



Policy Points

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Increasing Access to and Completion of College Among Working Adults in Arkansas: The Career Pathways Pilot Project

This brief describes the Career Pathways Pilot Project, a collaborative initiative between Southeast Arkansas College (SEARK College), the Arkansas Association of Two-year Colleges (AATYC), the state Adult Education program, and the Good Faith Fund (GFF). The Career Pathways Pilot Project is an innovative workforce development program aimed at increasing access to and successful completion of higher education credentials among the adult workforce, particularly relatively low-skilled adults.

Need for the Project

Improving the competitiveness of the workforce in Arkansas is absolutely critical to the future economic and social development of the state. A competitive workforce, meaning a skilled workforce, is vital to attracting new businesses to the state, developing the state's existing businesses, and improving per capita income across the state.

A competitive workforce is increasingly being defined as a workforce made up of workers with higher education credentials. The state's existing businesses increasingly need workers with higher education credentials, and the high-wage businesses Arkansas would like to bring to the state need them as well.

To achieve a competitive workforce in the near future, Arkansas must focus on more than the K-12 pipeline. Improving the K-12 public education system will eventually produce more college graduates, but the state also must improve post-secondary education opportunities for adults already in the workforce, who by 2020 will still make up over half of the state's active workforce. Very simply, increasing the educational attainment of adults is absolutely critical to achieving a competitive state workforce within the next few decades.

Unfortunately, Arkansas ranks low, relative to most states, on many measures of higher education attainment among the adult population. As Table 1 indicates, the number of adults enrolled in post-secondary education is low relative to most states. Moreover, data recently generated by AATYC indicates that Arkansas has approximately 44,287 students (19,171 adults)

enrolled in two-year colleges, which is 25,372 less than Kansas and 22,371 less than Mississippi, both of which have total populations similar to Arkansas (2.7-2.8 million).

In terms of completion, about 30% of students at Arkansas' two-year colleges complete their studies in three years, and only 16% of students requiring remedial or developmental education coursework complete their

Table 1: Post-Secondary Enrollment

Data Definitions	U.S.	Range among States	AR
Percent of Adults 25-54 Enrolled in Postsecondary Institutions	6.2%	3.9%-8.2%	4.1%
Percent of Students Enrolled in Community Colleges Requiring Remediation			70.6%

Source: *Continuing the Investment in a Competitive Workforce and Brighter Economic Future for Arkansas: A Policy Agenda for Investing in Arkansas' Working Families*, Good Faith Fund: August 2003.

studies in the same time period (see Table 2). Over 70% of students entering two-year colleges in Arkansas require developmental education coursework (see Table 1). In the Delta areas of the state, this percent is even higher, over 90% in some areas. These data suggest many students in the state’s two-year colleges face considerable challenges to completing their higher education pursuits. (Note: Although the completion statistics cited above are based on the overall student population, not the adult student population exclusively, adult students generally have comparable completion rates to the overall student population, and often have lower rates given the unique challenges adult students face.)

The Career Pathways Pilot Project is an attempt to develop a replicable strategy for improving both adult enrollment in and completion of college credentials. As described below, it is an attempt to create an alternative service delivery model for higher education tailored to working adults and their unique needs. A model that if replicated, can begin to institutionalize practices at Arkansas’ colleges that will better enable these institutions to serve the broad range of the state’s adult population, including those with relatively low skills, of which Arkansas has many. Serving this population well is an important need for the state not only because adults are key to improving the competitiveness of the state’s current and future workforce, but also because adults are one of the fastest growing segments of the student body at most colleges, particularly the state’s two-year institutions.

Conceptual Framework for the Project

Although the idea to pilot the project was that of GFF and its project partners, the conceptual framework for the project can be attributed to a report from the Workforce Strategy Center titled *Building a Career Pathways System: Promising Practices in Community College-Centered Workforce Development*. (See www.workforcestrategy.org for copies). This report defines a “career pathways” initiative and offers examples of such projects across the country. The Career Pathways Pilot Project represents an attempt to implement such a project at a two-year college in Arkansas.

Key Goals of the Project: An Alternative Higher Education Service Delivery Model

The Career Pathways Pilot Project has two key goals. The first is to create improved access to college level training for working adults. This population has some unique challenges in terms of applying and preparing for college. Among those challenges is a lack of knowledge about available training and related career opportunities; how to successfully apply for college; how to adequately prepare to succeed in college coursework; and how to connect to critical resources such as financial aid, child care and transportation, which are critical to helping working adults balance the responsibilities of school, family and work.

The second key goal is to improve the number of adult students who actually complete a college level training program, whether it be a short-term Certificate of Proficiency program or an Associate or Bachelor Degree program. Adult students also face some unique challenges in terms of completing college. Chief among them is a lack of opportunities to get the types of preparatory assistance that many adult students need in a manner that is well suited to the adult students’ unique needs, particularly those working full-time. Students who are not prepared, particu-

Table 2: Post-Secondary Performance

Data Definitions	AR
Percent of Full-time Community College Students Obtaining a Certificate/Degree or Transfer to a Four Year College*	30.2%
Percent of Full-time Community College Students in Remedial Education Moving Ahead**	16%

Source: *Continuing the Investment in a Competitive Workforce and Brighter Economic Future for Arkansas: A Policy Agenda for Investing in Arkansas' Working Families*, Good Faith Fund: August 2003.

*Another 12% of students were still enrolled three years after initial full-time enrollment, which was the time period used to calculate this percent.

**This statistic does not capture the remedial students who were still enrolled three years after initial full-time enrollment, which was the time period used to calculate this percent.

larly in the sense that they lack requisite basic academic skills and other college-relevant skills, often struggle to complete their coursework in a timely manner or at all, as indicated by the data above that only 16% of students requiring remedial education upon entry to a two-year college complete their studies in three years.

Other key challenges to completion that adult students often face include:

- inconvenient course scheduling, especially a lack of evening and weekend course offerings which are convenient for working adults;
- too few programs that can be completed in a semester or two and that articulate with advanced training options, such as Associate or Bachelor Degrees, to create a seamless, clear pathway of continuing higher education opportunities;
- too many programs that are not directly connected to labor market needs or real job opportunities, which is the key reason adults pursue additional training;
- a lack of effective and continuing student counseling and mentoring, which helps adult students to: determine required courses and continuing education opportunities; identify and address unexpected barriers to completion of their studies; and understand and connect to the job opportunities available to them during and/or upon completion of their studies.

The Career Pathways Pilot Project helps adult students overcome all of the above challenges. It does so via the unique components of the project design, which are discussed in detail below. By helping working adults overcome these challenges, the project embodies an alternative higher education service delivery model geared toward working adults, which are often described as “non-traditional students.” The prevalent service delivery model at most colleges is geared toward serving “traditional students”—students who immediately enroll in college after high school and who have very different needs than adult students. If successful, this alternative model will help Arkansas’ two and four-year colleges increase enrollment and completion among a key student population (i.e., adults)—a population these institutions want and need to serve better, and must serve better to improve the competitiveness of the state’s workforce.

The Career Pathways Pilot Project Design

The diagram on page 6 lays out the key components of the Career Pathways Pilot Project design. These components are described in detail in the narrative that follows.

Career pathways initiatives, as described in the aforementioned Workforce Strategy Center report, typically embody a partnership between a community college, one or more community-based organizations (CBOs), and sometimes government agencies or programs such as the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) or the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) programs. Each of these partners plays a unique value-added role. Again, the Career Pathways Pilot Project is a partnership between Southeast Arkansas College, the Good Faith Fund, the Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges, and the state Adult Education program.

Student Recruitment, Orientation, and Needs Assessment

The typical role of CBOs in career pathways initiatives is to recruit students, connect them to critical support services and mentor them through the career pathway they choose. Good Faith Fund is a CBO that has a proven track record of doing precisely these things for trainees in its nursing assistant training program, which has been operating in the Delta region of Arkansas for almost ten years. Through this program, GFF has developed an expertise in what is required to successfully deliver job training to relatively low-skilled, low-income adults, a key target population for the Career Pathways Pilot Project.

Based on this expertise, Good Faith Fund's primary roles in the Career Pathways Pilot Project are that of: 1) student outreach and program orientation, 2) student needs assessment, and 3) on-going, intensive student counseling and mentoring, including job placement and retention assistance.

Good Faith Fund has built a reliable outreach and referral network to recruit clients for all three of its direct-service programs, including the nursing assistant training program. Additionally, the tenure and quality of GFF programs has built a trust within the communities GFF serves that brings many clients directly to GFF. GFF will be employing all of these resources to recruit students for the Career Pathways Pilot Project. Recognizing that this project is intended to reach a broader population of adults than GFF has traditionally served—i.e., any adult who needs or wants to obtain a college credential—GFF is working to develop strategies to effectively recruit this broader adult population.

Once recruited, potential students are given a program orientation, which lays out how the program works and what is required to participate and succeed in the program (see Box 1 in the diagram on page 6). GFF staff describe in detail the various career pathways available to students, including the specific job opportunities that are accessible at the completion of each educational program within the various career pathways. Students are informed that local employers have helped create the pathways and are interested in hiring graduates.

The next step in the process is an extensive needs assessment (see Boxes 2 and 3). This assessment involves a support service and financial aid needs assessment, a career interests and aptitudes assessment, and an academic skill assessment. GFF staff use the support services needs assessment to connect students to local providers of services that students might need to be successful in college, such as child care, transportation, and even substance abuse counseling and other unique services. GFF also works with SEARK College financial aid personnel to determine any need for financial aid and begin the process of applying for such aid. The career interest and aptitude assessments, which are administered using Career Scope and the Kuder Career Planning System, are used by GFF staff to help students select one of the various career pathways that best suits their interests and abilities. Finally, the basic academic skill assessment, which is done using the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE), is used by GFF staff to determine if students are ready to enter college.

The Beginning of the Education Pathway: WAGE College Bridge Program or College Credit Programs

It should be noted that the Career Pathways Pilot Project was designed primarily to serve students with an interest in pursuing one of the six career pathways that are the focus of the project. However, recognizing that not all students will be interested in or suited for these six pathways, students will be allowed to pursue any program offered by SEARK College, and GFF staff will assist students in pursuing any program they select.

The following narrative describes how the Career Pathways Pilot Project will work for those students who are interested in one of the six pathways. The project partners are developing some additional program components to better serve those students with other program interests, some of which are described in the Remaining Challenges section.

Depending on their TABE score, students interested in one of the six career pathways will either move directly into one of the college credit programs that are part of each career pathway, or into a college preparatory program, which is being called the WAGE College Bridge Program. In general, if students score at a 9th grade level on the TABE they are determined ready to enter the Certificate of Proficiency programs, which are the recommended college entry point for most of the career pathways. Technically, however, each certificate program has its own minimum TABE score for entry, which varies from 8th to 10th grades.

WAGE College Bridge Program

Those students that do not meet the minimum TABE scores for immediate college enrollment are enrolled in the WAGE College Bridge Program. This program offers six contextualized adult basic education curricula, one for each of the six career pathways (see Box 5). These curricula are intended to do two things: 1) bring students basic academic skills up to the TABE level required for success in the Certificate of Proficiency college credit programs, and 2) impart job-specific competencies, including various soft-skills that often are overlooked by academic programs and which are necessary for success in college coursework as well as the specific jobs that are part of each career pathway.

The process by which WAGE curricula are developed enables the identification of the job specific competencies. WAGE (Workforce Alliance for Growth in the Economy) is a unique workplace literacy program the state created several years ago. WAGE uses Literacy Task Analyses (LTAs) of specific jobs to determine the particular skills needed to be successful in those specific jobs. LTAs are accomplished by observing local workers while they perform their job. LTAs enable adult basic education curricula to be tied directly to specific job skills and job opportunities with local employers.

In the WAGE College Bridge Program curricula, LTAs have been completed for the jobs for which the Certificate of Proficiency college credit programs prepare students. Those jobs include: various entry-level manufacturing positions, welding positions, nursing assistants, child care paraprofessionals, and office administration assistants. Based on these LTAs, six separate bridge curricula have been developed, again one for each of the six career pathways. The curricula designers are also conducting an analysis of the basic academic skills and other competencies needed to be successful in the Certificate of Proficiency college credit program courses, and are building these skills and competencies into the curricula.

It should be noted that many of the competencies are similar to competencies taught as part of “college survival seminars,” which colleges often use to prepare first-time students to succeed in college. These competencies include such skills as goal setting and time and stress management. Some additional college survival skills related to note taking and study and testing taking skills may be added to the curriculum if they are needed.

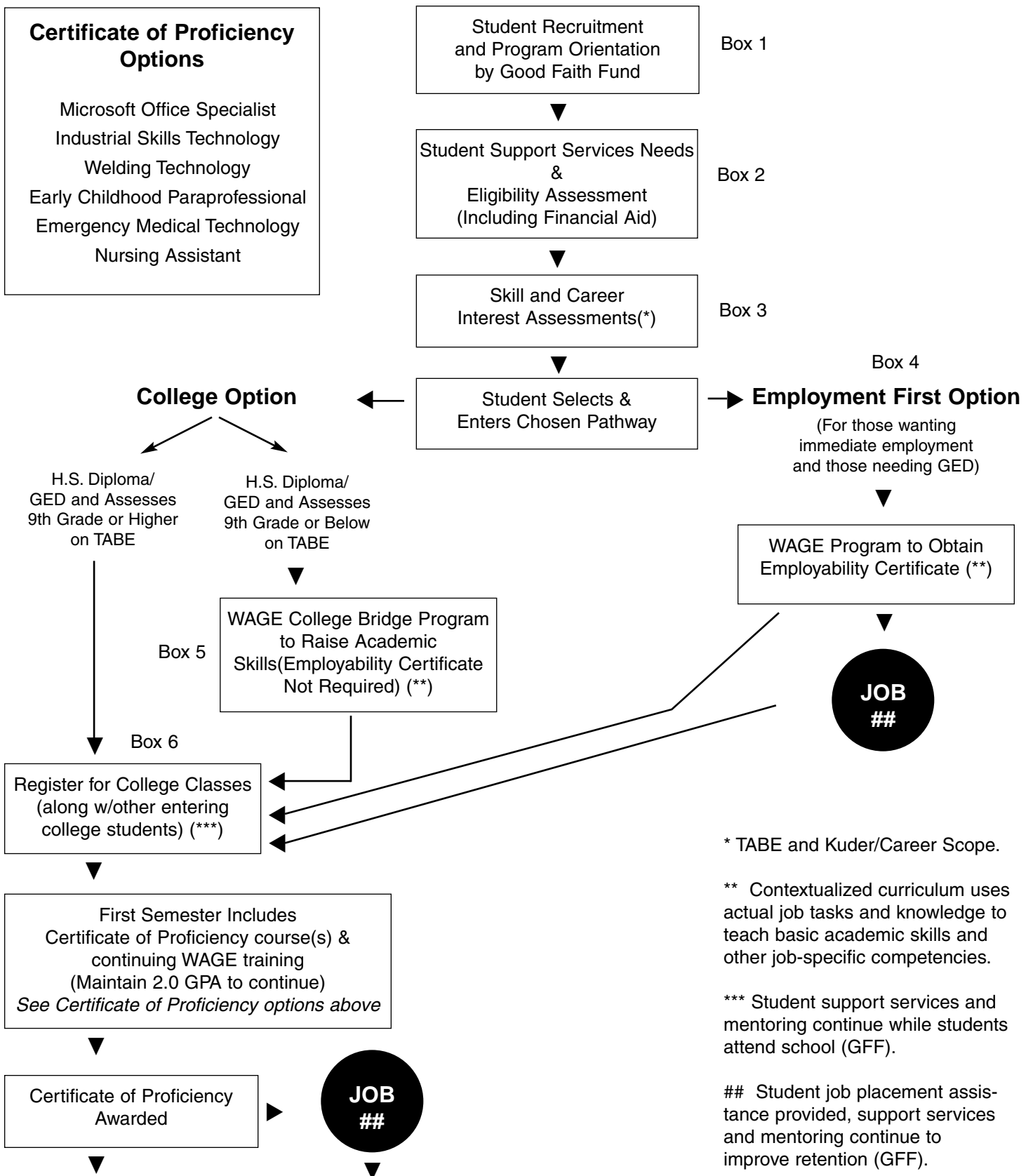
All WAGE curricula also use job tasks, which are identified through the LTA process, to teach the competencies. Using job tasks to teach basic academic skills provides for a “contextualized” basic academic skills curricula. Research indicates that such contextualization improves student learning of basic academic skills. A follow-up report by the Workforce Strategies Center references much of this research and highlights the importance of contextualized basic academic skills programs as key components of career pathways initiatives.

The WAGE College Bridge Program can also accommodate adults without a high school diploma or GED. As noted in the diagram (see Box 4), these adults will be encouraged to enroll in the WAGE Employability Certificate curriculum, a separate but connected curriculum. This curriculum also will prepare students for specific jobs with local employers, while preparing students to take the GED exam. Students who complete the certificate and obtain their GED have the option of seeking employment with local employers, if they have an immediate need for better employment, or entering college. Because this curricula offers the quickest transition into the labor market, it will be an option for students who have a diploma or GED but want or need to improve their employment situation immediately.

SEARK College and the state Adult Education program have provided matching funding to hire a new, full-time adult education instructor to teach the WAGE College Bridge Program curricula. This will enable more flexible course scheduling, and more one-on-one student attention, both of which are critical to successfully educating adults.

Career Pathways Pilot Project:

Career Pathways Process



Students may work, continue their education, or both depending upon their aspirations.

Certificates of Proficiency College Credit Programs

Those students who meet the minimum TABE score will be assisted by GFF staff to enroll in one of the college credit programs that are within the six career pathways. Again, for most of the career pathways the Certificate of Proficiency programs will be the recommended college entry point. However, for several of the pathways a Certificate of Proficiency may not be the best starting point for students, for reasons discussed below (see Box 6). The six Certificate of Proficiency programs are listed in the table on page 8. This step includes registering for the appropriate classes and, if necessary, securing financial aid.

The key components of the Career Pathways Pilot Project that have been discussed thus far address most of the above mentioned challenges that adult students often face when trying to enroll in and complete college. Specifically, they address: the lack of knowledge about available training and related career opportunities; the lack of knowledge about how to successfully apply for college and connect to critical resources such as financial aid; child care and transportation; and the lack of knowledge about how to adequately prepare to succeed in college coursework and adequate opportunities to receive such preparation. The remaining challenges mentioned above are addressed by the other key components of the Career Pathways Pilot Project design, which are described below.

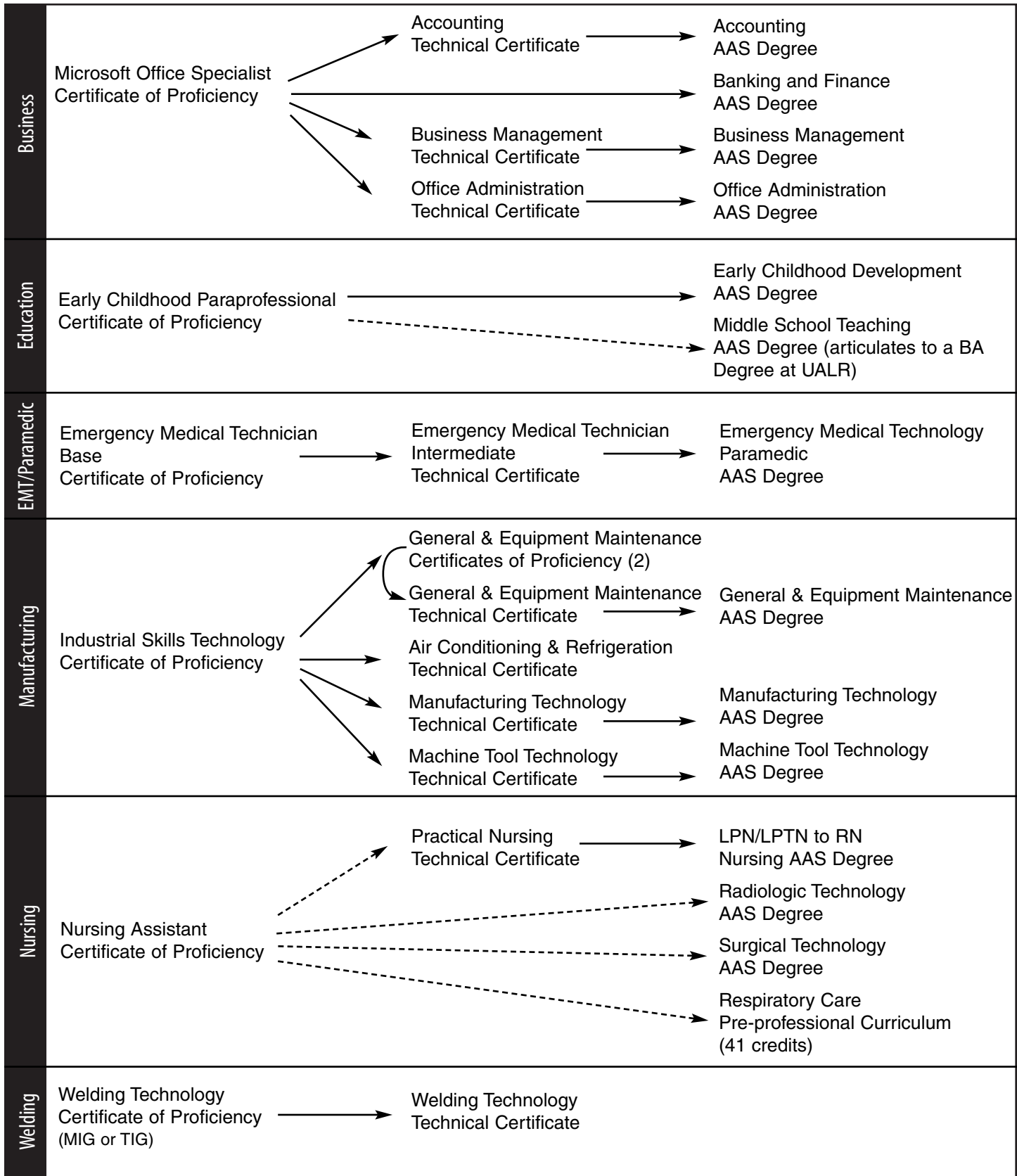
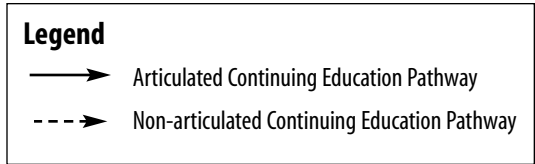
Continuation of the Education Pathway: Articulated Higher Education Programs

The Certificate of Proficiency college credit programs are part of a continuing higher education pathway. Most of these programs articulate with advanced higher education programs, meaning certain course credits count toward the completion of advanced higher education programs. Linking college credit programs is a key feature of career pathways initiatives. The obvious benefit of linking programs is that students are participating in a program that is part of a continuing education pathway that can be followed to advance a student's career. For example, the manufacturing pathway begins with an Industrial Skills Technology Certificate of Proficiency, which articulates to a General Equipment Maintenance Technical Certificate, which articulates to a General Equipment Maintenance Associate of Applied Science Degree. The Industrial Skills Technology Certificate also articulates to several other Technical Certificate and Associate of Applied Science Degree programs, including a Technical Certificate in Air Conditioning and Refrigeration. (See table on page 8 for a complete listing of the higher education program pathways).

Research suggests that higher education completion among adult students is facilitated by breaking programs down into smaller modules that: 1) are more quickly completed and thus translate into more immediate job advancement, and that 2) articulate with advanced higher education programs to provide clear opportunities for continued training and career advancement. GFF and SEARK College are considering even smaller program modularization of the higher education pathways, especially where this is warranted by local employer workforce needs.

Again, the Certificate of Proficiency programs are the recommended starting point for students in most of the higher education pathways. The primary reason for that is that the coursework for the Certificate of Proficiency programs is required for completion of the advanced degrees in the higher education pathway, so it makes sense for students to complete this coursework first, for a variety of reasons not least of which is to earn a college credential and get a better job if need be. However, since some of the Certificate of Proficiency programs do not articulate to the advanced degrees in the higher education pathways, students with an interest in such advanced degrees as their ultimate education goal will be encouraged to enroll in these programs from the start. For example, only some of the coursework for the Nursing Assistant Certificate of Proficiency articulates to the Practical Nursing Technical Certificate or other advanced degrees in that pathway. For students in this pathway who have clear aspirations for the advanced degrees from the start, it does not make sense for them to enter the pathway at the Certificate of Proficiency.

Career Pathways Pilot Project: Higher Education Pathway Options



Connection to Labor Market Demand

Another key feature of the Career Pathways Pilot Project design is the connection between the training provided by the project and real job opportunities in the labor market. Each of the higher education programs in the various pathways will prepare students for specific jobs that local or regional employers need to fill.

The LTAs described above serve to engage employers in the project and confirm the employers' need for various types of trained workers. Again, the LTAs also tailor the training curricula to the specific skill needs of particular jobs.

To date, LTAs have been conducted for various entry-level jobs, which the WAGE Employability Certificate will target, and for the jobs that the various Certificates of Proficiency programs target. LTAs will be conducted to more directly connect the remaining higher education programs in the pathways to real jobs with particular employers. To help move this process forward, GFF and SEARK College are partnering with the National Economic Development and Law Center (NEDLC) to conduct research that identifies the demand for the various occupations within the industries the Career Pathways Pilot Project targets, including identifying the actual occupational ladders within and between some of the particular local and regional employers in that industry. NEDLC has developed a methodology for conducting this kind of research for the specific purpose of developing effective industry-specific job training programs, and NEDLC staff will be assisting GFF and SEARK College in conducting the research.

Because of the connection to labor market demand, the Career Pathways Pilot Project will help students quickly translate their higher educational attainment into greater success in the labor market, meaning the ability to get a better job with better wages, benefits, and career potential. This connection to real job opportunities, combined with the hands-on job placement assistance GFF staff provides, helps adult students better understand and connect to the job opportunities available to them upon completion of their studies, which is something many traditional higher education service delivery models are not as prepared to do. When working with adults, this connection is absolutely critical since getting a better job is the primary reason adults pursue additional education.

Continued Counseling, Mentoring, and Support Service Assistance

Another unique feature of the Career Pathways Pilot Project is the continuous student counseling and mentoring, which will be provided primarily by GFF but with help from SEARK College personnel. Students will have access to GFF staff and assistance at any and all points in the process of advancing through their chosen career pathway. This assistance will include counseling and mentoring, as well as help with accessing needed supportive services such as child care and transportation, as they continue to pursue their higher education studies. It also will include assistance with job placement when they are ready to find a new job and assistance with job retention. This kind of support is a key feature of career pathways initiatives, and it is something GFF has been doing very successfully for its nursing assistant students for almost a decade.

Remaining Challenges

Although the design of the Career Pathways Pilot Project is nearly complete, there are a few challenges related to design that lay ahead. A key challenge is how to facilitate success with the developmental education coursework that students, who either start at or move on to, advanced higher education programs might need to complete. The Certificate of Proficiency programs, that are the first step of the higher education pathways, deliberately do not require developmental education courses. Students only need to achieve certain TABE scores to enroll, and those that do not achieve the requisite TABE scores will be remediated via the WAGE College Bridge Program. Once a student decides to obtain a Technical Certificate or Associate of Applied Science Degree, they will be

required to take the ASSET or Compass test—the college entrance examinations used by most two-year colleges in Arkansas. Depending on their scores, the student may be required to enroll in college developmental education courses in order to complete their studies. The Career Pathways Pilot Project partners believe that the need for developmental education coursework will be significantly reduced for those students that complete the WAGE College Bridge Program and the Certificate of Proficiency programs. However, the partners also agree that many students will still need some developmental education coursework, particularly those students that want to leap directly into more demanding Associate Degree programs.

According to the data above, enrollment in developmental education courses presents a clear barrier to timely completion of college for a large majority of students. There are many colleges nationally that have developed innovative approaches to developmental education, and these practices will be examined and possibly replicated as part of the Career Pathways Pilot Project. The project partners are committed to adopting some innovative practices that facilitate improved success in developmental education coursework because this is one more barrier to completion of college that the Career Pathways Pilot Project would like to address.

To begin addressing this challenge, SEARK College has created a Summer College Bridge Program that will be offered during the summer and possibly the fall and spring semesters. This eight week program will be taught by college developmental education instructors and cover such topics as math skills, reading skills, writing skills, critical thinking skills, and computer skills. The curriculum also includes an orientation to college and a career interest assessment. The program is intended to prepare students to score well on the Asset Test, thereby reducing or eliminating the need for developmental education courses.

Another key challenge will be sufficient access to financial aid, particularly need-based financial aid. Since many of the students participating in the Career Pathways Pilot Project will be relatively low-income adults, access to need-based financial aid is critical to the success of the project. Arkansas recently created the Arkansas Workforce Improvement Grant Program (AWIGP), which is a need-based scholarship program exclusively for adult students pursuing higher education credentials. The Career Pathways Pilot Project partners will be seeking increased funding for AWIGP so that it can help more adults access college. The partners will also be exploring changes to other state financial programs to improve access to financial aid for adults and seeking grants or other funding sources to assist students with tuition expenses.

A final challenge will be building a broad base of employer support for the Career Pathways Pilot Project. The process of conducting LTAs, as described above, has produced a significant base of employer support for the project. More employers need to be brought in to ensure every step in the various career pathways is connected to real job opportunities with local or regional employers. The occupational demand and career ladders research GFF will be conducting with NEDLC will be invaluable in terms of engaging more employers.

Potential for Replication

The Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges has been a partner in the Career Pathways Pilot Project from the beginning. A key reason for their interest was the potential for replication of the project at other two-year colleges in the state.

Since beginning the project, Arkansas was selected to participate in a National Governor's Association, Center for Best Practices Policy Academy. Arkansas was selected as one of eight states nationally, and the only southern state, to participate in the Academy. The Academy is formally titled the Pathways to Advancement Policy Academy. The objective of the Academy for participating states is to develop innovative state policies and/or other strategies to improve access to and completion of college credentials among adults, particularly lower-income, working

adults. The team from Arkansas that is leading the state's participation in the academy has identified replication of the Career Pathways Pilot Project as a key strategy that the state intends to pursue over the coming years. This leadership team includes the directors of several state agencies, and staff from the Governor's Office, as well as staff from AATYC and GFF. The leadership team is considering a variety of state policy changes relevant to improving the success of the Career Pathways Pilot Project, such as increasing funding for financial aid for adult students to pursue college, and seed funding to begin replicating the project at other two-year colleges. Participation in the Pathways to Advancement Policy Academy has made successful replication of the Career Pathways Pilot Project very likely.

Prepared by Mike Leach
Director of the
Public Policy Program of
Good Faith Fund
1123 S. University, Suite 1018
Little Rock, AR 72204
501.661.0322

e-mail:
mleach@goodfaithfund.org
www.goodfaithfund.org



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GFF
Good Faith Fund
2304 W. 29th Avenue
Pine Bluff, AR 71603