A2B4Equity Pilot Project to Leverage Proxy College Promise Funding and Ability to Benefit to Advance Adult Student College Access and Educational Equity: Final Evaluation Report

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Introduction

From Spring 2022 to June 2024, the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh evaluated the pilot program, A2B4Equity. The A2B4Equity program is focused on leveraging the Ability to Benefit (ATB) provision of the federal student aid program—specifically the credit hour option—to provide access to federal student financial aid for adult students without a high school diploma or equivalent. The pilot project hypothesis was that college promise funding could be used to fund the first six credit hours required in the credit-hour ATB option. In the pilot project, grant or other institutional funding was used as a proxy for college promise funding. Under the credit-hour ATB provision, if adult students without a high school diploma or equivalent successfully complete six credit hours in an eligible career pathway program (*sans* student financial aid), they can "prove their ability to benefit" from college and apply for federal student aid to fund the rest of their college program. (For more information on the credit-hour ATB provision, see the how-to guide, *The Unsung Student Aid Option: A College Leader's Guide to Implementing the Credit-Hour Ability to Benefit Provision in the Federal Student Aid Program*, written by CSW that accompanies this evaluation report.)

Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW) managed the pilot, and World Education, a division of JSI, provided technical assistance on implementing the ATB provision. Two community colleges in the City Colleges of Chicago system (CCC)–Daley and Truman–were selected to implement the pilot program, as well as two community colleges in Michigan–Mott and Wayne County Community College District (WCCCD). ECMC Foundation funded the pilot project.

This pilot project tested the viability of using proxy dollars for college promise funds as "first dollar" funding for Ability to Benefit (ATB) students, covering their tuition, fees, books, and supplies. City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) used existing institutional funding that supports Career Bridge student tuition across a number of programs as proxy college promise funds to pay for ATB students' first six credit hours in this pilot. The two community colleges in Michigan used a combination of ECMC Foundation grant funds and existing institutional funds to cover these credits. The pragmatic goal of this project is to test the viability of implementing programs that will result in ATB students becoming eligible and successfully applying for federal financial aid.

The research team was primarily concerned with: 1) Tracking students' outcomes, 2) Understanding the conditions that led, or did not lead, to successful implementation, and 3) Getting an understanding of when and how expanding access to ATB might become an institutionalized and scalable equity solution. To answer these questions, we sat in on multiple TA sessions, conducted multiple interviews across implementation sites at both mid- and end-points, collected additional sustainability planning data via short-answer survey, and collected student outcomes data.

As the research team sat in on multiple technical assistance (TA) sessions and engaged in conversation with World Education TA experts, we noted an emphasis on several elements around ATB work that we stayed attuned to in our data collection. The themes in bold were particularly prevalent in our site-specific data collection:

1) ATB has significant potential value for adult learners as a target population who have been failed by various systems, leading them to seek alternative education pathways.

2) A need to redesign existing systems to better support adult learners without traditional high school credentials, and the possibility of ATB as a critical pathway for adult learners to transition into post-secondary education and access federal student aid, providing them with opportunities for further education and economic mobility.

3) Successful implementation of an ATB program requires integrating adult learners into the college environment, helping them develop a college student identity, and seamlessly integrating access to college resources and support services.

4) ATB pathways should prioritize equity by addressing racial, economic, and other disparities, ensuring that all students have equal opportunities for success.

5) Implementing ATB requires a shift in pedagogy and support, with a focus on ensuring that students learn and are provided with the support they need to succeed, rather than maintaining traditional gate-keeping practices.

6) State-level policies and institutional practices play a crucial role in facilitating the implementation of ATB pathways, including providing guidance, resources, and support for adult learners.

This report is organized around two main sections. First, we offer a synopsis of the implementation of ATB for each of three sites (a united, two-college site in Illinois, and two separate community colleges in Michigan). Second, we will report on the relevant measures of success as outlined in the project scope.

Site Synopses

City Colleges of Chicago

City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) is a large urban community college system in Chicago consisting of seven colleges. Two of them—Daley and Truman—were selected to implement this pilot. At CCC, the ATB4Equity pilot project was initially delayed and ultimately not implemented as planned. The evaluation team defined "implementation" as identifying a cohort of ATB-eligible students and enrolling them in six college credits—with tuition covered—in an ATB-eligible career pathway program to: 1) achieve FAFSA eligibility upon completion of the six credit hours, and 2) Support students to complete the FAFSA enabling them to access federal student aid if they meet other eligibility criteria and continue on a credential pathway.

Initial plans for Fall 2022 to serve approximately 50 ATB eligible students across two Career Bridge Programs—Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Manufacturing – were unsuccessful in the sense that students in the eligible career pathway programs were not alerted to the ATB opportunity and did not receive support to complete the FAFSA. The time spent on this project provided space for some staff at CCC to explore the groundwork necessary for future ATB programming. It is worth noting that many eligible students, as will be reflected in the data reporting below, did complete six credits in the course of this project through CCC's ongoing bridge programs and were primed to complete FAFSA and access federal student financial aid.

CCC staff began the pilot project by identifying existing programs that could benefit from the additional aid and attention facilitated by the ATB4Equity design, which would in turn help expand program options and future pathways for students. At CCC, the Career Bridges program provides integrated adult education and postsecondary training across various colleges in the system including construction, healthcare, manufacturing, and early childhood education (ECE). Interviewees highlighted that one of the current limitations is that some programs are only offered at specific college locations which can pose a barrier for some students. Since CCC already has current funding set aside from their institutional budget to support students in the Career Bridge program, the ATB pilot project funding would have allowed for expansion and additional resources to support students' expenses related to their participation in the pilot program.

The team at CCC identified their target student population as older, adult students of color often termed "non-traditional." When considering the needs of these students, staff spoke of multiple daily challenges many students face including food insecurities, lack of childcare, lack of access to adequate internet, and language barriers. To this end, ATB eligible students often have responsibilities and obligations that can take up much of their time and energy. Therefore, to be able to offer programs that cover the cost of their education (and then some) is a critical way to help adult students focus on their future careers. Alongside the factors mentioned, another barrier that the adult student population faces at CCC is the social stigma of being a non-traditional student without a high school diploma. Programs such as the current Career Bridge program helps students as they advance their careers but also provides them with the space to envision themselves in credit-bearing pathways toward a prosperous future. The ATB4Equity pilot had the potential to further this possibility.

The CCC team identified both the TRIO department (a federally-funded set of postsecondary student support service programs) and expanded language supports as potentially helpful to a successful implementation of ATB4Equity. TRIO is a strong partner for providing support for students through workshops, enhancing financial literacy, and providing access to tutoring services. Expanding language support was mentioned as a potential equity intervention that the team at CCC would like to pursue given the number of ATB eligible students who are multilingual English language learners—which can make navigating the financial aid process more cumbersome. To this end, CCC staff would like to see financial aid support available from case managers who speak students' first languages. In addition, interviewees mentioned that the funding through ATB would allow for the expansion of no-cost credentials for individuals who are learning English or working towards their high school diploma.

Interviewees reflected on the critical role of connections and commitment from the Office of Financial Aid who, after recruitment, plays the most critical role in ATB program implementation given that the most important mechanisms are: 1) delivering financial aid to eligible students, and 2) getting those students through successful FAFSA completion as soon as they are near completion of their six credits. However, given major staffing transitions, under-staffing, and the lack of a culture of integrated service between adult education and the financial aid office, getting the level of necessary commitment across departments to select, reach out to, and support students to access FAFSA ultimately proved to be an insurmountable burden. Direct financial aid staff-to-student connections are critical to a successful ATB4Equity launch in order to ensure that these new-to-college students access the aid they need to transition from adult education to credit-bearing pathways. This did not happen at CCC.

In summative reflection, CCC noted that they have historically struggled to effectively utilize ATB

pathways, and not just during the course of this pilot project. It is critical to note again here that funding for the required six credits is not the issue at CCC. Rather, CCC lacks the infrastructure and processes for transitioning this particular subpopulation of students to career pathways and financial aid. CCC leadership noted that some of these issues stem from lack of leadership buy-in due to the relatively small numbers of students, in a large and overloaded urban system, who would benefit from the ATB option. These perceived small numbers cause college leadership to deprioritize supporting the creation of student transition infrastructure and process. This barrier also brings with it skepticism from some leaders and administrators that an ATB option *would be* better than focusing on quickly earning a GED or other high school equivalent given the perception that a high school equivalent is an important credential for students to fall back on.

Another critical and systemic challenge noted by CCC staff was a cultural issue across service offices. If students originate in adult education, Financial Aid and other centralized student service offices often turn students back to adult education services, *even after* they have completed their high school equivalency. This culture creates distinct challenges for transitioning students from adult education programs to credit programs. Breaking down these organizational silos and cultural divisions could be a critical change necessary to see any future traction on implementation of the ATB provision at CCC and possibly at other large, urban community college systems. This is especially true given how opaque and intimidating the student financial aid system is in general, and *in particular* to adult students who do not have a high school diploma or equivalent.

To this end, CCC leadership noted the importance of ensuring staff treat students with respect and dignity because, for many adult students, discussion of financial aid and documentation requirements can be very sensitive and intimidating topics. Lastly, in their final effort in the Spring of 2024 to connect at least some of their Career Bridges program students to federal financial aid, CCC identified and reached out to eligible students retroactively via email, text, and telephone. As these eleventh-hour efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, the CCC team reflected that in-person and integrated student support experiences would be critical to future success—e.g., financial aid coming to a late-semester class to engage students directly and offer support services and specific directions on completing the FAFSA and applying for student aid.

Mott Community College

Mott Community College (MCC) is located in Flint, Michigan. The community college recruitment efforts for this A2B4Equity pilot project were slow to yield candidate colleges in Michigan. MCC was not aware of the opportunity to participate until the summer of 2023. MCC implemented the A2B4Equity pilot in the Spring 2024 semester. Given the short time frame for evaluation, this analysis is more summative than formative.

Given that the first ATB cohort at MCC officially began in January 2024, only a subset of the total students MCC expects to enroll in and complete the six credit hours have been able to do so. As of May 2024, MCC could confirm eleven enrolled ATB students, eight of whom have already completed six credits and the FAFSA application. MCC has also reported an additional nine students in their pipeline to participate in their ATB pilot but these students were not yet confirmed as of the publication of this evaluation report. The evaluation team suspects that missing the 25-student threshold success measure for this pilot project is more a reflection of joining the project late rather than an indicator that MCC will not make their threshold in the near future.

The MCC Director of Workforce Development—with oversight over non-credit training programs and adult education programming—took on the central, organizing role for the ATB pilot at MCC. Beyond organizing, the Director not only made all of the relevant connections across departments, but also almost single-handedly identified and recruited students and monitored the financial aid partnership closely. This arrangement is a useful model for thinking about the commitment necessary to rolling out ATB at a campus without preexisting student transition infrastructure and processes. However, the conversion of this single-person-driven start to a sustainable and institutionalized structure will be a different story in the long term. The other core team members at MCC included the Director of Financial Aid, Director of Admissions, and a Career Navigator to support recruitment and students' career navigation.

As with other sites, MCC was focused on how the credit-hour ATB provision could provide access to student financial aid, removing financial barriers and enabling adult learners without a high school credential to take career pathway program courses in culinary arts, early childhood education, business marketing, and substance abuse services. MCC stressed the importance of addressing barriers like financial constraints, highlighting the transformative effect even small amounts of financial support can have on students' lives. They also cast this work as particularly important for racially minoritized populations.

Regarding the alignment of the ATB program with other support programs at MCC, leadership explained how the pilot program seamlessly integrated with existing programs like adult education, Gateway to College (a program that integrates adult education with postsecondary training), and financial aid opportunities like Michigan Reconnect and Michigan Achievement Scholarship. They stressed the importance of planning, partnership-building, and ongoing support for program implementation and success. In offering advice to other colleges preparing to launch an ATB program, MCC emphasized the need for thorough planning, clear communication, and ongoing, wraparound student support. They also expressed the need for more time and flexibility in program implementation to accommodate the complex needs of students to ensure program success.

MCC staff implementing this pilot emphasized the importance of resources needed to continue this work—students need tuition support as well as funding for books, supplies, and even transportation to make this transition to workforce-focused credit programs. Critical to student success was wraparound support to ensure that students were not expected to just "know" how to adapt to credit-bearing coursework life.

Wayne County Community College District

Wayne County Community College District (WCCCD) is comprised of five campuses in and around Detroit, Michigan. WCCCD focused their efforts on enrolling students aiming to enter their physical therapy/assistant program, accounting associate's and certificate, and their CIS: cybersecurity associate's and certificate. WCCCD successfully enrolled 25 students in their ATB pathway. As of March 2024, thirteen of those students had successfully completed six credits or more, and six had successfully accessed student financial aid. As with MCC, WCCCD was recruited to the A2B4Equity pilot project late, so their first cohort of students (about half of the total 25) only started in Summer 2023.

Interviewees stressed that their most important goal for their adult student population is to provide them with an opportunity to find a career that can provide a sustainable living. To do so, they focus on

providing support to persist in their program of study and to offer opportunities for students to find a career that is long lasting and sustainable. WCCCD identified adult students over the age of 25 as the ideal candidates for A2B4Equity. They are also attuned to meeting the unique needs of their adult students as a central component of achieving a successful outcome. Some of the needs described were food insecurity, housing insecurity, access to childcare, transportation, as well as confidence in identifying as a college student.

Interviews with WCCCD staff identified two specific services that helped meet these needs: a clothing closet and emergency funding. The clothing closet provides students with various professional clothing options at no cost to them. The emergency fund was a grant given to WCCCD from Scholarship America for students to utilize when they encounter emergencies that can derail their success in college.

Additionally, interviewees described that many of their students are struggling with social stigma and perceptions that they are not "college material," which contributes to a lack of confidence that they can achieve a college education. The team at WCCCD work hard to help students overcome these social stigmas, grow, and build confidence. As a part of this program, students have access to the college's food pantry, clothing closet, 24/7 telehealth insurance services, support services call center for external needs, and a "financial aid marathon" (financial aid marathon, an in-person workshop hosted by WC3D where students are able to get any questions on financial aid answered and gain access to academic advisors)—all free of charge.

The interviewees emphasized the importance of cross-campus partnerships as a key component to the success of assisting their adult students. Some of these campus partners mentioned included adult education, student affairs, institutional effectiveness (IE), the GED team, and most importantly the financial aid office. The financial aid office was identified as a crucial part of the ATB pilot as they are positioned to best assist students in the navigation and completion of the FAFSA process. Although WCCCD had already built strong cross-campus partnerships to support their students prior to this pilot project, they utilized the ATB pilot as an opportunity to assess where there are still transition gaps that need to be addressed.

When asked about the considerations of equity, the A2B4Equity pilot was described as fitting in with the preexisting efforts to advance equity for the students at WCCCD. Using a consistent internal vision to promote equity, the WCCCD team strives to achieve educational equity by taking an asset-based approach rather than a deficit-based approach to working with students. Throughout the interviews, staff described that many of the students at WCCCD often faced feelings of defeat, so it would be harmful to approach these students as lacking something needed for success.

Ultimately, WCCCD has seen success with students utilizing the ATB provision to complete college credits, continue onto credit-awarding programs, as well as earning a GED. Interviewees reported that A2B4Equity enabled the college to start the process of getting students into a college program much earlier than waiting for the completion of their GED, the traditional gateway to accessing federal student aid.

This pilot project also encouraged WCCCD to assess their current programs and procedures to understand what areas need to be strengthened or improved. The hope for ATB at WCCCD is that funding can further support the promotion of this opportunity to more students who could benefit from

ATB. In future iterations of this programming, the college wants to include emergency funding as a resource for ATB students.

The most critical takeaway from WCCCD was the importance of wraparound services for this student population. Students in the ATB pilot were incredibly nervous about fast-tracking into credit-bearing coursework. They needed resources, reassurance, and support to make this effort work. This includes funding for tuition, but also for fees, books, and transportation to campus.

Another critical aspect of the WCCCD program was enrolling students into a cohort so they could feel more comfortable in college courses surrounded by students "like them." Additionally, when faculty shared with the administration any collective struggles the students were facing, administrators actually entered in to offer further coaching to students to stay on track. This integrated approach is also absolutely critical when it comes to meeting the final goal of ATB: helping students apply for student financial aid. At WCCCD, financial aid representatives came directly into ATB classrooms at the end of the semester and made plans with ATB students to complete their FAFSA with support from a financial aid office representative (as compared to the CCC "email and call" tactic which, admittedly does not work for students who are overwhelmed with incoming information).

A2B4Equity Pilot Project Measures of Success

The A2B4Equity pilot project outlined six measures of success related to adult students enrolling in ATB-eligible programs and accessing federal student financial aid. Results are reported below.

Measure of success 1: Enroll 100 students in the ATB College Promise Pilot

Measure of success 2: 75% of the 100 students enrolled in the ATB College Promise Pilot will be Black and/or Hispanic or from another underserved student racial and/or ethnic group

Pilot Success Measure	Evaluation Data
Enroll 100 students in the ATB College Promise Pilot (approximately 25 students per college)	105 students across the four colleges enrolled in ATB-eligible career pathway programs
75% of the 100 students enrolled in the ATB College Promise Pilot will be Black and/or Hispanic or from another underserved student racial and/or ethnic group	87% of the enrollees were from communities of color (91 of 105)
80% of the 100 enrolled ATB students will successfully complete six credit hours, qualifying them to apply for federal SFA.	79% of the enrolled students successfully completed six credit hours (83 out of 105)

Site 1 (CCC)

CCC served 69 students in the two Career Bridge programs selected for this pilot. However, because CCC did not identify a cohort of students for this pilot and did not add a connection

to student financial aid into their existing Career Bridge programs selected for this pilot, the evaluation team does not consider CCC to have implemented this pilot program.

	Man	Woman	Total Count	Average Age	Racial/Ethnic Representation
Asian		9	9	41	13%
Black	2	7	9	39	13%
Latinx	10	32	42	36	61%
More than one race		2	2	30	3%
White	2	5	7	35	10%
Total			69		100%

Site 2 (MCC)

MCC joined the pilot later than other sites and is still actively enrolling ATB students. As of May 2024, eleven students are enrolled in the ATB pilot, although as many as nine additional students are "pending enrollment" for the next semester, for a total of 20 potential enrolled students.

	Man	Woman	Total Count	Average Age	Racial/Ethnic Representation
Black	3	2	5	25.75	45.45%
Latine/Latinx	1	2	3	31	27.27%
More than one race	0	0	0	0	0.00%
Unknown	1	1	2	36	18.18%
White	0	1	1	23	9.09%
Total			11		100%

Site 3 (WCCCD)

	Man	Woman	Total Count	Average Age	Racial/Ethnic Representation
Black	3	15	18	32.78	72.00%
Latine/Latinx	0	0	0	0	0.00%
More than one race	1	2	3	32	12.00%
Unknown	0	0	0	0	0.00%
White	0	4	4	43	16.00%
Total			25		100%

Measure of success 5: 80% of the 100 enrolled ATB students will successfully complete six credit hours, qualifying them to apply for federal SFA.

Measure of success 6: 100% of the ATB students successfully completing six credit hours will receive federal SFA for which they are eligible for the semester following the completion of their participation in the ATB college promise pilot program.

	# of students who completed 6 or more credits	% passed 6+ credits	# of students who completed six credit hours who completed the FAFSA	% of students who completed six credit hours who completed the FAFSA	% of students completing the FAFSA receiving student financial aid
Site 1 (CCC)	62	90%	0	0	0
Site 2 (MCC)	8	72.7%	8	100%	n/a
Site 3 (WCCCD)	13	52.00%	6	46%	n/a

Measure of success 7: Participating college systems will sustain college promise program eligibility for ATB students after the pilot ends.

Measure of success 8: Participating colleges will expand ATB college promise eligibility and programming to additional colleges in their respective systems.

Across the board, ATB implementation was more difficult and involved than predicted and as such, sites are not as far along in implementation as expected. These delays render responses to these measures of success premature.

City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) had a pre-existing ATB-eligible set of career pathway programs. Although they did not add in connection to student financial aid in this pilot program, staff interviewed for this evaluation indicated that this pilot project helped them better understand what is needed to add this component to their existing career pathway infrastructure and emphasized that they would like to see this become an institutional priority. The pilot project opened their eyes to the critical need for closer collaboration between college departments to facilitate Career Bridge students' connection to student financial aid. At MCC, students enrolled in the Gateway to College program already utilize the ATB provision at times, which will be sustained.

The ATB pilot project has spurred staff interest in expanding advising and supports for adult education students in ATB-eligible career pathway programs to utilize the ATB provision as well. However, MCC has no current plans or avenues for ongoing funding for the required six credits. At WCCCD, while there is strong evidence and belief that the team has the structure to utilize the ATB provision on a long-term basis, without access to funding to cover credits, fees, and expenses for ATB eligible students, the college cannot realistically make this pathway available. Currently, there is no such source of funding.

Conclusion

This pilot project demonstrated the potential and challenges of expanding or implementing ATB access on community college campuses. By covering some combination of tuition, fees, books, and supplies for ATB students' initial six credits, the pilot aimed to facilitate their transition into postsecondary education and make them eligible for federal financial aid.

The implementation at City Colleges of Chicago (CCC), Mott Community College (MCC), and Wayne County Community College District (WCCCD) showcased varied outcomes. While CCC struggled with coordination with student financial aid, MCC and WCCCD saw more promising results, particularly with wraparound services and integrated support systems that addressed financial and non-financial barriers.

The ability to integrate adult learners into college environments and the provision of comprehensive support to facilitate a seamless transition within the institution from adult education to credit emerged as the crucial factor for success. It follows that introducing this type of seamless institutional bridging would be more challenging in larger and more diffuse college contexts.

Despite some implementation hurdles, the project underscored the importance of ATB pathways in promoting educational and economic mobility for adult learners without traditional high school credentials. Key recommendations include fostering strong cross-departmental partnerships, ensuring consistent and culturally sensitive support from financial aid offices, and addressing students' holistic needs, such as transition to the culture of for-credit classrooms, transportation, and textbook coverage.

The findings suggest that with adequate planning, resources, and institutional commitment, ATB programs can significantly impact adult learners' educational trajectories, ultimately contributing to more equitable access to higher education and workforce opportunities.

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