



HELPING ADULT LEARNERS MAKE THE TRANSITION TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

As the education and skills needed by adults to obtain employment and earn a living wage have increased, community colleges, local educational agencies, and community-based organizations providing adult basic education (ABE) are encouraging learners to enroll in postsecondary courses to enhance their opportunities. Transforming ABE programs to include helping learners make a successful transition to postsecondary education is an iterative process requiring new forms of instruction, enhanced services, and collaborative relationships with other agencies and organizations.

Adults moving from ABE programs into higher education often face considerable challenges. Many need help strengthening their academic skills, as well as developing their study and time management skills. Many need assistance navigating enrollment and financial aid systems and other aspects of college life. In response to these challenges, ABE programs within and outside community colleges have begun more actively to assist adult learners in their transition to postsecondary education.

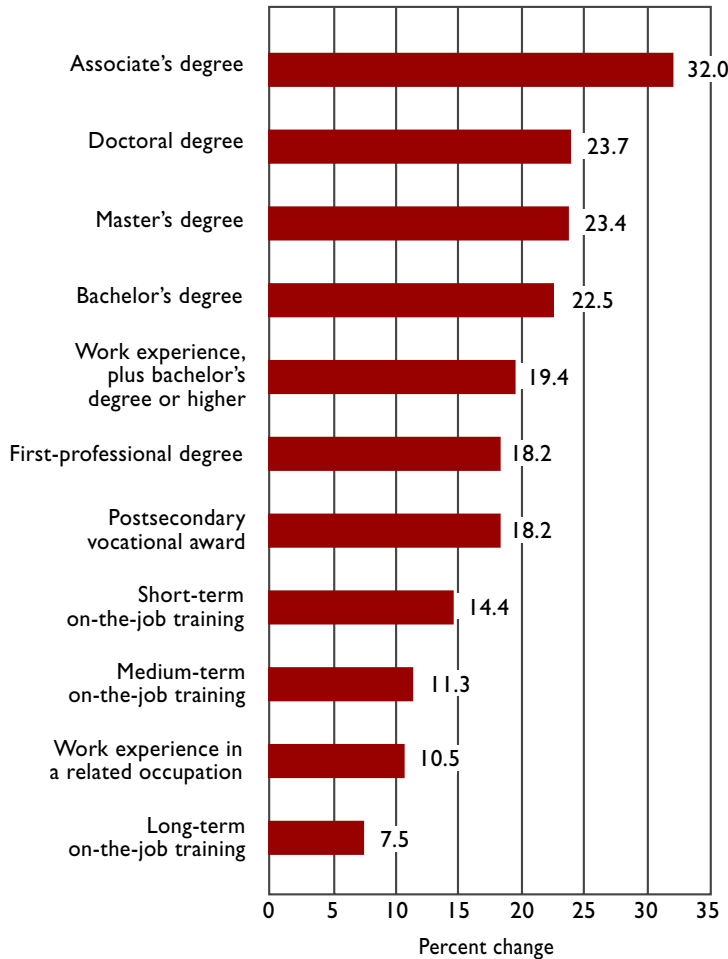
This paper discusses the challenges ABE programs must address in developing and implementing transition services, provides examples of emerging efforts, and discusses the implications of this transformation for policy and practice.

PARTICIPATION AND PAYOFFS FOR FURTHER EDUCATION

Recent data on the educational requirements needed for the fastest-growing jobs in our economy provide a convincing argument for enhancing ABE services to include transition to postsecondary education. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2002), the majority of these jobs will require postsecondary education, while those requiring only on-the-job-training or work experience will grow at less than the 15 percent average expected in this decade (Figure 1). Further evidence of the need for postsecondary education comes from U.S. Department of Education (2002) data that show the relationship between income and education (Figure 2). The income benefits from further education for men and women over age 25 are clear and document the payoff for any education beyond a high school diploma.

Participation in Postsecondary Education. The limited data on ABE learners' transition to postsecondary education show that only a small percentage enroll in postsecondary programs in the year following their participation in ABE. Although statistics on adults' participation in higher education have been collected for many years, national data on the extent of ABE learners' participation in postsecondary education have only recently become available through the Department of Education's National Reporting System for

Figure 1—Jobs and Growth Tied to Postsecondary Education: Percentage Change in Number of Jobs by Most Significant Source of Education or Training: Projected 2000–2010



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Tomorrow's Jobs*, Bulletin 2540-1, 2002.

federally funded programs operating under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, Title II, Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. The data show that in program year 2002–2003 approximately 48,350 adults were reported as enrolling in postsecondary education or training. This number represents about 20 percent of adults who had indicated participation in postsecondary education as a goal and about 1.8 percent of the 2.8 million adult education

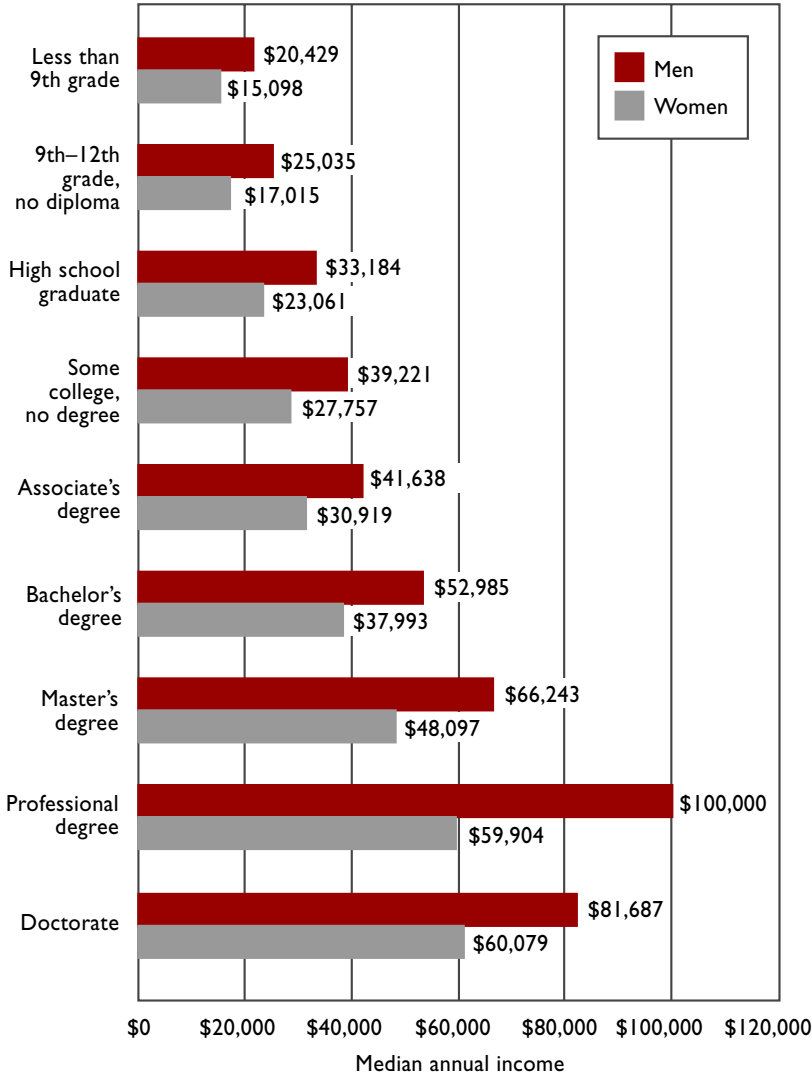
participants enrolled for that year. Nearly 200,000 adults obtained a General Educational Development (GED) certificate or high school diploma and are potential participants in postsecondary education. This pool of reported actual and potential participants in postsecondary education is less than 10 percent of all adults enrolled in adult basic education during 2001–2002 (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

A few state community college systems track the participation of ABE learners in their postsecondary programs. For example, Oregon found that 32 percent of ABE participants entered credit postsecondary courses during program year 2001–2002.¹

Data on adults who pursue a GED offer another view of ABE participants' aspirations and participation in postsecondary education. According to the American Council on

Education (2000), over 65 percent of GED examinees in 1999 were obtaining the credential to pursue further education. But Tyler's (2001) synthesis of research on the GED indicates that only 30–35 percent of GED recipients obtain any postsecondary education and only 5–10 percent obtain at least one year of postsecondary education. Furthermore, only one-half of 1 percent of female GED recipients

Figure 2—Income and Education: Median Annual Income of Year-Round, Full-Time Workers 25 Years Old and Over, by Level of Education Completed and Sex: 1999



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2002). *Digest of Education Statistics 2001* (NCES 2002-130). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

earns an associate's degree (Boudett, 2000). Although more than half of the adults who take the GED test aspire to continue their education, only a small percentage have achieved this goal.

Payoffs for Further Education.

For those who do participate in postsecondary education, research on the effects of adult education in welfare-to-work programs provides insight into the benefits of postsecondary education and illustrates the path adults may take toward further education. The results from the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies show the payoffs that participation in further education can have for adults who are economically and academically disadvantaged. This evaluation studied 11 programs serving welfare recipients to assess the effects of the Labor Force Attachment ("work first") and Human Capital Development models on participants' outcomes in employment. Analyses were conducted on data from adults who enrolled in ABE without a high school diploma, earned a GED, and then participated in postsecondary education.

Approximately 15 percent of the adults who enrolled in ABE without a high school diploma entered postsecondary programs during the study's two-year follow-up period. Participants more likely to enter post-

secondary education were those who earned a GED in less than one year and had higher initial literacy skills and higher levels of prior education when they entered the ABE program, compared to other participants (Bos et al., 2002).

The results of non-experimental analyses conducted as part of this study indicated that participation in postsecondary programs had substantial benefits in terms of adults' greater earnings and lower rates of welfare dependence. Effects for postsecondary participants appeared in the third year following their initial participation in adult education and included 47 percent higher earnings than those of participants who received only adult education services, as well as a reduction of 32 percent in welfare payments. (These estimated effects were not contingent on participants' completion of postsecondary education or training with a credential or certificate.) Although the benefits to those participating in postsecondary education were encouraging, the study's authors noted that only a small percentage of the ABE participants were able to earn a GED and enter postsecondary education, suggesting a need for better ways to prepare adults to continue their education (Bos et al., 2002).

APPROACHES TO TRANSITION TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Adult basic education programs face a number of challenges in providing effective transition services. As the data on welfare recipients' enrollment in postsecondary education suggest, adults must have adequate basic skills and obtain a GED or high school diploma to be successful in moving on to further education. Anecdotal information from

ABE program staff working on transition activities also indicates that ABE learners need to know about the procedures and requirements for enrolling in postsecondary education and how to work within an institution's bureaucracy to apply for financial aid and other fiscal assistance. ABE learners also may need help in developing their study skills and managing their time, as well as encouragement and the motivation to persist in preparing for postsecondary education and completing courses once they are enrolled.

Identifying the Target Population for Postsecondary Programs. While ABE programs strive to set expectations that all participants should aim for further education or training, a key challenge for staff is determining those likely to be admitted to postsecondary education. Information from ABE programs assisting adults in entering postsecondary education indicates that the programs often focus on learners who are close to receiving their GED or high school diploma or on English language learners in advanced-level classes.² The assumption is that these learners may have the skills to achieve the required score on the community college placement test and to be admitted to credit classes.

Anecdotal information from ABE program staff reveals some concerns about these assumptions. One issue is the extent to which GED scores predict scores on the community college placement tests. ABE instructors have indicated that the relationship between learners' GED scores and their scores on college placement tests (such as the COMPASS, which measures reading, mathematics, and writing) is not consistent. Thus, a GED score may not be a reliable predictor of learners'

success in being admitted to a postsecondary program. Another issue is whether ABE participants aspiring to enroll in postsecondary education have the required academic and organizational skills to be successful. While there are limited data about the completion rates of ABE learners in postsecondary education, informal efforts of ABE staff to track the experiences of ABE learners who have entered postsecondary education suggest that learners' academic skills may need enhancement for them to meet postsecondary course standards. In the absence of rigorous research findings on the factors associated with ABE learners' successful participation in postsecondary education, ABE staff have taken the approach of assuming that most learners who have postsecondary education as a goal can benefit from an array of services to strengthen their skills for this transition.

Developing an Array of Services. In some states, community colleges serving as the institutional home for a majority of ABE programs often have been at the forefront of the articulation between ABE and postsecondary education. These programs are well positioned to develop the internal organizational connections and services that can assist adult learners in preparing for postsecondary education. More recently, the Nellie Mae Educational Foundation instituted the ABE-to-College Transition Project in New England for ABE programs operating out of community-based organizations, correctional institutions, local educational agencies, as well as community colleges, to provide models of ABE transition services.³ The Foundation has funded 25 programs to implement multifaceted transition services to help adults entering postsecondary education. The experiences of

community colleges offering ABE transition activities and the Nellie Mae Educational Foundation's grantees provide examples of how ABE programs are developing services to support adults' transition to postsecondary education.

These programs generally have organized services for adult learners in three areas:

- Academic preparation: providing instruction in math, reading, writing, and computer use.
- Counseling: supplying information on financial aid, stress and time management, study skills, personal support, and orientation to college life.
- Mentoring: helping orient learners to college activities and offering encouragement and support.

Academic Preparation. ABE programs actively providing transition assistance have found that the math, reading, and writing classes generally offered for GED preparation are not sufficient to prepare adults for postsecondary participation. Thus, many of these programs are offering post-GED classes for adults seeking to apply for postsecondary education, while others have enhanced their GED courses to include topics aligned with coursework that will be required by the community college. For example, staff at three community colleges in Wyoming have been participating in a state-sponsored ABE pilot project to examine the extent to which GED math courses are sufficient preparation for ABE learners to obtain the required score on the COMPASS for admission into community col-

lege classes. As a result of their investigation, they have developed post-GED math classes to teach the concepts adults need to succeed on the COMPASS and in their classes (Alamprese, 2003).

A number of Nellie Mae Educational Foundation grantees also have designed new classes aligned to the academic content required by community colleges in their area.⁴ These classes in math, reading, and writing are designed to prepare learners for credit classes and to strengthen learners' academic skills prior to their matriculation. As part of the Nellie Mae initiative, ABE grantees not located in a community college have established partnerships with local colleges. Some grantees are offering academic courses on the college campuses as a way of helping learners get accustomed to the college environment. In addition, many Nellie Mae grantees are providing computer courses to enable learners to meet the requirements for preparing papers and projects.

ABE instructors who teach transition classes have noted that learners not only have to bolster their academic skills, but they also must learn to manage the amount of work and the pace of a college curriculum, including enrolling in multiple courses and completing homework in these courses. To prepare adult learners for these requirements, for example, the ESL program at Lane Community College in Eugene, Oregon, offers a structured curriculum for its high-level ESL learners that simulates this experience by having learners maintain an academic workload similar to that required in credit classes.⁵ Other ABE programs assign required homework in their transition classes with deadlines for comple-

tion, instead of offering it as an optional activity, as has been a practice in ABE programs. Staff from transition programs report that the strategies of offering academic courses aligned with college-level content and of conducting classes with requirements similar to those in college assist adult learners in matriculating and performing well in postsecondary programs.⁶

Counseling Activities. ABE transition programs offer a variety of counseling activities intended to help learners navigate the bureaucratic maze involved in applying for admission and obtaining financial aid and other assistance. Many transition programs participating in the Nellie Mae initiative have counselors on the transition program staff who meet individually with adults to help them complete application forms for admissions and financial aid. In some community college-based ABE programs, such as those in Oregon, learners can get help from the same counselors who are available to all other students. Other ABE programs have negotiated with the college's counseling office to offer specific meeting times for ABE students who want to apply to postsecondary programs, an arrangement that has increased ABE learners' access to this service.

Some community colleges provide an additional type of financial aid by offering a limited number of free tuition hours during the first year for adult learners who obtained a GED from the college's ABE program. In Oregon and Wyoming, community colleges vary in the number of hours they grant as a tuition waiver. In Oregon, Chemeketa Community College offers learners earning a GED a tuition waiver for six hours. Rogue Community College offers learners completing either the GED or

Adult High School Diploma the opportunity to buy one credit and get one credit free for up to six free credits. Learners can use these credits in any one term within one year of their graduation from either GED classes or adult high school. In Wyoming, Casper Community College offers learners who obtain a GED four credit hours of free tuition, and Western Wyoming Community College allows those completing a GED to apply for a scholarship, along with regular high school graduates, for a full year of free tuition.

An important component of counseling activities for transition learners are workshops and classes on study skills and time and stress management. Many adults need to learn a new approach to studying that enables them to organize and learn information efficiently and effectively. To address this need, transition programs are offering workshops on study skills or incorporating this information into their academic instruction. Transition programs also build learners' capacity to organize and manage time and deal with the stress associated with balancing multiple commitments. Many adults work and care for families while participating in education, and the rigorous requirements of postsecondary courses often mean that they must develop new strategies for meeting these demands. Workshops, peer-group discussions, and individual counseling can all address these issues. To provide these types of services, ABE programs are working with counseling services and other programs in community colleges to supplement academic instruction with activities designed to help adults function successfully in college.

Transition services also help orient ABE learners to the college culture and environment. ABE programs located on community college campuses can accomplish this by exposing ABE learners to services and facilities available at the college. Often ABE learners are not full participants in campus activities and preparing them to become matriculated students means encouraging them to take advantage of these opportunities. For ABE learners who have never been part of a college campus, transition programs offer college orientation courses that include information about available services and the culture of postsecondary education. The Nellie Mae grantees offering their academic courses on a college campus can simulate for learners the experience of being a college student and using campus facilities.⁷

Mentoring. The first year of matriculation often is the most difficult for learners and a time when they may need ongoing assistance. Mentors can help orient learners to college life and offer ongoing support as they embark on postsecondary education. One example is the Sumner Adult Education Program in East Sullivan, Maine, whose mentor supports ABE graduates in their first college semester and is available to former ABE learners throughout their time in college. At the ABE-to-College Transition Program in Holyoke, Massachusetts, mentors are former ABE learners who have entered college. These mentors provide information and support to ABE learners during their transition period and are available to assist learners during their first year of postsecondary courses.

While learners' academic skills are essential to their success in college, they also need to be able to manage their time and responsibilities well and to remain motivated and focused on achieving their goals. Mentoring and counseling are two critical components of supporting adult learners in meeting the challenges of postsecondary education.

Establishing Collaborative Partnerships. ABE transition program staff have established collaborative relationships both within and outside of their programs. For those programs operating within community college systems, collaboration with other departments and services is critical to the success of the transition program. Some ABE programs have worked informally with admissions offices and counseling staff to provide information to learners in GED preparation and advanced-level ESL classes regarding college admissions policies, timelines, and application procedures. Although these activities are helpful to ABE learners, they often do not result in a systematic or structured transition program. In contrast, other ABE community college programs have established a schedule for admissions staff to meet with ABE classes and to provide an overview and follow-up information about the admissions process.

Similarly, ABE program staff have made agreements with the counseling department in community colleges to serve ABE learners in their transition activities. For example, ABE community college programs in states such as Idaho are developing routine transition activities in which ABE staff work with admissions and counseling staff to offer regularly scheduled events.⁸ As the number of ABE learners who move on to credit classes has increased⁹

and ABE programs have been recognized as a feeder system for college degree programs, ABE staff can more readily establish relationships with other departments and services to aid ABE learners in their transition activities.¹⁰

ABE programs operating in community-based organizations, school districts, correctional settings, and other institutions have the challenge of establishing relationships with external organizations, such as community colleges and counseling programs, to develop transition services. The Nellie Mae grantees that have taken this step have found community colleges helpful in providing staff and space for transition classes, as well as college orientation services for learners. Collaboration between ABE programs and other institutions and agencies can result in expanded services for adult learners as well as access to other opportunities.¹¹

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Any significant effort to assist ABE participants in their transition to postsecondary education will require shifts in state policy as well as more systematic processes in ABE programs for developing information and procedures for linking with postsecondary institutions. Policies and procedures at the federal and state levels will be needed to support enhanced curriculum, new types of services, and the development of collaborative relationships.

Enhanced Curriculum. ABE staff currently providing transition services indicate that ABE instruction is not well aligned with requirements for credit courses in community colleges or technical training programs. ABE classes do not teach the required academic content, or the content taught is at a lower

academic level than needed. To address these shortcomings, state adult education offices can develop curriculum standards in mathematics, reading, and writing to guide ABE participants' transition to credit courses in postsecondary institutions and technical training. They also can support curriculum development to assist ABE instructors in teaching transition learners. The U.S. Department of Education can facilitate the development of state content standards by providing models of well-developed standards that states can use to create their own standards.

Besides developing content standards and curriculum, state adult education offices need to make transition activities a priority for ABE programs. While one approach to transition has been to align ABE curriculum to college requirements, another has involved the creation of classes for GED graduates to prepare them for postsecondary participation. An expansion of this approach will require that state adult education offices endorse the provision of services to GED graduates as a responsibility of the ABE program. To aid states in these activities, the U.S. Department of Education can identify ABE programs that develop, implement, and evaluate instructional models for transition from ABE to postsecondary education.

New Services. Counseling services play an important role in assisting adult learners in their transition to further education. While some ABE programs have counselors as staff members, many do not have designated staff for these support services. To meet the range of counseling needs of learners seeking to go on to postsecondary education, ABE programs will need support in developing new staff

positions as well as new services. State adult education offices can fund the design of models of counseling services to be disseminated to ABE programs, thus reducing the need for local development efforts.

Collaborative Relationships. Critical to the success of ABE programs in enhancing curriculum and creating new services is their capacity to develop relationships within and outside their institutions. For ABE programs operating in community college systems, these new activities will require the formation of intra-organizational agreements regarding learners' access to counseling and related services. ABE programs located in other types of organizations will need to identify new partners, such as local community colleges, counseling services, and business organizations, which can work with them in providing the necessary services for learners.

State adult education offices can play an important role in facilitating these relationships by forming partnerships with their state higher education offices and other state entities supporting services to enable adult learners to pursue further education and employment. State leaders in adult education also can be instrumental in offering a vision to guide ABE providers in transforming their services to expand opportunities for adult learners. The U.S. Department of Education can assist states in their collaborative efforts by providing training and technical assistance to state adult education staff on effective processes for working with staff from other programs within their agency, as well as those from other agencies who can assist with the various types of activities comprising an ABE transition program.

CONCLUSION

Recognizing that many adults in ABE programs need support to make a successful transition to postsecondary education, some community colleges and other ABE providers are making changes in their instruction, services, and partnerships to help adult learners attain the education and skills they need for employment and economic security. This transition assistance comes in many forms, from providing additional instruction to enhance learners' academic

skills, to offering counseling for financial aid, stress and time management, and study skills, to providing mentors who offer encouragement and support. These types of assistance need to be much more widespread if we are to see a substantial increase in the number of ABE learners who participate in postsecondary education. State and federal leadership is critical to promoting the enhanced curriculum, new services, and collaborative relationships necessary for effective transition programs.

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NOTES

¹Correspondence with Sharlene Walker, former Director of Adult Education, State of Oregon, April 1, 2003.

²See descriptions of ABE transition programs supported by the Nellie Mae Educational Foundation at <http://www.collegetransition.org/profiles>

³Information about the ABE-to-College Transition project can be found at <http://www.collegetransition.org>

⁴Information on the Nellie Mae Educational Foundation grantees can be found at <http://www.collegetransition.org>

⁵Discussion with Norm Johnson, Lane Community College, February 27, 2003.

⁶Discussions with staff from Clatsop Community College and Chemeketa Community College, February 27–28, 2003.

⁷Information on the Nellie Mae Educational Foundation grantees can be found at <http://www.collegetransition.org>

⁸Interviews with ABE program directors from Idaho's community colleges, October 1, 2002.

⁹The data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Reporting System indicate a 3 percent increase from 2001–2002 to 2002–2003 in the enrollment of ABE learners in postsecondary education (correspondence with U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, July 15, 2004).

¹⁰Correspondence with Sharlene Walker, former Director of Adult Education, State of Oregon, April 1, 2003.

¹¹Description of outcomes from the Nellie Mae Educational Foundation's grantees can be found at <http://www.collegetransition.org>