

**EDUCATING
ADULT WORKERS**

The
Shifting Gears
Approach
to Systems
Change

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About Shifting Gears

The Joyce Foundation's Shifting Gears initiative was launched in 2007 as a state policy change effort in Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin. The goal is to strengthen state postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems so that more low-skilled workers gain the education, skills and credentials needed to advance and succeed in our changing economy.

For more information on Shifting Gears, please visit www.shifting-gears.org.

About the Joyce Foundation

The Joyce Foundation supports efforts to protect the Great Lakes, to reduce poverty and violence in the region, and to ensure its residents have access to good schools, decent jobs, and strong democracy, and a diverse and thriving culture.

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About this Publication

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Executive Summary

Shifting Gears provides financial resources for states to strengthen state postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems. In addition, Shifting Gears provides management team leadership through proactive coaching and expert technical assistance, formative evaluative feedback, and communications support.

The Shifting Gears¹ approach to systems change incorporates **FOUR STRATEGIC ACTIVITIES:**

- 1) Using data** to foster improvements in policy and practice;
- 2) Pursuing policy change** to leverage improvements in systems and institutional practice;
- 3) Engaging the field** to generate ideas and buy-in for systems and institutional change; and,
- 4) Strategic Communications** to cultivate stakeholder support for systems and institutional change.

Shifting Gears encourages collaboration among state agencies and other stakeholders to carry out these activities.

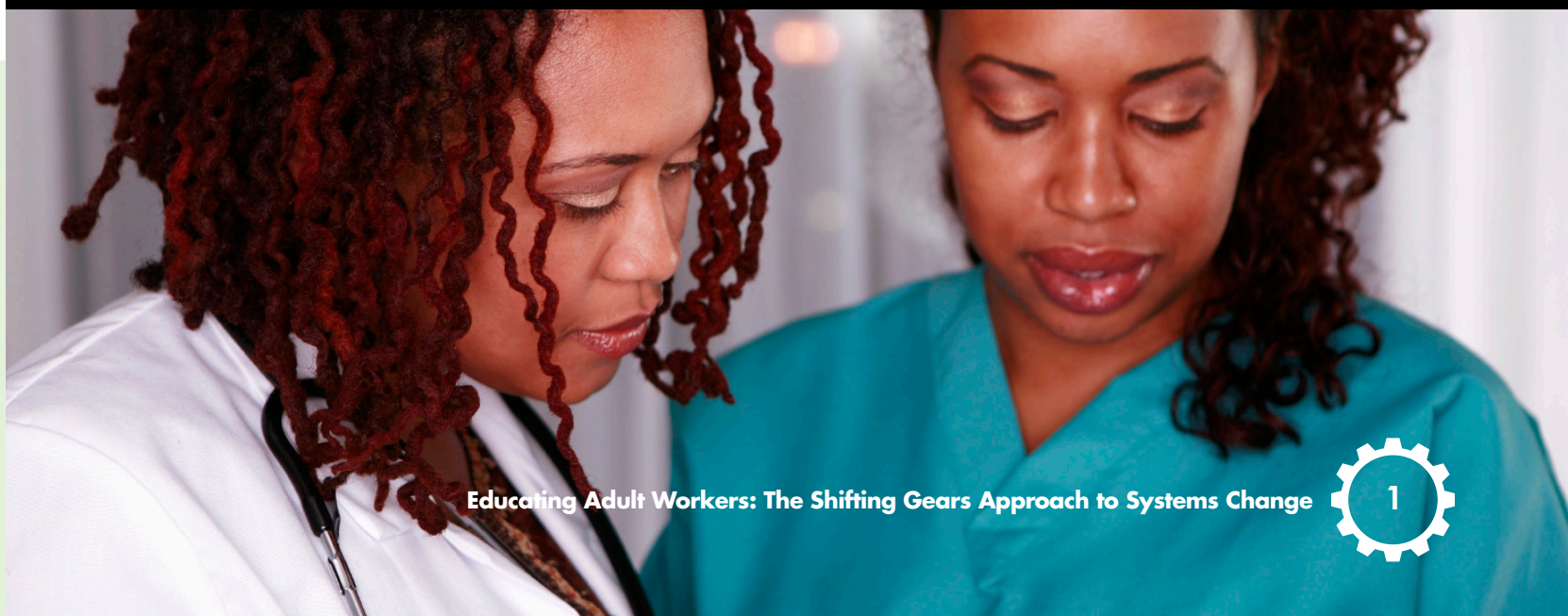
This paper addresses the Shifting Gears approach to systems change with a particular

focus on the *logic model*, and *policy agenda and action plan* – two tools used to guide and support states' efforts to pursue systemic change throughout the postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems. After two and a half years, several lessons have emerged about the challenges and opportunities states are likely to face when pursuing systems change efforts:

- Systems change seems daunting, but it is potentially achievable with a well-defined vision and clearly articulated plan of action.
- Multiple types of policy change may be needed for systems reform.
- Collaboration and consensus among stakeholders is essential, yet challenging.
- Proactive coaching and formative evaluation are critical.
- Ongoing cross-communication within the Shifting Gears management team is required for adaptive leadership.

Collaboration among stakeholders and focused attention on systems and institutional change provide a strong foundation for improving education and skills outcomes for adults. An interim evaluation report in 2011 will provide insights on progress toward each state's systems change goals.

¹ For more information on Shifting Gears, visit www.shiftinggears.org



Introduction

The Joyce Foundation launched Shifting Gears in 2007 as a state policy change initiative to generate a better-educated, skilled and more competitive adult workforce in Midwest states. The Initiative supports the states of Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin to strengthen their postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems so that more low-skilled workers gain the education, skills, and credentials needed to advance and succeed in our changing economy.

The Joyce Foundation engaged in this multiyear, multimillion dollar initiative because of significant challenges facing states in the region:

- Too many adult workers have inadequate education and skills to achieve economic self-sufficiency and meet the shifting occupational needs of businesses;
- The current K-12 pipeline of students is insufficient to meet employer needs;
- State systems are not effectively focused, structured or aligned to assist low-skilled adult workers in gaining the necessary education and skills for the 21st century economy; and,
- State policy leaders give insufficient attention to low-skilled adult workers.

The Shifting Gears' theory of change posits that state policy change is a critical lever to strengthen postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems to better serve low-skilled adult workers. State policy change can foster innovation, demand better student outcome data, drive reform and coordination among adult and postsecondary education, human services, workforce, and economic development systems as well as resolve policy disincentives and service-delivery inefficiencies. The practical benefit is

that by making existing education and skills-development systems work better for adults, an unemployed Midwesterner can more easily go to college to learn new skills and successfully attain a credential that is valued by employers.

Shifting Gears' focus on state policy as a lever for change is complemented by supporting activities to promote best practices, use data to improve policies and procedures, and communicate compelling reasons and ideas for change. The expectation is that each Shifting Gears state will use a variety of resources² to pursue system changes that result in a better-educated, skilled, and more competitive adult workforce within their state.

After two and a half years, Shifting Gears has evolved into an initiative that has garnered the attention of state officials and other stakeholders to consider the education and skills-development needs of low-skilled adult workers. Along the way, Shifting Gears has examined and assessed its overall approach to the initiative as well as the states' development and implementation of their own plans of action. This intentional reflection has generated a rich understanding of the multiple dynamics necessary to undertake and support a state systems change initiative. Additionally, this effort has led to insights on how key levers of systems change, such as state policy and data, can contribute to the process.

This paper addresses the Shifting Gears overall approach to systems change with a particular focus on the *logic model*, and *policy agenda and action plan* – two tools used in Shifting Gears to guide and support states' efforts to carry out their initiative. It reports on the initiative to date and offers lessons learned by the management team on working with states to pursue systemic change.

² In addition to financial resources made available to each state, Joyce provided expert technical assistance, cross-state sharing of experiences, learning about adult education practices from leading states, and other substantive support to help catalyze, propel and enhance policy innovation in participating Midwest states. Each state was expected to provide an in-kind or cash match equal to 50 percent of the Joyce investment.



Shifting Gears Approach to Systems Change

Shifting Gears is a new approach to grantmaking for the Joyce Foundation's Employment Program. This innovative effort seeks to expand the Foundation's policy work to directly engage state leaders and officials responsible for postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems, institutions and programs in a systems change initiative. Underlying this approach is the idea that state leaders can be both motivated and supported to achieve important system and policy changes with sufficient funds, guidance, and technical assistance.

In pursuing this approach, foundation staff recognized the need to alter its process of grantmaking and project management. Staff embraced a concept articulated in a Stanford Social Innovation Review article that challenged foundations to be more imaginative and proactive in the pursuit of social change.³ Leadership, the authors argued, requires a willingness and commitment to adapt; that is, to "lead boldly." To apply this idea of adaptive leadership, foundations should be ready to aggressively pursue stakeholder attention; generate and maintain stakeholder motivation to pursue change; actively frame the issue to find common ground among diverse stakeholders; and, be willing to mediate the tough conversations among stakeholders necessary to achieve social change.⁴

Adaptive leadership for Shifting Gears means that states are guided and supported in formulating and implementing their initiatives by the active engagement of Foundation staff and a cadre of outside experts. In other words, Shifting Gears

offers more than direct investments to Midwest states; the initiative also provides management team leadership to states through expert technical assistance, formative evaluative feedback, the convening of leadership teams across participating states, knowledge dissemination, and communications assistance. Through this multifaceted partnership with states, Shifting Gears intends to catalyze, propel and enhance policy innovation as a critical lever for influencing institutional practices throughout the postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems.

To achieve systems and institutional change, Shifting Gears empowered state executive branch leaders who, in collaboration with other stakeholders, would lead and manage the state effort to improve education and employment outcomes for low-skilled adults. Executive branch leaders include gubernatorial staff, workforce and economic development agency staff, department of education staff, and postsecondary education staff, particularly those representing community colleges. In practice, Shifting Gears projects are managed by staff representing community college chancellors or presidents, and directors of state skills-development agencies. Non-governmental stakeholders, including business leaders, chambers of commerce, practitioners, as well as non-profit advocacy organizations also participate in Shifting Gears.

The Shifting Gears approach was flexible from the onset. Initially, states proposed and were funded to generally pursue activities around policy, engaging the field, and data. A key lesson from first-year activities in these broad areas was that states needed more structured support to galvanize and facilitate systems change.⁵ Shifting Gears adapted to this challenge in several ways.

³ Ronald A. Heifitz, John V. Kania, and Mark R. Kramer. "Leading Boldly." *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2004: 19-31.

⁴ Ibid., page 30.

⁵ As Shifting Gears started, three states – Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin – were funded as implementation states as they had proposed a defined initiative with specific activities. Two states – Minnesota and Ohio – were provided planning grants to examine system change needs and opportunities within their state. Michigan received a planning grant at a later date. All Shifting Gears states are now receiving implementation funding with the exception of Indiana.

FIRST, states were supported to use tools to frame and focus their Shifting Gears efforts; these tools – a state *logic model*, and *policy agenda and action plan* - are discussed in more detail below.

SECOND, more proactive technical assistance was provided by external experts to help states identify the key policies and activities that would directly help them achieve their systems change goals.

THIRD, national expertise was provided to focus state efforts around data infrastructure needs and the kinds of data analysis that could support policy and systems improvement efforts.

FOURTH, on-site formative evaluation visits were conducted semi-annually to assess each state's progress in achieving their systems change goals.

FIFTH, quarterly cross-site conference calls and Webinars were added, as well as bi-annual cross-site team meetings, which created additional opportunities for states to share with and learn from each other. Importantly, the cross-site events were organized according to the issues and concerns that states identified. Most recently, communications expertise was added as an additional support strategy to help states make their case for change.

In sum, the Shifting Gears approach to systems change focuses on the following core activities that represent the foundation for each state's efforts to improve low-skilled workers' access and success in the postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems:

- **Using data** to foster improvements in policy and practice;
- **Pursuing policy change** to leverage improvements in systems and institutional practice;

- **Engaging the field** to generate ideas and buy-in for systems and institutional change; and,
- **Strategic communications** to cultivate stakeholder support for systems and institutional change.

Across these four strategic activities (See Figure 1 opposite this page), Shifting Gears encourages collaboration among state agencies and other stakeholders committed to improving opportunities and outcomes for low-skilled workers.

DATA CAN FOSTER IMPROVEMENTS IN POLICY AND PRACTICE

The Shifting Gears initiative encourages states to use data to better understand how systems serve adult students and to inform improvements in policy and practice. States are asked to consider how they can strengthen their data infrastructure and improve their capacity to conduct analysis toward this end.⁶ As a result, Shifting Gears helps states gain a better understanding of the characteristics of low-skilled adult students, their participation and progress in postsecondary education and workforce systems, and their education and labor market outcomes.

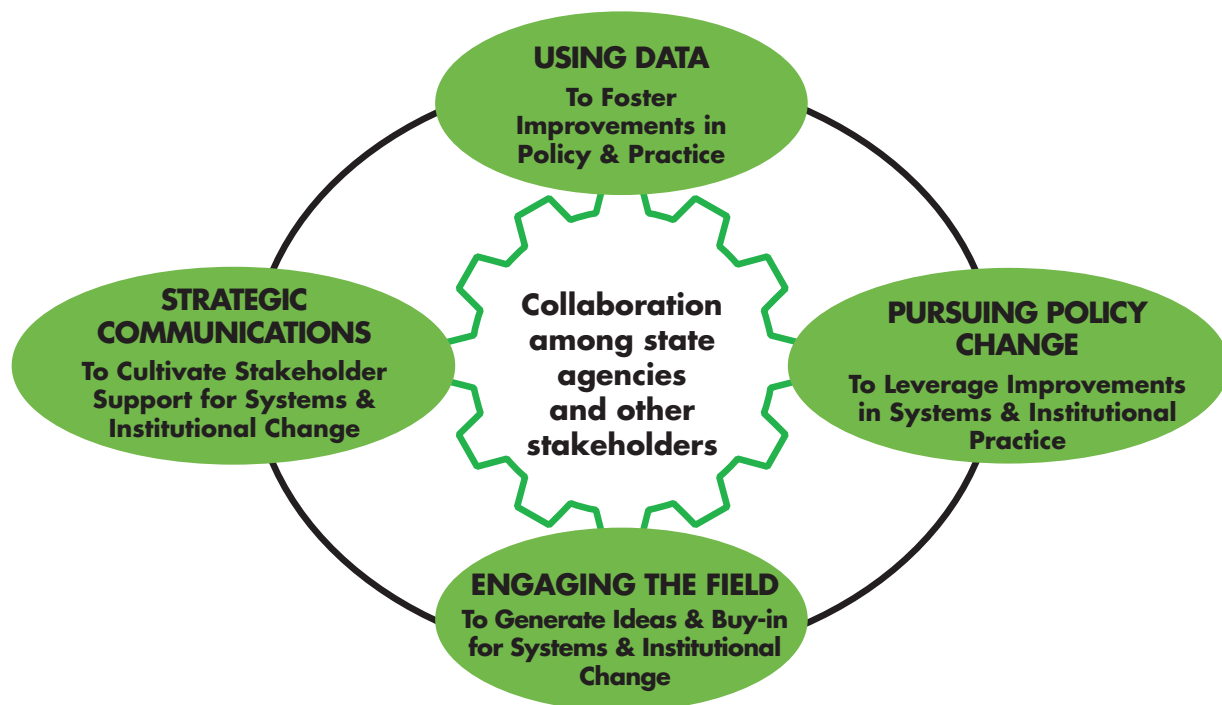
Fundamentally, states need to connect disparate data systems in order to recognize student achievement gaps and leaks in the educational pipeline, identify barriers affecting students' ability to transition or advance from one level of education and training to the next, and determine actions to improve education and training programs and systems.

For example, Wisconsin connected its adult education and technical college databases to determine whether adults who improved their basic skills in reading, writing and math

⁶ For a more in-depth discussion of Shifting Gears state data efforts, see forthcoming Shifting Gears data paper.



FIGURE 1: CORE ACTIVITIES OF SHIFTING GEARS



went on to get a certificate or degree at a technical college. The results will be used to inform and support improvements in system and institutional performance.

By helping states to better integrate data systems and to conduct data analyses, Shifting Gears enables state leaders to use data to drive and support efforts to strengthen the postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems as well as improve system practices on an ongoing basis.

POLICY CHANGE CAN LEVERAGE SYSTEMS CHANGE AND INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE

A second core activity for Shifting Gears involves the role of policy as a driver of systems change. Shifting Gears enables states to identify and

address administrative, regulatory, and legislative policies that directly or indirectly influence how education and skills-development programs are delivered to low-skilled adults, and how altering state policies can provide incentives for improvement in practice.

Policy is considered broadly by the Shifting Gears states. States identified policy issues that govern how skills earned through workforce education and training programs transfer to postsecondary education providers, and thus lead to more postsecondary credentials. States also identified policies that govern how curriculum is aligned across multiple providers (i.e., adult education, workforce and postsecondary) so that students can more effectively transition from one program and provider to another.

For example, Illinois is promoting curriculum alignment between developmental education and

credit-bearing career and technical programs. This helps to ensure that students who learn material at one level of postsecondary education are being prepared to move up and succeed at the next level of postsecondary education. Finally, states recognized that some policies require legislative action, such as how adult education and community colleges are reimbursed through state appropriations.

ENGAGING THE FIELD CAN GENERATE IDEAS AND BUY-IN FOR POLICY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE

A third underlying premise of Shifting Gears is that systems and institutional change need the involvement and buy-in from a broad coalition of stakeholders. In practice, engaging the field involves bringing together non-profit advocacy organizations, employers and/or employer groups, and adult education and workforce training providers, including community colleges, to build consensus that systems change is needed. Agreeing on the need for systems change sets the foundation for considering specific policy changes.

Engaging the field also involves investing in pilot projects and other program efforts that highlight and leverage innovative ways to deliver education and skills-development programs. For example, Minnesota invested in local “incubator” projects to learn how the delivery of support services could be better coordinated among adult education providers, community colleges, workforce centers and community-based organizations. Wisconsin supported curriculum development projects that modularized existing postsecondary diploma and degree programs into smaller “chunks” making it easier for low-skilled adults to attend classes. This effort laid the foundation for Wisconsin Technical College System staff to begin engaging important system stakeholders, such as chief instruction officers, chief student service officers, and deans to define how course and program standards and

procedures can best be modified. Wisconsin also supported regional projects to explore how business and industry partners can be effectively engaged in this work.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CAN CULTIVATE STAKEHOLDER SUPPORT FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

Strategic communications was recently added as a core aspect of the Shifting Gears model for systems change. Shifting Gears communications support is intended to build awareness and support for policy and systems change. A key step is to develop a common message for Shifting Gears across all participating states and to help states customize their own message so that top policy leaders and stakeholders can consistently advocate and support the state’s systems change goal and agenda. The addition of communications assistance will help states formalize a strategy that persuades policymakers, businesses, as well as leaders and practitioners in workforce education of the urgency of addressing the education and skills needs of adults.

Shifting Gears Tools to Support State Efforts

In 2008, as the initiative moved into its second year of operation, the Shifting Gears management team recognized the importance of helping states become more focused and intentional in their efforts around policy and systems change. As such, two significant tools were developed: a state *logic model* and a *policy agenda and action plan*. These tools are addressed in more detail below.

Logic Model

The Joyce Foundation used a *logic model* framework to convey the fundamental goal and approach to the Shifting Gears initiative. As shown in Appendix A, the Shifting Gears *logic model* specifies the intended impact of the initiative is to generate a better-educated, skilled and more competitive adult workforce



in Midwest states. The *logic model* also shows that work activities in the four core areas discussed above – data, policy, engaging the field, and communications – are integral to this approach. A fundamental premise of Shifting Gears is that to achieve this goal, states need to align and strengthen postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems. This systems change is represented as both an interim and long-term outcome.

The Foundation also used the *logic model* concept to provide a framework or tool to help the states organize and focus their work as well as communicate their approach to achieving systems change. As such, states were tasked with the assignment of developing their own *logic model*, which specified their systems goal as an outcome and translated their general work activities and proposed products into the *logic model* framework. Figure 2 below illustrates the basic idea of a *logic model*.

States were given the basic template of the *logic model* and informed that Shifting Gears project activities should result directly in *outputs*, which are tangible items, such as analytical reports resulting from research or explicit cross-agency agreements resulting from state stakeholder meetings. *Interim outcomes* reflect something that is achieved, such as the adoption of a state policy change or the implementation of new institutional practices within the postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems. Finally, the *long-term* outcome illustrates

that policy and practice changes have been implemented systemically. For example, a change in community college practices to facilitate transitions from adult education and workforce programs to postsecondary credential programs should be operational in all community colleges across the state.

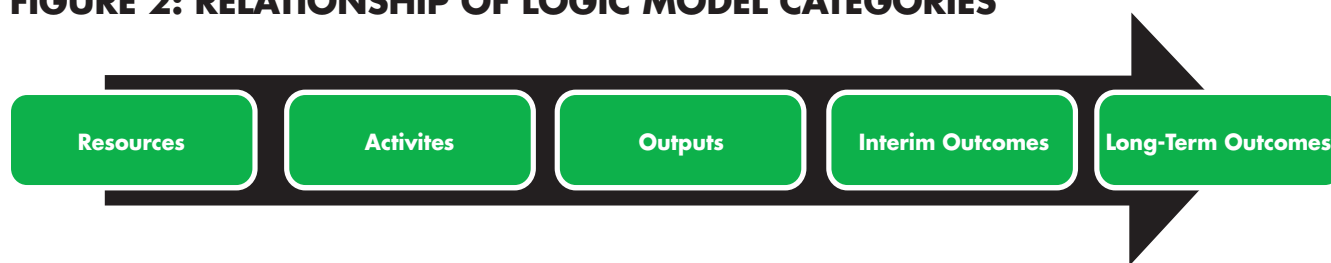
Shifting Gears used the evaluation team to help each participating state develop a customized *logic model*. This process involved one or more site visits with the state teams, and regular phone and email support. In developing their own project *logic models*, states were guided as follows:

FIRST, states were asked to identify the long-term outcome they wanted to achieve; that is, what is the systems change goal across postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems? It was important for states to have a clear grasp of the long-term outcome because it helped to ensure that proposed initiative activities were directed toward long-term systems change.

SECOND, states organized their project activities around the core areas of policy, data, engaging the field, and communications.

NEXT, these activities were connected to clear and tangible outputs such as analytic reports, improved data infrastructure, regional and statewide forums or workshops, and perhaps most importantly, the identification and adoption of a *policy agenda and action plan*.

FIGURE 2: RELATIONSHIP OF LOGIC MODEL CATEGORIES





AND LAST, the most critical aspect of the *logic model* was for states to envision interim outcomes that would result from the Shifting Gears supported activities and outputs. Shifting Gears considers the achievement of these interim outcomes as a necessary intermediate step towards the eventual institutionalization of effective policies and practices statewide.

Each state's logic model provided a framework to depict their approach to address how existing systems could be strengthened to more effectively serve the low-skilled adult population. State leadership teams were expected to work collaboratively to build buy-in for their logic model framework across participating state agencies, education and skills-development providers, and other stakeholders, including employers and non-profit groups. By helping states clearly articulate the long-term systems change outcomes expected, the logic model became an important organizing tool for developing strategies and policy priorities to guide and focus their work. State logic models also proved valuable to the management team by providing a point of reference to assess progress toward the long-term outcomes envisioned for the initiative.

States with a firm grasp of the desired long-term systems change seemed more effective in developing a logic model to frame their Shifting Gears project. For example, Wisconsin identified career pathway programs as the long-term outcome of their Shifting Gears initiative in their initial proposal to the Joyce Foundation. Career pathways is a strategy for delivering educational services that help individuals advance toward postsecondary credentials and degrees by blending education and training programs targeted to a particular industry or occupation. Wisconsin believed this approach would better serve low-skilled adult students because it would facilitate more effective transitions from one level of education and skills development to another. Wisconsin recognized that new approaches to adult basic and developmental education would be needed, including new connections to credit-based programs in technical colleges, as well as improved connections and transitions within the credit-based programs toward the achievement of two- and four-year degrees.

The state's *logic model* provided a framework for Wisconsin to organize its work activities to reflect that multiple types of policy and institutional changes would be necessary to fully implement career pathways statewide. For example, as

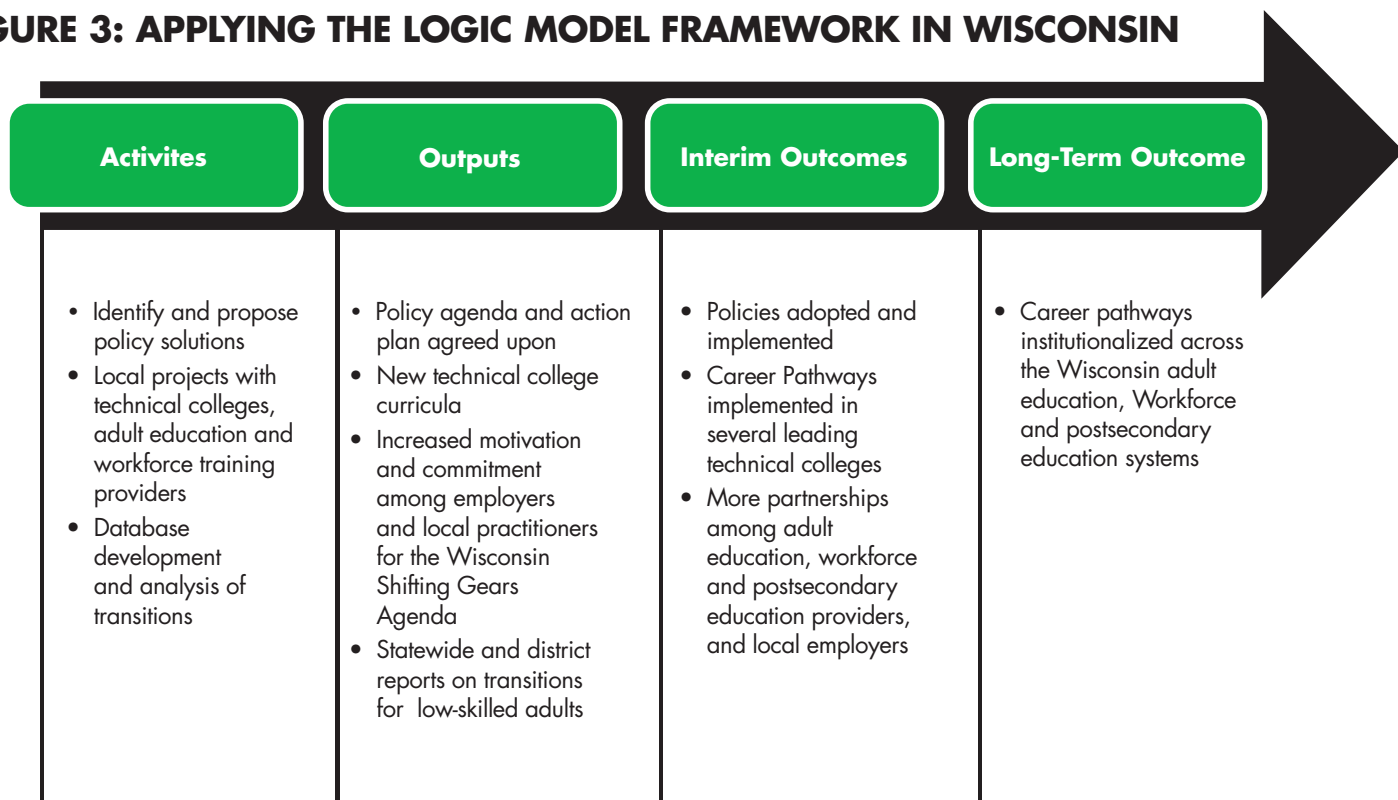
shown below in Figure 3, a significant activity was to support local projects to develop career pathways curricula for the technical college system. These local projects also served to engage the field of practitioners who would be responsible for eventually embracing or rejecting the career pathways model. In addition to the curricula developed from these activities, a second output was a body of applied knowledge that could be used to implement career pathway programs statewide. The development of these two career pathway assets was deemed critical to elicit support for system-level changes in technical college system policy areas that can be complicated to modify.

Wisconsin’s workforce agency directed its project activities likewise by supporting the development of new strategies at the regional level for engaging employers around career pathways educational and skills-development programs. The output of these activities was increased commitment

among employers and local practitioners to support Wisconsin’s systems change agenda around career pathways. Similarly, data activities were expected to result in analytic reports on how well the existing postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems served low-skilled adults. Wisconsin recognized that information on progress (or lack thereof) of low-skilled adults would be critical in providing a rationale for policymakers, institutional leaders and practitioners to embrace the call for adopting the career pathways model.

Although a *logic model* does not contain the level of detail needed for a work plan, its value lies in mapping out and connecting a large initiative’s various activities so they are all moving forward on parallel tracks toward a common end goal. A key mantra of the state *logic model* work became: “only do if it contributes or leads to systems change.”

FIGURE 3: APPLYING THE LOGIC MODEL FRAMEWORK IN WISCONSIN



Policy Agenda and Action Plan

State policy change is a significant feature of Shifting Gears because the Joyce Foundation focuses on strengthening public policies to improve the quality of life of Midwest residents. As noted earlier, Shifting Gears envisions state policy as a primary driver for achieving systemic and institutional changes within the postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems.

Achieving policy change is a complex process, particularly when systems change goals involve multiple policies across diverse systems. This challenge became evident as the implementation states were slow to engage in policy work until the end of the initiative's first year. This initial delay in the pursuit of state policy change is partially explained by two factors: **1)** the states were focused on other activities such as getting pilot and program projects underway; and, **2)** the state teams were generally led by and consisted of professional staff that did not have the authority to fully engage in policy work as they perceived it. The management team insisted that identification of a *policy agenda and action plan* was necessary for the initiative to move forward; thus, a critical aspect of Shifting Gears became how to empower and support professional staff to be policy-focused change agents.

One way the initiative encouraged state policy work was to broaden the understanding of policy among professional staff to include administrative and regulatory policy changes rather than the more traditional domain of legislative policy. This nuanced definition provided opportunities for professional staff to see how nuts and bolts policy issues – such as course classification and program approval – could support systems change. A second way Shifting Gears encouraged policy work was to help states create a policy committee to analyze the policy environment. Creating a policy committee involved bringing together professional staff with

agency leaders along with internal and external stakeholders to collaborate on policy and systems change priorities. State leaders noted that this collaboration was uncommon prior to Shifting Gears, and the resulting new relationships across agencies and systems are a significant initial achievement of the initiative.

By broadening state notions of policy and structuring conversations through a policy committee, states were able to identify a vast array of potential policy changes that spanned multiple agencies and programs. Sorting through this panoply of ideas and focusing on the most important and doable actions required dedicated attention from professional staff and agency leadership, and considerable external support and expertise from the Foundation and the management team. To further structure this policy work toward systemic changes throughout the postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems, the management team developed a *policy agenda and action plan framework* that both organized the policy ideas into discrete areas as well as required states to map out the actions necessary to achieve and implement policy change (see Appendix B). This tool allows the management team to follow and benchmark progress on specific policy items.

Embedded in the structure of the *policy agenda and action plan* tool is the concept that policy change is a multifaceted process that must be approached in a deliberate way. This means that the important distinction between adopting and implementing policies needs to be acknowledged and addressed. For example, it certainly would be an impressive policy victory for a social service program to make its support services available to participants in a community college career pathways program. However, this alignment of funding is only valuable if steps are taken to make sure that college staff and participants know how to access and use the resources; that is, successful and long-lasting





policy change requires both adoption and implementation in a useful way.

An additional strength of the *policy agenda and action plan* tool is that it allows for variation in the steps needed to achieve change across different policy ideas. For example, the steps needed to achieve a legislative change, such as establishing or expanding a need-based financial aid program for working adults, is different than the steps required to alter administrative course approval rules to facilitate the adoption of career pathways programs. The *policy agenda and action plan* is structured in a way that makes these differences evident, thereby leading to distinct strategies to achieve policy change.

In some instances, a uniform policy idea or proposal may be useful across multiple systems and programs. In Illinois, the Shifting Gears team, comprised of staff from the Illinois Community College Board, including adult education (ABE) and career and technical

education (Perkins), and the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, including workforce training (WIA), focused at the outset of their initiative on promoting occupational Bridge programs as an overall state strategy for helping low-skilled adults succeed in the postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems. Bridge programs prepare adults with limited academic or English skills to enter and succeed in credit-bearing postsecondary programs, thus leading to a career-path employment in high-demand, middle- and high-skilled jobs.

Illinois sought to incorporate the Bridge concept into both its adult education and developmental education programs. The policy levers available in each area varied considerably prompting the state leadership teams to wrestle with the concept of what a Bridge program might mean for each system. The result of these discussions was an agreement to develop and adopt statewide a common definition of a bridge program so that

community college developmental education programs, adult education providers, and skills-development providers would all pursue the same model.

Illinois also used the *policy agenda and action plan* tool to articulate distinctions in the policy changes needed to address diverse issues such as program funding, service delivery, and institutional capacity. For example, one policy proposal calls for allowing Bridge instruction to be reimbursed at the vocational skills rate, which is higher than the existing developmental education rate (a significant Shifting Gears policy achievement in itself). By increasing the reimbursement rate for Bridge development education efforts, Illinois hopes to incent local community colleges to adopt this model. This resource change is clearly under the purview of the Illinois Community College Board and is directed at incenting new institutional behavior.

Another policy idea focuses on allowing Workforce Investment Act training funds to be used for Bridge programs. This resource change is under the purview of the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and effectively provides resources for students desiring to participate in Bridge programs. Each policy proposal is identified independently in the *policy agenda and action plan*, and the steps to adoption and implementation are fashioned accordingly. Importantly, each policy change is focused on the same long-term systems change outcome: fostering the adoption and implementation of Bridge programs statewide.

The value of the *policy agenda and action plan* is twofold: first, it compels states to address each policy idea independently; and second, it offers an overall set of policy ideas that, collectively, are necessary to achieve systems change. Without consensus on a state policy agenda, the

opportunity for states to move forward is limited. By developing consensus around a state policy agenda, states are positioned to engage in the hard work of systems and institutional change, which is the current focus of Shifting Gears for the next several years.

Lessons Learned

Shifting Gears represents an approach for the Joyce Foundation to “lead boldly” by providing a framework for states to address systemic change in postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems. Shifting Gears expects states to address data, policy and communications issues, and to engage the field. Over time it became clear that the multifaceted design required the articulation of logical connections between the activities states addressed directly and the eventual systems change needed to improve opportunities and outcomes for low-skilled adults. Put simply, Shifting Gears may be a straightforward model – policy change as a primary means to leverage systems change – but its execution is difficult and time-intensive, thus requiring flexibility and patience from the Foundation.

Shifting Gears adapted to the challenges facing states by organizing its management team to work together in assisting state efforts. Additionally, Shifting Gears developed essential tools to provide structure and focus around each state’s efforts. These tools, a *logic model* and *policy agenda and action plan*, helped to connect state activities toward systems change goals, and generated more clarity around state activities.

After two and a half years focusing on the Shifting Gears approach to systems change, a number of lessons have emerged about the challenges and opportunities states are likely to face when pursuing systems change efforts.



- **Systems change seems daunting, but it is potentially achievable with a well-defined vision and clearly articulated plan of action.**

Identifying and articulating what systems change means is complicated. The Joyce Foundation set the parameters for change. Those were to strengthen and align state postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems to produce better outcomes for low-skilled adult workers; and concentrate attention on four levers of systems change: policy, data, engaging the field and communications. Each state, however, chose their system change goal(s) and the actions and strategies to achieve it. The *logic model* provides the structure so that state systems change is seen as concrete and tangible and that the proposed activities are designed to achieve the systems change objective. This level of focus and connectedness is critical to moving a systems change initiative forward so that all the various pieces are directed toward coherent and meaningful long-term outcomes.

- **Multiple types of policy change may be needed for systems reform.**

State agencies are generally organized by institutional governance and by federal or state funding streams. As a result, policies to address the education and skills-development needs of low-skilled adults are both embedded within institutional rules and regulation,

and cross multiple agencies with various federal and state revenue streams. Helping states simplify a complex policy environment by articulating clear steps and actions is essential; the *policy agenda and action plan* tool developed by the management team is proving useful in bringing focus and specificity to the policy change process. In doing so, the tool emphasizes that policy change is seldom exciting and does not solely revolve around high-profile legislative action.

Rather, important policy changes can be achieved through bureaucratic reforms that are far removed from the world of politics. On the one hand, these nose-to-the-grindstone administrative and regulatory policy changes hold tremendous potential to create incentives for education and skills-development providers to operate more effectively. On the other hand, they do not obviate the need to address issues through the legislative arena as some key, broad system changes issues, such as institutional funding formulas or student financial aid, may require legislative action.

- **Collaboration and consensus among stakeholders is essential, yet challenging.**

Shifting Gears requires that states bring different state agency directors and professional staff together to direct and manage the initiative, as well as develop



a consensus policy agenda for change. Prior to Shifting Gears, the needs of low-skilled adults were not a primary state policy priority, thus it was rare that the leaders of the various systems and programs that served low-skilled adults – each with its own bureaucratic structure and culture of decision-making – collaborated to strengthen state policies and systems. The process of moving a complex agenda with a diverse group of stakeholders forward did not happen easily as collaboration is an ongoing, iterative process, and gaining consensus requires patience and flexibility. Without consensus, particularly on the policy agenda, states could not move forward.

Several states have formed solid collaborative teams that are moving forward on an ambitious agenda for systems change; certainly each benefits from the external facilitation provided by the management team that helps clarify different perspectives around policy and systems change goals. The new relationships resulting from collaboration are uniformly described as positive and potentially long-lasting, which has implications for the sustainability of systems change efforts.

- **Proactive coaching and formative evaluation are critical.**

Promoting and achieving systems change across multiple agencies is difficult. States typically have limited experience in this area and little capacity to support such an intensive effort. Shifting Gears provides both the motivation and resources to act. An important component of this support is the proactive guidance of the technical assistance team that provides intentional and extensive coaching on key policy issues. Another component is the formative evaluation assistance that examines whether and how specific activities contribute to systems change goals and outcomes. This proactive assistance mitigates the risks many

professional staff may fear, especially when delving into policy and systems change. More importantly, proactive assistance and feedback can help states sharpen their focus on how best to achieve the changes in policies and institutional practices that can best benefit low-skilled adults.

- **Ongoing cross-communication within the Shifting Gears management team is required for adaptive leadership.**

Cross-communication is fundamental for adaptive leadership, and allows the management team to work collaboratively – sharing information and ideas on a timely basis – so that states receive consistent messages about expectations, and ongoing constructive support to help them achieve their policy and systems change goals. It is essential for the management team to have intentional time to share their experiences working with the states. Opportunities for sharing included brief email summaries from the technical assistance providers, formative evaluative memos from the evaluation team, and monthly conference calls for all management team members.

One significant benefit and a critical product of ongoing cross-communication was the development of the *policy agenda and action plan* tool as a way to help states focus their policy change process. Another benefit of cross-communication was that language and meaning of different Shifting Gears activities could be clarified so all management team members were providing the same message to states; for example, as states sought to better use data to inform improvements in policy and practices, their project activities were defined as efforts to strengthen infrastructure or conduct analyses, and all management team members used this framework in their interactions with states.

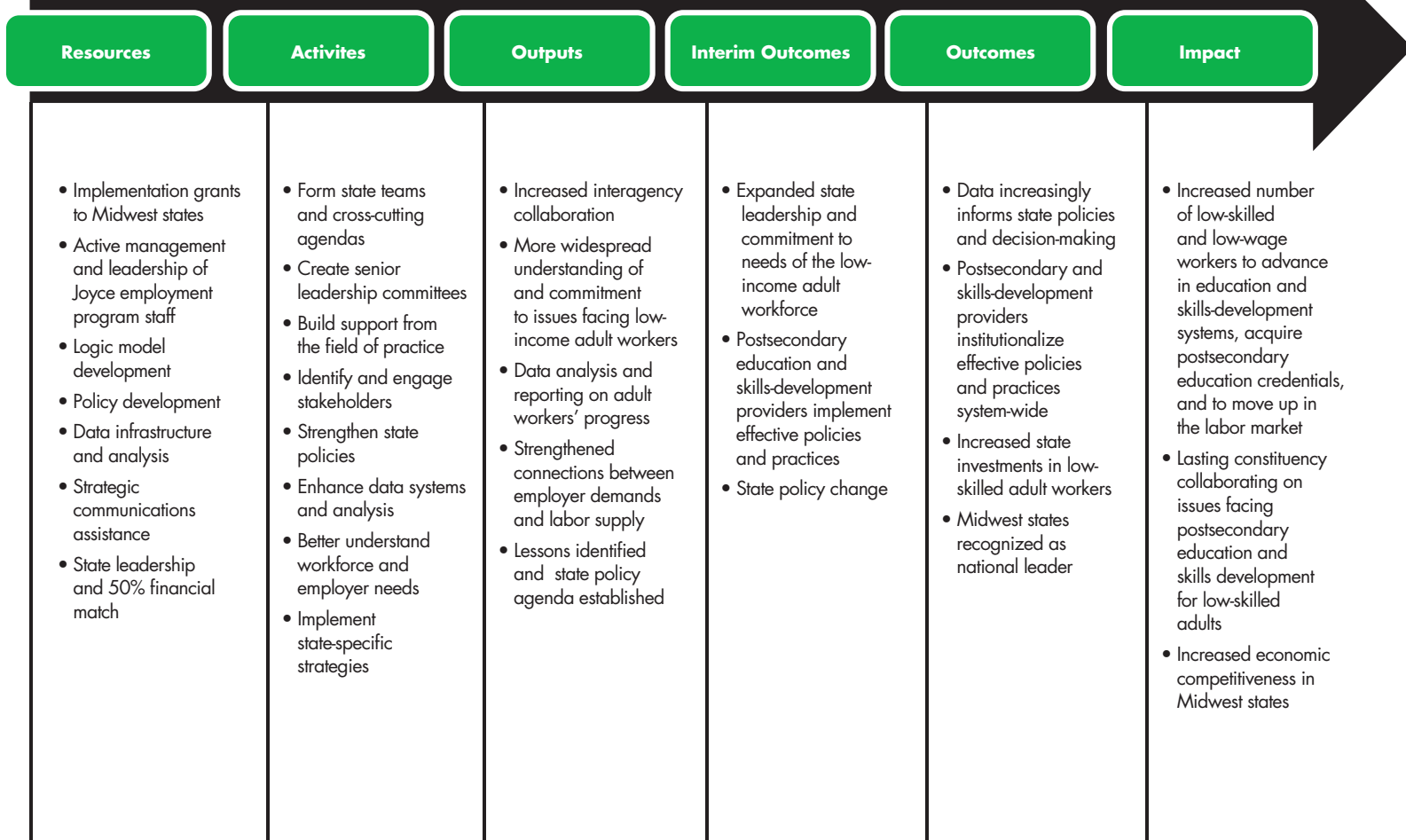


Conclusion

As discussed in this paper, Shifting Gears uses the *logic model* and *policy agenda and action plan* tools to help states organize and focus their activities toward systems change. The *logic model* enables states to articulate clearly the systems change desired, and to connect state activities, outputs and interim outcomes with that long-term outcome. The *policy agenda and action plan* helps states broaden their understanding of policy change beyond the legislative arena to include regulatory and administrative changes that can lead to systems change, as well as differentiate between actions needed to achieve and implement policy change.

It is too early to gauge the impact of the Shifting Gears approach to systems change in terms of improved skill levels, postsecondary credentials, and labor market outcomes. The newfound collaboration among stakeholders and focused attention on systems and institutional change provides a strong foundation and positive trajectory for making the postsecondary, adult basic education, and skills-development systems work better for low-skilled adults. An interim evaluation report in 2011 will provide insights on progress toward each state's systems change goals.

APPENDIX A: SHIFTING GEARS LOGIC MODEL FRAMEWORK



APPENDIX B: SHIFTING GEARS POLICY AGENDA AND ACTION PLAN TEMPLATE

	Policy Agenda and Action Plan for (insert state name)	Updated (insert date)
Policy Priority (insert #)		
(insert description of priority and note whether it is short-term or long-term)		
Actions	Timeline	Lead(s)
Policy Priority (insert #)		
(insert description of priority and note whether it is short-term or long-term)		
Actions	Timeline	Lead(s)
Policy Priority (insert #)		
(insert description of priority and note whether it is short-term or long-term)		
Actions	Timeline	Lead(s)

Shifting Gears Management Team

The following key Joyce Foundation partners help Shifting Gears states to better develop, manage, assess, measure and communicate this work.

- CLASP (Center for Law and Social Policy) provides ongoing policy guidance to all states and coordinates communications efforts between states and partners, including maintenance of the Shifting Gears web site and distribution of a quarterly newsletter.
- The Workforce Strategy Center (WSC) provides peer learning experiences through conferences and Webinars.
- Brandon Roberts + Associates designs and implements the Shifting Gears initiative evaluation process, with assistance from Dr. Derek Price of DVP-Praxis, Ltd.
- Davis Jenkins, Ph.D., Senior Research Associate, Community College Research Center, Teacher's College, Columbia University, advises the state grantees on using state data to inform improvements to policy and practice.
- Douglas Gould & Co. (PublicVoice) provides communications and advocacy support and technical assistance to the states.

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Notes

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