

## Career Pathways for a Productive and Self-Reliant Workforce: A To-Do List for Adult Educators

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### THE PROMISE OF ADULT CAREER PATHWAYS

The adult basic education field in the United States is now being encouraged to shift to a “career pathways” orientation by policy research organizations, federal and state agencies, community college organizations, business groups, and private foundations. In such an approach, adult basic education programs work with workforce development (“One Stop”) agencies, economic development initiatives, employers, labor unions, and social service agencies to organize the various entities into well-coordinated systems. These systems are meant to make it easier for lower-skilled adults and out-of-school youth to advance their education and careers as well as to provide employers with well-prepared and well-supported workers.

The arguments for making such a shift can be summarized as follows:

- ✦ The United States needs a better prepared workforce if workplaces are to be able to maximize new opportunities (e.g., technologies, workplace procedures, markets).
- ✦ Significant populations of youth and adults are not “work ready.” They lack the basic skills, occupational knowledge, credentials, support systems, and other assets that are needed to attain, retain, succeed in, and advance in emerging jobs.
- ✦ These underprepared workers will be in the U.S. workforce for many years, and we cannot ignore their lack of readiness. The nation’s economy, tax base, social stability, public safety, quality of life, public health, and democracy all depend on having citizens who can participate positively in the world of work.
- ✦ Current workforce development systems are generally not up to the task of preparing this workforce to move into emerging jobs. The collections of adult basic education, employment, technical training, social service, and other programs too often rely on outmoded practices, use funds ineffectively, lack adequate resources, focus on hypothetical or unrewarding jobs, and have low expectations of both staff and clients. In addition, they often don’t work together well.
- ✦ The reduced U.S. economy has led to a decrease in tax revenues and corporate and union training funds for workforce training. This decline in resources exacerbates the need to upgrade workforce readiness and productivity quickly and increase the efficiency of workforce development systems.
- ✦ Tinkering with the current outmoded system is a waste of time. A major rethinking of U.S. workforce readiness systems is necessary—now.

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## KEY SYSTEM COMPONENTS

Here are some key components of proposed new career pathway systems:

- emphasis on helping learners attain real and rewarding jobs, relevant credentials, and postsecondary education while helping local employers and meeting economic and social development goals;
- collaboration among stakeholders—including employers, unions, providers of adult basic education and occupational training, providers of employment and social services, and community organizations representing various worker populations—who have an interest in building a well-prepared workforce;
- accelerated learning strategies such as focusing on clearly defined skills, knowledge, and credentials needed for jobs; integrating basic skills and technical instruction; using effective instructional methods relevant to the learners being served; and providing intense and rigorous instruction;
- efficient provision of other student supports (e.g., social services, tutoring, career advisement); and
- provision of a structured, multilevel, goal-directed pathway with clear benchmarks, so students don't have to "find their way on their own."

(Community College Research Center, 2010; Maine Department of Education, 2010; National Career Pathways Network & Institute for a Competitive Workforce, 2009; National Center on Education and the Economy et al., 2007; Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006)

States are encouraged to support these local initiatives by providing leadership, policies, and funding to

- bring together stakeholders and help them invest time and other resources in a coordinated, sustained effort;
- focus efforts on real needs and opportunities in local economies;
- support the use of research-based practices in assessment, recruitment and retention, instruction, support services, career and educational counseling, stakeholder collaboration, credentialing, fund development, and tracking of meaningful outcomes through direct funding of demonstration projects, professional development, research, and evaluation;
- support longer-term scaling up and continuation of pilot models by seeding local innovations and

building on successes to leverage more funding and change; and

- analyze policies and funding in various agencies to see how they could be used and changed to support system transformation.

(Center for Law and Social Policy, 2011; Hilliard, 2011; Maine Department of Education, 2010; Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board, 2008; Zafft et al., 2006).

To make this vision real, a number of national initiatives are underway by private foundations (Endel, Anderson, & Kelley, 2010; Ghosh, Campbell, & Navin, 2011), the U.S. Department of Education (Rasmussen, 2010; U.S. Department of Education 2011a, 2011b), the U.S. Department of Labor (Employment and Training Administration, 2011 February 28; 2011 June 22), and employers (National Career Pathways Network & Institute for a Competitive Workforce, 2009).

## STEPS THAT ADULT EDUCATORS CAN TAKE

Advocates for adult basic education might view these efforts to reinvent U.S. workforce development systems as very promising because they could potentially bring new attention, resources, and broader stakeholder involvement to a field that has historically been marginalized and unsupported. On the other hand, adult educators might see this emphasis on a career pathway approach as a challenge to their professional identity and expertise at a time when funding is tight. Developing and sustaining career pathway systems requires particular kinds of partnership and curriculum development skills.

Adult educators who are open to getting involved in career pathway initiatives should proceed in a smart way. Outlined below are steps they can take to (a) build on previous related work in adult education and other fields, (b) help lower-skilled adults be both productive and empowered workers, and (c) strengthen adult basic education as a profession.

### **1. Recognize the Importance of Work-Related Basic Skills.**

Adult educators should recognize that responding to the work-related learning needs of lower-skilled learners is important for these reasons:

- Adult learners frequently enroll in adult education because they want to improve their ability to get or

retain a job, to feel more comfortable performing technical or social aspects of a job, to participate in job related training, and/or to advance to a better job.

- ✦ For workers, their families, and their communities, it is important to have rewarding, stable employment.
- ✦ The country currently has a high unemployment rate—especially for lower-skilled people—and education can be an effective way to reconnect to work and move to a more rewarding job.
- ✦ Employers want employees who have strong basic skills, technical skills, and credentials.
- ✦ The adult education field has good models of work-related basic education that we can adapt and develop.
- ✦ Adult education funders have made a priority of integrating adult basic skills with workforce development. If done correctly, such integration has the potential to build stronger, more comprehensive adult learning systems than the current mishmash of underequipped programs. It also has the potential to engage employers, unions, and other stakeholders in adult education, something that adult basic education has generally not been able to do in a broad and sustained way to date.

## **2. Don't Define Work-Related Learning Too Narrowly.**

Some adult educators might question focusing on work-related outcomes because they fear that work-related basic education is likely to (a) prepare learners only for low-wage, low-status jobs in which workers passively follow orders and accept their fate, and (b) ignore learners' need to understand and protect their rights through critical thinking and individual and collective action. These concerns are valid. However, we've been debating the purpose of work-related basic education in the field since the 1980s, and we have made significant efforts to define it in ways that promote both worker productivity and self-reliance. This effort includes creative educational practices that help workers understand and advocate for their rights, protect their safety and health, manage their salaries and benefits, and prepare for industry certification exams and further occupational training so they can move up the ladder to more rewarding positions.

Such an “empowered worker” approach to worker education also has the potential added benefit of strengthening the capacity of workers to be involved in the rebuilding of communities damaged by disinvestment in recent decades. At a time when informed participation in our democracy has been eroded, we need to consider how work-related education can help reconstruct our economy both at the workplace level and at the level of the communities in which workplaces operate. In short, we shouldn't define adult basic education too narrowly because “getting a job” is not the only responsibility of U.S. adults (Jurmo, 2010).

## **3. Learn From Previous Relevant Work.**

In career pathway models, adult educators are being asked to build partnerships with stakeholder groups (with whom they may not have worked before) and create work-related curricula customized to particular industries and job titles (with which they might be unfamiliar). As they take on these new roles, adult educators can learn from related efforts in the workplace basic education, college transition, and international nonformal education fields. Highlights of this work are described below.

### **Building effective partnerships.**

In the 1990s, researchers in the U.S. and Canadian workplace literacy fields developed a collaborative approach to planning, implementing, and evaluating workplace basic skills programs (Folinsbee & Jurmo, 1994; Sperazi & Jurmo, 1994). They were responding to the observation that too many of these programs were not well planned. Poor planning resulted in irrelevant and inadequate services along with a lack of buy-in and support from the employers whose workforces were supposed to benefit from the programs. The collaborative or “team” planning method involved stakeholders in joint identification of basic skills-related needs, setting goals for the education effort, clarifying stakeholder roles, creating plans, and monitoring and supporting the program in various ways once it got underway.

Fast-forward 15 years or so to today, when adult educators are being urged to build partnerships with employers, unions, social service providers, community colleges, and other stakeholders to create career pathway systems. These efforts run the same risk of not having real working partnerships in place that the earlier initiatives did in the early 1990s. The result could also be the same—that

employers won't efficiently identify their training-related needs, hire program graduates, or provide in-kind supports (e.g., sites for internships and site visits, guest speakers, etc.). While career pathway programs might like to work with employers, setting up effective partnerships with busy employers and other stakeholders (e.g., unions, workforce and social service providers) is not automatic or easy. The above-described collaborative planning process developed for workplace basic skills programs in the 1990s could be adapted to serve career pathway efforts.

### **Designing relevant and engaging curricula.**

Career pathway programs are encouraged to contextualize their basic skills curricula by teaching the skills as they are applied in the particular jobs for which participants are being trained. A participant in a carpentry program might, for example, develop the specific math skills needed for measuring materials or interpreting a blueprint. In many cases, it is fairly clear what job tasks and applied basic skills a curriculum should cover. Curricula that use effective practices to teach relevant skills might also already be available.

However, those willing to use contextualized work-related curricula need to be careful to (a) focus on the skill applications that learners actually need, and (b) use effective instructional methods. To ensure proper understanding of the skill requirements of a particular job, program planners must carefully analyze both the technical and the social/cultural navigation skills required in that job and work environment. They must also consider less obvious skills and tasks such as customer service, technical test taking, managing company and personal finances, health and safety practices, and understanding worker rights. "Non-technical" skills may be as important as or even more important than technical skills. Planners also need to assess learners' abilities vis-à-vis the skills, so that they can focus their efforts appropriately (Jobs for the Future, 2010).

Using effective instructional methods is the other important consideration. Work-related training programs often rely on subject matter experts as trainers. These may have a solid understanding of what to teach (usually emphasizing the technical aspects of a job) but limited understanding of how to teach. Too often, workplace trainers fail to assess learners' prior knowledge or their interest in a topic, rely on lecture (or videos) as the primary instructional activity, neglect to involve learners in discussion or other active forms of learning, and use the "are there any questions?" technique (which often scares off

learners who don't want to reveal their ignorance or who are not confident of their oral communication skills). Although many technical trainers empathize with learners and want to help them, too many have little knowledge of effective instructional practices. They may not even be aware that such practices exist. All workforce educators should understand how to use effective techniques such as project-based learning, Internet-based study that increases the time learners engage in "anytime, anywhere" learning, problem-posing, and others (Bower & Oesch, 2009; Equipped for the Future National Center, 2006; Jurmo & Panesso, 2009).

### **4. *Be Open to New Ideas, But Don't Support Ineffective Practices.***

Change is not easy. Career pathway systems depend on having multiple stakeholders who are willing to find new ways to collaborate, think, and operate. Many current stakeholders are wedded to old ways of thinking and are unwilling or unable to change. While it is important for innovators to be patient, to engage in dialogue and negotiation with other stakeholders, and to take the time to try out new ideas and make adjustments, experience shows that it might become necessary at some point to simply say no to ineffective practices and intransigent stakeholders and choose not to work with them. This requires a solid vision and plan, courage, and the willingness to pursue new partners (Collins, 2005; Living Cities, 2010).

### **5. *Support Opportunity for Low-Income and Lower-Skilled Workers.***

Adult educators who believe that career pathway systems should help low-income, lower-skilled learners prepare for decent jobs with potential for growth and family-sustaining wages and benefits should keep those goals in mind as they venture into this work. Educators should choose curricula that help learners to be both productive and empowered with an understanding both of their rights as workers and of how to protect those rights; and they should select staff, employers, and other partners who support these ideas (Living Cities, 2010).

### **6. *Recognize That Building New Systems Takes Time, Resources, and Leadership.***

Developing needed expertise, partnerships, plans, assessment tools, and curricula; selecting and preparing staff; and fine-tuning operations take time and resources.

Career pathway systems are a new idea for many adult educators and other stakeholders, and patience and continuous improvement will be required for these systems to gel. Funders and other stakeholders need to recognize this, but career pathway advocates also need to present solid plans and arguments to funders and other potential partners if their support is to be secured.

At the same time, we need to acknowledge that many workers, employers, and communities are in urgent need

of the kinds of opportunities that well-designed career preparation services can provide. At a time when government services are being reduced, we need a self-reliant citizenry that can deal proactively with the challenges it faces. Adult educators and other forward-thinking stakeholders need to focus their efforts and engage in collaborative continuous improvement. This is an opportunity for us to step up and provide leadership in solidarity with the large populations of lower-skilled youth and adults in the United States.

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