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# A Career Approach to GED Instruction: A Case Study

## THE GED BRIDGE TO COLLEGE AND CAREER PROGRAM AT NORTHEAST WISCONSIN TECHNICAL COLLEGE

Although high school completion rates have slowly increased over the past several decades, nearly 30 million adults today still lack a high school credential and, as a result, face a significant barrier to both higher education and employment opportunities. Policymakers and practitioners in the adult education field are searching for ways to improve the quality of programs that prepare students for high school equivalency exams, particularly in the past few years due to changes to the General Educational Development (GED) exam. The GED exam is intended to meet Common Core standards as well as to test students on the skills and knowledge required for them to transition to postsecondary education or training, and ultimately to careers. As such, GED preparation programs have been adapting their curriculum and services to focus on careers in which workers are in high demand. This movement has been part of a broader approach called career pathways, which aims to improve students' basic educational and occupational skills while they earn high school and technical credentials as well as postsecondary certifications or degrees.

MDRC described the four main elements of this career-focused GED curriculum model in [A Career Approach to GED Instruction](#) in April 2015. These elements are (1) a career-focused curriculum; (2) support services to help students enter college or a career; (3) direct connections to postsecondary institutions; and (4) managed cohort enrollment. An example of the model is the GED Bridge to College and Career (GED Bridge) program at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC). MDRC is currently evaluating NWTC's GED Bridge program. This case study describes the program components, the characteristics of the students in the evaluation, and early implementation findings. (MDRC previously evaluated a [GED Bridge program](#) at LaGuardia Community College in New York City, which had very positive results on GED receipt and college enrollment.)

### GED BRIDGE PROGRAM COMPONENTS

NWTC's GED Bridge program serves adults from the local community in Green Bay, Wisconsin, who did not graduate from high school and who are interested in obtaining a high school credential. It is designed to help these individuals obtain a high school credential and transition seamlessly to postsecondary education or training. The program includes all four elements of a career-focused GED curriculum model.

**1. Contextualized, career-focused GED curriculum:** The contextualized curriculum is designed to accomplish two primary goals. The first is to promote development of the basic academic competencies required to pass the GED exam using curriculum content focused on different career sectors, including health sciences, business, public safety, and various trades. The second goal is to help students develop the habits and skills required for success in college or occupational training programs. To accomplish these goals, the curriculum:

- Uses authentic materials from a variety of sources, including popular news media, textbooks, nonfiction books, and trade publications;
- Offers career exploration in which students have the opportunity to develop awareness of career options and a plan for transition.

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- 2. College and career transition services:** GED Bridge students meet regularly with a transition specialist, who works with them to plan for postsecondary education or training. The specialist leads regular college-readiness sessions on topics such as financial aid, time management, and college registration. Students also have access to individualized services that include assistance with developing a plan for meeting the student’s educational and career goals. In addition, the specialist monitors students’ progress and addresses barriers to their persistence in the GED Bridge program.
- 3. Direct connection to a postsecondary institution:** Students attend classes and receive services at NWTC’s main college campus in Green Bay, Wisconsin. The program incorporates elements of the college experience by administering classes in a semester format, developing assignments similar to those that are typical of college courses, and using syllabi. Students have access to faculty members and college advisors, which present opportunities for them to build relationships that can help foster and maintain their motivation to pursue postsecondary education and training. They also have access to extracurricular activities and free support services that are available to other students, such as student life, campus events, the athletic facility, Campus Care (the campus health clinic), Shared Harvest Pantry, Career Closet, counseling services, financial coaching, and student emergency funds. In addition, GED Bridge students receive a college admissions fee waiver.
- 4. Managed cohort enrollment:** Every semester, the GED Bridge program covers two seven-week units, each of which focuses on a specific career sector. New students begin the program at the start of either one of the units. In between units, the transition specialist leads a weeklong session called “Transitions Week” that introduces students to the different programs offered at the college, financial aid, and other services that support transition to postsecondary education or training.

## THE MDRC EVALUATION

The evaluation at NWTC began in January 2015. Using a random assignment research design, it compares the GED Bridge program with NWTC’s GED Prep program. The average study participant is 27 years of age, is currently working, and earns less than \$25,000 a year. In addition, almost half of the participants (45 percent) have a reading level at or below the ninth grade, based on the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE).

GED Prep is a traditional preparation program that uses standardized materials, such as GED workbooks, without any career-focused content. It provides no additional counseling services beyond those available to the general NWTC student population. Similar to the Bridge program, GED Prep courses are taught on the NWTC campus; however, the course format and materials are not intentionally designed to support transition to postsecondary education or training. GED Prep also offers open enrollment, meaning that students can start or stop classes at any time throughout the year.

## EARLY IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

NWTC has been in the process of developing the curriculum and refining the model since the program and evaluation began in January 2015. Consequently, it is only recently that the program has been operating in a steady state. Findings from the research team’s first site visit, conducted in April 2016, indicate distinct differences between the GED Bridge and Prep programs. The GED Bridge classes were less focused on traditional test preparation activities, and instructors used more instructional modalities and changed activities more frequently than in GED Prep.

Although it was a challenge to implement the managed cohort enrollment, it emerged from interviews with staff and participants that it was a critical aspect of GED Bridge. Program staff identified managed or closed enrollment as supporting the delivery of the curriculum, promoting student engagement and making it easier for instructors to use class time effectively.

GED Bridge students expressed enthusiasm for the contextualized curriculum, specifically that it integrated subject areas, and the content of the lessons applied to them even if they had passed part of the GED exam. Furthermore, students in GED Bridge viewed the support and assistance they received from the transition specialist as a positive aspect of the program, and many planned to continue their education at NWTC after they receive their GED.

Future reports will provide more in-depth and longer-term findings on the implementation of NWTC's GED Bridge program as well as examine whether the program leads to higher rates of GED receipt and college enrollment than GED Prep.