Getting Ahead at Ivy Tech: A Program to Support Underresourced Students

Barbara Duncanson
Educational Consultant

Introduction

Those of us who work in community colleges know without glancing at the statistics that we serve the majority of undergraduate students in the U.S. who are underresourced, overextended, and socially and economically disenfranchised. Our students are single parents, older adults, immigrants, minorities, the laid-off, the underemployed, and the never employed. They come to us with hope in their hearts for the education and the fresh start that will lead to a better life for themselves and their families.

At Ivy Tech Community College–North Central in South Bend, In., we know from the comments of employers that we do a good job preparing our graduates with technical skills for entry-level positions in a range of occupations. But we also know that too many of our students do not persist to graduation or they fail to fit in when they land that coveted first job—not because they lack intelligence, skills, or drive, but in many cases because they do not understand how to navigate the complex middle-class world of higher education and the workplace.

As part of a college-wide strategic plan to improve retention and completion, Ivy Tech–North Central five years ago began several initiatives designed to help faculty, staff, and students understand the hurdles facing individuals who want to move from poverty to a more stable life. The goals of these initiatives are to develop individual and institutional strategies to overcome these hurdles and to work with our communities to effect the necessary systemic changes.

This article describes one of these initiatives—the Getting Ahead program. This initiative is designed to empower underresourced students to set goals, take control of their lives, and take action in their college and community to help others who face similar barriers. Ultimately, the goal is to improve retention of underresourced students and help them succeed in higher education, the workplace, and in their personal lives.

Definition and Key Concepts

According to aha! Process Inc. (2010b), "Getting Ahead facilitates a process for people from poverty to investigate the impact that poverty has had on themselves and their community and to use this information to build resources for a better life and community."

Getting Ahead was developed by DeVol (2006). It is based on concepts outlined in previous works by Payne, DeVol, and others, particularly *Bridges Out of Poverty: Strategies for Professionals and Communities* (Payne, DeVol, & Dreussie Smith, 2001) and *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Payne, 1996). Some of the key Bridges concepts underlying Getting Ahead are the following:

The definition of poverty. Poverty is defined in the Bridges and Getting Ahead literature as "the extent to which a person, institution, or community does without resources" (DeVol, 2006, p. 64; Payne, DeVol, & Dreussie Smith, 2006, p. 48). According to DeVol (2006), there are 11 key resources that are necessary to live well. These resources are financial, emotional, mental, formal register, spiritual, integrity and trust, physical, support systems, relationships/role models, motivation and persistence, and knowledge of the hidden rules. Formal register is defined as "having the vocabulary, language ability, and negotiation skills to succeed in work and/or school environments" (DeVol, 2006, p. 64). According to Payne's definition of poverty, an individual may have an income significantly above the poverty level, but still be impoverished in other key resource areas.

The hidden rules of class. Payne, DeVol, and Dreussie Smith (2006) define hidden rules as "the unspoken cues and habits of a group" (p. 46) and maintain that these rules exist within and between economic classes. For individuals in poverty who want to move into a different socioeconomic class, understanding the hidden rules of the middle and upper classes, and choosing to use them, can lead to new relationships, educational opportunities, better jobs, and other resources.

Mental models. Payne, DeVol, and Dreussie Smith (2006) define mental models as "internal picture[s] of how the world works" that "exist below awareness; are theories-in-use, often unexamined; determine how we act; and can help or interfere with learning." For change to occur, "we must suspend our mental models" (p. 2). One of the objectives of Getting Ahead is for participants to

examine their mental models, as well as the mental models of people in other socioeconomic classes—not to determine which may be "good" or "bad," but to achieve greater understanding of themselves and others. Participants then can make conscious choices about if, how, and what they want to change about themselves, their environment, and their current situation.

Problem-solving ability of people in poverty. Bridges concepts are based on the fundamental principles of mutual trust and mutual respect. People in poverty are problem solvers with much valuable knowledge and experience that people from other socioeconomic classes may lack. Their input should be respected and valued, and they need to be at the table when organizational or community strategies are formulated to address issues of poverty (DeVol, 2010a).

How Getting Ahead Is Used in Social Services and Higher Education

Participants in Getting Ahead utilize the workbook *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World* (DeVol, 2006), which was developed with the assistance of people living in poverty (DeVol, 2010a). The workbook helps investigators understand and use the hidden rules of class to build up financial, emotional, social, and other resources. Participants are called "investigators" because they are investigating themselves and the world around them through the lens of economic class.

Working in a group with two trained facilitators, investigators develop a series of mental models to envision their current life, the life they would like to have (called their "future story") and the qualities their community would possess if it were a prosperous community for all. They assess their own resources and make plans to develop resources that are lacking. Upon completing Getting Ahead, investigators have individualized action plans based on the knowledge acquired through the coinvestigative process and expressed in new mental models. They also better understand the social, economic, and political barriers that contribute to poverty, and are empowered to advocate for systemic change and help others in similar socioeconomic circumstances.

Originally developed for and used by social service organizations with their clients, Getting Ahead is finding applications in higher education at a growing number of institutions. Walla Walla Community College in Washington is

planning to initiate it soon as part of a grant from the Gates Foundation (L. Horan, October 27, 2010, personal communication). Other higher education institutions such as Kent State University in Ohio (D. Kloss & S. O'Donnell, September 22, 2010, personal communication), the University of Wyoming (D. Schaad, October 4, 2010, personal communication), and North Carolina State University (S. Jakes, September 16, 2010, personal communication) use Bridges concepts and Getting Ahead in community outreach programs. Ohio Campus Compact has developed service learning initiatives based around Bridges and Getting Ahead (DeVol, 2010a). The Arkansas Department of Higher Education teaches the Bridges Out of Poverty framework to faculty and student support staff at colleges and universities to help them develop strategies for working with economically disadvantaged students (Arkansas CAR 2008–2009 CAR Narrative, n.d.).

When used with underresourced college students, Getting Ahead helps address the "double whammy" of low income and first-generation status that puts many students at risk of failure (Krodel, Becker, Ingle, & Jakes, 2009). According to Krodel et al. (2009), Getting Ahead and its new iteration for higher education called Investigations effectively support these students by engaging them in investigating and discussing their lives, families, and the impact of economic class with their peers. Through engagement and the power of relationships, Getting Ahead and Investigations help students move from a concrete, contextual learning style to the decontextualized, abstract thinking and reasoning required for success in college and the workplace.

How Ivy Tech–North Central Uses Getting Ahead

Ivy Tech–North Central began using Getting Ahead in fall 2007 at its South Bend campus. One class was offered each fall and spring semester through spring 2010. In fall 2010, a second class was added in South Bend and three classes were added at satellite campuses in Elkhart and Warsaw, IN. The program to date has been conducted as a personal enrichment course under the college's Workforce and Economic Development Department, with Continuing Education Units (CEUs) awarded at the conclusion. Graduates also may receive academic credit in the human services program for a nominal fee through the college's Prior Learning Assessment option.

Along with Youngstown State, Ivy Tech was one of the first two institutions to adapt Getting Ahead to higher education purposes. With no higher education template to follow, Ivy Tech has been building its own, with the following key components:

Funding. For the first three years, the program was funded through grants from the St. Joseph County Bridges Out of Poverty (SJCBOP) initiative, a nonprofit organization in the county in which South Bend is located (www.sjcbridges.org). SJCBOP members include representation from social service, government, and business as well as higher education, and they utilize Bridges concepts as a common approach to addressing issues of poverty in the county. SJCBOP's financial support in turn comes from area foundations and corporate partners, and has enabled it to fund Getting Ahead programs in a number of community organizations as well as at Ivy Tech. In 2010–2011, the Ivy Tech program was funded from strategic initiative resources authorized by the president of Ivy Tech Community College, a statewide, multicampus institution of which Ivy Tech–North Central is one administrative unit.

Facilitators. Facilitators are required to have completed Getting Ahead facilitator training from aha! Process, which can be done either through face-to-face instruction or via the Internet (aha! Process Inc., 2010a). In addition to completing the training, facilitators should possess certain key personal qualities. They must be empathetic but also tough, holding investigators accountable for doing their homework, contributing to the group, and building their future story. They must understand the difference between the roles of the facilitator and the instructor, and the roles of the investigator and the student (DeVol, 2010b). The most successful facilitators also bring relevant life experience to their classes, as individuals who either have themselves experienced poverty or have worked previously with individuals from poverty. In our Ivy Tech programs on each campus, our facilitating teams have typically been comprised of one staff member (to provide a campus resource for ongoing support) and one outside individual—a community member or a Getting Ahead graduate.

Recruiting students. To recruit for the initial class in fall 2007, a one-page flyer was distributed through Student Affairs at Ivy Tech and in a low-income housing development across the street from the campus. Since that first class, little recruitment has been necessary in South Bend. Word spread about its value, and the program has had a waiting list each semester.

Because the primary goal of the class is retention, current students are given first priority. Second priority is given to prospective students and employees, and third priority to community members. Many community-member investigators have been relatives of students who enroll to learn strategies to help their family members in their studies. Some community members have become Ivy Tech students as a result of participating in the class. To allow for group cohesiveness, relationship building, and mutual support, the enrollment in a Getting Ahead class is typically limited to 12.

While the Getting Ahead materials are designed for use by people from generational poverty, the Ivy Tech program has welcomed anyone who felt they could benefit from its socioeconomic-class analysis, self-reflection, and group support. Some investigators have been from situational poverty—middle-class individuals who lost their jobs and, in some cases, homes, cars, and other possessions in the economic recession. At least one—a student from Saint Mary's College performing an internship at Ivy Tech—has been an upper-middle-class individual. According to Liss (personal communication, October 2, 2010), a class comprised of individuals from multiple socioeconomic classes can be effective, as students learn about the experiences of different social classes from individuals who have lived those experiences.

Incentives. The underlying philosophy of the class is that investigators explore the material together, and that everyone has information and experiences of value to share with the facilitators and coinvestigators. Therefore, investigators should be compensated for their knowledge and participation (DeVol, 2006). In the first six semesters of the Ivy Tech program, investigators earned small-value gift cards to Kroger Supermarket or Walmart when they attended both sessions in a two-week period. Those who attended at least 80 percent of the sessions received a gift card of higher value at the end of the program. While gift values were nominal, the cards were welcome as positive reinforcement and assistance to cash-strapped investigators with food and gas expenses.

The class. Classes are scheduled at each campus at times convenient for investigators and facilitators. Forty-five hours of class meetings are required, plus homework. The original South Bend class, for example, meets once a week at the campus on Mondays from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. for 15 weeks. Classes begin with a light meal

(funded as part of the program cost) and informal conversation to build rapport. The curriculum consists of 15 modules. Investigators begin by creating mental models of "what it's like now" for them. In this initial stage, investigators describe a picture of what it is like to live in poverty in their community, and begin to investigate community issues that perpetuate poverty, such as housing and wages (DeVol, Payne, & Dreussi-Smith, 2006).

As the program progresses, investigators learn about the change process and assess their lives against Payne's 11 key resources (DeVol, 2006). According to one of the facilitators (G. Vaughn, personal communications at various times), the assessment can be eye opening. During the study of financial resources, investigators take a close look at their own finances, including their debt-to-income ratio—an exercise most have never undertaken, and which leads some to cancel cable subscriptions and cut up credit cards. Examination of relationships and role models often can be painful as investigators realize they may have to suspend or terminate some relationships that inhibit their ability to move forward with their goals.

The capstone of the program is the development of the individual future story—in essence, a mental model of what the investigators want their lives to become and a roadmap for getting there. Facilitators also provide information about college and community resources on which the investigators can draw.

Graduation celebration. The culmination of the program is a graduation celebration, with input from the graduates as to where, when, and how the celebration will be conducted. In South Bend, the celebration has always been a buffet dinner at the campus, to which graduates may bring their children and two adult guests who have provided significant support to them. The deans of the academic schools in which students are enrolled are invited, and the chancellor or her designate gives the welcome. A representative from Student Affairs encourages persistence toward educational goals and a staff member from Workforce and Economic Development awards the CEU certificates. For some graduates, this is the first college course they, or anyone in their family, have completed, and this realization can inspire them to pursue further education. Facilitators give various awards and tokens of achievement, and there are photos, tears, and hugs all around.

In one of the new Elkhart classes, graduates have elected to have an intimate dinner at a local restaurant with a few invited college and community guests, but no family or personal guests. This approach, which also has been used by some other Getting Ahead programs in our county, gives individuals who have not had the funds to dine in a sit-down restaurant the opportunity to learn some important social skills and gain more insight into the hidden rules of class.

Follow-up. Following up with Getting Ahead graduates is critical in helping them stay on track with their future story plans, despite the roadblocks that life continues to throw in their paths. The process of follow-up continues to evolve at Ivy Tech. Currently, our Getting Ahead graduates can stay in touch with the facilitators who work at Ivy Tech. Many of the graduates are students in the human services program and join the HUMS Club, which provides ongoing networking and support opportunities. Additionally, SJCBOP offers monthly networking meetings for Getting Ahead graduates from Ivy Tech and other programs throughout the community (SJCBOP, 2010a). Graduates share a meal with "allies," or community members interested in providing support to people emerging from poverty, hear presentations on a specific topic for the evening, and discuss that topic with the allies at their table. Friendships often are forged, and graduates call upon allies for professional help with legal issues, job-hunting, financial questions, and other matters.

Results of the Ivy Tech–North Central Getting Ahead Program

Ivy Tech is in the process of formalizing a procedure to track Getting Ahead graduates longitudinally. However, preliminary results of the first six classes on the South Bend campus are promising.

- A total of 56 individuals completed the program over the six semesters: 29 current students and 27 community members, employees, and previous students.
- Overall completion rate was 80%, the highest completion rate among all of the Getting Ahead programs offered throughout the community. A high completion rate is noteworthy because of the many obstacles people from poverty must overcome to regularly attend a class.
- Of current students participating in the program, 83% completed the class.
- Aggregated results of pre- and post-tests administered to each class showed improvement in building resources: 61% of Getting Ahead graduates

noted increases in their support systems and income; 48%, an increase in their budgeting skills; and 39%, increases in problem-solving abilities and education resources. Twenty-seven percent reported improvement in their employment situation.

- As of the middle of spring semester 2010, ten of 29 Getting Ahead graduates then enrolled at Ivy Tech showed GPA improvement, and 14 were on track to complete their associate degree programs in less than three years. Two Getting Ahead graduates had completed their degrees.
- Some community members became students after completing Getting Ahead.
- Based on Ivy Tech–North Central's experience, the Ivy Tech system is rolling out Bridges Out of Poverty training for faculty and staff statewide, with the eventual goal of expanding Getting Ahead to all regions as well.

Ivy Tech also has gained students from the Getting Ahead programs offered by other organizations in the area, including two women's shelters and a homeless center. To date, over 250 individuals have completed Getting Ahead classes through organizations affiliated with SJCBOP. Of the 142 SJCBOP has been able to track, 70, or nearly half, are attending Ivy Tech (SJCBOP, 2010b).

Comments of graduates reinforce these positive numbers. The author recently interviewed three Ivy Tech Getting Ahead graduates, asking each how she felt her participation in Getting Ahead benefitted her. The three graduates interviewed were females ages 49, 52, and 60; two African Americans and one Caucasian. In gender and race, they were representative of the 57 graduates, who were predominantly female (88%) and African American (70%). Two of the graduates, whom we will call Roberta and Dorothy, are raising children or grandchildren. The third, whom we will call Callie, is a recovering substance abuser who entered Ivy Tech while living in a women's shelter. She has since moved to a small house she rents near the campus, and prides herself on being financially self-sufficient.

All three of them described outcomes that point to the development of a future story and a plan to achieve it. Both Dorothy and Roberta felt the program helped them gain the confidence in the academic environment (and, in Roberta's case, also the workplace) they initially lacked as older women. Roberta,

who completed an associate degree in accounting, now is working on a second degree in business administration and plans to earn a bachelor's degree (personal communication, September 13, 2010). Dorothy settled on a career goal of helping substance abusers. She will complete her degree in May 2011 with concentrations in mental health and substance abuse, and then continue for a practical nursing certificate (personal communication, September 16, 2010). Callie, who initially entered Ivy Tech without a degree objective—"I just wanted to take a couple of classes to clear my head and get rid of some past issues," she said—is now focused on a degree in human services and a future helping others emerge from poverty. She currently is taking a semester off to work as an AmeriCorps volunteer, making contacts in the community and developing skills in project organization and public speaking. She also is cofacilitating a Getting Ahead class (personal communication, September 16, 2010).

Dorothy and Roberta credit the Getting Ahead program with teaching them practical skills—Roberta in time management and both in financial management. With the help of program facilitators, Roberta cleaned up her credit so she could purchase a home, and she learned to manage work and school more efficiently to have more time to spend with her family (personal communication, September 13, 2010). Dorothy learned to budget her money. She now is able to pay for a few extras, such as "a little vacation" for herself and her grandchildren: "It was only a weekend, but we got to go, you know. It's all about how you use your resources and how you adjust, and what you plan on doing," she said (personal communication, September 16, 2010).

For Callie, the change process through which she passed in the Getting Ahead program was painful, but ultimately empowering. Before Getting Ahead, she said, she didn't realize she was in poverty, or that her mother and grandmother had been in poverty, and she didn't know there was another way to live. The realization was life altering:

> I have not been a happy camper about all the information. I'm not going to lie to you, but it's not about the past, it's about what we're going to do about now … and starting with me the curse [of generational poverty] is broken, and anyone that wants to hear about it, I can give them the information I have the way I understand it. I am a spokesperson now for Getting Ahead and Ivy Tech. (Personal communication, September 16, 2010)

Through the change process, Cathy gained a purpose in life: "Now … I have been told that my story or my life was not in vain, and it could help somebody. I couldn't wrap my mind around the fact that my destructive past could help somebody until recently" (personal communication, September 16, 2010).

A common thread in the comments of the three Getting Ahead graduates is the power of the support group. G. Vaughn, an assistant director of admissions who facilitated all six groups, emphasizes the support investigators provide to one another as a key component of the program: "What I see … is the networking that is done in the program. … These students start off in some cases as strangers, but 15 weeks later they're friends. They are motivating each other; they're pushing each other to keep trying" (personal communication, September 16, 2010).

Among the examples of support Vaughn cited are bartering systems, in which students swap resources such as childcare and rides when they find themselves living close to each other, tutoring by a more advanced student of a newer student, sharing of information about resources available in the community and the college, and ongoing encouragement to each other to prevail against obstacles. She has even seen one student give another her gift card, saying, "Here, take mine. I know you need it because you have kids at home." This group support is invaluable in helping participants stay on track with their goals, and especially so for students, who get frustrated when tests and papers pile up at the same time they also may have a family problem (personal communication, September 16, 2010).

Having themselves been on the receiving end of support from the facilitators and the group, Dorothy, Roberta, and Callie all are eager to give back in kind to others. Roberta said she has served as a mentor for Getting Ahead investigators in later groups (personal communication, September 13, 2010), and Callie is focusing on a career using Getting Ahead and Bridges concepts in a social services environment (personal communication, September 16, 2010). Dorothy actively recruits other students to join a Getting Ahead class and keeps in touch with many of her former Getting Ahead coinvestigators:

> We're still in touch, most of those women in that class, and … there was one guy, and … I'm still in touch with him also. … [W]e grew together and we see each other. We hug each other. We've gone through other classes together. Some of them have moved on, but we always recognize [each other]. (Personal communication, September 16, 2010)

Lessons Learned

The Getting Ahead training provided by aha! Process provides many tips for organizing and facilitating a successful Getting Ahead class. However, some lessons learned at Ivy Tech–North Central may help higher education institutions seeking to move the Getting Ahead model from the social services environment to the academic context:

1. *Hire facilitators who know how to engage underresourced individuals and honor their advice*. Bridges Out of Poverty training offered through aha! Process can help faculty and staff understand the experience of poverty and the context in which many of our students operate. But knowing the concepts intellectually is a far cry from knowing them by heart. For example, when we launched the first Getting Ahead class, one of the facilitators, who knew how to communicate with people from poverty, quickly discarded the multipage information packet, chock-full of abstract concepts and vague outcomes, developed for student recruiting purposes by a well-meaning, middle-class administrator. She replaced it with a one-page flyer that simply said:

   - Learn how you can build resources for a better life
   - Build economic stability
   - Build a path to a good-paying job
   - Build stable housing
   - Build your savings for a rainy day and old age

   The short, direct, concrete approach worked, and the first class was quickly full.

2. *Get understanding and buy-in from administration, faculty, and staff*. Ivy Tech–North Central requires training in Bridges concepts for all permanent employees on our three campuses, and the training has been well-received, according to surveys and comments. The common Bridges framework and language all employees share helps to embed Getting Ahead within a holistic approach to working with underresourced students. Getting Ahead is not regarded as a small program that someone else is doing, but the outgrowth of concepts that are regarded as an integral part of how Ivy Tech–North Central interacts with underresourced students.

3. *When your community is engaged in Bridges concepts, more resources become available to your college program and your students*. Ivy Tech–North Central, Walla Walla Community College, and Sussex Community College have

had the good fortune of being embedded within community programs. In the cases of Walla Walla (L. Horan, personal communication, October 27, 2010) and Sussex (A. Liss, personal communication, October 2, 2010), community action programs initiated the partnerships leading to the development of the Getting Ahead programs at those colleges. In Ivy Tech's situation, the county-wide nonprofit organization and the Ivy Tech program have developed together and become closely intertwined. The partnership Ivy Tech enjoys with SJCBOP has provided not only financial resources, but also ongoing support for students through contacts with allies at the Monthly Networking Meetings, internship and service opportunities, and continuing financial literacy education. SJCBOP also has developed a network of 10 major employers who will give special hiring consideration to applicants who have completed the Getting Ahead program through Ivy Tech or other organizations. An SJCBOP employment specialist provides support for both the employee and the employer to make the job match work.

4. *Determine what the objectives of your program are, and who your target audience is*. This will dictate how you structure your program. If your program is primarily a retention tool and targeted at students only or if it is a tool for helping all students understand economic diversity, then utilizing the curriculum within an academic course, as Youngstown State University and Sussex County Community College have done, is the appropriate route. If your objectives also include recruitment or community service, then a noncredit model, such as Ivy Tech–North Central's, may be more effective.
5. *For many underresourced individuals, tangible incentives do matter, at least as a hook to engage them initially*. The shift from grant money to operating funds to support the program required Ivy Tech–North Central to discontinue the use of the gift cards as incentives. The move appears to have had an effect in retention, particularly on the South Bend campus, where all four community members enrolled in the evening class dropped out after they learned the incentives were no longer being offered. Anecdotes from past classes and other programs in the community indicate many individuals sign up for the program because they know they will receive periodic financial incentives, then stay because they find the information compelling. In place of the gift cards, Ivy Tech–North Central now plans to offer a scholarship to Getting Ahead graduates in our noncredit program if they enroll in an Ivy Tech class

within a year of completing Getting Ahead. Where Getting Ahead is offered as an academic course, the credit at the end of the course is regarded as the incentive (P. DeVol, personal communication, August 19, 2010).

6. *Concerns about a stigma attached to participating in the class are likely overrated, especially in institutions that serve a significant percentage of underresourced students*. We took care initially to maintain confidentially about students participating in the program, but quickly learned that students were eager to share information about the program with their instructors and classmates. In fact, Getting Ahead graduates have become our best recruiters.

Next Steps

The Ivy Tech–North Central Getting Ahead program is in a period of flux due to the shift in funding from grants to operational funds, the publication of new, higher education-specific course materials by aha! Process Inc., and the pending retirement of the chancellor who supported the program from its inception. These and other factors spur discussions of future directions for the program. These discussions focus primarily on two areas: developing an academic course and providing additional campus support to Getting Ahead graduates.

Developing an academic course. Next semester, the Ivy Tech program will transition to the new text, *Investigations into Economic Class in America* (DeVol & Krodel, 2010), currently used in credit-bearing courses at Youngstown State (K.Krodel, personal communication, September 15, 2010) and Sussex Community College (A. Liss, personal communication, October 2, 2010). The new text expands on *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World* (DeVol, 2006) by providing more information and resources on socioeconomic class, more information and exercises targeted at time management and planning skills, writing assignments geared to college students, and a resource list of movies, books, and poetry that deal with socioeconomic class issues (K. Krodel, personal communication, September 15, 2010). The class will continue to be offered as a noncredit course at least through the end of the spring 2011 semester.

Going forward, Ivy Tech–North Central will look first at developing a three-credit IVY course using the Investigations material. IVY courses, in the Ivy Tech system, are skill-building courses on a variety of topics. A three-credit

IVY course incorporating the Investigations curriculum would help many underresourced students develop the motivation, goals, and knowledge they need to succeed in college. Ivy Tech–North Central also plans to look at embedding the Investigations material in a course in sociology, English, or another liberal arts area. This would enable students of all socioeconomic classes to earn general education credit required for graduation while learning about how socioeconomic status has impacted not only themselves, but also classmates on other rungs of the socioeconomic ladder.

The academic version of Investigations may or may not replace the noncredit version, depending upon resources and interest among students. However, transitioning the program to academic affairs offers a number of potential advantages, such as institutionalizing the program to inoculate it against changes in leadership, attracting more students who can benefit from the program but lack the time to participate in it as one more activity in their hectic lives, and reaching middle and upper middle class students as a diversity awareness initiative.

Expanding campus support. A Getting Ahead Club for graduates and other students interested in issues of socioeconomic class will start in the spring semester under the leadership of Getting Ahead graduates Callie and Dorothy and with faculty support from the School of Public and Social Services. The club not only will provide networking opportunities to underresourced students, but also educate the college community about socioeconomic class barriers and the higher education experience of underresourced students. In fall 2011, the club will initiate monthly networking meetings at Ivy Tech similar to those offered in the community by SJCBOP, but targeting students at Ivy Tech and other colleges in the area who have graduated from a Getting Ahead or Investigations program. Programming will focus on challenges facing underresourced college students, and faculty and staff will be encouraged to serve as mentors. Informal interaction among college personnel and the Getting Ahead graduates will, it is hoped, not only help students persist, but also encourage faculty and staff to see the value and necessity of having Getting Ahead graduates at the table when decisions impacting students are made.

Conclusion

Bridges concepts and the Getting Ahead program materials are neither a perfect nor a finished product. To the credit of aha! Process, they are in a continuous state of evolution in response to comments from the communities of practice that use them. What they offer, even in a fluid state, is a set of flexible tools that higher education institutions can use and adapt to suit the needs of their students.

For Ivy Tech–North Central, these tools have given us a shared lens through which to view the experiences of many of our students, some tested approaches to engaging and helping them, and a common understanding from which we can develop strategic initiatives to enhance their success. For our students, Bridges and Getting Ahead have helped them achieve greater self-awareness, develop a future story, build supportive relationships to keep them focused on their goals, and gain the knowledge they need to become advocates for larger change. While Bridges and Getting Ahead by themselves will not end poverty, using these tools can be a first step that is both effective and practical for many colleges that serve a significant population of low-income students.

About the Author: Barbara Duncanson was the executive director of administration at Ivy Tech Community College–North Central and is currently a higher educational consultant.

Address correspondence to: Barbara Duncanson, 1314 Echo Drive, South Bend, IN 46614, bduncans@gmail.com

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