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FROM BASIC SKILLS TO MIDDLE-CLASS JOBS:
Bridge Programs Hold Promise for North Carolina’s Workforce and Economy

KEY FINDINGS:

• Nearly half a million North Carolinians aged 25 to 64 do not have high school diplomas or GEDs. For these working-age adults, unemployment, underemployment and lower lifetime earnings are more likely than for those with higher levels of educational attainment.

• In order to improve the prospects for workers with low levels of formal education, the 2011 state budget authorized community colleges to use up to 20 percent of their state literacy funds to support Basic Skills Plus programs, which provide adult basic education and occupational or employability training to such workers in order to accelerate the transition to employment.

• Research has found that bridge programs, like North Carolina’s Basic Skills Plus programs, are most effective when they provide contextualized learning opportunities, provide a pathway to further post-secondary training, and are complemented by student support services.

Workers Need More Than Basic Skills

For nearly half a million working-age North Carolinians without high school degrees or GEDs, the prospects of future economic security are increasingly dim. These workers have experience higher rates of unemployment and underemployment, and recent research suggests they will find it difficult to reach the middle class.¹ In 2009, 27.9 percent of low-income working families had at least one parent without a high school diploma or GED.²

North Carolina workers will need more than basic skills or high school degrees, however, to compete for the jobs of the future. According to research by the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce on projected job growth in the states, nearly 2 out of 3 of North Carolina’s jobs by 2018 will require some form of post-secondary education. The study also finds that the number of jobs for high school graduates and those without a high school degree or GED will increase by just 157,000 from 2008 to 2018 just one third of the total growth anticipated in the state over that period.³

Recognizing the role that community colleges can play in upgrading the skills of North Carolina’s workforce, the North Carolina General Assembly included in the 2011 budget law a special provision allowing community colleges to allocate 20 percent of the literacy funds they receive from the state to Basic Skills
Plus programs. Basic Skills Plus programs seek to engage workers without high school degrees or GEDs in accelerated programs of learning that include not only basic skills but occupational or employability training. These programs are modeled after nationally recognized efforts, called bridge programs, and are currently being implemented by 28 community colleges across the state.

Bridge Programs Provide Contextualized Learning and Preparation for Employment

In 2010, more than 500 bridge programs were being implemented across the country. These programs represent a range of design features but share in common a focus on contextualized learning and instruction that allows students to acquire basic skills while learning content specific to their occupational interests. These programs also provide some level of student support services and workplace readiness training and are oriented to the needs of industry.

Research has found that contextualized learning can be effective at supporting advancement to additional post-secondary education, attainment of occupational certificates, and other learning gains that basic-skills-only students do not experience. Similar outcomes have been connected to the provision of student support services such as career orientation and mentoring and academic tutoring, for example.

Additional analysis of bridge programs nationwide has found support for the inclusion of specific preparation for employment opportunities and certification of employability. One such tool that programs nationwide, including in North Carolina, have utilized is a Career Readiness Certificate, which provides a worker with a portable credential that employers recognize as reflective of employability.

Finally, these programs have been demonstrated to function best when aligned with industry demand and employment opportunities. In North Carolina, Basic Skills Plus programs have primarily developed in the areas of allied health, early childhood education, automotive technology, and construction.
Bridge Programs Hold Promise

Ongoing evaluation and research into the implementation of North Carolina’s Basic Skills Plus programs can not only inform more effective skills training for the nearly half a million workers with low educational attainment in the state, but it also can inform and shape national efforts to develop model bridge programs.

More importantly, designing skills training that benefits North Carolina’s working families and aligns with industry needs provides an important opportunity for the state’s economy to continue to grow in a way that supports broadly shared prosperity.


4 Workforce Strategy Center, November 2010. Building a Higher Skilled Workforce: Results from the BridgeConnect Survey.


7 Women Employed with Chicago Jobs Council and UIC Great Cities Initiative, Bridges to Careers for Low-Skilled Adults: A Program Development Guide.