



# Pathways to Success: A Guide to Successful Bridge Programs for Incumbent Workers

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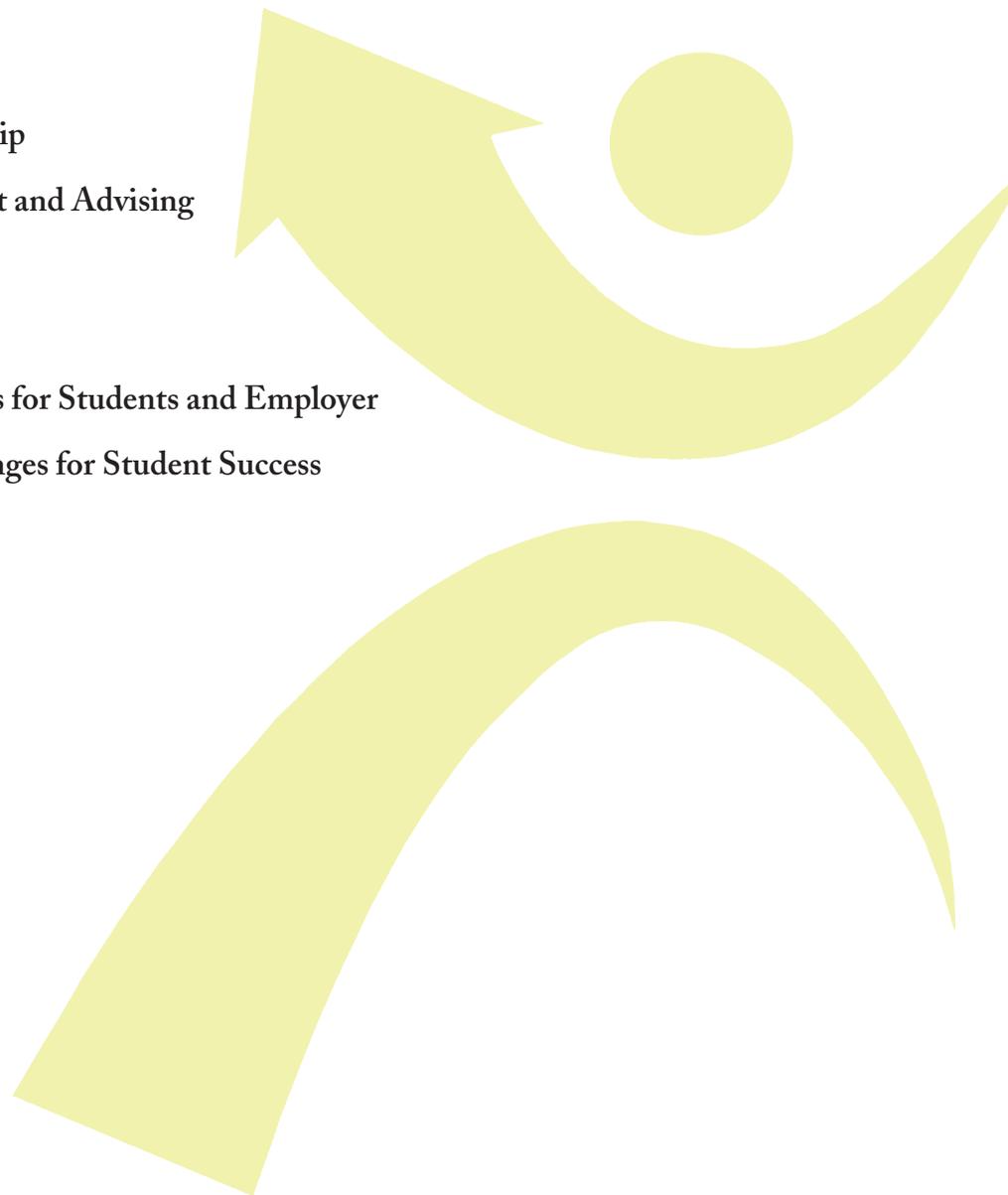
# Pathways to Success:

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# Foreward

The development of Bridge instruction in Illinois began in 2006 under national direction of the Joyce Foundation through a state-level initiative known as *Shifting Gears*. Since that time, *Shifting Gears* has sought to address state policy and local program disconnects that limit low-skilled adults' attainment of postsecondary credentials and employment in high demand occupations.

Through the collaborative efforts of partners in Career and Technical Education, Adult Education, Workforce Development and Student Advocacy, *Shifting Gears* outlined a unique strategy for developing and implementing bridge programs via community colleges and their local partners. Illinois offers two bridge program models: an Adult Education Bridge and a Career and Technical Education (CTE)/Developmental Education Bridge. Both models subscribe to a common definition adopted by Illinois' *Shifting Gears* initiative partners:

**“Bridge programs prepare adult students with limited academic skills to enter and succeed in credit-bearing post-secondary education and training leading to career-path employment in high-demand, middle- and high-skilled occupations. The goal of bridge programs is to sequentially bridge the gap between the initial skills of individuals and what they need to enter and succeed in postsecondary education and career-path employment.”**

The CTE/Developmental Ed Bridge, described here, proposes to combine developmental academics with career and technical instruction in an integrated and applied manner that aims to eliminate the need for separate developmental coursework in targeted academic areas such as math, reading, and/or science, depending on the CTE area. The CTE/Developmental Ed Bridge furthermore connects with a postsecondary Program of Study at the community college by including career development and CTE program-related knowledge and skills.

During the initial phase of Illinois' initiative, ten (10) community colleges piloted bridge programs, with three (3) projects focusing specifically on CTE/Developmental Ed bridges. Oakton Community College was one of those projects. Oakton Community College and its employer-partner collaborated to provide additional education and training for existing workers that would lead to advancement opportunities in the workplace. This document, *Pathways to Success: A Guide to Successful Bridge Programs for Incumbent Workers*, provides a summary of Oakton's experience in developing a bridge program designed to meet the specific needs of a local employer and address the challenges facing their students.

Since this project, numerous bridge programs have been developed across the state to aid students in furthering their education and employment goals. We hope you find this Guide helpful and encourage you to explore the use of bridges in closing the academic gaps for adult students interested in pursuing postsecondary education and improving their transition and success in career and technical education programs.

For more information on Bridges in Illinois, visit the ICCB Web site at [www.iccb.org](http://www.iccb.org) or the Shifting Gears Illinois Web site at [www.iccb.org/shifting\\_gears.html](http://www.iccb.org/shifting_gears.html).

# Executive Summary

Oakton developed a new CNA (certified nursing assistant) to LPN Bridge to Success program designed for incumbent frontline health care workers in the long-term care setting.

The overarching goal of the CNA to LPN Bridge to Success project was to create authentic pathways that helped the Presbyterian Homes' CNAs assume more responsibilities and attain higher salaries. The structure of the program and the supplemental support services helped to ensure student success for a population that would be unable to persist in a traditional college program.

This pilot site was unique since the target population was incumbent workers at one employer organization in the College's district. Administrators at Presbyterian Homes, (a continuing care retirement community with 1,500 residents) approached the Oakton nursing faculty to create a Practical Nurse Program for their current CNA employees.

Innovative instructional approaches improved student transition outcomes. The course curriculum could be lengthened, and course times were designed to mesh with the students' work hours.

Coordinators were crucial to the success of the program. They increased communication with students to help ease the anxiety of starting a new career program, the worry of taking college courses, and the stress of navigating a college system. The increased support was appreciated by students, Oakton, and the Presbyterian Homes administrations.

Oakton has two groups of students who finished the practical nurse portion of this program. Many are continuing in the registered nursing track.



## Guide Goal

This guide shares the many lessons learned with others who are involved with incumbent worker training projects.

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# Introduction

In 2006, Presbyterian Homes, a non-sectarian long-term care institution with multiple sites throughout the north and northwest greater Chicago area, approached Oakton Community College with a request to develop a career pathway for long-term, front-line, low-skilled employees, most of whom were certified nursing assistants (CNAs). This document describes the process Oakton and Presbyterian Homes used to establish a career advancement pathway for incumbent front-line workers at Presbyterian Homes. Establishing a viable career pathway to advance the career opportunities for those workers presented many challenges for each organization, as well as the students. This guide will describe the challenges and the lessons learned from each challenge.

Oakton and Presbyterian Homes developed a close partnership to devise and implement strategies that address the nursing workforce shortage existing throughout metropolitan Chicago, particularly at local long-term care facilities. Each of the partner institutions needed to either implement or change policies or procedures in order to ensure the success of the partnership and the students served. It was necessary to re-examine the components that comprise a good educational partnership because of the many and unique needs of the non-traditional students who wanted to take advantage of the opportunity afforded by the partnership.

Gauging academic preparedness resulted in some surprises. Assessment results determined the need for pre-college level bridge program coursework. This coursework was contextualized whenever possible, in an effort to help students better understand and retain the material. As might be expected, contextualization of course content presented certain challenges in faculty selection.

Among the many lessons learned was the vital role played by program coordinators for the success of the project. The creative solutions to the many issues faced by the program coordinators will be described as a key component of this guide.

Most importantly, we will describe the numerous challenges the students faced and how each partner developed unique solutions to remediate many of the barriers that could have prevented the students from succeeding. While many of those barriers initially were not perceived to be obstacles by the project personnel at Presbyterian Homes and Oakton, they were real issues to students and, if unresolved, could have prevented students from advancing.

Lessons learned from each phase of this project will be highlighted throughout this guide. Closely related unexpected positive results for all involved also will be presented. Although this project may seem to be unique to the partnership between Presbyterian Homes and Oakton, those who were involved believe that other projects involving incumbent worker training can apply many of the lessons learned from this project.

This project was made possible by a grant from the Joyce Foundation to the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB). ICCB distributed the award among Illinois community colleges that presented promising proposals for programs that would advance low-skilled workers to a rewarding career path. Oakton Community College, Presbyterian Homes, and the program's students are grateful for the opportunity to be part of this forward-thinking, life-changing project.

# Forming a Partnership



# Forming a Partnership

## In the Beginning

Presbyterian Homes, a not-for-profit, non-sectarian organization, has been providing residential and healthcare services for older adults for more than a 100 years. The organization consists of four Continuing Care Retirement Communities, an Adult Daycare Center, and a Home Health Agency serving the northern and northwest suburbs of Chicago and the north side of Chicago. In total, some 1,600 residents live on Presbyterian Homes' campuses, served by more than 1,300 employees.

Oakton Community College, a two-year public, open-access institution, offers baccalaureate, career, and continuing education courses to a student body of nearly 11,000 credit and 30,000 non-credit students. Oakton's two campuses in Skokie and Des Plaines, Illinois, serve residents of the 18 ethnically, racially, religiously, and socio-economically diverse communities of northern Cook County, and draw students from beyond Oakton's mandated boundaries, including the City of Chicago. The College offers a cluster of intensive degree and certificate health career programs, including nursing, nurse assistant, physical therapist assistant, phlebotomy, and medical laboratory technician. Graduates from Oakton's health career programs have a cumulative success rate of 96 percent on board certification examinations and are highly sought-after employees.

The largest Presbyterian Homes facilities sit within the Oakton Community College district boundaries. As a result of their proximity to Oakton's two campuses, Presbyterian Homes has a long-standing relationship with Oakton as a clinical site for Oakton's Associate Degree Nursing and Certified Nurse Assistant programs.

The much-reported impending nursing shortage was the impetus to begin the Presbyterian Homes and Oakton partnership. Between 2004 and 2007, all campuses of Presbyterian Homes experienced shortages of healthcare workers, especially Registered Nurses (RNs) and Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs). In spite of the temporary relief caused by an influx of retired nurses returning to work during the downturn in the economy, estimates predict that nursing shortages will be close to 300,000 nationwide by 2020. Further, about 55 percent of incumbent nurses are expected to retire in the next 10-12 years. With the large number of aging Baby Boomers needing health services at the same time, Presbyterian Homes sought both short- and long-term plans to manage its nursing needs.

Presbyterian Homes has difficulty luring RNs away from local hospitals and into its facilities because of its inability to offer competitive salaries.

### MEETING A NEED

#### Why was the program started?

- **Advance Careers**  
Opportunity for long-term (more than 20 years) valued employees to advance on a career ladder.
- **Address the Nursing Shortage**  
Nice retention tool for employer.
- **Enhance Community Development**

Those same hospitals, however, typically do not employ LPNs. Presbyterian Homes decided to focus on establishing a LPN training program because the LPN is very desirable in assisted living or nursing home settings. The LPN in the assisted living setting works directly with a supervising RN at the patient's bedside to provide patient care, and to assist with both data collection and medication distribution. The practical nurse is the bedside attendant who is most familiar with the patient's everyday behavior and is best able to detect subtle changes that might elude more senior health care professionals with less patient contact. An earlier response to changes in the patient's status promises a better outcome for the patient. It is in the best interests of a long-term care facility and its residents to employ the most well trained bedside attendants available. In the nursing home setting, the ideal bedside attendant is the LPN.

LPN licensure also is the next logical tier on a career advancement ladder for CNAs. Nursing is a profession that lends itself well to the ladder concept, from the entry-level CNA to LPN, and then to RN. The RN can begin with an associate's degree and proceed to a bachelor's degree. The RN also can consider pursuing a master's degree and a management position in a health care setting.

When the Presbyterian Homes' administrative staff approached Oakton in 2006 to explore a partnership for developing of an on-site LPN program, a number of interesting elements already were in place that suggested the proposed partnership could be successful:

- Presbyterian Homes had a large, interested base of potential students.
- Presbyterian Homes had established a goal of "growing their own" to fill a known shortage of LPNs, now and in the future.
- Presbyterian Homes already had administered "Operation Excellence," a teaching-learning program that fostered incentives for front-line workers to acquire additional skills and knowledge about patient care concerns.
- Presbyterian Homes' administrators believed that an LPN program designed specifically for their incumbent workers gave these employees a way to gain entrance into advanced nursing education that ordinarily would be impossible for many because of the highly competitive environment for admission to LPN/RN programs.
- Presbyterian Homes' CEO had the foresight to recognize that continuing nursing education was extremely important for continuity in the operation of the organization and care for its residents, and he established policies that would enable the program to move forward.

## PARTNERSHIP

- **Presbyterian Homes**  
A continuing care retirement community with 1,500 residents living on five campuses in the Chicagoland area.
- **Oakton Community College**  
A comprehensive community college in suburban Chicago.
- **Students**  
Long-term, full-time nursing assistants loyal to employer, hard working, with limited educational background; overwhelmed, yet motivated to improve their lives.

- Two key Presbyterian Homes’ administrators were qualified and willing to take the lead in working out the details to put the LPN program in place, with support from Oakton Community College.
- The Presbyterian Homes’ administration recognized that an on-site program would be more convenient and comfortable for employees who had been out of school for many years and might be intimidated by a college campus setting.
- Presbyterian Homes offers tuition support for its full-time employees.
- Fully-equipped classroom and clinical spaces were available.



## Initial Challenges

### Challenge: A Concerted Commitment to the Partnership

The first challenge was bringing the stakeholders to the table. With the busy schedules of those who needed to be present, it took a few weeks to find a common meeting time. The parties persisted in their goal, and those present at the first meeting included Presbyterian Home administrators, Oakton’s Business Institute trainers, faculty and administrators from the Oakton nursing department, and student advisors from the nursing department. The topics of discussion during the first meeting were:

- What would it take for a group of motivated, incumbent workers who already have financial and other support from their employer, to be able to move up from the lowest rungs of the healthcare career ladder and achieve the next level of training?
- What would it cost?
- What resources would be needed?
- What educational changes are necessary to accommodate the different student needs?
- What barriers were present in the current structure of the long-term care environment, within the community college, and at the clinical sites that may hinder student success?
- Review of initial employee survey results.

### Challenge: Capacity for Education and Training

Although Oakton Community College has worked with many district businesses to establish incumbent training programs, taking on a multi-year career advancement program in the health care field had never before been attempted. Germane to the mission of the community college is the commitment of resources to support career advancement of the local

workforce. While the mission of this project was understood to be important to faculty and administrators at Oakton, there was mutual concern between the potential partners that an already overburdened faculty and staff in Oakton's health career programs could not effectively deliver the type of program Presbyterian Homes wanted and needed.

The space currently available in Oakton's health career programs is chronically insufficient to meet the demands of the local health care industry and the number of students interested in pursuing health care careers. It was crucial that attention be devoted to alternative delivery sites, and to identifying health care professionals who could complement Oakton's current cadre of instructors.

Commitment to allocate the needed resources by both Oakton and Presbyterian Homes' administration was an essential step towards cementing the partnership. Supplemental monetary resources through the local Workforce Board and from the Joyce Foundation provided the additional equipment and staff support that was necessary for student success.

### **Challenge: Student Preparedness**

Academic assessment of prospective students was yet to be completed, but it was evident that the Presbyterian Homes employees, like many CNAs and other front-line workers across the country, had the following group profile:

- Many aspired to become nurses but lacked the opportunity or financial support.
- Educational experiences included:
  - Schooling in countries other than U.S.
  - Diverse quality of education
  - Varied English reading skills
  - Disparate levels of fluency in spoken English
- Most had been out of school for many years.
- Most needed to work full time to make ends meet.
- Inability to pay tuition up front.
- Family and dependent children obligations.

The LPN program envisioned by Oakton Community College and Presbyterian Homes would fill the training gap between CNA and RN. This contextualized program would be directly responsive to the workforce shortages identified by the partners. The challenge for both Oakton

and Presbyterian Homes was to develop a bridge curriculum that would minimize educational deficiencies. In addition, both institutions would need to modify or develop policies that would address the non-academic barriers that this group faced.

## BUILDING A TEAM



- Slow process
- Identify and utilize strengths of team members
- Improved communication
- Getting everyone on the same page
- Effective collaboration

### Challenge: Need for Formative Evaluation and Mid-Course Programmatic Changes

A community college/community-based organization partnership will improve students' transitions outcomes if structured correctly and needed resources are available. Oakton and Presbyterian Homes worked together throughout the course of the program to identify barriers to an incumbent worker career ladder program. Time and space issues were a concern, along with employer support and altered expectations of student outcomes. Oakton and Presbyterian Homes involved workforce education specialists, and researched other best practices and programs to accommodate the target population.

A good partnership takes time and communication to identify and utilize the varied and unique strengths of team members. Over the ensuing months, the partnership between Oakton and Presbyterian Homes grew to be very cohesive. Through trials, Oakton and Presbyterian Homes realized that the students' best interest was their mutual goal. The two partners began with monthly meetings and then, as the working relationship smoothed out, evolved into occasional meetings as needed. Weekly phone calls facilitated communication. In the beginning, overwhelmed students would complain to their employer about homework issues and perceived unfair testing practices. Presbyterian Homes' staff members understandably were concerned. Once Oakton personnel were able to convey that the students were struggling with course expectations, the employer understood that employees were adapting to the requirements and stress associated with college-level work, and then could support the College's stance. Student employees venting of frustrations was to be expected; the supervising administrator at Presbyterian Homes would listen and then send the student off with words of encouragement to study even harder. Exchanges like that developed trust that was developed that made the work of the partnership so much easier. Continuous communication between the partner institutions, as well as with the students involved, was very important.

## Selecting a Partner

Seek local educational programs and provider organizations that are interested in working with an incumbent worker population of students.

### Actions:

- Look for health care providers and educational institutions experienced in their respective fields.
- Select quality organizations/educational institutions as measured by reputation and other indicators specific to their environments.
- Choose partners that are willing to be flexible and take risks.
- Assure leadership from both partners.
- Discuss financial commitments including in-kind contributions of space, supplies, equipment, staff, and tuition resources from both partners.
- Discuss resource potential from both the provider side as well as from the educational side, i.e., grant and research resources.

### Profiles of partnering organizations:

- Presbyterian Homes has more than 100 years experience in caring for the elderly.
- Oakton Community College has provided first-rate postsecondary education for more than for 40 years.
- Oakton has used Presbyterian Homes as a clinical site for more than 15 years.
- Presbyterian Homes has hired RN graduates from Oakton, and has confidence in the quality of the health career programs offered by the College.
- Provider has a large base of interested CNAs as potential students.
- Both partners are financially sound.
- Both partners are leaders in their respective fields.
- Employer/provider has tuition scholarship and grant programs (95 percent of employees received some financial support).

### To have a lasting partnership each institution must have:

- Administrative commitment at the highest levels.
- Liaisons (advisors) between the academic institution and employer. Ideally each institution should have a committed liaison.
- Willingness to provide flexible scheduling for the students (both work schedules and class schedules).
- Willingness to support student needs (tutoring, computer access, ability to work flexible time, etc.).
- Ability to provide financial support or flexible payment plans.
- Trust that each institution has the same goal: student success.



# Student Recruitment and Advising



## Student Recruitment and Advising

This project was unique because the target population comprised incumbent workers at one employer organization in the College's district; however, the lessons learned can be applied to a more diverse mix of students.

Recruitment efforts were conducted at the employer's facilities since these students, like many incumbent workers who are seeking retraining, were at first uncomfortable finding their way to the College. The corresponding advising took many forms, such as information sessions, small group meetings, a visit to the Presbyterian Homes' CNA training course, and small or even individual meetings at several of the employer's sites.

Presbyterian Homes also conducted a survey to determine whether a cohort of employees was willing to pursue a career advancement program of study. The Presbyterian Homes' survey revealed that almost 100 employees in the front-line ranks were interested in advanced education to become LPNs. Interest was greatest among CNAs, but also came from several comparable employee areas, including housekeeping, food service, resident activities, and the business office.

A component of the survey conducted by Presbyterian Homes included questions about educational levels attained from past schooling. The survey questions asked if employees had previously taken coursework in English, math, or anatomy and physiology. Almost 90 percent stated that they had taken previous coursework in all those areas.

A summary of the survey results was provided during the first meeting between Oakton and Presbyterian Homes. Based on those survey results, the team members from Oakton believed that a wealth of well-prepared students were ready to take the nursing courses specific to the LPN program.

Oakton's initial meeting with prospective students was exhilarating. Nearly 100 front-line health care workers attended, eager to find out how to improve their skills, increase their salaries, and achieve new status and respect as an LPN. The employer was excited about the potential of a long-term, satisfied workforce with already established employment records. The College was excited to expand its nursing program in a new direction.

Once the first LPN cohort was selected, testing began to determine nursing skill levels, English abilities, and math-science acumen—revealing some initial hurdles. While this group of CNAs had high school diplomas or the equivalent and had already completed CNA training and licensing, their academic skills were significantly below even the most vulnerable group with which Oakton was accustomed to training, and they would need extensive remediation.

Students had routinely overstated their past educational backgrounds or misunderstood the questions asked on the initial employer survey. It became apparent that, although students thought they had met many of the LPN program admission requirements, such as a four-credit-hour, college-level course in anatomy and physiology, these often turned out to be a mere mention of anatomy in their CNA training course.

The results of the placement tests were a wake-up call to all, especially to the program administrators at Presbyterian Homes. Because these employees were very expressive and long-term, dedicated employees, it was unexpected that, as a group, their test scores would be so low. To determine if the test scores truly reflected this group's competencies, Oakton's nursing advisors scheduled appointments with each member of this group of prospective students. Upon review of individual academic transcripts, it became clear that this group of interested students did not have the preparatory coursework required for the program; in fact, only three students had any transferable college coursework. It was apparent that the questions asked by the employer on the initial survey did not specify college credit in the areas of English, math, or anatomy and physiology; rather, students had simply been asked if they had taken coursework in these areas. The employees answered affirmatively because they had received some coursework in these areas during their CNA training; however, the amount of coursework in each of these areas was minimal and not equivalent to college-level coursework as required by the LPN program admissions criteria. A ladder of developmental courses prior to admission to the LPN program would be needed.

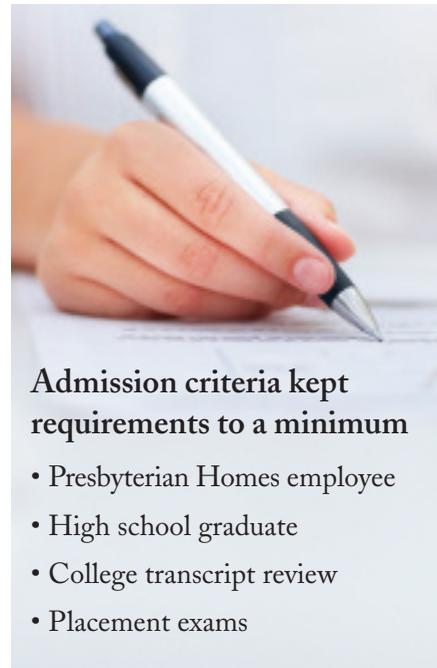
Oakton offered developmental mathematics and English classes in an effort to bring this cohort up to college-level work. The students then entered the initial prerequisite anatomy and physiology course, where only 10 of the 17 passed. Clearly, even with the employer's support, these students could not successfully complete college-level classes unless delivery of the courses was restructured. At this point, a bridge course was designed to prepare the students for success in college-level work and the LPN program.

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## LESSON LEARNED

Academic institutions should collaborate closely with partner employers to develop surveys that reflect the key questions needed to accurately assess the readiness of potential students before starting a program. Failure at the outset can be discouraging and deter students from reaching their goals.

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### Admission criteria kept requirements to a minimum

- Presbyterian Homes employee
- High school graduate
- College transcript review
- Placement exams



# Pathway to Success



## Contextualized Instruction - Curriculum

### Definition of Bridge program:

“Bridge programs prepare adults with limited academic or limited English skills to enter and succeed in credit-bearing postsecondary education and training leading to career-path employment in high demand, middle- and high-skilled occupations. The goal of bridge programs is to sequentially bridge the gap between the initial skills of individuals and what they need to enter and succeed in postsecondary education and career-path employment.”

(Source: Illinois Bridge Definition from *shifting gears.org* )

### THREE LEVELS OF STUDY

#### 1. Developmental

- New college-prep bridge course
- Enhanced math, English, study, and computer skills

#### 2. College-level nursing prerequisites

#### 3. Nursing curriculum

### Bridge elements to be used:

The project’s bridge program was patterned after a similar bridge program that serves a high risk cohort of Oakton’s Associate Degree Nursing program. The bridge course developed for this cohort contained contextualized course work in verbal skills, math, science, and medical terminology. Also included were elements of a “College 101,” or college success course. The students then took prerequisite courses as required by the LPN program, including introductory biology, two sequences of anatomy and physiology, chemistry, psychology of human development, nutrition, pharmacology, medication math, and a nursing informatics computer course.

Many adult bridge and career programs are designed to be delivered in a condensed format so that the students enter or advance in the workforce as quickly as possible. In the case of the Presbyterian Homes/Oakton program, all courses were lengthened. Twelve-week courses were expanded to 18 weeks. Fewer class and lab hours were scheduled each week, compared to the usual course scheduling. The added length in course delivery allowed the students more time to complete assignments, and to study and learn the material covered each week. The fewer weekly class and lab hours helped to accommodate the busy schedules of incumbent workers.

### Faculty selection:

Once courses were set, it was time to find the right instructors. Faculty members often were “hand picked” by the division dean, based on his knowledge of their teaching methods and their ability to connect with students. Their interpersonal skills needed to be excellent and aligned to adult learners. An instructor with a strong positive attitude would help the adult learner feel enthusiastic about class. Faculty who were accessible and accommodating to students’ questions and concerns would pave the road to success.

These instructors had to be cognizant of the unique challenges facing this group. Instructors needed to contextualize the course learning objectives to make them relevant to adult learners—a component crucial to the success of the program. The syllabus content remained firm, but the timeline had to be flexible to meet the working students’ needs. An instructor experienced at providing contextualized course delivery would be the biggest asset to student success in the classroom.

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**LESSON LEARNED:**

Faculty selection is critical. The traditional academic philosophy, “If they are extremely challenged, they will rise to the occasion,” would lead to failure for the targeted cohort. Our philosophy was, “If they are extremely challenged, they will quit. They need to be nurtured.” These students already were challenged before they even entered the classroom, with work and family obligations, and with little experience in academia, as well as all the other barriers identified earlier.

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## PRACTICAL NURSING STUDY SKILLS [NUR 044]

- Designed special college-prep course for this group
- Contained reading skills, vocabulary enhancement, team building, basic computer skills
- Introduced medical terminology
- Selected appropriate instructors





# Coordinator's Role



# Coordinator's Role

## PROGRAM COORDINATORS

- Helped students navigate **entire** college system.
- Assisted students with **all** college services.
- Provided direct student support.

## Transition Services – Coordinators

Choosing dedicated coordinators forms the solid foundation for a successful program. The coordinators are hired to keep the program running smoothly and be the students' contact person at all points for this project. Since this position is time consuming and vital to student success, it must be a paid position dedicated to the program. The traits of a coordinator must include positive interpersonal communication skills, writing skills, ability to work in a non-judgmental fashion with sensitive situations, and a love of learning. These traits make it possible to succeed with this special group of students.

The unique needs of full-time working students must be considered. Many in the Presbyterian Homes cohort were not native English speakers and not familiar with postsecondary level education. Approachable, friendly coordinators are the pillars and solid foundation of this program's success.

Many students stated that they had failed in past programs. Students needed to feel supported at the College, and the coordinators filled that role. Whenever a college-related concern would arise, students knew they could rely on the coordinators to help them resolve the issue, and this trust was crucial to their success.

The coordinators would help the students navigate the college system across all levels. The first step was the college admission system. The students were not computer savvy and needed to complete a paper application instead of applying independently online. The coordinator would actually meet the students in the registration office, provide specific registration instructions, and see that the student delivered the completed application to the registrar.

The coordinators met with students at their scheduled class time in the classroom on a weekly basis. Each week, about one hour before class, the coordinators would be in the back of the classroom to answer questions. At the start of the semester, the coordinators were bombarded with questions, both in the classroom and at other times on the telephone. As the semester moved along, though, students knew the coordinators would be there to answer their questions, resulting in fewer phone calls.

The coordinators also helped to manage any incorrect information and to calm fears. Worried students would become upset and then could not study. An immediate response was required to keep the situation in check and not spiral out of control. One worried student would communicate with the rest of the group and suddenly the program coordinators were

managing hysteria. This group could incite other students to believe that the “sky was falling!” A quick response would eliminate this panic.

This tight-knit group constantly communicated among themselves. Some days it was like a game of “telephone.” The first message was communicated correctly, but as it passed from one student to the next, the content would change. By the end of the telephone tree, the information was incorrect. A few confident students would pick up the phone to verify the information directly with the coordinators, though, which helped to set things straight before panic ensued.

Students needed to learn how to plan their time, and the coordinators often would help put this in perspective for them. A student might have an upcoming weekend family birthday party to attend and rely on the coordinators to explain how to manage that special obligation and fit in adequate study time. Students were not being irresponsible; they simply were not yet confident in their own time management skills. Students eventually began to become more self-reliant and, as the semesters rolled along, the coordinators had less and less reminding to do.

The initial courses met on the Presbyterian Homes campus. When the time came for the students to come to the main Oakton campus, they felt out of their comfort zone. The coordinators provided students with very specific driving and parking directions, and even met the students at the entrance and walked them in small groups to their classroom.

At various points throughout the program, the coordinators gave students simple tokens to mark their achievements, such as a pen with the Oakton name and logo. The coordinators also distributed Oakton t-shirts to the group to welcome them to the College. This gesture helped them feel part of the College community. The students prized and thrived on these inexpensive but thoughtful gestures from the coordinators.

Not everyone succeeds. The coordinators encouraged students, understood the amount of hard work they put into a course, and knew that if they failed, they would be devastated. The coordinators were the ones they would turn to in their distress. The coordinators met with the students to listen and then encourage them to continue their education.

## COORDINATOR'S ROLE

- Advocate for students
- Address students' concerns immediately
- Help with college-wide issues such as registration and financial assistance
- Provide individual advising session each semester
- Maintain weekly communication and physical presence

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**LESSONS LEARNED:**

Not everyone who takes a college course *passes* a college course.

Most students were juggling many issues that could pose barriers in the pursuit of their educational and career goals. With the help of the coordinators, they could see the “big picture” and work together to create a plan to face those obstacles.

Coordinators need to be knowledgeable about all aspects of program delivery for adult incumbent workers.

Coordinators should have experience in personal coaching, including motivation, finance, time management, test taking skills, study skills, and good listening skills.

Coordinators need to have knowledge of the functions of the departments at the academic institution that impact a student’s enrollment status, as well as key departments, such as human resources, at the employer institution.

The coordinators would be responsible for finding classroom space when none was available, making the “cottage” at Presbyterian Homes so important. The cottages had been used as single family residences; however, they were being phased out. The coordinators were allowed to transform a cottage into a classroom and a lab with mannequin “patients” and beds. Along with this came the responsibility to make sure any media equipment that instructors needed was available at the cottage at the appropriate time, which required the program coordinator to become knowledgeable about the College’s instructional media services department and the ins and outs of signing out laptops, projectors, and projector screens.

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# Financial Challenges for Students and Employer



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The generally low socio-economic status of the students presented many difficulties. Family budgets were tight, with little money for tuition and educational materials. The College developed and/or adjusted a variety of financial supports for these students.

## FINANCIAL ISSUES

### Cost

- Employer revised existing tuition reimbursement policy requiring students to pay up front and be reimbursed upon successful class completion.
- Employer pre-paid tuition and fees for full-time employees estimated at \$4,000 per student.
- Students also received financial aid from Pell Grants and other sources.



### Funding

- Oakton Community College received grants from the Joyce Foundation and the Workforce Board of Northern Cook County.

In the typical college setting, students register for their semester courses and then must pay the tuition by a payment deadline. If the deadline is not met, the College automatically drops the student from all registered courses. The registration process can be very stressful since the courses fill quickly. The science courses are particularly in demand, and with a limited number of sections offered, competition is stiff for the available seats.

For this special group of students, the College reserved seats, eliminating the pressure with registration. Coordinators helped students complete the registration forms, which guaranteed a seat in the course and allowed the student to register at any time up to the start of the semester. This “no pressure” registration system became an essential part of the students’ persistence and success.

The College did not require payment from these students at the time of registration. Instead, the coordinators compiled student names in a “batch” form and sent the list to the College’s accounting department. The accounting department entered a code into the computer protecting the students from being dropped from their course for non-payment. Several weeks after the semester began, accounting sent the batch bill to the employer and received payment soon after.

The employer pre-paid tuition for full-time employees at the start of the course. Upon completion of the class with a grade of “C” or better, the student became eligible for additional tuition assistance for the upcoming semester. Students who did not successfully earn the required grade were then responsible for the future up-front tuition payments until achieving the compulsory grade. This procedure eased the economic burden on the students and served as a motivator for success.

# Overcoming Challenges for Student Success



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## CHALLENGES FOR THE EMPLOYER

- Scheduling shift work around courses.
  - Understanding payment system and tuition deadlines.
  - Managing students who monopolized administrator's time with course concerns.
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## EMPLOYER SOLUTIONS FOR SUCCESS

- Assigned one person to schedule all student shifts.
- Developed strong working relationship with the College's accounting department which led to batched billing.
- Partnered with College program coordinators to reduce student anxiety.

As the previous chapters suggest, “expect the unexpected” became the mantra of the project partners. Some of the unexpected issues were hurdles to overcome; others were surprising, positive side effects of a successful non-traditional program. Each of the program stakeholders—employer, College and students—encountered the unexpected. Many of the surprises already have been described in the context of establishing the partnership and beginning the education of the first cohort. Others appear below to show readers how Presbyterian Homes, Oakton Community College, and students who enrolled in the program navigated unexplored waters.

## Employer Challenges

When the first cohort of students had completed all prerequisite coursework and began the LPN program, classes met in late afternoons and evenings at a dedicated Presbyterian Homes site. The staffing coordinators and directors of nursing at all Presbyterian Homes sites had to adjust schedules and provide flexible options for the employees enrolled in the program who also were full-time workers. This rescheduling needed to be fair for all employees, whether or not they were part of the LPN program. Some enrollees in the LPN program traveled to class from other Presbyterian Homes locations, requiring additional scheduling accommodations.

### Internal Policies Changed

- Tuition Program with Automatic Pre-pay
- On-site Classroom
- Accommodation of employee schedules

Presbyterian Homes successfully addressed those obstacles which had the potential to adversely affect both the workplace and educational environments. The positive repercussions for the long-term care environment were:

- Presbyterian Homes has not experienced a shortage of CNAs for the last two years; in fact, there is a waiting list of candidates. Applicants state that they are applying because of the LPN program and career advancement opportunities.
- Having an on-site career advancement program changed the workplace environment to that of a learning environment. Staff members observed the success of their peers and were encouraged to set goals for their own success and advancement.
- Resident satisfaction now ranges in the 90th percentile when compared to other long-term caregivers.

## College Challenges

This uniquely structured program brought many unexpected challenges to more departments at Oakton than the initial planning team ever imagined. Many college units had to make procedural accommodations and policy changes in order for this program to move forward smoothly. The LPN program affected a number of College departments:

- The Nursing Department spent countless hours with this group of students. They accommodated the students' work schedules to plan all aspects of courses—clinical, lab, and lecture. Faculty selection became difficult because of the unusual time constraints. Frequent problem solving sessions with coordinators were necessary.
- Accounting Services set up a “student protect” list and batch billing to keep students from being dropped from courses.
- Administrators supported the partnership with Presbyterian Homes by providing ongoing budgets for additional tutoring and coordinator support above and beyond the normal program requirements.
- The Office of Student Recruitment and Outreach worked closely with coordinators to admit students.
- Advising met with students as probation issues arose.
- The bookstore provided a list and price of the textbooks used for the courses, which enabled students to budget for their textbook purchases.
- The Business Institute assisted with planning and delivering remedial coursework.
- The Dean of Science and Health Careers provided invaluable support for the program. He made the final decision when critical issues arose, valued the coordinator's role, and praised their work which was instrumental to the program's success.
- The Grants Department wrote the grants to fund some of the services used by the students.
- The Learning Center offered support services as requested by the students.
- Media Services provided equipment that needed to be transported to other sites for instructor use.
- Registrar Services assumed the responsibility of registering students, a task initially handled by the project coordinators.
- Registrar Services also expedited evaluation of students' previous college records to facilitate registration.
- The Testing Center proctored the preadmission tests and arranged for special group tests.

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## CHALLENGES FOR THE COLLEGE

- The average practical nurse program is 9-10 months. Oakton lengthened the time period to three years, including the prerequisites.
  - Shift work presented problems in scheduling courses.
  - Finding faculty who can effectively teach at nontraditional times and connect with these students was a hurdle to overcome.
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## COLLEGE SOLUTIONS FOR SUCCESS

- Coordinators solved problems.
- Courses ran with reduced class sizes.
- Communication with faculty accommodated requests.
- Registration policy revised to help students..

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## CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS

- Full-time employees working rotating shifts
  - Lack of financial resources
  - Lack of transportation
  - Financial Constraints
  - Stress of college-level courses and expectations
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## SOLUTIONS FOR SUCCESS

- Customized courses
- Smaller class sizes
- Extended time for classes
- Convenient scheduling
- Class at Presbyterian Homes and Oakton's Skokie and Des Plaines campuses
- Free tutoring
- In-district tuition
- Attentive coordinators

## Students' Challenges

In general, students were long-term CNAs, culturally diverse, middle-aged students at a low socio-economic level. Many were parents already overwhelmed with time constraints. Their educational endeavors required extra support with respect to finances, emotional investment, time management, family, social commitments, and household management. Successful students found the resolve to forge ahead. These students depended on the program's additional support to bridge the gap. Students understood the importance of this opportunity to boost salary, job security, and satisfaction. In short, the program was the chance of a lifetime for them.

CNAs identified lack of time, money, and confidence as barriers to advancing to new positions. Family obligations and double shifts left little opportunity to devote time to classes and study. Further education required a monetary commitment that often was impossible to carve out of their tight budgets. Most of the CNAs never had tackled college-level course work or had been out of school for a long time. For them, the prospect of undertaking any postsecondary education was daunting. Employees who were considering the LPN career path program needed fundamental knowledge about what was in store, including the employer and peer support that would be available to them.

Oakton's nursing chairperson knew from previous programs the necessity to expand the length of time for the classes. The nursing program administrators restructured the LPN sequence to be accomplished in 18 months, rather than the usual 10 months, but even 18 months proved to be too accelerated for some students.

Work and family obligations sometimes impeded completion of coursework in a timely fashion. Students unaccustomed to college-level work did not always have the diligence to work through an academic assignment, but they also did not always know how or whom to ask for help. Unfamiliarity with the higher educational system and expectations were larger problems than anticipated and required intrusive intervention by the project coordinators.

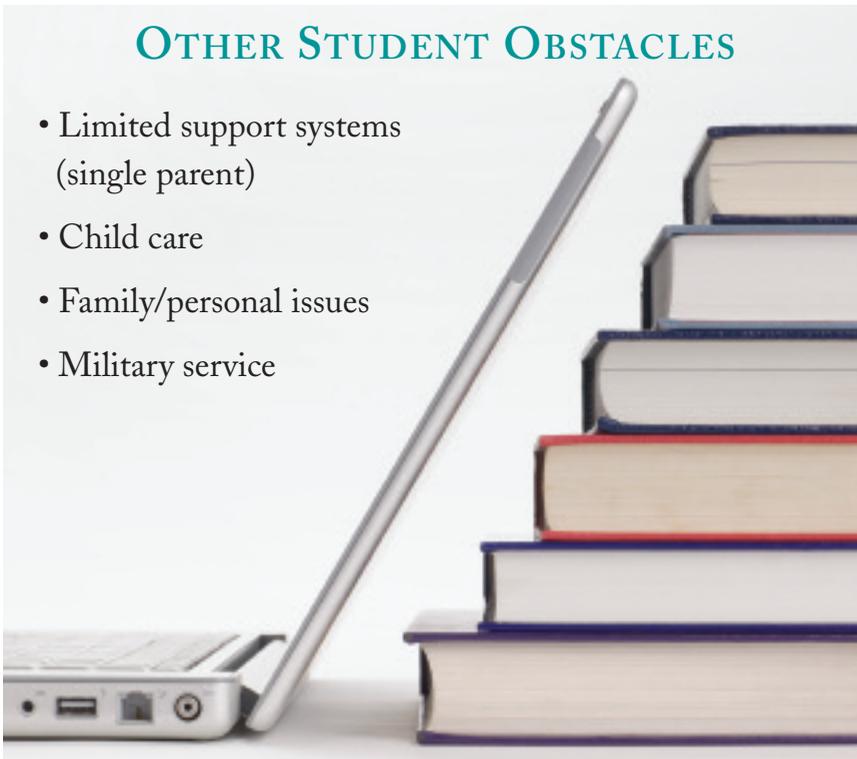
Most students had to work four to five shifts per week for their employer. This made course scheduling very challenging. It was imperative that the educational load did not exceed two days per week—a difficult challenge as science courses have a lecture and a lab component. With the start of the nursing courses, the schedule needed to accommodate lecture, lab, tutoring, and clinical days at the hospitals.

## Diversity within Cohort

Originally, cultural gaps within the cohort prevented team building. Students would sit, eat, and study in their distinct cultural groups. At the suggestion of one of the Presbyterian Homes administrators, students started to have pot luck suppers on class nights during their break. Each student brought an ethnic dish to pass. Subsequently, students started car-pooling to classes as well as studying together. Students became a team that supported each member, embracing their diversity as a strength.

### OTHER STUDENT OBSTACLES

- Limited support systems (single parent)
- Child care
- Family/personal issues
- Military service





# Conclusion



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To satisfy present and future healthcare staffing needs, healthcare educators must be willing and prepared to train and support non-traditional students, including the underemployed front-line work force.

The challenge for Oakton and Presbyterian Homes was to develop and implement an innovative program that targeted nontraditional students, addressed identified language and technical deficiencies, and expanded access to training and education by adapting coursework to best meet the needs of the cohort.

Having key administrative support at the highest levels, dedicated and broadly knowledgeable coordinators, and faculty who understand adult learner needs were three of the most important elements in the success of this program.

As word spread about the incumbent worker LPN program, Presbyterian Homes experienced a number of unexpected benefits, some almost unheard of in the long-term care industry:

- Provider has not experienced a shortage of CNAs for the last two years. Applicants state they are applying because of the LPN program and career advancement opportunities.
- Provider has not needed outside agency staffing for several years.
- Having an on-site program changed the workplace environment to that of a learning environment. With the high percentage of employees attending this program, the educational culture prevailed. The provider encouraged all staff members to pursue educational goals.
- Turnover rates for CNAs remain low at five to seven percent.
- Vacancy rates are less than one percent for RNs and two percent for CNA staff. With consistency in the CNA staff, the RNs tend to stay as well.
- Quality of care remains high; a more educated staff provides a higher level of care.
- Resident satisfaction ranges in the 90th percentile when compared to other providers.
- The graduation rate of the first class was high.
- The program has had a significant impact on changing the lives of the new graduates and their families.
- Provider has a steady stream of qualified nursing graduates to fill future vacancies.

### **Professional interest in this project**

The Oakton/Presbyterian Homes partners presented this successful program to several organizations with a focus on excellence in the health-care continuum, including: Leading Age (formerly The American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging, AAHSA); Illinois Community College Board Forum for Excellence; and Metropolitan Chicago Health Care Council. The partners even made a presentation to Senator Durbin and his representatives as a possible answer to Chicago area nursing shortages.

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## **POSITIVE RESULTS**

### **Practical Pathway LPN to RN Bridge Program**

- First class graduated December 2009
- 100% passed practical nurse state board exam (NCLEX)
- Changed the lives of new graduates and their families
- Second class of 17 completed program summer 2011.
- Program ongoing; future students graduate in 2012

### **Employer**

- Established career advancement program
  - Changed working environment to learning environment
  - Generated high employee satisfaction
  - Enhanced CNA recruitment
    - Increased retention of CNAs
    - Maintained low turnover rate
  - Eliminated use of outside agency staff
  - Increased resident satisfaction
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