

## **Chapter 6 -Arkansas – Helping Low-Income Parents**

Arkansas has 22 community colleges that enrolled 115,000 students in 2011. Almost two-thirds (63 percent) of Arkansas' community college students are women (AATYC, 2012). Arkansas also has the highest percentage of adults with only a high school education who do not earn a living wage in the country (NCHEMS, 2011). In the next decade, well over half (61 percent) of Arkansas' jobs will require postsecondary education, according to a recent estimate by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). As the job market for less educated workers continues to erode, these adults will be at risk and the state's economy will suffer. The parents among these adults will be most vulnerable since their children depend on their incomes as well. Recognizing the predicament, Arkansas is focused on promoting postsecondary education for low-income parents and adult caregivers, including those who receive public assistance. Building on the existing "welfare to work" model, Arkansas developed a new approach. The Career Pathways Initiative (CPI) is an educational program for low-income parents<sup>1</sup> who want to earn a certificate and/or a degree in local high-demand industries. The program began in 2005 and is offered at all 22 Arkansas community colleges.

### **Providing support system for parents**

The Career Pathways Initiative helps low-income parents overcome the particular challenges they face as they pursue their education. Student parents struggle to find and pay for childcare and transportation in addition to paying for tuition and books. Though student parents are more likely than other students to attend community colleges, these institutions are less likely to have on-campus childcare than four-year institutions (Miller et al., 2011). So the Career Pathway Initiative makes finding students childcare a priority by assigning specific advisors to help students find childcare. The advisors work as case managers and are knowledgeable about

---

<sup>1</sup> Participants must either be current or past recipients of federal or state low-income assistance programs (TEA cash assistance, food stamps, ARKids or Medicaid) or have earnings at or below 250 percent of the federal poverty level. A family of three at 250 percent of the federal poverty level would have a gross annual income of \$47,725 (Federal Register, 2012).

local childcare providers (public and private), well-versed in the application for childcare process, and work closely with students to ensure that their application process goes smoothly. The programs also provide transportation vouchers, academic tutoring and advising to students.

**Moving beyond entry level work**

The Arkansas program is particularly noteworthy because, unlike many traditional welfare-to-work models, it prepares students for work beyond entry level positions (Center for American Politics, 2009; Workforce Strategy Center, 2008). CPI uses a career pathways model that gives students a guide to a range of outcomes. Four hundred different programs offered across Arkansas’ community colleges are mapped out so students can literally see how each class is a stepping stone towards their ultimate goal. Using the pathways map, students can clearly see what classes they need to earn a certificate and, if they want, the additional courses they would take to complete an associate’s degree. The guides also include examples of the kinds of jobs and wages that they can expect depending on the degree they earn. With a clear path to a goal, students are motivated to persist until they achieve their goal or go beyond their original goal (Bone, 2010).

**Improving student outcomes**

Over the last six years, the Career Pathways Initiative has helped put thousands of low-income parents in Arkansas on the path to work and better-paying jobs. Enrollment has more than tripled since the first year and in 2011, there were slightly more than 9,000 participants, including 3,299 new students(see Table XX) (ADHE, 2011).

**Table XX: Enrollment in Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative from 2006-2011**

|                      | 2006  | 2007  | 2008  | 2009  | 2010   | 2011  |
|----------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| Total CPI enrollment | 2,233 | 3,750 | 7,834 | 9,627 | 10,017 | 9,909 |

To date, thousands of students 90 percent of whom are women have enrolled and completed more than 23,000 certificates and associates degrees. Almost half of all awards are in

healthcare, followed by business administration and manufacturing technology. The majority of the awards earned are employability or career readiness certificates<sup>2</sup>, which is the minimum postsecondary award available in the program. Hundreds of students also earn technical certificates and associate degrees each year (see Table YY).

Table YY: Number of certificates and associate’s degrees earned by CPI participants 2007-2011

| <b>Type of award</b>                   | 2007 | 2008  | 2009  | 2010  | 2011  |
|--|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| <b>GED</b>                             | 42   | 99    | 101   | 51    | 53    |
| <b>WAGE/Employability Certificates</b> | 205  | 1,234 | 3,039 | 2,119 | 2,049 |
| <b>Certificates of Proficiency</b>     | 249  | 598   | 660   | 736   | 662   |
| <b>Technical Certificates</b>          | 204  | 437   | 751   | 754   | 793   |
| <b>Associate’s Degrees</b>             | 221  | 406   | 616   | 763   | 880   |
| <b>Total awards</b>                    | 921  | 2,774 | 5,167 | 4,423 | 4,437 |

Overall, CPI student outcomes are better than those of traditional community college students in Arkansas. For example, CPI students had better retention and attainment rates compared to their traditional community college peers in 2011. For students who began community college in fall 2010, almost 40 percent withdrew by the next year compared with just about a quarter of CPI students. Moreover, 60 percent of CPI completers found jobs and 85 percent were still employed six months later, according to state records (Unemployment Insurance , UI, data match).

## **Conclusion**

Getting low-income parents to graduation remains challenging, but Arkansas’ Career Pathways Initiative shows that success is possible. Providing access to affordable and high-quality childcare is an essential part of the success strategy in Arkansas. Using a career pathways model

---

<sup>2</sup> Employability certificates focus on teaching basic skills, including computer literacy and soft skills for the workplace (ADHE, 2011).

to encourage students to prepare for work beyond entry level positions increases their chances of earning enough to move off of public assistance, and motivates them to achieve even higher levels of success. Additionally, since parents' education is strongly related to children's educational outcomes, the program indirectly improves opportunities for the next generation (Miller et al., p.3).

| <b>Arkansas Community Colleges</b> |         |
|------------------------------------|---------|
| Total no. of institutions          | 22      |
| Total enrollment                   | 115,168 |
| Percentage of women                | 63%     |
| Percentage of men                  | 37%     |

Source: Arkansas Association of Two Year Colleges (AATYC) 2012 Fact book.