CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH CENTER
Teachers College, Columbia University

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Adult Basic Education in Community Colleges

To thrive in the workforce and their communities, many adults in the United States need stronger basic academic skills [1] or enhanced English language proficiency.[2] Community college adult basic education (ABE) is vital for developing these competencies—helping individuals secure employment, advance their education, contribute to the economy, and engage in civic life.

What Is Adult Basic Education?

While adult students enroll in every program in community colleges, adult basic education programs serve a distinct mission. These programs provide foundational instruction for students who are:

- Developing basic reading, writing, and math skills
- Studying for high school equivalency diplomas
- Preparing for citizenship exams
- Learning English as a second language (ESL/ELL)

Some ABE programs also combine basic skills instruction with workforce training.

What the Research Tells Us

There is substantial need for literacy, English language, and other adult basic education courses.

- Between 2017 and 2023, the share of adults in the U.S. performing at the lowest proficiency levels in literacy and numeracy grew: In literacy it increased from 19% to 28%, and in numeracy from 29% to 34%.[3] Adults at the lowest literacy level are roughly four times more likely to live in poverty.[4]
- More than 19.6 million adults aged 25 and older don't have a high school diploma. That includes 9.5 million who were born abroad.[5]
- About 20 million adults report that they have limited English proficiency.[6]

Community colleges are an important part of the adult basic education system. Only a small percentage of those in need receive services, and many programs have waiting lists due to high demand.[7]

- ABE is provided through community colleges, local school districts, and community organizations.[8] [9] Community college programs may provide more comprehensive supports and easier access to certificate and degree programs, though a lack of coordination between parts of the college can make the transition to academic and workforce programs difficult.[10]
- Community colleges and other organizations provide ABE using federal and state funding as well as through contracts.[11]
- In 2000, federally funded public ABE programs served more than 2.6 million students, about 1.5% of the U.S. adult population. By 2021, enrollment had fallen to under 900,000, less than 0.4% of adults; however, enrollment has been rising since then.[12] [13]

There are various types of adult basic education programs in the United States, many financially supported through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). [14]

- More than 59% of overall WIOA program enrollment is in ESL programs, 33% is in basic skills instruction and 8% is in adult secondary education.[15]
- ABE is funded through the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA/Title II of WIOA).[16] About 27% of ABE providers funded through WIOA are community and technical colleges.[17]
- Adult Secondary Education, also funded through AEFLA, serves adults aged 16 or older who have not received a high school diploma and who are seeking high school equivalency outside of a high school setting.[18] [19]
- The federal government and state governments provide the bulk of ABE funding, with other public and private funding making up the difference. State ABE program agencies allocate funds to local providers.[20]
- In 2024-25, community colleges and technical schools received more than $229 million in grant funds from WIOA. Other federal funding also supports ABE programs at community colleges.[21]

Adult basic education at community colleges has the potential to increase social mobility.

- About 47% of ABE participants made skills gains over the course of the year 2023–24 by earning a high school diploma, passing a licensing exam, or demonstrating progress in other ways.[22] [23]
- About a third of adult learners participate in linked basic skills and occupational instruction.[24] A random assignment evaluation of the I-BEST model (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training), in which basic skills are incorporated into workforce courses, showed positive short-term impacts, including an increase in college enrollment and the completion of credentials, but no longer-term impacts on measures of employment or financial wellbeing.[25]

Policy Considerations

- Federal funding for ABE programs has become less stable, with funding freezes, budget fights, and changing eligibility.[26] Stable funding is essential for colleges to provide access to critical literacy and language services and to ensure programs are high quality.
- Colleges can support adult learners by providing flexible programming for students with multiple responsibilities, wraparound supports including financial assistance, career-focused advising, and other need-based services.[27]
- WIOA has increasingly focused on workforce training, with less funding targeted to adult basic skills since 2024. Increased funding for ABE can strengthen the pipeline to postsecondary workforce training and other college programs.
- As federal dollars focus more on workforce training, community colleges should build integrated ABE opportunities in which students can learn basic skills alongside workforce skills.
- To better understand the impacts and implementation of ABE programming, community colleges would benefit from improved ABE data collection and infrastructure.

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Endnotes

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