

VR and Adult Educations' Bridge Program: Focused Preparation for Career and Credential Training

Issue: The CPID project discovered that many students, otherwise excellent candidates for post-secondary credential training, needed trade-related academics and training in soft skills. These individuals were also a good fit for Wilson Workforce and Rehabilitation Center (WWRC)¹, but due to a variety of reasons were unable to attend (e.g. location of campus, time commitment, waitlist for training).

CPID response: The CPID Team collaborated with Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center (VALRC) and Adult Education to provide a **bridge course for individuals with disabilities**. The concept was to help participants identify a career path and then transition into their chosen education and training programs through the local community college.

Planning: From On-site to Virtual. Planning began in early 2020 for a program in both Williamsburg and Petersburg. The CPID Team worked with counselors within these areas to develop potential candidates. Due to COVID-19, this plan changed to an online course, which caused the restructuring of the curriculum, required additional assessments for digital literacy, and the purchasing of basic laptops for a few candidates. However, moving to a virtual format provided the opportunity to open up the Bridge option to other candidates across the state.

Assembling the Class: With additional information sessions (via Zoom) and direct calls to counselors, the program received referrals for 22 candidates. Of these, 18 had the means for virtually assessments using Zoom (CASAS and Digital Literacy). Twelve of the 18 candidates were determined as appropriate and enrolled in the course that began July 2020. It should be noted that CASAS (academic assessment), in their response to COVID, moved to a virtual format during this time which required additional staff training.

Classroom Grouping: The 12 students were broken into two groups each having two adult Education instructors assigned to them. The Instructors identified the initial groups by location and career goals. Interestingly, this grouping provided two distinct categories of students.

¹¹ In partnership with DARS and the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), WWRC is a Vocational Training residential facility located in Fishersville, Virginia, that provides workforce training, education, and other supports that result in industry-recognized credentials in career pathways and competitive employment outcomes for persons served.

Group A were individuals looking at shorter-term academics and soft skills to move quickly into employment. The Group B individuals were interested in further training and options that were available at community colleges.

Course Expectations: The course information stated, *“The course will run from Monday, July 6 and run through Wednesday, August 19. You will meet once per week as a group with your instructor for two hours. Additionally, you will be expected to participate in at least one additional virtual meeting with your instructor(s), either individually or in a smaller group, for an average of one hour each meeting, depending on your preferences and needs. You can expect to spend up to a total of five hours each week on work, including the class session and meeting(s) with your instructor.”*

Implementation: The instructors started the first week by meeting (Zoom) each candidate separately. This allowed instructors to get a better idea of the various goals in order to focus the bridge program. Additionally they discussed the expectations and objectives. This started the pilot model for responsive, individualized and supported instructional design that could accommodate a range of academic skill levels, career and education interests, and background experiences.

The course was broken into weekly whole group discussions and individuals sessions that worked on specific individualized goals. These goals could include guided work with academics, assistance with self-advocacy skills within both the educational and employment plans, and working on plans following the end of the bridge program.

Whole group discussion topics:

Week One: 1:1: Getting to know you and orientation to course, scheduling, goals and expectations

Week Two: Welcome, Zoom Overview, Effective communication, SMART goals and Resumes

Week Three: Career Exploration, Elevator Speech Intro, Time Management & Procrastination, SMART Goals Updates

Week Four: Career & College/ Training Exploration, Networking, Active Communication, SMART Goals updates

Week Five: Virtual Networking event, Reflection Session, SMART goals Update

Week six: Virtual Mock Interviews and building your toolkit for successful Transition, Smart goals update

Week Seven: Tool Kit Review, Reflections and Next Steps with VR Counselors.

Unique Nature of the Career Pathways Bridge Program: The characteristics that distinguish the 2020 bridge course from other adult education or training classes include:

- student-led content selection based on individual needs and goals;
- co-teaching for increased individualization;

- constant access to online resources for GED completion, soft skills, digital literacy including typing, and career training;
- an intentional supportive cohort who explicitly focused on goal-setting;
- In addition, an instructional focus on building learner confident, autonomy, and time- and resource-management.

The student-led nature of the bridge course leads to increase student ownership of his or her learning and their goals during and beyond the course. The facilitators supported students in researching and identifying appropriate resources for their unique goals and helping them begin on their chosen career pathways by setting short- and long-term goals and taking time to identify the wins and the challenges that they experienced during the class. They also focused on planning for how learners would continue their progress past the end of the course.

Course Structure

The structure of the course facilitated these goals even with learners who represented a wide range of academic skills and distinct career goals:

- the course was co-taught, providing each student with sufficient individual attention so that their tasks were directly relevant to their goals;
- one of the facilitators built an online platform that housed all of their instructional materials and a discussion forum, and students could access these anytime they wanted both in and outside of class;
- the course was intensive enough with two nights a week for three hours over ten weeks that students made quick progress and were able to form a supportive community;
- the course was taught in a computer lab so that all students had constant access to online resources;
- the students began each class with a discussion where they would reflect on their progress toward their goals and plan out next steps, a practice that increased motivation among students;
- the majority of the students had GED completion as a primary goal and training for a career as a secondary goal, and they could work either individually or with others who were similarly skilled or who had similar career interests;
- In addition, the instructors focused heavily on building a supportive cohort of students who would support each other.

The cohort aspect of the model proved vital to motivation and retention, as well as to building a supportive network of peers who could support one another beyond the confines of the class. The facilitators built this cohort through intentional goal sharing, cultural sharing days, and the practice of collaboratively building a class mission and set of class norms with the students.

Sustainability:

1. Need to identify post-grant means of payments to adult education instructors
2. Development of additional strategies for recent high school graduates in transition
3. Training on the CASAS on-line assessment for Adult Educators
4. Strategies for outreach and marketing the program to counselors

Future Research:

- Longitudinal Return on Investment (ROI) for individuals participating in the Bridge program
- Examining retention rates of individuals with disabilities that participate in a Bridge Program and then move on to post-secondary training within the community college system

Current research

- Upskilling adult learners with disabilities
<https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/NSC-Austin-Brief-MID-RES.pdf>
Webinar:
<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Adult+learners+and+disabilities&docid=608023144597554001&mid=F6D7AF39E10E1F4459A2F6D7AF39E10E1F4459A2&view=detail&FORM=VIRE>

Resources:

Products: Marketing material

Documents: Overview of tech skills

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