

Minnesota FastTRAC (Training, Resources and Credentialing) Supplement
Background Information
May 4, 2009

“I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college or a four-year school; vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma.”

--President Barak Obama, Feb. 24, 2009, speech to a Joint Session of Congress

I. Introduction and Purpose of FastTRAC

The purpose of the FastTRAC resources is to improve collaborative service delivery for improving education and employment outcomes of adult Minnesotans, particularly adults who lack the basic and foundational skills to enter and complete post secondary education, including occupational skill training. There are too many Minnesotans with a high school diploma or an equivalent level of education who cannot enroll and complete occupational training without first mastering basic skills (such as math, reading and writing) and literacy in English.¹

In particular, FastTRAC resources will be used to increase system capacities to deliver education and training programming and services consistent with stackable credentials.² “Stackable credentials” refers to a series of certificates, licenses, diplomas or other credentials that “stack” on top of one another and designate advancement along career pathways. The long-term goal of the FastTRAC initiative is to enable the acquisition, recognition and portability of stackable credentials across Adult Basic Education, workforce development and higher education systems. (See section I.D for further definition of stackable credentials.)

The types of activities funded with FastTRAC resources are intentionally focused in order to:

- demonstrate education and training models that eliminate or mitigate barriers in order to collaboratively develop stackable credential programming in Minnesota;
- align and develop funding sources that encourage and support stackable credential development; and
- raise awareness of the value of stackable credentials across education and workforce development systems as well as job-seekers, workers, and employers.

FastTRAC is about increased alignment and greater awareness toward the goal of helping more adults gain skills and occupational credentials leading to family supporting

¹ 48% of 2008 Minnesota high school graduates enrolled in a two-year community or technical college took at least one developmental course, “[Getting Prepared, 2008](#)”.

² “Systems” refers to local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs), workforce service areas (WSAs) and their partners (Vocational Rehabilitation, Wagner-Peyser, Veterans); the Adult Basic Education (ABE) system; and the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) system.

wages. Numerous reports describe the disconnects between what adults need to prepare for postsecondary education or training programs and the opportunities and services made available by adult education and job training providers.³ Among the most serious disconnects in Minnesota’s system are:

- Program scope and content are not adequately aligned between Adult Basic Education, two-year and four-year postsecondary institutions, and job/occupational training programs, leading to redundancy, poor completion rates, and higher costs for students/workers, institutions and taxpayers overall.
- Postsecondary institutions tend to focus financial aid, instruction and delivery strategies on traditional-age students, not on working adults who must fit education and training around the requirements of fulltime jobs and family responsibilities. (The average age of students across the MnSCU system is 25.4.)⁴
- Federal workforce investment dollars have steadily decreased for the past decade and become increasingly “programmed” to narrowly-defined eligible participants, leaving most adult workers ineligible for assistance with training and lifelong learning.
- As business needs evolve at the regional level, demands are placed on adult education and job training programs to evolve their curricula and delivery systems, but such systems find it difficult to adapt at the required pace.
- Existing data systems are compartmentalized and not geared toward tracking students/workers across systems, undermining data sharing and analysis needed for program improvements and better policy making.

The activities proposed and funded under FastTRAC are expected to further develop stackable credential models that transcend the “disconnects” described above. The stackable credential models simultaneously enable students to succeed while informing state leadership of ways and the value of systems alignment.

³ Visit www.cte.mnscu.edu and click on FastTRAC to find a list under “Resources” of national and Minnesota studies on adult education.

⁴ Investments in K-12 cannot alone solve Minnesota’s skills shortfall: (i) declining birthrates mean the pipeline of K-12 will begin shrinking after 2009, leaving a smaller pool of potential replacement workers and replacement skills; (ii) if today’s trends continue, insufficient numbers of youth will enroll and complete high school and college to offset the gap created by aging baby boomers leaving the workforce, though improvements in these education outcomes would help modestly to fill the talent void; (iii) moreover, even with a high school diploma or equivalent many graduates have insufficient or deficient aptitudes to enter and succeed in postsecondary education or job training. Nearly half of all students entering MnSCU institutions require developmental education.

A. Defining the Low-Wage and/or Low-Skilled Adult Population

Postsecondary education is the most important predictor of personal economic success and intergenerational mobility in the United States. While 25 percent of today's jobs require a postsecondary credential or college degree, the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that about 45 percent of all new jobs over the next decade will require a college degree or postsecondary credential. (A credential may be a certificate, license, diploma or degree.) Yet, 60 percent of working age adults in Minnesota (1,976,325) have not completed college (Associate's Degree or higher). Many are unemployed, unable to

Nearly 2 million Minnesotans over the age of 18 do not have a college degree. 41% of them earn less than \$10/hour.

Nearly 400,000 over the age of 25 have not completed high school or equivalent. 70% of them earn less than \$10/hour.

compete against higher skilled persons for jobs in today's dismal labor market. Many others are stuck in low-paying jobs without opportunities for advancement. This is a cohort of workers who are a readily-available human resource for Minnesota employers provided they can get additional basic and technical skills and credentials valued in the labor market.

B. State Systems Serving the Low-Wage and/or Low-Skilled Adult Population

Minnesota's education and workforce development systems are already serving this population, strengthening connections to improve education and labor market outcomes for low-wage workers. The serious downturn in Minnesota's economy means these agencies are serving higher numbers of out-of-work adults seeking educational and workforce opportunities. Even before the economic decline of 2008-09, efforts were underway to better align state systems alongside community-based organizations to improve education and employment outcomes for adults.

As many as 3 of 4 customers served by MN Workforce Centers may lack the skills and credentials to gain access to family sustaining jobs:*

- *50% of all customers ("universal" and "program eligible") have a high school diploma/GED or less;*
- *22% have some college but no certificate or other type of credential.*

** CRS customers, Jul-Dec '08.*

- The Minnesota Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Unified Plan (2006) strengthened a collaborative relationship between the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) Adult Basic Education (ABE) Office and DEED and introduced the *Education and Training Collaborative (ETC) Grant* to improve the ability of local workforce programs in partnership with ABE services to address the skills gap facing Minnesota's businesses.
- Between 2004 and 2007 the ABE Office sponsored the *Workforce Initiative for a Leadership and Mentoring Alliance (WILMA)* project which invested \$1.4 million in developing over 200 Workforce Education Classes throughout Minnesota. ABE supported the development of an on-going learning network of ABE providers

who are committed to sustaining the delivery of ABE services in an occupational context.

- ABE Transitions to Postsecondary Education and Training Initiative continues to articulate ABE curriculum with the Minnesota State College and University (MnSCU) system's placement testing tool (Accuplacer) and develop referral protocol between ABE programs and MnSCU institutions, including both ABE and English as a Second Language (ESL) programming. These efforts are intended to increase the number of ABE students who enroll and succeed in postsecondary education.

Any adult functioning below the 12th grade level in math, writing, or speaking English is eligible to attend Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes in Minnesota.

ABE will serve more than 80,000 adults in 2009, only 12% of the eligible ABE population.

For more information, visit [ABE system](#).

In addition, either on their own initiative or with the support of efforts described above, a few Minnesota postsecondary institutions, workforce development entities and ABE providers have developed programs that have broken down system barriers to produce positive outcomes and affordable programming for working adults. One of the primary goals of the FastTRAC Initiative is to scale up and create consistent, sustainable, seamless programming statewide. Simply, it is to make such programs the norm, not the exception.

C. Positioning FastTRAC to Sustain Commitments

The Minnesota FastTRAC: Training, Resources and Credentialing statewide initiative that started in 2007 grew out of relationships between ABE system providers, higher education, and workforce development practitioners both inside and outside state government. An initial funding opportunity in 2007-08 from the Joyce Foundation Shifting Gears Initiative channeled efforts in Minnesota to create FastTRAC. The efforts have been sustained by additional Joyce Foundation and state investments.

The Minnesota FastTRAC initiative is not a project or a program. It is a way of doing business differently. FastTRAC envisions creating sustainable stackable credential employment and training programs throughout the state. These FastTRAC programs would be available to low-wage and/or low-skilled adults for the purpose of improving basic, workforce readiness and occupation-specific skills in order to have the foundational skills to attain an occupational credential that improves a worker's prospects for earning family-supporting wages.

Stackable credentials refers to coordinated education and training programming that enables adults at any education level to access basic and occupational skills with the goal of earning a credential needed to enter and advance in the labor market. Programming is seamless in that modules of training and education are provided across

the higher education, workforce development and ABE systems to avoid duplication and delivered with the flexibility to enable adults to juggle work and family responsibilities. The priority is to create opportunities for low-wage and/or low-skilled adults who need credentials and higher skills to earn family supporting wages and enable businesses to compete in an ever more talent-centered economy.

D. Defining Stackable Credentials

The track record of existing stackable credential programs in Minnesota—and confirmed by strategies in Washington, Oregon, Ohio, and Kentucky—suggest that a stackable credentials framework comprises many or all of the following elements.

- **Career pathway model** – a program that admits and supports students in a specific “roadmap” of education and skills training which lead to credentials at every major level of career advancement in a particular industry. Career pathways offer opportunities at all points along a continuum of ABE/ESL basic skills, non-degree postsecondary occupational education and training with certification that may or may not require admission to postsecondary for-credit programs, and postsecondary education at the two and four-year degree level.
- **Accelerated programming** – attainment of skills and credentials through thoughtful instructional processes and content, e.g., high-intensity programs, dual enrollment options, in order for students to quickly enter and advance in careers.
- **Multi-level, industry-recognized credentials** – collaboratively developed, industry-valued credentials created by business and the workforce education and training systems for in-demand, skilled jobs.
- **Contextualized and competency-based curriculum** – flexible sequencing of basic skills and blending both core academic and technical skills.
- **Flexible entry points** - modularized curricula developed into sets of courses with discrete employment outcomes that enable students to enter and exit a degree or certificate program at specific points in their educational cycle rather than completing an entire program at once.
- **Connections to regional high-demand job needs** – credentials and bridge curriculum (see page 4, Section E for bridge curriculum definition) based on labor market analysis of employer demand and research on the skill sets business requires for various jobs within an industry.
- **Support services specific to adult students** – "wrap-around" student services that enhance student planning and informed decision making and increase student success in achieving both academic and employment goals. Services like career and academic counseling, peer mentoring, tutoring, and transportation and childcare assistance are examples of wrap-around services.
- **Comprehensive data collection and evaluation** – collection and analysis of baseline data as well as student and program outcomes, which follows the client across multiple workforce and education systems.