. (Washington's community and technical colleges are on the quarter system, so 45 credits is equivalent to two full-time semesters of coursework, or 30 credits in semester systems.)

Nearly 30 percent of the students who started with a GED, and 35 percent of those who started with a high school diploma, earned at least 45 credits or a credential in five years. Fourteen percent of the students who started with a GED, and 18 percent of students who started with a high school diploma, earned an advanced certificate or an associate degree in five years.

Not surprisingly, the higher students' educational attainment after five years, the higher the wages they earned on average. Compared with students who earned fewer than ten college credits, those who took at least one year's worth of college-credit courses and earned a credential had an average annual earnings advantage: \$7,000 for students who started in ESL; \$8,500 for those who started in ABE or GED; and \$2,700 and \$1,700 for those entering with a GED or high school diploma, respectively.

These findings are consistent with previous research on the economic returns to a subbaccalaureate education. These studies show that earning an occupational certificate (equivalent to two semesters of full-time study) provides individuals with a significant earnings advantage compared with individuals with just some college but no degree, although the magnitude of the advantage varies by student gender and field of study (Bailey, Kienzl, & Marcotte, in press; Grubb, 2002; Kienzl, 2004). These studies have also found that the wage gains associated with postsecondary education of less than a year are negligible.

Advancement beyond English as a Second Language and Adult Basic Education

Only one percent of ESL students who started with less than a high school education earned a GED or high school diploma in five years. In all, 12 percent went beyond ESL and enrolled in college-credit courses. Of these, two-thirds had a high school credential when they started in ESL. A much larger group of ESL students had a high school credential upon enrollment but went no further than ESL. Latino ESL students with a high school diploma were less than half as likely as other students to advance beyond basic skills. Males who earned a GED (particularly Latinos) were less likely than women to go further in their education. Part of this gender difference may result from the fact that, on average, men earn more than women, and thus forgo more wages when they attend school.

Thirty-one percent of the students who started in ABE or GED courses went on to enroll in at least one college-level course. Of this group, 70 percent, or 2,543 students, already had a high school credential. A larger group (3,245) also had a high school credential but went no further than basic skills, including 1,147 students who earned their GED or diploma at the college and left.

A number of factors seem to be associated with a greater likelihood that students who start in ESL or ABE/GED will go on to succeed in college-level courses. A higher percentage of students who succeeded in earning a credential or completing at least 45 credits received financial aid than did students who did not do either. In addition, students who took developmental education after taking ESL or ABE/GED were more likely to earn a credential or at least 45 credits than were those who did not. Students who expected up-front that they would attend college a year or longer were more successful than were students who did not know upon enrollment how long they would attend or those for whom information on their expectations for college was not available.

Although financial aid and developmental education were associated with higher chances of success, many students who went beyond ESL or ABE/GED did not receive these supports. Only about 23 percent of students who transitioned from ESL, and 35 percent of those who transitioned from ABE, received financial aid when they enrolled in collegelevel courses. Only 28 percent of ESL students who transitioned, and 33 percent of transitioning ABE students, enrolled in developmental courses. Moreover, less than one-third of ESL and ABE/GED students expected to attend college for a year or more. About half (54 percent) of ESL students, and 47 percent of ABE/GED students, did not have clear plans or their intent was not ascertained.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study of students in the Washington State Community and Technical College system finds evidence that attending college for at least one year and earning a credential provides a substantial boost in earnings for adults with a high school diploma or less who enter higher education through a community college. These findings are consistent with studies that have used nationally representative samples of community college students.

Short-term training, such as the type often provided to welfare recipients seeking to enter the workforce, may help individuals get into the labor market, but it usually does not help them advance beyond low-paying jobs. Neither does an adult basic skills education by itself nor a limited number of college-level courses provide much benefit in terms of either employment or earnings. Another recent study of Washington State community college students (Hollenbeck & Huang, 2003) found that adult basic skills programs had no impact on wages and had only a modest impact on average rates of employment in the long term (but not the short term). In contrast, individuals who went through community college occupational degree programs were eight percent more likely to be employed, and they earned over \$4,400 per year more on average than did similar individuals in Washington's labor force who did not enroll in any training program. Only individuals who took basic skills courses concurrently with vocational training enjoyed a significant benefit in average rates of employment and quarterly earnings.

Another study (Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board [WTECB], 2004), drawing on occupational forecasts by Washington State's Employment Security Department, shows that not only do workers with at least a year of college and a credential earn substantially more than do those with just some or no college, but that they are in higher demand among employers, at least in Washington State.

The findings from all of these studies of Washington State indicate that community and technical colleges should consider making at least one year of college-level courses and earning a credential a minimum goal for the many low-skill adults they serve. While hundreds of low-skill adult students in our sample were able to achieve this threshold level of attainment in five years, many more did not. Eight out of ten students in ABE or ESL were able to make modest skill gains, at best earning a GED, but did not advance to college-level courses. Seven out of ten students who had a GED and took college-credit courses left with less (and often a lot less) than a year of college credit and no credential. This is also true for the more than two out of three students who had a high school diploma and took college courses.

To enable low-skill adults to achieve the threshold level of one year of college plus a credential or more, community colleges in Washington State and elsewhere should rethink their programs and services. For example, the study summarized here found that there are students—the 69 percent of ABE and ESL students who make the transition to college-level work with a high school diploma or GED in hand—who are eligible to receive financial aid and developmental education. These supports would make it two to three times more likely that they would earn a credential, but, at best, only one-third of these students receive them. Therefore, it would be useful for basic skills and developmental education faculty to work together to encourage students to take advantage of developmental courses and to work with counseling and student services staff to ensure that eligible students apply for financial aid.

In addition, support should be given to the far larger group of students who have or earn a high school diploma or GED but never go beyond basic skills in community college. More aggressive efforts to educate them about their college education opportunities, combined with “bridge programs” that ease their transition to college, might increase their enrollment and success in college-level programs.

Finally, since short-term training that is focused on getting low-skilled adults a job generally does not result in earnings gains over time when students do not continue their education, colleges could help students avoid dead-end starts by ensuring that short-term training options lead to real educational attainment in the long term.

A commuter transit system that is run on the schedule of working adults and that can accommodate on-and-off traffic, but still makes connections to long-term destinations, may be an apt metaphor for an education system effective in serving low-skill adults. Such a system would provide a clear map of the educational pathways that students can follow to advance in their jobs and pursue further education, indicating where they can “stop out” of education for a time and reenter as they are able. The system would give students a lot of guidance and support so they do not get lost as they leave and reenter college, and would allow adults to go farther and faster than they do in the conventional college system.

Rethinking existing community college programs to create more of an educational transit system has to be done collaboratively, involving faculty and staff from across the academic and administrative divisions or “silos” that characterize most community colleges and higher education institutions generally. The Washington State Community and Technical College system is taking steps to break down those silos by sharing the results of this study widely among its faculty, staff, and administrators. Member colleges interested in improving outcomes for lowskill adult students have been invited to organize teams from across their various divisions—basic skills, academic transfer (where developmental education is typically housed), workforce education, and student services—to reflect on the state-level data from this study and on similar data from their own colleges. The aim is to encourage these crossdivisional teams to eliminate roadblocks to advancement and create pathways to educational and economic success for their many low-skill adult students.

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