



PROMISING BREAKTHROUGHS: INITIAL RESULTS OF THE CHARLES STEWART MOTT FOUNDATION'S BREAKING THROUGH INITIATIVE

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INTRODUCTION

The Breaking Through (BT) initiative of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation seeks to prepare “low-skilled” adults to be successful in college and the labor market by strengthening and expanding policies and practices within community colleges. By low-skilled, the project means adult learners who are below college-level in reading, writing and/or mathematics, often lacking a high school diploma, and frequently low-income. Administered by Jobs for the Future (JFF) and the National Council for Workforce Education (NCWE), Breaking Through seeks to enhance the foundational competencies of low-skilled adults by recruiting and enrolling them in pathways leading to postsecondary professional-technical education (PTE)¹ certificate and degree programs. The BT initiative also strives to promote public policies at the state and federal levels to improve outcomes for low-skilled adults and develop community college leaders who support and promote these educational opportunities². Jack Litzenberg (2006) of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation observed,

Our funding is designed to expand the efforts of institutions that already are developing or implementing innovative practices and are displaying a commitment to creating accelerated pathways to advancement for low-skilled adults. Several different models, generated by the community colleges them-

selves, will be tested and evaluated in *Breaking Through*. The demonstration is designed to help ‘knock down the walls’ between basic, developmental, occupational/technical, and academic education in community colleges. (p. 2)

Community colleges associated with the BT project are designated as “leadership colleges” or “learning colleges.” At the start of the BT initiative, six leadership colleges were selected to receive demonstration funding to expand their initiatives locally and ten learning colleges received funding to engage in peer learning. The concept of peer learning encourages community college practitioners to learn from one another, with special emphasis placed on helping learning colleges to jumpstart new initiatives for low-skilled adults.

Since 2005 when the project began, a leadership college was added in Durham, North Carolina and nine learning colleges were added, expanding the initiative to a total of eighteen states. Funding for the community college initiatives in North Carolina has been provided by the North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation. The Ford Foundation supports state policy efforts.

This brief summarizes major findings from the first year of a two-year evaluation of the original 16 community colleges engaged in the BT initiative. For additional information on year-one results, see Bragg and Barnett (2007). The information shared here centers mostly on the original six leadership colleges, drawing on multiple data sources including documents produced by the sites, semi-annual reports, observations and interviews conducted during professional development meetings, and field notes obtained during 2-day site visits between October 2006 and February 2007.

¹Professional-technical education (PTE) is used as an umbrella term to refer to career, occupational and workforce education and training programs designed to prepare students for entry or advancement in employment.

²The Breaking Through (BT) website, maintained by Jobs for the Future (JFF), contains additional background information; it can be accessed at <http://www.breakingthroughcc.org/>.

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High Leverage Strategies

A fundamental commitment of Breaking Through (BT) is to expand the role of community colleges in enhancing access to college for low-skilled adults. Enhanced adult education and literacy, developmental education, career planning and preparation, and postsecondary professional-technical education (PTE) are critical elements of the BT approach. Through the creation of curriculum pathways targeted at low-skilled adults, BT envisions a sequential approach that moves adult learners through prerequisite academics, including adult basic education (ABE), English as a Second Language (ESL), GED preparation and/or developmental education, into college credit PTE curriculum that leads to self-sustaining careers.

Community colleges engaged in the BT initiative are charged with addressing the needs of adults who lack the fundamental literacy and numeracy skills to enter and succeed in either college or the workplace. These learners typically lack the financial resources to enroll in college and nearly always are first-generation college-goers, meaning no one in their immediate (and sometimes extended) families has attended college. Building on existing programs that have similar goals, sometimes drawing on past experience transitioning at-risk youth, community colleges commit to employing four *high leverage strategies* identified by Liebowitz and Taylor (2004) in earlier field research that laid the groundwork for BT:

- **Integrated institutional structures and systems** that link disconnected programs such as Adult Basic Education (ABE), ESL, developmental education, non-credit workforce training, and degree-level PTE.
- **Accelerating the pace of learning** to address the urgency of low-skilled students to enroll in college-level course work and obtain college credentials to enter the workforce.
- **Labor market payoffs** associated with offering work-related content through curricular and instructional approaches that accommodate working adults, plus “stackable” credentials linking advanced learning to jobs.
- **Comprehensive supports** to enhance the chances that low-skilled students who typically juggle work, parenting, and education will persist and be successful.

Initial Results

Leadership Colleges

Site visits to each of the six leadership colleges confirmed that, along with the four high leverage strategies, each college has a distinctive philosophy and set of policies and practices to address students’ needs. These distinctive approaches relate to the larger context (e.g., previous experiences with serving low-skilled adults) well as the particularities of the current situation (e.g., current state of the local economy).

Central New Mexico College emphasizes apprenticeships in the construction trades, including accelerated and contextualized ABE and developmental education. This initiative offers a curriculum sequence along with multiple supports that leads to a certificate and associate’s degree. The initiative is managed and overseen by an “achievement coach” who, rather than being attached to a particular career as is common at Central New Mexico, is assigned to support BT students.

Community College of Denver emphasizes the initial preparation of students who test too low to enter postsecondary PTE degree programs. The goal is to facilitate rapid progression through an intensive developmental education course sequence, using the label of “FastStart” to capture the idea of acceleration. Students’ educational experiences are supplemented with career exploration and career development to help them identify an occupational field and ease the transition into PTE coursework.

Cuyahoga Community College offers a bridge to college approach through a State Tested Nursing Assistant (STNA) program. The program focuses on improving academic skills while introducing core concepts in health care. It is also designed to enable students to progress into the nursing pathway. Students continue until they achieve 8th grade levels on their test scores and then they transition to the next available STNA Plus program.

Owensboro Community Technical College emphasizes pathways that integrate low-skilled adults into employer-sponsored training programs by offering accelerated, modularized basic skills curriculum and student engagement activities. Pathways in business, health care and manufacturing are aligned with workforce training, some of which are employer-sponsored.

Portland Community College offers intensive as well as intrusive advising, with a focus on helping low-skilled students to progress from developmental education into certificate and degree programs in PTE. Developmental education students participate in the MOTT (Moving On Toward Tomorrow) program that includes cohort classes, mandatory advising, wrap around services, case management, and tutoring services.

Southeast Arkansas College offers contextualized and accelerated developmental education that prepares low-skilled adults to transition into an interdisciplinary licensed practical nursing program. A community-based organization, the Southern Good Faith Fund (SGFF), has helped to champion this initiative and contributed in numerous ways to its development.

A self-assessment instrument was completed by BT program leaders at each leadership college to collect baseline data on program design features. Figure 1 shows results by mean rating for all six leadership colleges on nine selected design features.

The six leadership colleges showed a moderate to high mean rating on the level of implementation of each program design feature. These findings suggest that the community colleges have

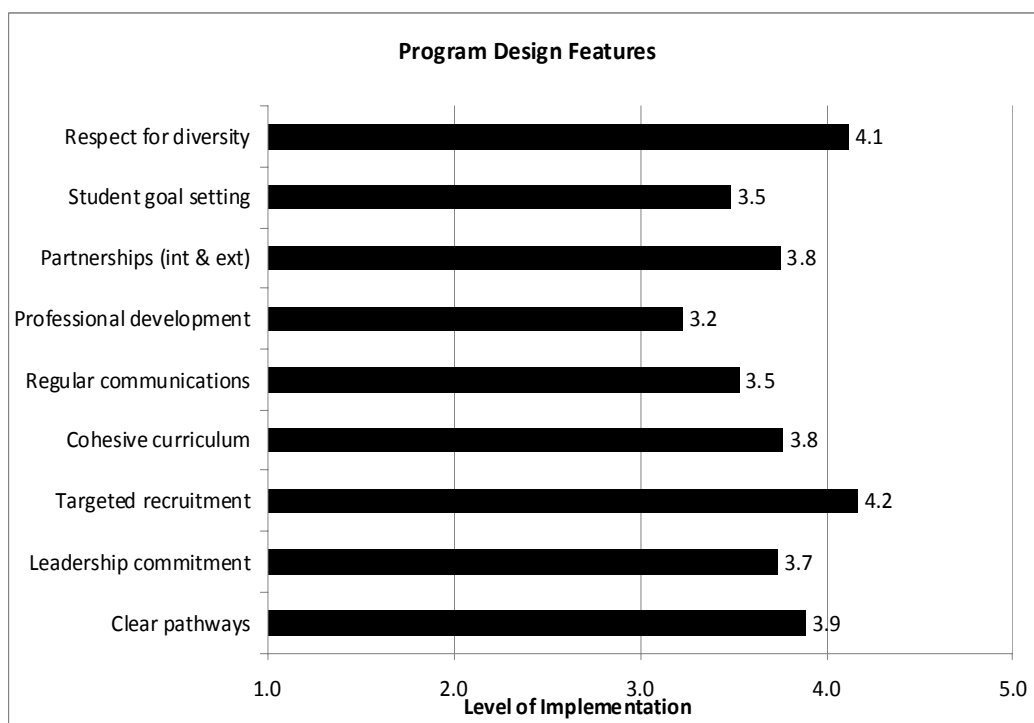


FIGURE 1. Mean rating of program design features for six BT leadership colleges.

a relatively high level of engagement with fundamental features of the BT initiative. Of the nine design features rated by program leaders, respect for diversity and targeted recruitment showed the highest mean rating of slightly over 4.0 on a 5.0 scale. Clear pathways, cohesive curriculum, internal and external partnerships, and leadership commitment showed mean ratings approaching 4.0 on the 5.0 scale. These items may not be as fully implemented because they take time to implement. For example, curriculum alignment and change can take years to implement; thus it is not surprising that program leaders would rate it slightly lower than student recruitment that occurs at the beginning of the program. Other items that revealed slightly lower mean ratings on the level of implementation, from 3.2 to 3.5, were professional development, regular communications, and student goal setting all of which represent a deeper layer of implementation. The appearance of regular communications at a lower level of implementation is a bit surprising; however, it is important to remember that the alignment of different functions that have not been connected historically is extremely challenging. Qualitative results suggest the importance of revisiting internal communications to ensure that the process continues to be work smoothly over time.

Learning College

Interviews with program leaders of the BT learning colleges showed the level of implementation varied substantially from one site to another, ranging from a few sites that were engaged in levels of implementation rivaling those of the leadership colleges to a few others that were only just beginning to learn about ways to

serve low-skilled adults. Results suggested the level of implementation of the learning colleges was associated with many factors but two stood out as particularly important. First, implementation was evident when a high level of priority was placed on adult education relative to other institutional priorities, as evidenced by college leaders expressing a personal commitment to serving the population. Second, levels of implementation were higher when there was an alignment of the skills, interests, and priorities of college staff to the goals and intended outcomes of the BT initiative. This was especially evident when college staff already had expertise in working with low-skilled adults (sometimes indicating that they themselves had similar life experiences) or displaying the willingness to acquire skills and knowledge needed to serve the population.

High Leverage Strategies

Drawing again on BT self-assessment results, implementation of the high leverage strategies was evident in the six leadership colleges and most of the ten learning colleges. The ratings suggested considerable commitment to the four high leverage strategies, with comprehensive supports and integrated institutional structures and systems receiving the highest self-ratings. Results suggest the four strategies are a meaningful contribution to conceptualizing transition programs for low-skilled adults. The following figure compares the mean self-assessment ratings of the six leadership colleges to nine learning colleges that participated in the self assessment during the first year of the evaluation.

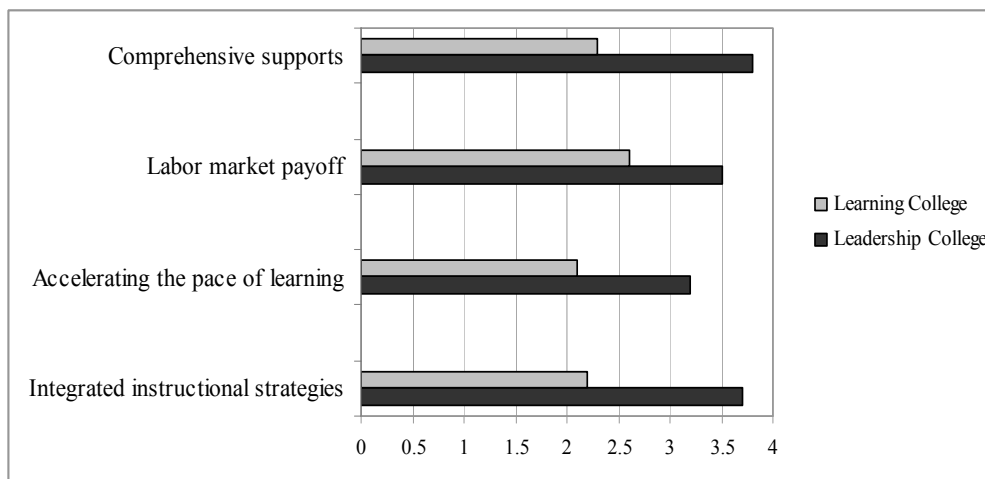


FIGURE 2. Mean rating comparison of leadership colleges and learning colleges on high leverage strategies.

The Role of JFF and NCWE

Participants in the BT peer learning meetings sponsored by JFF and NCWE valued opportunities for interaction with practitioners from other colleges and for the opportunity to extend their professional networks. The semi-annual meetings gave BT participants of both the leadership colleges and learning colleges the opportunity to learn about the national context influencing adult literacy and learning and to interact with others committed to developing new models. Survey data suggest opportunities to learn from others doing the same job is an especially valuable element of peer learning. BT participants specifically mentioned their appreciation for learning about how BT programs were structured at other colleges because they wanted to transfer practices to their own settings.

Strengths and Promising Practices

With regard to the four high leverage strategies, a number of promising practices were identified in the qualitative field work conducted at the leadership colleges:

Integrated Institutional Structures and Systems. Strategies that were commonly used to increase collaboration among different college departments and divisions included:

- establishing opportunities for regular and productive communications.
- overcoming long-standing administrative and logistical barriers that separate units and functions.
- utilizing internal and external resources to bring people and processes together.
- finding ways to improve student “hand-offs” from one part of the college to another.

Accelerating the Pace of Learning. Strategies used by the leadership colleges to accelerate the pace of learning, to enhance college success, and to engage students in developmental education and PTE instruction included:

- using diagnostic measures to target adult or developmental education to the specific needs of students.
- keeping student motivational level high by providing short, intensive courses or modules.
- blending traditional classroom and computer-based instruction.
- contextualizing instruction to enhance students’ acquisition of basic skills (math, reading, writing, and English language) and make learning more meaningful.

Labor Market Payoffs. Approaches to incorporating labor market payoffs among the leadership colleges included:

- forming partnerships with businesses and community-based organizations to help students enter into or advance in the labor market.
- assisting students to select careers.
- helping students to earn short-term certifications that allow them to work while pursuing further education.

Comprehensive Supports. A host of support services emerged among the six leadership colleges including:

- case management or wrap-around services.
- intensive and intrusive advising and counseling (academic and personal).
- coaching or mentoring.
- tutoring.
- assistance with financial aid and other life supports.

Barriers and Challenges

Despite the clear signs of progress with local implementation, barriers and challenges were of concern to program leaders as is always the case when new programs are put into place, particularly programs that serve student populations at high risk of failure. Not surprisingly, many of the barriers and challenges uncovered during the first year of the evaluation relate to the difficulties students face transitioning at various points along the educational continuum and the challenges that programs face aligning curriculum to assist students to be successful navigating the system. The following list represents emerging themes identified through the evaluation, typically in consultation with program leaders, as areas that students and others identified as needing attention:

- difficulties with accelerating basic skills (reading, writing, math) curriculum.
- challenges with assisting low-skilled adults to make career choices when they have limited job experience.
- instructor and staff burn out associated with inadequate experience and/or preparation, extra hours and efforts to meet students' needs.

Next Steps

Year one of the evaluation provided a baseline for measuring the advancement of the four high leverage strategies, recognizing that integrated institutional structures and systems and comprehensive supports have advanced more rapidly than labor market pay-offs and accelerating the pace of learning. Universally, however, the initial year of BT implementation showed a high level of support for serving low-skilled adults attending the selected community colleges. As the leadership colleges devote more time and attention to implementation, there is a growing expectation of institutionalization of BT-related policies and practices within the selected community colleges.

Taking the notion of peer learning one step farther, the project strives to help other community college leaders to become knowledgeable of BT programs and practices. In fact, understanding how awareness of BT programs is proliferating among community colleges nationally, including those directly associated with BT leadership colleges and learning colleges as well as others

having no formal affiliation, is a focus of year two. Recognizing the importance of institutionalization and sustainability, year two of the evaluation is focused on assessing whether local initiatives impact student outcomes and whether the ideas spread within the designated community colleges and to other community colleges in the U.S.

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Table 1
Key Features of Breaking Through Leadership Colleges

Leadership Colleges	Key Features
Central New Mexico Community College, Albuquerque, NM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Preparatory courses leading to apprenticeships in various construction trades. ▪ Hands-on program oversight with active participation from two major divisions within the college. ▪ Intensive, accelerated course integrating math and the construction trades. ▪ Blended classroom and hands-on learning. ▪ Cohort (learning community) model. ▪ Extensive student supports coordinated by a highly-involved “achievement coach”.
Community College of Denver, Denver, CO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strong commitment to developmental education, drawing on college history and the expertise and experience of national leaders. ▪ High level of experimentation with and actual implementation of accelerated developmental education. ▪ High level of sophistication about academic, career and support services. ▪ Systematic data collection to show program and student outcomes. ▪ Grant from United States Department of Education to replicate model in selected adult education programs in Colorado.
Cuyahoga Community College, Cleveland, OH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bridge between existing GED/ABLE program and the State Tested Nursing Assistant (STNA) Plus program. ▪ Explicit teaching of basic academic skills, workplace success skills, and job search skills in tandem with STNA course work. ▪ Integration of health occupations materials and concepts into the teaching of math, reading, and English. ▪ Well-developed connections between departments offering non-credit instruction. ▪ Career preparation differentiated from job skills training. ▪ Good relationships with schools and employers.
Owensboro Community Technical College, Owensboro, KY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Commitment to serve the needs of adult learners while also addressing the economic needs of the community. ▪ Clearly identified PTE areas of study that are tied to the pathway model; students who participate gain competencies crucial to future employment. ▪ Modularization creates a contextualized curricular and instructional approach important to student success. ▪ Accelerated developmental math. ▪ Extensive use of accelerated online instruction. ▪ Support services delivered in the form of an engagement specialist and success coach.
Portland Community College, Portland, OR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ New explicit pathways between developmental education and PTE programs. ▪ Student support is multifaceted, including Moving On Toward Tomorrow (MOTT) advisors and a college success course. ▪ Program design draws upon lessons learned in the ROOTS/TRIO and Carl Perkins programs. ▪ Infrastructure in place for information-based decision making, working closely with the college’s Institutional Effectiveness office. ▪ Students linked to community resources, including personal counseling and health care. ▪ Professional development component in partnership with the Seattle Jobs Initiative.
Southeast Arkansas College, Pine Bluff, AR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Long tradition of providing PTE; long history and commitment to allied health careers. ▪ Strong partnership with the Southern Good Faith Fund, a CBO that supports programs and services geared to low skilled, low income populations. ▪ Long standing partnerships with employers and other community partners. ▪ Accelerated, contextualized developmental education curriculum, pairing general education and PTE faculty. ▪ Curriculum emphasizes cohorts (learning communities). ▪ Comprehensive support services.