

Bridges to Careers  
Rural Minnesota CEP, Inc.

**Overview describing the innovative practice**

Employers have job openings and report a failure to find qualified candidates for their open positions. As Minnesota's available labor pool continues to tighten, we are still challenged with increasing the employment participation and skill level of available workers, especially in the rural areas and among specific populations.

How can we meet the hiring and skills needs of our rural employers? How can we ensure that our rural communities remain a vital part of our state's economy? Finally, how can we address the unemployment and underemployment challenges in our rural communities? This innovative strategy addresses these questions through the emergence of a new promising practice that approaches these challenges from a dual customer perspective---the job seeker and the employer.

This design implements a common-sense program that integrates both the participant's needs as well as the needs of the employer community. There are four phases of this career pathway model:

Engagement: This phase focuses on outreaching to individuals and engaging them in programs and services to encircle them with supportive services.

Bridging: Beyond the FastTRAC concept, this allows ABE and RMCEP to provide individualized, contextualized instruction in reading, math and language based on the needs of the chosen career cluster.

Enhanced Academic Instruction: This phase provides essential support for individuals entering the technical, professional, and/or college-level education in a training that leads to careers with sustaining wages. Within each of our colleges, the programs of study that we will use align with the identified clusters in demand in each region. These programs provide credit toward certificates, diplomas, degrees or other credentials that employers recognize. As individuals need further assistance, our ABE partners will provide additional occupational instruction as required within the chosen career cluster while the participant is in training.

Retention: This phase provides supports to ensure persistence and success in employment or to complete the first year of training. Examples include just-in-time supports and making sure our participants integrate and connect with the school peer and professional networks.

Rather than focusing on one career pathway for diverse people, we are focusing on multiple career pathways in our *in-demand industry clusters*. Rather than focusing on providing bridging academic support in a cohort model, we are focusing on *individualized bridging services* that are customized to each client. This two-pronged approach allows us to more effectively provide career awareness and counseling to job seekers, partner with higher education to deliver specific training, and support our employers' workforce needs. We believe this approach is making an impact in strengthening the local economies in rural Minnesota.

***Bridges to Careers is the next evolution in FastTRAC programming!***

**Jobseeker impact (ie: benefits, outcomes for jobseekers)**

This project is designed to provide skills training, paid internships, on-the job training (OJT), and job development for adult career pathways that have been identified as high demand industry clusters in WSA #2. Intensive and training services are provided to adults with multiple barriers to employment to begin a career

pathway in the industry clusters that are in demand in our service area. Training will result in an industry-recognized credential, diploma or certificate.

A key strategy is to provide *individual contextual skill-building activities* to address inadequate language, math, life or basic work skills. This is not done through a cohort model, but rather custom designed bridging curriculum is provided to each participant to assure success throughout the skill-training component. Participants work with their local Adult Basic Education programs where possible, but may utilize KeyTrain/Career Ready 101. Further, we have incorporated engagement strategies to assure participant retention and success. Progress is closely monitored by their RMCEP counselor.

As modeled in our FastTRAC programs, the navigation role is provided by our Job Counselors, who have experience and training in case management, career pathways and planning, ensuring wrap around services (including support services) are available for individual success. Each participant is assigned a Job Counselor who provides and coordinates all case management services. The coordination piece includes Integrated Resource Teams (IRTs).

This individualized, personal approach is supported by human development and workforce development theory in increasing success rates for participants. It also broadens the capacity to provide training and workforce development services toward a variety of occupations in demand. Finally, and most important, it provides for *consumer choice* through the career planning process and focus on career clusters, rather than one industry sector.

#### **Employer/Community impact (ie: benefits, outcomes for non-jobseekers)**

In listening to the needs of our area employers, matching those needs with short-term training opportunities that launch an individual on a path to economic success, as well as allowing for the multiple entry and exit points of a career pathway to accommodate life events, we will achieve positive results for our area employers, job seekers and in turn, strengthen our local economies. This design implements a common-sense program that integrates both the participant's needs as well as the needs of the employer community.

#### **Identification of those involved, including collaborators**

Those involved include each of our local Adult Basic Education agencies, our MnSCU educational partners, employers within each identified industry cluster, and RMCEP staff and counselors. In the case where IRT's are determined to be needed, other entities are brought to the table that have a stake in the success of that particular participant. These may include Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, caregivers, school or medical professionals.

#### **Leveraging/alignment of outside resources**

Some funding sources are leveraged through dual enrollment in our WIA Adult, WIA or State Dislocated Worker programs, or other programs for which the individual may also be eligible.

#### **Ideas for replication/lessons learned**

This program is easily replicated. One lesson learned is that it required very close collaboration with our ABE partners to understand the paradigm shift in service delivery between individualized, custom bridging services as compared to the traditional FastTRAC model.