



In Brief



University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

A CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS OF CAREER PATHWAY PROGRAMS THAT LINK LOW-SKILLED ADULTS TO FAMILY-SUSTAINING WAGE CAREERS

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In recent years, access to community colleges has stretched beyond its initial conception in the 1960s when most community college students were traditional-age learners who sought to transfer to a four-year college or pursue career preparation to enter the workforce. Today, nearly half of the nation's college students enroll in community colleges in which the student body is equally or more diverse than the communities in which they reside, where the average age of students is over 25, where students enroll in non-credit coursework and stop in and out routinely, where the preponderance of students are unemployed or working in low-wage jobs, and where an ever-growing proportion of these students are immigrants and English language learners (ELLs). Recognizing these trends, scholars have argued that community colleges should contribute to an equity agenda that enhances educational and economic opportunity for low-skilled learners. Career pathways can serve as a primary means of meeting low-skilled learners' needs by systematically linking disparate education and training systems using the community college as the nexus for partnerships and program delivery.

Little is known about educational programs referred to as *career pathway programs* that attempt to integrate adult literacy, adult basic education (ABE), General Equivalency Diploma (GED) instruction, English language literacy (ELL), and pre-collegiate developmental education with postsecondary career and technical

education (CTE) certificate and associate degree programs, and potentially with the baccalaureate degree. By conducting case study research, we sought to provide a detailed description of local curricular, instructional and support programs, policies and practices that seek to engage low-skilled adults in adult education and literacy programs that are linked to postsecondary CTE and ultimately to family-sustaining wage employment.

Purpose

The overarching research question for this study was: What programs, policies, and practices, particularly curricular, institutional and support strategies, are currently being implemented to support the transition of low-skilled adults through career pathways that align with postsecondary CTE? Several sub-questions were posed to investigate implementation strategies and provide insights into sustainability. It is important to emphasize that this study was designed as a descriptive analysis. The relative newness of career pathway programs targeting low-skilled adults, the charge from the study's national advisory panel, and the relatively short timeframe allowed for data collection did not support an outcomes evaluation. Even so, interesting and potentially promising practices are described in this report, providing a baseline for future policy and program development and outcomes evaluation studies.

Director's Note

I am pleased to share the executive summary of a recently published technical report by the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education titled *A Cross-case Analysis of Career Pathway Programs that Link Low-skilled Adults to Family-Sustaining Wage Careers* by Debra D. Bragg, Christine D. Bremer, Marisa Castellano, Catherine Kirby, Ann Mavis, Donna Schaad, and Judith Sunderman. The report features three career pathways dedicated to providing adult learners with the opportunity to engage in adult education and literacy and advance to postsecondary career-technical education (CTE). Features common to the three pathways and lessons learned about implementation, transferability and sustainability are discussed. The authors express their gratitude to the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, United States Department of Education for providing the financial support for this project, and to the members of a national advisory panel for their generous contribution of time and talent. (National advisory panelists are named in the report which is available at: http://occr1.ed.uiuc.edu/Projects/GED/Career_Pathways.pdf.)

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Methods

The study design was multi-phased, beginning with a review of literature conducted by Park, Ernst, and Kim (forthcoming) and the convening of an advisory panel of experts from throughout the United States. In the second phase of the study, the research team conducted telephone interviews with educational administrators at all levels, including state agency personnel knowledgeable about state and local career pathway initiatives. The third phase of the study involved data collection through site visits to three career pathway programs that emerged during the previous phase, with these three sites selected by the research team in collaboration with personnel employed by the United States Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) and the national advisory panel. The three programs and sites are **Carreras en Salud–Instituto del Progreso Latino (IPL), Chicago, Illinois; General Service Technician (GST)–Shoreline Community College, Shoreline, Washington; and Career Pathways Initiative (CPI)–Ouachita Technical College, Ouachita, Arkansas**. The final phase of the study focused on data analysis and report writing, culminating in the production of a technical report and other dissemination activities.

Results

Results show that the selected career pathway programs demonstrate a clear commitment to enrolling and serving low-skilled adults. Leadership support was evident at each site, with local leaders displaying a keen ability to leverage existing local strengths through internal relationships and external partnerships with employers, community-based organizations (CBOs), and others. By building on local strengths, the leaders exhibited sophistication in developing policy and program components identified by key stakeholder groups as instrumental to program delivery. At one site, administrators were able to leverage their knowledge of curriculum contextualization and of existing partnerships in the manufacturing sector to create a health care pathway serving primarily Latino learners. At another site, a large, well-respected associate degree automotive program aided by local industry and employer support was extended to low-skilled adults. At the third site, a rapidly evolving technical college was supported by the state's career pathway initiative to develop relationships with a comprehensive One-Stop Center to develop multiple pathways for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients. In all three cases, the local leadership had a deep knowledge of resources that could be used to facilitate the development of career pathway programs, and they mobilized those resources on behalf of low-skilled adult learners.

Though the characteristics of students targeted for the three programs varied (e.g., ELL, TANF, unemployed, low-skill), some characteristics were shared across the three programs. For example, all three programs enrolled immigrants, particularly Carreras en Salud–IPL and GST–Shoreline Community College, and many of these immigrants were English language

learners (ELLs) who benefited from the integration of language instruction into the adult literacy and CTE curricula. Through an urban partnership involving a community-based organization (CBO) called Instituto del Progreso Latino (IPL), the City Colleges of Chicago and other partner organizations, Latino students were identified to participate in career pathways in the city of Chicago. The ELL population was also evident in the GST–Shoreline program that evolved through a pilot of Washington state's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program that emphasizes the integration of English as a second language (ESL) and adult basic education (ABE) with CTE instruction. Through a co-teaching arrangement, the I-BEST approach emphasizes the integration of literacy education with workforce skills. Besides not being native-born speakers of English, many adult learners in the three programs lacked a high school diploma and functioned at very low literacy levels. Moreover, many students in the three programs were unemployed or employed in low-wage jobs, and some were TANF recipients, particularly the Ouachita Technical College students who were targeted for participation in an array of career pathway programs stimulated by Arkansas' statewide Career Pathways Initiative (CPI).

The organizational infrastructure and partnerships designated to support each career pathway program were unique, though common features existed. All three programs drew upon the resources of a local community college for some aspect of program administration and delivery, but the specific use of college facilities and administrative support varied with the involvement of external partners. Most notable of the three cases, in the Carreras–IPL program, where the administrative leadership was situated in a CBO, we observed commitment to the career pathway similar to the other two sites where community colleges were in the lead, but the added benefit of having the CBO as a lead organization enabled it to capitalize on longstanding commitments to serve a particular student population, in this case Latinos. The CBO's long history and commitment to open access; integrated ESL, adult literacy, and CTE curriculum; and wrap-around services was a particular strength of the Carreras–IPL program.

The demographic and educational characteristics of adult students participating in the three programs precipitated an array of support services. All three offered students assistance with financial aid, academic and career guidance, counseling services, and job placement, but they also offered intensive support services directed at fulfilling the unique needs of their students. These included case management, transportation and child care assistance, mental health services, addiction counseling, and in at least one site, support for students with disabilities. In all three programs, a comprehensive portfolio of support services was described by local administrators as essential to students' progressing through and being retained in the programs, and students themselves mentioned the support services as important contributors to their persistence.

Common curricular and instructional features of the career pathway programs included an initial entry point involving adult literacy programs such as ABE and GED. All three programs also offered ESL instruction, especially Carreras en Salud-IPL and GST-Shoreline. A contextualized curriculum emphasizing occupational content integrated with ESL, ABE, and developmental/remedial education and a stackable, modularized curriculum provided students with multiple entry and exit options. Certificates and degrees were available at various exit points, depending on how the curriculum was aligned with the occupational ladder. Besides these approaches, all three programs supplemented the curriculum with some type and level of technology-enhanced curriculum including computer-aided design to individualize instruction and allow students to accelerate through foundational aspects of the curriculum, including some areas of developmental/remedial education (math in particular). Instructional innovations such as team teaching and project-based assignments were evident in some classrooms in all three sites.

Consistently, developmental/remedial education was viewed as a supplement to the career pathway programs because all three sought to emphasize adult education and literacy instruction to reduce or eliminate developmental/remedial education so that students could enroll directly in college-credit courses once they completed the adult literacy portion of the curriculum. Despite this intention, all three programs utilized the community college developmental/remedial curriculum when students were unable to matriculate directly from the adult literacy level to postsecondary CTE. Because none of the programs focused on major modification to existing community college developmental/remedial education, administrators expressed concern about students who did not meet the college placement cut-off scores because of added cost and time and the resulting possibility of students' using up student financial aid and accumulating debt, which could contribute to non-completion and economic hardship.

Finding a means of assisting low-skilled adults to persist in postsecondary education is a substantial challenge. Although the sites served similar but different low-skilled student populations, the programs offered a number of similar strategies to serve these students' needs, including job readiness training, either as an initial stand-alone course or through integrating content into the career pathway curriculum. Either way, the intention was to help students understand and value fundamental employability and job readiness skills that would allow them to be successful in the classroom and on the job. Drawing on their partnerships with local employers, each pathway program heeded employers' calls for such instruction and in some cases employed their help in determining specific content offered in the curriculum. In addition, the programs tended to offer flexible scheduling, including multiple entry and re-entry points, recognizing that adults have competing responsibilities for family, work, and school. Cohort groups, learning communities, and other groups were seen as a way of encouraging support among small groups of learners, most notably in the deliberate efforts of the First Year Interest Groups (FYIGs) offered by CPI–Ouachita.

Although quantitative results establishing a definitive relationship between small group activities and student outcomes are not available, local program leaders and students were convinced that these activities encouraged persistence.

Each program operated with multiple external partners: employers, CBOs, chambers of commerce, state agencies, industry groups, and others. Relationships with these partners were central to the sustainability of all three programs, though they varied substantially from one another. For example, the presence of external partners helped provide the cachet that is needed to garner support for career pathways within community colleges, with employer and CBOs, and with the community at large. The creation of these programs was not easy because the partners had to overcome entrenched organizational policies and operations, including space and scheduling concerns, rigid curricular and assessment rules (particularly in the area of college placement testing and developmental/remedial education), faculty contractual agreements (including concerns with differential pay scales for full- and part-time instructors), and inflexible local and state-level curriculum approval processes. In one case, accreditation was viewed as a major impediment to growing career pathway programs because of the limitations it placed on the ratio of certifications to associate degrees. While community colleges offer advantages in terms of their centrality to communities and strategic mission to serve local needs, their organizational structure and formal policy orientation (local and state) may mitigate implementation of the full array of curriculum and support services needed for low-skilled adults to be successful.

Conclusions

Despite various challenges to their implementation, all three career pathway programs showed signs of growth (scalability), continuation within the community college and larger local community (sustainability), and replication (transferability) beyond their initial connections to particular CTE curriculums within single institutions. The establishment of partners (internal and external) contributed significantly to scalability and sustainability, providing a diversified means of funding the programs in their original form and for growing them into new permutations. Replication often occurred first internally by transferring the models from one CTE area to another, then attempting to replicate the ideas in other communities with other community colleges and partners. Transparency in the development of local and state policies, procedures, and support materials was crucial for the transfer of ideas from one site to another. Enhancing outcomes assessment was a goal of all three sites so that additional information could be shared internally and externally to promote program replication.

Despite these positive signs, local leaders continued to be challenged in their efforts to weave together modest and disparate funding streams. The administrative rules associated with various funding sources – e.g., when and how dollars can be spent,

how they can and cannot be co-mingled – were cumbersome and sometimes also incomprehensible. Practitioners wondered about the purpose of these rules and whether ultimately students were helped or hindered by them, despite the programs’ dedication to following the rules and their efforts to comply with guidelines in order to meet student needs. Bureaucratic hurdles that impede the implementation of career pathway programs need careful study. Assuming that the needs of low-skilled adults are not going away and in fact are growing, the importance of finding ways to serve diverse low skilled, low income adult populations becomes an increasingly important endeavor.

Last, this study offers an important lens through which to observe the community college as a nexus for enhancing America’s equity agenda and finding ways to enhance access and opportunity for

second-chance learners who have heretofore experienced limited success in postsecondary education. Though a great deal of information is still missing on the effectiveness and benefits of career pathway programs, a growing body of qualitative evidence documents a sincere commitment by community colleges and other partners to serve low-skilled adults. Results of this study reveal carefully constructed, articulated, and contextualized curricula; productive relationships with employers and partner organizations; and comprehensive support services show promise for meeting the needs of low-skilled, low-wage learners. Through concerted efforts to implement career pathways, access to postsecondary education and to family-sustaining wage careers may be within the reach of more adults. As these programs evolve, additional rigorous research to assess program and student outcomes needs to become a high priority.

Key Features of Selected Career Pathway Programs

FEATURES

| | Program components / curricular elements | Support services | Processes / persistence and completion | Organizational structures, college and partners | Barriers and challenges | Scalability, sustainability, and transferability | |
|------------------------------|---|--|--|--|---|---|--|
| <i>CPI-Ouachita</i> | <p>CPI-eligible students who are adult caretakers, parents, or relatives of a child under the age of 19 who is deemed financially needy; former or current recipient of TEA cash assistance; current recipient of food stamps, ARKIds, or Medicaid, or earning 200% of the FPL or less; majority are female low-wage employees.</p> | <p>Pre-college curriculum offered at Ouachita Technical College; multiple occupations targeted for career pathways; segmented (stackable) courses; self-paced developmental math; ABE a part of pathway; computer-aided instruction.</p> | <p>Services provided by college (case manager and FYIG) and Workforce Center partners. Key administrators familiar with students' needs; case managers assist students with job placement. academic and career counseling, financial aid, transportation, child care, support services for students with disabilities.</p> | <p>Job readiness class required; flexible scheduling; courses offered at sites convenient to students; FYIGs.</p> | <p>Leadership sited at community college; well-coordinated services between college and One-Stop partner; college actively reaches out to local employers to develop curriculum; state support; state developing formative evaluation of pathway sites.</p> | <p>Developmental courses not connected to pathway; some lack of program alignment (e.g., CNA to LPN); students are hired after completing one- and two-semester credentials; local workforce demand for certificate programs but college is nearing limit for maintaining accreditation ratio for a community college.</p> | |
| <i>GST-Shoreline</i> | <p>Primarily White males but some immigrants from Latin America, English language learners, veterans, out-of-school youth.</p> | <p>Pre-college curriculum offered at Shoreline Community College; contextualized ESL and ABE curriculum focused on the automotive industry; team teaching; computer-aided instruction; team and project-based assignments.</p> | <p>Community (workforce intermediary) agency, program director, and community college faculty provide support services; key administrators familiar with students and their needs; offer case management, child care and transportation assistance; mental health services; assistance with part-time jobs, career counseling.</p> | <p>Job readiness class required prior to entry; flexible scheduling.</p> | <p>Leadership sited at community college; well-established employer partners and college AAS program; employer partners assist with internship placement; state support.</p> | <p>Articulated goal to transfer ideas to other sites; offering website, curriculum materials, and teacher guides; model already used by other Job Corps, community college, and high school sites; considering replicating ABE & ESL integration in other occupational areas at SCC; expansion of the program and growth in student enrollment is underway.</p> | |
| <i>Carreras en Salud-IPL</i> | <p>Immigrant Latinos, primarily females, lacking a high school diploma or GED; low literacy, low income associated with low-wage jobs or unemployment; some are younger adult Latinos native to the Chicago area.</p> | <p>Pre-college curriculum offered at the CBO, IPL; contextualized ESL curriculum focused on nursing; bilingual ESL teachers; multiple entry points; curriculum aligned with the industry; ABE a part of pathway; GED infused with technical content; computer-aided instruction; team and project-based assignments.</p> | <p>CBO partners and program faculty provide services; key administrators familiar with population and needs; offer case management, academic and non-academic counseling, financial aid, child care vouchers, transportation assistance, tuition and books, career counseling, and job placement.</p> | <p>Job readiness infused into curriculum; flexible scheduling; students can stop out and re-enter pathway without repeating course work.</p> | <p>Leadership sited at CBO; employer partners co-developed curriculum and coordinated placement; established articulation with AAS and BS programs; sustained funding from foundations; state support for pilot year, beginning to gather data for formative evaluations.</p> | <p>Continual search for funding for support services; entrenched college operations and faculty contractual agreements; lack of alignment between pre-college instruction and college placement cut-offs.</p> | <p>CBO aggressively seeks funding from public sources, private foundations, and not-for-profit organizations; career pathway model transferred from manufacturing to health care within the auspices of the CBO; partnership between CBO and City College strong, but lack of alignment between CBO and system-level community colleges may weaken potential for long-term sustainability and scalability; commitment to research and evaluation encourages good practice.</p> |

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