

Good for Students, Good for Colleges: Investing in Bridge Programs as a Strategy for Success

Community colleges are at a crossroads: pressure is mounting to increase the number of students earning degrees and to improve student retention, and a growing movement seeks to fund colleges based on these performance measures. Meanwhile, enrollment declined nationwide for seven consecutive semesters through Fall 2014.¹ Consequently, colleges need to find new pools of students to recruit from; they also need to make sure that those students can succeed by persisting through college and successfully completing certificate and degree programs.

This challenge takes place in the context of a high need among the adult population: over 24 million Americans—12 percent of the adult population—lack a high school diploma or a high school equivalency degree² and 13 million adults have difficulty speaking English.³ Much has been written about the importance of adult education for disadvantaged adults.⁴ It is essential for community colleges to engage this population: that is the only way that college can truly become a driver of economic mobility and community empowerment.

This brief describes the advantages to colleges and systems of programs that help this large pool of adult students move to earn college credentials—particularly for college management, operations, and pedagogy. We refer to these efforts as “transition programs”—programs that attempt to assist adult education students to advance to postsecondary education.

A LARGE POOL, PREPARED TO COMPLETE

For many colleges, adult education programs could serve as a large “feeder school” into credit and certificate programs. However, this adult education student population is often neglected: a 2005 study in Washington, for instance, found that fewer than a third of Adult Basic Education and Adult Secondary Education (ABE/ASE)⁵ students and fewer than a fifth of students studying English as a Second Language (ESL) ever completed any college credits.⁶ Consequently, students are missing an opportunity to boost their earnings, and colleges are missing an opportunity to improve completion rates and increase enrollment.

The fact that these students are already enrolled in an adult education program affords colleges the opportunity to structure student transitions into postsecondary education in a way that promotes persistence. An effective transition program will enable students to enter college with little or no need for remedial or developmental education, improving their chances of degree attainment. If these students are already at the college, it is easier to ensure that they have a viable plan for how to complete a degree program.

In some states, adult education programs are primarily part of the higher education system; in others they are part of the K–12 system; and still others make adult education part of the workforce development system. Regardless, the benefits of a structured program will accrue in large part to community colleges, where an effective transition program could both provide a college with a ready source of students and prepare those students for success.

MODEST INVESTMENTS GENERATE RETURNS

In systems in which community colleges are responsible for adult education, the revenue-cost calculations show that it will be worthwhile to invest in adult education transition. Costs to assist students to transition are approximately \$500 per student, while revenues, including state reimbursements and tuition recouped from the increase in enrollment, are approximately \$970 per student. Although we discuss below the incremental costs of running transition programs in place of traditional adult education programs, we also provide a **companion worksheet** to allow colleges around the country to calculate their own potential return on investment. If adult education is not part of the community college system, similar economics will likely work through structured memoranda of understanding and shared costs/benefits across systems.

While incremental revenue is one reason to pursue transition programming, there are many reasons closer to the core of community college missions. First, these efforts will increase the diversity of life experiences students bring to their college classes; partly through

the inclusion of adult students, community colleges can offer an unmatched richness of thought and experience. Additionally, increasing the skill levels of adults is often a centerpiece of economic development for neighborhoods and communities. The only way this is ultimately possible is by engaging with those adults at their current skill levels and preparing them for college-level work.

To maximize the rate of transition to college, programs should prepare students for occupational certificates and degrees as well as baccalaureate transfer programs. While there are a number of types of transition programs, we discuss three models and their potential costs below.

TRANSITION PROGRAMS: BUILDING OCCUPATIONAL BRIDGES

The first type of transition program is the occupational bridge program, which is most suitable for students at sixth-grade literacy levels and above.⁷

Bridge programs may be defined as having three major elements: instruction that teaches basic skills in the context of an industry sector or career field; career development; and transition services.⁸

The instruction, structure, and student progression of bridge programs lead students directly into college-level occupational certificates. They also introduce students to workplace terms and settings for their chosen career field or industry.

One of the largest costs of this type of program is the instructors. Establishing occupational bridge programs requires redirecting funds and students from “traditional” adult education to transition programs. It is likely that class sizes may drop in order to implement these programs successfully, and professional development investments will be needed to prepare bridge teachers to teach contextualized, student-centered curricula.

The cost to build a bridge program is lessened by using the work already done to build career programs at the credit level. Assuming research on the local labor market has already been done to ensure that there are viable job prospects and that stackable credentials have been created in the pathway at the credit level based on that research, then a bridge program becomes the on-ramp to the credit pathway in that sector.

Transition services give students the assistance they require to get to college; for instance, students often need help completing financial aid documents or understanding community college pathways. Additionally, it would be best to help students by defraying the cost of

textbooks and other relevant supplies and by providing the instructor with access to equipment from college-level vocational classes. This is typically a minimal cost since equipment has already been acquired for occupational classes.

From a financial standpoint, setting up a bridge program is more a question of redirecting resources than adding resources, especially when community colleges provide adult education. Where they don't, there are added needs for close collaboration between systems.

TRANSITION PROGRAMS: ESTABLISHING ACADEMIC INCENTIVES

A second type of transition program is better suited for moving somewhat more advanced students directly into Associate of Arts and Associate of Science baccalaureate transfer courses. This type of program allows students who are still in adult education to be dually enrolled in introductory college-level classes. Given that students cannot receive financial aid without a high school equivalency credential or without demonstrating the ability to benefit from college-level work, many will only enroll if the costs to take such classes can be fully or largely defrayed by the college.

For the college, one option is to offer these students enrollment in sections that are not full, incurring no incremental costs. In some states, this may resemble high school dual enrollment programs, and it will be even easier for colleges to facilitate the link between adult education and college credit programs because students will initially be taking adult education classes alongside their college classes. They will eventually transition to exclusively taking college classes. By making this transition gradually, students have a more manageable, supported transition, and the college reaches well-prepared potential students who are more likely to enroll and complete credentials. The incremental tuition revenue from students taking college classes eventually will outweigh the initial investment in transition programs. The Gateway to City Colleges of Chicago program is one example of a successful incentive program.

TRANSITION PROGRAMS: INTEGRATED MODELS

Perhaps the most widely known transition program model blends career and academic basic skills courses. This model is distinguished from bridge and incentive programs because it features team teaching by instructors from career/technical classes and adult education basic skills instructors. The Washington State Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program and Illinois'

City Colleges of Chicago— Outcomes of Reinvention⁹

Goal 1: Increase the number of students earning college credentials of economic value.

Outcome: Since the launch of Reinvention, the number of students earning associate's degrees annually has increased by **96 percent**, the number of certificates awarded has increased by **33 percent**, and the graduation rate **has doubled**.

Goal 2: Increase the rate of transfer to bachelor's degree programs following CCC graduation.

Outcome: Since the launch of Reinvention, the rate of students transferring within two years of graduation has increased by **6 percentage points (42 percent to 49 percent)**.

Goal 3: Drastically improve outcomes for students needing remediation.

Outcome: Transitions from remedial to college-level coursework after one year remain steady at **31 percent**, and City Colleges is launching a comprehensive effort to significantly address this challenge.

Goal 4: Increase number and share of ABE/ GED/ESL students who advance to and succeed in college-level courses.

Outcome: Since the launch of Reinvention, transitions from adult education to college credit increased by **190 percent**. City Colleges also strategically reorganized the location of its adult education off-site classrooms to better align with community areas in greatest need, developed adult education bridge programs that prepare students for careers in high-demand fields while they also build basic math and English skills, and developed the Gateway to City Colleges program to accelerate the progress of high-performing adult education students.

Integrated Career and Academic Preparation System (ICAPS) are two notable examples of this model.

With these three types of transition programs, adult education students will begin to see clear, established pathways to college-level work that can benefit them. And ultimately, by effectively preparing students in adult education, supporting them through developing skills, and ensuring that they are on meaningful career pathways, adult education students will achieve persistence and course success rates that match or exceed those of their younger peers.

THE MOST IMPORTANT RESOURCE IS VISIONARY LEADERSHIP

Far too often, adult education students are invisible at the postsecondary level. As a rule, adult education programs are managed by a separate administration within the college or by a separate system entirely (sometimes the K-12 system). As a result, leadership's vision rarely includes adult education students. Even when adult education administrators design and actively promote programs to transition students to college, the postsecondary system is usually unprepared to receive them.

It takes visionary leadership that can see a future for these students from adult education into postsecondary programs and will help them successfully complete certificates and degrees that have value in the job market. The Reinvention model presented in the sidebar illustrates the return on investment that resulted under the leadership of City Colleges of Chicago Chancellor Cheryl Hyman when she established district-wide goals including the advancement of adult education students into credit and certificate programs.¹⁰

A combination of leadership, vision, and institutional support is essential to increasing the rate of transition from adult education programs to college. This vision illustrates the simple yet powerful message from one district; while adult education administrators are moving students towards credit and certificate programs, those at the postsecondary level are prepared and eager to welcome them into the system. Visionary leaders talk about the importance of these students, invest in them, and redirect resources to make the vision a reality.

The vision must be inclusive. A vision where the progress of adult education students is woven into the goals for the college or the system as a whole. A vision where progress is measured and reported publicly and includes data on adult education students' transitions into and completion of postsecondary programs. A vision where college leaders invest resources to ensure this vision becomes reality.

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About Women Employed: Since 1973, Women Employed has been mobilizing people and organizations to expand educational and employment opportunities for America's working women. Women Employed is the leading proponent of bridge programs as an essential component of a career pathways system in Illinois and has worked in partnership with City Colleges of Chicago to write bridge lesson plans and help train bridge instructors. Through our Pathways to Careers Network, we have mobilized hundreds of colleges, community organizations, and advocates to work for statewide policies that allow and encourage the widespread implementation of bridge programs throughout Illinois.

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Citations

- 1 <http://nscresearchcenter.org/category/reports/current-term/>.
- 2 For adults between the ages of 18 and 64. 2012 American Community Survey and 2013 Current Population Survey data compiled by the Working Poor Families Project.
- 3 For adults between the ages of 18 and 64. Population Reference Bureau analysis of the 2012 American Community Survey compiled by the Working Poor Families Project.
- 4 For instance, see Shaffer, B., "Strengthening State Adult Education Policies For English as a Second Language Populations," Working Poor Families Project, Fall 2014, or Wachen, J., Jenkins, D, Van Noy, M. "Contextualized College Transition Strategies for Adult Basic Skills Students: Learning from Washington State's I-BEST Program Model." New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. December 2012 or Hilliard, T., "Graduating to College: Three States Helping Adult Education Students Get a College Education", Working Poor Families Project, Summer 2012 or Martin and Broadus, "Enhancing GED instruction to Prepare Students for College and Careers." MDRC. May 2013.
- 5 Adult education in this brief refers to a specific constellation of programs funded by the federal government and some state and local governments that are designed to teach basic literacy and numeracy skills to adults who never received a high school diploma or high school equivalency credential. Adult Basic Education refers to those students whose basic literacy skills correlate with elementary school education. Adult Secondary Education refers to students whose basic literacy skills correlate with high school education. This constellation also includes adults studying English as a second language regardless of whether or not they have earned a high school diploma and regardless of their literacy level in their native language.
- 6 Jenkins and Prince. "Building Pathways to Success for Low-Skill Adult Students: Lessons for Community College Policy and Practice from a Statewide Longitudinal Tracking Study." Community College Research Center. April 2005.
- 7 See "The Potential of Community Colleges as Bridges of Opportunity for the Disadvantaged: Can it be Accomplished on a Large Scale?" by Davis Jenkins. Available online at: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED466244.pdf>.
- 8 See "Creating a Successful Bridge Program: A How-to Guide" produced by the Illinois Community College Board and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. http://www.iccb.org/pdf/shiftinggears/iccb_2012bridgeguide_web_rev_oct2012.pdf.
- 9 See "City Colleges of Chicago Fiscal Year 2016 Annual Operating Budget," available online at: <https://www.ccc.edu/departments/Documents/Finance%20Documents/FY2016%20Annual%20Operating%20Budget%20Board%20Approved%207-9-15.pdf>
- 10 City Colleges of Chicago is also a notable exception to this nationwide trend of declining enrollment. Between 2010 and 2013, City Colleges of Chicago enrollment increased by 15 percent. See http://www.ccc.edu/Documents/strategic%20initiatives_3%2020%202014.pdf.