

**For Immediate Release**

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**Groundbreaking study on the outcomes of  
Low-skill adults in community colleges**

Community colleges are crucial entry points to higher education for adults with no previous college experience. In fall 2002, more than one-third of community college students were over the age of 24, compared with only 15 percent of undergraduates at public four-year institutions.

CCRC has released *Building Pathways to Success for Low-Skill Adult Students: Lessons for Community College Policy and Practice from a Longitudinal Tracking Study*, a report based on a first-of-its-kind study of the progress and outcomes of low-skill adults in community colleges. The study uses student record information from the Washington State Community and Technical College System to track two cohorts of adult students 25 or older with at most a high school education who entered one of the state's community or technical colleges for the first time in 1996-97 or 1997-98. The study examines the educational attainment of the students in both cohorts as well as their earnings five years after they enrolled.

Key findings from this study are:

- Attending college for at least a year *and* earning a credential provides a substantial boost in earnings for adults who begin with a high school diploma or less.
- Short-term training, such as that often provided to welfare recipients, may help individuals get into the labor market, but does not seem to help them advance beyond low-paying jobs.
- Neither adult basic skills education by itself nor a limited number of college-level courses provides much benefit in terms of earnings.

These findings, which are consistent with previous research, suggest that community and technical colleges ought to make taking at least one year of college-level courses *and* earning a certificate or other credential a *minimum* goal for all of the many low-skill adults they serve.

The study also finds that while hundreds of the low-skill adult students who enter Washington State's community and technical colleges are able to achieve this goal in five

years, many more do not. The authors suggest that, to enable low-skill adults to achieve at least the threshold level of a year of college plus a credential, community colleges in Washington State and elsewhere should rethink and in some cases redesign their programs and services. The study provides guidance on the sorts of services that can increase adult students' chances of success.

The study was conducted by David Prince of the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) and CCRC Senior Research Associate Davis Jenkins as part of the Ford Foundation's *Bridges to Opportunity* initiative. It was designed to give educators throughout Washington's community and technical college system a better idea of the characteristics and experiences of their low-skill adult students, who make up one-third of the approximately 300,000 students served annually by the system. The study also sought to identify the critical filter points or roadblocks at which adult students drop out or fail to make it to the next level. The SBCTC staff is using the study's findings to promote a rethinking among educators throughout the system on how to better serve low-skill adult students.

A complete copy of the paper, ***Building Pathways to Success for Low-Skill Adult Students***, is available for download at <http://www.tc.edu/ccrc/>. The research and report were funded by the Ford Foundation. For more information about the report, please contact Davis Jenkins at (312) 953-5286 or [davis@uic.edu](mailto:davis@uic.edu).

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*The Community College Research Center, housed at the Institute on Education and the Economy (IEE) at Teachers College, Columbia University, is the leading independent authority on the nation's more than 1,200 two-year colleges. CCRC's mission is to conduct research on the major issues affecting community colleges in the United States and to contribute to the development of practice and policy that expands access to higher education and ensures success for all students.*