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The Bridge Program: An Effective Educational Approach to Meeting Employers' Critical Skills Shortages

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**The Bridge Program: An Effective Educational Approach to
Meeting Employers' Critical Skills Shortages
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This document is designed to introduce education and training organizations and other partners to the benefits of developing and implementing Bridge programs.

What is a Bridge program?

Bridge programs are designed to prepare individuals without the requisite basic skills for postsecondary education and training to advance to career-path employment and further learning in a specific high-demand industry or occupational sector. These programs are distinguished from traditional job training programs in that they seek to provide a broad foundation for career-long learning on-the-job and through formal postsecondary education and training. Bridge programs are the foundational step in a career pathways system that allows people to advance over time to better jobs and higher levels of education.

What are the benefits of Bridge programs?

Bridge programs meet the needs of students, employers, and educational institutions in the following in ways:

- They are designed for a population that is typically underserved by educational institutions and society, providing an opportunity to help the individual who has the desire to advance but who lacks the basic skills and knowledge for a career path job. These students might include low-skilled unemployed individuals; students with high school diploma or GED who are unable to meet college entrance exam requirements, including those in developmental education; adult education participants; and low-skilled incumbent workers in entry-level jobs. Bridge programs are often offered in compressed and flexible schedules enhancing students' satisfaction.
- They serve employers that need employees with the skills required to meet customer demands and to continue to grow and flourish. Very often jobs require specific degrees or certifications. Bridge programs are developed to move people as quickly as possible from noncredit to credit programs and to provide opportunities for certification and degree attainment.
- Bridge programs can build a pipeline of qualified applicants and improve outcomes for occupational/sector-based programs. This is especially important because employers are demanding higher educational standards while the preparation of incoming students is declining.

What are the key components of Bridge programs?

The key features of effective Bridge programs include:

- Curricula defined in terms of competencies;
- Articulation to further education and training;
- A focus on basic skills, communication and technology fundamentals; experiential learning;
- Exposure of students to high demand and well paying employment sectors through field trips, job shadowing and internships;
- Flexible program schedules;
- Support services, including assessment and counseling, case management, child care, financial aid and so on;
- Active cooperation between degree-credit and non-credit divisions within colleges and between colleges and outside partners such as community groups, social service agencies and high schools to recruit students and provide needed supports.

How is the development of Bridge programs being encouraged and supported?

The Workforce Boards of Metropolitan Chicago, a consortium of nine Workforce Boards covering the City of Chicago and DuPage, Kane/DeKalb/Kendall, Lake, Grundy/Livingston/Kankakee, McHenry, Northern Cook, South and West Cook, and Will counties, are interested in the development of Bridge programs in health care, manufacturing, and transportation/warehousing/ logistics. The Workforce Boards of Metropolitan Chicago are willing to consider including Bridge programs in a regional proposal to the state of Illinois for the Critical Skills Shortage Initiative (CSSI) funds. Through CSSI, the State has allocated \$15 million for gap funding in the state's 10 economic development regions.

Where can you go for assistance in preparing a proposal and launching a Bridge program?

The Workforce Boards of Metropolitan Chicago in cooperation with Women Employed, Chicago Jobs Council and UIC's Great Cities Institute, are convening working conferences for teams of organizations that are interested in creating Bridge programs. The technical assistance conference for Healthcare was held in May 2004. The conference *Creating Bridge Programs in Manufacturing and Transportation, Warehousing and Logistics* will be held on Sept. 8, 2004 and will address:

- The elements of effective Bridge programs, with case studies
- Jobs within each target sector offering opportunities for entry-level employment and advancement
- Education and/or training needed to prepare individuals for the select jobs within each target sector
- Components of building and maintaining effective partnerships
- Cost structures and sources of long term financing
- Recruitment strategies, support services, and progress and outcome measures for students

What are other potential sources of funding for Bridge programs?

Although the State's CSSI initiative may provide an important source of funds for Bridge program development, interested teams should look at realigning existing program resources and accessing other funds for program development and implementation; the conference will provide resource information.

Who should attend the Bridge program technical assistance conferences?

The technical assistance conference requires participants to attend in teams. Teams may be comprised of 1) members from various community college departments: noncredit, credit (including developmental education), adult education, and contract training departments; 2) multi-institutional partners including a college partnering with a community based training organization or social services provider; and/or 3) a training provider partnering with an employer or a union. Participants must also have leadership, willing faculty, and ability to implement a Bridge program.

This publication is a joint project of the Chicago Jobs Council, UIC Great Cities Institute, and Women Employed. For more information about the Illinois Career Pathways Initiative, contact Toni Henle at thenle@womenemployed.org.

