

# GUIDED PATHWAYS, WIOA, AND WASHINGTON STATE'S I-BEST:BLUEPRINTS FOR THE FUTURE OF ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

The guided pathways approach to community and technical college redesign has significant impacts for adult basic education (ABE). The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and Ability to Benefit provide federal support that complements the work being done in Guided Pathways. Washington state's approach to implementing guided pathways with Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) as a foundational element can serve as a model for colleges and ABE providers nationwide as they address adult basic education and developmental education redesign. Redesign elements include integration and contextualization of adult learning standards and foundational skills instruction; faculty training and support; and navigational services for students. ABE students are a diverse set of students who can help the nation meet its needs for a skilled and equitable workforce, so long as they are given a structured pathway that will allow them to succeed.

Guided pathways effectively launched as a nationwide movement with the publication of *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* (2015). Bailey, Smith Jaggars, and Jenkins identify that their "goal is to conduct research to help improve student success at community colleges" with the added observation that "there is little evidence that the nation is moving toward a widespread and significant improvement in the outcomes of community college students" (2015, i). The book then reviews the current structure of services and makes research-based proposals for improvements that will lead to better student outcomes. The Community College Research Center (2016) provides a succinct summary of the guided pathways approach: "The idea behind guided pathways is straightforward. College students are more likely to complete a degree in a timely fashion if they choose a program and develop an academic plan early on, have a clear road map of the courses they need to take to complete a credential, and receive guidance and support to help them stay on a plan" (p. 1).

These redesign aspects have significant and immediate impacts for adult basic education and English language acquisition (ABE/ELA) programs. Luckily, these impacts align with changes in adult education brought about by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and with the re-introduction of Ability to Benefit in 2014 that provides Title IV financial aid

to students without a high school credential. Guided pathways can be seen as a college initiative that aligns well with some pre-existing career pathway approaches in postsecondary education. Mortrude (2017) notes that “Guided pathways can fit the Higher Education Act (HEA) and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) career pathway definition” if the components of sector focus, career counseling, and specific occupational advancement are addressed. Taken together, the guided pathways approach, WIOA, and Ability to Benefit have created a unique and timely opportunity for adult education providers to meet workforce needs by connecting a diverse student population to the postsecondary credentials needed to secure living wage work in high demand industries. Washington state’s nationally renowned Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) provides a model for how this work can be accomplished and scaled.

## CONTEXTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Guided pathways is a redesign of the current model for serving students in the community and technical college system. The redesign targets and describes four features of the prevalent “cafeteria” service model: academic program structure, student intake, instruction, and progress monitoring and support. For each of these aspects of the current service model, guided pathways offers research-based strategies that are collectively intended to improve rates of student completion (CCRC, 2015, p. 2).

While each of these design elements are in need of critical attention by adult education providers, of most importance here is the joint focus on assessment and remediation. In the cafeteria model, “assessment is used to sort students” and remediation “is narrowly focused on college algebra and English composition” (CCRC, 2015, p. 2). In contrast, the guided pathways approach uses assessment to “diagnose areas where students need support,” and the instruction in these foundational skills is “integrated and contextualized with critical program outcomes” (CCRC, 2015, p. 2). It is important to note that “assessment” here is talking about current and future college placement practices, not formative and summative assessments in the classroom.

Many students on college campuses take adult basic education (ABE), English language acquisition (ELA), and pre-college, remedial, developmental education coursework in English and mathematics. Yet, as has been well documented, “most students who enter developmental education never successfully emerge from it to embark on a college-level program of study” (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, and Jenkins, 2015). Traditionally, assessment is used to place students into ABE programs if they do not have a high school credential or are learning English, and into remedial English or math sequences if they have the high school credential but do not achieve the cut score on a placement exam. Students who go on to earn their high school credential still usually end up placing into these developmental sequences.

In the guided pathways approach, however, assessment is used not to sort students into

different levels of programming, but to identify the crucial areas where a student needs support in their chosen pathway (CCRC, 2015, p. 2). Furthermore, the result of assessment is a focus neither on decontextualized high school completion, nor on remedial sequences in English and math, but on successful completion of a program that leads to a living wage career or to further education. The focus on the end goal rather than on a process of remediation stems from the observation that prior developmental education reforms “have sought to strengthen elements of the prevailing model without challenging that model. But if the problems originate in the model itself, then it is not surprising that the results of these reforms have been disappointing” (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, and Jenkins, 2014).

The structural and pragmatic outcome of this redesign for colleges and adult education providers is that foundational skills integrates with and contextualizes to learning outcomes in the student’s selected pathway. ABE and developmental education no longer exist as separate from the design of an academic program. Thankfully, federal and state policies and programs that support the guided pathways redesign already exist. Contextualized instruction can be built and supported from three complementary innovations that have taken place at the federal and state level: the redefinition of adult education in Title II of WIOA and the inclusion of Integrated Education and Training (IET) as a funded activity; competency-based, co-enrolled high school completion; and the Higher Education Act (HEA) provision known as Ability to Benefit.

While low college completion rates were providing animus for the guided pathways approach, skilled labor shortages in the U.S. workforce prompted the federal government to overhaul the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and establish the foundation of a comprehensive workforce development system. This was in response to statistics like those from Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2013), whose research indicated that by 2020 two-thirds of available jobs will require some type of postsecondary education and training—a rising figure (p. 2). There will be fifty-five million job openings through 2020, with total employment set to rise by twenty-four million in the next ten years (p. 2). Yet, at current levels the U.S. will fall five million short in credentialing workers with the skills needed to take these jobs (2013, p. 2). Meanwhile, the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education published figures establishing that one in six adults in the United States has low literacy skills, and one in three tests at low skill levels for numeracy (p. 3).

To address these and other challenges, a bipartisan Congress passed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which President Obama signed into law on July 22nd, 2014. WIOA requires the various funded partners of the old Workforce Investment Act (WIA) to become part of a unified workforce development system. WIOA binds education, training, and employment services together with a set of shared performance indicators and regional planning requirements among the partners. The biggest shift for educators occurs in Title II of WIOA, or the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA).

Traditional literacy efforts under WIA typically focused on teaching “life” skills in the classroom, with a high school completion as a terminal goal for both English language learning and adult basic education students. Through WIOA, however, the federal government redefined adult education as a service approach that transitions students to postsecondary education or otherwise prepares them for living wage work. In order to achieve transition to postsecondary education and training, WIOA directs adult education programs to provide students with the skills needed to be college-ready. This definition closes the gap between completion of a high school credential and enrollment in credit-bearing coursework that leads to a certificate or degree. The high school credential is still a required service under WIOA, but placing students in living wage careers in high demand fields became the new mandatory target.

At the same time, WIOA also placed new emphasis on Integrated Education and Training (IET), a service approach that contextualizes and integrates ABE standards and instruction with career-technical education programs. One of the primary benefits of an IET is that the student does not have to earn a high school credential prior to entrance into the program, nor do they have to test out of ABE. They can earn the high school credential while continuing to learn the necessary English language, mathematical, and employability skills in the context of the training program.

While it is technically possible for students to study for a test-based high school credential in tandem with their postsecondary program, the real opportunity under WIOA’s redefinition of adult education and emphasis on IET is to build a competency-based, co-enrolled high school completion program that allows students to count the credits they earn in the postsecondary program toward the completion of a high school credential. In Washington state, the program that provides this option is called High School 21+ (HS 21+). In state statute, each community and technical college also functions as a high school district, thus granting the college the authority to award high school diplomas. Students can get credit for work experience, military experience, and other forms of prior learning.

Ability to Benefit is a final key piece of federal support that colleges and adult education providers have in integrating instruction and contextualizing assessment of foundational skills. Traditional Pell grants require a high school credential. With the Higher Education Act (HEA) provision known as Ability to Benefit, students without a high school credential can receive Pell grants and other forms of Title IV financial aid which, unlike many state grants, provides students financial support for living expenses, allowing individuals to increase the amount of time dedicated to education and training. In order to become eligible, students must be enrolled in a Title IV eligible career pathway program, while the institution must meet a range of criteria, including that the student can earn a high school diploma as part of the program and that the student receives counseling services. Students must also either achieve a cut score on an approved placement exam or earn six college credits. Critical for planning efforts,

then, is how to fund the first quarter of a students' IET program until they can be placed on Ability to Benefit.

With WIOA Title II requirements and Ability to Benefit in place, ABE providers inside and outside the community and technical college system can join guided pathways efforts to integrate and contextualize instruction. With I-BEST, Washington state offers a blueprint for what these efforts can look like.

### **I-BEST: A MODEL FOR IET IN GUIDED PATHWAYS**

In the guided pathways approach, adult education merges with other college functions designed to establish where the student is at and what they will need most to be successful. Key intake activities include a basic skills assessment, setting both educational and career goals, the development of an educational plan, identifying whether or not a high school credential is needed, and the creation of a funding package built with the student's end goal in mind. A navigator is assigned, and this navigator serves to assist the student as they move along their pathway toward the certificate and/or degree that will launch or build their career options. Guided college and career pathways are defined, articulated, and funded from the beginning of the student's journey all the way to college certificates and degrees that lead to living wage careers. Students co-enroll in competency-based high school completion programming that allow students to earn their high school diploma while they earn college credit in I-BEST or other IET structures. They learn the metacognitive and foundational math, reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills as well as the employability skills needed to be successful in both the postsecondary classroom and in the workplace.

Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) is Washington state's delivery model, both for offering IET services in the community and technical college system as well as for how pre-college interfaces with postsecondary programs in guided pathways. I-BEST is "consistent with the design principles for guided pathways" in that the "the program integrates foundational basic skills" and "enrolls students in a prescribed, whole-program schedule of courses that are aligned with job requirements in related fields" (CCRC, 2015, p 4). The added benefit of I-BEST as the IET delivery model of choice is threefold: 1) it has research demonstrating its results and a positive return on investment, 2) it provides a model for serving all pre-college students; 3) it includes the training and support of faculty in integrating outcomes, developing joint assessments, and building continuous feedback loops to improve instruction.

I-BEST's effectiveness is well-documented and consistent. Wachen, Jenkins, Belfield, and Van Noy (2012) note that I-BEST "approximately equal[s] the additional costs incurred by providing the program" (p. 23). Washington state's own research determined that students in I-BEST gain an annual return on investment of 12.4% per year for students attaining a minimum of one year of college credit plus a workforce credential, with the taxpayer earning a 4.1%

return on investment for the cost of providing I-BEST (SBCTC, 2013). The reason I-BEST is worth the investment is because it produces results. In a long-term net impact study published in 2016, “I-BEST exiters gain[ed] substantial labor market outcomes” with employment rates rising by 12.3%, average hourly wage increases of \$1.61, and average hours of work per quarter increased by 65 hours (Hollenback and Huang, 2016, p. 118-119). I-BEST continues to scale-up in Washington state, serving 4,891 students in over 250 approved pathways for 2016-17 (an 8% increase in headcount over the prior academic year), with those students earning an average of 4.6 Student Achievement Initiative (SAI) points each (SBCTC, 2017). This more than doubles the average points per student of any other student type in the community and technical college system (SBCTC, 2017). SAI is Washington state’s nationally recognized performance-based funding model.

Since its initial inception as a short-term certificate program for upper-level ABE/ESL students, the I-BEST model has evolved and updated to include more students and more options. In 2010, I-BEST took a significant leap forward with the expanded “Prof-Tech” model that contextualizes developmental education requirements in an accelerated outcomes course to workforce content in a longer-term certificate or degree pathway that allows students to learn the English and/or math requirements as part of their pathway. Valenzuela (2012) demonstrated that I-BEST students learning math contextualized to their pathway outperformed students in the traditional remedial course (p. 56). In 2011, the model expanded further to include academic/transfer pathways, which are now available in nearly half of Washington state’s community and technical colleges. Emory, Ramyond, Lee, and Twohy (2016) found that Academic I-BEST students achieved an acceleration rate of 1.93, “indicating that the program reduced students’ time in the writing sequence by nearly two quarters” (p. 48). Finally, I-BEST is expanding into more options for lower-level ABE/ESL students with the I-BEST at Work model, which places an adult education instructor in a workplace with a company trainer to provide team-taught incumbent worker skills training. Students are then encouraged to continue their education at a community and technical college. These expanded models can serve not only all ABE/ESL students but also developmental education students, making I-BEST a blueprint for how all students needing to complete pre-college coursework can be served in the guided pathways approach.

In the guided pathways approach, instructional redesign also includes a call to train and support faculty in assessment and in using assessment results to inform continuous cycles of improvement for instructional design and delivery. Through the I-BEST Team Teaching Cadre, the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) continues to offer several trainings yearly, both in-state and out-of-state, to support I-BEST programming nationwide. Faculty receive training and support in the essentials of team-teaching collaboration that includes the contextualization of adult education standards and developmental education outcomes to the outcomes in the pathway program, as well as training and practice in contextualizing and co-planning assignments and assessments. In this

way, I-BEST meets both the guided pathways approach to support faculty in assessment and improvement, and the WIOA IET mandate that an IET have a single set of integrated learning outcomes.

Finally, guided pathways calls for significant progress monitoring and support for students. These navigational supportive services provide critical student feedback on progress with coaching and mentoring to retain the student and guide them to completion. In 2017 SBCTC created the I-BEST Navigator Cadre to support the professional development needs of an integrated approach to navigational services that meshes the highly supportive I-BEST environment with the larger supportive services redesign offered by the guided pathways approach. Trainings are now being conducted statewide to support and define the role of student navigators as they assist students with everything from intake and assessment to funding and co-enrollment in other services.

### **CONCLUSION: A DIVERSE AND EQUITABLE WORKFORCE**

With the right supports in the right places, all students can be successful in college-level programs, oftentimes years sooner than they would be in a traditional paradigm that insists on decontextualized remediation. The integration of adult education into guided pathways work is, at its core, about equity, diversity, and inclusion. In Washington state Prince, Bloomer, and Kaikkonen (2014) discovered that adult education students are more diverse than current mainstream college students and ABE as a whole is “a particularly important portal into community and technical colleges for groups under-represented in attainment in the state population” (p. 12). Immigrants and refugees are most likely to begin their college and career journeys in adult education (p. 13). And students in adult education are more likely to have low socioeconomic status regardless of race or ethnicity (p. 13). If colleges are going to fulfill their mission areas to serve their regions and connect students with real educational and economic opportunities as well as meet employer needs, they will have to include adult education in their planning and redesign efforts. I-BEST, backed by WIOA and Ability to Benefit and supported by a high school completion program like HS 21+, provides one powerful option for doing so. ☞

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