

MAY 2019

OPPORTUNITIES IN HEALTH CARE

Evaluation of Career Connections Program at Norwalk Community College

Karen R. Brown, MPA, Fairfield County's Community Foundation

Stacie R. Powers, PhD, Philliber Research & Evaluation



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Career Connections students at Norwalk Community College.

The Career Connections program was a career pathways program at Norwalk Community College (NCC) aimed at connecting opportunity youth in Fairfield County, Connecticut to high-demand allied health care jobs in the local labor force. The term “opportunity youth” in this program refers to youth, aged 18 to 25, who have graduated from high school or the equivalent, are not pursuing post-secondary education, and are not making a living above minimum wage.¹ The program design was conceived of by Fairfield County’s Community Foundation (“The Community Foundation”), as part of its Thrive by 25 initiative. The Community Foundation also funded Career Connections.² The Community Foundation, NCC and the NCC Foundation jointly selected Philliber Research & Evaluation as the third-party evaluation consultant for the program.

Because of the many challenges these youth face, the program was designed to provide full coverage of the cost of NCC’s allied health care certificate programs, as well as offer additional supports, such as workforce readiness training, internships, academic advising, job development, and subsidized transportation. An NCC Job Developer worked with employers to help place students in Fairfield County allied health care jobs. Career Connections, housed in NCC’s Continuing Education and Workforce Development Division, launched in winter 2017 and concluded in fall 2018.

Career Connections enrolled 52 students: 67 percent completed at least one allied health care certificate, and 27 percent advanced to jobs in allied health care or are pursuing nursing degrees.

The initial performance measures for the program were to enroll 110 students over two years, with the expectation that most would go on to a job or advanced degree in the allied health care sector. However, due to a variety of reasons,³ the program did not provide all the planned services for the first two student cohorts. Beyond that, there were important lessons learned regarding the level of time and support that opportunity youth need to be able to navigate successfully into a career pathway.

The program worked optimally when students (1) had a quick, well-informed start in a fully developed program, (2) had the opportunity for a second chance if things did not go smoothly the first time, and (3) had intensive support from the Job Developer to find salaried jobs that fit into students’ lives.

The program was enhanced along the way, as Career Connections program staff put additional screening and orientation materials in place to make sure students were fully informed about their options early on. Even then, given the complexity of the challenges students faced, in many cases they needed second chances. Some needed a second chance or extra support on coursework; some needed to switch to a different allied health care certificate to be more engaged; some just needed time to start over after setbacks in their personal lives. Importantly, these same students ultimately went on to complete their allied health care certificates at NCC. The Job Developer was not hired until the third cohort was starting; once students understood the level of support she offered, this position proved to be a vital asset to the students and the program.

¹ It is worth noting that the traditional definition of “opportunity youth” does not include those who are employed. However, in the case of Career Connections, those individuals working for minimum wage or less were eligible for the program.

² Fairfield County’s Community Foundation was able to fund Career Connections because of funding the Community Foundation raised from colleague foundations and donor-advised fundholders. For this list, please see the Acknowledgments section.

³ Career Connections was launched after an unexpected change in the original program operator. This resulted in NCC starting the program without all program components fully in place.

The program also worked to create several opportunities to establish personal connections with and among the students, who were often too busy to make additional contacts outside of their class time on campus. The Career Connections Workplace Strategies class, a required introductory class, was supplemented to include cohort activities; these included special “lunch and learn” sessions which afforded students opportunities to meet health care professionals.

The Job Developer also kept in close contact with students who were seeking employment—and worked with each to find a job that met their personal strengths and needs. Often this did not start with a full-time, career pathway job as had been originally envisioned. In many cases students needed part-time work, in a place they could travel to easily and with an employer who could accommodate their class schedule, just so they could continue in the program. The Job Developer frequently used text messaging, at all times of the day, to reach students when it was convenient for them.



Students who came into the program with previous experience in college, who lived in Norwalk, who were referred by a friend, or who did not have pressing employment or family situations, were more successful than others.

The program proved to be an important way for NCC to be able to engage students who had tried college (including community college) previously, but needed a shorter on-ramp to employment and/or more support in order to see positive results. Many NCC staff on the credit side began referring two-year Associate degree students to Career Connections when they were struggling. Half of the students ($n = 26$) had previously tried college. Among these students, 85 percent completed a certificate and 42 percent went on to a job in allied health care or a nursing program. Among students with no previous college ($n = 26$), the completion rate was lower, with 52 percent completing a certificate, and only 12 percent attaining a job in allied health care. Students with no prior college experience who were recruited by a friend had a 79 percent certificate completion rate; however, only 32 percent obtained a job in the allied health field care.

Career Connections did not provide unlimited supports, and students still struggled with the classic challenges that interrupt educational plans. Those who came into the program with more advantages—those who lived in Norwalk, those who were not living paycheck to paycheck, and the few who were white and/or had parents who had gone to college — had higher success rates. Students who achieved program goals were less likely to have pressing family or financial obligations than students who did not achieve program goals.

Interestingly, one of the most important determinants of success was if the student had a job when they applied to the program, which seemed to work against them: among those who were employed ($n = 25$), only 42 percent completed a certificate, whereas 85 percent of those who were not employed ($n = 27$) completed a certificate. This pattern then carried through to finding a job in the Fairfield County allied health care sector: only 12 percent of those who were employed when they applied found a job in the allied health field, compared with 41 percent of those who were not employed when they started the program.

The program emphasized the value of a program retention coach and of starting a career pathway with a certificate as a beneficial model for NCC as an institution.

Although no part of Career Connections was continued by NCC after Fairfield County’s Community Foundation funding ended, the experience provided important evidence for the value of the NCC Continuing Education and Workforce Development Division as a complement to the credit-bearing side, rather than as a standalone division primarily focused on revenue generation. With the proper supports in place, students who struggled in the pursuit of an Associate degree could experience some success and find sustainable employment through a certificate program, which would, in turn, make the transition to the credit-bearing Associate degree programs more likely to be successful. An enduring aspect of Career Connections was the creation of the NCC Foundation’s Bridge Scholarship Program for accomplished certificate program graduates to transition to Associate degree programs.

The work of the Career Connections' Job Developer created a model for what is needed for retention of opportunity youth students in NCC's wide array of certificate programs. Also, the allied health employer contacts made by the Job Developer can now be used by the NCC Career Services Center, benefiting all NCC students. While the program was operating, Career Connections students gained access to resources previously reserved for students in credit-bearing programs, such as subsidized bus passes and academic tutoring. This was an important institutional change at NCC, and one that proves a model for other Connecticut community colleges.

For Fairfield County's Community Foundation, Career Connections was a learning opportunity to develop new insights on serving opportunity youth and the challenges of funding direct service programs to support this special population of young adults.

For the Community Foundation, the lack of available scholarships for NCC's wealth of certificate programs was a fertile area for investment focused on opportunity youth. Indeed, the Community Foundation's Fund for Women & Girls and NCC had already demonstrated success in funding a community college program with wraparound student supports with the Family Economic Security Program (FESP), which targeted working students in Associate degree and credit-bearing certificate programs.⁴ However, Career Connections differed from FESP in that the timeline to certificate completion was much shorter; the entrance requirements were not as strict; and there was an employment outcome expected within a very short period. FESP, on the other hand, has evolved to be only open to students with an established 2.0+ GPA, has mandatory requirements for coaching session attendance in order to maintain the FESP scholarship, and has a more holistic student support model with a larger coaching staff. In addition, the FESP students are largely older than Career Connections students, with a more extensive history of paid work experience.⁵

One of the key lessons learned was the need to establish a better understanding of how long it would take to see concrete student outcomes when implementing a career pathways program for opportunity youth. This will therefore require longer funding commitments than many funders may initially anticipate. Small shifts, such as establishing better referral sources during the student recruitment phase like those that eventually emerged inside NCC, as well as cultivating relationships with local high schools and guidance counselors so that students could enter the program with more focused intentions, might help produce stronger programs.

For local allied health care employers, the program held several benefits: it was a local connection to a trained labor supply in a variety of entry-level allied health care careers; it helped fulfill employer goals for engaging with the community; and it provided a connection to a trusted Job Developer who could assist in making qualified placements.

One of the tasks of the Job Developer was to create a database of local employers in the allied health care sector who were interested in hiring graduates of the program. In many cases the relationship that developed occurred over the phone, and the Job Developer contacted employers she felt might be appropriate when she found students who seemed like they would be a good match. This match-making took several factors into account: the personality, preferences, and abilities of the student; the requirements and predisposition of the specific employer; and the general nature of the job (i.e. if it had a fast or slow pace, if it required a lot of face-to-face interaction, and other factors). After placement, the Job Developer continued to coach students when needed, offering advice on topics as diverse as how to get a better work shift to what to bring as a gift when invited to a party at the boss's house.

This database grew to 251 allied health care employers in a short period of time. In interviews with a sample of these employers, the Philliber Research & Evaluation team found that the employers were interested in working with the Career Connections program for a variety of reasons. In particular, they appreciated having the Job Developer as a resource to help them find and support the right job candidate. This allowed them to fulfill organizational goals for

⁴ The Family Economic Security Program began at Norwalk Community College. At NCC, FESP students exclusively pursued Associate degrees.

The Family Economic Security Program at Housatonic Community College was expanded to include students pursuing both Associate degrees as well as credit-bearing certificates.

⁵ For more information on the Community Foundation's Family Economic Security Program model, please see *The Evolution, Expansion and Evaluation of The Family Economic Security Program*, Fund for Women & Girls. <https://fccfoundation.org/publications/family-economic-security-program-white-paper-2016/>



hiring and employing the local labor force, but also reduced the risk they might typically take in hiring someone with little paid work experience. They also appreciated being able to network with Norwalk Community College to recruit skilled workers. It is important to note that Career Connections was implemented during a tight labor market in the Fairfield County allied health sector.

In addition, many students benefited from the extra help they received, and the program generated some interest from local employers. The key tension, however, came from the need to show results quickly in order to provide evidence to funders that the program was a good investment. However, this short timeline could not account for the challenging nature of the opportunity youth student experience: mainly that the very factors that create opportunity youth status may take some time and remediation to address, will likely occur in stops and starts and partial successes, can benefit from some experimentation with new program components, and will likely hinge entirely on second chances.

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Career Connections program made steady progress in developing several opportunities and supports for students while they were in allied health care certificate programs at NCC. This required finding new ways to take advantage of existing resources from NCC's credit-bearing side and finding ways of benefiting from the expertise of partner organizations such as the NCC Foundation, Fairfield County's Community Foundation, the Community Foundation's Thrive by 25 Cabinet, and the Philliber Research & Evaluation team. The Thrive by 25 Cabinet was composed of professionals selected by the Community Foundation to help guide its Thrive by 25 initiative; members are listed in the Acknowledgments section.

Below we summarize 12 key lessons learned and recommendations:

Promote Public Awareness of Community College Certificate Programs

The concept of certificate programs, and especially their advantage in leading to allied health career pathways, was not well understood by the general public or many of the opportunity youth who applied to Career Connections. It is critical that high school guidance counselors accordingly learn about community college certificate programs, so they can include this information in their student and parent advising. Visualizations of career pathways in specific job sectors would further prove helpful. NCC should also consider holding special graduation ceremonies for certificate graduates (with media attention), an important public awareness-building opportunity. Indeed, Career Connections included graduate ceremonies for specific student cohorts enrolled in Career Connections, which were very well-received by the students and their families.

Fund Program Planning Phase

Career Connections would have benefited from a longer planning phase, especially because it was challenging to hire qualified part-time program staff. This was not possible because of the unexpected change in the program operator. Funders should consider including at least a six-month planning phase in program budgets.

Focus on Student Recruitment and On-Boarding Strategies

Career Connections highlighted the importance of fine-tuned student recruitment and on-boarding strategies, especially critical when trying to reach opportunity youth.

The program's experience underscores the importance of these four (4) action steps:

1. Develop student recruitment feeder sources that are able to make appropriate student referrals, including from local feeder high schools. This was achieved to some extent within NCC departments during the program, for students who were struggling to complete Associate degree programs.
2. Develop an on-boarding procedure that includes an interview and orientation session before students commit to their path of study.
3. Have an appropriate screening process to make sure students will be able to meet academic requirements for their selected career pathways. Additionally, have program staff be well versed in the requirements for various program pathways. Several students could not pass the courses for EKG or EMT certifications because of the math requirements. In hindsight, a more finely-tuned advising model at Career Connections might have been able to steer these students toward more attainable allied health certificates first.
4. Make sure students develop relationships with key staff members immediately upon entering the program, so they understand the full menu of services and supports available to them.

Indeed, the Community Foundation's Fund for Women & Girls has found the above program ingredients to also prove critical in its Family Economic Security Program.

Design Opportunity Youth Programs for "Second Chances"

Coaching for program retention and job development are useful ways to keep students engaged who might otherwise drop out. Guiding struggling Associate degree students toward community college certificate programs may also prove beneficial to the credit-bearing side of community colleges, further building bridges between the two sides of the institution.

We also learned that students who need to drop out or take a break may come back to the program if given second chances. Indeed, we found that students who were given second chances (especially those who had tried college before) ultimately had good success rates. Workforce development programs for opportunity youth, therefore, should be designed as safe spaces for young adults to fail, while gaining important post-secondary education and training.

Understand the Limitations of Certificate Programs for Opportunity Youth

One of the advantages of community college certificate programs is that they are short-term on-ramps to employment. However, the short-term nature of certificate programs can also pose challenges for opportunity youth. We found that with some certificate programs (such as phlebotomy), missing just one class could become a barrier to certificate completion.

Design Multiple Student Cohort Experiences

We found that student group activities, such as lunch and learn sessions, helped students in disparate certificate courses come together and identify as a cohort. These group activities also fostered peer support and student confidence in their ability to persist in Career Connections.

Integrate Student Support Services into Certificate Programs Targeting Opportunity Youth

We learned that providing tutoring and transportation assistance were critical program components. NCC demonstrated admirable flexibility by offering Career Connections' students access to services (such as tutoring

and U-Passes for transportation assistance), initially only offered to NCC students pursuing credit-bearing courses. In addition, offering exam preparation tutoring proved critical. We urge other Connecticut community colleges with certificate courses to do the same, especially if they hope to enroll opportunity youth.

Career Connections highlighted the importance of strong personal relationships between program staff and students, via one-on-one coaching. Indeed, the Community Foundation's Fund for Women & Girls has learned how important individual coaching is for student success with our Family Economic Security Program (FESP) model for Associate degree students. Similarly, both Career Connections and FESP demonstrated the positive influence of programs including a discrete student cohort component.

Communicate and Define Job Development to Students

Students did not initially understand the concept of "job development," and needed help understanding how the Job Developer would actively partner with them to locate paid employment. We cannot assume that young adults understand what "job development" means, as they have likely never enrolled in a program which provided this service. We also learned that opportunity youth can benefit from targeted support in completing online job applications. The Job Developer importantly helped students stand out after they submitted online job applications by calling the specific employer or hiring site on the student's behalf. Given the plethora of online job applications in today's job market, the value of this Job Developer support proved extremely important.

Understand Opportunity Youth Are Not Monolithic

Career Connections was more successful with older youth (those at least 21 years old). We also learned that even older young adults – Fairfield County residents in their late 20s – were interested in the program. This suggests that future programs perhaps be more flexible with regard to age eligibility. We also learned that opportunity youth with some college experience were different from youth with no college experience. Future programs may consider grouping young adults together based on similarities in their previous educational attainment.⁶

We also learned that certificate programs focused on this young adult population may be better suited to offer a wider variety of subject-focused certificates, as it is challenging for young adults with very limited work experience to be certain about a career pathway at the age of 18 or 19. Offering a wider range of certificate focus areas – from allied health to hospitality to information technology, for example – may be the most ideal program design. This will require larger levels of funding.

In addition, Career Connections suggests that in a robust job market, young adults will more likely be interested in pursuing certificate courses while they are already employed (either part or full-time). To ensure these employed students are successful in certificate courses, community colleges may need to offer more courses during evening and weekend hours and may also need to extend the duration of such courses.

Prioritize Employer Engagement

We also found that local employers were receptive to this kind of program, especially the customized placement possibilities offered by the Job Developer. However, it is important to note that Career Connections occurred during a tight Fairfield County labor market, including for entry-level allied health care positions.

Some employers may also be useful allies in creating placements that allow students to work while they are still taking certificate courses.

We also learned that non-credit certificates in specific sectors can bolster the entire community college's employer partnerships. The Career Connections Program helped NCC as a whole gain new allied health care employer relationships in Fairfield County, through the Job Developer's focused employer engagement and outreach work.

⁶ Martha Ross and Natalie Holmes, *Meet The Millions of Young Adults Who Are Out of Work: Local Profiles of Jobless Young Adults and Strategies to Connect Them to Employment*, Metropolitan Policy Program at The Brookings Institute, April 2019.

Create and Institutionalize Certificate Program Scholarship Funds

Certificate programs at community colleges are affordable, short-term options for young adults. However, they still require tuition scholarships to ensure that low-income youth and young adults can access these programs. This is a possible future role for private philanthropy as well as employers. Indeed, several U.S. community colleges have recently been successful engaging local employers in funding non-credit certificate programs, such as Lenoir Community College in North Carolina.⁷ In addition, it is important that community colleges continue to pursue other sources of sustainable funding for certificate programs, such as from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), SNAP Employment & Training, and federal Pell grants.⁸

Collect Longitudinal Certificate Program Student Data

In order to further improve Connecticut community colleges' certificate programs, we need to institutionalize data collection at individual campus and Connecticut State Colleges & Universities (CSCU) system levels, so that we can better understand which certificate programs lead to the best employment outcomes in Connecticut as well as continued post-secondary education at the Associate degree level. This is especially important for programs targeting the opportunity youth population.

The lack of data on our state's certificate programs has been found to be a pervasive and limiting practice within Connecticut's community colleges. At the state level, it has therefore been recommended that "the Office of Higher Education shall develop and maintain a cost and outcome reporting system to provide information about all certificates awarded by public, private and nonprofit institutions."⁹

Unfortunately, data limitations exist on a national level in this field as well. The Bureau of Labor Statistics should consider updating its data categories to include labor market outcomes for non-credit certificate graduates.

We also need to better track the cohorts of opportunity youth after they graduate from our high schools or obtain a GED in adult education programs (but are not immediately entering two or four-year colleges, or employment). This will better enable new workforce development programs to reach this special youth population. This improved tracking is especially important for graduates of our state technical high school system.

We also need to better track community college "stop outs"—those students who attempt some credit-bearing community college courses, but then do not persist. As we learned in Career Connections, these students could specifically be excellent candidates for community college certificate programs.

We applaud national foundations, such as The Annie E. Casey Foundation, which are funding and evaluating multi-year, multi-city youth-focused workforce development programs, such as Generation Work. Hartford is a Generation Work site, and The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is a core partner. Generation Work will produce important evaluation data (conducted by MDRC), including about critical work supports such as transportation subsidies and child care as well as system change and scaling.

In addition, as part of The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Generation Work, Child Trends has developed an assessment instrument to facilitate the application of Positive Youth Development strategies in young adult training, education and employment programs. The Community Foundation looks forward to sharing the important lessons learned from Generation Work with our colleague funders and grantees in Fairfield County.

⁷ Mason Bishop, *Addressing The Employment Challenge: The Use of Postsecondary Noncredit Training in Skills Development*, American Enterprise Institute, March 2019.

⁸ For more information about the creative use of Pell grants to fund non-credit certificate-based job training, see David Altstadt, *The Power of Pell: Mott Community College's Use of Federal Aid to Train Unemployed Workers and Dissolve Silos Between Credit and Non-Credit*, Workforce Strategies Initiative of The Aspen Institute, March 2016.

⁹ Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee, *Higher Education Certificate Programs*, Connecticut General Assembly, December 2014.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Career Connections would not have been possible without the support of many individuals committed to young adult post-secondary success, including a Thrive by 25 Cabinet and Career Connections Subcommittee composed of the following individuals:

Mark Argosh, Social Venture Partners Connecticut
Motunrola Bolumole, Thrive by 25 Youth Ambassador
Christopher Bruhl, The Business Council of Fairfield County
Brandon Cardwell, Fairfield County's Community Foundation Board Member
Michael Chambers, Per & Astrid Heidenreich Family Foundation
Lucas Codognolla, Connecticut Students for a Dream
Jules Denise, Navigators Management Company, Inc.
Marc Donald, RYASAP, formerly with Domus
Gerry Fox, Fairfield County's Community Foundation Board Member
Lindy Lee Gold, Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development
Peter Hurst, Greater New England Minority Supplier Development Council
Chris Kunhardt, Social Venture Partners Connecticut
Nestor Leon, The WorkPlace, Inc.
David Levinson, Norwalk Community College
Cynthia Lyon, The Business Council of Fairfield County
Laura McCargar, Perrin Family Foundation
Jacqueline R. Millan, former Fairfield County's Community Foundation Board Member
Ruth-Ann Phillips, Thrive by 25 Youth Ambassador
Sylvia Shepard, Social Venture Partners Connecticut
Jennie Sparandara, JPMorgan Chase & Co.
Kiran Somaya, Norwalk Community College
Eileen Swerdlick, former Fairfield County's Community Foundation Board Member
Ralph Valenzisi, Norwalk Public Schools
Richard J. Wenning, Fairfield County's Community Foundation Board Member

We also acknowledge the significant contributions of two former Fairfield County's Community Foundation staff members: Alexis Bivens and Nancy von Euler. Both Alexis and Nancy worked closely with our NCC and NCC Foundation partners on Career Connections from the program's beginning.

Fairfield County's Community Foundation acknowledges the collaborative funding of a cadre of Community Foundation donor-advised fundholders and colleague foundations. Their collaborative spirit and belief in our region's young adults are deeply appreciated.

Champion funders included JPMorgan Chase Foundation, Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide Foundation, Inc., Almira Family Foundation and an anonymous donor. Additional funders included the BeFoundation; Barbara Benton Davis Fund at Fairfield County's Community Foundation; Goodnow Fund; Heidenreich Family Fund at Fairfield County's Community Foundation; Kendall Family Foundation; Christopher Kunhardt; Anne S. Leonhardt Fund at Fairfield County's Community Foundation; Scot and Lisa Melland; Sylvia Shepard and Will Holtzman; Eleanor Harrison Smith and Donald Ralph Smith Charitable Fund at Fairfield County's Community Foundation; Robie & Scott Spector Charitable Fund at Fairfield County's Community Foundation; Fred and Joan Weisman Fund at Fairfield County's Community Foundation; and Christine and Ted Yang.

Fairfield County is indeed fortunate to have a nationally-recognized community college located in the heart of our region, Norwalk Community College. We applaud the hard work of our NCC colleagues who led the Career Connections Program: Lauren McGuire, Maria Turkel, and Dr. Kristina Testa-Buzzee. We also benefited from a strong partnership with our philanthropic colleagues leading the NCC Foundation, Ann Rogers and Carrie Bernier.