

# Promising Practice

## A Community College and Employer Partnership



June 2010

### PRACTICE CONTEXT

As a pilot site selected to participate in Illinois' Shifting Gears (SG) initiative in 2007, Oakton Community College (OCC) partnered with Presbyterian Homes to develop a bridge course to prepare a cadre of their employed Certified Nurse Assistants (CNAs) to enter college-credit level prerequisite courses to a Practical Nursing program.<sup>1</sup> Oakton Community College is a comprehensive community college serving 450,000 residents in suburban Chicago. Presbyterian Homes is a large, continuing care retirement community with over 1,600 residents among five campuses in Chicago and nearby suburban areas.

Shifting Gears is a workforce development initiative sponsored by the Joyce Foundation and in Illinois, also supported by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO). In the first phase of SG, 10 community colleges received grants to develop bridge courses to provide low-skilled or low-income adults with the training necessary to prepare them for high-demand, middle-skill jobs that provide family supporting wages. Three high demand occupational clusters were targeted in the SG initiative: transportation-distribution-logistics, manufacturing, and health care.

Like in most areas, the suburban Chicago area in which this practice was located suffers from an inadequate supply of skilled and credentialed healthcare workers to meet the demand. The outcome of this partnership would provide Presbyterian Homes with more healthcare providers with the credentials required to meet the organization's and the residents' needs.<sup>2</sup>

### PRACTICE DESCRIPTION

Presbyterian Homes' Director of Nursing approached OCC's Nursing Chairperson to provide the CNA to LPN bridge course and the subsequent certificate education and training. At the start of the SG bridge course discussion, the Practical Nursing program was not an active program at OCC, although the College had program approval from the Illinois Community College Board to offer it. Nursing programs at OCC include the Basic Nurse Assistant Training (BNAT), the education required to sit for the competency exam to become a Certified Nurse Assistant (CNA) and an Associate Degree Nursing (ADN) program.

1 To become a Licensed Practical Nurse, students must complete a Practical Nursing program and pass a national licensure examination. The occupational outlook for LPNs is expected to grow much faster than average due to the increasing population of persons in long term care facilities.

2 Typical duties of an LPN include conducting patient assessments, monitoring vital signs and medications, entering medical records, setting up equipment for IV and fluid management, providing patient education, and other duties under the supervision of a Registered Nurse or physician.

The College worked closely with Presbyterian Homes in designing the bridge course. Building upon an 8-week course designed to increase the skills of underqualified applicants to the College's ADN program, College faculty determined that doubling the length of the course would better accommodate students' full-time work schedules and additional course content. By adding reading comprehension, medical vocabulary, and basic computer literacy content, nursing instructors believed the bridge course would prepare students for the prerequisite courses.

Allocation of resources was shared between the partners. Oakton Community College and Presbyterian Homes divided their primary responsibilities along lines of expertise, with both parties considering the needs of the full-time working students and the unique needs of a diverse group of employees, many of whom were not native English speakers and not familiar with postsecondary level education. The College's primary role was in curriculum development and delivery and in coordinating and providing transition services to the students. In addition to the rededication of work assignments of the transition coordinators, OCC allowed in-district tuition rates for students who resided outside of the College's district but were employed as CNAs by Presbyterian Homes.

The commitment of Presbyterian Homes to the OCC bridge course and the subsequent Practical Nursing program was substantial and included space, equipment, financial resources, and staff. Presbyterian Homes donated and retrofitted a cottage for use as a classroom with lab equipment, teaching aids, and computers, because most of the students did not have access to computers at home. Presbyterian Homes enlisted the assistance of other employees to serve as tutors and mentors to the bridge students. For example, a Presbyterian Homes pharmacist tutored the students in medical math. Presbyterian Homes paid tuition for bridge students in advance, instead of reimbursement after successful course completion, in recognition that many of their CNAs would not have the financial capacity to pay tuition. Also, some Presbyterian Homes residents contributed to a scholarship fund to assist students with tuition costs.

Presbyterian Homes' staff designated to the partnership included the Director of Nursing Education and the Administrator of Health Services, both with extensive backgrounds in nursing. Their roles consisted of identifying candidates for the bridge program, arranging for the facilities for classes and activities taking place on the Presbyterian Homes' campus, mentoring, advocating for the employees, helping organize work schedules, and communicating project goals and needs with Presbyterian Homes' management.

### 1. *Commitment to Working through Issues*

In an earlier partnership between these two organizations that attempted to achieve similar goals, lines of communication between students, their employer, and the college and between the two partners were not clearly established. Problems quickly arose. For example, students felt more comfortable discussing course-related issues with their employer rather than College staff. Communication break-down was attributed to the lack of each partner's knowledge about the other organization's specific practices, inconsistent information provided to students by the partners, and lack of Presbyterian Homes administrators' understanding of the extent of the academic skills gap of its incumbent CNA workforce as related to their readiness to enter credit-level prerequisite courses for the Practical Nursing program.

By the time the SG bridge program was implemented, these issues had been resolved among the partners, a process that took almost a year. Consequently, students were consistently referred to Presbyterian Homes' staff for work-related issues and to OCC's staff for issues related to their formal education. The partners kept each other informed of all communication with the students, thus strengthening the partner relationship and achieving timely resolution of issues as they developed. Although no formal agreement existed between Presbyterian Homes and OCC concerning the CNA to LPN bridge course and the Practical Nursing program, the two entities recognized, "it would have been a good idea."

### 2. *Shared Provision of Support Services*

Presbyterian Homes' commitment to their employees' success was further demonstrated by the designation of the Director of Nursing to assist in the provision of employee support services to students enrolled in the bridge course. Services also included pre-paying employees' tuition, providing tutoring services at the work place, advocating for employees when changes to work schedules were necessary to accommodate course requirements, and supporting the informal learning community of students/employees within the work environment.

Oakton Community College's role in support of this partnership was led by two transition coordinators: one a nursing instructor/advisor and the other an admissions counselor. The coordinators conducted weekly visits to the Presbyterian Homes' cottage and to OCC's Skokie campus to get to know students by listening to their concerns and answering questions. They met with students before and after class, or in the evenings and on weekends, "whatever it took to encourage and support their persistence and progress," according to one of the coordinators. Support from OCC personnel also facilitated the development of a peer support system for the students.

### 3. *Frequent and Open Communication*

Frequent communication between Presbyterian Homes and OCC was identified as key to this partnership's success. Much of the communication was between the transition counselors at the College and the Director of Nursing at Presbyterian Homes. During the planning stages, up to 12 calls per day between the two entities were reported. After program implementation, communication was still frequent, about once per month and more often when needed. Discussion between the two organizations' representatives was described as "candid." This established a strong, trusting relationship and avoided earlier problems that had developed between the partners.

- *Underestimate of Students' Academic Needs*

In the beginning of this partnership, some Presbyterian Homes' administrators and bridge students assumed that enrollment in the bridge course ensured a passing grade and automatic transition to credit-level Practical Nursing prerequisite courses. College administrators worked closely with Presbyterian Homes' staff and the students to help them understand that their competency on the job did not necessarily transfer to competencies needed for success in college. Over time, the employer partner and students gained greater understanding of the academic rigor of the credit-level prerequisite courses, and this issue was resolved.

- *Limited Nursing Instructor Availability*

Though not a factor in the bridge course itself, the subsequent prerequisite and Practical Nursing courses were changed to be offered at times and days that accommodate the students' work schedules. This extends the timeframe within which traditional nursing classes are offered. Oakton Community College hired adjunct clinical nursing instructors to help with the clinical portions of the program and worked hard to find qualified faculty willing to work evening or weekend hours.

## EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

The success of the college/employer partnership in this initiative can be measured at the organizational level and also at the student level. Presbyterian Homes reports that all of the students who participated in the bridge course are still employed by the organization; there is greater satisfaction from RN-level staff because they work with "more knowledgeable and skilled colleagues who are excited about learning;" and Presbyterian Homes' residents report greater satisfaction stemming from more engaged and knowledgeable staff.

Given the SG bridge course's success, OCC reports that it has used lessons learned in this experience as a template for developing a part-time ADN program, a first for the College. This option will increase access and opportunity for many working adults in the district and contribute to helping eliminate the shortage of Registered Nurses in the area.

For the original SG bridge students, success is measured by retention and completion outcomes. Of the 17 students who began the Shifting Gears CNA to LPN bridge course, 15 completed the course. Fourteen of them enrolled in the next course in the prerequisite sequence. All fourteen students have persisted in the Practical Nursing program and are on target to graduate in August, 2011. They will then be eligible to sit for their national licensure exam to become LPNs. Further, all have indicated they intend to enroll in OCC's ADN program. As additional evidence of this partnership's success, Presbyterian Homes' commitment is ongoing as they continue to cover all tuition for their employees as they complete their Practical Nursing degree.

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