

# Illinois Shifting Gears Policy Evaluation

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## INTRODUCTION

Illinois Shifting Gears is a multilevel initiative that has simultaneously created bridge programs in the field and altered state policy to facilitate the creation of more programs in the future. These efforts have informed each other, giving policymakers the opportunity to interact with practitioners, troubleshoot bridge programs, and make refinements to new and existing policies. The evaluation of Illinois Shifting Gears has two major parts. The first mixed method evaluation was completed in June 2009, and it examined eight pilot demonstration bridge programs offered by ten Illinois community colleges. This report, authored by Bragg, Harmon, Kirby, and Kim (2009), is available from the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL), University of Illinois.

This second evaluation focuses on the policymaking process associated with the Illinois Shifting Gears initiative. Although the role of the pilots and the Shifting Gears Steering Committee are discussed, this evaluation primarily focuses on the efforts of the Shifting Gears Working Group, which consisted of a small group of state staff representing the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) and the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), project consultants, and three members of the evaluation team. This policy evaluation examined the following questions:

- To what extent have state level stakeholders worked together to make policy changes that will remove or minimize impediments to the development and implementation of effective bridge programs for low-skilled adults?
- What state-level policies were targeted for change, how did stakeholders engage in the policy change process, and what changes were made or are anticipated?
- How did stakeholders collaborate to develop data infrastructure, and how have data influenced the policymaking process?

Copies of this second report, authored by Weitzel (2009), are also available from OCCRL, University of Illinois.

## METHODS

The findings reported here are drawn primarily from a series of semi-structured interviews with 13 Illinois Shifting Gears Working Group members in mid June and early July 2009. Participants included project consultants and representatives of the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL), and Women Employed. These interviews, which generally lasted 60-75 minutes, were conducted primarily by phone. Participants were asked a series of questions concerning the collaborative process, relevant policy context, and key policy decisions in Shifting Gears 1.0. Interview notes and recordings were reviewed to identify common themes and frequent responses across the interviews. Reports and proposals for Shifting Gears 1.0 and 2.0 were also reviewed by the evaluator.

The role of OCCRL's lead evaluators evolved over the course of Shifting Gears 1.0 as they moved beyond a traditional evaluation role to also become more active in project planning and development. Their experience with workforce development initiatives within the state and across the country and their broad knowledge of relevant research proved to be an asset to the Shifting Gears Working Group. Given their broader involvement, the lead evaluators on Shifting Gears from OCCRL decided to take a step back from leadership of the policy evaluation and employ a researcher who had not been part of prior Shifting Gears activities. This individual was asked to assume responsibility for data collection for the policy evaluation. So, while OCCRL's lead evaluators provided guidance on instrument design and the interpretation and reporting of aggregated results, they did not have access to the raw data or field notes.

This process allowed all members of the Shifting Gears Working Group to contribute to the policy evaluation, enabling everyone to speak freely about past experiences, accomplishments, and challenges and to envision future possibilities.

## **ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN SHIFTING GEARS 1.0**

### **Stakeholder Collaboration**

Shifting Gears project leaders at ICCB assembled an experienced and knowledgeable Working Group with a broad range of expertise across Adult Education (AE), career and technical education (CTE), the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), student support services, and many other aspects of workforce development associated with community colleges. Group members described their interactions as very open and collaborative, with members reaching consensus on virtually every major decision in the project.

### **Bridge Definition**

Drawing on extensive input from a range of state and local stakeholders, the Working Group developed a specific and thorough bridge definition and embedded it in WIA, CTE, and AE policy. This definition is the crucial first step in standardizing and institutionalizing a common approach to bridge programs.

### **Adult Education and CTE Classification**

Bridges were added to a new classification structure for Adult Education and CTE programs, which will allow direct funding of bridge instruction. The Working Group also developed guidelines to clarify how state and federal funds can be used by Adult Education providers to support bridge programs.

### **WIA 40% Expenditure Requirement**

Illinois' Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) now requires local Workforce Investment Boards to spend at least 40% of their adult and dislocated worker funds on job training. While this policy change began prior to other policy work associated with Shifting Gears, the close alignment of the Shifting Gears Initiative's goals with the WIA 40% Expenditure Requirement provided additional support for this recommended policy change. The Illinois Workforce Investment Board adopted the 40% Expenditure Requirement in November, 2007. Changing training policy to allow bridge programs to count as training is expected to open up a substantial stream of funding for bridge programs in Illinois in the future.

### **Tracking Transitions**

The Working Group collaborated with ICCB staff to begin designing and implementing data systems to track the success of bridge programs in moving students into credit programs or higher levels of CTE course work. Documenting the on-going performance of students enrolled in the bridge pilot programs (and other existing bridge programs prompted by the Critical Skills Shortage Initiative and related grants) will be crucial to improving student completion rates and building support for bridge programs in the future.

### **Student Support Services**

Analysis of the pilot programs identified models for the provision of support services that show promise of student success and appear to be sustainable. This knowledge will help shape policy strategy on this challenging issue in the second phase of Shifting Gears, which the Working Group calls Shifting Gears 2.0.

### **Programs of Study Link**

Bridge programs are now recognized as one of the major on-ramps to Perkins IV Programs of Study (POS) by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and ICCB. The decision to use Perkins IV POS as

an umbrella policy for implementation of bridge programs, which appears to be somewhat unique to Illinois among the Midwest states associated with the Joyce Foundation's Shifting Gears Initiative, effectively connects bridge programs to larger, well-established state and federal policy initiatives.

### **Raising Awareness Through Pilots**

The pilot programs not only helped state agency leaders identify and refine necessary policy changes but also cultivated a set of champions to push for the development of bridge programs with agencies not yet fully engaged (e.g., Illinois Department of Human Services, the Illinois Department of Employment Security) and with community colleges, AE providers, community-based organizations (CBOs) and others located at the local level. In Shifting Gears 2.0, the Working Group and these champions hope to apply both top-down and bottom-up pressure on policy leaders to support and further advance bridge programs for low-skilled adults.

## **PARTICIPATION, COLLABORATION, AND TIME MANAGEMENT**

Given the size and breadth of the Shifting Gears Working Group, the collaborative process went relatively smoothly. Although many members came from different agencies, organizations and professional backgrounds, the group developed a common language over the course of the project and helped each other understand the basic workings of their respective departments and constituents. Respondents noted that Working Group participants generally provided constructive, well-stated input and feedback and rarely engaged in turf battles or protective behavior. Virtually all major decisions were made by consensus. Nonetheless, Shifting Gears was not without some complications, and lessons can be drawn from them to improve project development in 2.0.

### **Group Composition and Stages of Involvement**

Working group members generally agreed that the team was composed of the right people with sufficient levels of authority and expertise to move the agenda forward. However, multiple members noted that engaging the entire group in the planning process sooner may have reduced misunderstanding and backtracking at later dates. Logistical complications and some false starts are to be expected in a project of this nature, but taking additional time for strategic planning at the outset with all members of the group would have been beneficial in the long run.

### **Time Management**

Considering the other professional responsibilities facing its members, the Working Group was able to contribute a substantial amount of time and energy to the project, which is a testament to strong project management and a sincere commitment of members to the fundamental goal of serving low-skilled adult learners. In addition to the ongoing communication among individuals involved in the project, the whole group met frequently in person or through conference calls as the project evolved. Endorsing the importance of communications and information sharing, some members noted that a "less is more" approach to meetings and project communication may have led to a more efficient use of time. More specifically, some members felt that group meetings could have devoted more time to strategic issues and less time to status updates and project details. As the Working Group proceeds with its work, it may be helpful to differentiate members by the level of detail that is appropriate for their involvement and responsibilities.

Perhaps the overarching lesson is that stakeholders, even those committed to a project, need to be strategically engaged in terms of both timing and content. At every level, the attention of key leaders and policymakers is finite, and requests for their involvement must be clearly defined and well timed. As the number of involved stakeholders expands in 2.0, it will be important to utilize their time and resources as efficiently as possible.

## **KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND DATA MANAGEMENT**

Illinois Shifting Gears has brought together many pieces of the workforce development puzzle. Laying the foundation for effective bridge programs requires action across several institutional sectors and agencies, and it is a significant achievement that the Working Group was able to bring the necessary expertise to the table. In comparison to previous efforts with bridge programs in Illinois, Shifting Gears made great strides in removing barriers to bridges and in using data to assess program effectiveness. Previous bridge initiatives, like those implemented through the Critical Skills Shortage Initiative, did not have a rigorous evaluation or make policy changes to negate the existing disincentives to bridge programs.

### **Utilizing Expertise**

In decentralized initiatives of this sort, developing a framework or process for sharing knowledge can be challenging. Respondents generally felt that the Working Group identified most of the relevant roadblocks to bridges by the end of Shifting Gears 1.0 and worked through the idiosyncrasies of AE, CTE, WIA, developmental education and other aspects of the community college. However, the Working Group may have missed some opportunities to benefit from the expertise of its members because an effective way to share such knowledge was not fully developed during Shifting Gears 1.0. If the group had been able to develop a working knowledge of the relevant sectors and programs at an earlier stage, some aspects of implementation may have gone more smoothly. Some respondents regretted that the Steering Committee had minimal impact on project planning, in part due to the timing of the Committee's engagement and a perceived lack of clarity about their role.

### **Data Sharing and Analysis**

As noted below, the use of data to advance the policy agenda is a key piece of Illinois Shifting Gears' theory of change. The Working Group assembled an experienced sub-committee to formulate performance questions and identify appropriate indicators for assessing bridge pilots. Unfortunately, difficulty collecting data and sharing it with the appropriate analysts slowed the collaborative process. Although information about data systems was provided and the groundwork was laid to support data sharing, the priorities of Shifting Gears 1.0 competed with the other data collection and reporting requirements of the ICCB, leading to delays. The data subcommittee operated on a collegial basis, making plans and sharing expectations on an informal basis, rather than developing formal data sharing agreements. In hindsight, this was a mistake. Numerous working group members identified data sharing challenges as the most notable complication to the Shifting Gears 1.0 work process. Fortunately, respondents were relatively optimistic that these difficulties could be overcome with sufficient attention from the ICCB's leadership and through the development of formal data sharing agreements with key parties engaged in providing, analyzing and reporting data.

## **IMPLEMENTING THE THEORY OF CHANGE**

In comparison to other Midwest states involved in Shifting Gears that have focused heavily on engaging upper-level state actors, the Illinois Working Group directed most of its efforts toward agency level policymaking and mid-tier management. Illinois' theory of change posits that existing policy impediments to bridge programs must be removed and best practices in programming must be identified before engagement of the governor or legislature can be fruitful. This line of thinking reflects the Working Group members' experience with structural, fiscal, political and cultural aspects of policymaking in Illinois and their awareness of current economic pressures. Given recent developments in the governor's office and tight budgets across the state, Working Group members felt that the likelihood of success would be enhanced if buy-in and expertise was grown within key state agencies and at the local level before support was pursued at the highest levels of state government. Some respondents had hoped

to broaden the Working Group's outreach in Shifting Gears 1.0, but changes in state government that occurred in fall 2008 through summer 2009 prompted the Working Group to maintain its level of effort at the mid-management level. This was viewed as an unfortunate but necessary development to insure the long-term future of Shifting Gears 2.0 and encourage implementation of bridge programs. Virtually all members of the Working Group supported this bottom-up theory of change, and felt it was the most prudent course of action for the state.

### **Pilot Programs as a Lever for Change**

Pilot programs are a cornerstone of Illinois' theory of change because they provide agency leaders an opportunity to test and refine bridge program policy and will eventually help them garner the support of peers within their agencies and with legislative and gubernatorial leaders. Also, in a large and decentralized community college system like Illinois', pilot programs are often the best way to jumpstart program implementation. Although the bridge pilots turned out to be more dissimilar than was anticipated at the outset of the project, the Working Group drew important lessons from these programs. Major policy benefits included improvements to the bridge definition, recognition of interdepartmental issues at the local level, and identification of promising practices in critical areas like support services and contextualized instruction.

The area of support services is one of the most complex problem facing bridge programs in both policy and practice, and the pilot programs have improved policymakers' understanding of where additional resources are needed. Specifically, the pilot programs strongly reinforced the importance of case management and transition coordination. As respondents noted elsewhere in this report and others generated by the Shifting Gears 1.0 initiative, the Working Group needs to develop a coherent strategy for support services and collaborate more closely with the Department of Human Services in 2.0. These efforts will greatly benefit from lessons drawn from the bridge program pilots. (For additional details, see Bragg, Harmon, Kirby, and Kim's Shifting Gears pilot evaluation [2009] available through OCCRL.)

### **Removing Barriers to Bridges**

The work outlined by Illinois' theory of change is proceeding according to plan. The Working Group has successfully identified and removed existing *disincentives* for bridge programs, embedded changes in agency policy and technical support, and cultivated champions at the local level. Notably, Illinois has linked bridge programs to Programs of Study under Perkins IV, a larger, well-developed policy initiative that has the potential to enhance the role of bridges' in the overall workforce development pipeline. This crucial connection allows leaders of Shifting Gears to tie bridge programs to funding streams and policy discussions that are already in motion, rather than pushing bridge programs as a new, disconnected strategy that is competing for diminishing funding at either the state or local level.

### **Transitioning to 2.0**

Working group members recognize that removing the disincentives to bridge programs is a necessary first step in a longer process of generating support for policy proposals associated with Shifting Gears 1.0. While the agency policymaking and pilot implementation in 1.0 was concrete and linear, the next phase of institutionalizing bridge programs is expected to require an even more strategic use of communication to educate stakeholders both inside and outside community colleges. The composition of the Working Group itself is not likely to change dramatically since most members are committed to continuing their involvement, but additional partners need to be engaged in Shifting Gears 2.0, including local Workforce Investment Boards, the Department of Human Services, additional community college leaders, and a variety of state and regional, and local professional organizations. Working Group members acknowledge that they need to work together to cultivate champions in the legislature (something a few dissenting members believed could have begun toward the latter stage of 1.0).

To accomplish this goal, Working Group members recognize that data are needed to sell bridge programs, and they worry about the initiative being hampered by data sharing difficulties. Formal data sharing agreements should limit the kinds of delays experienced in the past and help define the dissemination needed to advance the policy agenda. Some Working Group members also noted that deeper shifts in data management may be needed to use data to improve program performance. Members suggested that additional performance measures could be adopted and more two-way information sharing with local practitioners could be pursued. An expansion of data management capacity at the ICCB may be needed to allow for this transition to more performance-oriented evaluation.

Working Group members do not expect to see an explosion of bridge programs in the early phases of 2.0 but they are optimistic that fertile ground has been laid by Shifting Gears 1.0. They further recognize that, despite state budget shortfalls, opportunities exist to advance bridge programs with monies flowing to the state through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Many members of the Shifting Gears Working Group play key roles in administering those funds, and they are very active in helping local entities recognize bridge programs as an important tool for meeting their regional goals in workforce development.

Finally, consistent messaging and support from agency leadership combined with bottom-up pressure from local stakeholders is predicted to encourage community college leaders to implement bridge programs. Shifting Gears partners will help college leaders use bridge programs as an “on ramp” to various workforce development and employment programs, including new opportunities through the state’s Perkins IV Programs of Study roll-out. In a decentralized system with considerable financial limitations at the present time, Working Group members recognize the importance of offering a consistent message and believe that this path is the most likely to foster sustainable change.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Illinois’ Shifting Gears Initiative set pragmatic, concrete policy goals for 1.0 and successfully achieved them to a large extent. An experienced team of agency-level policymakers, consultants, and evaluators drew on local feedback to identify and systematically remove major impediments to bridge programs. The Working Group reached consensus on virtually all major decisions, although issues of time management and data and knowledge sharing hampered the collaborative process at some points in time. These issues were eventually overcome in 1.0, but lessons from them can be incorporated into the planning and implementation process for Shifting Gears 2.0. It is important to recognize that bridge programs are but one of several competing priorities for the vast majority of stakeholders. As the range of stakeholders expands in 2.0 and includes more organizations outside of the community college system, it will be necessary to differentiate players by their interests and levels of activity and adjust communication and information dissemination strategies accordingly.

Another key lesson from 1.0 is that extra time taken for planning at the outset may ultimately save time by minimizing false starts, confusion, and backtracking at later dates. A clear vision needs to be established at the outset of Shifting Gears 2.0, and it will be important to systematically draw on the knowledge of project partners during this process. The achievements of Shifting Gears 1.0 have put many of the key policy pieces in place, and Programs of Study and new workforce development funds through ARRA are providing supportive policy frameworks and funding to drive an increase in programs. As Shifting Gears 2.0 begins, the Working Group needs to identify crucial stakeholders who still need to be engaged, and most importantly, define what success should look like in coming years. Shifting Gears 2.0 presents a fundamentally different set of obstacles and opportunities, and the Working Group should periodically revisit both the internal strategies for managing the project and the external communication strategies to deal with these new challenges.



## REFERENCES

Bragg, D., Harmon, T., Kirby, C., & Kim, S. (2009). *Initial results of Illinois' Shifting Gears pilot demonstration evaluation*. Champaign, IL: Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois.