



## **I-BEST: Moving Low-Skilled Citizens to Career and College Pathways**

*By Tina Bloomer, Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges*

It seems implausible today, but a shortage of trained workers is on the horizon. Baby Boomers are reaching retirement age. There are not enough graduates projected in the next several years to fill projected employment gaps. When employers cannot find trained workers, jobs are vulnerable to being moved off shore.

There is one generally overlooked population that could help fill this gap: undereducated, low-skilled workers. These are people who were not successful in the traditional education model, or more important, it was not successful for them.

The traditional, adult, basic education model required students to first pass all the basic skills classes before gaining access to college-level, workforce education programs. Some adult students, with their multiple demands, found this sequential path too long and too difficult.

Historically, in Washington state, only 13% of English as a second-language students and less than one third of adult basic education students continued on to college-level work. Only about 5% of these students ended up earning one year or more of college credits or earn a certificate or degree within five years.

The Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges' (SBCTC) research—in partnership with Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia University—showed earning at least one year of college credit and one credential (for example, a certificate) marked a key turning point for these students. Upon reaching this level of education—identified as the tipping point—students are more likely to pursue higher levels of education and see increased earnings.<sup>1</sup>

The Washington state community and technical college system has designed an instructional model to meet the instructional needs of this important population: integrated basic education and skills training (I-BEST).

### **What is I-BEST?**

I-BEST is an instructional model that pairs two instructors—one from a college-level workforce education program and one from adult basic education—to instruct 50% of class time. Together, faculty members develop integrated program outcomes, plan curricula and assess student learning and skill development. The programs are built on education and career pathways and include college-level credits.

Students must qualify for federally supported levels of adult basic education, and wrap-around student service supports are provided. The programs must appear on the demand list for the local area. There are about 150 approved programs in Washington's 34 community and

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technical colleges in a wide range of occupational areas, including allied health, IT, accounting assistant and welding.

### **Student gains**

When compared to adult basic education students in other workforce programs I-BEST students were three times more likely to earn college credit and nine times more likely to earn an award, according to an I-BEST evaluation performed by CCRC. CCRC's evaluation further validated earlier findings that I-BEST helps move low-skilled students further and faster through college-level work.<sup>2</sup>

The study said I-BEST students did better than other adult basic education students. I-BEST students were more likely than others to continue into credit-bearing coursework, earn occupational certificates and make point gains on basic skills tests. I-BEST students also had a higher probability of persisting into a second year of education.

In 2006, the SBCTC adopted a strategic goal to “raise the knowledge and skills of the state’s residents” by increasing educational attainment across the state. This goal is a substantial challenge for the system, because Washington’s two-year colleges serve a diverse range from students with basic skills to highly-trained workers coming back to upgrade skills.

I-BEST has proven to be a game-changer in how Washington state delivers education to those most in need.

### **Student Achievement Initiative**

The Student Achievement Initiative was developed to better describe and quantify what students achieve by attending one of Washington’s community or technical colleges. This performance-based funding system aims to improve accountability by more accurately describing what students actually achieve each year and by providing incentives through financial rewards to colleges for increasing the levels of student achievement.

The measures are straightforward:

- Build toward college-level skills (basic skills gains, passing pre-college writing or math).
- Obtain first-year retention (earning 15, then 30 quarter college-level credits).
- Complete college-level math (passing math courses required for either technical or academic associate degrees).
- Achieve completions (degrees, certificates or apprenticeship training).

A student achievement gains analysis of adult basic education students found I-BEST students played a major role in increasing the overall achievement levels of adult basic



education and basic skills students. Eighty-eight percent of those adult basic education students who make it to the tipping point are I-BEST students.

College-level math has been identified in many studies as a significant barrier to college completion. I-BEST students comprised 92% of the adult basic education students who gained math points. These are two critical success markers in the Student Achievement measurement system.

The Student Achievement Initiative also drives the design and continuous improvement of I-BEST. When I-BEST is designed to get students through at least the first 15 college-level credits, students advance nearly twice as fast through their programs as students who attempt fewer credits.

### **Washington State Student Completion Initiative**

Enhancing and improving the I-BEST model is an ongoing process. The Washington State Student Completion Initiative—funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the Washington state legislature—improves access and completion rates for low-income young adults in pre-college and college courses in Washington state community and technical colleges.

The initiative funds four projects: Open Course Libraries, Rethinking Pre-College Math, I-BEST for Developmental Education and rewards for the Student Achievement Initiative.

The Washington State Student Completion Initiative extends I-BEST's reach by identifying new models of instruction focused on redesigning developmental education curriculum and instructional practices. The goal is to pilot strategies that move students further and faster toward the highest credential in the education pathway. I-BEST for developmental education extends the pathways developed in approved I-BEST programs at least two quarters in length. Basic education and developmental education students are eligible to participate in these pilot programs. The demonstration project allows colleges to test differing models for integrating curriculum that combines student services, revises curriculum design and develops engaging instructional models.

Expectations include new curricular materials and approaches that integrate workforce programs and developmental education curriculum. In practice, I-BEST faculty have found it is critical that equal attention is paid to both disciplines so these projects are held to the same standard. The colleges are examining instructional approaches and instructor support and will use data and a culture of evidence to modify, refine and improve practices to advance student success.



Another critical feature of I-BEST—shared planning time for the instructors as they develop their co-teaching roles and responsibilities—is continued in this project. The student support provided in the pilot programs include contextual learning opportunities and integrated program outcomes in cohort models.

I-BEST programs strive to include strategies that appeal to diverse student populations and provide clear career and educational pathways for students. The institutional support provided includes professional development tools and other resources to help students succeed with consideration of how to make necessary changes in structures, attitudes, paradigms and strategies for student success by building on strengths of students, faculty and staff.

Through this initiative, Washington’s community and technical colleges aim to give low-skilled students a viable way to earn meaningful credentials in a way that works for them. The question of how to transition adult basic education students to college is now being considered in a new way.

The data gives clear evidence of the success of the I-BEST model. Another less tangible—but just as important result of I-BEST—may be its role in changing how these students are viewed by others and how these students view themselves. They are now seen as a viable student population that can succeed in college and contribute. This represents a significant cultural shift and opportunity for adult basic education students.

## Resources

- For more information about I-BEST, visit:  
[www.sbctc.edu/college/e\\_integratedbasiceducationandskillstraining.aspx](http://www.sbctc.edu/college/e_integratedbasiceducationandskillstraining.aspx)
- For more information about the Student Achievement Initiative, visit:  
[www.sbctc.edu/college/e\\_studentachievement.aspx](http://www.sbctc.edu/college/e_studentachievement.aspx).

## References

1. Davis Jenkins and David Prince, “Building Pathways to Success for Low-Skill Adult Students: Lessons for Community College Policy and Practice from a Statewide Longitudinal Tracking Study,” Community College Research Center, April 2005, <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?uid=204>.
2. Davis Jenkins, Matthew Zeidenberg and Gregory S. Kienzl, “Educational Outcomes of I-BEST, Washington State Community and Technical College System's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training Program: Findings From a Multivariate Analysis,” Community College Research Center, May 2009, <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?UID=692>.



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