

BRIDGES TO OPPORTUNITY?

An Implementation Analysis of ICCB Bridge Programs for Adult Learners



Acknowledgments

The support and contributions of several individuals and organizations made possible this exploratory study brief about the implementation of bridge programs in Illinois.

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Any errors or omissions in this brief are the sole responsibility of the authors. We hope that the insights presented here contribute to meaningful discussions and positive changes in the lives of adult learners and their families.

Executive Summary

In 2023, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) partnered with the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) to explore how adult learners with foundational skills needs in Illinois are prepared for economic opportunity and upwardly mobile futures. This report captures the key insights and actionable recommendations that emerged from that study.

Approximately 20 million adults in the United States who have not yet attained a high school credential face barriers to well-paying jobs, highlighting gaps between their skills and job requirements. Critically, individuals from historically marginalized groups—including English learners, Hispanic or Latine individuals, women, and those with multiple barriers to employment—are overrepresented among these adults.

Bridge programs offer on-ramps to integrated education and training (IET) and other postsecondary education programs by providing (a) contextualized literacy, numeracy, or English instruction in one of 16 nationally recognized career clusters and (b) comprehensive support services that make higher level instruction and jobs more accessible and, hence, more equitable. Despite the promise that bridge programs hold for supporting the economic mobility of adults without high school credentials, there is little research on how these programs are implemented and the successes and challenges they face. To address these limitations, AIR designed a study focused on the implementation of bridge programs among five program providers in Illinois. AIR interviewed administrators, instructors, and staff and conducted focus groups with learners to explore the three core components of the bridge programs: contextualized instruction, career development, and transition services.

The report discusses the successes and challenges faced by bridge providers and offers insights and recommendations for further streamlining the implementation of bridge programs and creating a more coordinated educational pathway between bridge programs and Illinois' s IET program, known as the Integrated Career & Academic Preparation System (ICAPS). Although findings generally reflect themes common to multiple bridge program providers, specific insights into promising practices are based on experiences shared by individual providers. These practices and recommendations should be seen as effective strategies in specific contexts rather than as generalizable findings meant to be scaled in all bridge programs.

A range of promising practices as well as potential challenges surfaced from our analysis and can help bridge program providers enhance their own implementation in the interest of creating more equitable access to bridge programs and, by extension, occupational mobility. Through this analysis, we also developed recommendations meant to further support the implementation of bridge programs. In what follows, we identify a selection of these promising practices as well as challenges that were particularly salient in our analysis, but for a complete discussion, please see the report.

Promising Practices

- ◆ **Immersive Experiences to Demystify College.** Providers offered field trips to Career and Technical Education open houses, such as those at an industrial electricity program. These open houses and campus tours made it easy for adult learners to see themselves in a college setting and take steps to apply for higher education in ICAPS and other postsecondary courses.
- ◆ **Motivating Learners Through Bell Ringers and TED Talks.** Some instructors found it helpful to begin instruction with a bell ringer, an activity in which the first 15 minutes of class are used to watch and discuss engaging and motivational videos or TED talks. Instructors believed these videos, which were accessible to learners outside of instructional time via their learning management systems, would help learners to reflect on their own barriers, be more resilient in the face of personal obstacles, and persist through the bridge coursework.
- ◆ **Creating a Sense of Community With a Cohort Model.** Peer support and teamwork during courses were touted as important practices by both instructors and adult learners. Some bridge program instructors built opportunities for teamwork into the curricula, and learners could progress through a series of activities together, which reinforced a shared sense of achievement.

Challenges

- ◆ **Goal Mismatch.** Some learners entered bridge programs with objectives and motivations that were not well aligned with program goals, such as lacking immediate plans to continue to ICAPS or another postsecondary education program in a recognized career pathway. This lack of clarity made it challenging for learners to plan their next steps effectively. In some cases, learners in Adult Basic Education and English as a Second Language courses did not realize that they were in a bridge program, and they missed opportunities to participate and succeed in advanced occupational training programs.
- ◆ **Inconsistent ICAPS Alignment.** The lack of alignment between bridge programs and ICAPS created barriers for learners to transition to higher education programs, such as ICAPS. Administrators noted curriculum gaps that may require additional programming for smoother transitions from bridge courses to ICAPS. Some administrators also advocated for expanding ICAPS to include more career pathway options aligned with local industry needs. However, smaller programs, which are often community based rather than housed within colleges, face more challenges in offering diverse ICAPS and bridge courses due to limited resources.

In the last section of the report, we provide recommendations on how bridge program providers can address the challenges noted and further streamline program implementation in Illinois to foster more cohesive educational pathways from bridge program to ICAPS and other advanced occupational training programs.

Specifically, we recommend practices that can **improve entry into bridge programs** by clarifying program goals to learners at entry and ensuring bridge coursework is aligned with ICAPS opportunities. We also recommend multiple practices that can help **learners persist in bridge programs and transition to ICAPS or postsecondary programs**. Noteworthy among these practices is prioritizing immersive experiences—such as campus tours, open houses, and guest speakers—that can introduce learners to and give them detailed context about their courses of study and their economic potential. Finally, practices that foster a sense of community within a cohort can go a long way to improving persistence and motivating learners to transition to pathways of higher education.

Contents

About This Research Brief	1
Methods: How This Brief Contributes	2
Who Stands to Benefit From Bridge Programs?	
Adult Learner Backgrounds and Motivations for Participation in Bridge Programs	4
Advancing Equity Through Diverse Approaches to Bridge Programs	5
How Did Bridge Program Providers Contextualize Instruction for Adult Learners?.	5
How Did Bridge Program Providers Provide Career Development Opportunities to Adult Learners?.	9
What Transition Services Did Bridge Programs Provide to Adult Learners?.	11
Implementation Challenges: Opportunities for Further Advancing Equity	12
Barriers to Entry and Retention in Bridge Programs	12
Goal Mismatch	14
Inconsistent ICAPS Alignment	14
Barriers to Collaboration Between Bridge Program Providers and Other Partners	15
Inadequate Funding	16
Assessment Challenges.	16
Recommendations: Suggestions for Improving Bridge Implementation	17
Improving Entry Into Bridge Programs	17
Helping Learners Persist in Bridge Programs and Transition to ICAPS or Postsecondary Programs	18
Concluding Remarks	21
References	22

About This Research Brief

In 2023, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) partnered with the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) to explore how adult learners with foundational skill needs in Illinois are being prepared for economic opportunity and upwardly mobile futures. Approximately 20 million adults in the United States who have not yet attained a high school credential are excluded from employment in occupations that provide family-sustaining wages (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Due to persistent inequities in access to quality education and training, there exists a significant mismatch between the skills that these adults typically possess and those required by such occupations. Consequently, these adults remain most at risk of stagnating in low-income occupations throughout their lives.

Adult education programming is a critical resource for adults who want to support their literacy, numeracy, and English language skills development, career training, and transition to college and careers. Adults who participate in adult education in Illinois are disproportionately from historically marginalized groups, reflecting national trends. In the program year 2022–23, more than two thirds (69%) of Illinois’s adult learner population consisted of English learners, over half were Hispanic or Latino, and two thirds were women (National Reporting System, 2023). Further, more than a third reported being unemployed, and about one in five reported low-income status (National Reporting System, 2023).

The ICCB is the state agency in Illinois that coordinates public community colleges and adult education programming. An important component of adult education is integrated education and training (IET), authorized by Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to support adults’ occupational and economic mobility goals. IET programs—known as the Integrated Career & Academic Preparation System (ICAPS) in Illinois—accelerate adult learners’ progress in a career pathway by simultaneously providing foundational skills instruction along with occupational skills training and workforce preparation activities. However, adult learners with lower foundational skills are screened out of IET because they do not meet the minimum literacy, numeracy, or English proficiency levels to be successful in these programs. This narrowed pipeline perpetuates systemic inequities and poverty for the most vulnerable adults.

An innovative approach implemented by the ICCB is to offer adult learners on-ramps to IET programs or postsecondary opportunities called bridge programs. Critically, these programs provide literacy, numeracy, or English language instruction contextualized in one of 16 nationally recognized career clusters alongside comprehensive support services that make higher level instruction and jobs more accessible and, hence, more equitable. The goal of bridge programs is to bridge the gap between adults’ initial skill level and the level they need to enter and succeed in postsecondary education and career-path

Key Findings

- By offering foundational skill instruction that is contextualized in nationally recognized career clusters, bridge programs are on-ramps that seek to bridge the gap between the existing skill level of adult learners and the level they need to participate and succeed in advanced occupational training programs through.
- Adult learners in bridge programs have diverse motivations, backgrounds, and educational preparations, and they face multiple barriers to economic mobility.
- Bridge program providers shared promising practices, such as offering adult learners immersive experiences that demystify college and facilitating opportunities for learners to collaborate and seek peer support within their cohorts, which can help strengthen pathways to integrated education and training and other postsecondary education.
- Recommendations from this report, such as clarifying bridge program goals to adult learners and aligning bridge courses with the Integrated Career & Academic Preparation System, can be used to streamline learners’ transition to said system and to other postsecondary programs.

employment (ICCB, 2012). The bridge model supports Illinois adults who are 16 and older (and whose literacy or numeracy skills are at or above sixth grade levels or whose English language proficiency is at or above the low-intermediate English as a Second Language [ESL] level¹) in gaining the necessary skills to successfully transition to postsecondary programs or IET programs in such areas as healthcare, manufacturing, and transportation.

Bridge programs, by definition, include the following three core components:

- ◆ contextualized instruction that integrates literacy, numeracy, and English language skills and industry and occupation knowledge;
- ◆ career development that includes career exploration and career planning within a career area; and
- ◆ transition services that provide learners with academic advising, tutoring, coaching, and referrals to individual support services (e.g., transportation and childcare).

Methods: How This Brief Contributes

This research brief illustrates how bridge programs in Illinois address barriers to economic opportunity and advance equitable access to occupational training in high-demand and high-wage occupations among a diverse adult learner population. In addition, because research on bridge programs is lacking, conducting studies to understand the implementation and effectiveness of these programs is crucial to guide policymakers, program administrators, and other decision makers in improving bridge programming.

To address this pressing need for evidence, AIR collected data from five adult education providers in Illinois, which were selected to reflect the diversity of adult learners and program providers in the state. We considered several factors to select the providers, including the type of provider, whether the location is urban or rural, the number of adult learners served, the race and ethnicity of the learners, the backgrounds of the learners (e.g., immigrants and economically disadvantaged individuals), and the type of bridge program offered (e.g., career awareness or a general bridge; healthcare bridge; or transportation, distribution, and logistics bridge). In collaboration with ICCB, AIR constructed a purposive sample of program providers in Illinois that reflect the diversity in program providers according to these factors. However, despite our efforts to capture the diversity of program providers and their learners, the research design and analysis were limited by the small sample size of program providers. For this reason, the lessons learned in this brief cannot be generalized to all providers in the state.

At each site, we conducted focus groups with adult learners and interviewed administrators and instructors.² During the focus groups, we asked learners about their goals and motivations, their bridge course experiences, the factors that facilitated or hindered their success in the program and beyond, their plans for continuing education after the bridge course, and their suggestions for program improvement. In our interviews with administrators and instructors of bridge programs, we asked about bridge program design, curriculum and delivery, bridge program administration and organizational structure, bridge learner recruitment process and outcomes, and mechanisms for continuous improvement.

All five providers in the study offered bridge programs in one of the 16 national career clusters or a general career awareness bridge program that exposed learners to different career paths. Specifically, the providers offered bridge programs in the fields of construction, healthcare, hospitality, manufacturing, tourism, and early childhood education.

¹ In the National Reporting System for Adult Education, this level of proficiency corresponds to Educational Functioning Level 4 in ESL.

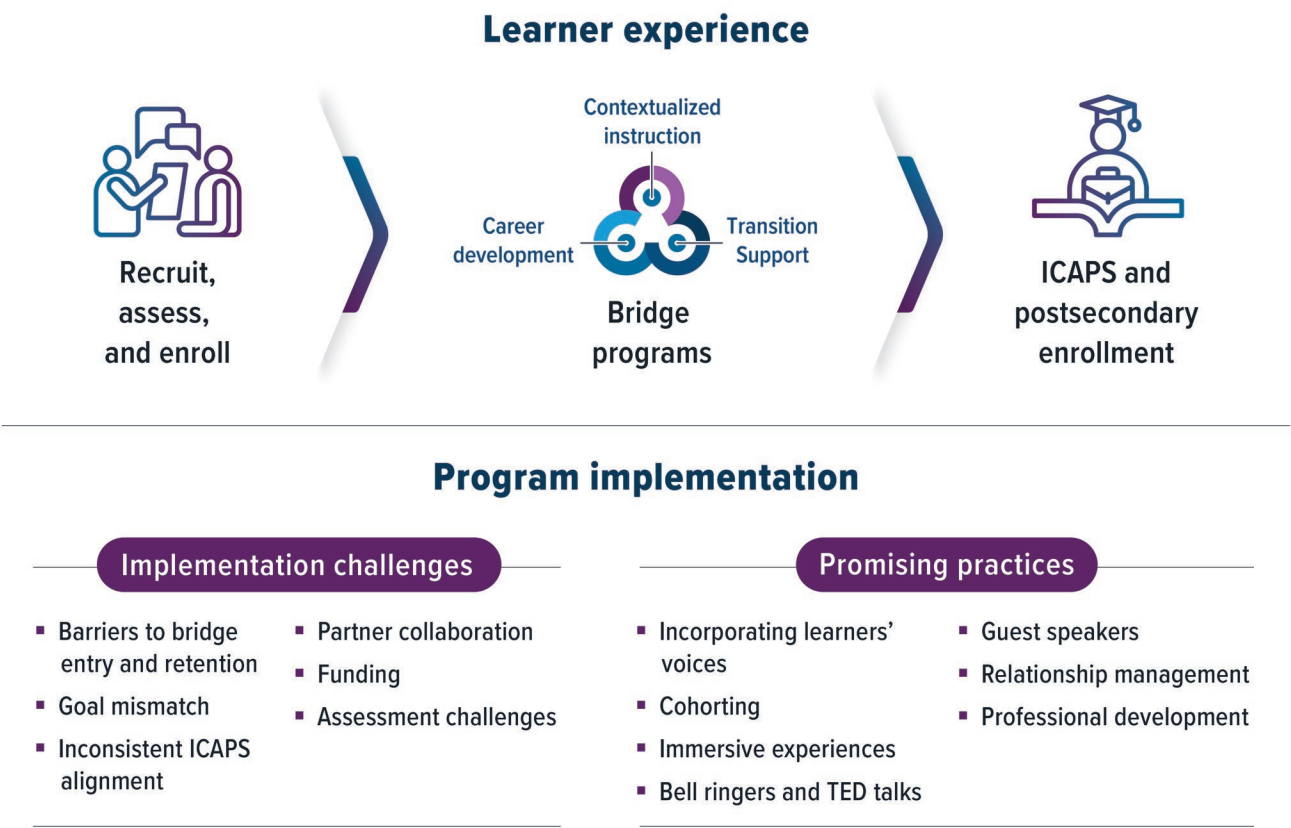
² Due to planning and scheduling considerations at one site, we conducted data collection with the site administrator only.

Modalities varied, with nearly all sites offering their bridge programs through virtual instruction, and three of the five sites supplementing it with in-person or hybrid instruction. Although some bridge programs focused on specific occupations or industries, such as phlebotomy, and provided it only to learners interested in phlebotomy, others offered more general career exploration as part of an existing Adult Basic Education (ABE) or ESL class, thereby providing bridge instruction to all learners in the class.

The following section describes the primary goals and motivations of adult learners participating in bridge programs. Next, we describe the three core components of bridge programs used to advance the occupational mobility of adult learners. We also share promising practices and challenges faced by providers. Finally, we conclude with a list of recommendations that can improve bridge program implementation by supporting streamlined transitions from bridge programs to education and training in career pathways in high-demand and high-skilled occupations.

Although most of our findings represent insights that were commonly heard across multiple bridge program provider sites and representatives, our specific findings on promising practices represent the experiences individual program providers shared with us. For this reason, promising practices and recommendations for improving bridge program implementation should be interpreted as evidence for what worked in a given case and for individual program providers, not necessarily as findings that are generalizable to our entire sample. We have offered them as insights that other providers may want to consider for their own bridge programs if they are not doing so already. Exhibit 1 summarizes the promising practices and challenges discussed later in the brief.

Exhibit 1. Bridge Program Components and Implementation



Who Stands to Benefit From Bridge Programs? Adult Learner Backgrounds and Motivations for Participation in Bridge Programs

Adult education programs in Illinois, including bridge programs, offer adult learners opportunities to improve their literacy, numeracy, or English skills. Consistent with this understanding, the learners we spoke to reported motivations that were often shaped by the bridge program provider's design and implementation of the bridge program. Bridge learners' motivations often revolved around building these foundational skills as well as attaining specific occupational goals. Although most adult learners sought to improve their foundational skills generally, many others reported skill building as the sole or primary motivation. Some learners wanted to speak better English with their employers and with their own children. Others, however, expanded on these motivations and also shared concrete occupational goals that drew them to the bridge program. Compared with learners who did not report such concrete goals, these learners typically had a clearer understanding of how the bridge program would support them. Importantly, learners who did not share concrete occupational goals primarily sought to improve their literacy, numeracy, or English skills. In such cases, bridge programming was not provided as separate instruction to those interested in attaining employment in high-demand occupations; rather, bridge instruction was integrated into an existing ABE or ESL class. Often, such bridge programming consisted of general career awareness. For example, at some sites, bridge classes were multilevel, meaning all beginning-, intermediate-, and advanced-level learners were instructed in one classroom by one instructor, but only the learners in the advanced level were considered bridge learners who engaged in career exploration through differentiated instruction. Across all sites, however, we observed that the variations in how bridge program providers designed their programs reflected the variations in the motivations and goals of the adult learners who enrolled in them.

By contrast, learners with clearly articulated career goals reported specific occupations they wanted to pursue, such as those in phlebotomy or nursing. Other learners who were exploring potential careers had similar, though not as clearly articulated, goals. These learners were motivated to participate in the bridge program to find better-paying jobs, but they stopped short of reporting that they were pursuing particular occupations. In a limited number of cases, learners said they intended to pursue a 4-year degree in healthcare and saw the bridge program as one of their first steps in that direction.

PROMISING PRACTICES



Incorporating Learner Voices

Administrators felt that it was essential for program success to involve learners in the planning process and to continually seek feedback for improvement. With one provider, feedback mechanisms, such as learner surveys and informal staff discussions, were used to monitor program effectiveness and make necessary adjustments in terms of curriculum, activities, and scheduling. Providers need to be nimble to ensure that bridge programs remain effective and relevant to the evolving needs of diverse learners.

Occupational Mobility Barriers

Although adult learners' prior experiences can support their learning, they often face important barriers that affect their self-efficacy and confidence (Housel, 2020; Osam et al., 2017; Patterson, 2018; Snyman et al., 2018). These include

- negative experiences in K–12 schools;
- interruptions to formal education in childhood; and
- traumatic events, such as war, political unrest, displacement, and migration.

Learners' motivations also reflected their personal values and aspirations. Many of the learners were immigrants and shared that they were motivated to improve their skills through the bridge program so they could make a positive impact in their country of origin. Finally, some learners had prior premigration education and work experience in the healthcare industry, often in occupations that were tied directly to the bridge program occupational pathway that they were currently pursuing. These learners wanted to continue their premigration occupation in the United States and saw the bridge program as a way to achieve that.

In the coming section, we describe how bridge program providers' efforts toward contextualized instruction, career development, and transition services helped learners gain knowledge about careers in different occupations.

Advancing Equity Through Diverse Approaches to Bridge Programs

Bridge programs are designed to advance equity in access to careers that provide family sustaining wages by helping adult learners attain the skills and knowledge they need to transition to college and occupational training programs. In this section, we describe how the providers that participated in our study integrated each of the three core components of contextualized instruction, career development support, and transition services in their bridge instruction. We turn to each of these components in respectively titled subsections.

How Did Bridge Program Providers Contextualize Instruction for Adult Learners?

A defining characteristic of bridge programs is not just their potential to provide adult learners with the foundational skills they need but also their ability to do so while simultaneously allowing them to explore a variety of careers, introducing them to specific occupations, job tasks, and expectations that they will encounter in them. Instructors' efforts toward these aims, collectively understood as contextualized instruction, are summarized in Exhibit 2, which illustrates the concrete ways that bridge programs help adult learners move toward parity in occupational training. In the exhibit, we describe strategies, such as opportunities for active learning, that bridge program providers use to instruct foundational skills in the context of careers and occupations.

Exhibit 2. Contextualization Examples

Bridge program	Contextualization example
Healthcare bridge	Using a scenario of taking a patient’s vital signs to teach technical vocabulary words and concepts, (e.g., “pounds,” “feet,” “inches,” and degrees in Fahrenheit) and the difference between the metric and imperial systems of measurement
Construction bridge	Bringing tools into the classroom to identify them, demonstrate their use, and discuss their functions at job sites
Early childhood education bridge	Introducing professional standards, such as the five domains of learning
Digital literacy	Embedding basic Microsoft Office skills (e.g., emailing, creating documents) Incorporating multimedia, such as videos Using online programs, such as Burlington English ^a
English acquisition	Providing explicit vocabulary instruction on • self-expression • technical vocabulary Using occupational scenarios Teaching Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education ^b

^a The online program provides content for adult English learners, with programs dedicated to occupation-specific lessons as well as those on soft skills.

^b Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education includes “instruction in literacy and English language acquisition and instruction on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and civic participation, and may include workforce training (WIOA, 2016).”

Some instructors, such as those teaching a bridge program focused on healthcare or automotive technology, took steps to contextualize their curriculum within those career clusters. For example, some instructors shared that they taught basic English lessons, including communication and technical vocabulary, by drawing on occupational scenarios that learners would encounter in a job. In the healthcare bridge program, instructors offered the scenario of taking a patient’s vital signs during a routine intake procedure and used it to instruct learners on the difference between the metric system that is used in their countries of origin and the imperial system of measurement that is used in the United States.

In construction bridge programs, we learned that instructors contextualized the curriculum by bringing various construction tools into the classroom and identifying their functions and use cases. This approach introduces learners to the tools and tasks for which they would be required and also allows them to practice their vocabulary and English knowledge. Within those lessons, instructors also incorporated opportunities for basic math skills by asking learners to conduct calculations that are commonly required when using the tools.

Contextualized Instruction in a Healthcare Bridge

Although instructors used the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 as an opportunity to instruct English vocabulary and communication skills, the modality of instruction shaped how much learners felt they learned. Because the act is so pervasive in the healthcare industry, it defines many of the routine tasks and procedures that healthcare staff must conduct in their work, and it therefore provided instructors with an apt opportunity to contextualize English language instruction.

In-person courses included group discussions, which helped learners retain the vocabulary throughout the term and allowed them to learn from one another.

By contrast, online courses did not allow for such direct interaction, so instructors should incorporate opportunities for group work and peer learning as much as possible.

Similarly, in early childhood education bridge programs, instructors used professional standards common in the field, such as the five domains of learning for early childhood learners, to teach educational vocabulary that adult learners will need to know and use correctly when they continue their education in college courses.

Nearly all instructors used course aids, such as videos, guest speakers, and digital tools, to contextualize curricula. These digital tools included online curricular platforms, such as Burlington English, among others, that provide content for adult English learners with programs dedicated to occupation-specific lessons as well as programs on soft skills. Moreover, in bridge courses in which instructors were required to include civics lessons in the curricula, such as in the Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education courses, instructors contextualized instruction by supplementing the applied lessons from Burlington English with course content provided by the ICCB. This content helped instructors align their curriculum with the general civics knowledge required for U.S. citizenship examinations.

Other instructors contextualized instruction by using scenarios related to hiring and onboarding new employees in a given occupation as an opportunity to teach English conversation skills. For example, although bridge courses have mock interviews as practice or preparation for the actual act of interviewing, instructors reported that they also used these mock interviews to teach learners the words they need to know to both understand what employers and interviewers look for during the hiring process as well as the verbal skills learners need to respond to questions and describe their own experience and candidacy for the roles. In these activities, instructors reported their goal was to develop the foundational skills required to succeed in the interview process, and as the semester progressed, they used the activity to later emphasize more advanced skills needed during the interview process, such as persuasive and engaging speech. An example appears immediately below.

“

And so trying to tell students, it's like you're telling a story about yourself. And so we spent a lot of time on that. It was like, 'Okay, here's your homework. You're going to start off writing this.' They'd give it back to me. I'd make comments and say, 'Okay, how else could you say this? Or what else would you say?' So when they left, those questions, they could do really well. We did the same thing with resumes. . . . And while we're doing that, we're also working on grammar and punctuation.”

—Bridge instructor

PROMISING PRACTICES



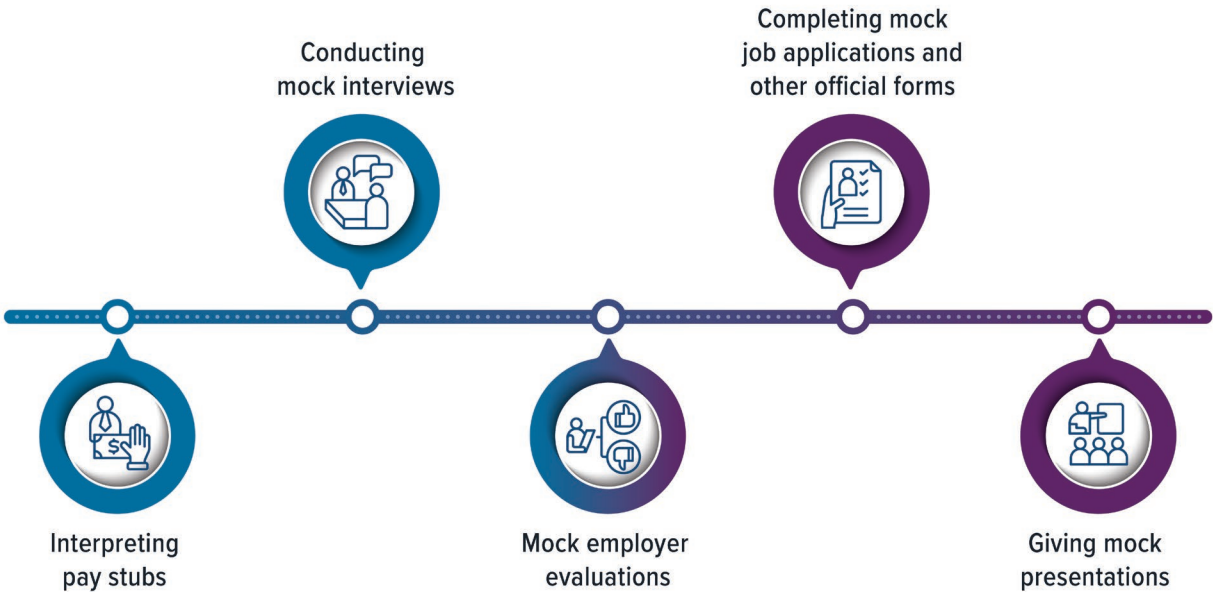
Immersive Experiences to Demystify College

Providers offered occasional field trips to Career and Technical Education open houses, such as those at an industrial electricity program. These open houses and campus tours make it easy for adult learners to see themselves in a college setting and begin taking steps to apply and attend. All learners, including beginning- and intermediate-level ESL learners, are invited to these open houses to further their career development efforts.

Opportunities for Active Learning

Instructors also offered active learning opportunities through technology, informal discussions, guest speakers, job preparation tasks, and hands-on activities. Recognizing the challenge some learners face with typing on their phones for job applications and assignments, instructors allocated classroom time to offer technological support, using resources like the Northstar Digital Literacy program for typing practice. Instructors also promoted unstructured classroom discussion sessions so learners could share ideas with classmates and ask questions about job preparation tasks, which were integrated into the curriculum to enhance practical skills, as detailed in Exhibit 3.

Exhibit 3. Common Job Preparation Tasks to Contextualize Instruction



Through these activities, instructors reinforced learning, encouraged active engagement, and emphasized interactive learning over passive instruction, encouraging learners to flourish through meaningful exchanges and classroom discussion. Several active learning practices are tailored to specific fields, particularly early childhood and healthcare. For instance, instructors assigned constructing sensory boards to provide a hands-on understanding of how children’s fine motor skills develop across developmental stages. Instructors also explored current education topics, such as rising daycare prices, and assigned research projects that aligned with learner roles both as parents and learners. In addition, in healthcare classes, instructors created assignments in which learners made vial bracelets with color beads that reminded them of the order in which blood is drawn. Learners also colored, labeled, and presented the body system to reinforce classroom learning and promote active engagement with course material.

How Did Bridge Program Providers Provide Career Development Opportunities to Adult Learners?

Bridge administrators tailored their career development efforts to adult learners' readiness levels to ensure they understood the different career choices and opportunities available to them. Administrators and staff members discussed the importance of meeting learners where they are and providing individualized support and guidance to facilitate transitions to postsecondary education and/or vocational training by helping learners identify their goals, explore career options, and access resources. Administrators discussed how the bridge programs facilitate learners' academic preparation as well as their holistic growth and readiness for their chosen career paths by providing the necessary support, resources, and skills to empower learners for success in further education and employment.

“

The bridge program, it helped me learn about not only what other options I had in the manufacturing career field, but also, I did build a resume, and it helped me narrow down jobs and look for jobs that'd be more suitable for me, and it helped me find this class.”

—Learner

The purpose of career development activities is to familiarize learners with the available educational pathways or career options and provide networking opportunities. These activities played a key role in demystifying college, building a sense of belonging, and providing opportunities for career exploration. The providers offered goal setting, career counseling, education planning, guest speakers, campus tours, informational sessions, interview practice, resume writing, and financial literacy development. Some of these activities were individualized and delivered through one-on-one meetings or case management. Critical employment soft skills, such as time management, dependability, teamwork, and communication, were also emphasized in many programs.

PROMISING PRACTICES



Cohorting

Peer support and teamwork during courses were touted as important practices by both instructors and adult learners.

Program providers should ensure that instructors build opportunities for teamwork and forging relationships with classmates into the curricula, ideally in a cohort model with which learners can progress through a series of courses together.

Career Guidance and Mentoring Supports

Programs provided career guidance and mentoring support through two main approaches. First, they used a broad bridge when the aim was to provide general information on career paths. Second, they integrated transition coordinators as part of bridge programs to help bridge learners identify both ICAPS and postsecondary options. In the first approach, advanced-level English learners were automatically placed into a bridge-to-careers course and worked on writing resumes as well as conducting career exploration searches, often through Burlington English. This bridge-to-careers course explored all 16 pathways before enrolling learners in specialized bridge programs. In the second approach, the coordinators offered personalized support outside of class through one-on-one meetings and follow-up through calling and texting. In addition, coordinators also worked with bridge learners to create action plans for completing their classes and facilitating introductions with potential employers. Extra support measures like virtual office hours, open-door policies, and weekly check-ins were also offered to bridge learners at some sites. Instructors and transition coordinators described their roles as fostering accountability and enhancing accessibility as learners transition into a job or college enrollment.

In an effort to support student persistence, one of the providers offered a monthly forum called Your Voice Matters Monday in which students could share their experiences and feedback with instructors and administrators. For example, students expressed that being part of a cohort makes them feel more likely to succeed than working alone. Student feedback helps shape classroom activities and support strategies, ensuring both meet student needs and goals. These sessions aim to build a supportive community, enhance student success, and continuously improve educational programs based on student input.

During class sessions, instructors enhanced mentoring support by inviting guest speakers who were either industry specific or representatives from learner support services, such as financial aid, admissions, and career centers. For instance, in early childhood bridge programs, guest speakers, such as home daycare providers, children's book authors, and principals, shared their experiences and what they look for in potential employees. In addition, liaisons from learner support services visited bridge programs once every two weeks. The goal was to offer hands-on experiences, introduce learners to different career opportunities, and build relationships with learner support services so learners could learn whom to seek guidance from when planning their careers.

PROMISING PRACTICES



Bell Ringer and TED Talk

Some instructors found it helpful to begin instruction with a bell ringer, an activity in which the first 15 minutes of class are used to watch and discuss engaging motivational videos or TED talks. Instructors believed these videos, which were accessible to students outside of instructional time via their learning management system, would help them reflect on their own barriers, be more resilient in the face of personal obstacles, and persist through the bridge coursework.

PROMISING PRACTICES



Relationship Management

Providers stressed the importance of strong internal and external partnerships for successful programming. It enabled

- collaboration, which involved adult education programs, community colleges, high schools, governmental entities, and local organizations;
- successful outreach, referrals, program offerings, and learner support;
- sharing resources, such as facilities, funding, and expertise; and
- partnering with local libraries for Wi-Fi access and study space.

What Transition Services Did Bridge Programs Provide to Adult Learners?

In their efforts to support adult learners in transitioning from bridge programs to ICAPS and postsecondary education, administrators discussed the need for seamless transitions, which meant aligning curricula, providing ongoing support, and ensuring learners were aware of their future course options. In the coming subsections, we discuss the practices that supported these efforts.

Warm Handoffs and Ongoing Support

Providers demonstrated their commitment to successful learner outcomes toward and beyond transitions. Some providers had staff positions and roles that were designed to support adult learners' transitions to ICAPS and postsecondary courses. Depending on the provider, these personnel were known as transition coordinators, learner success coaches, career pathway advocates, or liaisons. They helped learners with various applications, such as financial aid and registration, as well as with orientation to college life, support services, and course navigation. A few administrators discussed how these staff members follow up on bridge learners through one-on-one meetings, virtual office hours, phone calls, emails, and assistance with job placement.

One provider offered Workshop Wednesday, an ongoing support program for adult learners after they complete the bridge program. Based on students' needs, various college departments, such as admissions, tutoring, financial aid, and career services, presented tailored information. For instance, if students were unsure how to find academic support, the tutoring department presented information on available resources and how to access them. The goal for these workshops was to have learners establish connections with staff in different service programs and to have learners know where to seek help as they transition into college.

“

I think beyond [the tangible supports], just the emotional supports that we as staff provide our students, where it's not just like they're just another student and we're checking an attendance box. I feel like working with a staff who so deeply cares about what they do. . . . They're here because they want to be here, not because we're making the most money in the world.”

—Bridge instructor

PROMISING PRACTICES



Guest Speaker

Although many administrators indicated that internal and external partnerships are key to successful programming, one instructor emphasized how critical these partnerships were for career development. In their case, they worked with local nurses certified in CPR training to provide the training to learners in the healthcare course as guest speakers, an irreplaceable component of the career development and exploration programming that helps adult learners learn about nursing and decide if the career is for them.

Wraparound Services

Many bridge program providers recognized the diverse needs of adult learners and offered wraparound supports, such as basic needs (e.g., food, hygiene products, and clothes for adults and children), health and wellness support, transportation (e.g., bus passes and van pickups), and childcare. They often collaborated with other college departments, community organizations, and referral services to address various needs,

including housing, food insecurity, mental health services, dental care, disability services, childcare, and substance addiction support. Some programs also discussed technology access and digital device loaner programs for Wi-Fi hotspots, laptops, Chromebooks, and tablets. One provider shared how they leveraged braided funding to provide additional financial support toward program costs beyond tuition. For example, the provider used Perkins special populations supplemental funding to cover course materials (e.g., scrubs) and fees for other requirements for the phlebotomy class, such as immunization, CPR training, and drug testing. These wraparound supports reflected providers' holistic approaches to promoting learner persistence and successful transitions.

“

I go more by motivation than test scores. . . . Even if you don't think that they are ready, if you build in the proper supports, they will amaze you.”

—Bridge administrator

Implementation Challenges: Opportunities for Further Advancing Equity

Through their efforts to contextualize curricula and provide career development opportunities and transition services, bridge administrators and instructors encountered several operational challenges. Often, these challenges were fueled by limited resources, including funding, staff, and infrastructure, that made it more difficult for learners to transition to ICAPS. In the coming subsections, we describe the challenges that emerged as key themes voiced by bridge administrators, staff, and instructors.

Barriers to Entry and Retention in Bridge Programs

Administrators recognized the barriers reported by adult learners and discussed how other implementation challenges sometimes heightened these barriers. Specifically, efforts to address learners' barriers were sometimes challenged by limited funding for certain ICAPS pathways or by challenges in planning. For example, administrators reported that even when learners were eligible for bridge programs because they met language thresholds required to participate in them, their academic preparation, language ability, and literacy levels posed challenges to their success in the program and showed that they needed more time and effort to succeed in the program compared with those who were often at higher proficiency levels. We observed that despite understanding and responding well to our interview questions, many bridge learners expressed insecurity about their English-speaking abilities. These issues contributed to the challenges that programs faced, such as meeting performance metrics, adapting to

demographic shifts, and addressing the needs of diverse learners. Despite these challenges, however, administrators realized the need for ongoing support and guidance to ensure successful transitions. In order to address these misalignments between bridge program goals and adult learners' needs, some administrators emphasized the importance of understanding the unique backgrounds and occupational mobility barriers adult learners confront when navigating career pathways and worked to create an inclusive environment for them.

“

When you talk with the students, and if you talk to any of our bridge students, they're going to let you know that they were incredibly nervous and didn't think that they could do this. . . . We start them out with a tour. . . . I like to show people where they need to go and then they can see that the people that are there look like them, just like them, exactly like them. And maybe it's people that they shop with or they practice their religion with or they go to school with, their children go to school, and they belong and they fit.”

—Bridge administrator

When asked what helped them learn, adult learners told us that participating in a cohort model through which they felt supported and could practice with peers who shared similar backgrounds and struggles was one of the most important factors that helped them increase their confidence and improve their English skills. In addition, administrators highlighted the importance of financial incentives for learners to continue their education because many of them sought immediate employment due to socioeconomic pressures rather than pursuing a dream career. Other implementation challenges also surfaced during these conversations, such as language anxiety reported by adult learners and challenges in applying new concepts to real-life situations.

Other challenges administrators discussed pertained to the situational barriers that adult learners face. These barriers range from financial concerns, transportation, technology access, scheduling conflicts with work or family commitments, and childcare as well as substance addiction. These obstacles illustrate the importance of flexible programming and wraparound services. Although there is a wide range of support services available, getting relevant information to learners at the right time can be difficult. Some administrators noted that following up on referrals to partner organizations can be complicated due to the absence of an efficient data-sharing mechanism. In addition, the location of the service and a lack of transportation can hinder students from accessing available support services.

KEY CHALLENGE



Curricular Gaps

Sometimes bridge program providers will offer a bridge course or series of courses without the accompanying ICAPS program, leading to a missed opportunity for learners to transition. Although they may offer other ICAPS programs, bridge program and ICAPS providers should strive to align their programs in a given career pathway or cluster to expand the number of opportunities for learners to persist in these pathways. For example, if bridge program providers offer a phlebotomy program, they should ensure that an ICAPS opportunity in or related to phlebotomy exists that learners can take immediately on conclusion of their phlebotomy bridge instruction.



Students need an email [address]. Gmail is free, and they need to keep that same email throughout the process to keep that record together. If not, it is a lot harder to then have to reconcile it. . . . Students were just literally like, ‘Oh, I lost that phone; I have to get a new email.’ . . . If students don’t have a number that they can use for verification, then they’re not able to then create that email address. And so it’s really an access issue. And the reason they don’t have that is because they can’t afford it or they lose it.”

—Bridge administrator

Goal Mismatch

Sometimes learners entered bridge programs with objectives and motivations that were not well aligned with program goals. For example, some learners enrolled in bridge programs with little intention of continuing to ICAPS or postsecondary study in the near future. This made planning for their next steps difficult because they did not yet have clear objectives for what they wanted to pursue after the bridge program. Importantly, in a handful of cases when bridge instruction was embedded into existing ABE/ESL courses, we found that learners were not cognizant that they were enrolled in a bridge program, which led to missed opportunities for transitioning to ICAPS. This also challenged program providers to develop effective implementation plans while including learners who were still exploring their career options rather than pursuing a defined career development program.



For some of them, [success is] interpersonal and [about] them learning how to be better communicators and more working on their social skills. For some students, it’s walking across the stage and getting that diploma. For other students, it’s confidence. So I think success looks different for everyone that we have. If I’m being totally honest, I think success comes in many forms. Obviously, our goal is to help them get an Illinois high school diploma . . . and then also to either place in a career or go postsecondary. But [although] some students can do that very quickly, some take a longer time, and I think success is getting to that confidence level where they feel like they can do it themselves.”

—Bridge administrator

Inconsistent ICAPS Alignment

The lack of alignment between bridge programs and ICAPS presented barriers to learner transitions. Several administrators discussed potential gaps in their curriculum, indicating that additional programming may be necessary for smooth transitions from bridge courses to ICAPS. Others shared how providing a course on college culture and systems or an extended introduction to college may be necessary because of the difference in expectations between college and adult education. Some of the administrators also suggested that ICAPS needs to encompass a greater number of career pathway options that are aligned to local industry needs. However, offering multiple ICAPS and bridge courses beyond existing career tracks may be difficult for providers, especially for smaller programs, such as those operating within community-based organizations instead of within community colleges.



When you build a bridge, build it to somewhere. It can't just be from point A to point B. Bridges don't do that. They might get you over the tumultuous water . . . over some railroad tracks, but it doesn't end. You don't just drop off the highway. You keep going. And so you have to be able to say, here's point A; here's point B; here's point C; And then when you're done here, these are stackable credentials. That is my biggest advice. . . . Don't build a bridge to nowhere. You have to have somewhere for them to go. And different off ramps too, because life happens."

—Bridge coordinator

Further challenging ICAPS alignment are scarce resources, especially among smaller programs. These programs sometimes face additional challenges in guiding their bridge learners' opportunities to transition to ICAPS at local colleges, largely because of the unique learner populations they attract. Due to these factors, after completing a bridge program, some intermediate-level learners still face significant readiness and skill gaps. Further, when transitioning to ICAPS, learners in smaller programs with fewer resources often need to be familiarized with the culture in ICAPS and postsecondary education, including its norms and expectations. Finally, because the range of bridge programming options offered by such programs tend to be more limited than those offered by larger, better-resourced programs, smaller programs are also challenged in meeting the varied interests of learners, which prevents some learners from finding relevant ICAPS pathways. For these reasons, coordinating with college partners to offer a broader array of ICAPS options is critical for successful bridge programming at smaller programs.

Barriers to Collaboration Between Bridge Program Providers and Other Partners

Although administrators recognized the importance of collaboration with other bridge program providers, they also pointed out that collaboration was challenging at times. According to Illinois state statute (Illinois General Assembly, n.d.), Area Planning Councils (APC)s exist to “provide for the development and coordination of adult education programs in an [APC] Region” by requiring that program providers in a given APC cooperate with one another. These councils are tasked with “identifying services currently being offered to the identified population, producing a plan for continuing services, identifying gaps in services, identifying reasons for these gaps and as a planning tool to identify ways to service the identified service gaps” (Illinois General Assembly, n.d.). However, despite this charge, mechanisms are not always in place to ensure coordination and collaboration between them, leaving the policy practically unimplemented. Barriers to greater collaboration between providers included communication and timing of decision making across providers as well as competition for learners between them, overlapping offerings, limited funding, bureaucratic institutional structures, political dynamics, and resistance to change. In addition, some administrators shared their concern about having to patch together different grant funds to sustain and grow their ICAPS programs. This was especially challenging if the provider's bridge program did not lead to one of its own ICAPS programs. In these cases, the bridge program provider would be taking a risk planning for and preparing an ICAPS program because its success and enrollment would depend on the ability of another bridge program provider in the APC to effectively plan the concordant bridge program and enroll it with sufficient learners who would then transition to the ICAPS program. Others expressed difficulty coordinating with their

workforce partners (WIOA Title I, One Stop) within their APC due to the arbitrary assignment of partners and the geographic distances between them. Specifically, with respect to One Stops, administrators at one provider indicated that there were no intentional measures in place to regularly communicate or otherwise liaise with their One Stop partners throughout the year. In their experience, the sole touchpoint was the joint execution of their formal agreements to collaborate, but beyond those conversations about signing such memoranda of understanding, the partners were not regularly in touch with one another.

“

Within the APCs . . . to avoid competition, we're not supposed to offer classes at the same library that another community college offers classes if they're aligned in the same level, but there's not always communication or coordination around that. And so then there can be overlap or competition for the same student base to different things like that, like coordination of services.”

—Bridge administrator

Inadequate Funding

Adequate funding is critical for program growth and sustainability. Some administrators proposed extra monetary incentives for learners, including tuition assistance, gas card/bus passes for learners in rural areas, and stipends to attend school (similar to what is done with clean energy courses through the Climate Equitable Jobs Act). In addition, a few administrators communicated the need for an augmented budget to hire, train, and retain qualified teachers. Finally, some administrators described how added funding would allow them to grow the pathways they offered at their sites, an example of which appears immediately below.

“

We can maintain, and we do our most popular [ICAPS pathways], the ones that the students want, the ones where I have veteran teachers, the ones that have the most success. But to grow, I have to bring other grants. . . . And then they always ask, ‘Okay, what are you going to do for sustainability when this grant ends?’ And I don't have an answer for that. . . . I don't know how to sustain these. And if we don't have the funding . . . then there's not much I can do.”

—Bridge coordinator

Assessment Challenges

The current assessment systems assume literacy in learners' native languages, which creates challenges for beginning literacy learners. For example, some adult learners have not developed literacy skills in their native language, and yet some programs require even foundational levels of these skills in order to take assessments. Because attending the adult education program in Illinois is these learners' first formal experience in education, assessment becomes challenging because some learners do not have the requisite skills to take tests required for

various bridge programs. Another issue the current assessment systems present, especially to learners in rural areas, is a lack of remote testing capabilities. The assessment systems require high-speed Internet as well as a computer that runs the testing software. Learners do not always have access to such technology at home, and thus, the majority of testing still needs to be done in person, which triggers other barriers, such as transportation and childcare.

Recommendations: Suggestions for Improving Bridge Implementation

Bridge programs hold significant promise for the educational and occupational mobility of adult learners with foundational skills needs. Through our study, we discovered that the flexibility of program designs offered by ICCB allows bridge program providers to accommodate learners and contextualize implementation to the specific needs of their communities. Tailoring implementation provides students with contextualized instruction, career development activities, and crucial transition services that support the progression of adult learners to ICAPS and postsecondary study. However, despite the efforts of many bridge program administrators and instructors to implement high-quality programming, more work remains to be done to further serve adult learners in Illinois.

To this end, this section offers recommendations on how bridge program administrators can further streamline their program implementation in Illinois and create a more coordinated educational pathway between bridge programs and ICAPS. Based on the implementation challenges and promising practices noted above, we recommend practices that bridge program instructors and administrators could consider for improving entry and persistence in bridge programs and transitioning to ICAPS or postsecondary programs. Although these recommendations are informed by the experiences of the bridge program administrators, instructors, and learners that participated in this study, it is important to acknowledge that they are based on a limited sample of bridge program experiences and may not apply equally under all scenarios.

Improving Entry Into Bridge Programs

Implementing bridge programs successfully depends in part on the backgrounds and preparation of the adult learners who participate in them, both of which can be influenced by who enters bridge programs and how they do so. In order to ensure that learners best suited for success in bridge programs know about and can participate in them, administrators and instructors might consider implementing the recommendations below.

Clarify Bridge Program Goals to Learners at Entry

Adult education bridge program providers can more effectively convey program objectives and goals to potential learners by providing diagrams that outline the coursework, estimated duration, and future pathways associated with a given career cluster. These sorts of journey maps can help learners understand where they are entering a pathway and how much time they will need to advance to subsequent ICAPS and other postsecondary pathways, and the maps can also ensure learners' expectations and readiness for participation reflect the expected program outcomes. Further, providers can take the following steps. First, they can provide clear and accessible information by developing concise and easy-to-understand materials outlining program objectives, benefits, and outcomes and by using multiple formats, such as brochures, websites, and videos. They can also host regular information

sessions, both in person and online, in which potential learners can ask questions and hear from instructors, current students, and alumni about their experiences. Providers can collaborate with local community organizations, job centers, and social services to disseminate information about the programs to a broader audience. They can also provide detailed information about the pathways from the bridge program to further education, training, and employment opportunities, including ICAPS, helping learners understand the long-term benefits and the investments they require.

Align Bridge Courses or Opportunities With ICAPS Opportunities

Strategically planning for learners to transition from a bridge course into an ICAPS program ensures a seamless shift from foundational skills development to career-focused training. By aligning basic skills content with industry-specific preparation, bridge program providers can enhance learner outcomes. Learners gain critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills, and when they perceive a clear path from bridge courses to career training, their motivation to complete the educational journey increases. Collaborating with ICAPS staff to identify essential basic skills content and industry-specific knowledge lays a solid foundation for a robust bridge program. Critically, by identifying when and where ICAPS opportunities will be offered locally as well as when in the academic year they will admit learners, bridge program providers can align their programming with these critical next steps for their learners.

Acknowledge Internal and External Partners to Align Them With Implementation Plans

It is critical to engage both internal and external stakeholders, including adult education administrative and support staff, instructors, learners, ICAPS and Career and Technical Education staff, and partners, such as community college staff, workforce development boards, community organizations, and local employers. Establishing these relationships before the start of a bridge course enables a clearer understanding of learners, role definition, collaboration, and alignment of the bridge curriculum with employment opportunities and postsecondary education transitions. Prescheduled touchpoints facilitate ongoing check-ins, allowing for iterative planning and proactive addressing of potential barriers and challenges.

Helping Learners Persist in Bridge Programs and Transition to ICAPS or Postsecondary Programs

After learners enroll in bridge programs, consistent and ongoing support and guidance from bridge program personnel can help learners continue and complete the program. Further, effectively supporting learners through the bridge program culminates in their successful transition to ICAPS or postsecondary programs. In order to better support learners during their bridge course of study and ensure they are smoothly able to make this transition, bridge administrators and instructors can invest in teachers and staff through professional development opportunities, provide learners with immersive experiences that prepare them for subsequent ICAPS and postsecondary education, create and cultivate a cohort dynamic in their bridge classrooms, experiment with novel ICAPS enrollment policies, and plan for the appropriate level of support to bridge learners. We describe these recommendations below.

Invest in Teachers and Staff Through Professional Development Opportunities

Instructors need opportunities to network and share learnings and best practices. Statewide training events, such as the Professional Development Network, the Illinois Adult and Continuing Educators' Association conference, Transitions Academy, and Forum for Excellence, provide ideal platforms to facilitate these opportunities for exchange and should be actively brought to the awareness of faculty and staff so they can participate in them. Supporting bridge practitioners may involve offering targeted professional development centered on designing and implementing robust bridge programs. This includes addressing the transition from bridge programs to ICAPS or other postsecondary options. One consideration may be creating an Illinois virtual bridge learning community with monthly meetings—similar to the ICAPS learning community in which ICAPS providers share information and learn from one another—to facilitate knowledge sharing and problem solving among practitioners. In addition, workshops and sessions specifically focused on this transition and other aspects of bridge programming can be offered at state conferences or through open office hours. Consistent, repeatable, and accessible support via various delivery methods is essential for effective bridge-centered professional development.

One administrator discussed the importance of disseminating the information they gather through those training opportunities to all staff and faculty.

Some administrators discussed the importance of hiring the best candidates, taking the time to train them, and treating them well. Although teacher retention can be challenging, especially with limited funding, many administrators agreed that investing in their teachers and staff was crucial.

“

My old manager used to say, 'I'm a collector of gems.' I find some really good people. And then you really hang on to them and support them any way you can so that you retain your talent in this.”

—Bridge coordinator

Provide Immersive Experiences Often and Early

In bridge programs that are designed to prepare learners for subsequent ICAPS and postsecondary study, bridge instructors and administrators should prioritize introducing learners with postsecondary institutions early in the bridge experience through immersive experiences, such as campus tours, open houses, and guest speakers from institutions that can introduce learners to and give them detailed context about the future course of study and its economic potential. Ideally, these events would occur before the last day to withdraw from the bridge course so that participating learners can make informed decisions about persisting in the program. In addition, continued focus on informing and advising learners about all the steps that are required to continue their educational pathway to ICAPS or postsecondary programs, including applying to such programs, registering for courses, accessing resources, as well as the timing of each of these intermediate steps, can help learners navigate a complex and unfamiliar higher education system. Further, these immersive experiences can help learners plan for their first trip to the college and factor in transportation, travel time, parking, and all the other logistics of arriving on campus and preparing to navigate its many features, including the administrative offices that offer enrollment, advising, and financial aid, among other services.

Create and Cultivate Your Cohort

As bridge program providers admit applicants into the program, they should consider fostering a sense of community by providing opportunities for learners to socialize with one another throughout the program. This will set the expectation that they are collectively working toward the shared goals of the program and that they are there to support one another. Instructors and learners consistently stressed that classmates and cohort peers are central to the success of adult learners in bridge programs and that intentionally creating a cohort not only establishes norms and expectations for cooperation, which can contribute to improved course persistence, but also allows program providers to anticipate demand for subsequent steps, such as ICAPS transitions and occupational placements. Some administrators and learners discussed how the cohort of learners in a phlebotomy bridge program were given opportunities to conduct activities and assignments together and even discuss personal barriers to attending class. This helped create a solid community in which learners supported one another in not only preparing for class content but also in sharing transportation and food, thereby providing one another with peer support and creating a sense of belonging.

Although cohort dynamics sometimes naturally lend themselves to synergy in the classroom, at other times this culture may require more intentional effort from the bridge instructor to cultivate. To achieve this, instructors can check in with adult learners one-on-one through learning management systems used for course delivery and include a question or two about their attitudes on their perceptions of the supportiveness and cooperation of their cohort mates. These sorts of questions can surface any invisible barriers that may impede greater cohort collaboration, which can then be addressed collectively to the entire class without targeting individuals. Other strategies that instructors can use include ice breaker or bell ringer exercises. In these activities, instructors present all learners with a prompt or quote pertaining to the chapter or lesson for the week, which learners work on either individually or in groups and present to the class to facilitate discussion. The careful selection of topics relevant to learners' developmental and career needs is the key to ensuring that such activities engage the whole class and create shared understandings and collective learning.

Experiment With Novel ICAPS Enrollment Policies

Innovative course structures and enrollment policies can help attract more adult learners to ICAPS. Although many administrators appreciated the flexibility afforded to the bridge and ICAPS programming, there may be other innovative ways to support transitions and enrollment. For example, one administrator suggested providing opportunities for adult learners to try out college-level courses through mirrored courses, dual enrollment, or auditing.

Plan for the Appropriate Level of Support

Bridge programs may consider distributing a needs assessment to adult learners in each cohort to anticipate which services learners may need to transition into ICAPS (e.g., transportation, childcare, academic advising). This will help plan the intensity of the wraparound supports and services the cohort may require and ensure that they are offered at the appropriate level. If presentations from wraparound service representatives would benefit a cohort, consider coordinating with those representatives early in implementation so that bridge learners can benefit from these services early and often.

Concluding Remarks

Illinois's bridge programs have been instrumental in enhancing adult learners' foundational skills and guiding them toward specific occupational goals. By catering to adult learners seeking to improve literacy, numeracy, and English language skills, these programs serve as a pathway to careers in fields such as healthcare or technology, among others.

Through our conversations with adult learners, we learned more about their unique experiences, varied motivations, and goals for participating in bridge programs as well as the barriers they faced in developing the knowledge and skills that can set them on a path to economic advancement. These insights were complemented by the voices of staff at bridge programs, including administrators and instructors, who shared with us their perspectives on the successes and challenges of implementing bridge programs in Illinois.

To cater to diverse learner goals, bridge program providers incorporated contextualized instruction, career development, and transition services. They used occupational scenarios for teaching basic skills, provided active learning opportunities, and facilitated career exploration activities. They also offered individualized support through goal setting, counseling, and networking opportunities. Emphasizing soft skills, they provided mentoring and guidance for smooth transitions. Transition service staff worked to support bridge learners in transitioning to ICAPS or postsecondary education. Their commitment to learner persistence and successful transitions was evident in their ongoing workshops and wraparound services addressing basic needs, health, transportation, and technology access.

However, bridge administrators and instructors also faced challenges in contextualizing curricula, particularly as they provided career development opportunities and transition services. These challenges were often compounded by limited resources, such as funding, staff, and infrastructure. Entry and retention barriers included academic preparation, language ability, literacy levels, financial concerns, transportation, and childcare. Mismatches between learner goals and program objectives, inconsistencies in ICAPS alignment, and obstacles to collaboration between bridge program providers and other partners posed significant difficulties. However, a supportive cohort model and financial incentives were key in helping learners persist. Addressing these challenges requires flexible programming, effective collaboration, and adequate funding.

For the continued success of bridge programs, consistent support from program personnel is vital. This includes investing in professional development for teachers and staff, providing immersive experiences that introduce learners to postsecondary institutions, and fostering a cohort dynamic among learners. Experimenting with innovative ICAPS enrollment policies and planning for appropriate levels of support is also crucial. Statewide training events can enhance instructor effectiveness, and campus tours and guest speakers can help learners make informed decisions about their educational paths. Creating a sense of community through cohort activities can improve course persistence and support transitions. Innovative enrollment policies and needs assessments can ensure learners receive the support necessary to succeed. Implementing these strategies will facilitate smoother transitions and better prepare learners for further education and career opportunities.

In conclusion, although bridge programs have made significant strides in supporting adult learners, they also face important challenges that show where future efforts can be directed. To this end, by using the recommended strategies, they can continue to facilitate successful transitions and prepare learners for future economic opportunities.

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