

TRANSITIONING FROM ADULT ED PROGRAMS: A CALL TO ARMS

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Most national education leadership groups have a strong interest in improving access to postsecondary and vocational education — especially for people who are economically disadvantaged, have limited aspirations and/or may be educationally under-prepared due to poor schooling. Among the strategies that education leaders advocate are increasing financial aid opportunities, improving K-12 education, and strengthening the links between secondary schools and colleges. It is perhaps not surprising that community colleges figure prominently in most of these proposals and in the programs that are beginning to flow from them.

Increasing the number of students transitioning from adult education programs to community colleges is an additional strategy — one too often neglected — that has equally great potential for increasing access and greater potential for near-term results at a far lower cost.

Adult education programs currently serve more than 3 million people each year, many of whom are disadvantaged economically and/or educationally. There are an estimated 40 to 50 million adults with basic skills too low to enter or succeed in most college credit programs. Getting this population educated and up to speed is vital, especially considering that there probably aren't enough young people in the educational pipeline to fill the nation's workforce needs in the decades to come. Retiring baby boomers are expected to create a "workforce vacuum" in the near future, and adult education programs will play a critical role in lessening the burden.

Adult education programs have several natural advantages as a mechanism for increasing access: they provide remediation in reading, math, English and other basic skills; they offer high-school equivalency and English as a Second Language services; they are often administered by or closely linked to community colleges; and participants in the programs are self-selected "volunteers for learning," who often have aspirations for postsecondary education.

Research recently published by the Council for the Advancement of Adult Literacy indicates that where community colleges have made an effort to increase transitions from adult education to their academic and vocational programs, the results are dramatic. In a short period of time, large numbers of disadvantaged adult learners have gained access to postsecondary opportunities that would otherwise have been closed to them.

CAAL's research shows that the steps community colleges must take to increase transitions are fairly simple and inexpensive. They include developing collaborative links with adult education programs offered by schools, community-based organizations and other community agencies. In addition, colleges should recruit students from adult education programs — many times from their own campuses. Also, community colleges could provide elementary guidance and student support services and create short-term intensive remediation programs for students who fall just short of college readiness.

Creating a clear curricular alignment between the exit criteria of adult education programs and entry-level requirements for college would also enhance the transition process. Creating a clear division between adult and developmental education programs would allow capable students to “leapfrog” over developmental education — creating cost savings for students and colleges. Lastly, colleges should integrate basic skills remediation components into vocational programs.

CAAL research shows that a growing number of colleges are adopting one or more of these strategies. Program development, implementation and ongoing operations costs are small — usually on the order of \$50,000 to \$100,000 per college. Moreover, these strategies usually can be implemented, and bring results, in a relatively short time frame.

Proven models for increasing the transition from adult education programs to community college admission already exist. If they were widely implemented at community colleges, the potential benefit would be enormous.

The main problem is that most two-year colleges have either not yet adopted these strategies or have not done so in a systematic way. One barrier is lack of awareness about the strategies and their likely results. Overburdened college administrators may feel that they lack the mandate to proceed in this way. In addition, tightly budgeted community colleges and external adult colleges and adult education programs frequently lack the modest amounts of discretionary funding required.

CAAL calls upon community colleges, adult education programs, and postsecondary state governance authorities to mandate clearly articulated programs to increase transitions from adult education to postsecondary education. The state should also provide hands-on technical assistance to colleges and external adult education programs to help in the implementation of these mandates. Naturally, the state higher education budgets should include the modest resources necessary to fund these programs, and the federal Higher Education Act should authorize a small grant program to support the transition of adult students into the college ranks.

This may be a new theme for many national education leadership groups, but the novelty of the theme should not diminish its importance. Increasing transitional opportunities

must be an important part of the nation's tool-kit in responding to the problems of educational access. The nation is pursuing some strategies to the desired ends already, but if we do not move well beyond them in the ways recommended here, the United States will not be able to meet its manpower needs in the foreseeable future. Millions of Americans will be unable to take part in meaningful employment, or for that matter in the many other activities that make for sound citizenship, good parenting and effective community life.

By expanding adult education services, the millions of adults now without educational access can gain it — benefiting themselves and the nation.