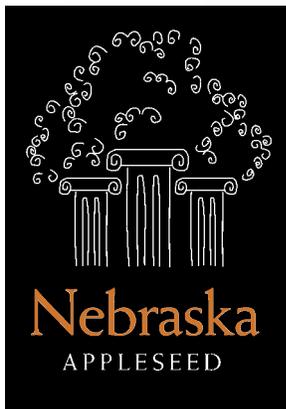




*Bridging the Gaps:
Addressing Nebraska's Skills Gap
by Connecting Working Adults
to New Opportunities*



January 2011



Nebraska Appleseed Center
for Law in the Public Interest



About Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest

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About the Working Poor Families Project

The Working Poor Families Project (WFPF) started in 2002. It is a national initiative aimed at assessing state policies and programs that are designed to help working families with low incomes achieve economic success. Supported by the Annie E. Casey, Ford, Joyce, and Charles Stewart Mott Foundations, the WFPF engages in partnerships with state nonprofit organizations to examine state education and skills development policies, economic development, and work and income supports. The WFPF supports state nonprofit groups to engage in a multi-stage advocacy process, beginning with an in-depth assessment of the economic conditions and state policies affecting working families and followed by actions to strengthen those conditions and policies. The WFPF is under the management of Brandon Roberts + Associates. For more information about the Working Poor Families Project, visit www.workingpoorfamilies.org.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction



Nebraska's workforce is a key to our economic success. The Nebraska Department of Economic Development touts an "unmatched work ethic" as one of our state's top selling points.^{1,2} However, in spite of the work ethic and strong participation in the labor force exhibited by our workers, Nebraska faces a significant skills gap.

Too many Nebraskans lack the education and skills needed to contribute to the future economy. The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce ranks Nebraska 7th highest in the nation in need for workers with post-secondary education by 2018.³

Jobs of the twenty-first century in Nebraska will focus on knowledge and technology-based industries, leading to an increased need for an educated workforce. As a result, Nebraskans will require more education to meet the needs of employers. Today, more than one-third (35%) of adults in Nebraska have no credential beyond a high school diploma.⁴ A significant number of these adults are stuck in low-wage jobs and need opportunities to gain education and training in order to move ahead. In fact, 26.7% of jobs in Nebraska are in occupations paying less than poverty for a family of four.⁵

Unfortunately, the pathways towards higher education and training are uneven, and some-

times inaccessible. Further, a significant number of Nebraska adults must first attain a High School Diploma or General Educational Development Diploma (GED) or complete remedial college courses to even begin pursuing a post-secondary credential.

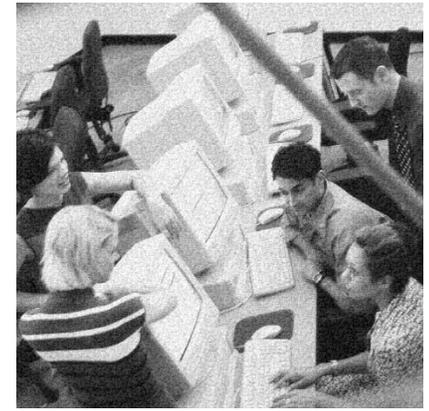
Bridge programs are initiatives that help adults in need of basic skills or English Language Learning to succeed in pursuing higher education and increased earnings. Bridge programs link educational courses with occupational skills development and accelerate the transition to employment and further education.

Fortunately, Nebraska has many assets to build on, including a strong and affordable community college system, a workforce with a solid work ethic, and a commitment to education. These assets position our state to effectively strengthen our basic skills development and post secondary systems by using a new strategy to build bridges to higher education for our lower educated workers. This can be done successfully as long as we make real commitments and smart investments in workforce development initiatives. Bridge programs are initiatives that help adults in need of basic skills or English Language Learning to succeed in pursuing higher education and increased earnings. Bridge programs link educational courses with occupational skills development and accelerate the transition to employment and further education. Often, they also provide additional supportive services, such as transportation or childcare assistance. Bridge programs help move adult learners into higher education and have the potential to be an effective solution to the education and skills gap in Nebraska.

Introduction (continued)

This report analyzes Nebraska's current and future skills gap, assesses the educational opportunities available, recognizes successful efforts to fill gaps and build bridge programs in the nation and in the state, and ultimately offers recommendations for building opportunities for Nebraska families and workers to gain the education and skills necessary to contribute to family and state economic success.

Nebraska is at a crossroads: we must recognize our education and skills gap and begin to build a stronger, more educated workforce in order to protect and grow the economic stability of our families and our state. Reforming Nebraska's basic skills development and postsecondary education systems to include bridge programs can achieve multiple goals by filling our skills gap and building educational and economic opportunity for working families.



Nebraska's Economic Vision for the Future

Nebraska has a dynamic and ambitious vision for the future, which builds on our state's resources and brings twenty-first century industries to scale. This vision depends on a strong and educated workforce. Unfortunately, many workers in Nebraska are not well positioned to fill the workforce needs of the

future. There is a significant gap between the skills employers predict they will need and the skills held by many workers today. The Nebraska Department of Economic Development has recently developed a strategic plan that identifies growth industries by region (Figure 1):

Figure 1:
High-Growth Industry Clusters in Nebraska by Region⁶

Metro Areas	First Class Cities	Other Counties
Biosciences	Agricultural Machinery	Agriculture/Food Processing
Financial Services	Business Management and Administrative Services	Biosciences
Health Services	Financial Services	Business Management and Administrative Services
Hospitality/Tourism	Health Services	Hospitality/Tourism
Precision Metals	Hospitality/Tourism	Precision Metals

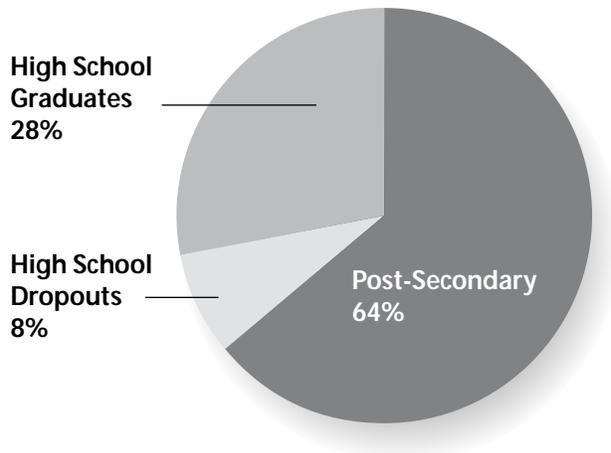
These high growth industries will not only require higher educated leaders, they will also require a workforce base to fill "middle skill" support positions. Nearly half of all jobs to be filled between now and 2014 will be in middle-skill occupations (jobs in the middle of education and earnings distribution, such as clerical jobs and transportation jobs.)⁷ For example, for

every ten architects and engineers, there are nearly eight middle-skill jobs for administrative support personnel, technicians, installers, maintenance, or production workers needed in the field.⁸ In Nebraska, and in the nation as a whole, developing an educated workforce will be a key to future economic competitiveness.

Projected Employer Needs

By 2018, 66% of all jobs in Nebraska will require postsecondary education.⁹ Further, the majority of job vacancies, or jobs employers will need to fill, will require higher education. Between 2008 and 2018, Nebraska is projected to create 321,000 job vacancies both from new jobs and from job openings due to retirement. 207,000 of these job vacancies will be for those with postsecondary credentials (defined as any job requiring at least some college credit), 89,000 for high school graduates, and 25,000 for high school dropouts (Figure 2).¹⁰ This not only means that employers will be seeking employees; it also means that individuals without basic skills will likely face significant struggles to find employment.

Figure 2:
*Projected Job Vacancies in Nebraska by Education Level between 2008 and 2018*¹¹



Nebraska's Education and Skills Gap



Current Education Levels

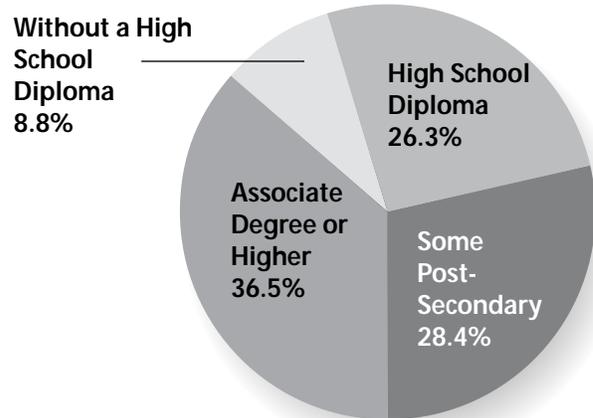
The success of our economic future depends on the strength of our workforce. Unfortunately, many Nebraska workers lack essential skills to fill future employment needs. Nebraska must grow the number of workers in Nebraska with higher education, however, currently, in Nebraska, only 36.5% of adults have an Associate's Degree or higher (Figure 3):

Nebraska will not be able to fill our workforce needs based on High School Graduates alone – even if we continue our current high rates of graduation. Further, Nebraska is susceptible to brain drain: we tend to lose more educated workers than we gain. Our state's fluctuating demographics reinforce the need for flexible programs that serve a variety of post-secondary needs.

Improving the education and skills of our current workers is essential to our future economic competitiveness. In fact, more than two-thirds of our 2020 workforce is already on the job.¹³ Further, the number of current adults without a high school

Improving the education and skills of our current workers is essential to our future economic competitiveness.

Figure 3:
Education Levels of Working Age Adults age 18 to 64 in Nebraska, 2008¹²



diploma is equal to more than 17 years worth of Nebraska high school graduates – meaning that investments in adults today have great potential to positively impact our workforce.¹⁴ Increasing education and skills training opportunities for low-income workers will be essential to creating a stronger labor force and more economically stable families and communities in the future.

Target Populations for Educational Opportunities

A significant number of Nebraska adults are in need of educational opportunities in order to

better contribute to the future economy (Figure 4).

Figure 4:

*Target Populations for Educational Opportunities*¹⁵

Total Number of Nebraska Adults without a High School Diploma or GED = 96,830 (8.8% of total population)
Total Number of Nebraska Adults with only a High School Diploma or GED = 288,495 (26.3%)
Total Number of Nebraska Adults with some Post-Secondary Education, No Degree = 311,245 (28.4%)
Total Target Population = 696,570

Addressing these issues also contributes to resolving disparities in Nebraska's minority populations. While white adults still make up the largest portion of those in need of opportunities for higher education, minority populations are more likely to have lower education levels. Black adults in Nebraska are twice as likely as white adults to lack a high school diploma, and Hispanic adults are more than nine times

more likely to lack a high school diploma.^{16/17} In addition to increasing the education and earnings levels of minority families, providing opportunities for minority adults to access education has been proven to increase the educational attainment of their children, a positive long-term impact of educational investments.¹⁸

Education, Opportunity, and Nebraska's Working Families



Nebraska's Working Families

Education and skills training are not only important for economic competitiveness, they are also vital to building quality of life in our state. Without a doubt, Nebraskans have a strong work ethic. Nebraska ranks second in the nation for overall participation in the labor force.¹⁹ In spite of hard work, more than one in four working families in Nebraska (27.5%) remains low income - almost 58,000 total.²⁰

Too many working families in Nebraska are held back by low educational attainment. In 44% of low-income working families in Nebraska, neither parent has any post-secondary education.²¹ Higher education has a clear connection to economic stability in Nebraska: individuals with some college or an Associate's Degree earn, on average, over \$9,000 per year more than those without a high school diploma or GED (Figure 5).

Figure 5:
*Nebraska Median Earnings by Educational Attainment*²²

Educational Attainment	Median Earnings
Less than high school graduate	\$21,715
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	\$26,018
Some college or associate's degree	\$30,804
Bachelor's degree	\$41,346
Graduate or professional degree	\$52,378

Education and Economic Stability

While a High School Diploma is a necessary first step in achieving economic stability, research shows that post-secondary education is essential to long-term economic success. The Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges identifies the attainment of at least one year of college credit and a creden-

tial as a "tipping point" for long-term job and economic stability.^{23/24}

This is true in Nebraska as well. "Top Jobs for Nebraska Families," a recent report by Nebraska Appleseed, identifies jobs by region and family type that meet four criteria: provide family sup-

Education and Economic Stability *(continued)*

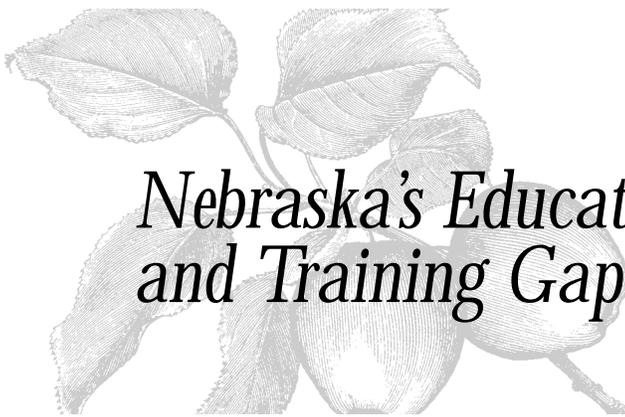
porting wages, are in industries likely to provide benefits, have growth potential in the state, and require less than an Associate's Degree (Figure 6).²⁵ What the report makes

clear is that jobs in Nebraska that are good for families require a basic credential. These jobs are available in our state and can be targets both for families and for programs designed to help workers obtain self-sufficient wages.

Figure 6:

*Statewide Summary of Top Occupational Areas with Most Jobs for Working Families*²⁶

Occupational Area	Total Number of Openings in 2010 Statewide
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	143
Office and Administrative Support	109
Production	64
Health Care Support	37
Business and Financial Operations	34
Management	33
Sales and Related Occupations	23
Computer and Mathematical Occupations	16
Education, Training, and Library	16
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media	6



Nebraska's Education and Training Gap



Current Options for Nebraska's Working Adults Seeking Education

Job opportunities do exist that are attainable for working families in Nebraska, if they are able to get the necessary education and training. Nebraska's current education and training systems include both assets to build on and opportunities to improve or modify educational delivery to meet the needs of adult students. However, two key shortfalls exist: the lack of sufficient resources and the need for systems that better serve adult students hold our state back. Changes are essential, because our future economic success hinges on our ability build a successful workforce, and specifically on our ability to connect those struggling in our labor force to education and training that enables them to engage in needed, well-paying work.

Unfortunately, the path is not easy and Nebraska's capacity to serve these workers is limited.

Post-secondary education is a clear goal for economic stability in Nebraska. However, for many Nebraska adults, basic skills deficits can prevent them from moving into higher education. These students, depending on their skill level, could benefit from enrolling in Adult Basic Education, Adult Secondary Education, and/or English Language Learning before enrolling in college-level courses (see Figure 7 "Options for Students Needing Basic Skills Education" for a description of these options).

However, lower educated workers or workers needing English Language Instruction have

Figure 7:
Options for Students Needing Basic Skills Instruction

Adult Basic Education:

Programs and services that target adults functioning below the ninth grade level

Adult Secondary Education:

Programs and services that target adults functioning at the ninth grade level through the twelfth grade level

High School Equivalency Completion:

Programs targeting adults working to earn their high school equivalency degree (GED)

English as a Second Language:

Programs and Services that target limited English proficient learners who have a focus on improving English communication skills in the instructional areas of speaking, reading, writing, and listening

Developmental Education:

Applies to instruction in secondary school level academic subjects for individuals who need to strengthen foundation competencies in order to be admitted to a post-secondary program.

Bridge Programs:

Provide adults in need of basic skills or English Language Learning with courses that link basic skills development and occupational skills development and accelerate the transition from pre-college to college level work

limited opportunities to pursue education. Nebraska currently serves only 8.9% of our 96,830 adults ages 18-64 that do not have a

Current Options for Nebraska's Working Adults Seeking Education *(continued)*

high school diploma or GED (Figure 8).²⁷ A 2008 survey found that half of all adult education programs in the state had a waiting list.²⁸

Figure 8:

Nebraska's Education and Training Gap

Education and Training Pool		Number Served	
Number of Adults (18-64) without a high school credential or equivalent 2008 ³⁰	96,830	Number receiving Adult Basic Education services 2006 ³¹	8,699
Number of Adults (18-64) who speak English less than very well 2008 ³²	54,570	Number enrolled in English Language Learning courses 2006 ³³	3,653

This is due, in part, to a lack of resources. Nebraska spends merely \$9.05 per adult without a High School Diploma or GED, ranking us 43rd in the nation in state support of adult education.²⁹

Working adults also experience other difficulties in pursuing education, including a lack of time, limited money, embarrassment or frustration, and lack of information. For many low-skilled adults the ultimate goal of achieving a post-secondary credential can be intimidating, and the path can be frustrating. This is particularly true for low-skilled adults that must take basic skills courses before earning college credit.

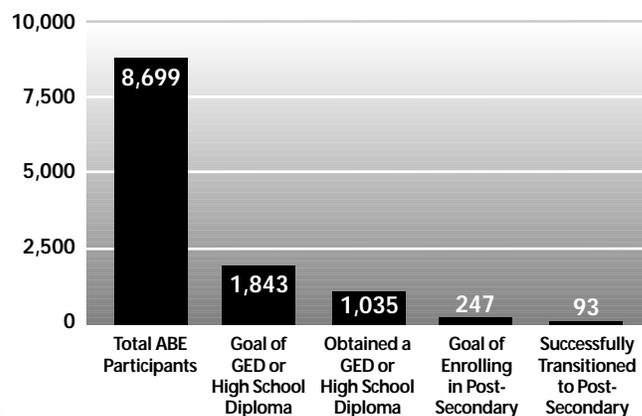
However, achieving higher education is an important goal. Only 247 out of 8,435 adult education participants in Nebraska stated the goal of transitioning to higher education – this is just under 3%. Only 93 students did so (Figure 9.) Reaching post-secondary education is possible for adult education students, and it should be a core goal of our adult education programs. Bridge programs provide the essential support strategies needed to move adult learners into higher education and the higher

earnings associated with achieving post-secondary education. We can do better.

Low skills, limited adult education opportunities, time and resource pressures and challenges, and struggles to reach and succeed in post-secondary

education all stymie success for working families in Nebraska. This illustrates the importance of supportive services for adults moving through the levels of adult education. It also represents a missed opportunity to link students to higher education in our state. Options can be developed to accelerate learning, support families, and serve more students in the state. This is particularly true because Nebraska's Community College system is strong and affordable – the 15th most affordable in the nation for low-income students.³⁵ Bridge programs are a smart strategy to fill these gaps and represent a vital opportunity to increase options for Nebraska workers.

Figure 9:
Percent of Adult Basic Education Students Who Enroll in Programs 2009³⁴





Building Bridges: National and State Efforts



Bridge Programs

Bridge programs are an effective strategy for building opportunities for working adults while filling workforce needs. Bridge programs help lower skilled adults make the essential educational strides to become successful in post-secondary education, and support their transition into a community college setting. Nebraska has a strong commitment to education and an accessible, affordable community college system well suited to bridge program development.

BRIDGE PROGRAMS help adults in need of basic skills or English Language Learning succeed by moving along a career pathway. Bridges consist of courses that link basic skills development with occupational skills development and accelerate the transition from pre-college to college level work.

One national model for building bridge programs is Wisconsin's Regional Industry Skills Education initiative, or RISE. This effort is a collaboration between the Wisconsin Technical College System and the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development working to create more flexible and accessible ways for adults to earn postsecondary credentials of value in the labor market. RISE describes key components of bridge programs in this way:³⁶

“Bridges are designed to prepare individuals without the requisite basic skills for post-secondary training leading to career-path employment and further learning in a specific industry or occupational sector.

Key features of bridges include:

- > Curriculum defined in terms of competencies needed to succeed in postsecondary training leading to career-path employment and further learning in a target field.
- > Focus on the basics of communication, problem-solving, applied mathematics, technology applications, and technical fundamentals taught in the context of training for employment and further learning in the given field.
- > Instruction emphasizing learning-by-doing through projects, simulations, labs, and internships.
- > “Wrap-around” support services, including assessment and counseling, case management, childcare, financial aid, job and college placement, and follow-up.
- > 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.”

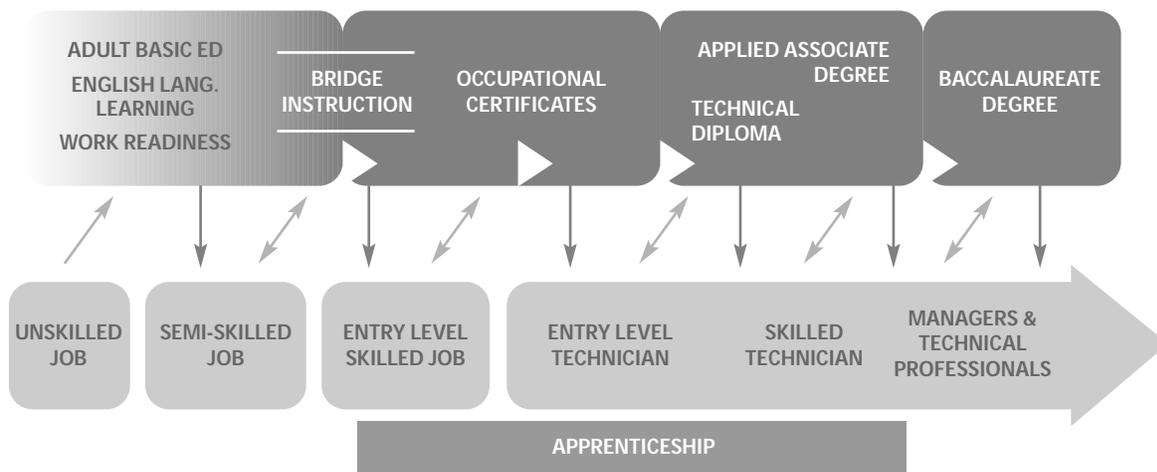
The goal of a successful bridge program is to put workers on a path to higher education and increased earnings in an in-demand profession. This approach is an innovative means of bringing together multiple stakeholders to achieve education and employment goals. Partners in bridge programs may include community or technical colleges, workforce development agencies, community based organizations, secondary education and vocational schools, government entities,

Bridge Programs (continued)

industry associations, unions, and faith based organizations. The following model illustrates a

bridge program based on Wisconsin's Regional Industry Skills Education project (Figure 10.)

Figure 10:
*RISE Bridge Program Model*³⁷



The Workforce Strategy Center recently conducted a national survey of bridge programs.³⁸ This survey found that participants in bridge programs were likely to make progress in a variety of ways, including: being more likely to enroll in further education or training within six months, being prepared for entry-level

skilled jobs in their bridge target fields, being eligible to enter into a degree-track curriculum program, having earned an industry recognized certificate or credential, and more. This underscores the value of bridge program investments in overall student success.

National Model: *Production MIG Welding Bridge, Chippewa Valley Technical College*

Wisconsin is a nationally recognized leader in efforts to improve postsecondary transitions for low-income adults.³⁹ In association with the RISE initiative, many bridge programs in Wisconsin have found success.

The Chippewa Valley Technical College MIG Welding Bridge program is just one example, as described in the Center for Wisconsin Strategy report, *“Building Bridges in Wisconsin: Connecting Working Adults with College Credentials and Career Advancement.”*⁴⁰

Recognizing growth in the local manufacturing industry, Chippewa Valley Technical College (CVTC) developed a targeted training program for low-income and/or displaced adults. Previously, training in production MIG welding was only available to students in single-credit night courses or as part of the full-time Welding Diploma program. CVTC’s Production MIG Welding program developed a program including both contextualized basic skills instruction and technical skills courses. The program has benefited from input from regional employers in the implementation of the program. It has also

benefited from the integration of Adult Basic Education components.

The first cohort of twelve students all completed the program and showed marked improvements in reading and math comprehension lev-

els. Subsequent cohorts have had similar success. While the economic downturn has stymied employment opportunities, graduates have left the program with valuable skills and nine credits at the college level.

Nebraska Model: *Pathways Out of Poverty, the Center for People in Need and Southeast Community College Green Jobs Partnership, Lincoln, NE*

“Green” (or environmentally sound) construction is a growing field in Lincoln, Nebraska. Recognizing this budding industry, the Center for People in Need, a non-profit community organization with a mission to move low-income individuals to economic self-sufficiency and Southeast Community College have developed the Pathways out of Poverty Green Jobs Program, funded by a grant from the federal Department of Labor.

The Pathways out of Poverty Green Jobs program works to serve a low-skilled, low-income target population. It is a unique program of education and training in green construction skills integrated with adult education and supportive services.

The program is based on the Washington Integrated Basic Skills Education and Training (I-BEST) program. It uses a core curriculum from the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER), consisting of eight basic green construction courses, including communications and employability skills. Successful completion of each module is recorded in the NCCER nationwide registry. Once the core curriculum is completed, students may advance into higher levels of craft training, such as apprenticeships, or apply for entry-level jobs.

Southeast Community College (SCC) delivers

the NCCER training in an instructor-led class and laboratory, including cooperative training components with partner employers. Using the I-BEST model of instruction, the Pathways out of Poverty Green Jobs Program integrates basic Education/English as a Learning Language (ELLESL) instruction into the skills training program. This model uses a team-teaching approach with either ELL/ESL or Adult Education instructors collaborating with the vocational instructor to ensure that students raise their educational levels in both adult education and skills training. Because computer competence is important to almost any occupation, the program also offers customized computer classes (Basic Computer & Keyboarding, Basic Word & Keyboarding, and Basic Excel). ELL/ESL and Adult Education classes are already offered at the Center by SCC, and participants may also elect these classes as needed. Two Vocational ELL classes (VELL) will be offered by SCC: ELL for Basic Computer and ELL for Green Construction. VELL/VESL classes prepare ELL students for vocational courses by teaching specific vocabulary, learning about the careers in that area, and introducing students to the expectations of college programs and the workplace.

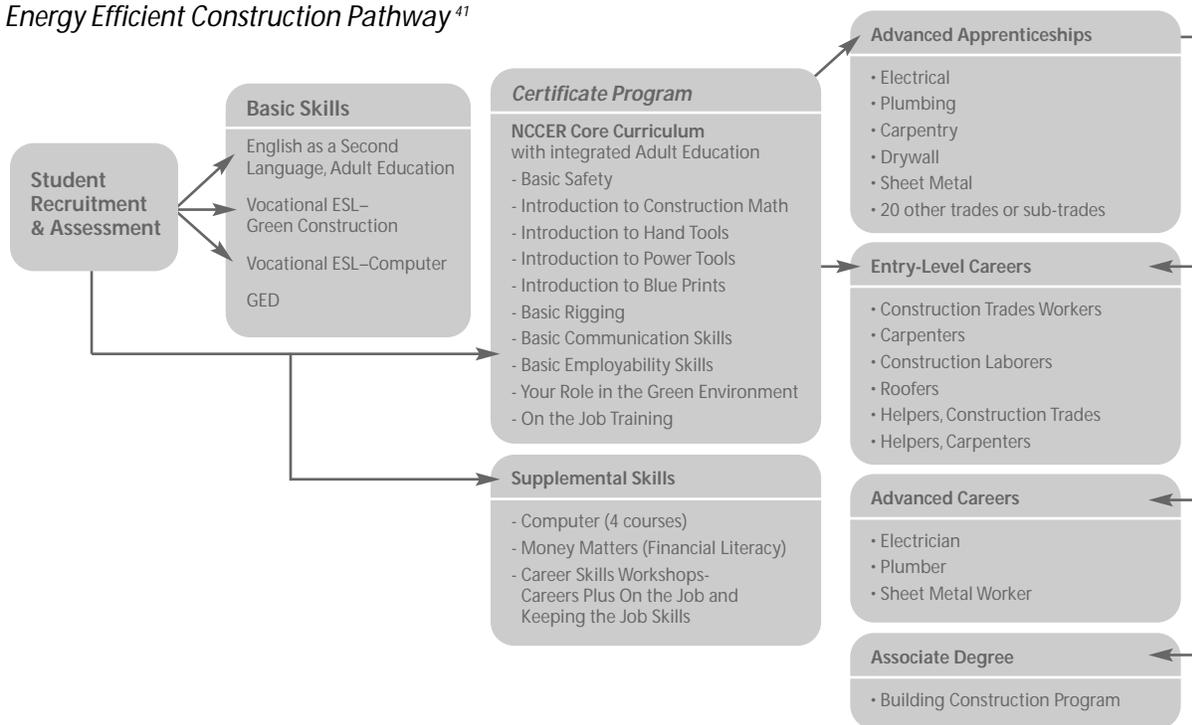
Many students require support services in order to participate, including transportation, childcare, and other basic needs. The Center for People in Need coordinates wraparound

Nebraska Model: Pathways Out of Poverty, the Center for People in Need and Southeast Community College Green Jobs Partnership, Lincoln, NE (continued)

services in collaboration with sister support agencies, to provide for participants' basic and

job-related needs. For a visual representation of the model, see Figure 11.

Figure 11:
*Energy Efficient Construction Pathway*⁴¹



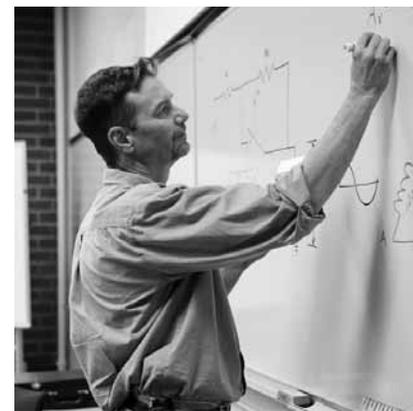
The Pathways out of Poverty Green Jobs Program works with a wide range of employers seeking employees with green construction skills, including Nebraska Building Products and National Insulation in order to link program graduates to employment.

The program began in the spring of 2010. To date, only one cohort has graduated, but all

nine participants graduated with a NCCER approved credential. The achievement of a credential is an admirable step for program participants, and the development of a bridge program collaborative is a laudable achievement for the Center for People in Need and Southeast Community College. This effort has the potential to serve as a model statewide.



Bridging the Gap: Challenges and Policy Recommendations



Challenges

Nebraska as a state can develop new strategies to serve adult learners and strengthen our workforce. Doing so will not be without its challenges. Understanding the potential difficulties our state faces is essential to moving forward in an effective manner.

1. Collaboration takes time. Successful bridge programs are built on successful relationships and collaborations. Clients, service providers, educators, and employers all have needs to be taken into consideration. Establishing clear expectations, delineation of responsibility and ownership, and timeframes is essential. This is particularly true because Adult Education programs in Nebraska are administered by the Nebraska Department of Education, who partners with community colleges and others. Multiple stakeholders must be involved to develop bridge programs successfully.

2. Funding is a continual challenge. Bridge programs can be expensive. Start-up funding can be a significant investment. Multiple funding streams with varied requirements can be difficult to align and sustainable funding can be hard to find. This is a particularly important challenge in Nebraska, where a significant amount of funding for bridge programs is received from time-limited federal grants. The ultimate goal is to align existing programs and dollars to support bridge programs in a new way. The challenge in Nebraska is both one of funding alignment and the development of a shared vision for state investments. (see Appendix A: Matrix of Key Programs for Bridge Development).

3. Clients need time. Clients frequently enter the program with multiple responsibilities and lower education levels. Clients need time to make progress and program and funding limitations can sometimes make it difficult to provide the time necessary for success.

Policy Recommendations

Nebraska has many assets to build on and the time is now to leverage our strengths to address the education and skills gap that lies ahead. The following policy recommendations can help strengthen and grow bridge programs in our state and meet the workforce needs of the future. In particular, Nebraska has many opportunities to align current programs and resources

to invest in Bridge Programs (see Appendix A: Matrix of Key Programs for Bridge Development and Appendix B: Best Practices for Bridge Program Development). Doing so will ensure that more Nebraskans access education and training services, more people transition effectively to postsecondary education, and our state's workforce becomes even stronger.

Policy Recommendations (continued)

1. Develop long-term vision for workforce development.

- a. *Develop a Bridge Program pilot.* Engage multiple state agencies in a bridge program pilot to test alterations in policy and develop best practices. Once developed and tested the pilot should be brought to scale statewide.
- b. *Develop detailed benchmarks.* Bridge program participants make significant strides towards long-term goals. Establishing detailed benchmarks helps service providers and educational institutions to identify areas of progress and struggle while working towards long-term employment and earnings outcomes.

2. Maximize and align current programs and resources.

- a. *Maximize Federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps) Employment and Training Funding.* Unlimited federal matching funding is available to serve SNAP recipients accessing community college programs. Nebraska has potential to identify more existing state funding for this purpose.⁴² Identifying more matching funds and investing these resources in bridge programs is an effective means of developing sustainable funding streams for bridge programs.
- b. *Provide funding for wage subsidies under the Aid to Dependent Children program.* Under the federal Aid to Dependent Children program (ADC), wage subsidies are allowable. However, Nebraska does not utilize this option. Implementing wage subsidies for ADC recipients contributes to successfully achieving both federal program work participation goals and family economic self-sufficiency goals. Specifically, provid-

ing wage subsidies for those in bridge programs would contribute to the success of both the ADC and bridge programs.

- c. *Increase flexibility for ADC recipients.* Allow ADC recipients, particularly young families, to pursue a High School Diploma or GED as a “core work” activity. This would allow parents to focus on GED completion without being required to engage in 20 hours of another work activity before they could participate in GED courses. This change would increase success for young parents and decrease sanctions for failure to participate in the ADC program.
- d. *Utilize Workforce Investment Act discretionary funding for bridge program sustainability and innovation.* 15% of federal Workforce Investment Act funding is available for state determined purposes. Utilizing a portion of these funds to support training expenses in bridge programs could contribute effectively to bridge program sustainability.
- e. *Increase Job Training Cash Fund flexibility.* The Job Training Cash Fund, a funding stream administered through the Nebraska Department of Economic Development, is designed to provide resources to cooperative projects involving educators, human services providers and employers. As such, it is ideal for bridge programs. However, it is limited in geographic scope to extremely high poverty areas. Allowing projects serving low-income people across the state would broaden the impact of this fund.

3. Make targeted investments for bridge program success and sustainability.

- a. *Increase investment in adult education.* The Workforce Strategy Center has found that nationally, the most significant funding stream for bridge program work is funding

for Adult Basic Education programs.⁴³ Increasing funding for this program allows for significant resources for providing contextualized training, and would allow adult education educators to better prepare students for post-secondary success. Make transitions to post-secondary education a primary goal of adult education. Measure the percent of Nebraskans obtaining a GED, the percent transferring to post-secondary education, and those achieving a post-secondary credential or certification and provide incentives for those achieving success.

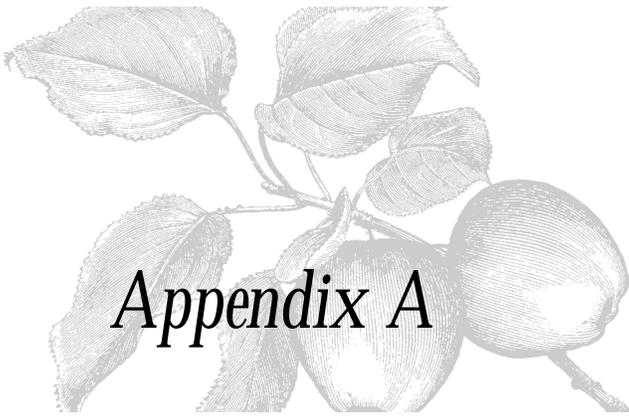
- b. *Provide start-up grant funding.* Develop a dedicated funding stream that allows qualifying bridge programs to access state funds if they meet requirements for credentials and stakeholder involvement. Provide only matching funds to other identified resources to encourage partnerships. For example, Minnesota is using adult education discretionary dollars to seed bridge development.⁴⁴

4. Remove barriers to client success.

- a. *Increase access to flexible financial aid.* Bridge programs students are frequently non-traditional, and face limited access to financial aid. Developing or opening up financial aid programs to students that are less than

part-time or that may otherwise not qualify for traditional financial aid would help working adults access and complete valuable training. Washington state's "Educational Opportunity Program" is an example of a financial aid program with a strong track record of serving low-income adults in bridge programs.

- b. *Increase access to school-based student supports.* Low-income working Nebraskans must balance work, school, and family. Supports such as transportation assistance, career counseling, and flexibility in time and location of the provision of courses can greatly contribute to non-traditional student success. Community College investments in such supports are sure to have payoffs for student success.
- c. *Develop opportunities for soft skills training.* Soft skills, such as interpersonal skills, can be essential to a variety of career tracks. Funding soft skills training and integrating soft skills into other educational functions can be a key to success. Existing programs can be maximized to provide this training, including Workforce Investment Act Title 1 funding, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training Program, and others (see Appendix A: Matrix of Key Programs for Bridge Program Development.)



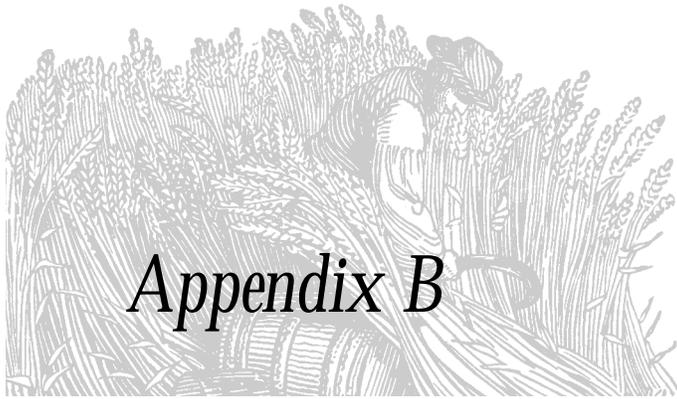
Appendix A



Matrix of Key Programs for Bridge Development

Program and Department	Funding Stream	Program Description	Constituency Served	Outcomes Required	Opportunities for Bridge Programs
Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Title 1: Adult and Dislocated Workers / Department of Labor.	Federally funded, no state matching funds are required.	Provides federal funds for workforce development, primarily for "One Stop" Career Centers providing employment and training services including job search, assessment, skills training, on-the-job training, customized training, adult education and literacy, and more. Local areas may also provide supportive services and needs-related payments for individuals in employment and training.	Adults age 18 and over and dislocated workers that have been laid off or have received notice of termination, displaced self-employed individuals, and displaced homemakers. Public assistance recipients and veterans receive priority.	WIA programs must meet performance outcomes: 78.8% must gain employment, earnings of approximately \$13 per hour, and a minimum percentage of clients must achieve credentials. ⁴⁵	15% of WIA Title 1: Adult and Dislocated Worker funds are reserved at the state level for statewide activities. These flexible "state discretionary funds" could be used to start up and implement bridge efforts. State discretionary funds can pay for incumbent worker training, pilots, and demonstration programs as well as regional collaborations.
Adult Education / Department of Education	Federally funded. A 25% state match is required.	Provides Adult Basic Education, Adult Secondary Education, and English as a Second Language programs to students in partnership with community colleges, public schools, correctional institutions, and community based organizations.	Nebraska Adult Education programs serve a variety of students; target populations include public benefits recipients, low-income learners, individuals with disabilities, and people with learning disabilities, single parents and displaced homemakers, individuals with limited English proficiency, criminal offenders, and the homeless.	Nebraska's Adult Education programs must meet federally determined benchmarks based on performance outcomes for students. These outcomes are based on the achievement of student-defined goals such as gaining employment, obtaining a GED, or entering post-secondary education. Other requirements related to student progress and other factors are required as well.	Nebraska should increase state discretionary funding to the Adult Education Programs to provide a strong foundation for bridge programs, contextualized training, and adult learning statewide.

Program and Department	Funding Stream	Program Description	Constituency Served	Outcomes Required	Opportunities for Bridge Programs
Aid to Dependent Children / Department of Health and Human Services	Federally funded. States must fulfill a "Maintenance of Effort" funding requirement intended to retain states' historical investments in the program.	Provides cash assistance, associated supportive services, and employment services to low-income families and children. The program is intended to move families from assistance to self-sufficiency via employment or education.	Families that is very low-income. For example, a single parent with one child may not earn more than \$597 per month to qualify. ⁴⁶	Nebraska must ensure that at least 50% of participants successfully participate in work activities 20 or 30 hours per week depending on family type. Families must move off of the program in five years or less.	Nebraska has the option of subsidizing employment via the ADC program but currently does not implement it. Beginning a subsidized work program through ADC targeted at bridge program recipients would contribute to meeting families' basic needs while they pursue bridge program education and training, ultimately contributing to their success in the program. Nebraska should also examine opportunities to apply excess MOE funding to flexibility for bridge program participants to engage in non-TANF activities.
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training / Department of Health and Human Services	Grants to states and uncapped, one to one federal matching dollars are available to states to serve SNAP recipients in employment and training activities.	SNAP E&T funds are intended to support a variety of education, training, and related services for SNAP recipients to help them meeting work hour requirements.	SNAP recipients pursuing qualifying education and training.	Matching funds must be in approved, qualifying activities from state or local sources.	Identify matching funds and submit a plan for approval to the United States Department of Agriculture. Use funds to support bridge programs, particularly supportive services.
Job Training Cash Fund / Department of Economic Development	State funding available from the cash reserve and subaccount interest.	Provides reimbursements for job training activities, including employee assessment, Pre-employment training, on-the-job training, training equipment costs, and other reasonable costs related to helping industry and business locate or expand in Nebraska, or to provide upgrade skills training of the existing labor force necessary to adapt to new technology or the introduction of new product lines.	Available only to cooperative projects involving human service providers, educators, and employers providing job training. Targeted to small employers, rural employers and employers in high poverty areas in the state, in Omaha, Lincoln, and Scottsbluff. Usage of community college training programs is prioritized.	Applicants must submit a business plan outlining the number of jobs to be created or retained, estimated wages, and job training activities. Business plan criteria, include that the wage levels of the newly created jobs meet the local prevailing rate, the goods or services produced will be export-oriented and 75% of the jobs will be full-time positions.	Expand geographical eligibility. Strengthen community college participation requirements by clarifying the regulations and requiring community college partnership providing credit bearing course work.
Community College Funding / Nebraska Community College System	Combination of state aid, tuition, and property taxes.	Provides accessible post-secondary education in a broad range of fields to students in six community colleges across the state, with strong links to business and industry.	Nebraskans in each of six local regions, as well as other students, with an intentional focus on providing affordable education and promoting transfer options.	Funding is correlated with college and regional needs, but there is a focus on degree completion and job placement outcomes.	Provide increased state aid to colleges implementing bridge programs based on the higher cost of contextualized, intensive training.



Best Practices for Bridge Program Development

1. Build Effective Stakeholders.

- a. *Cultivate top-level support.* Sustainability and scaling up of bridge programs depends on investment from top-level leadership (such as college presidents, upper level business management, and heads of nonprofit organizations) who champion programs and build outside stakeholders.
- b. *Engage businesses effectively.* Businesses are essential partners in bridge programs. We need to encourage employer support of bridge programs and cultivate their involvement in developing training programs. It is key that businesses develop positive working relationships with all bridge program stakeholders.
- c. *Develop job coach roles.* Job coaches provide career support and serve as a liaison between students and other stakeholders. This helps to ensure that the needs are communicated and met effectively.

2. Adapt Educational Systems to Bridge Program Clients.

- a. *Develop integrated, module-based curriculum following Washington State's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training model.*⁴⁷ I-BEST pairs workforce training with ABE or ELL so students learn literacy and workplace skills at the same time. Adult literacy and vocational instructors work

together to develop and deliver instruction. Colleges provide higher levels of support and student services to address the needs of non-traditional students. Integrating basic skills and college level, employment-targeted coursework benefits students because they develop skills that can be applied to work contexts and it accelerates learning.

- b. *Develop placement methods that are both meaningful and accessible.* Using multiple assessment factors, such as prior work experience, standardized tests, and personal strengths can assure that entry standards remain meaningful without limiting opportunities for students with real potential for success.
- c. *Provide financial aid opportunities for bridge program students.* Assure that non-traditional students can receive financial aid by developing credit-bearing bridge program courses that qualify for financial assistance.

3. Meet Client Needs.

- a. *Design bridge efforts around clients, not programs.* Assure that client strengths and challenges remain central in the program design. Examine program options to assure that the best fit is made for clients and other stakeholders.

b. *Assure that basic needs are met.* Students will not be effective if the basic needs of their families are not met. Providing a stipend or subsidy or paid work to assure that programs meet Aid to Dependent Children requirements and that family needs are provided for during education and training is critical. Developing options for clients facing emergency situations to receive short-term loans or other forms of assistance to prevent immediate needs from derailing long-term success is another way to ensure success.

c. *Provide opportunities for soft skills training.* Soft skills are essential to school and work success. While many government funded programs do not provide opportunities for soft skills training (such as time management or interpersonal skill development) these skills are key to overall bridge program success.

4. Build Systems with Long-Term Vision.

a. *Recognize fragmentation and align resources.* Education, job training, and family support resources can have varied qualification and outcome requirements. Recognizing the strengths and limitations of programs is essential to creating a program in which the “gaps” are filled and client expectations and experiences are reasonable. Program and resource alignment will build towards the goal of creating systems that serve clients in a new and better way.

b. *Measure, track, and report outcomes.* Providing evidence of the long-term impact of bridge programs is essential. Measuring, tracking and reporting required data is important, and should be supplemented with interview and survey data. Shorter benchmarks, such as moving up a level in an Adult Basic Education program, should be tracked and incentivized.

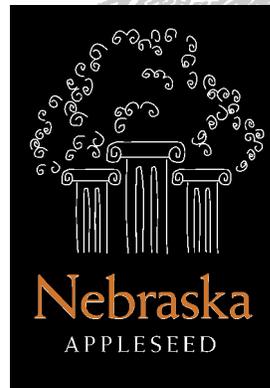
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