



## Research Report No. 08-1

Washington State Board for Community and  
Technical Colleges

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### INCREASING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT FOR BASIC SKILLS STUDENTS

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#### Background

With demographics shifting towards an aging population and growing diversity, policy makers, employers and others are thinking more about where they will get tomorrow's workers. The answer is the majority are already in the workforce today. However, with increasing demand for skilled workers and with more workers needing at least some postsecondary education for higher wage jobs, the challenge is to raise skills and knowledge attainment more broadly for workers who do not have a college education.

Community and technical colleges, with their open doors, are major gateways to postsecondary education for a wide variety of students. One group is students starting in basic skills (adult basic education and GED instruction (ABE/GED) or English as a second language (ESL)). An earlier study of Washington State basic skills students found that relatively few basic skills students advance beyond basic skills in their education (*Building Pathways to Success for Low-Skill Adult Students: Lessons for Community College Policy and Practice from a Longitudinal Student Tracking Study*; Prince, Jenkins, 2005). If they do progress beyond basic skills, it is typically into training for jobs on the lowest rung of the ladder with few getting enough education for higher wage and higher skill jobs. For these students, simply progressing through basic skills is a significant challenge. Their complicated personal lives are compounded by programs that are designed and structured in ways that don't meet students' needs. The education and training they receive is often not aligned in professional-technical pathways, but instead based upon pieced together credit and non-credit courses completed through intermittent attendance patterns and a patchwork of programs. The study identified a "tipping point" of at least one year of college credit and a credential as the threshold for earnings gains, to meet



For Information Contact:  
David Prince, Assistant Director, Research and Analysis  
Phone: 360-704-4347, email: [dprince@sbctc.edu](mailto:dprince@sbctc.edu)  
Tina Bloomer, Director, Student Achievement Projects  
Phone: 360-704-4325, email: [tbloomer@sbctc.edu](mailto:tbloomer@sbctc.edu)  
Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges  
TDD 800-833-6388

employer demands for skilled workers and prepare students for moving even higher in their post-secondary attainment. After five years, just two in every ten basic skills students reach the “tipping point.” Fewer ESL students attain this than do ABE/GED students, for whom the GED is viewed as important to opening doors, but who still all too often don’t step through them.

At the same time the study was being conducted, Washington community and technical colleges was also piloting a new approach for simultaneously teaching basic skills and college-level professional-technical training. Ten colleges participated in the pilots called I-BEST (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training). I-BEST’s goals are to increase the number of basic skills students who transition to college-level programs and to raise achievement for those who go further and faster. The pilots served 268 students. The pilot findings were promising enough to expand the model across all colleges.

In 2007, the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) launched the Student Achievement Initiative aimed at increasing academic achievement for all students, regardless of their program or starting level, by measuring student progress for the important incremental gains they make that lead to college success. The goal is to help more students reach the “tipping point” or beyond. These measures, called *momentum points* because their attainment can propel students forward, are in four categories: improving preparation for college-level courses, building towards a year of college credit, completing college math, and completing certificates, degrees and apprenticeships. A full description of the initiative is available at: [http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/e\\_studentachievement.aspx](http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/e_studentachievement.aspx).

The purpose of this paper is to describe basic skills students in relation to their participation in basic skills and their success in transitioning to college-level classes, and the momentum they gain towards college success from this participation. In the period of time covered by the data used for this analysis, 24 colleges offered I-BEST programs. The first part of this paper provides a description of basic skills students in all colleges. Subsequently, comparisons are drawn from within the 24 I-BEST colleges for students enrolled exclusively in basic skills, students who also attempt other college classes during the year and for I-BEST students. The data source for this paper is the Student Achievement Initiative database.

Specific questions answered are:

- What are the course enrollments for basic skills students by their starting levels of ABE and ESL proficiency? What are their enrollments in other college courses? What are their enrollments in I-BEST?
- What are the characteristics of students enrolled exclusively in basic skills, those enrolled in other college courses during the year and those enrolled in I-BEST?
- How much progress do students make if they are exclusively enrolled in basic skills, enrolled in other college classes during the year, or enrolled in I-BEST?
- What percentage of students makes pre- and post-test basic skills gains or earns a GED/HS diploma?