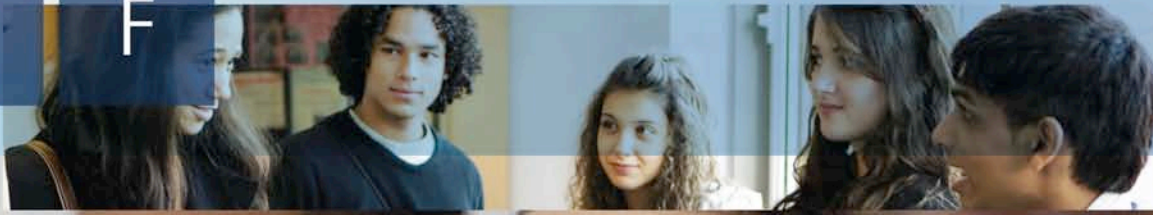


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BACK ON TRACK: PATHWAYS THROUGH POSTSECONDARY

Key Elements and Operational Features



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

Overview

Across the nation, millions of young people have either dropped out of school or are not making progress toward high school graduation. The majority of these young people obtain a high school credential-- in almost all cases a GED certificate-- and close to half of those enroll in postsecondary education. Yet despite their persistence, a college degree or credential remains an elusive goal. Only five percent of all youth and adult GED completers go on to earn a postsecondary credential.

How can the schools designed to serve off-track and out-of-school youth reverse these poor outcomes? The challenge these schools face is that they work with young people behind in credits and skills who, because of family, work and other obligations, must complete a diploma or GED *and* get ready for and connected to college in a short amount of time. Leaders and staff in such schools and programs believe that college completion can become a reality with the right program designs and adequate resources. These cutting-edge programs work to accelerate learning so students graduate college-ready, while simultaneously building transparent and supported pathways into and through postsecondary education, whether at a two- or four-year college or an apprenticeship or training program with value in the labor market.

Based on JFF's work with these programs and with the help of the organizations and networks that support many of them, Jobs for the Future has developed a Back on Track model to drive growth and scale in this emerging field of practice. This model, which can be used in designing or enhancing both diploma-granting and GED programs, articulates three program phases and accompanying features that help young people achieve their postsecondary ambitions.



There is evidence that this type of design can be successful with students who have been underrepresented in higher education. In nearly a decade of work with a network of over 200 early college high schools, JFF has seen programs with the right combination of acceleration and support change the educational trajectories of low-income and minority students. Early college students can earn up to two years of college credit while in high school, saving money and earning valuable exposure to the rigor and expectations of college. A quarter of early college students earn a full associate's degree along with their high school diploma, and 86 percent enroll in college immediately after high school.

It is time to adapt the lessons of early college to create a pathway to postsecondary for former dropouts and off-track youth. Doing so successfully will require a new approach that brings together secondary and postsecondary institutions with community-based organizations, and creates mutual accountability between these systems to effectively serve this population of young people. Jobs for the Future advocates for policies that support a robust landscape of Back on Track programs, and helps programs on the ground with every aspect of implementation.

In the three-phase model, each phase has distinct elements but will naturally overlap in terms of timing, resources, and staffing. Different programs can vary in design, with the program and its postsecondary partner sharing delivery of services in various ways, but data alignment and sharing to track student success is key. This model is intended to set a higher standard for alternative schools and programs, but it is also aspirational in nature. It assumes that most schools and programs do not have all phases or features fully in place. Leaders and staff can use the model as a framework to assess the strengths of their designs and plan focused improvements, building toward fully operational models that substantially improve college completion rates for young people who are off track to postsecondary success.



PHASE ONE: ENRICHED PREPARATION

Explicit College-Going Culture

- Staff deliver consistent messages, from intake through graduation, that students are college material and college success is the goal.
- Staff continually assesses progress through strategic use of data, using college access and completion as the key measures of program success.
- Staff create a climate focused on acculturation to academic norms and practices as well as personal responsibility for one's own learning and life goals.
- The physical setup and artifacts in the building, and opportunities to experience college classes and college life, enable students to perceive themselves as college students.

College Ready Curriculum & Instruction

- Curriculum emphasizes deep learning over test preparation, focusing on a solid understanding of key concepts and the exploration of major themes within the core disciplines.
- Curriculum is aligned and sequenced toward increasingly challenging subject matter, building skills needed for entry into credit-bearing college coursework.
- Substantial reading and writing takes place daily across the curriculum, and is scaffolded through collaborative group work, literacy circles, and other strategies that enable learners with diverse skill levels to support and challenge their peers.
- All students develop thinking, listening, speaking, and inquiry skills through purposeful questioning and opportunities to talk about their learning.
- Staff embed in the curriculum ongoing opportunities to practice college-ready skills and behaviors such as time management and test-taking strategies.

Intentional Use of Time to Maximize Instruction & Accelerate Learning

- Program organizes time flexibly to enable older youth to fulfill family/work responsibilities while working toward graduation and postsecondary goals.
- Program is of sufficient length and intensity to enable youth to both gain a secondary credential and get adequately prepared for college.
- Staff use regular assessments, including college placement exams, to diagnose students' specific learning needs and customize instruction to accelerate learning.
- Technological tools provide skill-building support and facilitate "anytime, anywhere" learning to supplement classroom instruction.
- Students are coached and supported to use time outside the program to accomplish their learning goals and develop independent work habits.



Personalized Guidance and Support

- Students develop a clear, realistic, and detailed postsecondary and career plan.
- Students develop an understanding of how they learn best, reflecting regularly on what they still must accomplish or master to graduate college ready.
- Program provides leadership, service and work opportunities to build students' agency, self-advocacy and key academic behaviors, such as persistence and time management.
- The program works to strengthen students' care network, such as child-care and mental health resources, so they have adequate support to address barriers that impede learning.
- Staff develop students' abilities to have greater responsibility and voice in their own learning and life choices.



PHASE TWO: POSTSECONDARY BRIDGING

*Note: This phase can be delivered through a number of different arrangements. The school or program providing the **enriched preparation phase** can also offer connections to postsecondary. The **postsecondary bridging phase** can be provided by a college or delivered through a partnership of the school/program and a college.*

Supported Dual Enrollment

- Students enroll in credit-bearing courses to gain exposure to college experiences and expectations. First courses can be those that teach essential skills within a career context (e.g., medical terminology taught in an English course) or, where possible, enriched math and English gatekeeper courses.
- Where appropriate, program takes advantage of available developmental education courses to build student skills and reduce time to completion.
- First college courses explicitly model college instruction through the use of syllabi, online message boards, and college-style pedagogy and assessments (e.g. sophisticated papers, research projects, and presentations).
- Program provides opportunities to take college courses accompanied by formal, intense academic support and scaffolding to ensure early college success.

A Focus on College Knowledge

- Program coaches students to develop college-ready academic behaviors, including study skills, time and stress management, persistence, and awareness of performance.
- Students gain college navigation skills, learning about admissions requirements, financial aid, college culture, campus resources, and relations with professors.
- Program continues to use college-ready instruction and curriculum to develop the key cognitive strategies and content knowledge required for college success.
- Students receive college IDs providing access to college facilities (e.g., skills centers, library, gym, and cafeteria).

Personalized Guidance and Connection to Best Bets

- Counselors use data such as attendance and assessment to monitor student progress toward the goal of entry into credit-bearing courses.
- Program utilizes cohort-based approach to leverage peer connections, expand students' social network and build additional postsecondary support
- Program integrates intentional career exploration and planning that takes into account students' career aspirations and labor market demand to help drive toward "best bet" postsecondary programs.
- Program graduates currently enrolled in college mentor students in the bridge phase to guide their key decisions as they transition to postsecondary.



PHASE THREE: FIRST-YEAR SUPPORT

Note: This phase can be delivered solely by the college or through a partnership between the school/program and the college.

Support for Students to Earn Credits Predictive of Completion

- Staff use data to monitor student progress, with particular attention to performance in the first few months of college classes.
- Students experience consistent check-ins (minimum of monthly) by designated person and are encouraged to connect with networks and support providers on campus, expanding their social capital and their awareness of formal and informal supports and resources.
- Students, particularly those who are struggling, receive intensive academic supports to help them succeed in credit-bearing college courses.
- Students are offered performance-based incentives, such as scholarships, to motivate them to accomplish personal and academic benchmarks.
- Staff create individualized plans that include additional customized academic supports for students who are not on track to earn a credential after the first year of college enrollment

Just-in-Time Support to Ensure Persistence

- Emergency funds are set aside for students to cover critical start-up expenses (e.g., books, housing, child care).
- Staff provide early and ongoing supports, anticipating and preventing obstacles and providing additional referrals and follow-up as needed.

Building Attachment to Postsecondary Education

- Students are connected to campus resources, especially those targeted for first-generation college goers.
- Key information on college courses and professors is provided by student mentors to help first-year students make more informed choices.
- Staff develop or facilitate on-campus alumni groups that include student mentors and advisors.
- Students engage in small cohort-based learning and leadership communities.



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