

FOCUSING ON ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

Bridges to Career Pathways in Southeastern Wisconsin

INTRODUCTION

Education and skills will be the cornerstone of competitiveness for Wisconsin. Leaders throughout the state and its southeastern region, known as the *Milwaukee 7*, or *M7*, are working in new ways to build the skills of the workforce and to ensure that regional employers have the employee and skill base they need. Research laid out in this report, conducted over the summer of 2008, is intended to help strengthen these efforts by providing more information on a key population in need of skills—adult basic education (ABE) students—and offering some insights on student perceptions of their own skills, the labor market, and the training they need to move ahead. Further, the report provides more detailed information on the broader population of low-wage working adults in the M7 region. The conclusion offers some policy suggestions that would help enhance the advancement prospects of regional ABE students.

The Regional Workforce Alliance (RWA)—a collaboration of workforce development, economic development, and educational organizations across Southeastern Wisconsin—has commissioned this work. They are interested in the experiences and challenges faced by workers in the region who are in most need of education and training in order to advance in the regional economy—those with no education beyond the high school degree. Given what is known about educational attainment in Wisconsin—that high school completion alone brings little reward in the labor market¹—targeting this segment of the workforce is of central importance to Southeastern Wisconsin’s economic and workforce development strategy. The goal is to better understand this population in order to better connect them to the region’s technical colleges and post-secondary credentials.

While the focus of the RWA and other initiatives is broader than just the ABE population, this population and its success in transition is a key focus of concern. ABE students generally do not have high school degrees and are developing skills at the high school level or below. Generally, ABE encompasses curriculum in “basic skills”—things like computer literacy, fundamental math concepts, basic writing, financial literacy, and English language skills—that are integral to a worker’s success in any job. Considering ABE students will be important to inform program innovations at regional technical colleges that are focused on raising skills and promoting connections to post-secondary education and career pathways.

At three of the technical colleges in Southeastern Wisconsin—Gateway Technical College (“Gateway”), Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC), and Waukesha County Technical College (WCTC)—basic education is provided through separate and specific administrative units within each school.² These departments generally provide Adult Basic Education (defined as K-12 instruction in all core academic areas), English language instruction, adult high school courses, and developmental/remedial courses (for college students) to residents of the technical college district. The ABE student population comprises employed and unemployed adults, high school graduates, and at-risk high school students contracted by the local school districts. Instruction and curriculum

¹ See *Skilled Workers, Quality Jobs: Meeting the Needs of Wisconsin’s Workers and Businesses*, Center on Wisconsin Strategy (2008), available at <http://www.cows.org/pdf/rp-skilledworkersqualityjobs.pdf>.

² Basic education is provided by the Academic Development Department at Gateway, the Pre-College Division at Milwaukee Area Technical College, and the Academic Support Center at Waukesha County Technical College.

Acknowledgements

This project was funded by the Department of Labor Employment and Training WIRED grant. Special thanks to the UW Survey Center, the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS), the Waukesha-Ozaukee-Washington (WOW) Workforce Development Board, the Southeastern Wisconsin Workforce Development Board, the Milwaukee Area Workforce Investment Board (MAWIB), Waukesha County Technical College (WCTC), Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC), Gateway Technical College, and the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (DWD) for their valuable assistance. Particular thanks to all of our ABE focus group participants who generously shared their experiences and feedback.

**WIRED Technical Assistance Report
Prepared for the M7 Regional
Workforce Alliance
November, 2008**

is delivered in computer-equipped learning labs at multiple locations: inside the colleges, at local Workforce Development Centers, at community-based organizations (CBOs), within correctional facilities, and in some public K-12 classrooms. The learning labs use individualized instruction, computer-based instruction, small group work, and course work utilizing the WTCS state curriculum. ABE students have access to special needs support services, career counselors, and workshops provided by the Workforce Development Centers. In addition, they have access to program instructors, registration and testing services provided by Student Services, and the services of college Learning Resource Centers.

In order to better understand ABE students and the barriers they perceive to education and skill development, five focus group interviews were conducted with current ABE students across Southeastern Wisconsin. These focus groups were commissioned by the Regional Workforce Alliance under the following general framework of inquiry:

1. A sound economic and workforce development strategy in Southeastern Wisconsin must connect those struggling most in our labor force—workers caught in low-wage, low-benefit jobs who either lack or possess no more than a high school diploma—with education and training that elevates their skills, equips them with post-secondary credentials, and secures firm attachments to higher-wage occupations in demand in the labor market.
2. One way to inform ongoing efforts by the regional technical colleges to promote these connections and nurture transitions to certificate and degree-granting programs is to gain a more in-depth understanding of the actual experiences of students currently participating in ABE (through focus groups).
3. Focus group results that report—from in-depth, first-hand accounts—on student motivation, day-to-day educational experiences, barriers to persistence and completion, perceived triumphs and challenges, and connections to jobs and further education, will assist regional technical colleges in evaluating current and planned curricular and support innovations to increase ABE completion and transition.

In addition to summarizing ABE focus group results for the Southeastern Wisconsin region, this report connects RWA's agenda to that of the statewide RISE (Regional Industry Skills Education) Partnership for Wisconsin³, a collaboration of the Wisconsin Technical College System and the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. RISE focuses on improving educational and occupational transitions for Wisconsin's low-income working adults, and promoting stronger state policies to support career pathways in the state. This includes fostering the expansion of bridge programming⁴, facilitating a career pathways approach in postsecondary training, and engaging business and industry to ensure that training is responsive to skills shortages in the statewide labor market.

The RISE Partnership recently identified a target population of workers in the state who are in most need of further education and training to achieve higher wages, better job quality, and more secure attachments to the workforce. This report employs the same methodology used by RISE to identify a regional target population in Southeastern Wisconsin. In addition, our report parallels RISE efforts by identifying a set of regional middle-skill jobs that require more than high-school but less than a 4-year degree, where skills shortages are projected to emerge in the next decade. The paper concludes with a series of recommendations on what technical colleges and the workforce development system in Southeastern Wisconsin can do (or continue to do) to achieve better ABE student outcomes and transitions.

³ See <http://risepartnership.org/>.

⁴ Technical college bridges can support transitions to postsecondary training for lower-skill adults. For the purposes of this paper, we use the term "bridge program" interchangeably with contextualized Adult Basic Education—an approach that provides core basic skills in the context of specific occupations, and ideally serves as a bridge to better jobs and further training in related certificate and associate degree programs.

More about the Regional Workforce Alliance, the Milwaukee 7 and WIRED

The **Regional Workforce Alliance (RWA)** of Southeastern Wisconsin—representing Ozaukee, Milwaukee, Waukesha, Washington, Walworth, Racine, and Kenosha counties—is a collaboration of organizations representing workforce development, economic development, and education across Southeastern Wisconsin. Partners in the RWA include: Workforce Development Boards (the Waukesha-Ozaukee-Washington ‘WOW’ Workforce Development Board, the Southeastern Wisconsin Workforce Development Board, the Milwaukee Area Workforce Investment Board), the Milwaukee 7, the 21st Century Learning Initiative, regional businesses, and local elected officials.

The RWA is the talent development arm¹ of the **Milwaukee 7**, and guides the WIRED initiative of Southeastern Wisconsin. The Milwaukee 7 encompasses the same seven counties as the RWA, and is a cooperative regional economic development entity with the mission of “attracting, retaining, and growing a diverse base of regional businesses and talent.”² **WIRED** stands for the *Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development* initiative, a federally-funded program designed to transform talent development programs and activities into a sustainable force for regional growth. The Milwaukee 7 is one of 39 regions across the United States participating in the WIRED initiative.³

¹ <http://www.milwaukee7-rwa.com/wiki/show/WIRED%20Governance%20Structure%20>

² <http://www.choosemilwaukee.com/milwaukee7/default.aspx>

³ <http://www.milwaukee7-rwa.com/wiki>

ABE STUDENTS IN FOCUS

In order to gain a richer understanding of the experiences of Adult Basic Education (ABE) students in Southeastern Wisconsin, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy and the University of Wisconsin Survey Center conducted a series of focus group interviews with ABE participants across the region. Through these group interviews, we hoped to learn more about the achievements and challenges confronted by students in pursuit of a GED or HSED, as well as barriers encountered while attempting to firmly transition to post-secondary certificate and/or degree programs. A focus group is a research tool used to draw out respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and reactions at a level of depth that is difficult to achieve with quantitative research or other qualitative methods like observation and individual interviews. Generally, a focus group interview is moderated with a series of topical open-ended questions—called 'probes'—to stimulate interaction among the group and garner a range of views. The information gathered includes a set of insights and thick descriptions which can be used to develop or test a research hypothesis or, in our case, provide a clearer understanding of the complexities of ABE student experiences to better equip the technical colleges to enhance and/or modify ABE curriculum delivery and support/transition services.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Five focus groups were held at Southeastern Wisconsin technical college campuses during the first two weeks of July 2008.⁵ The interviews were conducted with current ABE students who were taking courses through a local technical school or technical school affiliate (i.e., a workforce development center or community-based organization). Discussions drew participants from Milwaukee County, Waukesha County, and Racine County, and engaged two categories of ABE students: 1) adults receiving instruction designed for an academic competency level comparable to grades six through eight, and 2) adults receiving instruction designed for an academic competency level comparable to that offered in grades nine through twelve. Participants received their ABE instruction at one of four locations: 1) on a technical college campus in an ABE learning center or "learning lab"; 2) at a local community-based organization; 3) at their local job center/workforce development center; or 4) on the premises of a host company partnering with a technical college to provide "occupationally contextualized" ABE.

The personal backgrounds and life circumstances of focus group participants varied. The majority of attendees were currently unemployed and had been so for one year or more. Participants included:

- Former manufacturing workers recently laid off from companies they began working for 10 to 30 years prior, forgoing high school completion in favor of work.
- Young (18-35 years old) male and female high school dropouts, with and without dependent children.
- Adult (ranging 25-55) male high school dropouts who have been in and out of the labor force due to previous problems with substance abuse, some with criminal records and repeated difficulty with the law.
- Retirees collecting a pension and/or social security who dropped out of high school and are using retirement time to seek a credential (GED and/or HSED), some of whom anticipate re-entering the labor force on at least a part-time basis.

⁵ For a detailed description of focus group methodology as well as the complete focus group "question route", please see Appendix A.

Our study was designed to better determine how ABE instructional delivery and support services can maximize student success in both completing the GED/HSED and transitioning to post-secondary certificate and degree programs. In light of this goal, our focus group questions were categorized around four themes:

Impetus for Pursuing Adult Basic Education

Helping students succeed requires a deeper understanding of the practical and personal motivations driving a student to begin an ABE program in the first place. While some of these drivers are predictable, obtaining descriptive first-hand accounts during the focus groups illuminated current and future barriers to transition, highlighted student hopes and expectations, and provided insight into the clarity of student goals in both the classroom and the labor market.

Anticipated vs. Actual Experience of ABE Program & Support Services

A subset of focus group questions asked ABE students what they *anticipated* or expected before they began training, versus how they perceived their experience *in actuality*. These questions drew out the progress students felt they were making in the classroom, and the attendant quality of instruction and support. This line of questioning also prompted very specific suggestions as to how ABE course delivery and support services can be even more responsive to specific student needs.

Barriers to Completion/Transition

A central goal of our focus groups was to obtain a detailed understanding of the personal, psychological, and intellectual challenges students face as they work toward completing ABE coursework, attaining a GED or HSED, and/or transitioning to further post-secondary training. We asked a series of questions about learning-related challenges in the classroom; challenges related to the administrative delivery of ABE curriculum and support services; barriers related to childcare, family, and household obligations; work-related barriers; and psychological barriers. Many of the challenges faced while pursuing a GED or HSED will follow students as they transition to post-secondary training, and therefore must be taken into account when determining how to foster better transitions.

Connections to Higher-Wage, Higher-Quality Work via Post-Secondary Education

A post-secondary credential carries a significant payoff in the labor market compared to a high school degree or its equivalent—both in terms of wages and job quality. It is therefore crucial that we find ways to help low-skilled workers make successful transitions from basic education to post-secondary training that has a well-articulated career path. We would do well to pay attention, then, to the ways that ABE students are connected to the certificate and degree-granting divisions of technical colleges, to articulated career goals, and to specific training and guidance that will help them move into higher-wage, higher-quality work. A significant portion of each focus group was devoted to this line of questioning.

LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES OF FOCUS GROUPS

For the many benefits of focus groups in obtaining in-depth and nuanced information, this qualitative method has some inherent limitations. Given the necessarily small, intimate nature of the groups (in our case, an average size of seven participants), it is difficult to achieve a level of representativeness necessary for drawing region-wide conclusions. Our focus group participants represent a limited regional geography (Racine, Waukesha, and Milwaukee only), and a limited subset of ABE students within those geographical boundaries (the participant base did not include remedial and developmental ABE students, nor did it include ELL students).

However, our efforts did effectively capture extensive, detailed information about very specific subpopulations within the regional ABE student base. Both focus groups in Racine yielded a population predominantly composed of 35-55 year-old displaced manufacturing workers. One of two focus groups in Milwaukee included only students who have recently completed an occupationally contextualized “pre-welding” certificate course, generating relatively confined but intensely descriptive feedback on the effectiveness of this program. The participants of the second Milwaukee focus group differed with respect to age, gender, and extent of responsibility for dependent children, but all members shared a significant reliance on cash assistance programs via their W2 or Food Stamp Employment and Training (FSET) client status. Finally, members of our group in Waukesha—while diverse with respect to age, employment status, gender, and circumstances driving ABE program participation—were all receiving ABE curriculum instruction and support services within the same model ABE learning center.

RESULTS: IMPETUS AND MOTIVATION FOR PURSUING ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

Students enrolled in adult basic education in Milwaukee, Waukesha, and Racine are pursuing further training to achieve greater ‘rewards’ in the labor market, both financial rewards through jobs that carry higher wages and benefits, and psychological rewards through increased job satisfaction and self-esteem. We learned the following in asking participants to elaborate on what motivates them to pursue basic education at this particular time in their lives:

GED Attainment

An overwhelming majority of focus group participants stated that their primary goal in seeking basic skills training is the attainment of a GED. Most participants dropped out of high school—whether for relatively well-paid job opportunities in manufacturing firms years ago, as a result of having children at a young age, or due to recurring substance abuse and/or illegal behavior—and shared a frustrated understanding that the majority of jobs today, even very low-skilled jobs, require a GED or high school equivalency. Getting the GED was of such paramount importance to the participants that when later asked about career aspirations and connection to further training, several students expressed uncertainty and exasperation, sharing that they simply needed to focus on getting the GED and “getting a good job.”

“Well, for me, I came to classes because the jobs that I’m trying to apply for require the GED. It’s like, I’m over 18, even over 25, and I have a license...it’s like I have everything else but when it gets to that question—do you have a GED or high school diploma?—I don’t have that. So it’s like, if I want a good paying job, and they’re going to check my records, I’ve got that GED right there.”

“Like at fast food restaurants. You now have to have a high school diploma to work there. To flip hamburgers. I do that all day everyday at my house. I can make a hamburger.”

“And it still comes back down to getting the GED—you know, just walking in the door and then knowing that getting the GED is going to wind up opening a whole lot more doors for you.”

Job Loss/Intermittent Labor Force Participation

Related to obtaining the GED, most focus group participants were driven to pursue basic skills training as a direct result of losing their previous job and needing to retrain, and/or experiencing weak, intermittent attachments to the labor force. As mentioned earlier, the majority of students had been out of work for one year or more. Most participants from Racine and several from Waukesha had lost their long-standing jobs in manufacturing firms due to factory closings. Other participants included young, single mothers with small children who had been in and out of low-skilled work; high school dropouts whose problems with drugs, alcohol, or criminal behavior had severely hindered their ability to get and keep a job; and workers who experienced major health problems or had suffered injuries in their previous jobs which made it impossible to return to those jobs.

Personal Transformations/Setting a Good Example

Several respondents expressed that going back to school was part of a commitment to better their lives and ‘transform’ themselves. Students shared a desire to change course from years of making choices that were detrimental to their work and/or personal lives. They noted that they were in school to set a good example for their children by showing a commitment to education. A number of students shared that they had watched their mothers get their GEDs in mid-life, and this inspired them to pursue the same for themselves in an effort to make their parents proud.

“I had a lot of failure in my life, you know, based on my own decisions. My mother always told me that education was the key, but I didn’t listen, I chose to do other things. But now today, I’m trying to make a transformation, to be a responsible person.”

“More Money”

When asked about the motivation to pursue further training, many participants simply stated that they wanted to earn more money. This conversation revealed an understanding on the part of participants that, without further training and educational credentials, their opportunities for higher wage work are limited. Students expressed that they didn’t want to feel ‘trapped’, and that they wanted a path to monetary success.

“I went back to school because I was trying to make more money because I’ve been cooking for like 12 or 13 years and I want to do something else, you know, something else more challenging and something else to make more money. So that’s why I went back to school so I could take care of my daughter better. That’s all.”

“I want more than a job, I want a career.”

Some students shared that they were tired of simply ‘working a job’, and that they were going back to school because they wanted a ‘real career’ and ‘a path.’ Frustrated with low-wage, low-skill jobs that offer limited opportunity for advancement, these participants expressed an earnest determination to connect to a meaningful occupational pathway.

“I don’t want a job, I want a career. I want to be stable somewhere, somewhere I can advance. I’m tired of switching from job to job, back and forth, from one fast food restaurant to another.”

Retiree Educational Goals and Part-Time Re-Entry Into the Labor Force

A number of focus group participants were retired and collecting Social Security, or recently began collecting a pension. These students returned to school to acquire the credential they had forgone, to their regret, many decades ago, seizing the opportunity to realize a long-held dream. Several of them expressed an intention to obtain the GED or HSED and re-enter the workforce on a part-time basis to supplement retirement income or to acquire health insurance.

Mandates of Social Assistance Programs

Some focus group participants were extremely straight-forward in sharing with us that, while their motivation to continue training and credentialing to re-enter the labor force was strong and sincere, they are also driven to pursue ABE training because of work and training requirements mandated under W2, the Food Stamp Employment and Training (FSET) Program, or unemployment for maintenance of benefits.

"I really didn't want to go back to school because I figure I'm too old to go back to school. But basically I did it to continue my unemployment so I have some money coming in, and they will pay for the education, so basically that's why I went back."

RESULTS: ANTICIPATED VS. ACTUAL EXPERIENCE OF ABE PROGRAM AND SUPPORT SERVICES

Focus group participants were initially asked what they *anticipated* from their ABE program before they began classes (i.e. what sort of expectations did they hold? What types of thoughts and emotions were they experiencing?). Multiple participants felt excited and enthusiastic about the opportunity to pursue training and acquire new skills, and regretted that they did not fully appreciate school when they were young. Most students shared that they anticipated feeling afraid and embarrassed in the classroom—fearful about their ability to reacquire math and advanced reading and writing skills, and ashamed of their lack of educational credentials. Students anticipated experiencing severe test anxiety. Nearly every focus group participant over the age of 25 anticipated feeling “old” and less able to quickly absorb concepts or acquire dexterity with computer technology relative to younger students. Some students predicted that they would struggle trying to balance the intellectual and practical demands of training with personal, childcare, and work responsibilities.

Next, focus group participants were asked how they perceive their ABE experience *in actuality*, comparing it with their initial expectations. This line of questioning generated the following responses:

Dissipating fear and embarrassment

As anticipated, students felt fear and embarrassment upon beginning ABE instruction. However, they cited a marked decrease in these emotions as the program progressed. They attributed this to encouragement from ABE instructors and supportive interaction with other ABE students of similar age and life circumstances. Older students reflected upon how even interaction with young students reminded them that similar experiences and struggles span age groups, diminishing insecurity about their ‘maturity’. Additionally, students reported that with the passing of each cognitive hurdle (e.g. successfully mastering fractions, becoming comfortable using the computer, passing one part of the GED), their hopes for success were bolstered. In our focus group of students pursuing an occupationally-contextualized ABE pre-welding certificate, students stated that initial fears were quickly replaced by a new sense of purpose, self-esteem, and clear sense of occupational direction. Despite growing confidence shared by students as they progressed in their programs, many of them expressed persistent test anxiety and continuing difficulty with mathematics.

Satisfaction with quality of instructors

Students reported generally high satisfaction with the quality of their ABE instructors. They felt their teachers were supportive and encouraging, adaptive to different learning styles, and creative in their presentation of material. A slight decrease in satisfaction with instructors existed where students were taking courses at a workforce development center site or, in some cases, a community-based organization. Students here described their course delivery as more self-directed on the computer. These students expressed that at times they wished they had more structure, and that instructors would increase the frequency of their follow-up with students to determine progress and skills development. Some students taking ABE courses at the technical colleges wanted increased one-on-one attention during available ABE lab hours (as opposed to scheduling outside tutoring sessions). Again, in the case of students completing the occupationally contextualized ABE/pre-welding certificate, participants were extremely happy with the quality of instruction and personal attention. They viewed their instructors as mentors who pushed and encouraged them in the classroom and welding shop, and took a personal interest in guiding them into degree-granting welding programs.

“I like the learning center. I wish that there was a little bit more one-on-one help and more teachers for people that are really, really struggling. I know everyone’s struggling. I’m really struggling with the math, and I feel like—the teacher sits down with me for like five seconds and then she walks away and then I forget everything.”

Desire for more understanding, empathy and intuition/anticipation

Despite a generally high level of satisfaction with their instructors, focus group participants shared a desire for ever-greater understanding, empathy, and patience from them. Students elaborated on the emotional stress of struggling in the classroom; they felt embarrassed when they repeatedly failed to grasp concepts, and hesitated telling teachers that they were not ready to move on to the next topic. They wished the teachers had a better understanding of what each student struggles with in their personal lives, and they expressed frustration that ABE instructors didn’t proactively anticipate/discern when a student was struggling in the classroom, or personally.

Varied knowledge about and satisfaction with support services

Focus group participants varied in their knowledge about and use of support services to facilitate ABE program attendance and program transitions. By ‘support services’ we are referring to things like free bus passes, childcare, tutoring, career counseling, interview preparation, and resume-writing assistance, provided by either the tech college, job center, and/or designated community-based organization. Questions were also asked about participant access to public support services like food stamps, BadgerCare, and W2 childcare benefits. All focus group participants eligible for public supports were taking advantage of the full scope of services through their W2 client status or participation in the Food Stamp Employment and Training (FSET) program. Services offered at the job centers appeared well understood, with multiple participants noting they took advantage of resume and interview preparation services. Knowledge about support services varied most among participants taking their ABE coursework in “labs” or “learning centers” at the technical colleges and also between those students and the ABE students taking their coursework at Workforce Development Centers. Among ABE students at the technical college, students had varied knowledge of available support services, and a number of students wished the services were better publicized at the school. Students at the Workforce Development Centers were frustrated and envious when they heard about the range and quality of support offered at the tech college (particularly with respect to one-on-one or group tutoring, ‘career tours’, and counseling).

No Job “Guarantees”

As noted earlier, ABE students usually pursue training and/or a GED or HSED credential because of recent job loss, long periods of unemployment, and/or years of weak and intermittent connections to work. They have an urgent need to re-enter the labor force quickly, to adequately support themselves and their families. Many students face tremendous challenges that serve as barriers to persistence and attainment of the GED/HSED, a topic covered later in this report. Focus group participants who had just earned their GED, or were getting close to doing so, were frustrated and fearful that there was no “guarantee” of a job after all of their hard work. They noted that many jobs require “experience” along with the GED. Students wished that employers would hire them on a ‘probationary’ basis to gain that experience.

Throughout this conversation, the topic of Job Center services was discussed. Participant satisfaction with job center services was varied. Most had positive experiences receiving help with resume writing and interviewing skills, but some felt negatively about job centers, feeling that clients received no guidance and were simply directed to job postings on the computer that were often outdated or irrelevant.

RESULTS: BARRIERS TO COMPLETION, TRANSITION AND WORK

A significant part of each focus group discussion was dedicated to learning about the many challenges and barriers ABE students face as they strive to complete ABE coursework, obtain a GED or HSED, transition to certificate and/or degree granting divisions of technical colleges, or secure stable, quality jobs. An understanding of these barriers can constructively inform technical colleges’ efforts to enhance support and transition services, building stronger bridges to credentials that will pay off in the labor market.

Childcare, Family , Work, and Community

The ability to balance the demands of childcare, elder care, and family finances with those of school and work dramatically affects ABE students’ success in persisting with training. Focus group participants, several of whom were single parents, acknowledged that providing care for their children took priority over attending class or completing school work at home. In addition, managing daily life—finances and bill-paying (mortgages and rent), work obligations (the few focus group participants who were working held multiple jobs, and often worked nights), and personal safety (several students described living in dangerous, crime-ridden neighborhoods)—made schooling less of a priority than basic survival at times. Frustrated anecdotes surfaced from single mothers on W2 supports, describing how the very structure and delivery of assistance programs conflicted with programmatic training mandates, triggering benefit sanctions. For example, one mother explained that while the bus to take her daughter to childcare came at 8:30 am, she was expected to be at training at 8:30 am, and the bus on which she depended to get to that training ran on intermittent, unpredictable schedules.

“Because some people, you know, they have rough things going on in their life where they can’t go to school, where they are forced to move around back and forth and can’t get back in school, and that’s hard. But they want to work. And it’s like how do we go about it and who do we talk to about it—we already have stress in everyday life, worrying about making sure you’re safe when you walk out of the house. And now there’s more pressure on a person to get my GED—I have to take these classes. I have to. I have to. And it’s like some people—a lot of people—need their load taken off them, like me. I take care of my kids. I’m starting all over. My boy is six months. I have a 12-year-old and a 10-year old. I put my schooling aside to take care of them. And then my father died from cancer when I got back in school. Everything keeps coming, happening. It’s getting harder and harder for me to get my GED.”

ABE Delivery Structure

Given the many demands on students' time described above, some focus group participants expressed frustration with administrative elements of ABE program delivery. The hours of operation of some ABE learning labs were described as too limited and conflicting with childcare and family demands. For example, references were made to one learning lab's hours set from 8 am to noon, and then again after 5 pm, but students preferred that the lab remain open until 4 pm due to childcare responsibilities beginning at 5 pm. Other students wished that they could take math reference textbooks home to help them with homework exercises, a practice allegedly not allowed in some Learning Centers.

Limited Time/Urgency to Enter the Workforce

'Time' was repeatedly cited by ABE focus group participants as a barrier both to GED/HSED completion and to further training via transitions to technical college certificate and degree-granting programs. Childcare, family, and financial responsibilities bring an urgent need for ABE students to find jobs quickly, particularly for single parents. For some, the urgency is so great that even full-time or multiple low-wage jobs are a better alternative to staying out of the labor force, or limiting labor force participation in favor of training. Those focus group participants not eligible for W2 and without dependent children noted their urgency to return to the labor force in order to acquire health insurance, explaining that while they wanted to pursue further training beyond the GED, they couldn't afford out-of-pocket costs for their prescriptions for much longer and worried that lack of health insurance was a 'ticking time bomb.' Time was also noted as a factor influencing the training paths pursued by ABE students above age 55. Several of these focus group participants would have liked to pursue associate degree programs, but felt they were 'too old' and instead talked about shorter-term certificate programs they were less enthusiastic about, but which would afford them quick re-entry into the labor force.

"I took the course out here. I wanted to become a physical therapist assistant, but the clinical wait was two years. And I'm thinking, by then I'll need physical therapy myself."

Psychological Challenges to Persistence and Motivation

Focus group participants referenced multiple psychological challenges affecting persistence and motivation, and thus serving as barriers to ABE program completion, transitions, and re-entry into the workforce. Fears and embarrassment about being 'old' extended to psychological attitudes about finding work; many ABE students worried that prospective employers would choose a younger worker over a middle-aged worker. Several focus group participants who had been laid off from long-held jobs in the manufacturing sector felt bitter, angry, and dejected; they never anticipated that they would lose their jobs and be forced to retrain. Many of these discussants conveyed a painful understanding that they would never be able to recoup the level of wages and benefits they had earned in the manufacturing sector. Consequently, they felt paralyzed, hoping to continue training and maintain unemployment benefits for as long as possible before having to face re-entering the workforce.

Geographic Limitations and Transportation

Challenges related to geography and transportation were frequently cited by focus group participants as barriers to program completion, tech college transitions, and labor market re-entry. All discussants mentioned that reliance on public transportation made it more difficult to access computer and learning labs while taking pre-GED ABE classes. Many participants took advantage of bus passes, which helped a great deal, but some participants without access to bus passes faced high costs of transportation. Several participants stated that their job aspirations would be limited to their immediate locale due to lack of a vehicle. Geography, more generally, was referenced as a barrier to the pursuit of certain certificate training programs not offered at a student's particular branch campus.

Other

Barriers cited less often by participants are still worth noting. Some students mentioned the inability to finance transitions to tech college certificate and degree granting programs. For the majority of focus group participants, ABE/GED-prep coursework was not the financial responsibility of the student, rather guaranteed under the provisions of W2 benefits, the Food Stamp Employment and Training Program (FSET), or unemployment. One focus group participant stated that he greatly desired, but would be unable to afford, further training beyond ABE. While we expected affordability to be a commonly-cited barrier to the pursuit of postsecondary education, it was not commonly mentioned, causing us to wonder how seriously and realistically many ABE students were thinking about their ability to pursue further training.

Other cited barriers include the difficulty of finding work if an ABE student possessed a felony record and/or had recurring minor run-ins with the law. Finally, physical limitations (e.g. lacking the ability to lift 50lbs or more, or stand for long periods of time) were referenced as potential barriers to employment.

RESULTS: TECHNICAL COLLEGE CONNECTIONS

A final set of focus group questions sought to assess how ABE students in the M7 region currently connect, if at all, to the certificate and degree-granting divisions of the larger technical colleges. Fostering better transitions to further occupational training in technical colleges is a Regional Workforce Alliance (RWA) priority that prompted the decision to hold these ABE focus groups in the first place. Learning more about where the region stands now with respect to connectivity can inform next steps. The following themes emerged:

Vague Job Aspirations, With Notable Exceptions

In probing to determine how connected (or potentially connected) our focus group participants are to the degree-granting divisions of their technical colleges, we first asked about job aspirations. Our logic was that the degree of clarity or vagueness with regard to job aspirations would serve as a clue to the strength of student connections. We did find that those who articulated clearly defined occupational goals in specific industries (i.e. social worker in human services, CNC programmer in manufacturing, sous-chef in culinary management) had strong connections to the tech colleges. For example, some of these students were already registered in a program for the fall semester, or told us they would formalize their registration as soon as they completed their GED. However, these students were few in number. The majority of focus group participants had either vague (i.e. "I don't know what I want to do next. I'm thinking maybe childcare.") or conflicting ("I'm looking at pharmacy tech, but in the future I'd like to be a chef") job aspirations. These students showed weak connections to the tech college. They were most interested in completing their GEDs, and did not reference speaking to technical college teachers or administrators about further training.

Unclear wage expectations

We asked focus group participants to talk about their financial goals with respect to hourly wages. Those students who could articulate specific wage expectations (i.e. "I'd like \$15 to \$17/hour minimum") generally proved most connected to a technical college occupational certificate or degree program. Students who responded broadly (i.e. "more money" or "well I know I won't make as much as I did before I was laid off, so I guess no less than \$9/hour") did not show strong connection to further training; this group was a majority.

Firm Connections with Contextualized Pilot Program

Focus group participants enrolled in a contextualized ABE program showed the strongest connection to the technical college. These students expressed the greatest satisfaction with their programs and the possibility of a connection to a new career. They were either already enrolled in a year-long welding program at the technical college for the fall semester, or discussed changing their original educational plans to accommodate such enrollment.

ABE Course Delivery Location and Tech College Connectivity

There was a wide disparity in connection to the technical college and the likelihood of transition to certificate and degree-granting programs between those students who took their ABE instruction in a “lab” or “learning center” on the technical college campus, and those who took their instruction at the Workforce Development Center or W2-designated community-based organization. ABE students on technical college campuses referenced accessing a wider variety of classes and support services, including additional tutoring and program advising, career-awareness ‘tours,’ and counseling. Focus group participants taking ABE/pre-GED classes at W2-designated community-based organizations showed the weakest connection to certificate and degree-granting programs of the technical college. With this group, feedback to most of our questions about the technical colleges digressed toward expressions of shared frustration over managing W2 mandates and caseworker relationships. References to the “technical college” were rare to absent by these focus groups participants; they seemed to connect their ABE classes with their overall case management.

WHO NEEDS MORE SKILLS AND HIGHER WAGES IN SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN?

CONNECTIONS TO THE STATEWIDE RISE PARTNERSHIP

The goals and focus for the RISE (Regional Industry Skills Education) Partnership for Wisconsin are closely aligned with some of the goals of the Regional Workforce Alliance (RWA). As noted in the introduction, RISE is a collaboration of the Wisconsin Technical College System and the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, with the mission of improving educational and occupational transitions for Wisconsin's low-income working adults, and promoting stronger *state* policies to support bridge programs and career pathways. Through RISE, the state is working to build policy and practice that can support skills education throughout the state. The more mutually informed and aligned the RISE and RWA efforts become, the greater chance of success for low-wage working adults. We offer here some background on RISE, and the "target population" and potential occupational opportunities that RISE analyses identify for the RWA region.

The RISE initiative seeks to improve outcomes for: 1) *low-income adults*, by facilitating the attainment of higher skills and better jobs through accessible and navigable training and career advancement systems, 2) *employers*, by providing a reliable supply of workers whose skills are geared to industry needs, and 3) *the workforce training and education system*, by allowing more effective engagement with industry and more efficient alignment of resources.⁶

Central to the RISE platform is implementation of the "career pathway" model of instructional design for adult learners. The career pathway presents a new way of delivering a postsecondary program as a sequence of modules, each associated with a specific job or job advancement opportunity. Every module represents a step toward a degree or technical diploma, enabling working adults to pursue postsecondary occupational education in manageable increments, while gradually increasing skills and improving career and earning opportunities. Additionally, completion of a pathway module is associated with a credential that is recognized by employers within an industry and region, enhancing skills while improving occupational opportunities toward family-sustaining wages.

The RISE partnership recognizes that implementation of career pathways requires much more than core instructional design and provision, and thus includes four other critical elements in its operational platform.

- 1. Industry Engagement:** RISE prioritizes employer-driven career pathway development, and requires the involvement of a core group of employers from an industry sector in the identification, design, and support of any one career pathway. Industry identification for career pathway development is based, in part, on data and input provided by employers which shows a compelling need for higher-skilled workers, and real employment opportunities for workers who increase their skills. Additionally, regional businesses are key participants in the recruitment of individuals to pursue career pathways.
- 2. Adult Basic Education/English Language Learning Bridge Instructional Design:** Another major tenet of the RISE agenda is to address the needs of workers who require further basic skills training (the focus of this report) and to support their transition to post-secondary training. To do this, RISE is promoting bridge programming (i.e. the integration of basic skills training with industry or sector-specific occupational skill development) that reflects real cooperation between postsecondary and non-postsecondary divisions within the tech colleges. RISE promotes the development of bridge programming that a) employs occupationally contextualized learning strategies, b) offers instruction that results in college level credit, where possible, and c) emphasizes applied learning strategies through labs and simulations.
- 3. Pathway Support for Life Long Learning:** RISE seeks to connect low-wage workers to a lifetime of learning and skills development, and to optimize their success in doing so. To achieve this, the partnership is advocating for the provision of extensive career planning and assessment services, and convincing employers to commit to employee development through tuition reimbursement for career pathways training. Additionally, RISE is stressing the importance of multi-agency coordination of wrap-around services for adult learners—case management, childcare, financial aid, job placement—to help learners manage their work, education, and personal obligations.

⁶ See Wisconsin's Regional Industry Skills Education (RISE) Guidelines, http://risepartnership.org/pdf/guidelines_revised.pdf.

- 4. **Systems and Partnerships:** RISE considers the alignment of public systems and public and private resources as integral to the effective operation of career pathways. At least one technical college district and one workforce development board must be involved in a RISE career pathway project, with clearly defined roles and expectations for each institution. In addition, various funding streams (e.g. tech college, WIA, TANF, employer tuition reimbursement, state/federal financial aid) should be coordinated.

Recently, the RISE Partnership, assisted by the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, identified a “target population”⁷ of workers in the state who are in most need of further education and training to achieve higher wages, better job quality, and more secure attachments to the workforce. Indeed, as we face current and pending skills shortages, a segment of these workers are ideal candidates for connection to training and skills that meet this demand. Remember that this target population does not necessarily need ABE (the other focus of this report) in order to move into a tech college program. However, many of these workers need some support to feel connected to and capable of being at school, even if they do not need ABE level work.

Linking the RWA agenda to state efforts, we employ the same methodology used by RISE to identify a *regional* “target population” of low-wage working adults in Southeastern Wisconsin. The results are found in Table 1 below and in the text box on the next page. COWS used data from the 2006 American Community Survey⁸ to first determine the number of adults in the seven-county region of Southeastern Wisconsin who lack a 2 or 4 year college credential, and/or hold limiting English-speaking skills. The analysis then isolated the number of those adults who worked last year. Finally, from that population, COWS identified the subpopulation of workers earning wages under \$9.60/hr (a poverty-wage level), and the subpopulation of workers earning between \$9.60 and \$15.38/hr, adding them together to form a “target population” of 226,000 workers not participating in basic training and education, who might greatly benefit

Table 1
ADULTS IN SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN WHO COULD USE HIGHER SKILLS AND BETTER WAGES

	<i>Number</i>
Total number of adults (age 25-54) who have no 2 or 4 year college credentials and/or speak English “not well” or “not at all”	482,000
Total number of those adults who worked last year	406,000
Total number of those working adults with wages under \$9.60 per hour	110,000
Total number of those working adults with wages between \$9.60 and \$15.38 per hour	116,000
Total target population: working adults with low wages (less than \$15.38)	226,000
Number of adult (age 25-55) single mothers without college credentials with low wages (below \$15.38)	24,000

⁷ <http://www.cows.org/pdf/ds-RISETarget.pdf>

⁸ In order to isolate the M7 region of Wisconsin (Milwaukee, Washington, Ozaukee, Waukesha, Walworth, Racine, and Kenosha Counties) we used the PUMA geographic variable in the American Community Survey (ACS). A single PUMA delineates the geographic area in which approximately 100,000 persons reside. While this is the smallest available geographic unit in the ACS, in sparsely occupied areas a single PUMA may capture the population of more than one county. This is the case with some of the M7 counties. However, only one PUMA - that of Walworth County - captured persons residing outside of the M7 (PUMA code 01700 counts residents of Walworth and Jefferson Counties). In order to correct the problem we checked the total population of the M7 using the American FactFinder tool available from the census online. We then divided the M7 population as given by American Fact Finder by the total estimated population we found, giving a factor of proportionality between the two figures. We then multiplied all of our estimated population findings by this factor of proportionality.

For the M7 region, then, there are some 226,000 working adults who could use skills to move into a better job. This is a real challenge in the region, but also a real opportunity, as there are so many workers who, with skills and education, would be able to connect to key industries with labor shortages. The text box below offers details on demographics of the target population. Perhaps especially relevant to the issues here, some 24,000 of the potential target population are single mothers with children at home.

Demographics of the RISE target population in the M7 region

Gender

- 104,000 men
- 122,000 women

Race/Ethnicity

- 136,000 white (9.3% of whites in M7)
- 46,000 black (17.1% of blacks in M7)
- 32,000 Hispanic (19.8% of Hispanics in M7)
- 11,000 other (13.9% of “All Other” persons in M7)

Single Mothers

- 38,000 single mothers in M7
- 32,000 single mothers who were employed
- 24,000 employed single mothers who fit the criteria of the RISE target population (earning less than \$15.38/hour, no college credential, and/or speak English not well or not at all)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2006

Tables 2 (on next page) and 3 (on page 18) provide more information on the current occupation and industries where M7’s low-wage working adults are employed. The potential target workers are less likely to be employed in professional and technical occupations, and much more likely to be employed in service and production occupations. They are also more likely to be employed in manufacturing and construction industries. This information can help shape strategy. It is clear that there is a significant and experienced workforce already in manufacturing and construction. Developing the skills of these workers and connecting them to the opportunities of some of the region’s leading manufacturers and construction firms that may be facing skill shortages may help strengthen the regional talent pipeline.

Table 2

M7 MEDIAN HOURLY WAGES BY OCCUPATION, AND DISTRIBUTION OF WORKERS OF THE M7 BY OCCUPATION

<i>SOC Code</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Median Wage (2006 \$s)</i>	<i>% of Total Employed RISE Target Pop</i>	<i>% of Total Employed M7 Pop</i>
11	Management	25.00	5.68	7.75
13	Business and Financial Operations	19.23	2.34	4.16
15	Computer and Mathematical	26.92	0.93	2.2
17	Architecture and Engineering	24.04	1.25	2.15
19	Life, Physical, and Social Science	22.57	0.27	0.77
21	Community and Social Services	14.90	0.53	1.16
23	Legal	24.17	0.15	0.98
25	Education, Training, and Library	17.78	2.01	5.58
27	Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media	13.41	0.6	1.59
29	Healthcare Practitioners and Technical	25.48	1.56	4.79
31	Healthcare Support	10.80	3.37	2.66
33	Protective Service	19.23	1.65	1.59
35	Food Preparation and Serving Related	7.69	5.12	5.77
37	Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance	8.55	5.37	3.84
39	Personal Care and Service	7.50	3.66	3.51
41	Sales and Related	12.00	11.12	11.5
43	Office and Administrative Support	13.46	16.22	14.39
45	Farming, Fishing, and Forestry	5.77	0.32	0.37
47	Construction and Extraction	18.75	7.87	4.96
49	Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	18.27	4.11	2.76
51	Production	14.96	15.38	9.83
53	Transportation and Material Moving	12.00	9.99	6.66

Table 3

M7 MEDIAN HOURLY WAGES BY INDUSTRY, AND DISTRIBUTION OF WORKERS OF THE M7 BY INDUSTRY

<i>NAICS Code</i>	<i>Industry</i>	<i>Median Wages (2006 \$s)</i>	<i>% of Total Employed M7 RISE Target Pop</i>	<i>% of Total Employed M7 Pop</i>
11	Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting	5.77	0.65	0.70
21	Mining	23.08	0.03	0.05
22	Utilities	25.00	0.74	0.63
23	Construction	18.52	8.62	5.59
31-33	Manufacturing**	17.13	22.93	18.08
42	Wholesale Trade	17.31	4.94	3.62
44-45	Retail Trade**	10.66	10.66	10.75
48-49	Transportation and Warehousing**	15.07	6.56	4.47
51	Information	20.67	1.88	2.12
52	Finance and Insurance	18.75	3.63	4.46
53	Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	12.50	1.19	1.58
54	Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	19.23	2.50	4.80
55	Management of Companies and Enterprises	19.23	0.14	0.14
56	Administrative and Support and Waste	11.63	5.22	4.14
61	Educational Services	17.11	3.17	7.97
62	Health Care and Social Assistance	14.42	11.71	13.37
71	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	9.41	1.94	2.39
72	Accommodation and Food Services	7.69	6.07	6.92
81	Other Services	10.29	4.65	4.57
92	Public Admin., Military, and Justice	20.24	2.26	2.65
99	Federal, State, and Local Government	Missing	0.49	1.00

**These figures are averaged from Stata estimates for each NAICS 2-digit industry: (31,32,33), (44,45), (48,49)

MIDDLE SKILL JOB OPPORTUNITIES IN SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN

As Wisconsin's regional economies focus program and training investments on low-skilled adults needing stronger connections to technical skills and post-secondary credentials, they are compelled to do so in the context of emerging occupational opportunities. Projected skill shortages threaten the productivity of the state's regions, brought on by demographic and economic shifts including low unemployment, high rates of labor force participation, and an aging and diversifying population. Occupational and skill shortages are expected to be strongest in jobs that do not require four years of college education, but still demand technical expertise and solid academic skills.⁹

Southeastern Wisconsin should prepare its workers to fill shortages that are emerging in key, high-skill industries. The RISE Partnership has identified key occupations *statewide* for building career pathways and connections. Called "middle skill" job opportunities¹⁰, these are jobs where skill shortages are projected to emerge in upcoming years, and which hold promise for workers without a four-year college degree. *Statewide* middle skill openings are projected in health care, skilled manufacturing, information technology and construction.

In line with RISE efforts, COWS, assisted by the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, screened occupational projections data for the seven-county region of Southeastern Wisconsin to produce a *regional* list of middle-skill opportunities. This list is found in Appendix B, and includes information on average annual openings, typical education and training path required, and wage and salary information for each occupation. Middle skill opportunities projected for the Milwaukee 7 region align, in part, with statewide projections. The region will see openings in **construction** (skilled carpenters, electricians, and plumbers, as well as construction laborers), **health care** (registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, medical and dental assistants), and **manufacturing** (skilled positions in maintenance, machining, and welding). Additionally, opportunities in the **clerical/sales** industry (customer service representatives and manufacturing sales representatives) and **logistics** (heavy and tractor-trailor truck drivers and auto technicians and mechanics) are projected for Southeastern Wisconsin. Regional technical colleges must continue efforts to develop career pathway programs tailored to these opportunities.

⁹ See *Skilled Workers, Quality Jobs: Meeting the Needs of Wisconsin's Workers and Businesses*, Center on Wisconsin Strategy, April 2008, <http://www.cows.org/pdf/rp-skilledworkersqualityjobs.pdf>.

¹⁰ See <http://www.cows.org/pdf/ds-middleskillopportunities.pdf>.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Across the state and the country, a vast amount of attention has been directed recently towards improving ABE programming and fostering better transitions to post-secondary education. The U.S. Department of Education, the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS), and numerous non-profit policy think tanks like Jobs for the Future, the National Council for Workforce Education, the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), and the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS) have all examined adult basic education and set forth a wide array of constructive and insightful recommendations on the topic.¹¹ These recommendations include, but are not limited to: increasing overall and per pupil funding of ABE programming by state government; developing a more inclusive student financial aid policy; emphasizing a career pathways approach to curriculum and workforce development; promoting more workplace education; integrating ABE and occupational training; promoting accelerated programming; and improving and enhancing data collection on outcomes and transitions.

Our focus group interviews of ABE students in Southeastern Wisconsin generated a more contained and focused set of recommendations that serve to complement the above-mentioned suggestions. Some of these recommendations are familiar, reinforcing some of what we know already about ABE student experiences and barriers. The implementation of the following recommendations is a critical step toward a regional workforce development agenda that aims to provide low-wage workers with the programs and support they need to further their education and secure quality, family-supporting jobs.

1. **Dedicated ABE Counselors¹²:** Many of the themes revealed through our focus groups—for example, the overwhelming personal challenges confronting many ABE students, confused or vague job aspirations, and often weak connections to postsecondary training in the technical college—call for more ABE-specific counseling and support services accessible to students both on and off campus. Waukesha County Technical College (WCTC) has recently employed an ABE-specific counselor in its ABE learning lab on campus, serving as a possible model for this specialized advising service.
2. **Convenient Scheduling and Increased Access to Resources:** ABE focus groups drew out some specific suggestions related to course scheduling and access to resources. One request was for expanding hours of operation at an ABE learning center to allow more lab time for students who must leave in the afternoon to begin childcare duties. Another request was for permission to take GED reference books and other textbooks home for help with schoolwork in the evening. Where relevant, regional technical colleges should examine and modify these and other structural elements of curriculum delivery to maximize student access.
3. **Increased Awareness of Academic/Career Resources and Support Services:** Awareness by our focus group participants of support services available to them—such as academic counseling, career advising, and supplementary tutoring in math and English—were varied enough to suggest that technical colleges should evaluate the current promotion of these services and determine strategies to maximize student awareness. The provision of specialized ABE counseling as suggested above would be an ideal channel to better promote these services. Our focus groups revealed that students taking courses at off-campus program sites (i.e. workforce development centers, community-based organizations) are least knowledgeable about the services available to them. Increasing awareness of students at these sites should be a high priority. One related initiative is the proposed Career Readiness Network, spearheaded by MATC, Gateway Technical College, and the Milwaukee Area Workforce Investment Board. Part of this initiative is an effort to place pre-college career advising services within community-based organizations that host adult learning labs. A “package” of career services is proposed, culminating in a type of “career-readiness” certification to aid students transitioning back to the workforce.

¹¹ See, e.g., *Adult Basic Education to Community College Transitions Symposium, Proceedings Report*, prepared by MPR Associates, Inc. for the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2007, <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/cctransreport.pdf>; *Overcoming Obstacles, Optimizing Opportunities, State Policies to Increase Postsecondary Attainment for Low-Skilled Adults*, Center for Law and Social Policy, March 2008, <http://www.clasp.org/publications/bbtpolicyoverview.pdf>; *Skilled Workers, Quality Jobs, Meeting the Needs of Wisconsin's Workers and Businesses*, Center on Wisconsin Strategy, April 2008, <http://www.cows.org/pdf/rp-skilledworkersqualityjobs.pdf>; *Back to Basics: Strengthening Adult Basic Education in Wisconsin*, Center on Wisconsin Strategy, November 2006, http://www.cows.org/pdf/rp-back-to-basics_110706.pdf.

¹² The call for specialized counseling is not limited to ABE students. Partners examining ABE outcomes and transitions recommend counseling specific to ELL (English Language Learners) students as well. We omit ELL from this report only because we did not have a significant population of ELL students in our focus groups.

4. **Integrated & Contextualized ABE:** Discussions with ABE focus group participants completing an occupationally contextualized ABE/pre-welding certificate revealed the tremendous potential of this model program to promote transitions from ABE training to practical postsecondary credentials. Contextualization refers to designing basic skills course offerings—reading, language, writing, and math—in the context of work and occupation. For the purposes of this report, we consider contextualized programming to be synonymous with “bridge programming.” Regional technical colleges should continue to expand programs that integrate ABE instruction with training for occupational degrees. Recent WTCS-funded bridge-related projects in the region include: culinary arts, welding, and certified nursing assistant at Waukesha County Technical College; and participation in a statewide welding bridge project by Waukesha County Technical College, Milwaukee Area Technical College, Gateway Technical College, and Moraine Park Technical College, as well as the Southeastern Wisconsin Workforce Development Board, the Milwaukee Area Workforce Investment Board, and WOW Workforce Development Inc.
5. **Departure from Focus on GED/Simultaneous Enrollment Opportunities:** Given what we know about the relatively limited labor market payoff of GED attainment only, regional technical colleges should stress the importance of pursuing postsecondary credentials beyond the GED that garner greater rewards in the labor market in terms of wages and job quality. In Wisconsin, an associate degree commands a median wage of \$16.94, better than the national average and significantly better than the median Wisconsin wage for high school drop-outs (\$11.07) and those with only a high school degree (\$14.23).¹³ Getting students past the GED and preparing them to enter and succeed in associate degree programs could dramatically improve outcomes for these students. A promising possibility would be to remove the prerequisite that students attain a GED before pursuing postsecondary degrees, and promoting simultaneous enrollment in both basic education courses and degree-granting programs.
6. **Improved Postsecondary Exposure:** Our focus groups revealed a disparity—between students taking courses at a technical college and those taking courses at a local workforce development center or community-based organization—in terms of connectivity to the certificate and degree-granting divisions of the technical college. To foster better transitions for off-campus ABE students, technical colleges should take steps to improve postsecondary exposure. Focus group discussions with W2 participants revealed particularly weak connections and limited knowledge about the technical college training. Colleges should work with individual W2 agencies and the Department of Workforce Development to expand institutional awareness and develop bridge programs more readily accessible to W2 clients.¹⁴
7. **Course Offering Focused on Transitions to Post-Secondary Education:** Students fail to transition to and/or succeed in college for a variety of reasons and only one of them is lack of academic preparedness. Factors such as social competence, personal autonomy, self-confidence, and ability to deal with societal barriers have as much or more to do with transition, retention, and graduation as writing ability or mathematical competence. Coursework that emphasizes developing effective study behaviors, planning and time management, and understanding college institutional policies such as how to access financial aid and seek guidance when necessary, can all contribute to successful transitions for ABE students. WTCS colleges (including those in this region) are developing college success courses designed for ABE students which provide learners with strategies to develop skills for success in postsecondary pursuits. These courses teach learners to apply self-management techniques, explore resource management strategies, practice study skills, and learn about ways to improve personal effectiveness. Southeastern Wisconsin tech colleges should continue efforts to offer this type of programming to ABE students, and track course effectiveness.
8. **Focus on Middle-Skill Job Opportunities:** Making clear connections between training programs and regional job opportunities is crucial to developing pathways out of low-wage work for students like those who participated in our focus groups. Our identification of regional “Middle Skill Job Opportunities” (modeled after similar identification statewide by the Wisconsin RISE initiative) is the place to start. Development of bridge programming and career pathways within regional technical colleges should target these middle-skill occupations and their attendant skills and competencies.

¹³ Center on Wisconsin Strategy, *Skilled Workers, Quality Jobs*.

¹⁴ See note 4, above, as well as recommendation number 4, on our definition of the term “bridge program.”

APPENDIX A FOCUS GROUP COMPOSITION AND QUESTION ROUTE

FOCUS GROUP COMPOSITION

During the first two weeks of July 2008, University of Wisconsin Survey Center (UWSC) and Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS) staff conducted a series of five focus groups in the Milwaukee 7 region. These focus groups were conducted with adults who had elected to enroll in Adult Basic Education (ABE) courses through a local technical school or technical school affiliate in order to complete their GED or HSED, or to develop or strengthen basic skills.

The location and group composition of these focus groups were as follows:

- **Milwaukee County:** Two focus groups were conducted with ABE students in the Milwaukee County area. The first group was composed of students with skill levels assessed at or below the 9th grade level and took place on July 1st with nine attendees. The second group was composed of students with skill sets assessed between the 9th and 12th grade levels, and consisted of two attendees. Both groups took place at the Milwaukee Area Workforce Investment Board (MAWIB) in the city of Milwaukee.
- **Waukesha County:** One focus group took place in Waukesha County, with seven students currently completing ABE coursework through Waukesha County Technical College (WCTC). The group was held on the WCTC campus on July 9th. The attendees of this group had mixed skill levels (some of whom were assessed at being below the 9th grade skill level and others who were assessed between the 9th and 12th grade levels).
- **Racine County:** Two focus groups were conducted with ABE students in the Racine County area. Both groups were held at Gateway Technical College (GTC) in the city of Racine, though not all students attended ABE classes through GTC (some were completing ABE classes towards a GED through Workforce). The first of these two sessions was held on July 9th with students assessed between 9th and 12th grade skill levels, and the second was held on July 14th with students assessed below the 9th grade skill level.

Focus group participants were recruited by ABE program administrators at each of the regional technical colleges, and student attendees were paid \$40/each for their time. The focus group sessions were attended by ABE students from a wide variety of backgrounds in all cases. For example, some of the attendees included:

- Parents of young children or teenagers returning to school to acquire their GEDs and develop job skills.
- Retirees interested in completing GEDs or learning a new skill to help them re-enter the labor force.
- Displaced workers in need of a GED to attain employment, acquire new skills to re-enter the labor force, or maintain benefits.
- Students returning to school to complete HSEDs in order to attend college.
- Workers hoping to transition from jobs requiring less skills, which therefore compensate less in terms of wages and benefits, to higher skill-level careers with more available opportunities for advancement and higher compensation.
- Workers struggling to find work due to their past employment record or criminal record, who therefore hoped to increase their chances of employability by strengthening their respective skill sets.

FOCUS GROUP QUESTION ROUTE

Welcome, and thank you all for coming to our discussion today. My name is Lisa Klein, and I work for the University of Wisconsin Survey Center. We are here today to hear from you to help us understand how we can connect people to higher-paying, higher-quality jobs in the area. We've asked you all to join us today because you are all enrolled in additional training programs right now, and we want to hear from you about your experiences with these programs, challenges you face related to completing your program, and your goals and future plans.

Before we get started, I'd like to establish a few basic ground rules to help our conversation be as productive as possible. First, if you have a cell phone or a pager with you, please turn it onto silent mode. You may answer an important call if need be during our talk; please just go outside to do so. Second, we want to be sure that everyone's opinions are heard, so please be sure that only one person is speaking at a time. Finally, you are going to hear a lot of different opinions today, some of which you may not share. Please be respectful of other people's thoughts, even if they are different from your own. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions; we just want to hear your opinions.

We will be tape recording this conversation in order to make analysis easier after the session is over. However, your name will never be associated with the information you share in any reports or publications. We expect that this discussion will last for about an hour and a half, and when we are finished, you will be paid \$40 in appreciation of your time.

With that in mind, let's get started. Let's have everyone go around the room and share your name and your favorite class or subject that you are currently taking, starting with you...

1. Think back to when you first decided to sign up for classes through your ABE program. Why did you make that decision?
 - PROBE: What goals did you have when you first signed up for the program?
 - PROBE: What expectations did you have before you started taking classes?
2. When you think about your current experiences taking classes through an ABE program, how similar have these experiences been to your goals and expectations?
 - PROBE: In what ways have your experiences met your goals and expectations?
 - PROBE: In what ways have your experiences been different from your goals and expectations?
 - PROBE: Are you achieving the goals and learning the skills you intended when you first signed up for the ABE program?
3. When you think about your current experiences with ABE classes, what has this experience been like for you overall?
 - PROBE: How satisfied are you with the format and teaching style of your classes?
 - PROBE: In what ways do you feel you have been successful in your ABE classes?
 - PROBE: In what ways do you feel you have had difficulty or struggled in your ABE classroom?
 - PROBE: Does your current experience in the ABE classroom make you feel connected to the larger tech college?
 - PROBE: Do you know about the opportunity to be connected to specific certificate or technical programs in the college?
4. There are many challenges that students encounter while they are enrolled in school. These can be challenges with the program itself, or challenges in other areas of life. What challenges have you experienced that have been or could have been a barrier to completing your ABE program?
 - PROBE: Are there barriers involved with the classes themselves?
 - PROBE: Are there childcare barriers?
 - PROBE: Are there other barriers in terms of family or work obligations?
 - PROBE: Are there any other kinds of barriers?

5. Let's talk specifically about some of the support services offered that can help students in your ABE program. We are going to talk about several different kinds of services, such as services offered by your school or program, services provided by the Workforce Development Center, or social services.

a. Let's start by thinking about services offered by your school or program.

WCTC: Have you heard about academic counseling, career counseling, personal crisis counseling, transitions counseling, or critical life skills counseling through WCTC?

PROBE: Have you utilized any of these services?

PROBE: What was that experience like for you?

GTC: What sort of support services like academic counseling, career counseling, bus passes, etc. have been offered to you through GTC?

MATC: Have you heard about bus passes, public assistance, or work experience assistance available through MATC?

b. Are you familiar with the Workforce Development Center?

PROBE: Have you utilized any of their services, such as career planning, job search services (like JobNet, the online state job search tool), or classes that help you to write your resume or practice for a job interview?

PROBE: What was that experience like for you?

c. Finally, let's talk about different social services offered.

i. Have you heard about the child care subsidy available through social services?

PROBE: Have you received this subsidy? What was that experience like for you?

ii. Have you heard about BadgerCare?

PROBE: Have you received BadgerCare? What have your experiences with BadgerCare been like?

iii. Have you heard about Food Stamps (or the FSET program)?

PROBE: Have you received Food Stamps? What have your experiences with Food Stamps been like?

iv. Have you heard about W-2?

PROBE: Have you received W-2? What have your experiences with W-2 been like?

v. Have you heard about Medicaid? PROBE: Have you received Medicaid?

What have your experiences with Medicaid been like?

Let's talk about something different for a moment and think about jobs.

6. How many of you are currently working at a job?

PROBE: For those of you who are currently working, what kind of work do you do?

PROBE: What other kinds of jobs have you had in the past year?

7. Do you think that the ABE program will help you in any way in your current job?

PROBE: If so, how? If not, why not?

8. Think about the kind of career you'd most like to have in the future. What kind of career do you want to have in the coming years?

PROBE: What kind of job do you see yourself in within the next few years?

PROBE: What goals do you have in terms of wages and income?

9. When you think about your career goals for the future, how much do you feel that the ABE program will help you to meet these goals?

PROBE: Are you currently working towards a GED? Do you feel that the GED program will help you to reach your job goals?

PROBE: Do you plan to take any other classes or complete any other kinds of training in order to reach your job goals?

10. When you think about your career goals for the future, what do you feel are the barriers to you reaching these goals?

PROBE: How do you plan to overcome these barriers?

11. Imagine for a moment that you could talk with the person in charge of the ABE program that you are currently enrolled in. If you

APPENDIX B KEY MIDDLE-SKILL OPPORTUNITIES IN SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN

In the following table, COWS screened state occupational projections data to produce a list of promising industries in the seven county region of the RWA. We identified occupations where skill shortages are projected to emerge in coming years, and which hold promise for workers without a four-year college degree. All of the jobs listed are projected to have a minimum of 50 total openings per year between 2004-2014, pay an entry-level wage of at least \$10, and do not typically require a four-year college degree or experience in a related occupation (excluding almost all supervisory and management positions).

SUMMARY

<i>Industry</i>	<i>Number of Occupations</i>	<i>Estimated Annual Openings</i>
Construction and Utilities	9	900
Manufacturing	10	1,100
Health Care	9	1,720
Clerical/Sales	16	3,080
Logistics	5	900
Other	2	190
Total	51	7,890

DETAIL

SEE END NOTES RE: NUMERICAL REFERENCES IN TABLE HEADER

<i>SOC Code</i>	<i>Occupational Title</i>	<i>Avg. Annual Openings¹</i>	<i>Typical Education and Training Path²</i>	<i>Average Annual Salary³</i>	<i>Entry Level Wage⁴</i>	<i>Exper. Hourly Wage⁵</i>
CONSTRUCTION AND UTILITIES						
47-2031	Carpenters	250	Long-term on-the-job training, apprenticeship	\$43,036	\$13.95	\$24.06
47-2111	Electricians	150	Long-term on-the-job training, apprenticeship	\$49,559	\$17.36	\$27.06
47-2152	Plumbers, Pipefitters, and Steamfitters	120	Long-term on-the-job training, apprenticeship	\$58,551	\$22.17	\$31.14
47-2061	Construction Laborers	100	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$36,748	\$10.88	\$21.06
47-2073	Operating Engineers and Other Construction Equipment Operators	90	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$46,841	\$18.30	\$24.63
47-2051	Cement Masons and Concrete Finishers	70	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$41,362	\$14.18	\$22.74
49-9021	Heating, Air Conditioning, and Refrigeration Mechanics and Installers	70	Long-term on-the-job training, apprenticeship	\$38,392	\$11.56	\$21.90
47-2181	Roofers	50	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$36,155	\$11.57	\$20.29
MANUFACTURING						
49-9042	Maintenance and Repair Workers, General	280	Postsecondary vocational training, apprenticeship	\$35,926	\$11.79	\$20.01
51-4041	Machinists	190	Postsecondary vocational training, apprenticeship	\$37,109	\$12.85	\$20.34
51-4121	Welders, Cutters, Solderers, and Brazers	130	Postsecondary vocational training	\$34,194	\$12.47	\$18.42

<i>SOC Code</i>	<i>Occupational Title</i>	<i>Avg. Annual Openings¹</i>	<i>Typical Education and Training Path²</i>	<i>Average Annual Salary³</i>	<i>Entry Level Wage⁴</i>	<i>Exper. Hourly Wage⁵</i>
MANUFACTURING (Continued)						
51-5023	Printing Machine Operators	90	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$34,803	\$11.00	\$19.60
51-4072	Molding, Coremaking, and Casting Machine Setters, Operators, and Tenders, Metal and Plastic	80	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$29,447	\$10.37	\$16.05
49-9041	Industrial Machinery Mechanics	60	Postsecondary vocational training, apprenticeship	\$45,698	\$17.10	\$24.40
51-4011	Computer-Controlled Machine Tool Operators, Metal and Plastic	60	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$36,186	\$11.43	\$20.38
47-2211	Sheet Metal Workers	60	Long-term on-the-job training, apprenticeship	\$48,778	\$15.89	\$27.23
17-3013	Mechanical Drafters	50	Postsecondary vocational training	\$45,272	\$16.24	\$24.53
51-4033	Grinding, Lapping, Polishing, and Buffing Machine Tool Setters, Operators, and Tenders, Metal and Plastic	50	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$32,491	\$10.68	\$18.09
51-4111	Tool and Die Makers	50	Postsecondary vocational training, apprenticeship	\$45,790	\$17.17	\$24.44
HEALTH CARE						
29-1111	Registered Nurses	950	Associate or Bachelor's degree ⁶	\$56,373	\$22.56	\$29.38
29-2061	Licensed Practical and Licensed Vocational Nurses	150	Postsecondary vocational training	\$39,187	\$15.41	\$20.56
31-9092	Medical Assistants	140	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$28,410	\$11.18	\$14.90
31-9091	Dental Assistants	120	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$28,832	\$10.68	\$15.45
29-2034	Radiologic Technologists and Technicians	80	Associate degree	\$49,634	\$18.81	\$26.39
29-2021	Dental Hygienists	70	Associate degree	\$56,076	\$24.58	\$28.15
29-2071	Medical Records and Health Information Technicians	70	Associate degree	\$30,731	\$10.55	\$16.89
31-9094	Medical Transcriptionists	70	Postsecondary vocational training	\$31,847	\$12.63	\$16.65
43-6013	Medical Secretaries	70	Postsecondary vocational training	\$29,015	\$10.88	\$15.48

<i>SOC Code</i>	<i>Occupational Title</i>	<i>Avg. Annual Openings¹</i>	<i>Typical Education and Training Path²</i>	<i>Average Annual Salary³</i>	<i>Entry Level Wage⁴</i>	<i>Exper. Hourly Wage⁵</i>
CLERICAL/SALES						
43-4051	Customer Service Representatives	610	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$32,296	\$10.51	\$18.04
41-4012	Sales Representatives, Wholesale and Manufacturing, Except Technical and Scientific Products	500	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$63,057	\$16.10	\$37.42
43-3031	Bookkeeping, Accounting, and Auditing Clerks	410	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$31,169	\$10.68	\$17.14
43-6011	Executive Secretaries and Administrative Assistants	380	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$36,434	\$12.98	\$19.79
43-6014	Secretaries, Except Legal, Medical, and Executive	290	Postsecondary vocational training	\$28,425	\$10.62	\$15.19
41-4011	Sales Representatives, Wholesale and Manufacturing, Technical and Scientific Products	140	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$72,831	\$21.77	\$41.64
15-1041	Computer Support Specialists	110	Associate degree	\$40,044	\$13.67	\$22.04
41-3099	Sales Representatives, Services, All Other	110	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$58,573	\$13.49	\$35.49
43-3011	Bill and Account Collectors	90	Short-term on-the-job training	\$28,690	\$10.92	\$15.23
43-3021	Billing and Posting Clerks and Machine Operators	80	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$28,839	\$11.18	\$15.21
43-5061	Production, Planning, and Expediting Clerks	80	Short-term on-the-job training	\$40,999	\$13.77	\$22.68
43-3051	Payroll and Timekeeping Clerks	60	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$32,330	\$11.39	\$17.62
43-6012	Legal Secretaries	60	Postsecondary vocational training	\$34,750	\$12.51	\$18.80
43-9041	Insurance Claims and Policy Processing Clerks	60	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$30,994	\$11.62	\$16.54
13-1031	Claims Adjusters, Examiners, and Investigators	50	Long-term on-the-job training	\$47,462	\$15.37	\$26.54
43-4161	Human Resources Assistants, Except Payroll and Timekeeping	50	Postsecondary vocational training	\$33,764	\$12.64	\$18.03
LOGISTICS						
53-3032	Truck Drivers, Heavy and Tractor-Trailer	390	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$37,438	\$13.57	\$20.21
49-3023	Automotive Service Technicians and Mechanics	200	Postsecondary vocational training	\$36,402	\$11.02	\$20.74
53-7051	Industrial Truck and Tractor Operators	140	Short-term on-the-job training	\$29,049	\$10.16	\$15.87

<i>SOC Code</i>	<i>Occupational Title</i>	<i>Avg. Annual Openings¹</i>	<i>Typical Education and Training Path²</i>	<i>Average Annual Salary³</i>	<i>Entry Level Wage⁴</i>	<i>Exper. Hourly Wage⁵</i>
LOGISTICS (Continued)						
53-3021	Bus Drivers, Transit and Intercity	90	Moderate-term on-the-job training	\$37,826	\$15.26	\$19.65
49-3031	Bus and Truck Mechanics and Diesel Engine Specialists	80	Postsecondary vocational training	\$38,596	\$13.46	\$21.10
OTHER						
33-3051	Police and Sheriff's Patrol Officers	100	Long-term on-the-job training	\$48,475	\$18.10	\$25.91
43-5052	Postal Service Mail Carriers	90	Short-term on-the-job training	\$45,149	\$17.35	\$23.88

NOTES

(1) **Total openings** are the sum of new jobs and replacements, and indicate how many new people are needed to enter a given occupation.

Replacements are an estimate of the number of job openings expected because people have permanently left a given occupation. Permanent exits occur if someone dies, retires, or otherwise leaves the labor force. Openings resulting from people changing employers, but staying in the same occupation are not included. Permanent exits also include openings resulting from someone permanently changing occupations. For example, a person leaves their job as a cashier and becomes a truck driver.

(2) **Typical Education and Training Path** gives a general indication of the education or training typically needed in a given occupation. There may be other pathways into the occupation, as well as additional educational, training, or licensing requirements. In those set off by italics, the Wisconsin case differs from the standard BLS description by including post-secondary vocational training and/or apprenticeship.

Short-Term On-the-Job Training: These occupations require no more than one month of on-the-job training and the training usually happens at the workplace.

Moderate-Term On-the-Job Training: Training for these occupations usually occurs at the workplace and lasts from one to twelve months.

Long-Term On-the-Job Training: These occupations require more than one year of on-the-job training, or combined work experience and classroom instruction.

Postsecondary Vocational Training: These formal training programs last from a few weeks to more than a year, and are offered at vocational or technical schools.

Associate Degree: This degree requires two years of full-time academic work beyond high school.

(3) **Average Annual Salary:** An occupation's average hourly wage is calculated by summing the wages of all employees in a given occupation and then dividing by the total number of employees in that occupation. In most cases, the annual average salary is equal to the average hourly wage multiplied by 2,080.

(4) **Entry Level Hourly Wage** is the average of the lower third of wages that are paid in a given occupation.

(5) **Experienced Hourly Wage** is the average of the upper two-thirds of wages that are paid in a given occupation.

(6) Depending upon the specific position and employer either an Associate or Bachelor's degree are most common.