Job-Training Programs Make Remediation Relevant

Sheila Ortega, at work in a retail market in San Antonio, hopes to earn a degree after completing courses in the I-BEST program at the Alamo Colleges, which combines job training with remedial instruction.

By Katherine Mangan

San Antonio

A few years ago, Sheila Ortega was scrubbing floors at a local grocery store, a high-school dropout with no clear path out of poverty. Today Ms. Ortega, 23, has four certificates in manufacturing skills and big plans for the future.

What turned her around, she says, was a program here at the Alamo Colleges that caught her up on fundamentals while she worked toward her credentials. It combines developmental, or remedial, education with job training and intensive advising, so that even the least prepared students can quickly get certified for jobs that employers are trying to fill.

Designed to solve two problems, the model was developed in Washington State as Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training, or I-BEST, and is now being adapted
and tested at more than 150 community colleges nationwide. It challenges the traditional approach to developmental education, in which students must pass a series of courses in math, reading, and writing before moving on to credit-bearing work. The problem there, say educators who are pushing to streamline remediation, is that many students get discouraged and drop out before cracking their first college textbook.

I-BEST and its spinoffs let students jump right into job training by teaching academic skills, in practical terms, at the same time. For example, an aspiring pharmacy technician whose eyes glazed over in middle-school math might see the point when learning how to measure the correct dosage of an antibiotic for a 50-pound child. Same with the welding student calculating how many quarter-inch steel plates, at 10 pounds per square foot, he can safely load into a one-ton truck.

The nonprofit advocacy group Jobs for the Future coordinates a network of similar programs at 78 community colleges in seven states, and the results are encouraging. Students in Washington’s highly structured program are three times as likely to earn college credit and nine times as likely to earn a work-force credential as their peers in traditional basic-skills programs, according to multiyear studies by the Community College Research Center at Columbia University’s Teachers College.

Focusing on job-related skills in math and reading is more effective than "running students through a gantlet" of remedial coursework, says Davis Jenkins, a senior research associate there. "Many students, when challenged and supported, can succeed" in credit-bearing programs, he says.

The dual programs, however, are expensive and time-consuming to run and may not attract enough students, the research center found. Another finding: When I-BEST serves as a bridge to a degree program, the compressed, embedded remediation isn’t always enough for a successful leap to the more rigorous coursework required for, say, a certified nursing assistant to become a registered nurse.

While some associate- and bachelor’s-degree programs have long incorporated subject-specific remedial work, the approach can be especially helpful, advocates say.
for students who might otherwise start out in English as a Second Language programs or adult basic education. They tend to struggle most with traditional approaches to remediation.

It was a good fit for Ms. Ortega, who learned English after coming to San Antonio from Mexico in the fifth grade. She passed all but one of the exit tests math required to graduate from high school in Texas.

Demoralized, she dropped out and started working as a cleaner at the grocery store. She got a high-school-equivalency diploma and temporary work authorization under President Obama’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals plan, but her mother kept encouraging her to go to college. "I was like, ‘No way, it’s not for me,’” says Ms. Ortega. "Even the word ‘college’ terrified me."

Her mother, undeterred, drove her to the Alamo Colleges’ work-force-training center to check out a traditional pharmacy-technician program. When counselors there described the I-BEST alternative, including the academic support she badly needed, she signed up.

**Fast Track, High Touch**

Ms. Ortega enrolled in April, and this month she donned a cap and gown to collect certificates for an introductory course in logistics, as well as courses in supply-chain, transportation, and warehouse management. If her application for financial aid is successful, she’ll start building on those skills this fall in an associate-degree program in logistics—followed, she hopes, by a bachelor’s degree.

"I can move up quickly and be a manager by the time I’m 27," she says. "With a degree, I could become a CEO."

A typical work-force sequence in Alamo’s five-college system involves three semesters of noncredit developmental classes followed by two semesters of technical training. The I-BEST route cuts that to two semesters, after an "on ramp" of up to seven weeks of intensive remedial instruction.
To qualify, students generally have to score below eighth-grade level on a basic skills assessment. They go from the remedial courses to about two months of integrated technical training and basic-skills instruction, during which they can earn a GED as well as credentials in such skills as forklift operating or phlebotomy. The result, educators at Alamo hope, is a quicker, less slippery path to a decent-paying entry-level job.

Alamo is one of 21 college districts in Texas that get support for similar programs from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board’s Accelerate Texas program. And people here are optimistic. Among students who start out in adult basic education in Texas, fewer than 6 percent enroll the next year in college-level classes, says Linda Muñoz, who directs Accelerate Texas. An exact comparison isn’t available, but those who complete certificates through I-BEST, many of whom would otherwise have gone through traditional basic-skills courses, have better odds of success. The following semester, about three-quarters of them are either employed or still in college.

During a recent introductory-logistics class at Alamo’s Palo Alto campus, Ms. Ortega gives a spirited PowerPoint presentation assessing shipping options for Amazon.com. Listening in are her two instructors: I-BEST courses are designed and taught by duos, with one person focused on job training and the other on basic skills. For this course, Nonie Cabana, an adjunct instructor of logistics, and Jennifer J. Osborn, a college-and career-readiness instructor, meet for 30 minutes before or after each class, reviewing slides and coming up with vocabulary and math exercises to support the technical training.

Later in the class, students take turns guessing, based on their classmates’ clues, the meaning of terms like "procurement," "eminent domain," and "dunnage." Math lessons for future warehouse clerks and transportation coordinators include metric conversions and calculations of the time it takes to travel various distances at different speeds.
Between lessons, Ms. Osborn talks with students about stress and burnout at home, at school, and on the job. The mother of five, who is enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of the Incarnate Word, freely shares anecdotes of being fired from a job, sleeping in her car, and bartending to make ends meet. "I look now at wow, how I’ve changed," she tells the students. "You can have that same feeling."

The Alamo program’s student-success coordinator, Stephanie Coats, frequently stops by to offer encouragement and hugs. When a homeless student showed up exhausted and filthy, she found him a bed at a local shelter. To reassure another student convinced that he’d never find work, she tracked down an employer willing to hire ex-offenders.

"I try to be a cheerleader for them and let them know they’re not alone," says Ms. Coats. "I remind them that everyone’s struggling, and that we’re going to hook you up with the help you need so you can stay in school."

The personal touch that the program relies on doesn’t come cheap. At Alamo Colleges, the general student-to-adviser ratio is more than 350 to 1. For the 200 or so students in I-BEST during a given semester, it’s 66 to 1. That, along with paying two instructors for a single course, can be an obstacle for community colleges at a time when state appropriations are down and enrollment in the sector is shrinking.

**Concerns about Tracking**

Such programs are cost-effective, declares Louisa Erickson. They take people who would pay a nominal fee for adult-basic education or English as a Second Language and convert them into regular, tuition-paying students. As the lead staff member for I-BEST at the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, Ms. Erickson helped develop the model, working with officials at two-year colleges. She and her team have since advised educators in more than 20 states seeking to create their own versions.
One challenge: getting basic-skills and technical instructors to collaborate. That involves not only bridging a cultural divide, she says, but also convincing the technical instructors that students are capable of the work.

Some developmental educators also have doubts about a model that’s being widely but loosely copied.

While Washington’s I-BEST has produced impressive results, colleges that cut corners could perpetuate class divisions in higher education, says Hunter R. Boylan, a professor of higher education and director of the National Center for Developmental Education at Appalachian State University.

He doesn’t want to see spinoff programs become a "dumping ground for students who traditionally have difficulty in college—minorities and the poor," he wrote in an email to The Chronicle. "Low-scoring students might be tracked into vocational/technical/career programs," he said, while others would have more opportunities to earn bachelor’s degrees.

But some students don’t see it as an either-or. Pablo Aguilar, 36, finished Alamo’s I-BEST program this month with a handful of industry certifications as well as credits toward an associate degree in business management, which he plans to start in the fall.

Mr. Aguilar tried college at 19 but wasn’t ready for it, he says. Now a father of two working a warehouse job, he realized he’d never make more than $10 an hour unless he educated himself. He also wants to give employers a reason to overlook the three years he spent behind bars for drunk driving.

"This program has given me a second chance," he says, "and I’m going to run with it."