Promising Practices

GED Bridge to College Careers Program

The NCTN Promising Practice Series presents detailed descriptions of strategies from the field that are designed to promote the successful transition of adult basic education students to postsecondary education.

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Program Context

LaGuardia Community College initiated the GED Bridge to College Careers Program in 2007 to improve GED pass rates and postsecondary transition of adult students. The 14-week program serves adults, ages 19 and older, and integrates GED preparation with rigorous college-level material using a career-focused curriculum. Contextualized coursework investigates themes in health care or business, and the world of work, and is designed as a springboard to either college or vocational training. The program is free to students and includes:

- preparation in all 5 GED subject areas, taught through a specialized business or health careers curriculum
- sector-focused contextualized coursework that introduces students to key concepts, issues, and terminology in the health or business professions
- academically integrated college knowledge and career awareness workshops led by a college transitions advisor
- group and individual career guidance, college admission, and financial aid advisement
- retention support in first year of postsecondary education

Document Links:
Sample student outreach information
Sample Flyer

Rationale and Background of the Practice

In New York, nearly 3 million adults lack a high school diploma or GED, which significantly limits their employment and education opportunities. In 2005-2006, to better understand how LaGuardia facilitates the GED to postsecondary pathway, they examined GED program data and discovered that: (1) attrition was common in our GED programs, (2) too few students were staying and earning their high school equivalency credential and, of those that did, (3) just 35% went on to enroll in certificate, associate, or bachelor's degree programs.

The Bridge program was designed to address these issues by:

- increasing access to GED programming for a broader spectrum of adults reading at lower levels thereby serving more in need;
- raising class expectations and academic rigor to better prepare students for GED examination and college simultaneously;
- improving alignment to students’ postsecondary and employment goals, with career focused instruction; and
- building in transition services and coursework to create a more seamless path to postsecondary programs.

Description of the Practice

The main components of the Bridge program include: (1) a two-day admissions and orientation process, (2) contextualized sector-focused curricula, and (3) academically integrated college and career workshops.

Admissions & Orientation

The intake process is designed to identify eligible program participants who are prepared to make a serious commitment to their coursework. On Day 1, students attend a program information session, complete an application and take the TABE Reading Comprehension test. If they meet the minimum 7th GED reading level requirement, they are invited to Day 2 to complete a writing sample and participate in an interview to determine their interest in the career focus he/she has selected and to determine if their life commitments (e.g., work hours, family responsibilities) will allow them to participate in a program.
Contextualized Curriculum

Discipline focused content in health and business is a key feature of the classroom instruction. Sector-focused reading, writing, and math curriculum can help to make basic skills coursework more meaningful to adults returning to school by explicitly linking coursework to their specific workplace aspirations and reasons for returning to school. Students who can see the connection between what they are learning and their career goals appear more motivated to persist even when they are taking pre-college, basic skills classes.

Meaningful career and future-focused content aligned to students’ interests increases retention and facilitates student transitions to the workplace, career trainings and college, and give teachers the opportunity to provide in depth instruction that increases the rigor of GED coursework so it mirrors the college classroom.

In the first few weeks of class, students are introduced to the rigorous expectations and academic routines of the Bridge classroom. This includes an emphasis on problem-solving and discovery while working independently, in pairs and in groups, extensive reading and writing, substantial homework, and ongoing assessment and academic self-reflection.

In the Bridge to Health Program, students complete coursework related to patient care issues, community health, medical terminology and epidemics and infection control that is designed to address specific academic standards in math, reading and writing content areas.

For example, in the patient care unit, students practice close reading skills by creating a chart that details treatments, symptoms, and other key medical facts they encounter in a reading about palliative care, and then make written recommendations for next steps. In the epidemics unit, students practice key geometry, graphing and percent skills by interpreting real data related to an epidemic like AIDS to create charts that show the growth of cases of AIDS and maps that show the concentration of cases in a special geographic area.

In the Bridge to Business Program, students complete coursework related to personal budgeting, advertising, business ethics and law, entrepreneurial design, e-commerce, and basic financial concepts such as supply and demand, markets and price setting. For example, in the business ethics unit, students read a case study of small business owner who has to decide what action to take on a client's account that is 120 days past due. To practice close reading skills, students identify possible actions presented in the reading, and then write a statement defending one, using evidence from the reading and their own experience.

The objective of contextualized curriculum is to develop transferable academic competencies and professional awareness that will serve students in the workplace, college, and/or vocational training.

Career and College Workshops

During the semester, students participate in career and college workshops that are integrated into the classroom activities. We cover goal-setting and college knowledge and students do a research project about a career of their choice. Students can also meet with a transitions advisor in individual counseling sessions to address a specific personal issue, like student debt. Most of the college and career counseling, however, is done through class assignments and small group activities. The goal is to have students poised to take their next educational steps by the time the GED Bridge course ends which includes having completed college and financial aid application.

Professors also deliver guest lectures similar to the courses they teach in the college during the Bridge semester. These lectures usually include a PowerPoint presentation, so students get an opportunity to practice note taking, ask the professors about their own career pathways, and dialogue about college majors. The students are encouraged to think beyond the most obvious majors, like nursing, to consider the range of options in health sciences or business administrations. A panel of professors and practitioners are invited to talk about what a day in their profession is really like.

Replication

The program is free to participants and costs approximately $3,000 per student to run. The pilot program has been generously funded by MetLife and the Robin Hood Foundations.

Staff Time and Skill

The department has ten full-time and part-time administrative and instructional staff who serve more than 500 students annually. All professional staff members have master's degrees in their related disciplines and experience working with nontraditional student populations. They work hard to maintain a full-time employment model, because instructional staff needs to be able to participate in curriculum and program development projects and be available beyond class time to work with students.

Student Characteristics

Bridge students are 19 years and older (approximately 50% of students are between 19-24), read at the 7th grade reading level and above as measured on the TABE, (50% of students enter reading at 7th & 8th grade levels). Bridge students are adults with adult responsibilities who juggle home, school and work responsibilities. In terms of race and ethnicity, our students mirror our community of Queens: 50% Latino/a, 15% African American, and the remainder are a broad mix. Students must have low or extremely low income levels in order to qualify for the program with more than half receiving public assistance.

Advantages and Outcomes

There are several lessons that they have learnt over the course of the program design, development, and delivery. First, building partnerships with our colleagues in Academic and Student Affairs department has been key. Faculty and department heads have helped to design the sector-specific curriculum. As adult educators, the program staff know how
Department heads have helped to design the sector-specific curriculum. As adult educators, the program staff knew how to design engaging curricula but they needed to know more about the technical and discipline focused materials used in various majors, the skills needed to function in the career major, professional competencies, etc. And, they needed to explore the best ways to integrate these materials into the developmental sequence of skill building for learning activities that GED students require (e.g., working with longer readings, develop foundational academic writing and research skills, etc).

Also related to the curricula, was the importance of identifying the most important components, how different standards for college success and on the GED test articulate. At the end of each semester, they have a day of reflection to identify what worked and what was challenging and they review the data that has been collected about the program, like pass rates, referrals to the GED exam and attendance statistics.

Their relationship with the Office of Student Services has enabled them to create a more seamless admissions and enrollment process from the preparatory phase into degree programs. This has included connecting students to special programs and services designed to help students being retained in the critical first year of college.

Finally, in terms of advantages, they have recognized the importance of professional development for the instructional and counseling staff. Teaching staff needs the opportunity to meet regularly to share and discuss best practices and develop curriculum collaboratively.

In partnership with MDRC, a nationally recognized social research firm, the Bridge program has completed two semesters of a small scale randomized control trial (RCT), serving approximately 190 students. The purpose of the evaluation is to examine the extent to which GED instruction that is linked specifically to students’ career interests and goals improves their likelihood of passing the GED and transitioning to postsecondary education. The study began in September 2010, and will be complete in 2012. Initial findings suggest that students who complete academically rigorous, contextualized coursework and receive comprehensive postsecondary transitions services are more likely to persist in preparatory classes, pass the GED exam, and transition to postsecondary education. For more information on the study, visit MDRC's webpage on the study: www.mdrc.org/project_32_113.html