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INTEGRATED CAREER PATHWAYS: LESSONS FROM ACCELERATING OPPORTUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

The Accelerating Opportunity (AO) initiative, which launched in 2011, was an unprecedented investment in underprepared adult learners. Multiple funders joined forces to support the implementation of integrated career pathways at community colleges across seven states. These states spent four years focused on large-scale state and institutional transformation. The goal was to address policy, programmatic, and systems gaps at the state and college level so that greater numbers of adults with significant educational and skills gaps could successfully advance from federally-funded Adult Basic Education into and through technical pathways in high-demand occupational areas. The initiative also included a rigorous third-party evaluation, which provided an important opportunity to deepen our understanding of the impact of integrated pathways on student outcomes.

The final grants to states ended in 2015, and the final implementation and outcomes reports were published in 2017. JFF is now in a position to reflect on over five years of learning from and with our state and national partners. This initiative provided valuable lessons about what it takes to implement integrated career pathways for underprepared adult learners, including lessons about instructional practice, supportive services, policy, and systems change.

This is a critical time for understanding what it takes to increase the skill levels and employment opportunities of Americans. The OECD's 2013 Survey of Adult Skills (PIACC), a landmark international study, shows that the United States is falling behind in international comparisons: one in six adults have low literacy skills, and one in three have low numeracy skills. Educators and policymakers are seeking evidence-based approaches to addressing these skill deficiencies; Accelerating Opportunity has the potential to be one such approach.

In this article, we explore lessons that JFF learned as the initiative lead as well as lessons

documented by our evaluators. With the current push of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to expand integrated education and training we hope that what we have learned can help practitioners, researchers, and policymakers continue to improve outcomes for underprepared and underserved adults.

WHAT IS ACCELERATING OPPORTUNITY?

Accelerating Opportunity was developed as a strategy for helping more underprepared adult learners enter and succeed in postsecondary credit-bearing career pathways. While postsecondary credentials are increasingly important for obtaining family-supporting careers, more than sixty percent of adults 18 and older lack any postsecondary credential. In addition, weak literacy and numeracy skills keep millions of adults from succeeding in today's labor market. Historically, disconnected systems—including adult education, secondary education, community colleges, and workforce development—have made it difficult for underprepared adult learners to advance through education and training programs in a reasonable time frame. Very few Adult Basic Education students (by some estimates, less than 5%) ever enroll in college-level pathways, much less graduate with marketable credentials.

The Accelerating Opportunity model was designed to accelerate progression by combining Adult Basic Education and career and technical education into a single integrated career pathway. Accelerating Opportunity builds on the I-BEST (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training) model developed by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC). Through I-BEST, Washington pioneered the use of postsecondary team teaching for Adult Basic Education students.

Participating states and colleges all agreed to implement the following non-negotiable elements:

1. Explicit articulation of two or more career pathways that begin with Adult Basic Education or ESL and continue to a one-year college-level certificate and beyond
2. Evidence of strong local demand for the selected pathways
3. Acceleration strategies, including contextualized learning and the use of hybrid course designs (online plus classroom-based instruction)
4. Comprehensive student support
5. Evidence-based dual enrollment strategies, including paired courses and I-BEST and I-BEST-like approaches
6. Achievement of marketable, stackable, credit-bearing certificates and degrees and college readiness
7. Award of some college-level professional-technical credits
8. Partnerships with Workforce Investment Boards and employers

PARTNERS AND FUNDERS

The initiative was supported by a consortium of funders: the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Kresge Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Arthur Blank Foundation, the Woodruff Foundation, the Casey Foundation, and the University of Phoenix Foundation. JFF also partnered with three other organizations to provide a full range of technical assistance and initiative leadership: the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, the National Council for Workforce Education, and the National College Transition Network/WorldEd.

WHAT DID WE ACCOMPLISH?

In its four years of implementation, the AO initiative achieved scale and success for adult learners. The initiative grew from 8 colleges in each of the 4 original states to cover seven states, in which 85 colleges implemented 189 integrated career pathways in manufacturing, healthcare, automotive, business, education, and other sectors. Over 10,000 individuals enrolled in AO programs, earning over 12,000 credentials, with more than 3,500 students earning 12 or more credits.

An evaluation of AO conducted by the Urban Institute examined the initiative's operation in four states (Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, and Louisiana) and provided additional insights into the impact of programs on participants. AO students expressed high levels of satisfaction with the program. Among over 400 students surveyed, 97% said it met or exceeded their expectations, and two-thirds said they would recommend the program to family and friends.

In a rigorous, quasi-experimental study, AO was found to increase the probability of earning a credential compared to similar non-AO students (see Figure 1). In most cases, AO reduced the number of credits earned, suggesting more efficient course-taking and accelerated learning among participants. With respect to earnings, the initiative had mixed results; however, AO showed strong and sustained positive impacts on earnings for two subgroups of students: AO students recruited from adult education in Kentucky and from career and technical education in Kansas. It is likely that the mixed results are influenced by diverse state economic contexts. More long-term data would provide greater insight into the trajectories experienced by AO participants over time.

In addition to its impact on students, AO resulted in changes at policy and system levels. For example, Illinois altered its performance-based funding measure to include momentum points, such as GED® acquisition and transition to postsecondary, a change that added an incentive for community colleges to address the needs of adult education students more intentionally and to work more closely with the state Division of Adult Education. In Kansas, new state agency agreements enabled the use of TANF funds to cover the tuition of students who completed a 12-credit hour AO pathway. In Georgia, the state's Technical College System altered its testing policy to delay COMPASS testing to allow adult education students to enter credit-bearing

courses based on their TABE scores. At the college level, many institutions made changes to better integrate ABE students, such as providing them with access to college resources (library, parking, student ID's) like other college students. Colleges also made efforts to facilitate the co-enrollment of adult education students into college courses and alter course scheduling to better meet the needs of adult learners.

Significantly, AO changed the culture around perceptions of ABE students and their potential in community college. Adult education students are now seen as part of the strategy to help states boost college enrollment, meet employer needs, and achieve credential attainment goals. As leaders in Illinois reported, "...three years ago, adult education was seen as a free program for ESL and GED students. Today, adult education is seen as a potential area of growth for the college credit enrollment."

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Lessons About Partnerships

The AO leadership team recognized early on that **partnerships are an essential building block for an initiative focused on bridging the "silos" of adult and career and technical education**. Historically, the internal and external partners needed to develop integrated pathways work—college CTE departments, Adult Basic Education, student services, workforce development partners, and employers - haven't worked together closely (if at all). In some cases, the AO grant provided the impetus for these stakeholders to come together for the first time.

At the beginning of the initiative, ABE staff had to collaborate regularly with CTE leadership and faculty to identify the appropriate pathways and courses for co-enrollment and determine what the team teaching model would look like. Throughout implementation, faculty needed to meet frequently to share information on student progress, hone team teaching strategies, and identify new potential pathways for expansion. It was also important to work closely with student services in order to ensure access to supports like tutoring, counseling, and other resources. Often this too was a new relationship for ABE; in many colleges ABE students did not previously have access to college-provided supports.

College leadership commitment played a large role in the success of these internal partnerships. At colleges where the upper-level leadership made clear their support of AO it was easier to build internal relationships. At colleges where ABE was the primary driver, it was more challenging to make headway.

Colleges relied on external partnerships with the public workforce system and employers to inform program design, recruit participants, and assist with job placement. Some colleges also worked with community-based organizations (such as Goodwill Industries) to provide supportive services. These external partnerships were more challenging to establish—especially partnerships with employers. However, employer engagement did increase over the course of the initiative.

Partnerships proved critical at the state level as well. In particular, state-level collaboration between CTE and ABE could set the tone for colleges. In Illinois, for example, the close working relationship between state CTE and ABE leadership sent a clear signal to colleges that AO wasn't just an ABE initiative. Similarly, states could facilitate partnerships with the workforce system or other state agencies (such as TANF) that would then drive local-level partnerships. These state-level partnerships also enabled leveraged resources and funding. In Kansas, collaboration with the state TANF agency led to an agreement that TANF would fund pathway tuition for eligible students.

Lessons About Instructional Practice

One important lesson from AO is that **team teaching, while challenging, provides students with an accelerated and supportive learning environment**. Over the course of AO, JFF and its partners learned about the various ways that team teachers contribute to classroom success. A core component is contextualized basic skills instruction, but the benefits of the partnership go beyond content delivery. In many cases, the adult education teacher would model how to be a student—how to take notes and how to ask questions during class. They are also often the ones to notice when students are getting lost, and can stop the CTE instructor and ask for clarification. ABE teachers also provide CTE instructors with feedback on teaching techniques, as well as new ideas for how to reach students.

One of the most important lessons is that **picking the right teachers is critical—**as well as knowing when a teaching team isn't working. Team teachers are a diverse group, but they do need to be collaborative and willing to experiment with classroom practice. Once the right teachers are on board, they need time to plan and coordinate activities, and they need professional development to understand what team teaching can look like. Another lesson is that the implementation of team teaching requires **ongoing professional development** and other supports to build instructors' effectiveness and flexibility in applying this new approach. For example, instructors need to understand the different models that can be used to maximize their contributions as equal partners in the instructional process.

Lessons About Supportive Services

The AO experience reinforced the need to consider adult learners more holistically and offer them an array of supports to encourage their persistence and success in postsecondary education.

Comprehensive supports: In addition to academic supports like advising to support goal-setting and efficient course-taking, students require non-academic advising to navigate the college environment. Students also require career services to support career exploration, transitions to work, and financial services to help them manage the costs of postsecondary education. Finally, low-income adult students can benefit from personal counseling and access to social services that help them manage life situations that can impede progress in college.

This range of supports should be available throughout a student's path through community college and be adjusted to suit student needs at different phases of their progress.

Partnerships: Offering comprehensive student supports can challenge the capacity of most community colleges and thus requires collaboration across multiple departments as well as external partners. For example, local career centers can supplement college resources to provide career services, while community-based organizations can offer help with housing, child care, transportation, and mental health counseling.

Bringing the services to students: The AO experience revealed that students do not always access available services due to lack of information or reluctance to ask for help. It is thus important to communicate about available services to students, such as through presentations to classes, which can inform students and faculty alike. To reduce the stigma associated with accessing services, programs can require that all students participate in forms of support, such as non-academic advising, which can open up conversations to address personal, financial, and other issues that can impede student success.

Lessons Learned About Systems Change

Changing perceptions about a population like Adult Basic Education students does not happen overnight; it takes time and the commitment of leadership.

Alignment with larger goals: AO leaders aligned the initiative with other state efforts to connect low-skilled adults to education and workforce services, recognizing that this segment of the population had been largely underserved by these systems, showing how AO's success could meet larger education and workforce goals. For example, Kansas intentionally framed AO as a workforce initiative, which helped gain buy-in from the state workforce system.

Building buy-in through positive experiences: Over time, colleges developed strategies to better serve low-skilled students and successfully promoted positive attitudes toward these students on campuses. Internal partnerships between the college AO staff and CTE or college administrative staff created understanding of the value of the initiative and the potential for success among ABE students. One of the most powerful levers for change was faculty who had positive experiences with AO students; they became champions for the initiative and persuaded other faculty members of its value. Shifting attitudes motivated change in college policies to help students, such as waiving course prerequisites for AO students.

Lessons About Getting Started with Integrated Pathways

The timing of the AO grants meant that many colleges had to hit the ground running with their initial pathways. Later, as colleges expanded to new pathways, they were able to take more time to lay the groundwork for pathway implementation. For those getting started with integrated pathways, we recommend taking time up front to think through the following elements and questions.

Stakeholder engagement: Prior to getting started, it's important to engage everyone who

might be involved with pathway development and implementation. This includes everything from college leadership to admissions. Focus on making sure that everyone understands what integrated pathways will mean for their work. For example, your registrar needs to know how to code team-taught classes.

- What departments and individuals will be impacted by this work? How can you get them on board with potential changes?
- Who are your possible champions and who might get in your way?
- Does college leadership understand why integrated pathways are important for meeting the college's strategic goals?

Pathway selection: Some programs lend themselves to integration more than others. In selecting pathways, colleges considered multiple factors, including labor market demand (including starting wages), student interest, and the receptivity of instructors and program leadership. At JFF, we felt it was important for students to be able to earn a credential after a semester of full-time enrollment, but also wanted to ensure that students could continue on after the first semester to earn more advanced credentials. If these pathways didn't already exist, it was tricky for adult education leaders to push department leadership to shift pathway structures.

- What pathways and credentials are in demand in your local labor market? What are the starting wages in those fields?
- In what fields has the college already developed pathways with multiple stackable credentials?
- What programs have leadership and faculty that are receptive to trying new things?
- What programs and careers are your ABE students interested in?
- What programs have manageable initial reading and math skill requirements?

Student support: As discussed earlier, students in integrated pathways tend to need a higher level of support and guidance, especially at the beginning of the pathway. This includes a mix of academic and non-academic supports.

- Will students have access to a dedicated navigator or coach?
- What on-campus supports can students access?
- What external supports are available (through the workforce system or community-based organizations)?
- How proactive or "intrusive" will supports be?

Team teaching: In addition to picking the right instructors, it is critical to build in sufficient up-front and ongoing professional development. Team teaching is a new experience for many faculty; they need to feel supported, especially at the beginning when they are working out the kinks of working together in the classroom.

- What kind of up-front joint planning time will instructors have?

- What professional development is available?
- Are there team teachers they can shadow at your college or another college?
- Will team teachers have ongoing paid planning time throughout the semester?

Implementing Integrated Programs in Non-College Contexts

Although AO was implemented in states where Adult Basic Education was offered through community colleges, several aspects of the AO experience apply across situations, regardless of where ABE services are offered—in community-based organizations, school systems, or colleges.

Labor market connections: To ensure students' success in transitioning to the labor market, the selection of integrated pathways must be driven by labor market demand. It important to engage employers—directly or indirectly—by working with workforce system partners to ensure the relevance and marketability of the skills and credentials offered in integrated programming.

Partnerships: Integrated career pathways necessitate partnering at multiple levels, from agencies and institutions to the classroom. As noted earlier, partnerships can be valuable to enable the provision of comprehensive supports, including career advising and personal supports. It is important to bring partners together to determine what each can offer to support the success of an integrated pathway effort.

Planning: Developing integrated pathways requires planning to design services, mobilize resources, and anticipate barriers. Planning supports the alignment of integrated pathway efforts with larger system goals. It is particularly important that instructors be given paid time for planning the integration of instruction to ensure clarity of roles and alignment of learning objectives.

Communication: As is the case for most educational reforms, communication plays an important role in launching and sustaining integrated pathway initiatives. It is important to communicate program goals within and across the agencies/institutions involved, and communicating successes is critical for building and sustaining buy-in.

Data: Data on student completion and outcomes can help to clarify the purpose and provide the rationale for an integrated approach to adult learning. As an integrated pathway unfolds, data can be used to demonstrate success or highlight problem areas to be addressed.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

JFF and its partners are thrilled by the ongoing commitment to integrated pathways across the AO states. Each state is taking a slightly different approach to sustainability and scale, but all continue to offer integrated pathways for adult education students and increasingly for developmental education students as well. Many colleges are also considering how to combine integrated instruction with other community college redesigns, such as the development of

more structured pathways and enhanced advising models.

Georgia's colleges have continued to offer Accelerating Opportunity programs for their GED students, often through partnerships with United Way and other local organizations and funders.

Illinois continues to scale Accelerating Opportunity, with more than half of the 48 colleges in Illinois continuing to operate aspects of the model (called ICAPS). To move the state toward stronger economic mobility and education and employment outcomes, this fall the state's Adult Education program began a 10-month process to develop a Five-Year Strategic Plan. The plan includes strategies to ensure students have access to comprehensive pathways with postsecondary education and training, embedded employability skills training, and comprehensive support services.

Kansas continues to support integrated pathways through its AO-K Proviso, which makes the first twelve credits of approved pathways free for students without a high school diploma and provides colleges with funds to support team teaching. The state is also exploring strategies to use team teaching for CTE students who already have a high school diploma.

Kentucky continues to offer AOKY as a dual enrollment option for GED seeking students, with adult education providing contextualized GED prep to the program or sector the student is enrolled in. The student receives wraparound services from the college and continues to get career coaching services from the local Kentucky Career Center. Programs offered in AOKY vary from college to college based on local labor market data from one to 12 programs. Currently, AOKY is much more focused on students without a high school credential; as a result, enrollment is lower than during AO, when colleges also targeted developmental education students.

Louisiana prioritized integrated pathways in its most recent ABE providers RFP, and is working to ensure that each college continues to offer at least two pathways. Its 5 for 6 scholarship, funded through the revenue colleges receive from tuition increases, covers tuition for the first six credit hours of a pathway, after which students are eligible for Pell. Colleges and their adult education partners (in locations where adult education is not offered by the college) are working to expand the number of pathways available and increase overall enrollment. They are also starting to expand bridge programs for those students who need additional basic skills development before starting an integrated pathway.

Mississippi is supporting the statewide implementation of integrated pathways through its MI-BEST initiative. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation provided support for all 15 colleges to develop team-taught pathways; as of March 2017, over 1200 students had enrolled in integrated pathways.

Synthesizing Lessons Learned

In 2017, JFF received a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation to conduct a meta-analysis

of program evaluations, including the AO evaluation, with the goal of synthesizing what we know about training and education models, as well as programs and practices, that prepare adults for living-wage careers. The purpose of this analysis is to inform the field about how best to address the education and employment needs of America's large and underserved adult learner population, as well as catalyze future public and private investments in underprepared adult learners. The analysis identified three main foci for assessing the impact of career pathways: pathway entry, integrated training, and career progression. Positive and significant impact was found for pathway entry and integrated training, with more limited evidence of impact for career progression models. Common core elements emerged across all three foci, including engaged education/employer/workforce partnerships; contextualized, accelerated, and competency-based instruction; work-based learning; and proactive student supports.

Expanding Team Teaching

Through a grant from the ECMC Foundation, JFF is working with five colleges across two of the AO states (Kansas and Kentucky) to expand the team teaching model to serve all CTE students who need to build their basic academic readiness. These colleges are experimenting with a variety of strategies to extend the reach and effectiveness of the AO model, including restructuring the first semester of CTE programs to provide greater support and prepare students for a range of credentials and careers.

FUTURE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Accelerating Opportunity was a fantastic learning opportunity for JFF and its partners and funders. But there are many other research questions we would love to dig into further as we expand our understanding of what works for underprepared learners. Some of our burning questions relate to better understanding how the AO model can work in states where adult education is not housed within postsecondary education. In AO, we focused on states with this governance model because we felt that this state-level connection would facilitate local-level implementation. While some colleges in AO did partner with K12 or CBO-based ABE providers, we haven't yet tested how the model works—or how it may need to adapt—in states where ABE is housed within K12 education or within the workforce system, which is the case in the majority of states.

There are numerous questions we could explore related to team teaching models, including what approaches work best in different pathways, how the team teaching relationship evolves over time, and how CTE instructors who work with a team teacher evolve their own teaching practice.

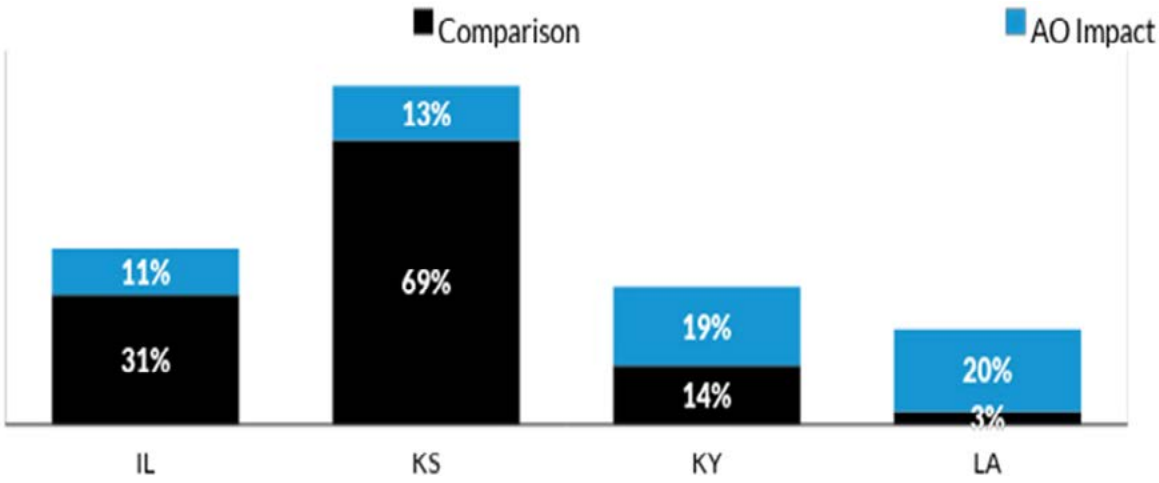
JFF is also interesting in exploring how team teaching can be integrated into other education and workforce development models, including apprenticeship, on-the-job training, and competency-based education.

Finally, there is more to learn about the long-term outcomes on student employment and wages, as well as the return on investment for integrated pathways.

CONCLUSION

Accelerating Opportunity was a tremendous opportunity to learn about how the integrated pathway model can be implemented and scaled in diverse contexts. Over the course of the initiative we worked closely with our partners and our states to refine the model, strengthen college capacity, provide professional development, and create opportunities for cross-state sharing. In this article, we have highlighted some of the major lessons learned during the initiative, with a focus on lessons that can help practitioners and policymakers strengthen opportunities for underprepared learners. Our lessons learned span everything from individual student interventions to state policy, but we would like to conclude with the most important lesson: implementing integrated pathways is hard work, but the impact on students' lives and families makes it all worthwhile. ⌘

FIGURE 1: LIKELIHOOD THAT ACCELERATING OPPORTUNITY STUDENTS EARNED ANY CREDENTIAL, RELATIVE TO MATCHED COMPARISON GROUP, BY STATE



Source: New Evidence on Integrated Career Pathways Final Impact Report for Accelerating Opportunity. Urban Institute, 2017.