

**TO ENSURE
AMERICA'S
FUTURE:
BUILDING A
NATIONAL
OPPORTUNITY
SYSTEM
FOR ADULTS**

Strengthening Links Between
Adult Education and
Community Colleges

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy



FEBRUARY 2005

**TO ENSURE
AMERICA'S FUTURE:
BUILDING A
NATIONAL OPPORTUNITY
SYSTEM FOR ADULTS**

**Strengthening Links Between
Adult Education and Community Colleges**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Project on Adult Education and Community Colleges**

February 9, 2005



**Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy
1221 Avenue of the Americas – 46th Floor
New York, NY 10020
(212) 512-2362
<http://www.caalusa.org>**

© Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy

**Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy
(Ed., Gail Spangenberg with Betsy Feist and Bess Heitner)
1221 Avenue of the Americas – 46th Floor
New York, N.Y. 10020**

CONTENTS

FOREWORD	iii
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	v
A. Challenge and Opportunity	v
B. Report Focus	v
C. Importance of Linkages	vi
D. Nature of Linkages	vii
E. Strengthening Linkages	vii
F. A Matter of Priorities	x
INTRODUCTION	1
I. THE GATEWAYS	4
A. Adult Education	5
B. Community Colleges	6
C. Similarities	8
D. Linkage	9
E. The Importance of Linkage	13
F. The National Opportunity System	15
G. Potential and Reality	17
H. Priorities	19
I. Leadership	20
II. PROVISION	22
A. Dimensions of Service	22
B. Colleges and Other Providers	24
C. College Roles	25
D. Adult Education Within the College	31
E. Responsibility	34
III. TRANSITIONS	36
A. Students of the Present	36
B. Transition Rates	36
C. Potential	38
D. Personal Barriers	39
E. Articulation	42
F. The Curricular Continuum	45
G. Strengthening the Interface	48
H. Increasing Synergy with Developmental Education	50
I. Prerequisites for Success	56

IV. PUBLIC POLICY	62
A. Missions	63
B. Governance and Management	65
C. Funding	69
D. Transition Policy	73
E. The Policy Opportunity	76
V. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS	78
A. The Community College Role	79
B. The Adult Education Role	81
C. The State Government Role	83
D. The Federal Role	85
APPENDICES	88
Appendix I: Research Titles in the CAAL Community College Series	88
Appendix II: Community College Study Task Force	90
Appendix III: Endnotes: Notes and Sources	92

FOREWORD

This report is a call to arms. It comes at a pivotal time for both the adult education system and the community college sector.

The gap between the “haves” and the “have nots” in American society is growing, and the main pathway to the education and training needed to hold decent jobs and function well as parents and citizens is through the community college door. This has long been the case, but we are at a historical juncture. We ignore present realities at our own peril. We can’t afford to keep doing business as usual. A growing number of adults lack a high school credential. Too few adults are enrolled in ABE, ESL, and GED or other diploma programs, and too few are making the transition to community colleges. We are reaching only about three million adults with current programs, a fraction of the need. Moreover, efforts to address the challenge are fragmented and underfunded.

It is time for community colleges to make service to underprepared adults a much higher priority. These people represent a substantial portion of America’s current and future workforce. They come from cities and towns all across the country, from every large urban center and every small rural area. In fact, most colleges embrace economic and workforce development already, but to benefit themselves, and to benefit their present and future students *and* their communities, they need to go well beyond their present role. And supportive policies and funding from government will be needed to help them. The same is true of the adult education system in all its parts – K-12 systems, community-based organizations, libraries, and others that make up the national provider network.

The adult education and literacy system and community colleges will have to find new ways to work together toward a common goal – through transition programming and in the many other ways discussed in this report – if the National Opportunity System for adults envisioned in this paper is to become reality. That system should come into being for two simple reasons: it is essential to the effective functioning of our democracy, and without it the United States will not remain globally competitive. Creating the system our country needs is achievable. What we need most is the *will* to do it. Fortunately, as this report shows, there is impressive experience on which to build and there are many examples of leadership to help guide the way.

Many people and organizations helped make this study possible. In a time of unusually tight funding, McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., the Ford Foundation, Verizon, Inc., the Lumina Foundation for Education, the Nellie-Mae Foundation, Household International, Harold W. McGraw, Jr., and other individual donors have cared enough to stay the course. Hundreds of professionals across the country have given their time and insights in one way or another. And the task force that guided the study (see Appendix II) is a very special group whose experience and wisdom helped shape the effort at every step. CAAL is deeply grateful to them for their generosity and service to the cause.

And, then, there are the students, the most important beneficiaries of our effort.

In most research projects, there is a certain “wake up moment” – an incident that encapsulates what the project is about and why it matters. In the two years of research and deliberations

that led up to this report, that moment came for CAAL early on, in February 2003, when we visited an adult education program at an Oregon community college. After a long day with administrators and teachers, our project director stepped outside to clear his head. He encountered a young woman who had been seated in one of the classes observed.

She asked him what he was doing there. He explained, then asked what *she* was doing there.

It turned out that she was a single parent on welfare who divided her time between work and school. She had moved to Oregon a few years before because in her native state, welfare recipients were not allowed to attend school. She was there to get her high school equivalency diploma; she had dropped out because she had difficulty learning, and she thought she'd never be able to graduate. When she enrolled at the college, she found out why. She was tested for learning disabilities and discovered that she was dyslexic. The student services staff worked with the adult education faculty to develop a special program for her. She was learning quickly, and she expected to receive her high school equivalency diploma soon.

When asked what she expected to do after graduation, she said "Oh, I guess I'll go to college. After all, it's easy. I know my way around here. All I have to do is walk over to the admissions office and sign up. They told me all about that." What did she want to study? She said she wanted to become a nurse, that she had always wanted to be a nurse, and the college had an eighteen-month Licensed Practical Nurse's program that didn't cost much to attend. She thought this would allow her to support her son without help from anyone.

We asked her name, explaining that we would like to check in sometime to see how she was progressing. She wrote it on a piece of paper. Almost two years later, we phoned the college's student records office and discovered that the young woman had graduated high in her class. We did not ask her whereabouts, but we learned that she has become a nurse.

This report is for her, a courageous, determined woman. It is also for aspiring adults everywhere. All across America, they can make it, too, if the National Opportunity System called for in this CAAL report becomes reality.

The nation, government, colleges, the adult education system – all have a central role, and all stand to benefit from enlightened and bold action. The National Opportunity System we are recommending depends on their response to the challenges – and the opportunities – treated here.

Gail Spangenberg
President, CAAL

Byron McClenney
Task Force Chair

Forrest P. Chisman
Project Study Director

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A. CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY

A widening skills gap is at the heart of many of the major economic and social challenges the United States faces today. Too many Americans lack the basic skills and educational attainments required by a postindustrial economy. This places severe limits on the American economy to innovate, grow, and compete in the global marketplace. And it relegates many millions of our citizens to low-wage, low-opportunity jobs, as well as to increasingly marginal positions in the nation's social and political life. If present trends remain unchecked, our children will inherit a nation that has declined from international preeminence to the ranks of a second-rate economic and political power.

The skills gap has many causes but only one solution: we urgently need a National Opportunity System that allows all adult Americans to obtain the knowledge and skills they require. At present, we have a wide range of education and training systems, but we lack an overall opportunity system that knits them together. We need seamless pathways of opportunity that allow individuals to progress up the ladder of education and training as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Furthermore, we urgently need pathways that give all Americans the opportunity to attain much higher levels of education and training than most have attained in the past. In today's economy, high-opportunity jobs require some form of postsecondary education or other specialized training, and an increasing number require postsecondary academic degrees or certifications. Important as it is, education at the high school level is no longer enough to meet national workforce needs or to ensure individual well being. We must build a National Opportunity System that provides seamless paths to postsecondary achievement for all adults who aspire to this goal.

However it is configured, a National Opportunity System cannot focus solely on our youth, though it must obviously include them. There simply will not be enough young people entering the workforce to close the skills gap in the decades to come. To close that gap, we must provide much greater and more systematic opportunities for adults to upgrade their education and training through the postsecondary level. If we do not, children in kindergarten today will inherit a bleak future, regardless of how good their education may be.

Moreover, a National Opportunity System cannot focus solely on native-born adults. Demographic projections indicate that most of the future net growth in our workforce will come from immigrants – most of whom come to the United States as adults, and many of whom have either low educational levels, or deficient English language skills, or both.

B. REPORT FOCUS

Constructing the National Opportunity System that is essential for our nation's future requires radical, results-oriented thinking about how to reconfigure, augment, and link our present education and training systems. It requires breaking down boundaries to construct new

pathways. An increasing number of states have recognized this imperative and are engaged in strategic planning toward the desired new goals.

This report is concerned with one aspect of the challenge faced by states, educational institutions, and the nation as a whole. Its focus is on strengthening the linkage between adult education and community colleges. It explains in some detail how pathways of opportunity can be constructed to allow adults with low basic skills to progress up the educational hierarchy.

This critically important component of building a comprehensive National Opportunity System has not been well understood in the past. This report is the first comprehensive examination of linkages between colleges and adult education.* Its purpose is to add a new dimension to thought and action about what must be done to close the skills gap in America.

C. IMPORTANCE OF LINKAGES

Approximately three million Americans are enrolled in adult education programs each year, and most of them would benefit greatly from postsecondary education. Because of their liberal admissions policies and low costs, community colleges are the logical gateways to educational and economic opportunity for these and the tens of millions of other adults with low basic skills.

At present, too few adult education students pass through these gateways. Although adult education programs and community colleges are linked in many ways, those links must be strengthened to incorporate adult education students into the National Opportunity System. This linkage is manifestly in the national interest, as well as the interest of individuals. Adult education students are among the Americans who must have the opportunity to benefit from postsecondary academic or vocational education if we are to close the skills gap. Moreover, these students have demonstrated a commitment to taking the first steps in improving their education and skills. It would be foolish and wasteful not to help them take the next steps. If we do so, there is the potential for millions of Americans who lack the education and training required by our economy to contribute to the general welfare and their own. If we do not, a major national opportunity will be lost.

The national goal must be to create seamless pathways of opportunity that lead large numbers of low-skilled adults through the adult education system and into postsecondary education.

In the past, adult education and community colleges have been regarded as separate service systems. In the future, they must be regarded as interdependent components of the National Opportunity System.

Strengthening links between adult education and community colleges is the functional equivalent of the efforts underway by many educational leadership groups to create closer ties between

* In this report, the term *adult education* is used to connote the combination or range of services defined by Title II of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act – P.L. 105-220). These are: Adult Basic Education (ABE, which focuses on improving basic reading, writing, and math skills for adults functioning below the ninth grade level), Adult Secondary Education (ASE, which focuses on upgrading the knowledge and basic skills of adults to the high school equivalency level, and usually on preparing adults for high school equivalency tests, such as the GED), and English as a second language (ESL) instruction at the precollegiate level

K-12 and higher education. We cannot close the skills gap without placing far greater emphasis on broadening the educational opportunities of adults. These two efforts must be pursued in tandem if we are to create the National Opportunity System our nation so urgently needs.

D. NATURE OF LINKAGES

The most effective way to accomplish this goal is to build on the *existing* links between colleges and adult education. These take three principal forms:

Provision. Almost half of American community colleges provide adult education services as defined in this report. Collectively, colleges serve at least one third of all the students enrolled in adult education in the United States. These students make up an estimated seven percent of all community college enrollments nationwide, and in some states they comprise a much higher percentage. Most adult education service, however, is provided by school systems. Community based organizations, libraries, and other local institutions also play important roles. For the most part, colleges provide adult education because they see it as part of their comprehensive mission to serve unmet educational needs in their communities, focus on adult students, and respond to local workforce needs.

Transitions. Adult education programs offer students two of the prerequisites for entry into postsecondary programs: high school equivalency credentials and English language skills for language minorities. They also provide instruction that is very similar to the college preparation courses offered by the lower levels of developmental education programs at a fraction of the cost. Adult education programs and colleges are, therefore, natural partners in providing educational opportunity. Adult education can and should be the first step in transitions through the community college gateway. Enrollment in adult education programs can and should serve as the first enrollment in postsecondary education for students with deficient basic skills.

Policy. Adult education is under the governance of community college boards or other postsecondary authorities in 13 states, and in several of these states this governance arrangement has been adopted in recent years. More importantly, these and other states have adopted policies to strengthen links between adult education and colleges by means such as common funding systems, clearly specified entry and exit criteria, joint planning procedures, required faculty qualifications, and incentive grants to increase transitions.

These existing forms of linkage mean that adult education students are students of both the present and the future at many colleges. They provide the tools by which colleges, adult educators, and policymakers, working together, can ensure that a far larger number of current adult education students (whether at colleges or not) can become successful students of the future in academic and vocational programs.

E. STRENGTHENING LINKAGES

Provision. Those colleges that provide adult education service must strengthen their programs by fully integrating adult education students into college life. This means:

- ◆ All provider colleges can and must follow the example of leadership institutions in treating adult education as a core service rather than a peripheral service.
- ◆ They must set high standards for their adult education divisions.
- ◆ They must give adult education students the same quality support services, facilities, faculty, and status that they provide to other students.
- ◆ They should provide adult education faculty with the same pay, benefits, professional development opportunities, and roles in college governance assigned to other faculty with comparable education, experience, and responsibilities, and they should prepare all college staff and faculty to receive and fully support adult education students.
- ◆ Adult education managers should occupy the same place in the college's management system as the managers of other core services.
- ◆ Adult education should be a component in the college's central planning, budgeting, program improvement, marketing, institutional research, and accountability systems.

Those colleges that do not provide adult education service or that are only one of multiple providers in a geographic area must form collaborative arrangements with adult education providers to define the most appropriate roles that each institution in the community can play to expand the opportunities of adult learners. Colleges, adult education leaders, or both, should convene the educational leadership in their communities to identify gaps in the opportunity system and devise means to fill them.

Among the contributions colleges and the outside adult education system can make to each other are sharing facilities, staff, and support services; creating jointly administered programs to meet special needs (such as specialized job training programs for disadvantaged adults); and establishing mutual expectations about the requirements for college entry as well as how those can best be met.

Transitions. Transitions from adult education to postsecondary programs can and must be increased by more active recruitment of adult education students by colleges, as well as better orientation and support systems for these students to overcome barriers to enrollment.

Transitions also can be increased by the creation of special "gap" or "bridge" programs. These are usually short-duration instructional modules aimed at assisting students with high school diplomas or high school equivalency credentials but lacking the skills required for admission to college academic or vocational programs. Rather than providing comprehensive instruction in basic skills or academic subjects, gap or bridge programs target the specific skills or areas of knowledge that students must improve to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.

A great deal can also be accomplished by establishing greater synergy between adult and developmental education programs, and between credit and noncredit English as a second

language (ESL) programs.** Across the nation, at least some colleges have taken the initiative to create this synergy. These leadership colleges have demonstrated that students can often progress faster, at lower cost, and with less attrition if adult education is regarded as the lower level of developmental education, and if the curricular linkages between these two services are strengthened.

Most importantly, transitions can and must be increased by creating articulated curricular sequences that allow students to navigate more easily the route from ABE/ASE/GED or ESL programs to success in postsecondary education. Curricula must be designed to ensure that each step on the educational ladder prepares students for the next step, and the sequence of instruction should be transparent to students, faculty, and administrators.

This alignment requires that the educational process from adult education through postsecondary completion be viewed as a seamless system. And it requires breaking down institutional and programmatic boundaries to progress. Students should be placed in the educational programs that offer them the greatest benefit. Completion of each program should prepare them for subsequent placements. And everyone involved in the educational process should know the rules of the game. For example, students who earn high school equivalency certificates should have the opportunity to gain the skills required for success in college academic or vocational programs, or other forms of postsecondary training aimed at meeting industry skill standards.

In the end, creating seamless curricular sequences entails designing educational programs for success. This requires that adult educators, college faculty, and administrators collaborate, that all are prepared to examine carefully their requirements for success, and that they adjust their curricula, assessment, and placement systems to create seamless pathways of instruction. It also means that both colleges and adult educators must “think outside the box” in terms of crafting instructional strategies that are best suited to meeting particular learning needs. They must consider if strategies like self-paced instruction in learning labs, targeted curricular modules, or individual tutoring might be more appropriate than a standard course, or program, or level of instruction.

By combining these approaches, the number of adult education students who enter postsecondary programs can be increased dramatically.

Public Policy. To date, much of the progress in strengthening linkages by these means has been due to initiatives of college and adult education leaders at the local level. Public policy at the state and federal level has encouraged some of these developments, but existing policy must be strengthened to achieve the potential of adult education and colleges to provide pathways of opportunity.

** Discussions of English language instruction and other educational services for people with limited proficiency in English refer to this area of education by different terms. Most commonly, it is designated as English as a Second Language (ESL) or English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). For purposes of clarity, this report will use the term ESL, without prejudice to the merits of other terminology.

First and foremost, transitions between adult education and postsecondary education should be a stated priority of both state and federal adult education policy, and of state community college policy. To support this priority, both the federal government and the states should provide funding for special transition initiatives linking all colleges and adult education providers. These initiatives should “take to scale” the approaches developed by leadership institutions and introduce new approaches as well. States should mandate these initiatives and monitor their progress at all institutions.

States have a special responsibility, because most have governance authority for both community colleges and adult education. State authorities should encourage better integration of adult education services into the culture and operations of colleges that provide them, and they should facilitate local planning of the avenues through which colleges and adult education programs can best support each other. Most importantly, states should take the leadership in helping local educators design and implement seamless curricular pathways between adult education and postsecondary programs. And they should remove any state regulatory barriers to facilitating transitions.

In some states, adult education provided by colleges is supported by the same funding systems that support other college programs – full time equivalency (FTE) reimbursements or their equivalents. This financing system provides a mechanism to level the stakes between adult education and other services, and possibly to increase total adult education funding. Colleges can and should be reimbursed for adult education service at the same FTE rate that applies to comparable credit programs.

Both the federal government and states should invest in a critical missing ingredient: the development and application of student data systems that can be used for both formative and summative research on strengthening linkages. At present, anyone seeking to bridge the gap between adult education and colleges is groping in the dark; longitudinal student record systems that can reliably track student progress across the two systems either do not exist or are not used in appropriate ways.

Finally, adult education in the United States is grossly underfunded by the federal government and by most states. This leads to service deficiencies by all providers and, too often, to the attitude that adult education is a second-class service relative to other college offerings. Total funding and per-capita funding for adult education should be increased to a level that is comparable to other community college offerings, and the federal government and the states must both contribute to attaining this goal.

F. A MATTER OF PRIORITIES

These and other types of initiatives at the local, state, and national levels can greatly expand the opportunities for millions of low-skilled adults. All of them are eminently feasible. There are colleges, adult education programs, and states in which some combination of these strategies has been adopted and in which students, institutions, and communities are expanding the boundaries of opportunity now.

Nationwide, however, far too little progress has been made in strengthening the links between colleges and adult education. This has not been a goal – or even a common topic in the

educational discourse – among most adult educators, community college leaders, or policymakers. As a result, the potential for linkage between these two systems is much greater than the reality.

In the end, bridging the gap between potential and reality is a matter of priorities. There is a natural tendency for colleges, adult educators, and the policymakers concerned with both to focus on the priorities of colleges and adult education as separate service systems, rather than to focus on their interdependence.

Instead of concentrating on institutional priorities, all parties involved should focus on the priority of building a National Opportunity System that does a far better job of meeting the national need for underprepared adult students, whether native born or immigrants, to make their contribution to building a high-productivity workforce. To achieve this, strengthening the links between adult education and community colleges must be a high priority for institutions and policymakers nationwide.

It may take some time to achieve this goal on a national scale. But it presents a challenge from which individual educators and policymakers should not shrink. There is no college, adult education program, or state that cannot take the steps to strengthen provision, transitions, and policy that leadership institutions and states have adopted.

The responsibility for meeting national priorities ultimately comes down to the responsibility of individuals. To build the National Opportunity System, individual leaders can and must find the time to learn what is required to create seamless pathways of opportunity for low-skilled adults in their communities and states. And then they must take the steps required to achieve that goal.

Community colleges and adult education programs are unified by their commitment to meet the needs of adult learners, whatever those needs may be. They are both highly flexible instructional systems. By asserting their joint commitment to strengthening the links between them, as this report strongly recommends, their dedication to expanding an essential and neglected area of service will be evident.