Breaking Through:
Helping Low-Skilled Adults Enter and Succeed in College

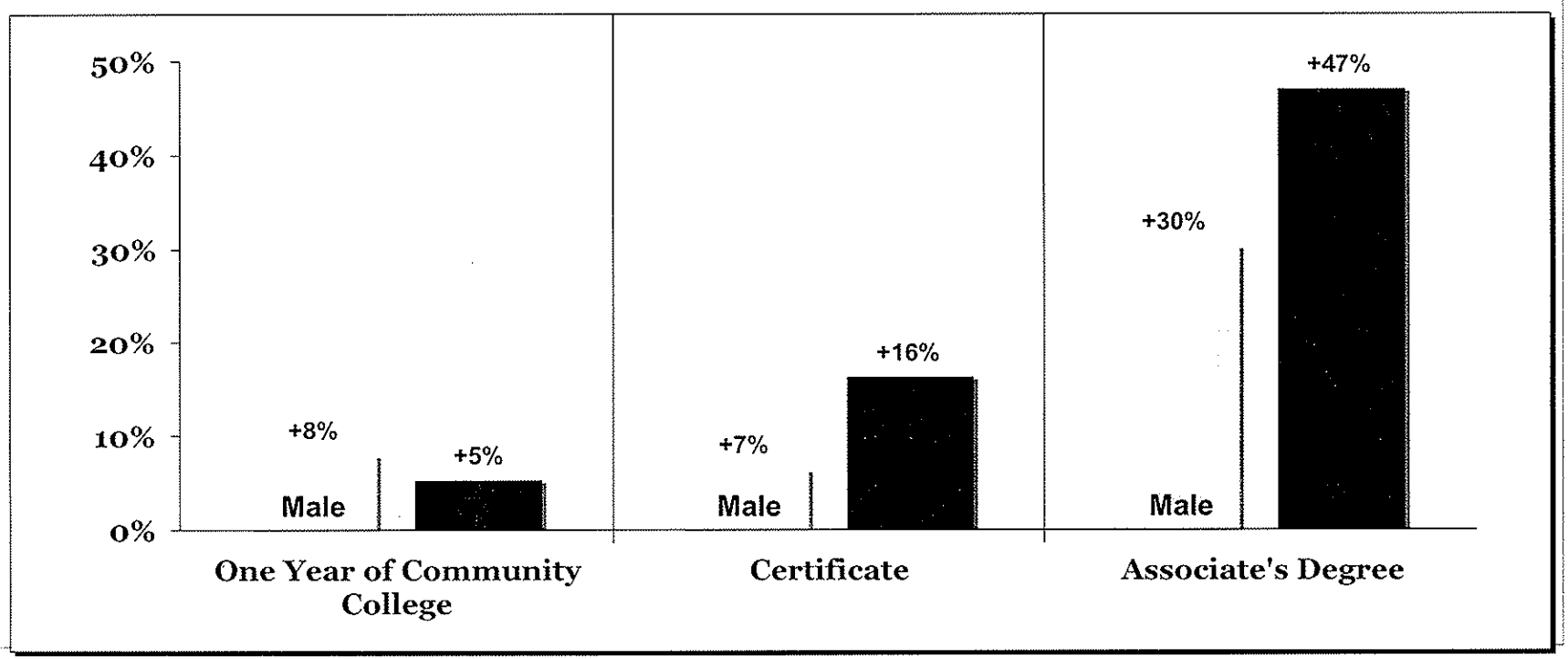
Presentation to the Washington Learns Subcommittee on Higher Education

Scope of Problem:
Huge Number of Adults Lack Skills for Training & College

- Nationally, 88 million adults (18+) lack literacy skills needed to enroll in college-level courses
- Skills of approximately 50 million are too low to qualify for non-credit education (TABE/ 8th grade)

Why is this a problem?

- Low-literacy adults lack access to degree programs that can dramatically increase wages.



Few Low-Skill Adults Make It to College

- The "pipeline" doesn't work
  - Only 7% of ABE students earn GEDs
  - Only 30-35% of GED obtainers enter college
  - Only 4% of them earn an AA degree

Completion Rates for Low-Skill Adults are Very Low

- Example from Washington State: cohort entering community colleges in mid 90s.

Entering Status	Percent Obtaining Associates Degree after 5 Years
ESL	1%
< HS Diploma	1%
GED	9%
HS Diploma	12%

Prince and Jenkins, 2005

Why do so few low-skill adults move up?

- Our research identified multiple barriers
- We've organized these barriers into four groups

1st Barrier: Programs are disconnected

Programs for low-skill adults are profoundly disconnected and people find it very difficult to construct an upward path through multiple programs, including:

- ABE/ESOL
- non-credit workforce training
- developmental education
- occupational/technical degree programs

2nd Barrier: Pace is too slow

- Programs, especially at the "lower" end, tend to have a leisurely pace
- Diagnostic procedures rarely used to target areas for remediation
- Students must take programs from different fields in a lengthy sequence

3rd Barrier: Lack of Labor Market Payoff

Low-income adults usually have to support families, but few programs connect to the labor market:

- Programs often lack "job" content -- reducing motivation and relevance
- Many programs developed in isolation -- completers can't build a sequence of skills and credentials
- Most programs developed without employer connections -- completers aren't assured of job/economic rewards

4th Barrier: Lack of Supports

Many non-traditional students face multiple barriers to success, including:

- lack income for child care, transportation, etc., required to succeed in education
- lack preparation in college success skills
- family and friends often aren't supportive
- usually don't "know the ropes" for making academic progress
- younger adults, in particular, need guidance and support

Four Synergistic High-Leverage Strategies Increase Access and Success

1 **Create alignment between colleges and other institutions/systems:**
Establish links among programs so that low-income students can navigate them easily for advancement

2 **Accelerate Learning:**
Help students learn more and faster and complete programs more quickly

3 **Labor market payoff:**
Offer students intermediate credentials, jobs, and other quick economic payoffs

4 **Comprehensive Supports:**
Help students develop realistic plans and provide supports that keep them enrolled and attending, particularly through difficult transition points

Create Alignment Between Colleges and Other Institutions

- Create an institutional focus on success for low income, low skilled students by aligning programs and funding to create clear paths from low basic skills to degree programs

Accelerate Learning

- Implement instructional practices and program designs that accelerate the advancement of adults to meaningful learning gains and credentials.

Labor Market Payoff

Redesign pre-college and college programs so that each stage supports job-holding and/or economic advancement

- Program completers earn credentials valued by local employers in strong industry sectors
- Programs/credentials are sequentially arranged so they build toward occupational/ technical degrees

Comprehensive Supports

- Improve persistence and success by providing career counseling, advising, academic and social supports, and case management.

Policy Supports: Incentives

- Set performance targets with incentives for community colleges and ABE/GED programs to collaborate/align resources
- Remove seat time requirements so can accelerate learning via competency-based instruction
- Allow use of ABE funds for integrated career pathways
- Fund pilots in high-demand career fields

Policy Supports: Use Data

- Create longitudinal student record system to track student progress across ABE, GED, and community college
- Conduct formative and summative research on strengthening linkages.
- Collect/track data on gatekeeper courses, success rates, etc.

Policy Supports: Financial Aid

- Provide financial aid to part-time working adults