

Building Bridges to College and Careers for Illinois Adults

Occupational bridge programs are a solution to a complex challenge facing workers, businesses, and the Illinois economy. Low-income adults need a pathway to family-supporting careers. High-demand fields that could expand Illinois' economy need more trained workers. But too many Illinois adults lack the basic skills they need to enter programs that prepare them for these high-demand jobs. Bridge programs address this challenge by providing a path into education and training for adults with low literacy and math skills.

Bridge programs:

- ▶ Blend workplace competencies, career exploration, and basic literacy and math skills
- ▶ Accelerate advancement through short, intensive classroom components
- ▶ Are held at times and places convenient to working adults
- ▶ Offer academic and personal support services to help balance work, family, and school responsibilities

“The supportive instructors, team learning, and financial aid made college possible for me. Bilingual instruction that combined math and health, English and medical terminology was useful for my work in the hospital. Even when the bridge program was difficult, I knew I had to work harder because I want to be a nurse one day.”

—Eva, graduate of the Carreras en Salud bridge program in Chicago, a partnership of Instituto del Progreso Latino, Wright College's Humboldt Park Vocational Education Center, and others

Bridge programs are the gateway to college credentials and careers

Bridge programs put college or job training within reach of working adults with low basic skills. In today's economy, an occupational Associate's degree is one of the best ways to improve job opportunities and wages. Men with an occupational Associate's degree earn 30 percent more than high school graduates with similar backgrounds, and women earn 47 percent more.¹ For many Illinois adults, bridge programs are the only way to start on that path.

These unique programs, developed by partnerships of community colleges, community-based organizations, and local employers, offer meaningful short-term skill development that can lead to college credentials and a career in a high-demand field. Filling an important educational gap, bridge programs serve students in adult education or remedial classes and low-skilled workers who want career advancement but are not

prepared for college. Nearly 100,000 Illinois adults every year² do not have the basic reading and math skills to enter college coursework and could benefit from an occupational bridge program.

Bridge programs serve community and business needs

In the past two years, Illinois community colleges and community-based organizations have piloted more than 30 bridge programs in two key industries (healthcare and transportation-logistics), serving over 1,500 adults and achieving impressive results: an estimated 80 percent of students have completed a pilot bridge program.³ In comparison, nationally, half of students in traditional adult education classes drop out before 10 weeks and only 10 percent attend classes continuously for a year.⁴

Bridge programs build strong partnerships with employers and provide the skills needed by in-demand industries. The bridge program strategy is driven by local employer needs and serves the additional purpose of preparing adults for good jobs close to home.

The best way to implement bridge programs is to build local partnerships

“To bridge low-literate, low-skilled students' entry into healthcare programs, we offered blended on-line programming, extended the number of class hours, and created targeted CNA preparatory programs — all of which provides important support to adults juggling child care, transportation, and work.”

—Dr. Charlotte Warren, President of Lincoln Land Community College in Springfield

“Bridge programs are one of the most important strategies in addressing the critical skills gap in Illinois: our students, who normally would have to spend at least another year in ESL, remedial, or developmental education, have been able to “jumpstart” their academic program by enrolling in our highly successful automotive bridge program, gaining valuable on-the-job skills necessary for good employment and the confidence to advance.”

– Dr. Marguerite Boyd, *President of Harry S. Truman College in Chicago*

among community colleges, community-based organizations, and employers, leveraging resources from a broad range of sources. Each partner brings their own strengths: community colleges serve the majority of Illinois’ economically and educationally disadvantaged students and have the flexibility to serve both student and local workforce needs; community-based organizations have access to the programs’ target population and expertise in meeting their needs; and employers provide input to ensure that

programs are preparing participants to succeed in the local labor market.

Bridge programs need state funding to thrive

Bridge programs are a great investment: for individuals, employers, communities, and Illinois. Pilot programs have achieved excellent retention and completion results for low-income working adults, built strong partnerships to serve local business needs, and encouraged community colleges and workforce organizations to strategically integrate their resources and capacity.

The Illinois Community College Board and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity have funded the initial bridge program pilots, but there is no dedicated state funding stream to support program development and maintenance. The Illinois General Assembly should prioritize this pioneering approach to educating adults and increasing Illinois’ economic competitiveness by funding occupational bridge programs across the state. Today’s workforce, Illinois

employers, and the state’s economy deserve the investment.

¹ Silverberg, Marsha, et al. 2004. *National Assessment of Vocational Education Final Report to Congress*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

² *Making the Pieces Fit*. 2004. Chicago, IL: Women Employed Institute.

³ *Survey of Pilot Bridge Programs*. 2006. Springfield, IL: Illinois Community College Board.

⁴ Comings, John P., Andrea Parella, and Lisa Soricone. 1999. *Persistence Among Adult Basic Education Students in Pre-GED Classes*. Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy.

“Our bridge program has greatly benefited Richland Memorial Hospital by increasing the knowledge level, competency, and self-esteem of our staff, resulting in higher quality care for our patients. This excellent opportunity is moving our staff up the hospital’s job ladder and is an asset to our community.”

– Cindy Bailey, *Director of Nursing at Richland Memorial Hospital and partner of the healthcare bridge program at Olney Central College in Olney*



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Women Employed’s mission is to improve women’s economic status and remove barriers to economic equity. We promote fair workplace practices, increase access to training and education, and provide women with innovative tools and information to move into careers paying family-supporting wages.

For more information on Women Employed and to download publications on bridge programs and career pathways, visit www.womenemployed.org or contact Toni Henle at 312.782.3902 x233 or thenle@womenemployed.org.