

## PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVE

### *The Academic I-BEST: A Model for Precollege Student Success in College Transfer Programs*



Beginning in 2011, Lake Washington Institute of Technology initiated an I-BEST (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training) program designed to allow upper-level basic education students to directly enter academic courses required by college transfer degrees. This program, the Academic I-BEST, represents one of the earliest examples of the teaching principles used in Washington State's highly successful Professional-Technical I-BEST program being applied to transfer-level academic coursework. Its intended student outcomes are aligned with two state and national initiatives: the desire to reduce or eliminate students' time spent in remedial academic sequences and the effort to transition basic education students into college programs. Although this variation of the I-BEST program has not yet undergone rigorous research, its preliminary results are promising. At Lake Washington, program students have accelerated through remedial sequences and accumulated college-level credits much sooner than would have occurred under earlier systems that required students to progress through mandatory levels of remedial coursework. Because of this, we feel the Academic I-BEST represents a promising method for addressing a long-standing problem of practice in adult education: how

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do we efficiently move community college students through remedial sequences and into courses that count toward their college degrees? This case study outlines our experiences with this program by summarizing existing research on I-BEST in general; by describing our version of the Academic I-BEST; by providing preliminary student outcomes; and by describing those elements that appear to us to make the model worthy of consideration by other precollege programs.

Washington's *Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training Program (I-BEST)* is a nationally-recognized model that "challenges the traditional notion that students must move through a set sequence of basic education or pre-college (remedial) courses before they can start working on certificates or degrees" by integrating instruction and delivering precollege content in the context of career-technical or academic transfer programs (Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, n.d.). It has been rigorously researched over the past decade, with studies providing strong evidence supporting the model's impact on student learning gains and outcomes. The Community College Research Center has published a series of papers examining the efficacy of I-BEST. A 2009 multivariate analysis found that "students participating in I-BEST achieved better educational outcomes than did other basic skills students who did not participate in the program" (Jenkins, Zeidenberg, & Kienzel, 2009). The study revealed that I-BEST students were more likely to continue into credit-bearing coursework, earn credits that count toward college credentials, persist into their second year, earn educational awards and show point gains in basic skills testing (Jenkins, 2009). A follow-on study reinforced the impact of I-BEST programs, finding that "when students were exposed to this program, there was a direct and statistically significant relationship to their actual enrollment in it, which further supports our finding of a causal

relationship between I-BEST and positive student outcomes" (Zeidenberg, Cho, & Jenkins, 2010).

The content delivery systems initially developed through I-BEST are based on a two-pronged theory of change. The first of these is integration: programs are team-taught, with one faculty member teaching technical content and the other basic skills in math, writing, or English language. The second principle is contextualization, defined here as "the merging of basic skills and subject area" instruction (Perin, 2011). *Contextualization* directly challenges two weaknesses generally attributed to traditional remedial academic instruction: 1. the difficulty students have in transferring and applying academic content that seems unrelated to their field of study and 2. the accompanying perception that this content is irrelevant. Numerous sources speak to the benefits of contextualization, with Perin (2011) noting, "Among the many different innovations underway that attempt to promote the learning of low-skilled college students (Perin & Charron, 2006), contextualization seems to have the strongest theoretical base and perhaps the strongest empirical support." (p. 283). Perin draws this conclusion from a perspective that, cognitively, contextualization both improves the transfer of information and increases intrinsic motivation.

### **Academic I-BEST Overview**

While our basic education program at Lake Washington Institute of Technology (LWTech) was an early adopter of the original I-BEST model (now called the Professional/Technical I-BEST), these initial programs were solely designed to allow basic education students access to short certificates in workforce programs. Students with ambitions to earn degree-level academic credits were not served by I-BEST, and when they attempted to make the jump from remedial education to college on their own, they faced quarters to years of remediation.

The likelihood of students persisting through this gauntlet of remediation was slight. According to research compiled for LWTech's 2011 accreditation self-study, only 8% of students enrolled in upper-level basic education reading and writing courses (NRS level 4) ever completed college-level English, with outcomes in math even worse as just under 4% of individuals reached college level.

Because students in the Professional-Technical I-BEST were, conversely, experiencing excellent success, when the state expanded the model to what is now called the "Comprehensive I-BEST Pathway" in 2010, we at LWTech submitted a proposal to offer an Academic I-BEST program, one that allowed upper-level basic education students to bypass prerequisites and directly enter one of the college's transfer degree tracks. Although it must be stressed that our results have not undergone rigorous evaluation, we were immediately struck by what appeared to be vastly improved outcomes from our students in the Academic I-BEST program. Students, who would have been struggling for several quarters to navigate a complex set of prerequisite requirements, were directly enrolled in classes such as Communications, Sociology, and Cell Biology that are generally transferrable across Washington State. With I-BEST support, they were mainstreamed into these classes alongside standard college students. As is discussed in more detail below, they began acquiring college credits immediately, and their grades and course completion rates often exceeded those of students who had placed directly into college.

### **The Model in Operation**

The Academic I-BEST attempts to take many of the current methodologies in adult basic education, especially the concepts of integration and contextualization from the original version of I-BEST, and bring them together in a way that has not occurred before. All classes are linked in a

learning community format, are team-taught, and are contextualized, meaning that the classes teach their disciplines using a similar content. In addition, the system we had used in math or English, which inflexibly mandated student placement into one level in the sequence per quarter, is replaced by one run in an accelerated, outcomes-based fashion, meaning that students have the ability to advance multiple levels based upon the competency/proficiency they demonstrate within the duration of a class.

Because the theory and logistics behind the Academic I-BEST are unavoidably complex, for purposes of this article we will use our longest running pair of classes—a multilevel English class and Communications 210 (CMST 210), Interpersonal Communications, to illustrate the model. (The diagram appended to this article further illustrates this course pairing.) The English class includes lower- and upper-level developmental writing classes plus English 101, our first college-level English class. I-BEST students (about 10 per section of 25) come from the upper-levels of basic education, and they are enrolled alongside students from both developmental education and college. In their initial quarter, I-BEST students are enrolled in CMST 210 and a lower-level developmental English course as well as in a support class (a separate three-hour course reserved for them—during which they can review difficult content from English or Communications in a smaller group setting along with their basic education instructor). Classes are scheduled back-to-back, so that all students move as a cohort from English to Communications, with the I-BEST students then breaking out separately for their support session.

Team-teaching and content integration occur among a three-person faculty team: an English instructor, a communications instructor, and a basic education instructor. Outside of class, all three instructors meet prior to the quarter and again weekly, to sequence lessons and discuss students'

progress. During class time, the basic education instructor is present in each academic class for half of each session, so she co-teaches with both the English and Communications instructors. In this version of team-teaching, both instructors interact with all students with both instructors circulating the room when students are working in small groups or with the basic skills instructor teaching simultaneously during lecture by clarifying terms.

Although the level of contextualization in the Academic I-BEST classrooms can vary, in general we expect a deep level of contextualization with the content from the paired academic class, the “content class” (in this case, CMST 210), serving as the basis for most assignments in the English and support classes. In this example, the communications instructor needs to provide the English instructor with her syllabus, allowing the English instructor to understand the expectations of her course. From there, the content instructor and the English instructor must work together in deciding which communications assignments will translate best into the English classroom. If at all possible, the instructors should negotiate their syllabi in a way that allows the English assignments to capture the content instructor’s learning goals. To tighten this process even further, we have considered having outcomes from both courses in the paired set added as a common section of the syllabus. By the end of the integration process, we have developed a communications class that is slightly more writing intensive than it would be normally, while the English instructor might find some essays that may not fit his ideal vision of a mode of development-based five-paragraph essay. However, both classes should, in the end, achieve their ultimate goals and satisfy the course requirements as outlined by the college.

The actual process of assigning and receiving the assignments is also arranged by the instructors. Generally, the content instructor will teach shared

content during, or slightly ahead of, the English instructor’s assigning of the essays, with the essays moving through the drafting process as the unit progresses. The English instructor and the content instructor both receive a copy of the final essay. The English instructor will grade primarily on the quality of writing, while the content instructor will grade primarily on content.

### **Student Assessment**

Although the academic courses are linked, grading for each course is the responsibility of each instructor and is based on course outcomes. I-BEST students in English and CMST 210 are graded identically to their mainstream peers. Grading in the multilevel English class, for both I-BEST and non-I-BEST students, takes on an added measure of complexity because of the outcomes-based assessment that allows them to accelerate through the writing sequence. I-BEST students are initially placed into lower-level developmental writing on enrollment, but they are assessed against the outcomes for English 101 from the start of the class since completion of that course, which meets degree-level writing requirements, is their goal. Assessment can be done using a variety of methods (essays, exams, in-class writings, etc.) but is based primarily on the essays the students produce. While all students are given the same essay prompts, each student’s ability to meet the general course outcomes is determined individually. For instance, at Lake Washington, an outcome requirement for English 99 (the highest developmental level) is that students be able to “Possess rudimentary editorial skills” while an outcome requirement for English 101 is that students “Draft and edit effectively structured essays to suit audience and purpose.” Students capable of meeting that latter outcome would be assessed as having met the requirements of English 101 regardless of their initial placement.

In addition to assessing student work against

course outcomes, the support instructor and English instructor track the amount of drafting required by each student to bring his/her essay up to college level. Ability and effort are weighed simultaneously, and both of these are considerations when deciding the level of course outcomes the student is achieving. A student's ability to work a draft into college-level writing shows work ethic—a key component of success. However, while students may be able to redraft a single essay to meet college-level requirements, if their subsequent essays do not show their ability to retain knowledge (i.e. if the first draft of their second essay has as many errors as the first draft of their first essay), then it does them a disservice to move them forward.

The final assessment as to which course in the sequence the student shows the best possibility of completing is made in week six or seven, in a conference, with the student given the opportunity to have a voice in his or her placement. During this session, each student is shown which of the outcomes, for which level writing class, he or she is meeting. Students may be advised to stay at the level in which they were originally enrolled, or to accelerate and push to complete the requirements for a higher level class. The class agreed on during this conference then becomes the level in the writing sequence for which the student will ultimately receive a grade. Under this system, then, the placement determination is made weighing both ability demonstrated through students' writing and their effort, and it includes input from the English instructor, the support instructor and the students themselves. Those students who do not complete English 101 within a given quarter can retake the multilevel English course for credit, with that second English course contextualized using content from a second paired academic class.

### **Student Outcomes Overview**

The Academic I-BEST has become increasingly

popular in Washington State, as “12 colleges—roughly a third—have approved Academic I-BEST applications on file” with the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (W. Durden, personal communication, March 22, 2016). Currently, analysts in the state's basic education department are developing a tool (expected to be operational by Winter 2017) that will summarize total numbers of students enrolled and track their progress toward their two-year degrees.

On the LWTech campus, Academic I-BEST students have done well relative to their mainstream peers in both their English classes and their paired academic content classes (which at LWTech include General Psychology, Development Psychology, Introduction to Sociology, Interpersonal Communication, Public Speaking, and Cell Biology). Simply in terms of grades earned, the data indicates that the I-BEST model greatly benefits students. For example, in comparing the average grades earned by Winter 2015 I-BEST students to non-I-BEST students in Interpersonal Communication (CMST 210), Introduction to Writing (ENGL 99), and College Writing (ENGL 101) campus-wide, I-BEST students on average received higher grades in all three classes: 3.5 to 3.3 in ENGL 99 and 3.8 to 3.3 in both CMST 210 and English 101. The results indicate that, with the appropriate types of support, basic education students can not only pass college-transfer courses but actually excel in them, earning college credits in classes they would have been precluded from entering under our prior system.

While individual course grades can serve as one measure of student performance, we have begun looking at outcomes more broadly by piloting a data analysis tool that tracks measures such as cumulative grade point, Student Achievement Initiative (SAI) points (a state statistic that tracks student attainment of milestones including credit completion, completion of certain key academic

courses, and certificate or degree completion); and a local measure we are tentatively calling the “acceleration rate”—the number of quarters students in I-BEST save over those in traditional basic education and developmental sequences. The acceleration rate is calculated by subtracting the actual number of quarters a student required to complete English 101 from the quarters that would have been required under our traditional system. This figure gives us each student’s net gain in time, a significant statistic because “we have learned that long sequences of fragmented, reductive coursework are not an on-ramp to college for underprepared students, but a dead-end.” (Charles A. Dana Center, Complete College America, Education Commission of the States, & Jobs for the Future, 2012). Results from the first student cohort (15 students) tracked were extremely encouraging, with students earning a GPA of 3.6; generating nearly 6 SAI points per student (against a state average of 2 points per academic transfer student); and an acceleration rate of 1.93, indicating that the program reduced students’ time in the writing sequence by nearly two quarters.

### **Three Final Elements for Consideration**

Our success with the Academic I-BEST program may at heart reside simply in the manner in which it motivates students. Students, who, in traditional systems, are told they are potentially years away from earning a single college credit instead enter important, foundational courses immediately, and they do so in an environment in which both faculty and their peers are invested in their success. However, any program considering adopting the model should be cognizant of significant technical design elements as well as those more affective factors.

To that end, we advise any programs considering adoption to pay particular attention to the following points:

- The underpinnings of successful contextualization

come from frequent discussions among the faculty involved, not just on general course content but to such specific items as curriculum design and lesson sequencing. Time for this interaction should be built into the program.

- The right team creates the tone for the class and models the behavior we expect of college students. The three-instructor team is an invaluable part of the Academic I-BEST, lessening anxiety for students who have been accelerated into college, and allowing all faculty the opportunity to demonstrate their ability in their particular areas of expertise. The three-person team pushes the Academic I-BEST into being an immersive, contextualized, community-focused program model—one that mimics the way that learning occurs outside of the classroom.
- Finally, this type of instructor class management and cooperation does not occur by magic. Time for professional development and unstructured faculty interaction are paramount. “With anything new comes apprehension and resistance,” noted co-author Karen Lee on her initial experience with the program. One easy way to overcome resistance is by developing faculty confidence through training and opportunities for experimentation. When this time is provided, outcomes for faculty can be as meaningful as they are for students. As co-author Sean Twohy said during one of our discussion sessions, “Really, for me, I think of my career in terms of two eras: before and after the I-BEST program.” The Academic I-BEST can, then, become a powerful tool for developing faculty and students alike. ❖

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