



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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PATHWAYS TO EMPLOYMENT: A RESPONSE TO BUSINESS NEEDS

Overview

Central Piedmont Community College's (CPCC) vision is to become the national leader in workforce development. The community development area brings education and training to the workplace in innovative ways. The college has used the North Carolina Community College System's model, Pathways to Employment, to create a unique program to train Work First participants (North Carolina's welfare recipients) for employment in the Charlotte area. CPCC, working in cooperation with the Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services, has developed and successfully implemented a flexible, short-term training program that provides academic, social, and job-specific instruction designed to help students enter the workforce as skilled employees within 12 to 14 weeks.

Development

In fall 1996, the North Carolina Department of Human Resources and the North Carolina Community College System developed a training model to meet the needs of Work First and welfare reform. The model, Pathways to Employment, was an integrated, flexible comprehensive program that incorporated basic skills training, pre-employment training, and specific job skills training. Funding was provided by the community college system to 10 colleges to implement the model and evaluate its effectiveness.

Originally designed for Mecklenburg County's Department of Social Services AFDC recipients, the program has attracted a variety of participants, including recently dislocated workers. The short-term training, combined with the availability of jobs and the specific career ladders developed for each program, has provided students with hope for a better future, a job skill, and a job with a career opportunity.

Partner Businesses, Organizations, and Agencies

Pathways faculty and staff develop partnerships with local employers to assist in the development of curricula for each training program. Employers' needs are identified, and a training program is designed to train Work First clients to meet the critical need for skilled workers. Strong partnerships with Carolinas Healthcare System, Presbyterian Hospital, and Med-Dent Solutions give the program credibility. These partners provide valuable opportunities for field trips, clinical experiences, job shadowing, and guest speakers. Partnerships also exist between CPCC's Pathways program and local agencies, including the Department of Social Services, United Way of Central Carolinas, Charlotte Enterprise Communities, Johnston YMCA, Freddie Mac, Dress For Success, Mecklenburg County Work Release Center, Mecklenburg County Drug Court, Job Link, BRIDGES, Mecklenburg County Women's Commission, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Urban League, and the Women's Shelter. These agencies provide student referrals, assist with job placement, pay tuition, buy student textbooks, and provide daycare, transportation, and follow-up services.

Innovative Solutions/Ideas

The Pathways to Employment Program is a flexible, 12-to-16-week training program that combines classes teaching basic academic and job readiness skills, and training for jobs where skilled workers are in high demand. Students attend classes from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Thursday, and one-half day on Friday. Instructors focus on human resources issues (employability and life skills), basic skills (reading, math, and communication skills), and specific job skills. Areas of study include Medical Reimbursement Specialist, Hospital Unit Coordinator, Medical Office Administrative Procedures, Heating and Air Conditioning, Office Information Specialist, Customer Service Representative, and Data Entry Specialist. A new program in Vinyl Siding Installation is currently under development and will be offered to inmates in the Mecklenburg County Jail North.



The short-term training that Pathways students receive is successful because of the integrated components of the curriculum. Students learn the specific skills they will need for their jobs in the occupational courses. The career skills classes help those students who need to complete GED's, as well as all of the adult learners who need to improve their basic skills. In the employment readiness class, students learn how to write a résumé and a cover letter, to dress for an interview, and to handle difficult questions. They learn about interviewing techniques, where to look for a job, as well as how to participate in career fairs. Potential employers and employment agencies are invited to make presentations to the students in class.

Central Piedmont has a unique partnership with the Department of Social Services. Having a DSS representative on the campus is crucial to a smooth-running program. The social worker completes the initial screening of student applicants, administers testing, completes registrations, conducts student orientations for each program, provides Pathways students with bus passes, ensures that the students' childcare is in place, issues vouchers for textbooks and materials, and handles most paperwork on campus. The social worker also serves as a liaison between the Work First clients and their individual social workers. These services help students stay in class and, in turn, improve the program's retention rates.

The partnership with the Department of Social Services has resulted in a computer lab for Work First participants in the Pathways program. This new lab has enabled the program to expand, allowing additional students to be trained in high-demand skilled jobs.

CPCC's partnership with the United Way of Central Carolinas ultimately established a fund to provide for student scholarships. These scholarships provide books and tuition to students who want to enroll in Pathways (and are not Work First clients), but do not have the financial resources to do so.

The partnership with the Charlotte Enterprise Communities has resulted in model programs, such as HVAC training for inmates of the Mecklenburg County Work Release Center and the Vinyl Siding Program at the Mecklenburg County Jail North. Another partnership with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Urban League has resulted in follow-up services to Pathways students who withdraw from the program. CPCC refers students to the Urban League for services in the areas of job search and substance abuse counseling.

Outcomes/Results

CPCC has demonstrated that its efforts are meeting the work-related self-sufficiency needs of Pathways'

participants, serving 405 students in 3.5 years. Of this number, 100% were low-income, single parents, with a median age of 28, averaging 2.76 children per client. The majority needed to improve their basic skills. Program results include: a retention rate of 80%, 81% of graduates employed six months after graduation, and 75% of graduates truly self-sufficient.

In a recent press conference in Charlotte, President Bush discussed welfare reform; he took time to shake hands with students in the Medical Office Administrative Procedures class and congratulate them on making positive changes in their lives. Referencing the Pathways program, the President stated: "The innovation that takes place in this community is positive and strong, and that's why we're here—to herald a program that actually works. Sometimes they sound good on paper, they read good, but the results are short; and that's not the case in Mecklenburg County when it comes to putting people to work."

The quality short-term training with its integrated curriculum, the on-site social worker, the strong partnerships with community agencies, and the program's retention and job placement rates make Pathways to Employment a successful solution to workforce development.

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