



Bridges,



Pathways,

&



Leadership



Programs and Policies
to Move More Low-Skilled
Adults Into and Through
Postsecondary Education



WISCONSIN COUNCIL ON
**children
& families**

Raising Voices to Make Every Kid Count

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About the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families is a multi-issue, non-profit children's advocacy organization committed to ensuring that every child in Wisconsin grows up in a just and nurturing family and community. WCCF's efforts in workforce development are based on the fact that kids are more likely to thrive when their parents have access to jobs, training, and income supports that lead to family economic security. Through policy analysis and research, as well as aggressive advocacy, the Council seeks ways to bridge the growing skills gap in a manner that serves both the changing needs of employers and the continued struggle of many of Wisconsin's working poor and unemployed.

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Executive Summary

A significant skilled worker shortage can already be felt in Wisconsin, with many employers unable to find enough workers with the skills needed to perform and succeed on the job. This is true at the national level as well, with 80 percent of employers responding to a recent National Association of Manufacturers survey saying they are experiencing a shortage of qualified workers overall, and more than 90 percent indicating a moderate or severe shortage of qualified skilled production employees (such as machinists, operators, and technicians).¹ Periodic Manpower, Inc. surveys of employer needs also indicate shortages across a range of positions, from salespeople to teachers to skilled trades.²

Employees, in turn, are seeing that in this rapidly changing and increasingly knowledge-based economy they need to possess new skills and higher educational credentials in order to earn a family-supporting wage. In fact, an estimated two-thirds of all new jobs created between 2000 and 2010 (and a higher portion of jobs that pay a family-supporting wage) will require at least some postsecondary training.³ Another indication of the growing value of higher education levels is the fact that wages for those without a high school degree have actually declined 19 percent in the last 30 years, while wages for those with a college degree increased 16 percent.⁴

But the maxim, *the more education the better*, is not by itself very helpful in shaping a state policy response to the shortage of skilled workers. Due to limited resources, the question becomes: what level of education pays off in the job market and is reasonably achievable by low-skilled adults?

A growing body of research suggests the answer is to

focus on moving more low-skilled workers into and through postsecondary educational programs such as technical diploma and associate degree programs of at least one year in length. When Wisconsin's workers are able to complete this level of schooling and training, as compared to stopping at high school or GED completion, they reap meaningful earnings gains and employers are able to remain productive and competitive.

Low-skilled adults face a number of unique challenges as they attempt to retool their skills and earn higher educational credentials, and states must design adult basic education (ABE) and postsecondary programs accordingly. Two promising approaches to doing just that are “career pathway” and “bridge” programs that:

- (1) focus on accelerating the time it takes to earn valuable credentials and skills,
- (2) contextualize courses and materials to actual in-demand jobs and industries,
- (3) foster more transitions between the basic coursework and postsecondary programming, and
- (4) provide enhanced student supports for low-income and other at-risk students.

These elements should be mingled in comprehensive career pathway and bridge programs at our technical colleges and 2-year universities – informed by local job markets and with input from employers on the skills they most need from workers. Existing programs in Arkansas and Washington State, to name just two, provide examples that should prove informative for Wisconsin's higher education leaders and legislators in this effort.

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As policymakers and higher education officials respond to the need to increase the skills of all of the state's workers, legislators should examine existing state and local policies and practices in order to remove statutory, rule, or procedural barriers to program implementation and success. In Wisconsin that means taking the following steps:

1. Depart from a longstanding reliance on and focus on the GED by prohibiting the use of the GED as a prerequisite for occupational postsecondary programming. Allow widespread dual enrollment in both basic education courses and certificate and degree programs where appropriate.
2. Collect and disseminate data that is needed to gain a clear view of the impact of our investments in adult basic education programming, including tracking and reporting back to the legislature annually on:

- the numbers of students entering adult basic education programming;
- those that complete basic education programming and gain the GED or HSED;
- those ABE students that transition to postsecondary programming;
- what programs those students enter (e.g. certificates, technical diplomas, or associate degree programs), and

- whether they complete any postsecondary programming within 5 years years.

These data points must include the numbers of *all* students entering, then gaining the GED, transitioning and so on, not merely those who have stated a goal of college completion or obtaining that credential, as is currently done.

3. Require the Wisconsin Technical College System Board to set goals for transitions from adult basic education to post-secondary programming, as other states have done with much success.

Strides must be made now to improve how we educate and train our residents, and more specifically, how we can help move more working adults into and through postsecondary programs.

4. Examine and evaluate the sufficiency of the current level of state funding for adult basic education programming – funding that is currently significantly lower than neighboring states, against whom we are competing for skilled workers and businesses.

The demographic and economic changes that have led to the shortage in skilled workers are irreversible. Taking these steps would send a strong and clear signal to our colleges and universities, to other adult basic education providers, and to the administrators of existing state and local workforce programs that strides must be made now to improve how we educate and train our residents, and more specifically, how we can help move more working adults into and through post-secondary programs.

Low-Skills Prevalent in and Problematic for Wisconsin's Workforce

Mention of a skilled workforce shortage in Wisconsin will come as no surprise. Much has been written about the significant economic and demographic changes that have taken place in Wisconsin – and indeed around the nation – in recent years that have resulted in a growing shortage of workers with the requisite skills in a number of industries and professions. Baby boomers are beginning to retire, more non-English speakers are entering the workforce, and many of our high school students (both those who graduate and those who do not) are entering the workforce with deficiencies in basic skills (such as computer literacy and basic math and English proficiency).

As recently as 2005, 400,854 Wisconsin adults (25 and older) lacked a high school degree or a GED.⁵ Large portions of those who *do* graduate remain at low skill levels. For instance, in 2001, 30 percent of students entering two-year colleges required remedial education courses in reading, writing, and math. Eleven percent of students entering the state's four-year colleges needed remediation in math, and nearly seven percent needed remedial courses in English.⁶

Subsequently, many employers are having a hard time finding qualified employees, even for mid and low-level skilled positions. Several key industries in the state

face shortages: skilled manufacturing, health care, and skilled trades, among others.⁷ Added to this workforce shortage is the fact that labor force participation is already high in Wisconsin compared to the national average.⁸ In other words, there is no large, currently untapped group of workers waiting in the wings to meet employers' needs.

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Likewise, workers are finding that the new economy job market does not hold as many family-supporting jobs for those with only a high school diploma – or less – as it once did. Even those with some college but no degree often find themselves mired in jobs that do not offer a family-supporting wage, much less health insurance or retirement benefits. New skills and higher credentials are required of

workers in order to become economically self-sufficient in today's economy.

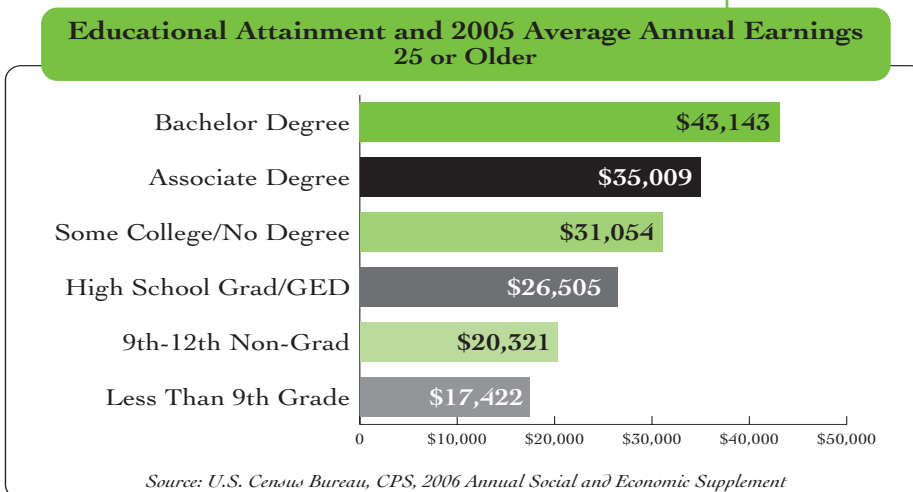
Increasing the skills and education levels of our workers in order to meet employers' needs and to raise workers' wages is a critical economic development and family economic security challenge facing the state. Fortunately, a significant body of research indicates there are ways to meet this challenge head on.

Research Suggests Focusing on the “Tipping Point”

When workers are able to upgrade their skills and obtain higher educational credentials they reap a significant labor market payoff. The following chart shows the higher earnings that typically come with higher levels of education. Also, the gap in earnings between the lowest and highest education levels has grown dramatically as our economy has changed in recent years, producing an even greater *earnings premium* on higher education levels than there has been in the past.⁹

Along with increased earnings, those with higher education levels are much more likely to work full-time, and to have access to jobs with benefits. Furthermore, unemployment levels decrease as educational levels increase: for example, on a national basis, recent unemployment rates were 8.4 percent for those with less than a high school education, 4 percent for those with an associate degree, and 3.3 percent for those with a bachelor degree.¹⁰

The benefits of education are not monopolized by the



worker, but are felt by their families and their communities as well.¹¹

But the maxim, *the more education the better*, is not by itself very helpful in shaping a state policy response to the shortage of skilled workers. Due to limited resources, the question becomes: what level of education pays off in the job market and is reasonably achievable by low-skilled adults, given the challenges they face?

Recent research conducted in Washington State is having an impact around the nation on how states answer this very question.

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“Tipping Point” Study

This study was conducted for the community and technical college system in Washington State, prior to which little was known of the educational and employment outcomes for low-skilled adults who entered their colleges.¹²

Researchers analyzed the experiences and outcomes of those 25 and older with a high school education or less, along with those 18 to 24 who lacked a high school diploma or GED. (By not graduating, the latter group had effectively thrust themselves into the

workforce, whether they were employed or not.) This sample group totaled about one-third of all students entering a community or technical college for the first time during the test period, including adult basic education (ABE) and English as a second language (ESL) students.

The higher students’ educational attainment after five years, the higher the wages they earned on average – not surprisingly.

What is informative is the fact that compared to students who earned fewer than ten college credits, those who took at least one year's worth of college-credit courses and earned a credential (such as an occupational certificate or associate degree) had an average annual earnings advantage of:

- \$7,000 for students who started out in ESL, and
- \$8,500 for those who started in ABE or GED preparation.

Unfortunately, only 4 to 6 percent of either group (ESL and ABE/GED prep students) ended up getting to this critical level - 45 or more college credits (equal to one full year of study because they use a quarterly academic year).

The results are consistent with other research that indicates earning an occupational certificate (equal to two-semester of full-time study) provides a significant earnings boost compared to individuals with just some college but no degree. Other studies have also found that the wage gains associated with postsecondary education of *less* than a year are negligible.

The bottom line finding from the Washington State research is that there is a *tipping point* level of education and credential attainment at which there is a substantial boost to earnings for adults with a high school diploma or less who enter higher education through a community college, and that this tipping point is a post-GED credential and about one year of postsecondary study.

The “Tipping Point” in Wisconsin?

The value of postsecondary programs of typically a year or more, resulting in a post-GED credential is clearly illustrated in the Tipping Point study conducted in Washington State. Is the same true in Wisconsin? Recent data presented by the Center

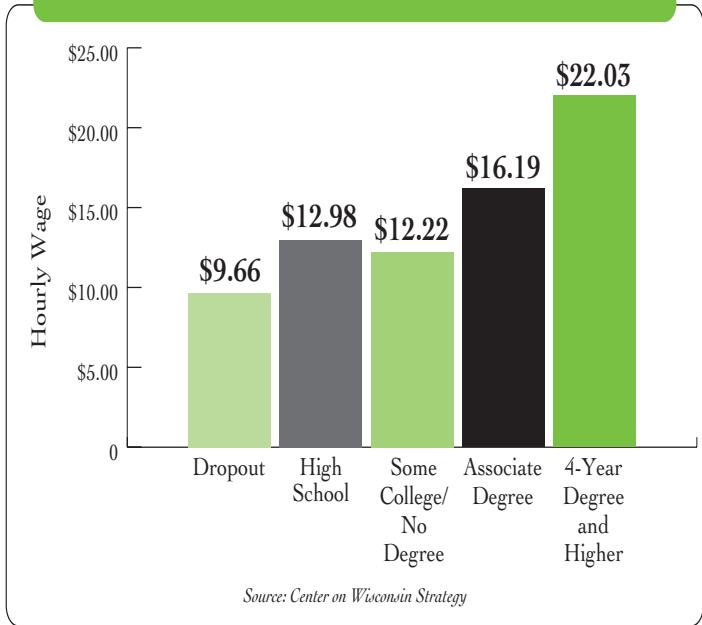
on Wisconsin Strategy suggest as much. The chart below recreates data from the Center’s recent publication, *Back to Basics: Strengthening Adult Basic Education in Wisconsin*.

The jump in average wages from the Some College-No Degree category to the Associate Degree category is significant - a 32.5 percent increase. This indicates that at that latter level of educational attainment, significantly better jobs are to be had in the Wisconsin job market.

Other data indicates that this will continue to be the case. Over the next decade, for instance, 77 percent of new job openings will require less than a four-year degree.¹³ These are not all low-level service sector jobs, but include many good-paying skilled positions in the trades, manufacturing, health care, and mid level service positions.

“Tipping Point” research has highlighted the need to get beyond the GED, and to focus on moving more low-skilled adults into and through postsecondary programs.

Education/Wages Connection in Wisconsin



Adult Basic Education Practices and Outcomes are a Key Piece of the Workforce Puzzle

Many adults are not academically or otherwise prepared to enter postsecondary programs directly. They must first complete adult basic education (ABE) courses to gain their GED or High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED), or to increase their skills through remedial coursework.

Efforts to get more low-skilled adults into and through postsecondary education, therefore, need to include and engage the ABE system (through the technical colleges and community based organizations providing these programs) and take into account its funding, structures, students, and current outcomes.

Many low-skilled adults entering ABE experience a number of barriers to successful completion of those programs, and to making that valuable transition to a postsecondary program. They are often juggling school with family and work obligations, they may lack recent experience in academic settings, and they often lack language proficiency and basic study skills and habits.

The manner in which adult basic education is provided has come under scrutiny in recent years. ABE is traditionally taught in a classroom, with the material in the context of family and citizenship issues. Alternatively, and as will be seen below in the Washington State example, many have turned to teaching basic skills in the context of work and even specific jobs as a way of increasing motivation and improving completion rates.

Critics have also noted how in many cases completion

of ABE programs did not provide easy entry into subsequent postsecondary programs. For instance, GED gainers often have to take significant amounts of remedial education before beginning a postsecondary program. When this is the case, the length of time it takes to get into and through an entire postsecondary program can be increased dramatically, and completion rates correspondingly decrease.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the outcomes of traditional ABE programs are often poor, with many dropouts and few who transition to postsecondary schooling.¹⁴ Many adult students drop out at several points along

the educational spectrum, a situation often referred to as the “leaky pipeline.” Fixing the leaks in the basic education and postsecondary systems, and where those two systems connect, will be key to helping working adults increase their skills and reach the tipping point.

Efforts to get more low-skilled adults into and through postsecondary education, therefore need to include and engage the ABE system.

Best Practices Highlight Potential Program Models and Key Program Elements

A number of states have taken action in response to the difficulties of providing ABE to low-skilled adults, to the unique challenges working adult students face, and to the need to get these students through basic education and into and through postsecondary programs.

Following are descriptions of two such state efforts. These programs in Arkansas and Washington State include a number of critical program elements and provide good models for improving the outcomes for low-skilled adult students.

Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative Case Study

The Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative is a workforce development program intent on increasing the numbers of adult workers, particularly those who are low-income, who get into and complete postsecondary schooling. The Initiative – which is a statewide effort in place at eleven two-year colleges in Arkansas – was inspired by the Southeast Arkansas College Career Pathways Program.

Higher education officials in Arkansas started out with the belief that their traditional service delivery model in higher education may be serving those who immediately enroll after high school, but that it probably was not serving non-traditional students very well (a growing population). They wanted to create a system in which working adults, who face a number of challenges in coming back to school, had better access to and support going through post-secondary programs. They wanted to see more adults coming into the system, and they wanted to see more adults *completing* their programs of study.

An important initial step in the Arkansas program’s development was the conscious effort to clearly identify and very specifically describe the challenges faced by and needs of adult students. Some of these challenges and needs are:

- A clear connection between training programs and real job opportunities.
- The need for extensive remedial coursework to prepare for college credit courses, which can significantly extend the time required to earn a college credential.
- Convenient locations and scheduling, especially weekend and evening classes.

- Access to financial aid, particularly when taking few credits.
- Adequate academic advising, monitoring, and support services, such as tutoring.
- A heightened need for career counseling, including providing information on available training and related career opportunities.
- Adequate access to support services such as child care and transportation.

The central element to the Initiative is a set of clearly delineated pathways of training and employment. These are written out maps showing paths students can take, describing the various courses at each step that must be completed before moving on to the next step along the pathway. They often contain a combination of non-credit and credit courses.

For example, one of the six pathways in the Arkansas Initiative is Nursing and Allied

Health. It begins with a noncredit employability certificate or a college credit certified nursing assistant (CNA) certificate of proficiency that qualify students for a number of different entry-level jobs in the health care field. Because the pathway and its steps are clearly delineated, students can step out of and reenter the pathway as their desires and work needs dictate. Farther down the pathway, students enter advanced college credit programs such as a Licensed Practical Nurse program.

Five other pathways have been developed: (1) business, (2) education, (3) emergency medical technician/paramedic, (4) manufacturing, and (5) welding.

Importantly, there is a close connection between the

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courses and training included in the pathways and real jobs that are available in the local job market.

Local employers are an integral part of the development process of each pathway. They help confirm that workers are indeed in demand in the various fields, they help ensure the coursework and skills obtained are what are actually needed on the job, and they provide internship or work study opportunities in many cases. They provide this input by taking part in regular pathway focus groups.

Another important part of the Initiative are the “Workforce Alliance for Growth in the Economy,” or WAGE, bridge programs. Bridge programs are meant to serve those students who are not prepared to enter directly into college credit programs. They are an integral part of many pathway efforts, as the numbers of working adults needing that basic skill remediation is high.

In bridge programs, basic education courses are often contextualized, that is, taught in the *context* of work and even specific jobs. Doing so can reduce the overall amount of instruction hours needed to get to the next step along the pathway. In their Nursing Track program portion of the pathway, for instance, completing the LPN degree program would take three semesters under the traditional system, and now takes only one year.

Intensive student support services are another key component of the pathway and bridge programs in Arkansas. For instance, a full-time student support consultant describes the various pathways that are available to students, talks of the types of jobs that are available in each field, and so on. This intensive, hands-on support continues through assessment (in the form of needed support services, financial aid needs, career interests, and substance abuse counseling).

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding is used for these consulting positions. In 2005, the state set aside \$16 million of TANF funds to expand the WAGE career pathways model to the 11 community colleges now taking part.

Washington State I-BEST Case Study

Another respected and often-discussed example of basic skills/postsecondary reform is the Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program in Washington State. After the tipping point research was released, officials there devised I-BEST pilot projects. The core of the program is a dual teaching model of instruction – combining both basic skills and job skills training in the same classroom. ABE or ESL teachers and occupational faculty co-teach courses in these programs.

Due to their focus on helping students reach the tipping point (about a year’s worth of postsecondary schooling and a post-GED credential), the I-BEST programs are only allowed for professional-technical programs that include at least one year of college-level training. Like pathway programs, they include many stop-in, step-out points, where students can take what has been completed and work in that given field before moving on to the next step.

Importantly, higher education officials and state legislators in Washington understood that the existing funding formula might inhibit colleges from wanting to take part, given the need for collaboration and planning between both basic education and occupational faculty, which are often highly siloed departments on college campuses. Because of these demands, funding for the I-BEST projects was enhanced by counting the participating students at a 1.75 FTE rate.

There is a close connection between the courses and training included in the pathways and real jobs that are available in the local job market.

Not every student is prepared for such a program of study. In ESL/occupational I-BEST programs, for instance, only “3s” and higher (on the six level ESL testing scale) were eligible to enroll.

The results of the projects have been significant:

- I-BEST students as a whole were five times more likely to earn college credits, and 15 times more likely to complete workforce training than those in traditional programs.
- The workforce training completion rate for just the ESL students was 44 percent, compared to a three percent rate of completion of workforce training for the comparison ESL group.
- The I-BEST students earned an average of 12 workforce and 10 college credits, compared to two workforce credits and three college-level credits for the comparison group.

Officials in Washington determined that the I-BEST programs were valuable first steps along pathways from low skills to higher educational attainment and higher wage jobs. They have noted that a number of important lessons were learned in the early I-BEST pilot projects, which have informed subsequent programs (the I-BEST program has recently been taken statewide in Washington):

- The programs entail significant planning and coordination throughout the process.
- Specifically, administrators and teachers from basic skills and workforce training have to work very closely together, often this is new to colleges.
- Curriculum development and revising is constant, given the changing nature of the labor market and specific jobs.

- Planning has to include other parties, including employers and community organizations.
- Enhanced student supports are critical for these students, as many have had little success in school in the past, even though the lowest-qualified students are not eligible for the programs.

A number of other states have developed pathway and bridge programs similar to the ones described above. Information on some of these other efforts is included under Additional Resources at the back of this report. Just as important as identifying whole

programs that may act as models, is to look widely at these efforts and discern the most notable and important program elements involved.

A few program characteristics appear key to improving postsecondary outcomes for adults with low skills:

- (1) **acceleration,**
- (2) **contextualization,**
- (3) **transitions, and**
- (4) **enhanced student supports.**

Key Program Characteristics

A few program characteristics appear key to improving postsecondary outcomes for adults starting out with low skills:

- (1) acceleration,
- (2) contextualization,
- (3) transitions, and
- (4) enhanced student supports.

Acceleration

The longer it takes working adults to complete programs of study, the higher dropout rates will be. For many working adults who have to take adult basic education offerings before moving on to the certificate or degree programs that can pay off for them in the end, it simply is too long a road. Several states have tried to accelerate their offerings to meet this challenge (often referred to as the “leaky pipeline”), either by allowing students to simultaneously be enrolled in basic education and degree program coursework, or by simultaneously offering the basic courses with any remedial coursework that might also have to be completed. Other methods are to offer condensed

“modules” or “chunks” of coursework that can be completed in a relatively short period of time.

Contextualization

This refers to actually designing the basic skill offerings – reading, writing, math, or language skills – in a work context instead of the traditional family and citizen context used in most basic education courses. The work-focus appears to increase student motivation dramatically. On most campuses vocational staff and basic education staff, which would have to work together in planning such contextualized offerings, are highly siloed, with little interaction between or integration of the two.

Focus on Transitions

A focus on moving more basic education students into subsequent programs is important given what is known about the labor market payoff, or lack thereof, for those students who do not advance to any training beyond their GED. For example, Kentucky set a goal of increasing the number of those transitioning beyond their GED. While they have not yet achieved their goal of 40 percent, they have improved dramatically, from 12 percent originally to 22 percent in 2004.

Enhanced Student Supports

Lastly, in order to move more low-skilled adults into and through post-secondary offerings, there must be enhanced student supports available to them (in the form of academic and career counseling, informing of the availability of other key social supports, mentoring, and so on). As noted earlier, Arkansas took the step of using TANF funds to place counselors at the eleven college campuses involved in their efforts to meet the unique needs of adult learners.¹⁵ And Illinois has implemented the Illinois Student Success

Grant, which is targeted funding to provide the student services needed by economically disadvantaged and academically at-risk students at their community and technical colleges.¹⁶

Moving Forward on Career Pathway and Bridge Programs

These key program elements should be combined in bridge and career pathway programs at our technical colleges and our two-year university campuses.

Interested and motivated campus leadership can learn from the existing research and evidence-based practices presented here along with other examples. They can create their own successful programs, which will help produce better outcomes for low-skilled working adults entering their campuses, and which will help them meet the needs of their local employers.

Such efforts are not completely new to Wisconsin education officials and workforce development professionals. A few individual programs have operated or are currently being run around the state.

The Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership in the Milwaukee area, for instance, is the lead organization in operating the Center of Excellence in Skilled Trades and Industries. This effort is a demand-driven operation in which key employer needs are identified and pre-employment training programs are then developed. Local technical colleges and other local training organizations help develop the curriculum, combining the soft and technical skills required in that particular profession, and resulting in a certificate.

The program has been a successful one. In 2004,

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for example, 150 participants were placed in laborer, utility, and construction jobs at an average starting wage of \$15.80 an hour and with benefits.¹⁷

Two additional current opportunities are worth mentioning.

Importance of “RISE” Initiative

The Wisconsin Technical College System and the Department of Workforce Development are in the process of designing pilot programs along these lines. The effort, which stems from a grant from the Joyce Foundation, is referred to as the RISE (Regional Industry Skills Education) Initiative.¹⁸ Legislators have an opportunity to guide those efforts by establishing useful criteria and an outcome focus that would help eventually take those pilot efforts to scale in a statewide effort to create more opportunities for working Wisconsinites. Not involving interested legislators, who clearly have a role to play in meeting the state’s workforce challenges – both in design and funding – risks slowing down future efforts.

Bridge Programs and W-2

Wisconsin Works (W-2) is the state’s TANF work program, and includes a number of work and training requirements of its participants. Adult basic education is one of the few education and training options afforded to W-2 participants. According to a recent Legislative Audit Bureau report, nearly one-third of all W-2 participants were scheduled to receive adult basic education schooling - about 7,000 individuals.¹⁹

Due to the relatively high numbers of W-2 participants engaging in ABE, bridge programs represent a promising option for connecting those participants with schooling and occupational trainings that can pay off for them in the job market. Individual W-2 agencies could benefit from a thorough exploration of bridge program elements and issues, with the Department of Workforce Development (as the responsible agency for administration of the W-2 program) leading that training and working closely with W-2 agencies to develop such bridge programs for its participants.

Policies That Foster Program Improvements and Better Outcomes

A review of best practices can be informative, and can point policymakers in useful directions. It can save time and resources, and can highlight potential problems to watch out for in the process of program development. But in order to devise and implement evidence-based practices that could improve the outcomes for low-skilled adults attempting to retool their skills and earn higher educational credentials, a close look at current state policies is needed, including statutes and rules as well as less formal program practices.

An examination of current policies and practices in Wisconsin reveals three areas that need to be addressed: necessary data collection and dissemination, practices regarding use of the GED as a prerequisite for postsecondary programming, and state funding.

What Data is Needed and Why It’s Critical

Currently the Wisconsin Technical College System reports data required by the federal government that contains, among other things, transition rates (to college level programs), but only for those students who have listed college as a goal. This subset of the much larger ABE student population is insufficient to obtain a full view of the impact of our investments made in ABE programming.

Fortunately, more specific and full information is *collected*, but currently not *reported*. As a result, reporting the following data annually to the legislature does not require a significant new IT effort:

- the numbers of student entering adult basic education programming;
- those that complete basic education programming and gain the GED or HSED;

- those that then transition to post-GED programming;
- what programs these students enter (e.g. certificates, technical diplomas, associate degree programs, bachelors degree programs), and
- whether they complete any post-GED programming within 5 years.

Again, these data points should include the numbers of all students entering, then gaining the GED and then transitioning. The data should not be limited to those who have stated college completion or obtaining that credential as a goal, as is currently done.

The Wisconsin Technical College Board should then set a goal for transitions from the GED and HSED to postsecondary programming, as other states have done with much success. (As mentioned earlier, Kentucky, through legislative leadership, established a goal of having 40 percent of GED earners transition to postsecondary education. While they have not yet met that goal, they have improved from 12 percent to 22 percent.)

The GED and Why it Shouldn't Matter So Much

Historically, the GED was the baseline educational credential, with which one could obtain a low-skilled position but soon earn a family supporting wage. That situation is rare in today's economy and job market. Because of this, Wisconsin legislators should ensure that our basic education departments and our postsecondary programs focus on getting beyond the GED, into the kinds of postsecondary programs that pay off so well, for them and for the employers who need them.

To do this, other states have created dual-enrollment options, allowing those still earning their GED, for example, to simultaneously enroll in part of their for-credit occupational program, thereby reducing the time it takes to complete their studies, and significantly improving the motivation of these students.

Legislators can depart from this longstanding reliance on and focus on the GED by prohibiting the Wisconsin Technical Colleges from using the GED as an automatic prerequisite for postsecondary programming and allowing widespread dual enrollment in both basic education courses and certificate and degree

programs where appropriate. The technical colleges can determine those programs where such dual enrollment is not appropriate, but the signal should be clearly sent that the focus needs to be on helping more students get beyond the GED.

Current Funding Levels and Whether They're Sufficient

Wisconsin currently funds its ABE programs at low levels compared to other states. For example, according to the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, Wisconsin is fourth of five Midwestern states in state and local adult education expenditures per student (at \$360 per student, compared with Michigan at \$1,846, Minnesota at \$778, Iowa at \$708, and Illinois at \$130).

The legislature should examine and evaluate the sufficiency of this rather low level of state commitment for adult basic education programming. As we are in an intense competition with other states to increase the skills of our workforce, such comparably low levels of funding do not appear to correspond to the critical nature of the basic skills shortage problem.

Wisconsin legislators should ensure that our basic education departments and our postsecondary programs focus on getting beyond the GED.

Conclusion

Wisconsin faces a substantial and growing skilled worker shortage. Employers increasingly need skilled workers in order to remain competitive in a global economy, and our workers correspondingly need increased skills and higher educational credentials in order to obtain family-supporting jobs.

Improvements to our system of adult basic education and how that system interacts with postsecondary programs are key to meeting this challenge and helping our working adults succeed. With career pathway and bridge programs developed with evidence-based models in mind, those improvements can be made in the near future, and could result in improved employment and earnings outcomes for our hardworking adults returning to the classroom.

The legislature has a significant role to play in meeting this challenge. It can help facilitate the creation and operation of these programs by removing policy barriers, such as a continued reliance on the GED, improving data collection and dissemination, and re-examining the current low level of investment being made in adult basic education programs.



Additional Resources

Bridges to Careers for Low-Skilled Adults: A Program Development Guide. Women Employed with Chicago Jobs Council and UIC Great Cities Institute. October 2005. Available at <http://www.womenemployed.org/docs/BridgeGuideFinal.pdf>

Building a Career Pathways System: Promising Practices in Community College-Centered Workforce Development. The Workforce Strategy Center. August 2002. Available at http://www.workforcestrategy.org/publications/promising_practices.pdf

Building Bridges to College and Careers: Contextualized Basic Skills Programs at Community Colleges. The Workforce Strategy Center. January 2003. Available at http://www.workforcestrategy.org/publications/Contextualized_basic_cd_report.pdf

Changing Courses: Instructional Innovations That Help Low-Income Students Succeed in Community College. Richard Kazis, Marty Liebowitz. MDRC. July 2003. Available at <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/349/full.pdf>

From Bad to Good Jobs? An Analysis of the Prospects for Career Ladders in the Service Industries. Pablo Mitnik and Matthew Zeidenberg. Center on Wisconsin Strategy. January 2007. Available at <http://www.cows.org/pdf/rp-bad-good.pdf>

From Jobs to Careers: How California Community College Credentials Pay Off for Welfare Participants. Anita Mathur, et al. Center for Law and Social Policy. May 2004.

The Career Pathways How-To Guide. Davis Jenkins and Christopher Spence. The Workforce Strategy Center. October 2006. Available at http://www.workforcestrategy.org/publications/WSC_howto_10.16.06.pdf

What Community College Policies and Practices are Effective in Promoting Student Success? A Study of High and Low-Impact Institutions. David Jenkins, et al. Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. Revised May 2006. Available at http://www.achievingthedream.org/_pdfs/_dataandresearch/_publications/CCRC_institutional_effectiveness.pdf

Working Together: Aligning State Systems and Policies for Individual and Regional Prosperity. Christopher Mazzeo, Brandon Roberts, Christopher Spence, Julie Strawn. Workforce Strategy Center. December 2006. Available at http://www.workforcestrategy.org/publications/WSC_workingtogether_12.1.06_3.pdf

Endnotes

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- ² For a recent survey of labor demand, including specific skills in particularly short supply, see Manpower Inc.'s recent 2007 Talent Shortage Survey, available at <http://www.manpower.com/>.
- ³ Carnevale, A.P., and D.M. Desrochers. *Standards for What? The Economic Roots of K-16 Reform*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2003.
- ⁴ Waldron, T., B. Roberts, and A. Reamer. *Working Hard, Falling Short: America's Working Families and the Pursuit of Economic Security*. Working Poor Families Project, October 2004.
- ⁵ American Community Survey, 2005. U.S. Census Bureau.
- ⁶ Jenkins, Davis and Katherine Boswell. *State Policies on Community College Remedial Education: Findings from a National Survey*. The Education Commission of the States, Center for Community College Policy, Summer, 2002, as contained in the Center on Wisconsin Strategy's publication *Back to Basics: Strengthening Adult Basic Education in Wisconsin*. Available at http://www.cows.org/pdf/rp-back-to-basics_110706.pdf.
- ⁷ See the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Developments long term job projections available at http://www.dwd.state.wi.us/oea/long_term_projections/lt_brief.pdf.
- ⁸ The percentage of Wisconsin working age residents in the workforce is 70, the national percentage is 66. Dresser, Laura, and Joel Rogers. *The State of Working Wisconsin, 2006*. The Center on Wisconsin Strategy. Available at <http://www.cows.org/pdf/rp-soww-06.pdf>.
- ⁹ *State of Working Wisconsin*, page 29.
- ¹⁰ Zafft, Cynthia, and Silja Kallenbach, and Jessica Spohn. *Transitioning Adults to College: Adult Basic Education Program Models*. NCSALL Occasional Paper, December, 2006, citing Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2005.
- ¹¹ For an interesting overview of statistics relating to poverty, workforce development, basic skills and literacy, see the many fact sheets available from the National Institute for Literacy, available at <http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/facts/facts.html>.
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- ¹³ *Wisconsin Projections, 2004-2014, In Brief*, page 6. Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development.
- ¹⁴ For the most recent state performance data, see *Adult Education and Family Literacy Act: Program Year 2003-04, Report to Congress on State Performance*. U.S. Department of Education Office of Vocational and Adult Education. 2006. Available at <http://www.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/ovae/2004aeffa.pdf>.
- ¹⁵ A fuller discussion of the Arkansas Career Pathway program is available at http://www.goodfaithfund.org/_pdf/pub_pp/pp_v27_6_06.pdf.
- ¹⁶ For a description of the Illinois Student Success Grant program, as well as other similar efforts, see *Investing in Success: Educational Support for Illinois Community College Students*, available at <http://www.womenemployed.org/docs/SupportServicesReport.pdf>
- ¹⁷ For more information on this program, see their brochure at <http://www.wrtp.org/pdf/CtrOfExcelBroc.pdf> or the WRTP's home page at <http://www.wrtp.org/>
- ¹⁸ For a brief description of this initiative see this Department of Workforce Development press release http://dwd.wisconsin.gov/dwd/newsreleases/2006/1201_joyce_foundation_grant.pdf.
- ¹⁹ *Wisconsin Works (W-2) Program: An Evaluation*. Legislative Audit Bureau. Report 05-6, April 2005. Available at <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/lab/Reports/05-6full.pdf>.



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