

CAREER FOUNDATIONS: THE MISSING LINK IN ADULT CAREER PATHWAYS

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ABSTRACT

Career Foundations is a career exploration and goal setting course jointly developed by City Colleges of Chicago and Women Employed and launched at City Colleges in 2014. Subsequent expansion of Career Foundations to local community organizations proved to be the catalyst that jumpstarted true collaborative career pathways efforts among diverse agencies. Through a consortium convened by Women Employed, the Chicago Jobs Council, and the Chicago Citywide Literacy Coalition, not only has Career Foundations been adopted by multiple organizations, but they have worked together to ensure consistent, accurate information and access to pathways leading to family-sustaining employment for their students and clients.

But Career Foundations (both the course and the local consortium built around it) would likely not exist without the earlier proliferation of adult education sector bridge programs throughout Chicago, nor without a major initiative launched by City Colleges in 2011 that included revamping its Career and Technical Education programs to align them with employer needs and employment opportunities.

An appetite for bridge partnerships between City Colleges and smaller organizations had already surfaced among Chicago's adult education providers, but structural barriers to bridge collaborations seemed insurmountable. However, as information about WIOA reauthorization and its emphasis on career pathways for people across the educational spectrum began emerging, community-based adult education providers and workforce development agencies alike became hungry for City Colleges pathways information to effectively serve their students and clients. It quickly became evident that partnerships built around Career Foundations as a

common tool were highly feasible and would substantially benefit organizations, the colleges, and the community.

BEGINNING WITH BRIDGES

In 2011, adult education providers throughout Chicago were no strangers to sector bridge programs as a way to prepare students for college and careers. Bridges—programs or courses designed to help adults with low skills achieve college readiness through instruction contextualized to a particular sector—were incentivized by the Joyce Foundation Shifting Gears initiative launched in 2007, and were subsequently required by the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) for all funded adult education providers in accordance with ICCB’s 2009 Adult Education five-year strategic plan.¹ That plan stated, “We envision adult education as the foundation of a career pathways system that prepares adult learners for economic self-sufficiency.”^{2,3}

ICCB’s bridge definition grew out of the Shifting Gears work, specifying three elements: contextualized instruction integrating basic skills and industry or occupation knowledge, career development, and transition services to help students move from adult education or remedial coursework to credit or occupational programs.⁴

In Illinois, the majority of adult education students are served through community colleges, although many community-based providers receive ICCB adult education funding as well. By far the largest provider in the state is City Colleges of Chicago (CCC), which offers adult education (AE) to 27,000 students annually at six of its seven colleges. Several CCC colleges piloted AE bridges under Shifting Gears or other funding sources; however, with little institutional support outside of AE departments and no state funding earmarked for bridge programming, most early CCC bridges proved to be short-lived.

However, in 2011, CCC’s launch of a district-wide “Reinvention” initiative, aimed at improving the institution and enhancing student success, dramatically altered the direction and scope of its bridge programming. Among its strategic priorities were “reviewing programs

1 Illinois adult education programs, governed by the Illinois Community College Board and funded by a combination of federal and state funds, serve individuals lacking high school equivalency or who are English language learners. While generally not funded to offer job training programs, they prepare students for transition to postsecondary education and training.

2 The Joyce Foundation launched Shifting Gears, a seven-year initiative, in 2007 to promote efforts to “equip low-skilled workers with the necessary credentials to expand their job opportunities and strengthen economic growth in the Midwest...” Many bridge demonstration projects were launched under the initiative, and it sparked a strong focus on policy development to help promote and sustain bridge efforts. See <http://www.joycefdn.org/shifting-gears>.

3 *Creating Pathways for Adult Learners, A Visioning Document for the Illinois Adult Education and Family Literacy Program*, Illinois Community College Board, 2009.

4 *Creating Pathways for Adult Learners*, 32.

and offerings to increase the economic and educational value of the credentials students earn [and] better aligning our programs with employer needs.”⁵ A CCC district-wide task force reviewed existing programs of study, researched regional labor market data, and engaged employers as advisors to revamp career programs, many with stackable credentials that would launch students onto career pathways. As a result, seven College to Careers (CCC’s name for Career and Technical Education) pathways were identified as promising in terms of current and future job outlook, family-sustaining wages, and opportunities for advancement.

As part of its pathways redesign, CCC committed to integrating and funding adult education bridges as onramps to career programs for individuals with low skills. New adult education sector bridge programs were designed at the district level in collaboration with college leadership, and were expanded in less than a year from one college to six. The range of sectors was broadened as well. Healthcare was the first sector targeted for bridge program development and new healthcare bridges were launched in fall 2012. Steadily over the years, bridges in four more sectors were developed and launched at various CCC colleges: transportation, distribution, and logistics; hospitality/culinary; early childhood education; manufacturing; and information technology.

Using the ICCB bridge definition as the foundation, CCC designed bridges that were longer and more intensive than earlier models to help students at 6th grade reading and math levels or higher achieve readiness for the GED® test and college-level coursework in reading, writing, and math, through instruction contextualized to the participant’s chosen career pathway. Career exploration and transition services—the second and third component of the state’s bridge definition—were built into the design. In fact, CCC bridge participants took their first college course (part of their chosen certificate program) with tuition waived and with support while still enrolled in the bridge. Some bridges included industry-recognized certifications, enabling completers to apply for entry-level jobs immediately.⁶

From the beginning, City Colleges welcomed the advocacy agency Women Employed (WE) as a natural partner in the development and expansion of its bridge programs. WE was already focusing substantial efforts on building and strengthening educational and career pathways for disadvantaged adults at local and state levels, recognizing that to earn credentials that open the door to better-quality, better-paying jobs, individuals must be able to count on community colleges, the most accessible and affordable postsecondary institutions. Women Employed took an active role in bridge curriculum development and instructor training.⁷

When bridges were first launched around the state, “career pathways” was not the

5 *Reinvention*, Chapter 1, https://www.ccc.edu/menu/Documents/Reinvention/REI_Reinvention_Chapter_1_03302011.pdf, 6.

6 E.g., forklift operations and food sanitation certifications can be earned.

7 CCC bridge and Career Foundations curricula are publicly available at <https://womenemployed.org/pathways-careers-network>.

catchphrase it has become today, and many bridges were focused on getting individuals into entry level training and jobs. Designing bridges that were part of a pathway and promoting access to stackable credentials were goals strongly shared by CCC and Women Employed.

WAS THE CART BEFORE THE HORSE?

By the time every CCC college had implemented at least one sector bridge program, it became increasingly clear that there was a missing link in an adult education student's trajectory—some type of short career exploration and goal-setting tool that would guide low intermediate students into sector bridges and pathways that were a good fit for them. For students, such a tool could foster a stronger sense of purpose in their current program and empower them with the knowledge they needed to set and follow through on their future direction. For the institution, the tool could help boost bridge enrollment and increase retention in both bridge and other adult education programming. It could also aid advisors, who typically faced large caseloads, by arming their prospective advisees with broad pathways knowledge and a basic career plan.

With experience in developing bridge curricula under their belts, CCC and WE set out to develop a supplemental adult education course—the missing link—that would precede the bridge and help participants with a minimum 4th grade reading level, or at least intermediate level English language skills, make informed pathway choices. Input on the curriculum was solicited from bridge instructors and community organizations. The resulting course, named *Career Foundations: Making Your Education Work for You*, guides participants through the following components:

- Gaining self-awareness in terms of skills, interests, values, financial goals
- Matching skills, interests, and values with career clusters
- Learning about programs of study at CCC with emphasis on **career pathways and stackable credentials**
- Learning about support services available
- Choosing a CCC pathway of interest and developing a plan and timeline to get to college

In summer 2014, once course approval for Career Foundations was received, teachers were trained, and the course was launched as a supplement to basic skills instruction.

City Colleges data indicates that between FY15 and FY17, 301 out of 966 adult education students who took Career Foundations transitioned to credit courses. “Although Career Foundations is geared toward students at lower levels of adult basic education, over 30% have subsequently enrolled in credit [courses].” Practitioners know that this is a high rate of transition for adult education students.⁸

⁸ *City Colleges of Chicago: Adult Education Transitions Overview*, City Colleges of Chicago, September 21, 2016. Presentation delivered to the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy.

CAREER FOUNDATIONS AND THE COMMUNITY

Bridge expansion at CCC coincided with statewide efforts to promote bridge expansion, whether the provider was a community college or a community organization.⁹ In Chicago, there were successful CBO bridge programs in both adult education and workforce development programs (i.e., bridges for adults with or without high school equivalency but with foundational skills needs). However, some smaller community-based adult education programs reported that they struggled to meet state bridge requirements due to the limited size of their participant pools and a lack of resources. CCC adult education leadership, keenly interested in building relationships beyond the college walls in its efforts to promote college transition, offered to partner with community organizations on bridges. There seemed to be an abundance of goodwill and an appetite for partnerships, but no clear initiative surfaced, and there were barriers, including the lack of state funding for bridge programs and the absence of provisions for providers to partner and each receive “credit” for serving the students.

Interested in fostering partnerships and real systems change, Women Employed began to work closely with CCC’s Adult Education division, the Chicago Jobs Council (CJC), and the Chicago Citywide Literacy Coalition (CCLC) to develop and seek consensus on a vision that would align programs across the city, facilitate student transitions across programs, and align services no matter which agency acts as the initial or primary service provider.¹⁰

Women Employed worked along with CJC and CCLC to generate collaboration among service providers. For a year, leaders at these three advocacy agencies held conversations with community organization leadership to build trust and overcome resistance to working with City Colleges. Additionally, New York-based nonprofit Public Agenda (with funding from the Joyce Foundation) conducted formal qualitative research with City Colleges and community organization personnel to gauge readiness for collaboration and elicit information on potential barriers. Findings were that organizations that historically had difficult relationships with City Colleges began expressing optimism about collaborating with CCC for the first time in recent history.

Meanwhile, community organizations were first hearing about the Career Foundations course; reaction was that this was a tool they urgently needed to build into their programming. Some organizations saw Career Foundations as a way to offer the “career exploration” bridge component with existing resources. Furthermore, the idea of partnering around Career Foundations seemed to resonate with organizations in a way that partnering around bridges had not.

9 Bridges were first required by ICCB in FY12-13 for their funded programs, but were strongly encouraged starting with the release of its 2009 five-year strategic plan.

10 The group crafted the following vision statement: “Any low-skilled Chicagoan, no matter which organization s/he approaches for help, has the opportunity to improve his or her skills to be able to transition to a postsecondary credential leading to a family-sustaining job.”

As WIOA reauthorization requirements gradually started becoming available, not only did adult education providers become eager for CCC pathways information, but workforce development agencies did as well. Both types of organizations realized they needed to understand and help clients get onto career pathways. Information on CCC's revamped postsecondary pathways had been slow in filtering through to the community, and the Career Foundations course held promise as a means of demystifying those pathways.

With growing interest from the community, Women Employed noticed CBO managers were enrolling in the 12-hour teacher training to learn about the course. In response, they developed a shorter (three-hour) orientation, the "Career Foundations Institute," especially for directors, managers, transition advisors, and support staff who needed an understanding of the curriculum to manage program planning, instructor support, and recruitment, and who could contribute to the shared vision of pathways alignment through implementation of the course. After the first institute in Summer 2015, 12 organizations came together to form the Career Foundations Consortium, convened by Women Employed and with continued CJC and CCLC involvement.

During Year 1, the Consortium:

- Implemented Career Foundations at each organization
- Collaboratively designed a recruitment flyer
- Developed a list of reputable non-college training programs to supplement CCC pathways
- Participated in student and staff field trips to CCC campuses
- Developed curricular adaptations for an ESL population

Significantly, there was collaboration and sharing between WIOA Title I and Title II organizations, many of whom had never had the opportunity to sit at the same table, despite the similarities among the populations they serve. The course had become the catalyst that brought diverse organizations together to promote and align local career pathways.

The Career Foundations Consortium is now in its third year and, with minimal changes in the roster of participating organizations, includes five funded under adult education (WIOA Title II) and seven under workforce development (WIOA Title I or a local funding source, e.g., Community Development Block Grant funds). The Career Foundations Consortium model has been fine-tuned over time. Under the model, Women Employed has committed to:

- Maintaining the Career Foundations curriculum
- Providing teacher training
- Providing liaisons for technical support
- Convening consortium meetings to share best practices and challenges
- Coordinating CCC campus visits and facilitating student transitions
- Collecting data through instructor and student surveys
- Providing stipends to consortium members

Student response has been positive. In student end-of-course surveys, 95 percent indicated they learned about next steps to complete their education goals. Ninety-six percent reported feeling more confident about reaching education and career goals. As a group, respondents showed a 19 percent increase in their level of interest in going to college as a result of the course.¹¹

Participating organizations agree to outcome targets for the numbers of students served with Career Foundations, cohorts launched, and transitions accomplished (e.g., moving to bridges, college career pathways programs, upper-level high school equivalency or ESL classes at CCC, or enrollment in a training program). Organizations also agree to communicate regularly with their WE liaisons, provide data on outcomes and transitions, attend consortium meetings, participate in college visits, and send new Career Foundations teachers for training.

In May 2017, researchers from Penn State University released preliminary findings from a study of pathway programs in Chicago, Miami, and Houston. In public remarks, they noted that Women Employed's Career Foundations work is one of the only examples they found of on-the-ground efforts to coordinate programs across systems and move adults into postsecondary training.¹² Thus, development of the consortium not only allowed both workforce development and adult education organizations to come together and share knowledge, expertise, challenges, and solutions, but the collaboration has been invaluable as we seek to encourage the development of an aligned pathway system that can be replicated in other regions. This work can serve as an example for both citywide and state-level workforce development and adult education collaboration going forward.

While we have come a long way, we have only laid the groundwork for our collective vision to create a citywide career pathway system that more than 45,000 young and older adults can access through existing organizations and colleges in their neighborhoods. Much work is still to be done—partnerships must be expanded so smaller organizations without the capacity to deliver programming will refer clients to Career Foundations classes; cooperative agreements must be developed with larger agencies and institutions to become referral networks to move more students through Career Foundations; and procedures must be institutionalized to facilitate transitions from community programs into college-level classes—to ensure a functioning career pathway system where adults experience a smooth transition from community programs into college, where they can earn the degrees and credentials needed to launch or advance a career and achieve their dreams. ☘

11 *Career Foundations Student Post-Course Survey*, Women Employed, survey conducted through Survey Monkey October 2017-April 2017.

12 *Data-to-Action Summit*, Carol Clymer and Esther Prins, May 1, 2017. Lecture presented at Data-to-Action Summit in JPMorgan Chase, Chicago.