



update

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Courses to Employment Number 1

Beyond Graduation: Promoting Post-Program Engagement and Advancement

In many cities and regions, nonprofit organizations are partnering with community colleges to improve opportunities and outcomes for low-income individuals by developing and operating sector-oriented workforce development programs.

These partnerships are designed to provide quality training consistent with the needs of local employers in targeted industry sectors, while also addressing a range of special supports low-income adults need while they work and learn and, subsequently, make employment advances. Interest in this work is based on the idea that community colleges and nonprofit organizations share an interest in serving low-income adults, and have complementary capacities and resources to implement new adult training and education methods that can provide a pathway to greater economic success.

These nonprofit/community college partnerships serve individuals using diverse approaches that address their particular needs and fit employment opportunities available in local industry sectors. Many such partnerships operate programs designed to help participants acquire a common skill set required to access entry-level jobs in targeted industry sectors. Other partnerships offer opportunities for individuals to progress through educational offerings that correspond to various levels of occupational skill, professional credentialing and employment. Nonprofit involvement typically complements college counseling, outreach and alumni efforts by targeting resources and approaches to the needs of low-income adults.

Generally, these partnerships find it valuable to maintain a relationship with

participants and graduates over an extended period of time. While many workforce development practitioners may agree this long-term engagement of participants is worthwhile, it is nonetheless a challenge to develop and sustain effective approaches. This publication explores why and how some nonprofit organizations are working with community colleges to maintain relationships with adult participants after they have completed training. It also presents a number of the challenges and provides various points to consider in designing a long-term engagement strategy.

This publication makes liberal use of examples drawn from a number of college and organizations participating in the AspenWSI-managed demonstration, "Courses to Employment: Sectoral Approaches to Community College-Nonprofit Partnerships." One program – Capital IDEA in Austin, Texas – has made a particularly strong commitment to long-term engagement of participants both during and after training. Therefore, its story and activities are highlighted in more detail in the shaded boxes appearing throughout.

Courses to Employment: Sectoral Approaches to Community College – Nonprofit Partnerships is a three-year demonstration (2008-2010) designed to illuminate the role that partnerships involving nonprofit organizations and community colleges can play in addressing the special supports low-income adults need while they work and learn and, subsequently, make employment advances. Funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and managed by the Aspen Institute's Workforce Strategies Initiative, the Courses to Employment demonstration involves six partnerships working to help low-income adults achieve greater success in higher education and, ultimately, the workforce. The demonstration is designed to support, strengthen and evaluate their efforts. In particular, the demonstration seeks to learn more about effective models of collaboration, program features, costs and outcomes for the students.

The six projects are:

Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County, Shoreline Community College, and Pacific Associates, Seattle, Wash.

The partnership's **Automobile Career Pathways Project** focuses on entry to and career advancement in automotive services and related industries. The first stage of the project is a General Service Technician (GST) program designed to provide industry-recognized, entry-level automotive service skills training to adult basic education and English-as-a-Second Language learners. After completion, a Career Navigator works with GST graduates over a three-year period to identify advancement opportunities and overcome barriers to additional education and skills acquisition. The partnership involves the Workforce Development Council, a workforce intermediary organization that leads the area's WorkSource system.

Capital IDEA and Austin Community College, Austin and Round Rock, Texas

This is a partnership between the area's largest community college system and a nonprofit organization established by leaders of the business community and Austin Interfaith – a coalition of 30 religious congregations, public schools and unions. The partnership's health care initiative provides case management, financial assistance and other academic and non-academic supports to low-income area residents for up to five years as they work toward college degrees and certifications in high-demand nursing and allied health professions.

Instituto del Progreso Latino, Association House of Chicago, Wright College Humboldt Park Vocational Education Center and National Council of La Raza, Chicago, Ill.

This partnership's **Carreras En Salud** (Careers in Health) project assists underemployed Latino workers in Chicago to enter into and advance along career and educational pathways in nursing. Services are designed to allow participants to enroll in one or more training programs along a career advancement pathway at a pace that is consistent with personal goals and needs. For these partners, this work is part of a larger set of objectives related to helping Latino families achieve economic and educational success and participate fully in the civic life of the communities in which they live.

Greater Flint Health Coalition and Mott Community College, Flint, Mich.

This partnership provides low-income residents of Genesee County with a range of academic and non-academic supports to advance from entry-level and certified nursing assistant jobs into nursing and allied health occupations. The **Flint Healthcare Employment Opportunities Project** was selected to participate in this initiative through a special Home Community Grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, which has a particular interest in supporting initiatives within its home city of Flint.

Community Career Development, Inc., Los Angeles Valley College, East Los Angeles College and Los Angeles City College, Los Angeles, Calif.

The **Logistics/Goods Movement Training Academy** is a broad partnership involving three Los Angeles community colleges and a nonprofit organization that operates the Wilshire-Metro

WorkSource Center. The partnership offers a variety of programs to prepare low-income adults for occupations in the growing “goods-movement” and transportation industries. The partnership also works with METRO (the local transit authority) to provide pre-employment training to help fill vacant bus operator positions. Participants gain access to a broad range of supportive services offered through the public workforce development system that are vital to their success.

Northern Virginia Family Service and Northern Virginia Community College, Fairfax County, Va.

This partnership prepares low-income adults for positions in business and medical office administration through its **Training Futures** program. The curriculum provides 25 weeks of credit-earning skills training in a simulated work environment and includes a three-week internship. Participants receive a high level of individualized support as they train for new careers and, for many, are introduced to a first college experience.

Beyond Placement: Rationale for Longer-Term Engagement

There are many reasons for nonprofit/community college partnerships to maintain longer-term contact with graduates, ranging from a desire to extend support to participants as they enter the labor market and continue on career and educational pathways, to a recognition that former participants can provide valuable input on ways to improve the quality of programming and service for new participants.

Nearly all successful workforce development programs implement systems and strategies to track program graduates for some period of time to capture information about job placement, wages and retention. When nearing completion of training, job development staff typically begins to assist participants in their job search by providing coaching and job leads, arranging for job fairs and on-site interviews with employers, assisting with on-line applications, etc. Most programs also periodically telephone graduates to obtain information about their employment status. How long they continue to do so usually is set by public and private funders (typically from 90 days to one year).¹

After placement and initial job retention goals are met, these partnerships may seek to maintain

contact with and provide additional services to graduates for a variety of reasons including: to address the need for non-educational services as individuals transition to new employment; to help graduates achieve additional career and educational goals; to allow individuals to contribute to the growth and development of programs from which they benefited; and to enhance the communication strategies of these programs. Though the rationale for extending programming to graduates may be convincing, there are many challenges to conducting and sustaining such programs.

One major obstacle is related to public policy and funding, which does not generally support post-graduate efforts. For example, programs that seek to assist participants over a longer period often combine short-term job training that includes support for services such as case management, intensive counseling, and job development with longer-term higher education strategies. Once a participant has completed short-term training, funding to continue the level of wrap-around support necessary to ensure students’ success is difficult to secure. Furthermore, many sources of funding for short-term training require immediate job placement, which makes it challenging to connect participants to long-term educational programs. Nevertheless, there

¹AspenWSI is working intensively with the six programs involved in the Courses to Employment demonstration to track employment and educational outcomes for program graduates. Depending on the timing of graduation relative to the CTE grant period and the capacity of programs to track long-term outcomes, this varies from 90 days to one year post-graduation. Participant outcome data (baseline participant characteristics, education outcomes and employment outcomes) collected through this study are intended to inform the larger workforce development field about the value and effectiveness of these partnerships.

are some innovations in development. The discussion and examples provided below explore the ways in which this rationale for post-graduate engagement has led partners in the CTE learning group to explore opportunities for extended engagement of participants.

Responding to the Need for Non-Educational Supports

By developing partnerships with community colleges, nonprofit organizations seek to provide their constituents with access to greater employment and educational opportunities. These partnerships can result in workforce development programs that are extremely effective in assisting participants to obtain important employment and wage gains. But, even graduates of the most effective programs may continue to require some level of support after placement in entry-level work. Paradoxically, once employed, often at starting wages that are not yet fully family-sustaining, workers commonly encounter new challenges as income and housing supports wane, child care expenses grow in relation to increased work hours, and other personal and family stresses mount. For many newly hired workers, health care and other benefits take effect only after several months of employment. During these initial months, balancing work and family while learning to reconfigure budgets and cope with new challenges can be surprisingly difficult.

The nonprofit organizations that are engaged in this work typically have a broad mission and a set of goals regarding individuals, families and communities that go beyond placing participants in entry-level jobs. Such organizations generally are committed to fostering healthy, self-sufficient families and communities, and are experienced in providing or linking constituents to a continuum of social and employment services. Despite the many challenges of packaging resources to support this work, they nevertheless want to provide program graduates with additional services over a longer period as they transition into new employment situations and work

to achieve greater personal and family goals. This can involve the provision of counseling and other direct services, referrals to other service providers that can pick up where a program ends, and support for the continuation of effective peer networks. Furthermore, organizations whose goals include community development and change may seek to achieve broader impact by helping graduates develop their roles as active participants and leaders in community and civic spheres.

Two examples from the CTE learning group illustrate these points:

The Carreras en Salud (Careers in Health) program, operated by Instituto del Progreso Latino in collaboration with several partners, is one of many programs that the organization has undertaken in keeping with its broader mission to *“contribute to the fullest development of Latino immigrants and their families through education, training and employment that fosters full participation in the changing United States society while preserving cultural identity and dignity.”*² After completing some level of patient care training through the Carreras en Salud program and entering into new employment, many participants remain engaged with Instituto’s Center for Working Families.³ The center helps these graduates make the transition to new jobs by providing access to a range of extended services such as: classes in financial literacy, connections to child care solutions, and assistance applying for the Federal Earned Income Tax Credit – often for the first time.

Northern Virginia Family Services (NVFS) has developed a wide range of programs designed *“to empower individuals and families to improve their quality of life, and to promote community cooperation and support in responding to family needs.”*⁴ NVFS works with Northern Virginia Community College to operate the Training Futures program. Training Futures supports graduates as they transition into employment, and works to maintain a long-term relationship of support with past participants. Graduates of the six-month training program in office procedures are invited to attend weekly Job Club meetings

²Taken from Instituto del Progreso Latino’s mission statement.

³The Center for Working Families is a comprehensive partnership between Instituto and The Resurrection Project, designed to promote and support the economic success of Latina/o families throughout Chicago.

⁴Taken from Northern Virginia Family Services’ mission statement.

where they get help from program staff and meet with peers to share ideas and leads, and receive encouragement. Training Futures also hosts two to three annual networking events for all program graduates. The events: help graduates maintain a community among their peers who have faced and continue to encounter similar challenges; keep graduates abreast of new learning opportunities; and provide some ongoing skills upgrading through guest presentations on topics of interest to graduates, such as conflict resolution or keeping one's resume up to date. In addition, Training Futures occasionally hosts a large-scale networking event – such as the 10-year anniversary party in 2006 that drew hundreds of graduates.

In keeping with their mission, some organizations also work with graduates to promote their participation in volunteerism, advocacy efforts and civic engagement. These organizations point to the important role that such activities can play in the development of healthy self-esteem, personal growth and a sense of mastery over one's own life. At the same time,

they recognize that such engagement can serve as a way of enhancing the organization's ability to extend impact within the communities to which they are committed. Organizations such as Instituto del Progreso Latino and Capital IDEA build a message of civic responsibility into their workforce programs and offer opportunities for participants and graduates to become change agents in their own communities.

For example, Instituto del Progreso Latino maintains and strengthens relationships with its participants through advocacy work that mobilizes constituents to action on issues of primary concern to Latino families and communities in Chicago. Instituto was a key player responsible for organizing the large immigration reform rallies in Chicago in spring 2006. By affording participants opportunities to engage in civic action around immigrant rights and other issues pertinent to their lives, the organization works toward its own greater goals of systemic change, as well as personal development of the individuals it serves.

Capital IDEA's Approach to Graduate Engagement

Background

Capital IDEA (Investing in Development and Employment of Adults), was founded in 1998 as a joint project of Austin Interfaith, a broad-based organization of congregations, schools and other community institutions of the Industrial Areas Foundation, and members of the central Texas business community. Capital IDEA describes its work as lifting central Texas working families out of poverty by sponsoring educational services that lead to life-long financial independence. Capital IDEA serves its communities by providing support to low-income students in central Texas who enter and complete degree programs at Austin Community College (ACC) and other post-secondary educational institutions in the region.

Capital IDEA and ACC successfully work together through the Capital IDEA College Prep Academy to help low-income participants complete required developmental education courses and pass the college's admission examination. Once students are enrolled in full-time degree programs at ACC, Capital IDEA

continues to provide financial support and intensive case management services for up to five years until graduation.

Recognizing shortages of qualified workers in the region's health care sector, coupled with poor college persistence rates, Capital IDEA believes that it has an important role to play in addressing the critical needs of both employers and struggling families in the communities it serves. For Capital IDEA and its partners to achieve their underlying goals requires a long-term investment in the adults Capital IDEA supports as they pursue post-secondary degrees, embark on careers and continue to build stronger families and communities.

Staying Connected to and Supporting Graduates

For Capital IDEA, connection and service to participants does not end with degree attainment. Capital IDEA understands that, even after its participants graduate from partner colleges, their need for assistance may continue.

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For example, Capital IDEA is working to build a network of professionals who will provide new entrants to the workforce with financial planning and debt management assistance. In addition, Capital IDEA has found that the collegial networks participants form among themselves and find so valuable as they struggle to balance the demands of study, work and family can continue to play a valuable role for program graduates transitioning into new careers. Through its alumni activities, Capital IDEA provides opportunities for graduates to continue to benefit from these peer networks as they enter a new phase of their lives.

Capital IDEA is committed to developing longer-term relationships with its graduates, not only to help them make a transition into employment, but also to build its own organizational strength and to achieve its mission of supporting the development of stronger communities in the region it serves. It recognizes that graduates represent a tremendous resource. Through volunteerism and other forms of giving back to the organization, they can play an invaluable role in growing a stronger and more effective community organization.

One of the organization's core values is to increase civic responsibility among the men and women it serves. Capital IDEA works to integrate the value of community service into all aspects of its programming. In fact, one of the earliest ways Capital IDEA maintained contact with past program participants was by educating them about civic responsibilities

and encouraging them to participate in neighborhood voter registration drives. To continue to engage its graduates, Capital IDEA created an Alumni Association, which, through a variety of educational, social and service opportunities, supports the organization's greater mission and goals.

For Capital IDEA, alumni activities are part of an ongoing strategy to involve and strengthen local communities. The organization believes such activities can play an important role in building new leaders, particularly at a time when the region is growing and changing demographically. (For instance, the majority of the population in central Texas is expected to be Hispanic by 2040.) Indeed, with so many of Capital IDEA's graduates mirroring the fast-changing racial and ethnic makeup of the region, the possibility that some alums will emerge as community leaders is clearly on the minds of the organization's administrators, including Executive Director Steven Jackobs, who says: "I hope that the alumni can provide new, self-conscious, newly educated and professional leadership to the region as a whole, and help it make a political transition to match the demographic transition."



Capital IDEA participant Cheri Mixon and her daughter Emory Pollard at the 2nd Annual Children's Museum event for single parents, February 2008.

Building Opportunities for Advancement

Many community college/nonprofit partnerships help participants make a first step or a series of progressive steps along a career pathway by offering achievable, short (six months or less) training and education opportunities. Beyond achievement of short-term career and educational objectives, it is often a goal and a challenge to continue encouraging and supporting graduates as they pursue more education and career advancement. Even after they have made a transition to new employment,

graduates often need additional support to reach their personal goals. Men and women who have graduated from programs associated with the CTE learning group report that they see possibilities for future achievements that they previously believed were beyond reach. Yet, taking that next step along a career ladder or educational pathway can be extremely challenging, especially for those still struggling to provide for the needs of their families on entry-level wages. To help people make additional advances, programs typically must develop

strategies to encourage them to continue and to access additional supportive services.

Accordingly, many of the CTE demonstration partnerships have built onto short-term programs to encourage and often actively help graduates progress along longer-term educational pathways. Some of the strategies they have developed include: building clear links to existing certificate and degree programs; creating new certificate or degree programs that build directly off short-term training; providing advancement counseling; and building ongoing peer support networks for graduates. Examples from the Logistics/Goods Movement Training Academy in Los Angeles and the Automotive Career Pathways project in Seattle illustrate this range of strategies for helping program graduates to continue to advance.

In Los Angeles, Community Career Development, Inc. works with three colleges in the Los Angeles Community College District to operate a six-week Logistics/Goods Movement Training Academy designed to introduce students to the industry and the career opportunities it offers. The program results in a certificate of completion, forklift certification documenting safety and experience in forklift operation, and six units of college credit hours. Graduates are eligible for one tuition-free “Bonus Class” at one of the colleges as an incentive to continue their education. This benefit provides tuition, books, parking and academic counseling. The class also can serve as a selling point to gain the attention of employers who may be interested in hiring graduates and appreciate the added educational opportunity available to the candidate. In addition to this bonus course, East Los Angeles College received approval for a new curriculum for Logistics Certificates and is awaiting approval of a new curriculum for an associate degree. These new programs, which were developed with input from logistics employers and industry experts in Los Angeles, are designed to further build an educational pathway that leads to greater family self-sufficiency for the participants seeking employment in jobs related to the nation’s largest combined seaport – Los Angeles/Long Beach. The curriculum is the first of its type in Los Angeles. The logistics program partners reached out to graduates of the Logistics Academy to explain the new program and to enroll those

interested. The first courses were taught by East Los Angeles College instructors at Community Career Development. Unfortunately, the current economic downturn has dramatically slowed demand for port workers, while at the same time California community colleges are experiencing severe budget cuts. Given this situation, some of the logistics offerings are not being regularly scheduled. Nevertheless, project leaders believe that longer-term employment projections support the idea that this is the appropriate time to build educational/career ladders for participants.

Further enhancing efforts to open new opportunities for advancement, graduates of the Logistics Academy have begun to organize informal alumni get-togethers. They believe that the peer support networks that proved so helpful while in the Academy can continue to be a vital resource as they continue along educational and professional pathways.

The Automotive Career Pathways Project, in Seattle, Wash., is a partnership between Shoreline Community College and the Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County to train adult basic education and English-as-a-Second Language learners for entry-level employment as Automotive Service Technicians. The entry-level General Service Technician (GST) program is an industry-recognized certificate-awarding program consisting of 45 credits over the course of a full academic year. The program involves a combination of classroom training and internships with local employers. In 2008, the Council and Shoreline began working with Pacific Associates, a local provider of employment and training services, to strengthen the Automotive Career Pathways Project by adding a career navigation component. The Advancement Navigator’s role is to encourage current and former GST students to pursue further education and training, and to explain how that can lead to promotion and advancement opportunities. Understanding the financial challenges that many GST graduates continue to face as they consider further education, the Navigator helps individuals address a range of social service needs and develop individualized plans for additional education. In cases where a student’s educational goals match the needs of his/her

employer, the Navigator works with the employer to help graduates take advantage of tuition reimbursement benefits and financial aid, and identifies additional ways the employer can support ongoing education. Moreover, Shoreline and Pacific Associates have found that the skills taught in the GST program can provide the foundation for additional training for “demand” occupations not exclusively related to automotive service and repair, such as HVAC technicians and electricians. In helping graduates to consider options for continued training and career advancement, the Navigator helps them identify opportunities to build on their skills, and pursue careers in a variety of industries that meet their needs and fit their skill set and experiences.

Strengthening Program Capacity

Leaders of programs in the CTE learning group report that former students who provide service back to programs after graduation benefit tremendously from the experience. By contributing time or resources to a program from which they have benefited, graduates can enhance their self-esteem, build meaningful connections to others and reinforce personal gains. Former students can also be a tremendous resource to a program, and can help enhance organizational strategy and capacity. Graduates can contribute their knowledge and experience by serving on advisory committees, helping with recruitment of new participants, acting as peer instructors and mentors to current students, helping job development staff with information about job leads and employment trends, and, in some cases, making financial contributions. The examples below illustrate this wide variety of ways in which graduates contribute to programs participating in the Courses to Employment demonstration.

One way to involve graduates is to invite them to become members of advisory committees that help shape and improve programs. For example, graduates of the Logistics/Goods Movement Training Academy in Los Angeles serve on occupation-specific advisory committees and advise external review boards at partner colleges to help keep the content of the curriculum current and to conduct program reviews.

Some programs provide opportunities for graduates to work directly with current

students. In Chicago, graduates of Carreras en Salud (Careers in Health) volunteer to conduct outreach and recruit new candidates, and to mentor current enrollees. During each training cycle at Training Futures in Northern Virginia, a panel of six graduates returns to tell students how they overcame hurdles during training and to offer tips for a successful internship experience.

Graduates also can play a valuable role connecting their employers to current participants at the program they attended. The Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority frequently asks successful employees who completed the bus driver pre-training program offered by Los Angeles Valley College and Community Career Development, Inc. to speak to current program participants. The graduates can provide current participants with useful information on the hiring and training process, help them gain an accurate picture of the jobs for which they are preparing, and inspire them with personal stories. And in Seattle, graduates of Shoreline College’s two-year Automotive Service Technicians program often help their employers recruit program participants into company-sponsored training programs at local automotive dealerships.

Another way that graduates can give back to programs is through financial contributions. Training Futures, for instance, asks employed graduates to make a donation when it sends out holiday cards each December. Capital IDEA also encourages graduates to make financial contributions to the organization. Program leaders at Training Futures and Capital IDEA believe that asking for contributions is a way to paint an aspirational vision of success for their participants. By encouraging participants to imagine themselves as eventual donors, they intend to help them gain confidence in their ability to reach personal career goals. While Training Futures and Capital IDEA are optimistic in their expectations for participant achievement, they understand that graduates are unlikely ever to become a major source of revenue for their organizations.

The Courses to Employment sites see their graduates as a tremendous potential resource for their programs. Although some of the Courses to Employment partnerships have made strides engaging alumni, they generally agree that they

need to do more to develop additional and better opportunities for graduates to give back. Some community college representatives among the demonstration group note that community colleges do not typically have strong alumni programs, and are unlikely to perceive of these efforts as competitive with existing college fundraising, marketing or other alumni outreach efforts. And for some colleges, this engagement

of program alumni complements their recruitment efforts, encouraging students to go further in their education and participate in more college classes. For many of the programs involved in the Courses to Employment demonstration, developing mechanisms to involve graduates is considered a key aspect of the future growth of their program.

Creating Opportunities for Capital IDEA Graduates to Give Back

“Involvement in the Capital IDEA Alumni Association gave me the opportunity to relate to folks in the program and to support them ... When I fell short in school, I had Capital IDEA alumni calling me and offering me help. Some of these people, I didn’t know who they were, but they cared.”

– **Eloina Serna**, Member,
Capital IDEA Alumni Association

“You want to contribute to the program because the program took care of you. You’ve been there and you know what it’s like.”

– **Chris Nix**, Member,
Capital Idea Alumni Association

Through various alumni activities, Capital IDEA maintains a level of engagement with graduates that helps the organization build and expand its programming, services and enrollment. Graduates, whose life experiences and successes can provide inspiration and practical advice, are encouraged to contribute their time and/or resources to support current Capital IDEA students in a variety of ways. They support efforts to recruit new participants, acting as volunteers at orientations and conducting outreach through their churches and community organizations. For example, a group of alumni called “The Ambassadors” was formed to recruit men of color – a demographic that Capital IDEA would like to serve in greater numbers but has had difficulty reaching.

Once students are enrolled, Capital IDEA provides opportunities for graduates to help support them by volunteering to act as mentors and tutors, serve as occasional

speakers at peer-support meetings, help at ceremonies and celebrations, and, it is envisioned, help those whose English skills are limited by volunteering to meet with them for English conversation.

PROPS (Positive Reinforcement of Parent Scholars) was started by graduates active in the Capital IDEA Alumni Association to help support students who are single parents. As is common throughout the United States, single parents at Austin Community College have particularly high dropout rates relative to other students. Many of the Capital IDEA alumni active in PROPS were themselves single parents while students and know how hard it is to balance time pressures, often with little or no support. Through PROPS’ efforts, single-parent students receive much needed encouragement to stay in school. Each event hosted by PROPS is structured around one of four priorities identified by the students themselves: time with their children, social time with other adults, alone time or study time.

The Capital IDEA alumni are also well positioned to help students when they are ready to enter the job market, by providing job coaching and assisting with job development. As part of its goals for further growth of the Alumni Association, staff plans to build an active group of alumni acting as job references for current students. Staff also sees opportunities for alumni to offer feedback about job leads, provide information about specific employers and workplaces, recommend Capital IDEA students to employers, and perhaps become directly involved in making placements and in earning placement fees from employers.

Enhancing External Communications

Sustained relationships with former program participants can greatly enhance an organization's external communications and marketing strategies by:

- providing information about needs and opportunities in the community and among area employers, and
- augmenting the organization's ability to deliver compelling messages to investors, policy makers and constituents.

For most nonprofit organizations and community colleges, developing and growing positive relationships with the communities they serve is a priority. Long-term connections with the men and women who complete workforce programs can help build the organization and strengthen programming by providing valuable information and insights about community needs and satisfaction levels. Graduates also can provide the organization with information about their employers, alerting job developers to industry trends and employment opportunities.

While most programs typically are funded to track employment data on graduates only for a year or less, generally educational attainment and career advancement leading to higher-wage jobs is a multiyear process. By maintaining contact with graduates, programs can collect anecdotal information that they then can use to highlight program strengths and weaknesses. This information can help leaders monitor program quality by pointing to areas for further investigation. The stories garnered from graduates about their post-training experiences also can be of great value in engaging funders and future participants. Programs that can demonstrate that graduates of bridge programs did, indeed, go on to complete further education, or that workers placed into entry-level jobs were able to advance into better-paying positions over time, have a case that is likely to be valued by workforce program investors. In and of itself, the extent to which former program participants remain engaged with the colleges they attended and the nonprofit organizations that helped them may be a positive indicator of program quality. For example, contributions by alumni in the form

of dollars, volunteer hours, or other donations are a strong indication that graduates feel they received something of value.

Long-term relationships with former program participants also can result in loyal advocates who are willing to approach funders and public officials on behalf of the organization and support public policy initiatives that advance the organization's objectives. For example, Logistics/Goods Movement Training Academy graduates provide letters of support to enhance grant solicitations for the program. And both Carreras en Salud and Training Futures often ask former graduates to speak to the press or at fund-raising events. The Toastmasters-like training that Training Futures' participants receive as part of the curriculum has an extra benefit of preparing confident and effective communicators ready to speak on behalf of the organization.

Post-Training Continued Engagement: Challenges and Mechanisms

Challenges

Although the idea of continuing to engage program graduates over an extended period of time would seem to have obvious benefits, doing so can be challenging to effectively implement and sustain. The Courses to Employment demonstration sites report that the most significant challenges include: constraints on the graduates' time and ability to participate in additional programming; difficulties maintaining accurate contact information for program graduates; lack of access to information regarding graduates' pursuit of additional education; and insufficient resources to develop and sustain programs.

Time constraints

Graduates of even the most successful workforce development programs for low-income adults typically encounter a range of personal, family and employment-related commitments and stresses as they transition into full-time jobs. Despite the enthusiasm they may bring to an alumni group, obligations to family and career can limit their participation. While programs

might hope that graduates take charge of alumni organizations, leaving this up to volunteer leaders may not be effective or sustainable.

Keeping track of graduate contact information

Maintaining accurate student contact information, as well as data on employment and continued education, is another challenge. Faced with many challenges, it is not unusual for lower-income families to change addresses and phone numbers relatively frequently. At two Courses to Employment sites, Los Angeles and Northern Virginia, different approaches to dealing with this challenge have been developed:

The “Bonus Classes” offered to graduates of the Los Angeles Logistics Academy were first conceived of by Los Angeles Valley college as a way of collecting outcomes data from program graduates. When former participants contact the college about taking a bonus classes, they are asked for information about their employment and educational status that can be reported back to program funders.

In Virginia, Training Futures gives it students e-mail addresses, and teaches e-mail communication as a part of its office procedures training curriculum. In addition to the obvious workplace-related benefits of learning e-mail

skills, Training Futures sees this as a way to build communication channels that will continue after program completion. Moreover, whenever former students come into the office for a job club meeting, event or to network, they are asked to update all contact and employment information, including changes to their e-mail address.

Access to educational advancement data

One major obstacle to providing further support to graduates as they pursue additional career and educational goals is the lack of access to data about their continued education. After program completion, students may enroll in additional courses at the partner college or another post-secondary institution. The community college partners in the Courses to Employment demonstration have a strong interest in knowing whether these graduates go on to further study within their institutions and if they earn additional certificates or degrees. But, tracking college persistence for these graduates can be difficult because of privacy laws and policies and other procedural obstacles.

Working with the Training Futures program, Northern Virginia Community College is trying to address this data challenge. Training Futures

The Value of Alumni Stories

“I like referring people to Capital IDEA. I work with juveniles and I talk to their parents about Capital IDEA. If I see someone standing around, not doing anything, I tell them about Capital IDEA.”

– **Chris Nix**, Member,
Capital Idea Alumni Association

Capital IDEA recognizes that alumni stories can provide powerful evidence that the program is valued by the people it serves and their families. Seeking to preserve the richness of these testimonials, Capital IDEA has developed a Speakers Bureau where graduates’ success stories are recorded and systematically archived. Capital IDEA counselors work with participants and graduates to craft and

then practice telling their story in a way that simultaneously respects the experience of the graduate and illuminates the value of the program. While Capital IDEA recognizes that these stories have immense value, the staff understands that these are very personal stories that involve sensitive content, and that sharing them must be done in a way that is constructive for the individual storyteller.

Such stories are used to support fund-raising and development goals, as well as outreach and recruitment. They are printed in annual reports and brochures and posted on the organization’s Web site. Alumni also are invited to speak at recruitment events, graduations, and fund-raising events and to accompany Capital IDEA staff to meetings with funders and employers.

participants are enrolled at the college, where they can earn credits toward completion of the program. Upon registration at the college, student information is entered into Northern Virginia Community College's database. The database includes a special code for Training Futures participants, which allows the college to track their future study. This coding system helps the college explore questions about the longer-term benefits of its partnership with Northern Virginia Family Services. (For example, does the program serve as a feeder to degree programs?) In this case, the ability of program leaders to make use of this information is dependent upon consistent use of an information release form signed by program participants, as well as support from college leadership to drive through bureaucratic hindrances and to provide staff time for data analysis. Moreover, the development and management of positive working relationships among staff at various levels at the nonprofit and the community college is critical to the data sharing process.

Lack of resources

For programs interested in extending their contact with graduates, perhaps the most significant obstacle is a lack of resources dedicated to funding ongoing engagement. Support for these activities is rarely available through public funding streams. Yet, the experience of organizations that have tried to do this work in the past indicates that an effective post-graduate program requires dedicated staff, a budget for events and activities, a data collection and management system that is robust yet accessible, and, in many cases, working partnerships with other educational institutions and community groups.

Tips for Maintaining Contact

The experiences of Capital IDEA, as well as other partnerships in the Courses to Employment demonstration point to some lessons about maintaining contact with program graduates over an extended period.

■ **Talk to participants about long-term engagement early and often.** Rather than waiting until graduation day to talk to participants about staying connected to the organization, expectations and opportunities for participation

in post-completion activities can be shared with students early – even during recruitment and eligibility screening. During training, students can be encouraged to keep updating their contact information after program completion. Organizations such as Capital IDEA intentionally incorporate the idea of giving back to the organization and to the community, starting with their first contacts with prospective participants. Training Futures infuses the expectation of giving back throughout its program in a way that staff believes changes the tenor of training itself. When participants graduate from these types of programs, they are poised to help newer students, particularly when they have been taught and shown, through the example of those who have gone before them, that there is great value in what they can offer to others.

■ **Gain their trust, serve their needs.** The degree to which participants feel connected to an organization (often through personal relationships with counselors and instructors) and to their peers (through strong peer learning and counseling mechanisms) often is important when deciding to maintain contact after completion.

■ **Capture their stories.** The testimonials and stories of triumph among program graduates can be an incredibly valuable component of an organization's communications and marketing strategies. But they are useless without a way to solicit, record and preserve them. Programs, such as Capital IDEA, have found it very helpful to develop mechanisms, such as a Speakers Bureau, to ensure that these stories are captured, stored and used effectively.

■ **Dedicate staff time and resources.** It appears that the more effective graduate engagement initiatives are those that are fully integrated into an organization's strategic goals and operating strategy. This means that these efforts receive dedicated staff time and a place in the organization's budget.

■ **Make the most of technology.** Effective utilization of technology can be very helpful for maintaining contact with former participants, marketing graduate services and building communities of alumni. This can mean adding fields to existing management information

The Evolution of the Capital IDEA Alumni Association

“Capital IDEA is more than a program – they are like friends and family. You can even get your kids involved and get to know one another’s families, which helps build them up.”

– Eloina Serna, *Member, Capital IDEA Alumni Association*

“We [the Alumni Association] have had setbacks because of time concerns. I look at this like a brotherhood or sisterhood – where you know what one another is about. But, it is tough to do things as much as you would like to, because we have families and responsibilities.”

– Jacob Garcia, *Member, Capital Idea Alumni Association*

Over the past 10 years, Capital IDEA has taken various approaches to the development of an Alumni Association. Despite some false starts, the organization remained committed to the idea that long-term engagement of alumni was a critical component of its overall strategy.

Version 1.0	The Members Association	In February 2000, Capital IDEA launched the Members Association for currently enrolled students to involve them early in a structure that could continue post-completion of the program. The Association was highly organized with officers and representatives by occupation, by-laws, a mission statement, etc. Despite student enthusiasm, the Association fell apart as it became clear that the commitment was too much for members attending school and juggling family needs.
Version 2.0	Two-pronged Engagement Approach	Next Capital IDEA tried to involve current students in a less intensive way, allowing them to participate more informally in alumni events. Separately, a small cadre of graduates formed an Alumni Association and began to develop and organize their own activities. They established a group to support current students dealing with challenges that they themselves had experienced as students – such as managing child care, completing developmental education course work and securing employment. They developed recommendations for programmatic improvements; volunteered as tutors; organized social activities with students; assisted at community events; and participated in civic responsibility/voter registration work. During this time, Capital IDEA put the alumni project in the category of “other duties as assigned” – resulting in only limited staff attention. Although launched with great enthusiasm from a few dedicated alumni, the Association ultimately disbanded.
Version 3.0	Alumni Association In Development	In 2005, the Alumni Association re-emerged as a strategic priority. Capital IDEA recognized that its success would require dedicated staff and resources. A concept paper was adopted, and the organization acknowledged the need for an Alumni Coordinator. However, because of budget constraints the position was put on hold. In the meantime, a portion of one staff member’s time was allocated to developing the structure for the Association. A small group of alumni continued as regular, active participants.
Version 4.0	The Capital IDEA Alumni Association	Convinced of the strategic importance of alumni engagement, Capital IDEA has identified dollars, a staff person and a small budget for it. A job description for an Alumni Coordinator and a set of strategic objectives tied to specific organizational goals are included in Capital IDEA’s 2009-2013 strategic planning. Beginning in 2009, the full-time position is filled and \$6,600 has been allocated in the annual budget for alumni activities. Plans include greater support for an active Alumni Association that will help engage graduates in efforts to continue to grow Capital IDEA’s programming, and support the ongoing development of graduates through re-employment/ advancement assistance, networking and general support.

systems, taking advantage of on-line social networking tools or tapping into larger technology projects of community colleges or other partners.

Management Information Systems. Robust MIS are a critical component of an effective long-term engagement strategy. It can be very helpful to start by adding fields to participant databases and implementing processes for staff to enter newly gathered information about continuing education, employment status, volunteerism to the organization, etc. And by adding a special program code to participants' records at the community college, aggregate data can be pulled to inform partners about participants' continuing educational attainment.

E-mail. Increasingly, e-mail can be a tool for reaching graduates. Some programs issue e-mail addresses to participants and encourage them to continue to use them, even after graduation. Others make an effort to record and update external e-mail addresses for their students.

Alumni Web sites. It can be relatively simple to add alumni pages to existing organizational Web sites. A Web site can be a great place to post alumni events, offer volunteer opportunities and market additional services to graduates.

On-line social networks. A growing number of workforce organizations now cite using common social networking services, such as LinkedIn and Facebook, to build networks among their alumni and to keep in contact with them. Some organizations may choose to invest in building their own Internal Social Networks to ensure greater control and privacy.

■ **Have realistic expectations about what alumni can give back.** While program graduates are often very enthusiastic about remaining engaged with a program, many enter demanding employment while continuing to struggle with family and personal challenges. In designing alumni programming, especially that which depends upon their leadership, it is important to consider the amount of time and commitment that individuals are truly able to dedicate. The point here is that

excessive reliance on volunteerism on the part of graduates can cause an alumni initiative to fall flat.

■ **Recognize that your graduates are a tremendous resource.** Graduates can make terrific volunteers, instructors, staff members and even financial contributors. Program alumni have much to offer – their personal experience overcoming tremendous barriers to sustained employment and post-secondary educational attainment; their direct knowledge of and connections to the workplaces in targeted industry sectors; their enthusiasm and dedication to their own personal advancement as well as, in many cases, to their families and communities; and their future careers and earning potential. These are assets that can greatly enhance current programming and support strategies to build and sustain an organization.

Conclusion

The Courses to Employment project is based on the idea that community colleges and nonprofit organizations share a mission of serving low-income adults, and have complementary capacities and resources to implement new methods of adult training and education that can improve outcomes and, it is hoped, open the education/training pathway to economic success to greater numbers of low-income adults. Two approaches to helping low-income workers improve their economic situation have the potential to coalesce and become even more effective. One of these is the growing interest in helping low-income working adults to access higher education and gain credentials that can help them in the labor market – credentials that generally can be acquired at a community college. The other is the trend among workforce development programs to apply a sectoral approach to their work, focusing on specific industries that can offer low-income workers opportunities, and developing strategies that support the competitiveness of those industries, while helping low-income workers get better jobs. Bringing these approaches together has the potential to leverage capacity and generate synergies that can improve the ability of

Capital IDEA – Tools and Mechanisms for Engaging Alumni

“The Alumni Association brings out leadership in folks. When I joined the Alumni Association, I just wanted to give back. But, as I became more involved, I had ideas about what we could do.”

– Eloina Serna, *Member,*
Capital IDEA Alumni Association

Capital IDEA’s alumni activities are considered a *programmatic* component of the organization that builds on its sense of life-long involvement of students. The organization’s Board of Directors, according to the by-laws, must include an alumnus. Importantly, Capital IDEA’s leadership has worked to secure funding in its 2009-2010 budget for a full-time Alumni Coordinator and support for alumni activities (\$6,000/year). In addition, the organization has committed to investing a percentage of senior staff time (Executive Director, Deputy Executive Director and Senior Employer Coordinator) toward alumni activities, and dedicates a portion of its Web site to this: <http://www.capitalidea.org/alumni/>.

Capital IDEA has developed many mechanisms to keep graduates engaged. But it is important to note that the organization, which provides participants with a robust set of supportive and case management services while enrolled, believes that the role its counselors play and the relationship that they have with participants is a major determinant of the extent to which graduates stay in contact with the organization after completion.

Staff at Capital IDEA begins talking to participants about alumni volunteerism at program orientation. In fact, prospective students fill out a “Giving Back Plan” as part of the Capital IDEA application process before being accepted into the program. (See the tools at the end of this document: “Capital IDEA Sample Giving Back Plan.”) In making a plan, potential participants are asked to identify the sorts of post-graduation activities they might volunteer for upon program completion. Forms are stored in participant folders and, upon program completion, are revisited by counselors with the participants. Capital IDEA is developing a process whereby information provided

on the forms will be entered into the participant database and used, in aggregate, as a planning tool.

As currently configured, Capital IDEA’s Alumni Association has four volunteer officers. About 12 graduates are active on a regular basis, volunteering to assist current students and attending social networking events. A larger group of about 50 alumni participate in larger events such as annual barbecues. All 350 participants who have completed degrees are considered members of the Association and are classified as “actively participating in Capital IDEA Alumni Association” or “not participating.” (See the tools at the end of this document: “Capital IDEA Alumni Leadership Training and Alumni Association Structure.”)

There are no Alumni Association dues, but members are encouraged to make small donations to the organization to support current students once they are in a position to do so. This strategy is an extension of the organization’s philosophy and commitment to civic responsibility. In addition, although alumni contributions are in no way a significant funding stream at present, Capital IDEA staff envisions a future in which alumni contributions might become one among several types of funding blended together to support the program. Executive Director Steve Jackobs fully expects that, decades into the future, a body of Capital IDEA graduates will be working in professional positions and earning salaries that will permit them to be substantial financial supporters. Mirroring the strategies of other post-secondary institutions, he believes that the organization can and should expect its alumni to be long-term supporters. One Capital IDEA graduate currently donates \$1,000 per year to the organization, and others make annual donations of \$100 or more. The Alumni Association’s “Sponsor-a-Scholar” initiative is intended to raise funds to sponsor one Capital IDEA student per year. It is an opportunity for graduates to make small donations and simultaneously support their community.

the workforce development system in local communities to build skills and improve opportunities available to low-income workers.

In focusing this *Update* on working with program graduates, AspenWSI hopes to illuminate an important aspect of how community colleges and nonprofits in the Courses to Employment demonstration are working collaboratively to have greater impact for participants. Through ongoing engagement, these partnerships seek to meet a range of non-academic needs of low-income working adults that ultimately helps them pursue further education and succeed on the job. Because there is great variation both in goals and strategies among the CTE partnerships, and among the local economies in which they are located, no one model presented here forms the perfect blueprint for all others to follow. Yet, in each example presented herein, nonprofit organizations and community colleges are able to use their complementary assets to innovate in ways that demonstrate the great potential of these partnerships to go beyond the usual boundaries of traditional workforce development or community college programming to serve low-income adults.

Toolkit

Many of the documents and tools developed by Capital IDEA as part of its alumni engagement strategy and referenced in this publication are available on-line.

- 1. Capital IDEA Alumni Leadership Training and Alumni Association Structure.** Description of the mission, history, values, structure and decision-making processes for Capital IDEA's Alumni Association. www.aspenwsi.org/CTE/IDEAstructure.pdf
- 2. Capital IDEA Sample Giving Back Plan.** Form used during Capital IDEA's enrollment process to introduce students to the idea of post-graduation service to future students. Form is revisited with students at graduation. www.aspenwsi.org/CTE/IDEAsample.pdf
- 3. Capital IDEA Alumni Association By-laws.** www.aspenwsi.org/CTE/IDEAbylaws.pdf
- 4. Capital IDEA Alumni Association Speakers Bureau Handout.** Flier for soliciting stories/speakers from former Capital IDEA-supported students. www.aspenwsi.org/CTE/IDEAhandout.pdf
- 5. Capital IDEA Job Description – Alumni Coordinator.** www.aspenwsi.org/CTE/IDEAjob.pdf



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For more information about the CTE demonstration, please visit: <http://www.aspenwsi.org/WSIwork-HigherEd.asp>

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