



Policy Points

A publication of the Southern Good Faith Fund Public Policy program

The Southeast Arkansas College Career Pathways Program

This brief describes the Career Pathways program, a collaborative initiative between Southeast Arkansas College (SEARK College), Southern Good Faith Fund (SGFF), the Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges, the state Adult Education program, the Arkansas Department of Higher Education, and the Arkansas Transitional Employment Assistance (TEA) Board.

Career Pathways 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-income adults. The program inspired the Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative, described below, which is a statewide effort to implement career pathways programs at eleven two-year colleges in Arkansas.

Much of the conceptual framework for the program 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 was among the first to define “career pathways” programs and offer examples of such programs across the country.

An Alternative Higher Education Service Delivery Model for Adult Students

Career Pathways is designed to help adult students, particularly low-income adults, overcome the unique challenges they face in terms of enrolling in and completing postsecondary training. The program does so by the unique components of the program design, which are discussed in detail below. By helping adults overcome these challenges, the project embodies an alternative higher education service delivery model geared toward adults, which are often collectively 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 typically do not face as many challenges to success as adult students.

The unique challenges of adult students, particularly low-income adult students, include:

- Adequate career counseling that provides updated information about available training and related career opportunities;
- Training programs that are not directly connected to real job opportunities, which is the key reason adults pursue additional training;
- The need for extensive remedial coursework to prepare for college credit courses, which can significantly extend the time required to earn a college credential;
- Convenient course locations and scheduling, especially evening and weekend course offerings which are convenient for working adults;
- Adequate academic advising, monitoring, and support services, such as tutoring;
- Adequate access to financial aid to make tuition affordable; and
- Adequate access to support services such as child care and transportation, which are critical to helping working adults balance the responsibilities of school, family, and work.

Although Career Pathways is designed to provide an alternative higher education service delivery model for adult students, many of the practices that are part of the model could benefit the broader population of students at most community colleges. Most community college students

experience some of the same challenges to success as adult students, just not as many and to the same degree. For this reason, the practices described below that are part of Career Pathways have the potential to be applied institution-wide to improve retention and completion for a broader population of students. SEARK College is evaluating the impact of these practices on student success and the potential for applying them institution-wide.

The Program Design: Meeting the Unique Needs of Adult Students

Career Pathways includes three key design components that are aimed at meeting the unique needs of adult students.

1. Clear Pathways of Continuing Training and Employment

This is the defining characteristic of career pathways programs nationwide. This component of Career Pathways design includes mapped pathways of noncredit and college credit programs tied to high-demand occupations. See Diagram 1 for an example of the nursing and allied health pathway. This pathway begins with a noncredit Employability Certificate or a college credit Nursing Assistant Certificate of Proficiency that qualify students for various entry-level jobs in the health care field. The pathway continues on to advanced college credit programs, including Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) and various allied health certificate and degree programs.

There are five other pathways that are the primary focus of Career Pathways, each of which includes a similar sequence of credential programs. Most of the college credit programs in each pathway articulate, meaning certain course credits count toward the completion of advanced college credit programs.

Additionally, there is a strong connection between the training or credentials provided and real job opportunities in the local labor market. Each of the credential programs in the various pathways will prepare students for specific jobs that local or regional employers need filled.

Focus groups made up of local employers in the industries targeted by Career Pathways have been organized to verify demand occupations, job ladders, job skills and internship or work study experience opportunities.

2. Curriculum Innovations to Improve Student Success

A second key design component of Career Pathways is curriculum innovations. Career Pathways involves three key curricula innovations, all of which are aimed at improving student retention and completion. Two of these curricula deal with remedial instruction and are intended to prepare students for or transition them into various college credit programs within the six pathways. A common term for such curricula is “bridge programs.”¹

a) WAGE Bridge Program

The Workforce for Growth in the Economy (WAGE) Bridge program is designed to serve those students who need lower levels of basic academic skills remediation before entering college credit programs. Initially the curricula that make up this program are intended to do two things:

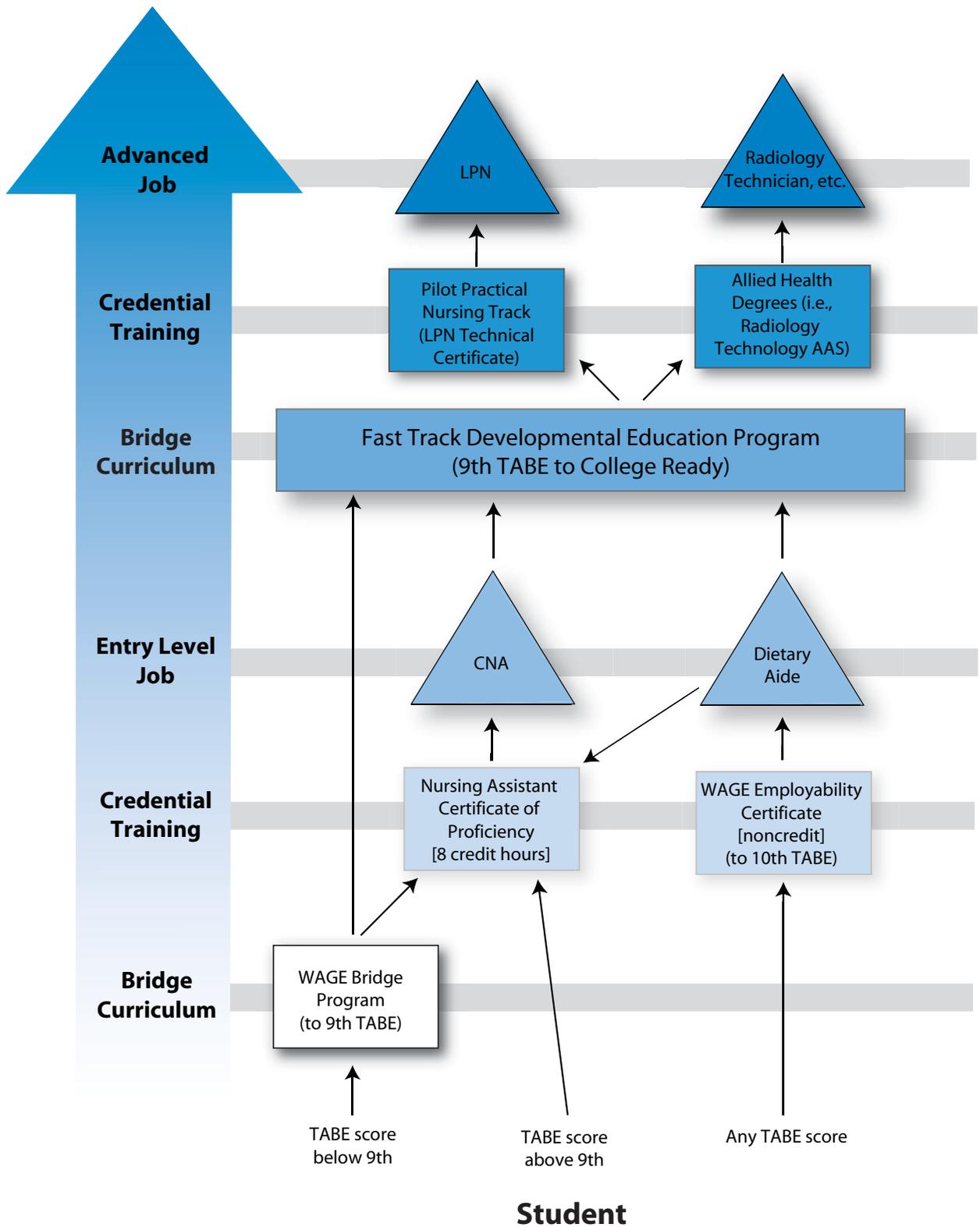
- Bring students’ basic academic skills up to the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) level required for entry and success in specific Certificate of Proficiency college credit programs, which are the college entry point—meaning students are actually enrolled in college credit courses—for all six career pathways. The required TABE level varies between 8th and 9th grade.
- Impart job-specific competencies, including various soft skills that often are overlooked by academic programs.

Diagram 1 shows how the WAGE Bridge program is used to prepare students for the Nursing Assistant Certificate of Proficiency college credit program within the nursing and allied health pathway.

Additionally, these curricula are being used to provide lower levels of remediation for select groups of students who will move on to a special developmental education program to continue their remedial instruction (see the Fast Track Developmental Education program description on page 4).

The process by which all WAGE curricula are developed enables the identification of the job-specific competencies. WAGE is a unique workplace literacy program Arkansas created several years ago. WAGE uses Literacy Task Analyses (LTAs) of specific jobs to determine the particular basic academic and soft skills needed to be successful in those specific jobs.² 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.

Diagram 1
Nursing and Allied Health Career Pathway: Credentials, Jobs, Bridge Curriculum Innovations



For the WAGE Bridge program curricula, LTAs were completed for the jobs for which the Certificate of Proficiency college credit programs prepare students. Those jobs include manufacturing and machine operation positions; welding positions; nursing assistants; child care paraprofessionals; and office administration assistants.

Based on these LTAs, six separate adult basic education bridge curricula have been developed, one to prepare students for each of the Certificate of Proficiency college credit programs that again are the college entry points for all six career pathways. The curricula also address the basic academic skill levels and other competencies needed for success in the Certificate of Proficiency college credit program courses.

The curriculum also use job tasks, which are identified through the LTA process, to teach the basic academic skills and other competencies. For example, students who are using the curriculum designed to prepare students for the CNA Certificate of Proficiency program will be building their basic academic skills by performing CNA job tasks such as body and food measurements and calculations.

Using job tasks to teach basic academic skills provides for a “contextualized” basic academic skill curriculum. Research indicates that such contextualization improves student learning of basic academic skills.³

As depicted in Diagram 1, the WAGE program at SEARK also offers a noncredit Employability Certificate and a General Educational Development (GED). The Employability Certificate is connected to entry-level jobs in each career pathway and is meant to provide a non-credit credential that can lead to entry-level employment for those students who prefer such an option. Enrollment in the Employability Certificate is free and does not require any minimum TABE score.

Students seeking a GED are strongly encouraged to complete the Employability Certificate. With some supplemental instruction, the Employability Certificate can be used to prepare for the GED.

b) Fast Track Developmental Education Program

The second curriculum innovation that is part of Career Pathways is the Fast Track Developmental Education program. This curriculum targets students interested in various one-year and two-year allied health certificate and degree programs who need significant remedial or developmental education instruction before qualifying to enter these advanced college credit programs.

The curriculum is intense and intended to take students from a 9th grade TABE level to college ready, meaning

ready to enter advanced college credit programs, in one semester. This amount of remedial instruction usually takes two semesters. The curriculum, which covers reading, writing, and math, is contextualized to allied health careers, and is co-taught by SEARK developmental education faculty and allied health program faculty in a learning community format.⁴ See Diagram 2 for the schedule of courses and meeting times.

The Fast Track Developmental Education program complements the WAGE Bridge program by providing continuing remedial instruction for students so that they can complete all the remedial coursework they need to enter advanced college credit programs (that is, programs beyond the Certificate of Proficiency level, which require less remedial coursework to enroll).

Those students who are not yet at a 9th grade TABE are encouraged to use the WAGE Bridge program to reach this entry level of basic academic skills proficiency. Diagram 1 shows how the WAGE Bridge program is being used to prepare students for the Fast Track Developmental Education program within the context of the nursing and allied health pathway. SEARK College is interested in developing other fast track curricula targeting other pathways such as education, manufacturing, and business administration.

Target students for the Fast Track Developmental Education program are adults who have completed any of the Certificate of Proficiency programs or the Employability Certificate within the health care pathway and/or have been working in an allied health care job successfully for some time. Local employers are being asked to recommend employees who fit this profile and give employees time off to attend classes.

**Diagram 2
Developmental Education Fast Track**

All classes meet Monday through Thursday

- 8 a.m. - 9:15 a.m. **Math for Allied Health I** (first eight weeks)
 Math for Allied Health II (second eight weeks)
- 9:30 a.m. - 10:45 a.m. **Writing for Allied Health I** (first eight weeks)
 Writing for Allied Health II (second eight weeks)
- 11 a.m. - 12:15 p.m. **Technical Reading for Allied Health** (first eight weeks only)

The WAGE Bridge and Fast Track Developmental Education programs described above are attempts to build alternatives for adult students to succeed with the remedial coursework they often need before qualifying to enter college credit programs. These alternatives are a part of a larger vision at SEARK College to build multiple remedial instruction “pipelines” or options for students.

This larger vision includes developing three primary remedial instruction options: the traditional developmental education option which is tuition-based and structured around semesters; an adult education option which is free and self-paced, and an adult education and developmental education synergy option. This later option is embodied in the WAGE Bridge and Fast Track Developmental Education programs synergy described above, and is only available for now to students who are interested in completing various allied health college credit programs. SEARK College is currently working to build the capacity of its adult education program to be able to get students college ready, which requires instruction beyond the traditional GED curriculum. Once this larger vision is realized, SEARK College will have multiple remedial instruction options for students, each of which will have a unique appeal to students depending on their particular needs and preferences.

c) Pilot Practical Nursing Track Program

The final curriculum innovation is the Pilot Practical Nursing Track program. This program is intended to further expedite entry into and completion of nursing degrees for students completing the Fast Track Developmental Education program. This curriculum integrates the basic nutrition and physiology coursework, which are traditionally LPN program prerequisite courses, into the LPN program coursework. This integration contextualizes the prerequisite coursework and reduces the overall amount of hours of instruction, thus allowing students to complete the LPN degree program in one year. Traditionally this program takes at least three semesters to complete.

3. Intensive Student Support Services

Intensive student support services are the third key design component of Career Pathways. They begin with the recruitment of students and continue through job placement and retention. Once recruited, potential students are given a program orientation, which lays out how the program works and what is required to participate and succeed.

A full-time student support consultant, who is employed by SGFF but is stationed on the SEARK College campus, describes in detail the various career pathways available to students, including the specific job opportunities that

are accessible at the completion of each credential program within the various career pathways.

Next is an extensive needs assessment. This assessment involves a support service and financial aid needs assessment, a career interests and aptitudes assessment, and a basic academic skill assessment. The support services needs assessment is used to determine if students need child care, transportation, or other support services. Even substance abuse counseling and other unique services are provided by referral if necessary.

The student support consultant also works with SEARK College financial aid personnel to determine any need for financial aid and begin the process of helping students apply for such aid. Students ineligible for federal Pell Grants or other traditional sources of aid may be provided aid from the Last Resort Scholarship Fund.

The career interest and aptitude assessments, which are administered using Career Scope and the Kuder Career Planning System, are used 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 TABE and/or the Asset Test, is used to determine if students need remediation and how much, or if they are ready to enter college.

Another key component of student support services is academic monitoring. The student support consultant monitors student academic progress and helps coordinate needed academic support services. Student class attendance and progress are monitored weekly using a tracking sheet that students are required to have signed by their instructors daily. The tracking sheet is brought by students to the student support consultant on a weekly basis for verification. Students not making satisfactory progress with reference to grades and attendance are contacted by the student support consultant for an individual meeting to determine appropriate support service needs.

All child care and transportation vouchers are based on the tracking sheet. Vouchers are verified for renewal weekly. In this way, these support services are being used to incentivize student retention and completion.

Career pathways instructors also are encouraged to e-mail the student support consultant regarding any concerns about a particular student. Instructors are notified which students are in Career Pathways and inform the consultant when they are not coming to class, making poor grades or otherwise struggling.

Students who are identified by their instructors and the student support consultant as needing academic course tutoring or other academic supports are referred to

Student Affairs. Student Affairs staff report back to the student support consultant on student progress. Attending tutoring sessions is a requirement for continued support services such as child care and transportation.

Other Student Support Services include college orientation and college survival skills seminars. Career Pathways staff, in conjunction with other SEARK College staff, provide a special cohort orientation for all Career Pathways students at the beginning of each semester.

In the first two weeks of each semester, a College Survival Skills Seminar also is provided for all Career Pathways students enrolled in college credit courses.

Finally, once students complete whatever education credential they are seeking within the pathway they have chosen, a career consultant works with them to find employment. The consultant also works with students who want or need employment or internship or work study opportunities while they are in school. The consultant works with local employers to identify employment opportunities for students.

Funding for many of the student support services, as well as the student support and career consultants, is provided by a Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) grant awarded to SEARK College by the Arkansas TEA Board. A similar TANF grant is supporting implementation of career pathways programs at 10 other community colleges in Arkansas. See the description of the Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative below.

Summary

The three key design components of Career Pathways that have been discussed above address the primary challenges that adult students often face when trying to enroll in and successfully complete college credential programs.

By addressing these challenges, Career Pathways embodies an alternative higher education service delivery model for adult students—one that addresses their unique needs in a way that the traditional higher education service delivery model does not.

Recognizing the value of and need for this model at every community college in Arkansas, the Arkansas Department of Higher Education secured a state TANF grant from the Arkansas TEA Board to fund what is being called the Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative. This initiative is aimed at enabling 11 community colleges in Arkansas to implement career pathways programs. A forthcoming Policy Points will describe this initiative in detail.

Endnotes

¹ Henle, Toni; Jenkins, Davis; and Smith, Whitney, *Building Educational Bridges to Careers for Low-Skill Adults: Program Development Guide*, June 2005.

² Soft skills include work ethic, teamwork, self-discipline and communication.

³ Workforce Strategy Center, *Building Bridges to College and Careers: Contextualized Basic Skills Programs at Community Colleges*, January 2003.

⁴ Learning communities bring together small groups of college students who take two or more linked courses together. For more information, see Prince, Derek, *Learning Communities and Student Success in Postsecondary Education*, MDRC and DVP-Praxis Ltd., December 2005. Also see Bloom, Dan and Sommo, Colleen, *Building Learning Communities: Early Results from the Opening Doors Demonstration at Kingsborough Community College*, MDRC, June 2005.

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