SHOP TALK # 51:
BRIDGES TO CAREERS FOR LOW-SKILLED ADULTS

Every now and then a resource comes around that belongs on every program director’s desk – not as a showpiece but as a working copy, marked by dog-eared pages, highlights, and post it notes. *Bridges to Careers for Low-Skilled Adults* is one of those resources. This program development guide focuses on developing the first rungs of the ladder for adults who lack the basic skills needed to enter and succeed in postsecondary education and training leading to career-path employment. This how-to guide, developed with funding from the Center on Law and Social Policy (CLASP), is rich with information useful to all bridge and transition program partners, including employers, community colleges, local education agencies, community-based organizations and workforce agencies.

The 118-page document can be overwhelming at first glance. But taken apart by its table of contents, the guide is a valuable piece of work that can save local education and training providers hours of research and planning. Chapter 1 is a must read that provides an overview of bridge training programs, models, and definitions that can assist providers in enabling students to advance to both better jobs and further education and training. What most distinguishes bridge programs is their dual focus on preparation for postsecondary learning and career access and advancement. A career pathway is a series of connected education and training programs, with integrated support services, work experience, and learning on the job - all of which enable adults to combine work and learning. The guide addresses the significance of each of these.

Bridge programs can often be built on existing educational programs that serve low-skilled adults, but sometimes these programs need to be reconfigured to ensure a connection both to job advancement and further education. Bridge programs are suited for adults with reading and mathematics skills below the ninth-grade level who may or may not have a high school diploma or GED. The programs are generally designed to prepare adults to qualify for entry-level skilled jobs and enter two-year college occupational certificate and associate degree programs.

Key features of bridge programs include the following:

- the curriculum is defined in terms of competencies needed to succeed in postsecondary training and jobs that, with experience and further training, can lead to career advancement;
- programs focus on communication, problem solving, mathematics, and technology applications taught in the context of workplace problems and situations;
- instruction emphasizes learning by doing (projects, simulations, labs);
- programs include opportunities to explore college and career opportunities through field trips, job shadowing, internships, and other means;
- programs are offered at times and locations convenient to working adults;
- programs are compressed to allow adults to complete them quickly so they can move on to better jobs and further education;
support services include assessment, counseling, case management, childcare, and financial aid; and
provides help and college placement assistance and follow up.

Texas’ TISESL initiative is a good example of a lower bridge program for non-native speakers at the low-intermediate level (as defined by the National Reporting System). Although TISESL (Texas Industry Specific English as a Second Language) participants are usually far from qualifying for college-level training or career-path employment, they can begin to explore postsecondary and career opportunities as part of the bridge experience. Lower level bridge programs emphasize the teaching of basic skills such as reading, communications, and applied math in the context of developing skills such as customer service, basic computer operations, and job-specific skills. Some lower bridge programs cater to individuals who want to enter a specific career field in a particular industry sector. In this case, the program integrates basic skills and occupation-specific technical skills. The goals in either case: to improve the individual’s job prospects, provide a foundation for continued education and training, and increase career awareness.

Higher level bridge programs prepare adults for advancement into entry-level skilled positions and into occupational certificate or associate degree programs. Most of these require a minimum seventh grade reading level for native speakers or a high intermediate ESL level. Some providers offer both lower and higher level bridge components, with one feeding into the other, just as these can then lead into postsecondary programs.

Chapter II of the guide is lengthy and needs to be digested in increments. It is designed to help the reader plan a program, build partnerships, and build and sustain employer relationships. Chapter II also devotes a significant section to curriculum development and provides some good examples of programs and curricula already in place.

Chapter III is devoted to budgeting and funding bridge programs, with budgetary worksheets to assist one in identifying costs and contributions. Chapter IV focuses on actual program implementation and management, and Chapter V briefly discusses program evaluation in terms of how readily participants are advancing to the next levels of education and employment.

A special feature of the guide is its attention to partnerships with employers. Without employer support and participation, the connection to careers is fragile at best. Likewise, partnerships with postsecondary institutions that offer career ladder educational opportunities are a must. These are critical links for adult education providers.

Because the guide is free and downloadable, a program director can pick and choose various templates, worksheets and parts of the guide for meetings and work sessions. The direct link is http://www.womenemployed.org/docs/BridgeGuideFinal.pdf. TCALL’s Clearinghouse Library can also send you a free hard copy by mail on request (call 800-441-READ or email tcall@tamu.edu to request a copy.)

Make time to take a look at this resource. Local programs can select those parts most helpful to them in the process of building bridges to postsecondary education and training and employment. One final note: the program profiles included in Chapter VII provide excellent examples of how some programs were developed, partnerships formed, funding secured, etc. The information is a bit dated in some cases. If you are interested in a particular profile, contact Barbara Tondre for an update on its status.