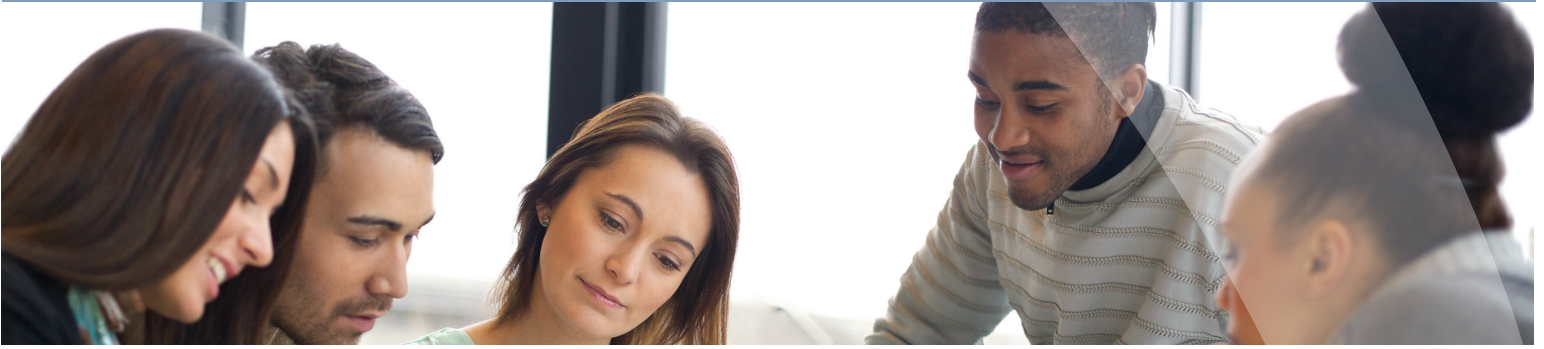


CROSSING THE DIVIDE:

AN EMERGING TYPOLOGY OF POSTSECONDARY BRIDGING FOR OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

By Cheryl Almeida and Lili Allen



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

POSTSECONDARY BRIDGING AS A KEY STRATEGY FOR OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

Being disconnected from school and work between the critical ages of 16-24 is a common hazard for low-income and/or minority young people in the United States. Each year, 1.2 million young people drop out of high school. The cumulative effect can be seen in the fact that nearly 40 percent of our young people between 16-24 are under- or unattached to school and work at some point during this formative stretch of their young lives.

Being out of work and/or school during these years has ripple effects throughout a lifetime. The longer these young people—currently referred to as “opportunity youth”—flounder, the more diminished their prospects of gaining skills and credentials needed to fully participate in the economic and civic life of their communities. For young people who are especially vulnerable because they are transitioning from foster care or reentering from the correctional system, the chances of

being disconnected (and the consequences) are even more dramatic.

Responding to the moral and economic imperative to help this large group of young people move back into the civic and economic mainstream, Jobs for the Future developed a Back on Track Through College model. Aimed at transforming dropout recovery and reconnection programming, the model articulates three overlapping phases and accompanying features designed to put vulnerable young people on a path to a postsecondary credential and a good job: an enriched preparation phase (focused on college- and career-ready skills), postsecondary bridging (focused on developing the mind-sets, academic and metacognitive skills, and study and work habits needed for postsecondary success), and first-year postsecondary supports (focused on helping young people overcome obstacles to persistence and completion of credentials).

Over the last five years, JFF has assisted a range of institutions and organizations to enhance existing programs or start new ones that embody key features of the Back on Track Through College model.

Through our work with communities around the country, postsecondary bridging strategies have emerged as a particularly critical and especially replicable component of programming for vulnerable youth. Bridge programs—particularly in the form of summer campus-based offerings for students who need to brush up their skills before entry—are not a new idea. Recent high school graduates take advantage of these programs to get the time and support to focus on readiness for postsecondary study and to develop a range of “college knowledge” and navigational skills they will need for postsecondary persistence and success. However, efforts undertaken by dropout recovery, transition, and other such programs to customize the features to be effective for older, vulnerable and system-involved youth are a relatively recent phenomenon.

This issue brief offers a typology of evidence-informed bridge programming drawing on frontrunner programs that have designed their strategies specifically for this population and that have attained early indicators of success. By highlighting core components of bridging, along with options for approaches and specific features, we hope to inform the design and support the scale of bridging programs that provide a critical leg up for vulnerable segments of the opportunity youth population to earn the postsecondary credentials that are so essential to thriving in today’s economy.

THREE PROMISING BRIDGE PROGRAMS

With support from The Annie E. Casey Foundation, JFF selected and partnered with three programs to assist them to further strengthen the features of their postsecondary bridging component, to build their data capacity, and to improve their evaluation readiness. The three programs selected for this initiative already had in place core features of the Back on Track model and shared the goal of preparing older disconnected youth for postsecondary education through supported bridge programming. We selected these sites based on

the strength of the core features of their programs and an assessment of how they gather and use data.

The **College, Career, and Technology Academy** in Pharr-San Juan-Alamo, Texas reengages over 200 former dropouts and off-track students per year, primarily low-income and immigrant youth and young adults. CCTA provides postsecondary preparation and supported dual enrollment and other postsecondary bridge programming to enable students not only to graduate from high school, but to transition successfully into college.

All CCTA students start with a one-on-one meeting with staff to carefully review what they need for graduation—both in terms of academic credits and state tests—and to enroll them in a course of study that addresses these needs. The school strongly emphasizes the foundational and critical-thinking skills needed for postsecondary success by

The school strongly emphasizes the foundational and critical-thinking skills needed for postsecondary success by employing a multipronged strategy of small, highly engaging classroom courses, online credit recovery, intensive reading remediation, and tutoring.

employing a multipronged strategy of small, highly engaging classroom courses, online credit recovery, intensive reading remediation, and tutoring. As soon as students pass the state English assessment they are eligible to dual-enroll in a college course of interest to them, primarily in Career and Technical Education, while they complete the requirements for a high school diploma. The students also enroll in a credited College Success class offered by the local college to help them develop the skills (e.g., study skills and work habits) to succeed in postsecondary education and to understand their options for attaining valued credentials. A Transition Counselor works with them to complete their college applications and financial aid forms and provide support as they transition to postsecondary coursework.

LifeLink, run by Good Shepherd Services, serves 170 New York City students per year who are graduating from transfer (alternative) schools or High School Equivalency programs and looking to better prepare

for postsecondary education. LifeLink provides intensive academic preparation and mobilizes students to gain the resilience, self-efficacy and social/emotional competencies necessary for postsecondary success.

Students enter an intensive six-week program that is peer led in every aspect. All of the instruction, one-on-one tutoring, and group support is delivered by former “failing students,” and is focused on preparation for placement exams and academic expectations of the City University of New York community colleges. Each student creates an individualized program of study designed around her own abilities, needs, and desired results. Coached by peer leaders, students are responsible for every step of their involvement, from enrolling in the program to selecting the types of support that will be most helpful to them in completing a college credential. LifeLink uses modest financial stipends to incentivize student effort. The stipends, earned only by focused productivity, help students meet financial needs and reinforce the idea that investing in their education will be rewarding financially as well as intellectually. LifeLink also provides a retention program once students enter college, including periodic workshops and tutoring sessions, college and career advisement, counseling, employment assistance, financial aid assistance, and referrals within the college.

The **College Initiative** in New York City serves 120 older youth per year; 100 percent of them have a criminal justice history and a majority enters the program from incarceration. Through the College Initiative, these youth receive postsecondary counseling, intensive mentoring, and support during the transition into college.

College Initiative staff conduct outreach to prospective students while they are incarcerated, and at reentry agencies, often bringing current College Initiative students with them to speak about their journey from prison to college. They hold twice-monthly orientation sessions at the College Initiative site that focuses on “myth-busting,” for example to correct misguided ideas about the eligibility of former inmates for financial aid. In one-on-one meetings, College Initiative staff work with participants to identify any barriers to

college entry, to assess and build their motivation, and to determine next steps such as ordering transcripts and completing the FAFSA and City University of New York applications. Students participate in a ten-week college prep program focused on academic skills and self-advocacy. Once students enroll in college, College Initiative staff walk them through the bureaucratic hurdles that typically discourage students from persisting, often advocating with CUNY administrators and negotiating with probation officers on their students’ behalf. Peer mentors provide ongoing support and College Initiative staff offer ongoing counseling and case management supports.

All three sites share the theory of action inherent in the Back on Track Through College model: that providing older, disconnected youth with intensive and coherent academic and social supports, developing their self-advocacy skills, and engaging them in supported opportunities to experience college expectations and culture, will significantly increase

their postsecondary success.

Despite the diversity of institutional contexts, populations, and policy conditions, the three programs share a core set of objectives:

LifeLink provides intensive academic preparation and mobilizes students to gain the resilience, self-efficacy and social/emotional competencies necessary for postsecondary success.

1. To help youth develop the academic skills necessary for postsecondary success and meet their career and life goals;
2. To assist youth to develop their personal identity as college-goers and the academic behaviors, resilience, efforts-based mind-set, and range of social/emotional skills that undergird postsecondary and career success;
3. To support students through the myriad navigational and other obstacles as they make the transition into a postsecondary program of study.

To reach those objectives, the three programs all have put in place key features of bridge programming. At the same time, populations served, program priorities, core partners, and funding considerations all play a role in the variations among the programs.

A TYPOLOGY FOR POSTSECONDARY BRIDGING FOR OLDER UNDERSERVED YOUTH

The typology below attempts to capture both the consistency across core components as well as the different options in operational approaches and variations in specific design features seen in the three types of programs described above. It begins with an overview of each type of bridging program, and then provides specific details on the key features of the programs (see page 5). The intent is to allow programs serving similar populations and interested in developing bridge programs to draw from across the typology to design bridge programs that best meet the needs of their young people. The typology can also be used to help organizations bolster more traditional postsecondary bridge programs by offering the features and services often missing from these programs.

► **Dropout Recovery with Embedded Bridging:**

Until fairly recently, alternative schools and GED programs were focused primarily on helping youth recover credits or pass high school equivalency exams to obtain a high school credential. Starting about five years ago, new efforts emerged to push toward college readiness as the goal for youth in these alternative schools and programs, and some schools and programs, such as CCTA, began to embed postsecondary bridging in their high school programming. The intent is multifaceted: to explicitly signal to youth that college is the goal; to give youth a head start on college; and to give them experience on a college campus so as to build their confidence and college knowledge.

- ### ► **Short-Term Bridging into Postsecondary:** There have been longstanding efforts to offer bridge supports to high school graduates to augment their academic skills, but rarely has this option been available for off-track youth and recovered dropouts. LifeLink exemplifies this approach, which bolsters traditional academic prep with skill- and resiliency-building for more vulnerable youth. This approach can be especially useful in communities that seek to draw youth from a range of diploma- and GED-granting schools and programs into a set of summer bridge programs. It is important to note that LifeLink provides follow-up supports to youth once they complete the summer bridge phase.

- ### ► **Re-entry with Bridging:** Incarcerated youth face a host of barriers to reentry, including poor quality schooling in juvenile facilities and a dearth of programs offering supported transitions into postsecondary education and training. As advocates and states seek to shrink the prison population, bridging programs for reentry youth will increase in importance. Programs like the College Initiative, designed with the specific supports and opportunities needed for formerly incarcerated youth and adults, will be critical exemplars for the field.

It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive typology. Over the coming years, as interest in the opportunity youth work further develops and efforts to build transitions to postsecondary for specific populations such as system-involved youth continue to grow, it will be important to build out this typology to incorporate the latest innovations and learning and to continue providing guideposts for the field in further developing such opportunities.

SECURING RESOURCES FOR BRIDGE PROGRAMS

Funding for postsecondary bridging programs typically comes from private philanthropic dollars, especially when the provider is a nonprofit community-based organization. Even when a postsecondary institution is offering the bridging program there are often fees attached. However, recent actions at the state and postsecondary institution levels may signal early shifts in the perceived value of postsecondary bridging/first-year supports in improving credential attainment, particularly for vulnerable populations.

Maine, for example, recently passed legislation that funds postsecondary education navigators through Jobs for Maine's Graduates involving both the University of Maine and the community college systems in eight locations statewide. In New York City, community colleges that are part of the CUNY system have recognized the effectiveness of the postsecondary bridging program, which includes first-year supports offered by community-based organizations that are part of the Bronx Opportunity Network (BON). As a result, the colleges have asked the BON to expand their on-campus work to support additional students at the college who are in danger

POSTSECONDARY BRIDGING TYPOLOGY

Key Features	Dropout Recovery with Embedded Bridging	Short-Term Bridging into Postsecondary	Reentry with Bridging	Potential Indicators
Outreach & Recruitment	Personalized and community outreach to recent dropouts close to graduation	Recent graduates now in college help program recruit/network with peers still in alternative schools/programs	Active recruitment of formerly incarcerated youth and those close to release via presentations at CBOs and prison facilities	# Youth reached
Orientation & Enrollment	Individual and/or group intake focused on relationship building and needs assessment. Includes transcript review, course selection, college application, child care.	Workshops to build understanding of the pay-off of college; college visits; college prep sessions including practice filling out college applications, taking a placement test.	Myth-busting sessions focused on financial aid eligibility for individuals with a record, and assessments of readiness, including academics, motivation and potential barriers.	# Youth successfully complete orientation requirements
Academic Prep	Modularized, condensed, credit-bearing college courses ("mini-mesters") delivered by teachers with adjunct college instructor status or by college faculty coming to the recovery program site.	Intensive prep to complete graduation tests/requirements (pre-bridge); personalized instruction in core academic subjects and preparation for college placement tests; coaches to support academic success.	Intensive college prep focused on academic skill-building and tutoring and preparing for placement tests.	# Complete academic prep programming # Who earn credits (where offered) # Test out of lowest level developmental education courses # Enroll in postsecondary
Additional Skills for Success	Embedded credit-bearing "College Skills for Success" course includes college norms/expectations, career exploration, research and study skills; goal setting, self-efficacy; transition counselor works to ensure youth take required placement tests, investigate potential career paths, choose and apply to colleges, and complete financial aid material.	Strong systems of peer support built through program activities and events; development of social/emotional competencies including resiliency and accountability through personalized counseling and group trainings; workshops on key topics such as study skills, time management, and effective communication; support to complete college application and FAFSA, complete online registration and select courses; stipends to incentivize efforts and based on productivity.	Emphasis on a range of social-emotional skills and college knowledge, e.g., self-advocacy, efficacy, study skills, college navigation, and support for completing college application and FAFSA.	# Complete college application # Complete FAFSA # Create personal goals # Develop career plan # Demonstrating accountability and self-efficacy # Showing observable improvement in time management, study skills, etc.
Wraparound Supports	Transition counselor helps youth navigate and resolve school-related, family, or financial issues that may impede their education and advancement.	Personalized counseling and community-building activities to help build a supportive peer group, life skills development activities, and coaching/mentoring provided by older students or recent graduates.	Ongoing mentoring and counseling for barrier removal, e.g., missing documents necessary for financial aid, addressing debt, housing.	# Showing increased stabilization, for example in housing, child care, family, program attendance and engagement.
Handing Off and Following Up	Youth are supported to choose and enroll in college classes, access financial aid, understand college policies, and draw on college support services. Meet with youth enrolled in college classes, in groups and one-on-one as needed.	Academic advisement, tutoring, social and emotional counseling, strong network of peer support and connection with college resources through regular meetings with counselors and student mentors, tutoring sessions and group activities at both the college and program center.	Peers trained as mentors to provide one-on-one mentoring; counseling staff follow up to ensure mentors are in contact and providing support; ongoing counseling and case management.	# Persisting through a first semester # Persisting through first year # Accumulating credits # Earning 20-25 credits # Transition to other full-time program # Graduate w/degree # Complete certificate program # Gain career employment

of dropping out. Working with cohorts of students, the BON will provide intensive support services addressing academic, financial, and social needs.

There are also isolated examples of community colleges that have engaged in cost sharing with partnering community-based organizations. In almost all cases of cost sharing, an inside champion at the community college works closely with the community-based organization to put the agreements in place.

MOVING FORWARD

In developing a typology of postsecondary bridging for vulnerable populations of young people, our task was to extrapolate from what several different types of promising programs are doing to identify a set of core features and the variations in carrying out those features that would be helpful in an emerging field. Certainly it is clear from this effort that bridge programs can be delivered by a range of organizations and partnerships for youth in a range of different circumstances.

At the same time, the typology reflects how core features need to be adapted to reflect these various realities. The message to on-the-ground innovators is that in designing a bridge program, it is important to consider the specific context, including the age and skill levels and particular assets and barriers of the population to be served, the funding streams and partners that can be leveraged, and the institutional commitments of the partnering organizations. While the typology attempts to categorize each type of program, it is also intended to allow leaders to look within and across program types in order to draw on the features that are the most advantageous given program circumstances, and that are best suited to meet the needs of the young people.

The typology also suggests a set of common indicators—measures that programs can apply and track to assess the implementation of each of the features and the impact they are having on the young people. In our experience working with programs across the country, schools and programs serving youth who have struggled in school typically understand the importance of gathering data both to inform and guide program improvement and to show the effectiveness required for sustainability.

Certainly the leaders of the three programs in this project were very clear on the importance of data. But it was also clear how many challenges they face in gathering the types of data listed here. These include balancing the tensions between providing adequate direct service staff and at the same time maintaining the staff and technology required for gathering, analyzing and using data effectively. In addition, gathering data on young people's progress once they enter postsecondary requires data-sharing agreements with partnering community colleges, which can take considerable time to negotiate and operationalize and often include allocation of resources. Tracking young people over time is ideal although often complicated given the population's frequent mobility.

In addressing these challenges, program leaders should start by taking stock of what they can reasonably provide in terms of data staff and management information systems and the trade-offs they are willing to make in the process. In building out their data, programs should consider starting with an agreed-upon set of core outcomes that they are relatively confident they can track consistently. In this process a guidepost to keep in mind is that tracking fewer outcomes but with high quality data is preferable to tracking many outcomes but with poor quality data (that is, for example, significant missing data, questions about accuracy of data, etc.).

The outcomes identified for tracking should include program-based indicators over which the program has control and that it can consistently track. These outcomes should also both inform program improvement and be useful in making the case to funders and policymakers about the program's effectiveness. Identifying and nurturing a "champion" within the partner college can also go a long way in facilitating a data-sharing agreement and ensuring a reasonable turnaround of quality data back to the program site. The longer-term goal would be to continue to increase the data that are gathered and analyzed, and develop processes for using it strategically while maintaining data quality along the way.

As these programs are demonstrating, providing consistent and high-quality programs and services while tracking the results is challenging when serving a population of young people who often face an array of obstacles leading to instability in their lives and an

inability to persist in programming. Yet it is possible to help young people overcome such obstacles.

The programs here are using a number of strategies to do so. For example, young people facing chaotic and unstable living conditions may have uneven attendance. One way programs are addressing this is through their recruitment, orientation and assessment processes. If young people identify as facing multiple barriers, program staff work with them proactively before enrolling them in the bridge program, to help remove or lessen barriers that will most likely impede progress. Another strategy programs use is to work with young people on developing a plan for addressing barriers while also participating in programming, and then monitoring this plan regularly to make sure it is working. These strategies also increase the likelihood

that the young people will be able to persist in postsecondary and that programs can track the results.

Building and sustaining a program that helps young people who face considerable barriers successfully transition into and through postsecondary requires a consistent willingness to reassess and innovate. Our aspiration is that this typology will inform the further development of bridge programming for opportunity youth by clarifying key components of the types of programming that can pay off in better outcomes, and offering some guidance to the field on how to balance tensions around which data are most critical to collect, both in regard to ensuring program effectiveness and showing the kind of program impact that supports sustainability.

ENDNOTES

¹ For more information on Back on Track Through College model, see <http://www.jff.org/initiatives/back-track-designs>

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Cheryl Almeida directs Jobs for the Future's research and policy on improving options and outcomes for struggling students and out-of-school youth. She has over 30 years experience in research, evaluation and policy, and program development in education and child development.

Lili Allen is Associate Vice President, Reconnection Designs, at Jobs for the Future. She oversees and drives strategy for the organization's work with states, regions, and communities that are building quality pathways to postsecondary credentials and career-track employment for off-track and disconnected youth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper was made possible through partnership with leaders at the schools and programs profiled herein, and their college partners. In particular we would like to thank Jim Marley and Theory Thompson of Good Shepherd Services; Michael Carey, formerly of the College Initiative and John Bae of the College Initiative; Yolanda Gomez, former principal of the College, Career and Technology Academy; and Chris Efthimiou of CUNY.

For their generous support of this work, and their thoughtful review of this publication, we would like to thank Patrice Cromwell and Ilene Berman of The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Finally, we would like to thank Adria Steinberg at Jobs for the Future for her careful editing of this publication, and Sophie Besl for her assistance with design.

MAY 2016

Jobs for the Future works with our partners to design and drive the adoption of education and career pathways leading from college readiness to career advancement for those struggling to succeed in today's economy. Across the country, we work to improve the pathways leading from high school to college to family-supporting careers. Our work aligns education and training to ensure that employers have access to a skilled workforce.



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

TEL 617.728.4446 FAX 617.728.4857 info@jff.org

88 Broad Street, 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02110 (HQ)
122 C Street, NW, Suite 650, Washington, DC 20001
505 14th Street, Suite 900, Oakland, CA 94612

WWW.JFF.ORG

