

INCREASING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT FOR BASIC SKILLS STUDENTS

Findings

- Colleges reported serving some 45,000 basic skills students in 2006-07. The vast majority (93 percent) attended exclusively for basic skills. The others (7 percent) were also enrolled in other college-level courses at some point during the year.
- Twenty-four (24) colleges offered I-BEST programs and reported 900 student enrollments (273 ESL and 627 ABE/GED). This represents an increase by 55 percent in these colleges (65 percent for ESL students and 50 percent for ABE/GED) of students who were able to enroll in college-level course work during the same year they enrolled in basic skills.
- Hispanics and males in general are less likely to attempt classes beyond basic skills, compared to female and non-Hispanic peers who start out enrolled in basic skills. Similarly, Native Americans appear less likely to go further. More work needs to be done to engage these groups.
- In the programs studied in this report, both I-BEST students and other students were more likely to attempt college-level work when they reached ABE level 4, GED levels 1-2 and ESL levels 5 and 6 than students from lower levels.
- The number of students starting the year at these levels is 55 percent of ABE/GED students and 32 percent of ESL students. This represents a significant number of students who are poised to attempt other college courses.
- This study found there was also a small group of students (5 percent) who started the year having already experienced some college-level course work. Colleges should be sure to take into account prior educational experience when assessing and advising students to ensure they are advised into college courses where possible.
- The majority of ESL students (68 percent) and a substantial portion of ABE/GED students (45 percent) begin the year at lower levels. More should be done to increase these students' basic skills and to transition them as well.
- Increasing basic skills rates (percent of students who make a substantial gain, GED or HS completion) are central challenges for basic skills programs. Less than half of basic skills students make gains during the year. Students who enroll in other college classes during the year are more likely to make gains than students exclusively enrolled in basic skills throughout the year.
- Students who enroll in I-BEST are the most likely to make gains and the gains they make are larger than for other basic skills students.

About the Study

The purpose of this study was 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 (integrated basic education and skills training). The first part of this study 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?
 - How much do students increase their pre- and post-test basic skills?
 - How much critical momentum do basic skills students gather when they transition from basic skills to college courses or begin an I-BEST program?
 - What are the key challenges that emerge for moving basic skills students further and faster in their attainment? Which colleges appear to be promising leaders in addressing these issues?
- Greater attention can be given to GED preparation for higher level ABE and GED students so that students ready to pass can achieve this milestone.
 - The evidence from basic skills rate gains shows that infusing college content helps students at every level to increase their basic skills. This suggests that using professional-technical program content at lower levels in the form of

exploratory classes or experiences, comprehensive goal setting and information on transition opportunities can help to raise skill levels while also providing information on the next steps needed on the pathway. These methods should be useful in preparing more students at all levels for I-BEST in particular.

- While increasing their basic skills is essential to getting ready for college-level work, students do not gather college momentum until they transition into college-level courses. There is evidence in the programs studied that I-BEST helps students build first year momentum for earning college credits and thereby increases their preparation and possibilities for going even further.
- The percentages of I-BEST students who earn their first 15 college credits is substantially higher than in cases when basic skills students attempt college coursework in other ways (53 percent versus 11 percent for ESL and 61 percent versus 26 percent for ABE/GED students).
- This momentum point for all students is significant for providing a solid start on a college-level pathway to the “tipping point” as tested in the achievement initiative and found in other research.
- Furthermore, I-BEST students maintain momentum better by completing 30 or more credits at a higher rate than ABE/GED students enrolled in college courses in other ways (32 percent for I-BEST students compared to 11 percent for other students).

Implications of the Study

Further work needs to be done to help advance basic skills students to college-level math, including building the pre-college bridge. The Student Achievement Initiative has points that measure pre-college readiness in pre-college math and English. This also has implications for I-BEST, which attempts to prepare students for the next level of instruction on a pathway as well as for immediate employment opportunities. As pre-college math begins with pre-algebra, formal ways to increase articulation from basic skills to pre-algebra should be identified. The relationship between basic skills instruction in reading and writing and how it relates to the next set of college transitions should also be reviewed.

It is increasingly important for all Washingtonians to have post-secondary education for better jobs and to meet employers’ demand for a skilled workforce. To this end, the State Board has launched a new initiative aimed at measuring student progress and rewarding colleges for increasing student achievement. The findings in this report suggest that there can be a strong interface between I-BEST, instruction methodology, and building pathways for students to the “tipping point” and beyond. The Achievement Initiative’s momentum points can be helpful in development of this interface.

For students starting in basic skills, achievement starts with increasing basic skills and preparing for college. Students who combine college content with basic skills through I-BEST and other ways increase their basic skills at higher rates than students enrolled exclusively in basic skills. Application of this finding to basic skills curriculum at all levels serves the dual purposes of increasing the pipeline of students capable of transitioning and increasing their basic skills.

College credits are the mileposts on pathways. The momentum points for basic skills are only progress indicators and do not indicate full college-level momentum until the student has transitioned to some college-level course taking such as I-BEST. The first 15 college credits actually marks the starting line for momentum. The evidence in this report suggests that I-BEST should consider getting students to the starting line and in fact further suggests that some I-BEST students can get well beyond.

The findings have implications for advising as well. Momentum points in the Achievement Initiative are useful milestones that students can strive to achieve. They should be made aware when they reach critical momentum points and learn how reaching them gives momentum for going even further. Student progress toward momentum points should be part of student advising and goal setting. Students at all levels should receive information about the difference that reaching *momentum points* can make, so they can see how others like themselves are progressing.

Finally, the report identifies colleges where students appear to move further and faster. The State Board Student Achievement Initiative provides a means to measure incremental progress in student achievement and provide evidence for developing and improving practices. Currently, the community and technical college system does not have a consistent way to quantitatively evaluate promising practices. The Student Achievement Initiative provides a common measurement through the *momentum points*, which can be used to measure results in a uniform way. Next steps could be for these leaders to identify, assess and share promising practices with the system that help students progress forward.

Full report available at http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/College/abe/resh_08-1_increasing_student_achievement_for_basic_skills_students.pdf

Prince, David. Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. January, 2008.