

Research Brief

The Role of Participation in ABE-to-College Transition Programs in Adult Student Postsecondary Enrollment, Persistence, and Success 2016

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The Adult Transitions Longitudinal Study

The Adult Transitions Longitudinal Study (ATLAS) was an unprecedented longitudinal study of 227 adult students who entered one of 11 ABE-to-College transition programs in fall 2007 or spring 2008. The study followed these students for four years.

The goal of these college transition programs was to help adult students build their **personal, career, academic, and college** knowledge readiness. The programs were all components of larger adult education programs participating in the New England ABE-to-College Transition Project designed and managed by World Education and funded by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation since 2000.

Student Characteristics

The majority of ATLAS participants shared these characteristics: they were U.S.-born, native English-speaking females with one or more children under the age of 16, working part-time, with a combined household income of under \$30,000. The average age of participants at the start of the study was 36. Over 40% identified as people of color, and 19% did not speak English as their first language.

Findings on College Outcomes

The research question was: *What are the outcomes of participating in the ABE-to-College Transition program?*

After participating in a 15-week college transition program, and using college transcripts to confirm outcomes, here are the college outcomes for the 220 participants for which we have data:

Almost two-thirds (138) enrolled in college (predominantly community college) at some point after the transition program, and almost half did so within a year of participating in the program.

Of the 138 participants who enrolled in college, **91% earned at least three non-developmental, transferable college credits**.

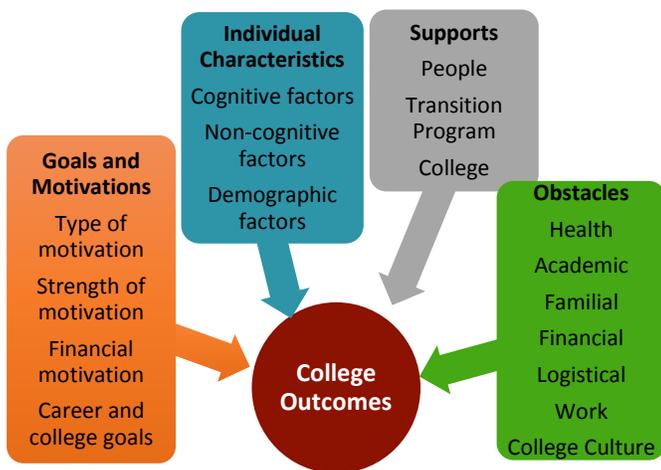
Almost **40% of ATLAS participants did not take any developmental classes after enrolling in college**, and another 22% took only one developmental education class.

Variable	College Outcome	Percentage of whole sample (220)	Mean for those enrolled in college (138)
Overall College Trajectory	Never attended college	37%	
	Enrolled in college but dropped out	32%	
	Enrolled in college and still enrolled or graduated	31%	
Enrollment	Completed at least 3 non-developmental (transferable) credits	57%	
	Enrolled in college within one year of the end of the transition course	47%	
Success	Reached "tipping point" momentum (30 transferable credits)	21%	
	Mean credits completed		25.15
Persistence	Mean semesters completed		4.20

One fifth of the 138 participants reached the “tipping point” momentum of 30 transferable college credits, and 16% earned at least 45 credits.¹ Those who did enroll in college within the four-year time frame of the ATLAS study took, on average, two classes per semester, indicating that most students will not finish within two years, a finding supported by Juskiewicz (2015). The number of participants who stayed enrolled after the first semester dropped consistently in subsequent semesters, but those who did stay in college enrolled in an increasing number of classes.

Factors Influencing College Outcomes

The research question driving this aspect of the study was: *What are the factors that influenced those outcomes?* We investigated factors such as goals and motivations, individual characteristics, supports, and obstacles, which can be seen in the diagram below. We then identified the strongest factors related to different college outcomes (credits completed, semesters completed, etc.).



Most Significant Factors

While there were multiple individual, program, and college factors influencing college outcomes, certain factors seemed to play a greater role in either enrollment, persistence, or success in college.

Completing the ABE-to-College transition program and attending more of the available instructional hours offered by the program were key factors in college enrollment within one year of participating in the course and in overall college trajectory.

Having career planning skills, including being able to state a specific job goal, identify the steps for getting that job, and having overall planning skills were a key factor in a participant’s overall college trajectory, reaching the “tipping point” of 30 college credits, and completing more semesters.

Having a strong transition program support network—represented by strong connections with and support from peers and teachers—was a significant factor in students earning 3 college credits and in the overall college trajectory. Likewise, for those who enrolled in college, having a strong **college support network**—talking and working with fellow college students and instructors—was a significant factor in completing more semesters and earning more credits.

Improving one’s Accuplacer arithmetic score, from the beginning of the transition program to the end, was significantly related to enrolling within a year after the course and to reaching the “tipping point” of 30 credits, regardless of actual arithmetic score. We hypothesize that this may be a sign of increased self-efficacy about succeeding in college.

Being mentored—either one-to-one or in a small group—was a significant factor in students enrolling in college within one year, as was **receiving grades** and a **high level of feedback** on written work from transition program teachers.

Students in programs that taught **personal and academic readiness**, such as time management strategies, note-taking, how to budget, and how to work in student groups were more likely to have successful college trajectories than participants attending programs that did not teach these skills.

Interestingly, other program factors were not significantly related to college outcomes, such as the attendance policy (strict or lax), the location of the transition course (inside of a community college or in an ABE program), whether the program offered college credits as part of the transition course, and the days per week that the course was held.

Health problems were a significant factor in every college outcome except enrolling within one year. Poor health, and longer and more serious episodes of illness, represented a difficult-to-overcome barrier to positive college outcomes.

Implications for Adult Education

This study provides strong evidence that attending a **college transition program is related to positive enrollment, persistence, and college success**

¹ Prince and Jenkins (2005) coined this phrase to indicate the number of college credits that provide greater earning potential. We use it to indicate the credits indicating a “momentum” towards success in college.

outcomes. Public and private funders should seek to maintain or increase funding for these programs.

ABE-to-College Transition programs should consider:

- Funding a **career advisor, coach, or navigator** position to provide career awareness and planning support;
- **Fostering a supportive learning community** within the transition program and encouraging students to seek to create the same once in college;
- Maintaining or adding a **mentoring** component and teaching **study skills and personal readiness**;
- Having transition course instructors **give grades** and regular, **fine-grained feedback** on transition course participants' assignments and work;
- Helping participants see growth in their academic skills to **increase their self-efficacy and confidence** to attend college;
- Providing **extra support for older adult transition students** to apply to and enroll in college; and
- Referring adult students to public assistance and other agencies that can help them with **counseling and resources aimed at stabilizing their lives** so that they can attend and complete the transition program and college.

Implications for Colleges

Colleges admitting adult and non-traditional students should consider:

- Establishing a **consistent course numbering system** that clearly conveys to students which courses are developmental education and which are credit-bearing, since many participants had difficulty distinguishing developmental from credit-bearing courses;
- Training college advisors to work with newly enrolled adult students to **ensure they understand and select appropriate classes**;
- Setting up mechanisms in colleges for students struggling with crisis or chronic health problems to continue their studies through **distance or online learning** until they can return to college; and
- Experimenting with mechanisms for involving adult students in college activities and strengthening their **college support network**.

Methodology

The ATLAS study used annual questionnaires with all participants over four years and interviews with a subsample of participants to collect data on individual characteristics and postsecondary educational trajectories of participants. In addition, participants

completed a literacy test in the first and last year of the study, and we used data that the eleven programs had collected about attendance and program features. Finally, we compiled and analyzed college transcripts from all 138 participants who ever enrolled in college, which was helpful in gauging college outcomes.

This study did not have a control group since, at that time, the transition programs were not able to over-enroll enough adult students to use a randomized control trial. Thus, since we only had access to those students who voluntarily enrolled in the program, we cannot say that the motivation to enroll in the transition program was not the same motivation that prompted participants to enroll, persist, and succeed in college.

However, completing the transition program and attending programs with specific components—for individuals with particular characteristics—were both significantly related to more positive college outcomes. Thus, the results of this study provide support for the stance that ABE-to-College transition programs, when organized with specific components and for individuals with particular characteristics, can effectively support transition to college for adult basic education students.

Participating Programs

Connecticut: Vernon Regional Adult Basic Education.

Maine: Belfast Adult Education, Rockland Regional Adult Learning Center, Sumner Adult Education

Massachusetts: Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD), Cape Cod Community College Adult Education Center, X-Cel Education

New Hampshire: Nashua Adult Learning Center, Second Start

Rhode Island: RI Regional Adult Learning (RIRAL)

Vermont: The Tutorial Center

References

Juszkiewicz, J. (2015, March). *Trends in Community College Enrollment and Completion Data, 2015*. DC: American Association of Community Colleges.

Prince, D. and D. Jenkins (2005). *Building Pathways to Success for Low-Skill Adult Students: Lessons for Community College Policy and Practice from a Statewide Longitudinal Tracking Study*. New York: Community College Research Center.