

**Promising Practices
from the
Chicago Bridge Training Program Pilots**

Report to The Joyce Foundation

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Overview

This paper presents lessons learned from a formative evaluation we conducted of Chicago-based bridge training pilot programs. Bridge programs are designed to prepare adults with limited basic skills for postsecondary education and training leading to career-path employment.

The three pilot efforts included in the evaluation were:

- *Carreras En Salud*, which includes a bilingual pre-Certified Nurse Assistant bridge and a Certified Nurse Assistant to Licensed Practical Nurse bridge program. The Carreras programs are provided through a partnership involving two community organizations, Instituto del Progreso Latino and Association House, Wright College's Humboldt Park Vocational Education Center, and the National Council of La Raza. Students enter programs based on their literacy levels and each program prepares them to enter the next level of training.
- *Olive-Harvey College's Transportation, Warehousing and Logistics Bridge* program prepares students with a 6th to 8th grade literacy level for the GED exam and to enter the college's Commercial Drivers License program.
- The *Automotive Bridge* program run by Truman College in collaboration with two nonprofits, Howard Area Community Center and Jewish Vocational Services. It prepares students to enter Truman's automobile repair certificate program and associate of applied science degree program in automotive technology.

We interviewed administrators, staff, faculty and students, reviewed program materials, and observed classes. We also participated in meetings that brought together program administrators and staff and Chicago City College district office representatives to discuss challenges and share solutions. In February 2006, we presented summaries of our findings on the strengths of each program and suggestions for improvement.

This paper identifies promising practices of the three bridge program pilots. It also discusses the obstacles to bringing bridge training programs with these promising practices to scale, and suggests possible strategies for overcoming such obstacles. In the conclusion, we present suggestions for what leaders at the state and local level can do to advance bridge program development to the next stage in Chicago and throughout Illinois. Profiles of bridge program students are presented in the appendix to this report.

Promising Practices

In this section, we describe practices that staff, faculty and students of the three pilot efforts mentioned as positive features of their programs. We refer to these practices as “promising” because they have not been rigorously evaluated and many are still in development.

Clear connections to jobs through strong relationships with employers. Strong connections to employers and jobs are critical both to ensure the relevance of bridge programs and to motivate students to endure what is for most a challenging academic experience. Carreras en Salud is strongest in this regard. The Carreras staff aggressively reached out to hospitals and home health agencies, seeking input on the design of its bridge programs and assistance with monitoring their progress. Carreras designated a staff person to spearhead outreach to employers through breakfast meetings and one-on-one visits at the employers' offices. As one Carreras staff member said: "We haven't done anything without the input of employers." The Carreras program has the additional advantage of having staff dedicated to helping students find jobs during and after their training.

Truman also expanded its employer relationships during the pilot. The lead instructor in the Truman automotive program, who worked in the industry, said that "these industries are communities, and you need to develop ties in them." He added that "personal contact is key." This instructor went out and talked to local employers to get feedback on the program design, recommendations of other employers and agreements to consider hiring students from the program. As a result, several employers donated equipment and others that hired graduates have asked for additional students. Olive-Harvey built relationships with employers in trucking and other transportation industries that are eager to hire graduates of the college's transportation program. One of the students we interviewed cited that relationship as one of the most valuable features of the program.

Clear connections to college-level programs. Most bridge program students have little experience or information about postsecondary education. The staff at all three pilot sites emphasized that bridge program students need a substantial amount of handholding to help them through the process of applying for college-level programs and financial aid. Truman expanded its automotive bridge to 64 hours from the original 32 in large part to devote more time to preparing students to pass the COMPASS test, which qualifies them for entry into college-level programs. The program also exposed students in the bridge to the college's automotive certificate programs and piloted using students in the college-level program as mentors to bridge students. The Carreras program incorporates instruction in study skills, test taking, time management and critical thinking.

First step on a career path. Ideally, bridge programs are the initial step in a series of interconnected education and training programs that support advancement to successively higher levels of education and employment and that enable students to "stop out" and return as their circumstances permit. Carreras, which starts with bridges to CNA training and continues to the LPN and RN levels, was explicitly designed to create "career pathways" in healthcare. During the course of the pilot, Carreras and Olive-Harvey developed lower level bridge programs to serve those with 5th – 6th grade literacy levels. Truman's automotive bridge, which has a minimum 9th grade literacy entrance requirement, prepares students to enter Truman's automobile repair certificate program and associate of applied science degree program in automotive technology, which in turn prepare students for jobs as technicians in the automobile industry.

Career and college guidance. The three pilots highlight the role bridge programs play in socializing students to the culture of postsecondary education and career-path employment. The majority of interviewees felt that the bridge program gave them an invaluable opportunity to improve themselves and the confidence to take the next step in education and careers. Most students did not have a well-formed concept of career or plans for the long term. In most cases, their main objective was to get a better job. The bridge programs introduced them to jobs they would qualify for at the end of the bridge as well as to the types of jobs at subsequent levels of career ladders in those fields. Through their lessons, interaction with teachers, other students, and employers, and exposure to careers and postsecondary education, students were able to develop clearer plans for the future.

Instructors as the “hub” of the program. Most of students we interviewed said that the faculty were the most valuable part of the program. Students from all three programs said that instructors helped them not only with their coursework, but also with time management, confidence building, motivation, personal issues and thinking about careers and jobs. In describing their impression of the instructors, students used phrases like, “she gave us what we needed,” “he was always there for me,” and “he challenged us to do better.” One woman specifically said that she was on the verge of dropping out, but her instructor helped her overcome her insecurities and stay in the program. Several other students said without the instructors’ care and encouragement, they would not have completed. Instructors clearly spent a lot of time with the students in and outside of the classroom.

Wrap-around support services. All three of the pilots recognized the importance of personal guidance and support to student retention, completion and transition rates. Olive-Harvey’s experience is the most dramatic. Retention and transition rates in the college’s transportation bridge increased dramatically when it hired an advisor to guide and motivate students to overcome personal doubts and challenges and help them find transportation, child care and other supports as needed. Students in the Carreras program benefited from the case management and other supports provided by the community organization partners in the project.

Targeted marketing and recruitment. Bridge programs will likely be most successful when they recruit individuals who have an interest in and an aptitude for the particular career fields they target. Carreras had the best developed approach to recruitment, working with hospitals to recruit incumbent certified nursing assistants (CNAs) and with college admissions staff to identify individuals who applied for the licensed practical nurse (LPN) program at Wright College’s Humboldt Park Vocational Education Center, but who lacked the necessary qualifications. They recruited for the CNA bridge program by networking in the community.

Carreras also sought to build broader awareness and support for the program by informing aldermen and other community leaders about it. Individuals such as these will help spread the word about the program to community residents and, in some cases, to employers. The Carreras staff also sponsored breakfast meetings with local clergy and spoke to congregations to get the word out. In addition, the staff made presentations at local primary schools to encourage the students to start thinking about college and careers early on and tell their parents about the program.

Truman College worked with Howard Area Community Center (HACC) to recruit for its automotive bridge. In the first cycle of the program, HACC only referred a couple of its clients to the program, but, given the positive reviews by these initial clients, HACC stepped up its recruitment in subsequent rounds.

Over the course of the pilot, Olive-Harvey College worked on with the Chicago Housing Authority and the Chicago Department of Human Services on creating a process to recruit CHA residents for the transportation bridge program. This relationship has helped the college recruit students for the program and opened up education opportunities for CHA residents. Olive-Harvey’s decision to lower the entrance requirements for the bridge to the 6th grade level was motivated in part by a desire to serve more CHA residents through the program.

Student tracking to support program evaluation and improvement. All three sites indicated that they would ideally like to have the capacity to track whether or not students are indeed able to advance to the next level of education and employment. Instituto del Progreso Latino, one of the partners in Carreras, has an information system that it uses to track clients into the workplace, but Instituto’s system is not connected with the City Colleges’ PeopleSoft student information system. Truman College has “flagged” bridge students in PeopleSoft tracking system, but it has not yet analyzed this information to, for example, compare the rate at which bridge students advance to college-level programs with that of students in its adult literacy programs (particularly the upper-level ESL students, who are most similar demographically to the students in the automotive bridge).

Top-level support. All three pilots have benefited from the commitment and support by the leadership at each of the partner organizations. The presidents of the three City Colleges involved – Olive-Harvey, Truman and Wright – have championed their programs within their institutions and with outside stakeholders. This sort of leadership will be essential if bridge programs are to move beyond the pilot stage and be offered on a substantial scale.

Obstacles to Bringing Bridge Programs to Scale (and Possible Solutions)

The following table shows statistics on the bridge pilots to date, including the number of classes or cohorts that have been offered in each case, and the number of participants who have enrolled, completed and advanced to the next level of education and training.

Program	Cohorts	Enrolled	Completed	Advanced
Carreras en Salud				
Pre-CNA Bridge	5	82	60	41
CNA to LPN Bridge	2	41	39	39
Olive-Harvey College				
Transportation Bridge	4	99	51	28
Truman College				
Automotive Repair Bridge	3	65	53	42

This section examines obstacles to offering on a much larger scale programs that embody each of the promising practices described above, and identifies some ways in which such obstacles might be overcome.

Clear connections to jobs through strong relationships with employers

Community college occupational programs often form employer advisory boards, but, for bridge programs to be successful, the ties to employers need to be even closer – more like the relationship in the private sector between firms that supply products or services to other businesses and their customer firms. Many community colleges have contract training divisions that do have customer-focused relationships with employers through which they provide training and other services customized to the employers' needs. But community college customized training staff often have little contact faculty in the college-credit programs.

Colleges in many cases need to take a much more strategic approach to working with employers. According to the Carreras staff, for example, a college's president in the institution can help build strong employer relationships by reaching out to the executives of firms in industries targeted by bridge programs and advocating bridge programs as one solution to their workforce needs. A staff person at Humboldt Park Vocational Education Center offered the following advice on how to strengthen ties to employers: "Open your doors to professional associations. Allow them to use your facilities for meetings. They may not know about you now, but they are looking for places to meet and this allows them to get to know your programs." Building and maintaining strong relationships with employers ideally requires having a designated staff person who is responsible for employer outreach. Finding funds to support such a position beyond limited term grants is a challenge, however.

Ideally the relationship with employers in bridge programs goes even further and includes integrated job placement services. Yet community colleges generally do not have the staff or resources to provide direct job placement. One solution is to build relationships with organizations that do provide such services. This is one of the strengths of the Carreras program, in which Wright College is partnering with Instituto del Progreso Latino, which has long experience doing job placement.

Clear connections to college-level programs leading to a career path

Bridge programs are needed precisely because most programs for adults with low literacy are not well connected to college-level occupational programs, nor do they prepare students to pass the placement tests and succeed in the "general education" courses (math, English, psychology, etc.) needed for degrees. At the October 2006 meeting of the bridge program "learning community" being organized by the Chicago City Colleges and Women Employed, participants from the City Colleges identified as top priority the need to work with colleagues in their colleges and district office staff to better align the adult education program curriculum with college entrance requirements (particularly the COMPASS placement standards) and with the basic competencies needed for success in college-level coursework leading to both credentials and employment in the targeted fields. Only through such system-wide alignment

of curriculum and standards will bridge programs become integrated into the fabric of college offerings and situated as the first step on a career pathway.

Career and college guidance

Community colleges have academic advisors, financial aid staff, and career counselors, but generally they serve students in college-credit programs. Most colleges have far fewer student services staff than are needed to adequately serve their credit-program students, so students in bridge programs and other non-credit offerings often have to turn to the instructors for advice or figure it out on their own. Bridge program instructors do their best to provide guidance to students, but many of them work part-time and few have detailed knowledge of admissions, financial aid, program offerings, and other information that could help prepare their students to enter college-level programs.

Truman College responded to this need by reprogramming grant funds to hire a part-time “advocate” who helps bridge program students explore their college options and guides them to the necessary support services. The bridge staff also convened staff from the college’s student service offices to discuss ways to support students in making the transition to college-level work. Olive-Harvey similarly hired a part-time student advisor to work with bridge students.

Truman has begun to incorporate guidance on registration and financial aid as well as career counseling into course hours. This way, the instructors get paid for the advising they are otherwise providing on their own time. There are models for this. Most community colleges offer “college success courses,” which typically include units on college and career guidance and planning. Such courses offer an opportunity to help students improve basic skills such as reading, writing and math in the context of exploring options for college and careers and learning note taking, test taking, time management and other skills needed for success in college and careers.

Professional development

Because funding for support services is limited, bridge program instructors have to wear many hats: teacher, motivator, academic advisor, tutor, personal counselor, and employment coach. They have to be knowledgeable about the field for which they are training and open to teaching basic skills in the context of technical content. Attracting individuals with these qualifications can be difficult, particularly since bridge instructor positions tend to be part-time and without fringe benefits.

The staff of the Carreras program said that it is important to be flexible and creative with scheduling to attract qualified faculty. This means offering classes with evening and weekend hours. Even then, given the nursing shortage, Carreras had a difficult time recruiting instructors, given the high salaries commanded by nurse educators.

Bridge programs differ from conventional academic and occupational programs in their approach to curriculum and instruction. Even experienced instructors may need guidance on

how to connect instruction in basic skills with occupational skills, industry knowledge and career awareness.

For bridge programs to be offered on a wide scale, there needs to be support for curriculum development and training for instructors in contextual teaching methods. The staff of the Truman College bridge programs recommended that the Illinois Community College Board create a “bank” of proven bridge curricula that could be adapted by colleges to specifications. At the same time, instructors and staff from all three pilots emphasized the importance of giving instructors time and resources to work with one another (and with college-credit level academic faculty) to design or modify curricula and experiment with different ways of teaching. The City Colleges and the Illinois Community College Board should consider as a model the Workforce Preparation Academy, which the City Colleges launched a couple years ago to train adult education instructors. One focus of the Academy’s curriculum was on how to contextualize the teaching of basic skills in learning activities focused on preparing students to advance to better jobs and enter college-level occupational programs. That program was well-received by those who participated.

Wrap-around support services, targeted recruitment and broad-based marketing and engagement.

Truman College’s student advocate and Olive-Harvey’s bridge student advisor were proactive in identifying students with problems, helping them explore solutions, and hooking them up with the appropriate services. At Truman, the advocate advised students how register for college and apply for financial assistance and provided personal counseling and referrals to support services as needed. At Olive-Harvey, the retention of bridge students improved markedly when the college hired an advisor who helped students secure transportation vouchers, free meals, and scholarships for the college’s Commercial Driver’s License (CDL) training program. According to students, this person was diligent in following up with them to ensure that they were getting the necessary support and encouraged them when they became discouraged.

In general, however, community colleges have limited capacity to provide case management and other intensive supports for students with issues other than academics. Students with personal issues generally have to depend on the goodwill of instructors and staff.

In the Carreras program, case management and other supports are provided by the two community organization partners, Instituto del Progreso and Association House, which have professional staff dedicated for these purposes. Howard Area Community Center provided case management to the clients its staff referred to the Truman bridge programs, but not to other students in those programs. While a college could provide more intensive supports to students if it had the resources, the Carreras and the Truman programs show the potential benefits of partnering with community organizations or other social service entities to offer such services.

As mentioned, community organizations can also play an invaluable role in recruiting students and marketing bridge programs through their local networks. To take fullest advantage of their

potential, community organizations should ideally be involved early on in the program development process.

Of course, not every community has organizations with the experience of Instituto and Association House; in fact, in some parts of the state, there are few if any community organizations involved in job preparation and training. Moreover, there are usually few financial incentives for colleges to partner with community organizations. Colleges and community organizations often rely on different funding streams, with different performance measures that are not always compatible with bridge program goals. In other cases, colleges and community organizations compete for funds. Local and state officials seeking to expand bridge programs need to consider how existing funding programs can be used to encourage, not discourage such partnerships.

Student tracking to support program evaluation and improvement

As mentioned, all three pilots are “flagging” or identifying information on bridge program students in databases on students and clients more generally. Truman and Humboldt Park are tracking students who go on to the next level of training, but they are doing the tracking “manually” and would not be able to do so with much larger numbers of students, though they could potentially use the PeopleSoft system for this purpose (*see below*). None of the pilot sites has access to data to track labor market outcomes or whether students have passed college entrance examinations or received professional licenses or certifications. Instituto, which collects data on the Carreras students, has not yet established a data sharing agreement with the City Colleges that would make it possible to see which students go on to City College programs and how well they fare. The City Colleges have recently installed a new district-wide student information system from PeopleSoft. The colleges have devoted an enormous amount of effort to getting the system in shape to do registration and other transactions necessary for their operations. According to City College administrators, the colleges and the district office are in the early stages of thinking about how to use the data in the PeopleSoft system for institutional research. They would like to be able to track bridge students over an extended period of time. This will require customized programming and perhaps even additional data elements.

All three programs could conceivably match data on bridge program students with Unemployment Insurance (UI) wage records from the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES) to examine their students’ labor market outcomes. IDES and the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) and Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) have a long track record using UI wage records to track labor market outcomes of education and training program participants. So, there is strong precedent and experience in the state should these agencies decide to collaborate in doing such tracking of participants in bridge programs.

Funding for broad range of services and partners involved in bridge programs

Sources of Funding. Underlying many of these challenges is the lack of a dedicated source of funding that can be used to sustain the broad range of services involved in bridge programs and

provided ideally through a partnership of colleges, community organizations and other entities, each playing a role appropriate to its mission and strengths.

Detailed program delivery costs are beginning to emerge. The program staff at Carreras estimate the cost per student for curriculum development, delivery and books (based on 20 students per class) as follows:

Program Level	Development and Delivery	Books
Pre-CNA and VESL	\$ 356	\$ 100
CNA (tuition at Daley College)	\$ 1,250	\$ 150
Pre-LPN Bridge (A and B)	\$ 1,200	\$ 150
LPN (tuition at Wright College)	\$ 3,600	\$ 400

The per-participant costs of counseling and administration are estimated to be \$300- \$450 for pre-CNA, VESL, and Pre-LPN students. The estimated cost of tutoring, counseling and administration for LPN students is \$950.00 per participant. We suggest a more thorough examination of costs, including a comparison of the different programs.

The pilots had to cobble together funding for their program from a daunting array of sources. For example, the following are funding sources that the Carreras partners have tapped to support the many aspects of the program:

- Illinois Community College Board, Bridge Program Pilot grant (drawn from Workforce Investment Act (WIA) for adult education) – startup and operation of the pre-CNA bridge using WIA incentive funds from adult education and Perkins.
- Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, Critical Skills Shortage Initiative contract – startup and operation for the CNA to LPN bridge.
- Illinois Department of Human Services, Title XX “donated funds initiative” grant – startup and operation.
- National Council of La Raza, U.S. Department of Labor grant – startup and operation.
- Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) grant – nursing instructor salaries and other healthcare training program costs.
- Workforce Investment Act (WIA) vouchers – tuition.¹
- Hospitals, home health care agencies and other employers – tuition benefits for incumbent employees who enroll in bridge training.
- Pell Grants – tuition for LPN program.
- Local Initiative Support Corporation grant, or LISC – development of database system used to track participants in these and other programs run by Instituto.
- Private foundations – matching support for public funds and other costs not covered by public funds.

¹ Instituto del Progreso Latino worked out an arrangement with the Mayors Office for Workforce Development (MOWD) to “bundle” WIA vouchers so that it could more readily recruit individuals with an interest in the bridge programs and make it easier for them to apply for WIA funding.

Each source of funding has its own performance and reporting requirements. This obviously creates administrative challenges for each partner, let along the added complexity of coordinating funding and administration among the partners. It is unlikely that any one source of funds covers the actual administrative costs.

The funding for the Truman College and Olive-Harvey College bridge programs was simpler. Truman College used Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) bridge pilot grant to fund curriculum development, the part-time “student advocate,” and tools and uniforms for students in the automotive bridge. Support for tuition and program administration came from federal and state Adult Basic Education (ABE) funds administered by the ICCB. Similarly, Olive-Harvey used an ICCB pilot grant to fund purchase of educational materials, forklift trucks, and student scholarships, bus passes and meals. State and federal adult basic education funds supported administration of the bridge program.

Although the funding schemes used by Truman and Olive-Harvey were less complex than that of Carreras, they still have several constraints. For one, the U.S. Department of Education, which administers the federal Adult Basic Education (WIA Title II) funding, has given ambiguous and sometimes conflicting guidance on whether ABE funds can be used for contextual instruction that integrates instruction in basic skills with vocational skills training, how ABE funds can be combined with other funds, and the extent to which they can support curriculum development. Washington and other states that fund programs that integrate basic skills and vocational instruction tend to use state ABE monies, rather than federal funds for this purpose.

The Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) allows the use of ABE funds to support tuition for up to 12 hours of vocational instruction for eligible students. However, ICCB must approve the vocational courses to certify that they meet state and federal guidelines. For its bridge program pilots, Truman was able to use ICCB-approved course numbers for its bridge programs, although, moving forward, it would like to see ICCB expand adult education course offerings to accommodate a broader range of course topics. The City Colleges of Chicago Adult Education Division is conducting a survey of bridge programs to determine which ICCB course numbers are currently being used and what new ones are needed. The City Colleges staff is also collecting curricula that have been approved by ICCB for possible sharing.

Of course, even if ICCB does expand the list of vocational courses approved for ABE funding, support is still limited to offering 12 hours of vocational instruction. That means that programs like Truman’s, which includes 16 hours of instruction, will have to find other ways to cover any additional hours of instruction. Moreover, in Illinois, as in many other states, ABE is reimbursed at a lower rate than college-level programs generally, and college-credit occupational programs in particular, which are funded at a higher rate than general education courses. Thus, ABE funding falls short of covering the full costs even of bridge program instruction, let alone program development and other costs. Because colleges cannot charge

tuition for ABE programs to cover any shortfalls in funding, there is little incentive to offer such programs on a large scale.

While ABE will fund students who lack a high school diploma or GED, Truman and the other pilots saw many applicants to the bridge pilots who had a high school credential, but lacked the requisite basic skills even for a bridge program. And because bridge programs are “non-credit,” in that they do not lead directly to a college-level certificate or degree, students cannot qualify for Pell grants and other financial aid. ICCB might be able to base eligibility on need as demonstrated by an individual’s performance on the TABE or other assessment, but this might require a change in state regulations. Kentucky and some other states allow high school graduates with limited basic skills to participate in adult basic education.

Of course, students with a high school credential might qualify for WIA vouchers. All of the providers said that WIA funds are extremely difficult to administer, however. This is particularly so for the colleges, which are not set up to readily use WIA funds. Moreover, the level of WIA funding has been declining for several years, so it is no longer a dependable source, even if it were easier to tap.

Many individuals who are working in relatively low-paying jobs exceed the income requirements to qualify for WIA funding. Even students who received support for tuition often had to reduce their work hours or quit altogether to concentrate on their studies. This was particularly true in the Carreras healthcare bridges, which are especially demanding. Married students with working spouses were in some cases able to rely on income from spouses to reduce their work obligations so they could devote more time to school. Single parents and those without children were occasionally able to rely on family members for child care and living assistance, but usually lacked the income support of married students.

Even if support from established funding streams like ABE and WIA were more abundant and easier to use, such funds have been difficult to use for certain program development costs. These include partnership building and coordination, program planning, curriculum development, support services and instructor training. ABE funds may be used for these types of activities if the curriculum primarily focuses on the development of adult students’ basic skills needs. In addition, there is the cost of scholarships for students who do not qualify for ABE, WIA or financial aid.

All three pilots relied on grant funding to cover these costs. Yet, if bridge programs are to be offered on a much wider scale, how can these costs be covered? Oregon and other states have used WIA discretionary funds and state incentive awards to fund program planning, partnership development, faculty training and other capacity-building activities involved in building bridge programs. All three Chicago pilots said that the pilot grants provided by ICCB were sufficiently flexible to enable them to experiment with different strategies, such as the hiring by Olive-Harvey and Truman of part-time student advisors or advocates. Carreras, Truman and Olive-Harvey, which all used Critical Skill Shortages Initiative (CSSI) funds from DCEO to support start-up costs, indicated that that funding program, which uses WIA discretionary funds, is similarly well suited to supporting bridge building and capacity development.

Moving to the Next Stage

Although they have not been subject to a rigorous outcomes evaluation, the three pilots examined here nevertheless were successful in implementing promising practices and in raising awareness about the bridge approach among practitioners and policy makers in Chicago and throughout the state. They highlighted challenges that would face efforts to provide bridge training on a more substantial scale, but they also suggested strategies for addressing these challenges. For example, Truman College showed that Adult Basic Education (ABE) monies can be used to fund the operation of bridge programs (at least in part), and identified steps the Illinois Community College Board and other state and local agencies could take to facilitate use of ABE funds for this purpose.

For bridge programs to advance to the next stage of development in Chicago and Illinois, college and state agency officials need to push for expanded piloting and evaluation of these efforts. Fortunately, this has already begun happening. The Illinois Community College Board has articulated its support of the bridge program model, and the Illinois Community College Presidents' Council has formed a working group to explore how to expand bridge training. The president of Truman College was instrumental in the formation of the working group and is an active member. Several other community college presidents, representing all areas of the state and including this year's president of the Council, are participating. The working group has instructed ICCB to survey the completed bridge pilots in healthcare and transportation-logistics so that it can draw common lessons from implementation efforts. It is also planning to examine funding options for bridge programs.

Another new effort is the series of institutes sponsored by the City Colleges of Chicago and Women Employed that have brought together novice and more experienced teams of bridge program developers and faculty at four of the campuses and their community partners to do program planning and development. The first two meetings were well received by participants. The City Colleges and Illinois Community College Board should find ways to fund these meetings, which seem to be a cost-effective way of promoting the development of both programs and faculty and staff.

A recent grant from the Joyce Foundation under its Shifting Gears Initiative will provide a structure for ICCB and the presidents, along with partners like Women Employed and the Chicago Jobs Council, to examine ways that existing policies, organizations and resources can be adapted to promote bridge program development. For example, while there is currently no dedicated funding for the bridge program faculty training, ICCB supports the operation of Adult Learning Resource Center (ALRC), which could offer training for bridge program instructors and staff. As part of this process, ICCB should consult with bridge program providers to identify policies or regulations that might be changed or adjusted to facilitate bridge program development.

Also included as a goal of the Shifting Gears Initiative, ICCB and the presidents are planning to initiate conversations with other state agencies about the potential for combining resources

to support bridge programs. ICCB can build on the strong relationship it has developed with DCEO on the Critical Skill Shortages Initiative and other efforts. DCEO has also committed resources to using the state's Unemployment Insurance (UI) wage database managed by Northern Illinois University to track program outcomes. The success of the Carreras program in tapping Department of Human Services Title XX funds suggests that ICCB should pursue conversations with IDHS as well.

While the bridge pilots to date have increased interest in the bridge model, state and local agencies and policy makers are unlikely to provide substantial funding for bridge programs over the long run unless there is solid evidence that they are effective. Hence, another key focus of the next phase should be to conduct an impact evaluation of bridge program pilots. The pilots are collecting the sort of data on participants that could be used in an impact evaluation. New pilots should be encouraged to collect similar information and to use it not only to evaluate program impact but to improve effectiveness. The Shifting Gears Initiative evaluation will also provide valuable outcomes data on programs implemented by the six to eight demonstration sites.

Whether these promising pilot efforts will become the seeds for bridge program offerings on a much larger scale in Chicago and Illinois more generally will ultimately depend on continuing leadership by college presidents, agency staff and others, and further engagement of stakeholders such as employer and labor groups, and advocates.

APPENDIX

Chicago Bridge Training Program Student Profiles

Overview

Bridge training programs are designed to prepare adults with limited basic skills for postsecondary education and training leading to career-path employment.

This appendix presents profiles of students from three Chicago-based bridge training programs that are being piloted with funding from the Illinois Community College Board, Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and other sources. The three programs are:

- *Carreras En Salud*, which includes a bilingual pre-Certified Nurse Assistant bridge and a Certified Nurse Assistant to Licensed Practical Nurse bridge program. The Carreras programs are provided through a partnership involving two community organizations, Instituto del Progreso Latino and Association House, Wright College's Humboldt Park Vocational Education Center, and the National Council of La Raza. Students enter programs based on their literacy levels and each program prepares them to enter the next level of training.
- *Olive-Harvey College's Transportation, Warehousing and Logistics Bridge* program prepares students with a 6th to 8th grade literacy level for the GED exam and to enter the college's Certified Drivers License program.
- The *Automotive Bridge* program run by Truman College in collaboration with two nonprofits, Howard Area Community Center and Jewish Vocational Services. It prepares students to enter Truman's automobile repair certificate program and associate of applied science degree program in automotive technology.

We interviewed ten students from these programs. The purpose was to better understand the backgrounds, aspirations and challenges facing students in bridge programs. This work was conducted as part of a formative evaluation of the three bridge program pilots that we conducted with funding from the Joyce Foundation.

The next section summarizes key points from the interviews. The third and final section presents profiles of each of the ten students.

Key Points from the Interviews

How students found out about the programs

Most students learned about their program through word of mouth; others heard about it when they enrolled in a GED or English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) program at a community organization or one of the City Colleges. Some found out about the Carreras program through a public service announcement on Latino cable TV and radio stations.

Reasons for enrolling

Most of the students had had a series of low-skill, low-wage jobs that offered no benefits and limited opportunities for advancement. All of them wanted better jobs, but lacked the necessary qualifications. Several of the students had been laid off from companies that either downsized or closed. Others anticipated being laid off and wanted to enter a new, more secure field with opportunity to make more money.

Although a few of the students sought out the program in which they enrolled, most indicated a prior interest in the given field. Several students in the Truman auto program mentioned that they wanted to be able to repair their own cars as well as those of family and friends. They said they were tired of being charged a lot for low-quality automobile repair service.

Most students' families encouraged them to go to school, and most families helped financially and with child care and other responsibilities.

The fact that the programs were offered free of charge was not surprisingly a major attraction for students. (Students in the Truman auto program were given a free set of tools if they enrolled in the introductory automotive technology course at the next level of education.)

Some students reduced their working hours while others changed jobs or, in a couple cases, quit their jobs, to allow them to devote more energy to school.

Reflections on the academic experience

Every student praised the instructors, advisors, and tutors for their patience and willingness to answer questions. Students in the Carreras bilingual programs appreciated the fact that instructors would answer questions in Spanish for clarification, even though the instruction was in English. The students emphasized that instructors were helpful not only with the course work, but also with issues related to time management, confidence, motivation, personal problems, and careers.

Most students mentioned that they liked the combination of teaching methods – lectures, textbooks, projects and peer learning. Each student preferred a given method depending on his or her learning style.

Most students were challenged by the fast pace of instruction (particularly in the Carreras pre-LPN program), long hours and need to balance work, school and family. All of them said that the sacrifice was well worth the opportunities it would afford them.

Use of support services

Financial aid. Most of the students with working spouses or partners said that their partners' income was barely sufficient to support their households while they were in school, and they could not have afforded the cost of tuition, books, and supplies were they not offered at no cost.

Single students had the greatest difficulty, especially when they had to reduce their work hours. One woman in a pre-LPN course needed a scholarship (she was not eligible for financial aid) as well as financial help from extended family members.

Financial assistance for tuition, books, and supplies seems also to be a determining factor for students transitioning to the next level of education. Students who do not qualify for financial aid are generally not able to continue. In the first two cycles of Olive-Harvey's program, only limited funds were available for scholarships for the expensive CDL training program. Retention increased dramatically when scholarships were offered to all students.

Child Care. One person, a single woman who worked part-time, said she asked Carreras for child care assistance. She had previously relied on her mother, but her mother could not afford to reduce her own work schedule to provide the full extent of child care she needed with the increased school hours. Instituto del Progreso Latino, one of the Carreras partners, was able to secure funding from a government program that compensated her mother for looking after her children and made up for the mother's lost wages. Others were able to make arrangements with family members. Several mentioned that some students dropped out because of scheduling problems, especially related to child care.

Advising and Case Management. Most students indicated that the guidance and support they got from instructors and staff were key reasons they were able to complete their programs. Students said that instructors and staff "were always being there for them," and "challenged and pushed them to do better." One woman specifically said that she was on the verge of dropping out, but her instructor helped her with school work and overcome her insecurity. Many students said without the instructor's care and encouragement they would not have completed the course. Instructors spent a lot of time with the students outside, as well as inside, the classroom in personal meetings and over the telephone.

Students in the Olive-Harvey and Truman programs said that the student advocate or advisors available through these programs helped them solve problem with they needed it and referred them to appropriate support services. Truman's student advocate advised students on how to apply for college-level courses and financial aid. Retention in the Olive-Harvey program increased markedly after the college hired a bridge student advisor, who helped students obtain transportation vouchers, meals and scholarships for the CDL program.

Next steps

Most graduates of the Carreras healthcare and Truman auto technology bridge programs said they wanted to go to the next level of training, though several said they would work first. Over half of Olive-Harvey's students completed the bridge and transitioned to the CDL program when scholarships became available.

Most students said that they got a much clearer idea of the career options available to them in the industries targeted by their particular program. Students in the Carreras health care program indicated that they had already decided on a specialty, while others indicated a desire to find a job that would expose them to different specialties so they would be better able to choose. Students in the Truman auto program talked about opportunities in dealerships, repair and service chains and auto parts stores. Some had a clear idea about possibilities for advancement beyond the first job.

Students with children indicated that their children were very proud of them, and some wanted to accompany their parents to school. They reported that the experience has helped to teach their children about the importance of working hard for what they want. Several also said that their spouses or partners were considering going to school after they completed the bridge and returned to full-time employment.

Nearly every student said that the bridge training opened up valuable opportunities for them that they would not otherwise have had. Some viewed the experience as a major turning point in their lives. Most students had already recommended the program to family members, friends, and co-workers, although they were honest about the challenges.

Bridge Student Profiles

The following profiles are based on interviews with students in each of the three Chicago bridge pilot programs. We use pseudonyms to protect the students' privacy.

**Maria
Carerras en Salud
Pre-CNA Bridge**

Maria is 49 years old and married, with three grown children and a grandchild. Her husband was laid off from a medical laboratory and is currently using his unemployment benefits to attend an HVAC training program. Maria completed the Carerras en Salud pre-CNA program at Instituto del Progreso Latino and plans to enter the CNA program at Richard Daley College next term.

Before Maria moved to the Chicago suburbs in the 1970s, she attended a private vocational school in Mexico, called a bilingual academy, where she studied basic business English. But “like all young people at the time, I didn’t see the importance of learning English. After all, we were in Mexico.” She enrolled in high school when her family moved to the United States, but it did not offer bilingual courses. With only six bilingual students, her high school offered little support for Spanish speakers. Not learning much because of the language barrier, Maria wanted to quit school at 16 “because it was a waste time.” Her father agreed if she would get a job. At that time employment was easy, “if there was a job, people just hired you.”

Over the past 30 years she had several jobs in manufacturing. She left the first one when she got married, and her second employer closed. She has been at her current job for four years. She works from 6:30 am to 3:00 pm, (5 am to 3:30 p.m. when there was overtime), earns \$13 an hour, and has health insurance and a 401(k).

Now, 30 years later, she finds it “unbelievable how fast time went.” Still she is pleased that “after so many years, I am finally going to school,” and says, “it is never too late.”

Maria heard about Carerras en Salud from a public service announcement on Univision, a Spanish language television station, in which Dr. Ricardo Estrada, director of Carerras en Salud, asked nurses from other countries if they would like to work here and invited them to an orientation. Maria’s aunt Theresa, who had been a nurse in Mexico, was interested and asked Maria to drive with her. Theresa encouraged Maria to attend the orientation and to apply. Based on the assessment test, she was placed in the lowest level ESL course and a CNA-prep course with other students who knew little English. Maria also started a GED program at Triton College, but an advisor there suggested that she wait until she completed the CNA course because it would be too difficult to do both and work full time.

She decided to enroll in Carerras because manufacturing jobs were harder to get and offered less pay and fewer benefits. She explained, “In factories, the co-pay for insurance is getting higher, companies are closing or moving, there is no job security, and new employees are hired at lower wages.” Because she is at the highest pay level at her current job, she thinks she could be laid off soon, and because of her limited education she may not be qualified for a new job that pays comparable wages and benefits.

In Carerras, Maria has learned about how the body works, medical terminology, how to “scan” for an illness, and how to use diagnostic tools, such as mammography and blood tests. She

reports that the frequent tests made her concentrate and take thorough notes, “because you don’t know if questions will be on the final exam.” She found having a bilingual teacher essential. She teaches in English, but answers questions and explains difficult concepts in Spanish. Maria thinks that both languages are important: “English because we will be working with patients in English, and Spanish to help us fully learn.” Maria also noted that her instructor always answered the many questions. As Maria says, “If you don’t ask questions, how are you going to know?” Maria also liked that the instructors encouraged peer learning and gave assignments to teams of students. Team members would share notes and sources of information, help each other with presentations, and discuss homework.

Maria would like to work in a nursing home for six months and, building on that experience, to move to hospital where she can develop a specialty, which she cannot do in a nursing home. She also plans to get a GED, and then an LPN, and maybe more.

**Edna
Carreras En Salud
Pre-CNA and CNA Programs**

A 32-year-old mother of two children under 12, Edna was born in Mexico. There she enjoyed school, particularly math, but had to leave after the eleventh grade because her family could not afford her tuition and books. In 1994 she and her husband moved to the United States. Last year she enrolled in a citizenship course at Instituto del Progreso Latino so she could vote and become more involved in her community.

Edna did not plan to continue her education beyond the citizenship course, but she liked the course so much she decided to enroll in Instituto's GED program and then completed it in two months. Near the end of the program her teacher encouraged her to consider enrolling in a career program. An Instituto counselor gave her information on the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program and scholarships.

She expressed interest and the counselor recommended that she take the pre-CNA bridge so that she would be well-prepared to succeed in the CNA program. Edna had to seriously consider the challenges of arranging child care, transportation, and meals for her family. She explained that it was a difficult decision, "because I thought I might have to drop out because of my responsibilities and it was better to use the money to help someone who would succeed." On the one hand, she said her husband's encouragement and support "set me free to do the things I wanted to do and the scholarship made it financially feasible." On the other hand, she felt her first priority was her family, so "if my children didn't have sufficient care, I would not be able to concentrate 100 percent and therefore shouldn't participate in the course." Letting go would be difficult, but her eldest son, like her husband, said that school would be good for her and that he would take care of his little brother. She ultimately decided to enroll in the pre-CNA program.

She took English in morning from 8 am to 2:30 pm and the pre-CNA course from 5:00 pm to 9:30 pm. Edna found it difficult to adjust to a full-time school schedule, but she performed well and completed the 14 week program.

Edna said that the bilingual instructors in the pre-CNA program were critical to the students' success. Although the instructors present the material in English, they helped the students understand the lessons in Spanish and English, and frequently answered questions in Spanish. Edna also found that peer learning through the use of student teams was valuable. "The students in each team work together in solving problems and helping each other. You have to come to school prepared, debate your homework assignments with your team, and explain your answers. If you don't do your homework you won't have anything for the team and you let them down." She said that the teacher always answered questions, but first gave students the opportunity to find the answer themselves, which Edna thinks "challenged everyone to try harder and to learn." Edna feels that the combination of math, English, health, and medical language gave her the solid grounding that she needed to succeed in CNA training and beyond.

After Edna completed the pre-CNA program, she enrolled in the CNA program and continued her English course. Edna considered working part time while she was in the CNA course, but she couldn't manage the CNA program, her English class and a job, feeling it was more important to finish English first.

In addition to learning career skills, Edna reports that both programs at Carreras helped her develop a stronger sense of self-confidence. She attributes this to her increased ability to communicate with other people, the opportunity to do “wonderful and useful things” in clinicals, and the chance to “learn by helping others and helping others to help themselves.” That her friends and family find her accomplishments so impressive is also gratifying. Her husband “felt so proud of me at the CNA graduation because I was valedictorian and the teachers recognized my work.”

Near the end of the course, Edna's instructor encouraged her to take the CNA exam, which she easily passed. This enabled her to secure a CNA position at health clinic in her community where she would like to work 40 hours a week and continue her education. She plans apply for the pre-LPN program to take the pre-requisites for the LPN. She hopes to work full time and has applied for financial assistance.

Edna's goal of becoming an LPN reaches back to her childhood, when she had a “fantasy” of becoming a doctor. Now she says “Carreras is giving me the opportunity to succeed in something I always dreamed about.”

She is excited to go to Wright College because she feels it will be the real beginning of her career in medicine. She wishes that more people could attend these types of programs. She thinks providers need to advertise the opportunity on television, in churches, and in Spanish language newspapers.

Edna feels that “it was her lucky day” when she entered the pre-CNA course and is encouraging her husband to go back to school. He plans to consider it when she completes her studies and is working in her new career.

**Yesinia
Carreras en Salud
Pre-LPN and LPN**

Yesinia is 29 years and lives with her pre-school age daughter. She completed the Carreras en Salud Pre-Licensed Practical Nurse and Practical Nurse programs at Humboldt Park Vocational Education Center, passed the licensing exam on the first try, and recently started a job as a Licensed Practical Nurse at a suburban medical center.

Yesinia graduated from high school in 1995. Her first full time job was at a department store, where she became an assistant manager of the home department and was earning \$11 an hour with benefits. She explored the possibility of entering an employee training program to become a department manager, but she realized that even after the training, there would be few if any openings for managers. So after nine years, Yesinia “felt stuck” and decided to move to the health care field.

Yesinia had wanted to be a nurse and had been taking general education classes at Morton Community College on and off since 1997, hoping to complete the prerequisite courses. But she ended up a CNA rather than complete the coursework.

To get into the health care field, she took a pay cut, starting at \$9.90 an hour to work at a suburban medical center. Although she was able to increase her hourly earnings over three years to \$11.81 with overtime, she found that she would not be able to advance further without additional training and certifications.

Yesinia applied to several nursing programs in the metropolitan area, but there were long waiting lists. She said, “I think that my “C” average at Morton also kept me from being accepted.” She heard about Carreras from a cousin and applied. Carreras called her for an interview, explaining that the purpose of the program was to meet the critical need for more Hispanic nurses. Yesinia explained, “they were accepting people like me who couldn’t qualify for other programs. I was in the first class of six at Humboldt Park. It took me a little longer than a year to complete the course because I continued to work 25-26 hours a week.”

She received financial assistance from Carreras en Salud for books and tuition and was “able to arrange child care because of the hours of the program. I went to school and worked part time, and picked up extra hours at work on the weekend, including a double shift on Sunday. My family took care of my daughter on the weekends.”

Yesinia thinks that the instructors are the most important part of the program and distinguish it from other programs. “Their doors were always open. Ms. M., the lead instructor, was my mentor and tutor. All of us could go to her for any situation. She would keep us focused on studying what was most important. I almost dropped out during the OBY and pediatric lessons because I knew I had to get an 82 on the exam, but she pushed, motivated and encouraged me – and I stuck with it.” Yesinia believes that the biggest difference from other programs she had enrolled in was the frequent personal contact with the instructor. “We had to meet with Ms. M. every week and we knew that everyone was there for us. The students could always find

someone to help. In other schools there are tutors, but they are not strong in everything and can't always give you what you need." She cited another difference: the instructors in Carreras want you to "be the best that you can be and to succeed – the extra motivation really, really helps. Ms. M. wants everyone to go on for their RNs – and everyone in my class wants to do that. What the program gave me was confidence, which will help me be a better health care professional."

"In terms of skills, the most important lesson for me was team work. In a hospital, nothing can get done well without the team."

Yesinia applied for an LPN position with her current employer because it offers tuition reimbursement and she can get paid while she is going to school to become a registered nurse. She also wants to work in every hospital unit to explore what area would be best for her. Currently she is interested in becoming a surgical technician, but that could change. She plans to apply to a nursing school that is closer to home and work. She has already submitted her transcript and will sign up to take the entrance exam, which includes math, English, and nursing basics.

Yesinia thinks that the Carreras en Salud is an excellent program for Latinos who want to get into the medical field but are intimidated by or cannot qualify for other programs. She has already recommended the program to other people at the medical center and a few are looking into it. "I owe Ms. M. and Carreras en Salud so much."

Andrea*
Carreras En Salud
Pre-LPN Program

Andrea is a 34-year-old single mother of two school-age children. She does not receive child support, and with only a GED her income places her below the poverty line. Andrea entered the workforce as a cashier and worked in several stores, earning \$5.00 to \$5.35 an hour. She increased her hourly wages working for five-and-a-half years as a CNA at a nursing home, where she first learned about the Carreras en Salud program from a bulletin posted in the employee lounge. A pending lay-off at the nursing home and her need to earn more to support her family convinced her to pursue the program.

While attending the accelerated Pre-LPN program, Andrea works part-time (24 hours a week) as a CNA at another nursing home, earning \$8.20 an hour with some paid leave, but no health insurance, and supplements her income with babysitting for a friend. The reduced work schedule allows time to attend class, and her family and church help her financially. Although her employer does not provide financial assistance for training, her supervisor supports her participation in the program because the nursing home needs bilingual nurses to serve the all-Latino population of the home. This employer hopes to promote her to LPN when she completes the program.

Attending the bilingual Pre-LPN program, which compresses three months of coursework into eight weeks, she says, “every day they cover three chapters and generally have a test.” She attends classes at Wright College’s Humboldt Park Vocational Education Center (HPVEC) three to four days a week, depending on the requirements of the term, from 5:30 pm to 9:20 pm.

Andrea takes advantage of the financial assistance, child care, book vouchers, one-on-one tutoring, and counseling that are available at HPVEC. She understands that these services are part of the approach of “pushing us to keep going and not fall back,” while providing support and helping students to understand the world of college. For example, when she began the program she did not understand the purpose of financial aid or book vouchers or that the check she would receive in the mail was for tuition, so she spent the money on household necessities rather than registering for an anatomy class. In addition, the school counselor helped her secure funding from a government program (Day Care Access) to pay her mother for a day a week of child care. Her mother could not afford to reduce her work hours to help her without this support.

Andrea says she is “particularly grateful for the wonderful Pre-LPN instructor at Association House,” who still checks up on her even though she has moved on to courses at the HPVEC, and “really cares how the students are doing. She is a beautiful person who helped me succeed.” Andrea has also developed a mutually supportive relationship with other students, many of whom are older Latinas, by helping them with their English while they help her refine her Spanish. “We want to see each other go places.”

* Based on interview notes by Maureen Crimmens and Sapna Mehta, Women Employed Summer Leadership Program, 2006.

Andrea plans to continue her education to become an LPN, and then to work toward her RN. She does plan to slow her pace, because it is a challenge to keep up with the intense coursework and her work. She has found the classes especially challenging because she has been out of school for a long time. She knows that when she is ready, “Wright College provides a full range of academic and job search assistance to help you find a job in whatever field you’re in.” Andrea hopes to continue to work for a nursing home, because she enjoys working with the elderly residents. She said, “since many of them do not have family members who care for them, I develop relationships with them and try to create a good, friendly atmosphere.”

She feels that going through the program is a positive influence for her children, who “are proud of their mom,” because “it teaches them to look forward to the future.” Andrea thinks that the best thing about the program is that “it opens doors.” She has already referred two others to the program, and has told them: “It’s the best thing since sliced bread, but it’s going to be fast and ...stressful.” She feels that it is great opportunity for the Latino community: “We are needed. They need bilingual nurses out there. The program tries to help us in whatever way so that we can succeed and better ourselves. When it all boils down, we are going to better our children, our community, everything.”

Michael*
Olive-Harvey College
Certified Drivers License Program

Michael, 35 years old and a father of two small children, recently worked a 40-hour a week job at two different McDonalds as a cashier earning \$5.50 an hour. He did not have health insurance or paid leave, but was able to rearrange his schedule to respond to his personal needs, such as illness or child care emergencies. He left after a little more than a year when he realized that he needed a better job. Recognizing that his lack of a high school credential would limit his opportunities, he enrolled in a GED program at Olive-Harvey College.

The GED instructor told him about Olive-Harvey's Transportation, Warehousing, and Logistics Distribution (TWL) programs. Although he knew almost nothing about the industry, he thought it would provide "a very good opportunity to get a better job in the future."

Now that he is enrolled in the Certified Drivers License (CDL) program, Michael is committed to it and excited about beginning a new career when he finishes. Michael reported that his family is "very happy that I finally found a career path" and they support his efforts to change his life, because "they all knew that I needed to get out of the old job and feel this program will definitely benefit me and my future."

Michael appreciates how the program combines a classroom component to build basic skills with a practical component where they practice driving trucks on designated routes. He likes that he can "move at my own pace." One teacher "really inspired me to do my very best everyday." The CDL exam was "easy" for him and he earned his license and is now learning all the technical details of truck driving.

Michael reported that Olive-Harvey makes it "very simple for the participants to get a job or at least apply for one once they have completed the program and are ready." He plans to work for one of the companies that recruit students at Olive-Harvey. He believes that "this opportunity is fantastic and simple and extremely available to all the students in the program, which is just great!" He is looking forward to finishing this program and beginning a job in truck driving.

Michael added that he convinced his girlfriend to get her GED at Olive-Harvey and he has already recommended the CDL program to a few of his friends.

* Based on interview notes by Maureen Crimmens, Women Employed Summer Leadership Program, 2006.

Jason*
Olive-Harvey College
Certified Drivers License Program

Jason, a high school graduate, is 28 years old, married with four young children. His wife works, but is also the primary caretaker of the children.

Jason attended a pre-nursing program at Chicago State College, after changing his major from pre-med, then to biochemistry, and then to nursing. He still has five prerequisite science classes to complete before he can enter a Licensed Practical Nursing program.

For the past five years he has had his own business, Nate's Products, which sells fashion merchandise. He earns \$50 to \$500 a day and works 10 to 30 hours a week. He does not have health insurance, paid sick leave, or other benefits.

Before starting his own business, Jason worked briefly at a factory as a forklift driver. He left that job after only two months because he felt that it was a "dead-end job and I wasn't going anywhere." Without a license or occupational certificate, he assumed he would never be able to advance. Before that he worked for three months as a bill collector, a position he left because of a long commute on Metra to downtown Chicago from his home on the south side of Chicago and an inflexible work schedule, which prevented him from taking classes at Chicago State. He would have been eligible for health insurance and other benefits at both jobs if he had stayed longer.

Jason attributed his tendency to leave jobs after a short tenure to his preference for working independently. However, he reported that with better pay, he would be more encouraged to stick with a job.

Jason heard about the Certified Drivers License (CDL) program from a friend who learned about it at an unemployment agency. Jason completed the paper work and took a test to determine whether he could meet the program requirements. He ended up enrolling in the truck-driving program because the grant covered tuition and fees, and he had the requisite math and reading skills and a valid driver's license. He was also attracted by the fact that it was a short course that "could produce immediate employment results." He thinks the nursing program is too long, and he was not sure he could find a job even with an LPN or bachelor's degree. In addition, he is still paying off student loans and the pre-nursing program is expensive.

By the fourth week of the CDL program, Jason had learned how to check different parts of a truck before starting up and techniques for addressing problems. For example, he learned how to check for a flat tire, read the temperature gauge and decide whether to continue driving, and what to do if the gas pedal goes to the floor and the brakes do not work. Students spend most of the day driving trucks supplemented with some classroom time.

* Based on interview notes by Teresa Lim, Women Employed Summer Leadership Program, 2006.

There are reading assignments and regular quizzes. Jason says that “it is up to the student to study every night and apply themselves, otherwise they will fail the exams. If a person fails a test three times, then he has to wait 30 days to get into a new class to pick up where he had left off.” The program is six weeks, but he says that some students have been there for a few months because they have not been applying themselves. Developing study habits was initially difficult for him, but he has learned that “you can apply yourself or you can waste a lot of time.” He believes that the instructors are “wonderful, and encourage all of the students.”

Jason says the program’s Monday through Friday 9 am to 3 pm schedule is “almost like a job.” After class he goes to work and returns home around 8 pm, so he does not have much time to spend with his children. However, he believes the effort will pay off and he will be able to spend more time with them in the future.

He believes that the CDL license will open his choice of jobs. He says he can be an independent truck contractor, like some of his friends who have completed the program, or work full- or part-time for a union company that provides benefits. In addition, Jason thinks that the CDL will provide him with a new skill and could increase access to more potential customers for his merchandise.

The program’s effect appears to go beyond Jason’s own prospects. He laughed and smiled about the reactions of his children, who “grab his book bag and want to go to school with him.”

Ramon
Harry S. Truman College
Automotive Bridge and Introduction to Automotive Technology 101

Originally from a small city in Mexico, Ramon moved to the United States 10 years ago. He completed junior high school in his hometown, which is the equivalent of two years of high school in the United States. Ramon is 32 years old, married with two children.

When he moved to the United States, Ramon worked in various restaurant jobs, in the kitchen, and as a bus boy and cook. Most recently, he worked as a chef in an Italian restaurant, where he earned \$1,250 every two weeks without health benefits or paid leave. He left that job because there was “no future” and he felt as if he were “wasting time.” Given his limited formal education and lack of experience, there were no opportunities to advance in the restaurant business. He now works in a Sushi restaurant to earn money while he is in the Truman auto program.

Ramon learned about the auto bridge program through his English class at Lakeview Community Center, near Truman College, where an advisor encouraged him to take more advanced English at Truman and told him about the auto course. Ramon was immediately interested because he had “always liked cars,” and had briefly worked as a mechanic in Mexico. He had wanted to take an automotive class in Chicago but could not afford the usual tuition and fees of \$800 to \$900. At Truman there was no tuition and upon completion he would receive a uniform and \$800 worth of tools.

Ramon enjoyed being in school again, even though he reported that when he was young he did not focus on school. Now he believes “it is time to go straight.” He particularly liked the instructor who could answer everyone’s questions and provide step-by-step descriptions of how cars work. “Everything I learned is valuable, and now I understand the more advanced cars,” specifically about engines pistons, coolant, rings, hydraulic brakes, and the names of all of the parts. The course differs from others “because of the opportunity to take practice tests, discuss the answers, review our mistakes, and most important, to talk about the material in class.”

He is now taking the required courses for his associate degree, which includes general education classes. He will continue to work full time while he is in school. He wakes up at 6:30, goes to school, works, and gets home after 10 pm. Sometimes “I wake up feeling very tired, but then I remember that this is what I want to do so I get up and go.” When he has free time, he works on friends’ cars to earn a little money and to help them out.

He plans to earn his associate degree, get a job starting at \$15 per hour, and save money to open his own business. He would also like to work as a Truman College auto instructor. Ramon expressed his gratitude for the program, because the opportunity “will improve my life – this type of job is better.” He says, “My children have also learned they can study what they want and that it is never too late. I have been telling them that if you want to do something you have to work at it and learn every day – study, study, the more you know the better you do.”

Tomas
Harry S. Truman College
GED, Automotive Bridge Program and Automotive Technology 101

Tomas is 33 years old, married to a nurse, and has three children. Tomas was born in Mexico and has lived in the Chicago area for 28 years. He completed the tenth grade in Chicago.

He has worked 12 years as an awning installer, where he made \$17 per hour with health insurance and other benefits. He is proud of the skills he developed on the job, including welding, sewing, and graphics. Although his performance was strong, he was laid off when business declined. He thinks this was because he was the highest paid employee. After a few weeks of unemployment, his wife urged him to go to school to prepare for a better job. Her salary and his unemployment insurance were sufficient to cover the family's expenses while he was in school.

Tomas first enrolled in a GED class at Truman College, where he learned about the auto bridge program. Tomas "decided to enroll because I always liked working on cars, the bridge paid for the class, and if I passed, they would provide a very complete set of tools, worth \$800, to help get me started." With TABE scores at 9th grade for literacy and math, he was eligible for the program.

Tomas believes the instructor was key to the program's success. "The instructor presented the lessons from the book, used examples, asked questions to make sure we understood the information, and gave us an opportunity to talk with each other about what we were learning." Tomas explained that this was a new way of learning, "I had always learned on the job where there was little opportunity to learn reasons or principles, so I was only able to learn how to complete the tasks." The bridge and introduction to automotive technology course, however, taught writing and communication while teaching the basic automotive systems, such as fuel, electrical, steering, breaks, and suspension, and how to rebuild engines.

Tomas passed the entrance exam for the Automotive Technician Certificate program, which consists of four courses to prepare them to pass the Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) skill certification test. He wants to pass the exam because it will help him to "earn more money." Assuming he does well in the certificate program, Tomas plans to pursue an associate degree in building science.

In addition to the technical aspects of cars, Tomas reports that the bridge program taught him about auto-related careers and helped him to identify an employment goal: to work as a repair technician for a well-known brand, such as Volvo.

Ricardo
Harry S. Truman College
Automotive Bridge Program and Automotive Technology 101

Ricardo is 24 years old and married with two young children. For him, going back to school was “the opportunity of a lifetime.” Ricardo dropped out of school when he was 16 years old, became involved “with some bad people” and did not return to school.

For three years he had jobs that he felt would lead nowhere, including several restaurant jobs where he was paid under the table, a large grocery chain, and a maintenance company. For the next five years, he was employed by a small delivery firm specializing in dental, optical, medical, and beauty products. He started with that company as a driver earning \$8 per hour without benefits. Over time his responsibilities grew to include training new drivers and office work, so his wages increased to \$13 per hour with health and life insurance. He learned what he needed to know on the job, including Chicago street navigation and record keeping. He did not need a certified drivers license. However, when the company lost a major account, he was laid off.

Ricardo’s wife encouraged him to go back to school for a GED “so he could get a better job.” He heard about the Automotive Bridge program when he enrolling in Truman’s GED program. “I didn’t know what I wanted, so I decided to start with the auto program.... To tell you the truth, I did think about enrolling in automotive training a few years ago, but didn’t have time, so when I was laid off I seized the moment.” With a TABE test of ninth grade in literacy and math, Ricardo was accepted. He and his wife agreed to “work together as a family” while he was in school. He could take care of their two children after school and her income could support the family.

The course suited Ricardo. “Knowing so little about cars, I thought I would just learn the basics, like what is a tool, not the complicated things about how a car works. I had no idea what an alternator was, and I learned that in the first class.” He read and reviewed the lessons on his own, and hands-on experience allowed him to apply lessons from the book to various cars and situations.

He also liked the instruction in work readiness, computers, and communication that was part of the course. He learned to “surf the net, build my resume, use Microsoft Word, design flyers, prepare reports, and type.” The GED class taught him fractions, addition, subtraction, and some algebra and geometry, which his wife helped him with. He said the instructors were helpful.

Ricardo was hired two weeks before he completed the course at a starting wage of \$8 per hour with some health benefits in an automobile sales job that he learned about through Truman. Even though this was below his previous wages, Ricardo felt that this would help him “start on a good path.” The company gave him a flexible schedule, including free evenings and weekends, to allow him to go to school and to pick up his children from their school. He plans to work 40 hours every week when he completes the introduction to the automotive technology course.

Ricardo likes his job, especially meeting customer needs and using computerized records. Ricardo found that he likes responsibility and that it is “thrilling to work for a deadline.” He thinks positively, so “if something negative happens, I try to learn from it and become stronger and wiser.”

One of the most important outcomes of the auto bridge (and subsequently his first course in the automotive technology program) was giving Ricardo “confidence in his ability to learn and in what he knows.” He now plans to continue for an associate of applied science degree, and is beginning to think about a bachelor’s degree in business administration. His supervisor has indicated that he may be eligible for their tuition assistance program for education in business administration with an automotive focus.

Ricardo is positive about his and his family’s future. He feels that the bridge gave him “a great starting point and because I am still young I have time to advance.” His wife wants to go back to school after he completes the associate degree and when his earnings can support the family. In recommending the course to friends, Ricardo advises them “to first make sure this is what you want to do, but even if you don’t end up wanting it in the long run it will help you learn something and gain confidence.”

Robert*
Harry S. Truman College
Automotive Bridge Program and Automotive Technology 101

Robert is 29 years old. His two children live with their mother. Robert dropped out of high school in the 12th grade. Last year he enrolled in GED classes at Howard Area Community Center (HACC). Midway through the course, his reading scores on the practice tests were “off the charts” so the instructors told him he was ready for the test. He completed the application process to take the GED, but has been on the waiting list for seven months.

Prior to enrolling in the GED course, Robert worked for three months at a factory warehouse that shipped orders for sports memorabilia and knickknacks. He got the job through a temporary agency, so even though the company had a union, he was not eligible for benefits. Robert’s previous job was at a factory that makes ice cream toppings. That job was seasonal and he worked the night shift from 1 PM to 1 AM. Based on these and other experiences, he does not want to continue to work in factories. On referrals from two county sheriffs, he provides security for bars and musicians a few nights a week, usually on the weekends. His average wage has been around \$6.50 an hour.

A flyer distributed at his GED class sparked his interest in Truman College’s automotive bridge program. He passed the bridge program’s entrance exam and registered within a month. He said, “I didn’t know anything about cars, but I like to learn new things and put my mind to work.” Recognizing his commitment to succeed, HACC gave him a grant that covered all of his expenses in the program. His mother was happy about the program and encouraged him to keep going. She supported him financially during the program so he could “focus on school.”

Robert started with the Saturday automotive bridge program. Upon completion, he enrolled in Automotive Technology 101, where he learned the theory of automotive systems. His third course was an accelerated course on brake systems. The bridge classes were all classroom work, while the other two courses combined classroom with shop. He plans to take the transmissions course next.

Robert likes the program because it is teaching him an entirely new set of skills. He prefers shop, but understands how important it is to learn the theories behind automobile systems. The accelerated summer classes fit his learning style.

Robert appreciates that the instructors are well informed and have experience in the field. They “taught us things that we never knew you could do to a car.” One day his instructor taught Robert how to cut rotors and drums and then asked him to show the other students how to do it, which helped him learn. Robert also liked the fact that the program develops skills suited to specific jobs: “someone who completes the Brakes Class can work at Midas Muffler and is prepared to pass the ACE Test (Automotive Certified Excellence), which provides a certification recognized by employers. Certified Master Mechanics must pass all eight of the ACE Tests.

* Based on interview notes by Kristen Buller, Women Employed Summer Leadership Program, 2006.

Robert said that his instructors taught him about different occupational paths, noting: “There’s a lot you can do with this knowledge, not just be a mechanic.” He would like to work as a technician/mechanic for a while at an independent shop. His longer-term goal is to become a Master Mechanic, as well as to get his AAS in Automotive Technology. Eventually he would like to get a bachelor’s degree, and to own his own business.