

## THE INITIATIVE AFTER ONE YEAR

# Fall 2005–Summer 2006

In the fall of 2005, Jobs for the Future and the National Council for Workforce Education launched *Breaking Through: Helping Low-Skilled Adults Enter and Succeed in College and Careers*, with funding from the C.S. Mott Foundation. The goal of this multi-year, college-based initiative is to increase the number of low-skill adults who enter and succeed in community college-based occupational/technical certificate and degree programs.

The primary approach to achieving this goal is to strengthen and expand practices in community colleges that support low-skill adults through *demonstration grants* to institutions, coupled with extensive *peer learning activities* among the grantees.

*Breaking Through* also seeks to expand the number of colleges that support its goals through a *Leadership Initiative* targeting the nation's 1,100+ community colleges. The initiative is expanding awareness among community college leaders of the growing need to serve low-literacy adults, and it is enhancing expertise about promising strategies for helping such students enter and succeed in postsecondary education.

Finally, the initiative is supporting research into *state policies* that effectively promote the educational advancement of low-skill adults and disseminating findings to stakeholders and policymakers.

This report summarizes key *Breaking Through* activities and accomplishments in its first year, from fall 2005 through summer 2006.

### Summary of Key Achievements of the Breaking Through Demonstration Component

During the first year of *Breaking Through*, the partners, funders, and grantees laid a strong foundation for achieving the initiative's ambitious goal. These early achievements, described in more detail below, are:

- In October 2005, *Breaking Through* awarded demonstration grants to six Leadership Colleges. Each Leadership College has demonstrated a strong commitment to, and significant progress toward, the goal of advancing low-skilled adults. These colleges receive funding and technical support to expand and institutionalize their approaches.
- Also in October 2005, *Breaking Through* awarded demonstration grants to ten Learning Colleges. These colleges already have begun to restructure their offerings to support the advancement of low-literacy students to degree programs, and they have demonstrated their commitment to doing more. They benefit from opportunities to learn from one another and also receive technical assistance from NCWE and JFF.
- In September 2006, the initiative expanded to include a statewide effort in North Carolina, thanks to a generous grant from the North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation and the active commitment and involvement of the state community college system. One Leadership College and five Learning Colleges were selected.
- The initiative launched a multi-year peer learning strategy that will include a spring event each year at a



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Leadership College and a fall event at NCWE's annual conference.

- The state policy effort expanded from a small research component to an in-depth analysis of six key policy areas, with support from the Ford Foundation. The goal is to identify and disseminate information about policies that support the advancement of low-literacy adults into and through college degree programs.
- JFF and NCWE designated a team of independent evaluators and selected a nationally recognized expert to provide technical assistance in data and tracking.
- JFF and NCWE developed and inaugurated a multi-faceted communications strategy to expand awareness of the growing need to serve low-literacy adults and enhance expertise about promising strategies for helping such students enter and succeed in postsecondary education.
- The partners and funders refined the strategy for the Leadership Initiative to target current college presidents in several key states. The goal is to leverage change in institutions that are not currently part of *Breaking Through*.

### The Leadership Colleges: Grantee Performance and Outcomes

In spring 2006, the original six Leadership Colleges and the *Breaking Through* partners signed comprehensive Memoranda of Understanding, committing the colleges to achieving significant outcomes for students, supported by significant changes in institutional behavior. Each MOU describes a set of clearly defined activities the colleges will undertake in order to achieve defined outcomes for students, as well as institutional change objectives.

All six colleges have undertaken very challenging *Breaking Through* projects and set high standards for accomplishment:

#### *Central New Mexico Community College* Albuquerque, NM

CNM is aligning its programs and services to create a pathway into apprenticeships in high-demand construction trades for low-skilled adults. The pathway includes access to an Associate's degree in these fields.

#### *Community College of Denver*

Denver, CO

CCD is piloting three approaches to accelerating the pace at which low-skilled adults (eighth grade and below) prepare to enter college-level programs in high-demand occupations/industries.

#### *Cuyahoga Community College*

Cleveland, OH

Building on its "FastTrack" training programs, Tri-C is strengthening its pipeline into health care careers for low-skilled adults and increasing the skills and credentials of nursing assistants to help them advance.

#### *Owensboro Community and Technical College*

Owensboro, KY

OCTC is piloting innovative support services to students in the college's three career pathways for low-skilled students.

#### *Portland Community College*

Portland, OR

PCC is piloting the provision of intensive, wraparound support services to students in developmental education to test whether such services increase students' persistence, retention, and advancement to professional and technical education programs.

#### *Southeast Arkansas College*

Pine Bluff, AR

SEARK is developing and piloting two programs: a contextualized "Fast Track" developmental education pathway into allied health occupations; and a Practical Nursing curriculum that incorporates the college-level math and science prerequisites.

Staff from JFF and NCWE conducted site visits at each of the Learning Colleges as part of their implementation of promising strategies to strengthen and expand *Breaking Through* achievements. Each college will report on progress every six months. The first progress reports were submitted in June 2006 (see box on selected first-year outcomes).

## The Learning Colleges: Site Visits and Work Plans

NCWE representatives have visited each of the 10 Learning Colleges selected in October 2005. NCWE was impressed with the colleges' energy and commitment. Some colleges seem close to Leadership status, while others are early in the Learning stage. Furthermore, the Learning Colleges reported significant benefits from the initiative's peer learning activities. However, they also reported that it is often difficult to launch a new initiative in the absence of additional operating funds for that initiative.

As a result, the *Breaking Through* Leadership Team from JFF and NCWE is implementing a strategy to help all interested Learning Colleges to develop coherent *Breaking Through* proposals for Leadership College-level projects. The team members suggested that some Learning Colleges may be ready (or close to ready) to seek funding to support such projects. This planning process will be addressed during a *Breaking Through* peer learning meeting in October 2006. Interested Learning Colleges will receive assistance from the *Breaking Through* Leadership Team and from a Leadership College with relevant experience and expertise. The Leadership Team will focus its attention on creating and implementing a fundraising strategy for those colleges.

Staff from the National Council for Workforce Education will continue to provide technical assistance to Learning Colleges to focus their goals in the initiative and strengthen their capacity to achieve those goals.

## Launching *Breaking Through* Statewide in North Carolina

The *Breaking Through* North Carolina state initiative, funded by the North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation, was officially launched in September 2006. The launch was part of a two-day meeting that included both an orientation to the initiative and an in-depth peer learning exercise for the North Carolina grantees.

Six colleges, selected through a competitive RFP process, are participating. Durham Technical Community College is a Leadership College. The five Learning Colleges are Davidson County Community College, Forsyth Technical Community College, Pamlico Community College, Pitt

Community College, and South Piedmont Community College.

In attendance at the meeting were Marilyn Foote-Hudson, executive director of the North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation, as well as a number of senior officials from the North Carolina State Community College System. The formal announcement of the grant awards was made through a telephone-based press conference, with representatives of the state, the colleges, the foundation, and NCWE and JFF participating. Stories on *Breaking Through* appeared in the *Winston-Salem Journal*, on North Carolina NPR affiliates (WUNC-FM and partner stations), and throughout North Carolina via a statewide educational newswire service.

## Inauguration of a Multi-Year Peer Learning Strategy

Jobs for the Future and the National Council for Workforce Education offer *Breaking Through* colleges two peer learning events per year, one in October as part of the NCWE annual conference and one in April at a Leadership College. To date, two meetings have been held: the October 2005 in San Antonio, Texas, launched the initiative; the April 2006 in Cleveland, Ohio, hosted by Cuyahoga Community College, looked at health care, support services, and accelerated learning. Central New Mexico Community College will host the fall 2006 meeting, which will celebrate the completion of the initiative's first year by going deeper into the four strategy areas. Portland Community College will host the spring 2007 meeting.

These events provide *Breaking Through* colleges with opportunities to exchange ideas and learning in a structured fashion. *Breaking Through* staff keep in touch with the colleges to learn about both their strengths and their technical assistance needs, and they use the knowledge to organize the meeting agendas.

In addition, *Breaking Through* has initiated two focused efforts to disseminate peer expertise:

An electronic learning group is devoted to exchanging "know-how" and addressing other issues related to contextualizing math. Feedback from the colleges has consistently identified "contextualization" as a promising strategy that

colleges want help with. The colleges have also identified math as a major stumbling block for adults attempting to advance toward college. The electronic learning group will report on their progress at the fall 2006 meeting, and a session at the NCWE conference will allow others to explore the work of this group more in-depth.

The second effort is the development of a training package for college-based case managers. Many of the Leadership Colleges are implementing some form of case management as a support for *Breaking Through* students, but a number of the colleges report that they lack training in case management methods. They worry, for example, that they are creating dependence among their students rather than fostering independence. Portland Community College has developed a partnership with the Seattle Jobs Initiative—coming out of SJI's presentation at the April 2006 Peer Learning Meeting—to adapt SJI's case management training tools for its use. SJI is a nonprofit organization that creates opportunities for people to support themselves and their families through living-wage careers. *Breaking Through* will build on Portland's pilot and develop a tool that can be disseminated nationally.

### Augmenting the State Policy Effort

When the Mott Foundation funded *Breaking Through*, it included resources to support a modest state policy research component, reflecting a belief that institutional change is important but not sufficient. With significant supplemental funding from the Ford Foundation, *Breaking Through* will conduct research on six key state policy topics that hold potential for improving the ability of low-skilled adults to succeed in college. These topics are:

- State approaches to financing community colleges;

## Selected Leadership College Outcomes

### Strategy: Accelerate the Pace of Learning

Nearly 200 students from Community College of Denver, Southeast Arkansas College, and Central New Mexico Community College have enrolled in accelerated developmental education programs to speed their entry to occupational and technical certificates and degrees, as well as to improve their employment opportunities. For example, 33 students completed CNM's intensive career and skill development course and are now applying for construction trades apprenticeships and/or pursuing certificates and Associate's degrees at the college.

Several colleges have undertaken significant efforts to revamp their curricula in order to speed student progress. Community College of Denver is aligning its GED curriculum with developmental education in order to reduce the amount of time students spend in developmental education after obtaining a GED. In addition, both Southeast Arkansas College and Cuyahoga Community College are developing contextualized developmental education curricula as a first step in pathways leading to health care certificates and degrees.

### Strategy: Provide Comprehensive Support Services

While all of the colleges are expanding the support services available to *Breaking Through* students, Portland Community College has made the pilot of a support services strategy the core of its project. Over 65 students are enrolled in MOTT (Moving On Toward Tomorrow) program across four PCC campuses. Students commit to participating in a cohort and taking three classes: Study Skills, Career Exploration, and College Survival. In addition, they get access to the MOTT advisors. Initial results indicate that MOTT students are better prepared for their classes and have stronger attendance and retention records than developmental education students not enrolled in the program.

Owensboro Community and Technical College, Cuyahoga Community College, Community College of Denver and Central New Mexico Community College are using *Breaking Through* resources to hire additional staff to provide a variety of supports to students.

### Strategy: Develop Marketing and Public Outreach Approaches

Most of the colleges have developed communications and public relations materials in order to recruit students to their programs and communicate to potential employers for graduates. Owensboro Community and Technical College held a community breakfast event to announce their Industry-relevant Modular Accessible Credentials (IMAC) programs in both business and manufacturing. Portland Community College has developed a MOTT program brochure for students. Southeast Arkansas College has worked closely with an employer partner, Jefferson County Medical Center, to market their health care programs to frontline workers, recruit potential students, and inform the program content.

- Increasing financial aid for low-skilled/part-time students;
- Connecting basic literacy programs to degree programs;
- Connecting developmental education effectively to occupational/technical degree programs;
- Supporting innovative education strategies for low-skilled adults; and
- Supporting comprehensive supports for low-skilled adults.

An issue brief will be prepared on each topic. The first three reports will be available in 2006, with the others to follow in 2007.

In addition, two *Breaking Through* consultants, Julie Strawn and Amy-Ellen Duke of the Center for Law and Social Policy, will provide an overview of current state policies in the areas outlined above. They will also provide technical assistance to support research on the topic of transitions for adult learners from pre-college into community college degree and certificate programs. This technical assistance will include participation on two panels, as well as consultative services to the initiative.

### Selecting Evaluators and an Expert in Data and Tracking

After soliciting proposals for an independent evaluation of the initiative, *Breaking Through* engaged two highly experienced scholars for this task: Debra D. Bragg, of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Elisabeth A. Barnett of Teachers College, Columbia University. Bragg directs the Higher Education and Community College Executive Leadership programs, the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, and the University of Illinois site for the National Centers for Career and Technical Education. Barnett is a senior research associate at the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Also, *Breaking Through* has contracted with Dr. Peter Ewell of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems to provide technical assistance on data and tracking issues, with a focus on the Leadership Colleges. Currently, he is soliciting input from those colleges on data systems and the related challenges and

will provide recommendations on where his expertise would be of greatest utility to the initiative during the next two years.

### Implementing a Multi-Faceted Communications Strategy

The ability of *Breaking Through* to meet its long-range goals depends in large part on its ability to capture and disseminate practices and policies that show promise for advancing low-skilled adults. To accomplish this, the initiative must be able to identify and analyze practices and policies in *Breaking Through* colleges and states. What practices and policies are working? How were they modified to meet unexpected challenges? In what contexts do they work best? *Breaking Through* will articulate the lessons learned through the initiative and distribute them to key audiences.

Toward this end, *Breaking Through* is developing a comprehensive communications effort, centered on research and publications. This effort will target several “product categories”—*state policy* and *broader awareness* are two examples—with publications as appropriate to each category.

The *Breaking Through* Web site is under development and will be operational in October 2006. The site is designed as a tool for disseminating and exchanging information relevant to *Breaking Through* in a variety of ways.

Equally important, *BreakThroughs*, the initiative’s newsletter, was launched in August 2006 and appears every two months. *BreakThroughs* is circulated to an extensive list of interested practitioners, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

### Refining the Leadership Strategy

To bring *Breaking Through* to a broader community college audience, the National Council for Workforce Education is managing an outreach effort to college leaders. NCWE has shaped this effort to focus on leveraging its membership base and concentrating on several states where college presidents meet regularly, the number of colleges is high, and change seems possible. California and Texas are the first two states to be targeted for this effort. NCWE staff, as well as leaders from *Breaking Through* colleges, will target presidents’ meetings in their areas for focus groups and presentations.

