



Research Snapshot

A Cross-Case Analysis of Career Pathway Programs that Link Low-Skilled Adults to Family-Sustaining Wage Careers

Overview

In the 1960s, most new community college students were of traditional college age and sought transfer to four-year colleges or career preparation programs. Today, however, access to community college has changed, and many students now enrolling have little or no experience with higher education; a sizeable proportion are also well beyond 18 to 22 years of age. Many of these older students are considered at risk because they enroll in non-credit coursework and may stop in and out of college. Some community colleges also enroll younger students, including high school students, who may be at risk of dropping out or have already done so. Other growing segments of the postsecondary student population are immigrant students, English language learners (ELLs), and students with disabilities—all frequently overlooked at the postsecondary level.

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 whose life circumstances may create barriers to college-going. Career pathways can serve as a primary means of meeting such learners' needs by systematically linking disparate education and training systems using the community college as the nexus for partnerships and program delivery. By conducting this study, the researchers sought to provide detailed descriptions of local programs, policies, and practices that seek to engage low-skilled adults in adult education and literacy programs that are linked to postsecondary career and technical education (CTE) and ultimately to family-sustaining wages.

The overarching research question was: What programs, policies, and practices, particularly curricular and institutional strategies, support the transition of low-skilled adults into career pathways linking adult education and literacy instruction to postsecondary CTE? Several subquestions were posed:

1. What student populations are career pathway programs targeting and serving?
2. What program components and curricular elements are associated with career pathway programs?
3. What support services, such as counseling, mentoring, tutoring, and financial aid, are offered and tailored to meet the needs of low-skilled adult learners?
4. What organizational structures within community colleges and partner organizations provide an infrastructure to support career pathway programs?
5. What processes and practices are implemented to facilitate student persistence and completion as a part of career pathway programs?
6. What barriers and challenges impede the implementation of career pathway programs?
7. What lessons emerge that could be useful to scaling up, sustaining, and transferring career pathway programs to other organizations, particularly community colleges?

The design of the study was multi-phased, beginning with a review of literature and the convening of a national advisory panel that included practitioners, federal and state agency personnel, and scholars. In the second phase, the research

team conducted telephone interviews with educational leaders, government agency personnel, and local providers of career pathway programs. The third phase involved data collection through site visits to three career pathway programs that emerged during the previous stage of the study, selected in collaboration with Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) personnel and the national advisory panel. The three programs were 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 fourth phase focused on data analysis and report writing.

What We Learned

Results show that the selected career pathway programs demonstrate a clear commitment to enrolling and serving low-skilled adults. Despite the differences in local contexts and occupational foci, results of the study show a number of programmatic components held in common by the three programs. The programs demonstrate a clear commitment to serving low-skilled adult populations, and leadership support was evident at each site. Common curricular and instructional features of the career pathway programs included an initial entry point involving adult literacy programs such as adult basic education (ABE) and the General Equivalency Diploma (GED), and all three offered English as a second language (ESL) instruction. 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. Each program operated with multiple external partners, and relationships with these partners were central to the sustainability of the programs. Enhancing outcome assessment was a goal of all three sites so that additional information could be shared internally and externally to promote program replication.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite the various challenges to their implementation, all three career pathway programs selected for this study showed signs of growth, continuation within the community college and larger local community, and replication beyond their initial connections to particular CTE curriculums within single institutions. The establishment of partners contributed significantly to growth and sustainability, providing a diversified means of funding of the programs. Replication often occurred first internally by transferring the models from one CTE area to another, then attempting to replicate the ideas in other communities and with other community colleges and partners.

Despite these positive signs, local leaders continued to be challenged in their efforts to weave together funding streams, and administrative rules associated with various funding sources were cumbersome and sometimes incomprehensible. Therefore, such bureaucratic hurdles need careful study.

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. Although a great deal of information on the effectiveness and benefits of career pathway programs is still missing, qualitative evidence shows that community colleges and other partners demonstrate a sincere commitment to serving low-skilled adults in selected programs. Based on these results, additional attention and support needs to be given to the career pathways programs that are emerging in association with community colleges throughout the United States so that family-sustaining careers may be within the reach of more low-skilled adults.

This study was led by Debra D. Bragg, Christine D. Bremer, Marisa Castellano, Catherine Kirby, Ann Mavis, Donna Schaad, and Judith Sunderman.

The complete report is available from the NRCCTE website at www.nrccte.org.

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