

NCTN Promising Practice Series: *Wrap-Around Services*

The NCTN Promising Practice Series presents detailed descriptions of strategies from the field designed to promote the successful transition of students from ABE/ESOL to postsecondary education.

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Program Context

Capital IDEA assists disadvantaged adults with incomes below 200 percent of Federal Poverty Income Guidelines to enable them to acquire basic, life, and technical skills needed to enter high-skill, high-value occupations. The Capital IDEA concept originated in the late 1990's when the congregations and schools of Austin Interfaith noticed that the rising cost of living was putting increasing pressure on ordinary families. Breadwinners were taking on extra jobs, and still not making enough to make ends meet. They had neither the time nor money to afford the tuition, childcare, and other expenses needed to train for higher-wage careers. At the same time, employers found themselves short of workers in many skilled occupations. When these community and business leaders recognized that their problems were related, a conversation started, and Capital IDEA was formed.

The College Prep Academy is a 12-week, full time educational program co-sponsored by Austin Community College and Capital IDEA. The Academy consists of classes designed to increase participants' academic skills in Math, Reading and Writing in order to successfully complete the requirements of the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA) test and prepare them for college. Capital IDEA also offers ESL and GED classes for people whose goal is to attend college but do not yet have the skills needed for the College Prep Academy. All services (ABE, GED, ESOL) are provided, no matter what level, for college bound students who test above a 5th grade level in reading and math. Capital IDEA contracts with Austin Community College to provide the academic instruction component of the program and all academic classes are held on the ACC campus.

Rationale and Background of the Practice

People in our community have many barriers to college and not all of them are financial. Most are first generation college goers and college was not a concept that they were brought up to consider. Their families don't know how to answer their questions about college, guide them through the application process, or build their confidence in their abilities to succeed in college. Our Counselors are almost like surrogate families, providing the support and guidance that people need to build confidence in their ability to navigate the system and succeed in college.

Most of our students have children and childcare is so expensive that it becomes a real barrier to education. We provide childcare vouchers during class hours for students who are parents and will provide them for as many years as it takes someone to graduate from college as long as they are actively enrolled and attending. In some situations, we have even provided childcare for a few months after graduation to help with the job search.

Description of the Practice

Capital IDEA provides comprehensive support services, referred to as *Wrap-around services*, to every student enrolled in the program until they graduate from college or enter employment. These wrap-around services include:

- Weekly class meetings with a Career Counselor
- Weekly (at minimum) individual contact with a Career Counselor
- Full tuition
- All books and materials provided
- Childcare voucher for hours spent in classes for students actively enrolled
- One-time emergency assistance with rent or other expenses on a case-by-case basis
- Referral and vouchers to more intensive clinical services, e.g. mental health, when necessary
- Transportation assistance, as needed on a case-by-case basis

The Career Counseling is the heart of our program. Each student is assigned a career Counselor depending on the chosen career path. The Career Counselors are very specialized - they have to learn everything they can about the fields of study they cover and know about the curriculum, skill requirements, and work opportunities in order to assist students with their career goals. The Career Counselors are focused on helping students stay in and succeed in school. Currently, a staff of 10 Counselors works with 650 enrolled students, giving each a caseload of 60-70 students.

Career Counselors meet weekly with individual students, usually face-to-face. The Counselors park themselves on campus so that they get some time face-to-face with students. If this isn't possible, then they are in regular contact through email.

Career Counselors hold weekly group sessions called VIP (*Vision, Initiative, Perseverance*) meetings. These meetings are 1-1.5 hours per week and attendance is required. During these meetings, Counselors teach college readiness and career awareness skills and also coach students on communication and life skills, like conflict resolution. Counselors develop their own lesson plans for group work, responding to whatever issues come up, depending on the needs of the students.

The assigned Career Counselor continues to work with each student until graduation. A few months prior to graduation the students also begin to meet with the Placement Coordinator who helps them prepare for the job search and coaches them through the process. There is also an

Employer Coordinator who develops and maintains relationships with area employers and serves as a job developer.

The Capital IDEA Counselors also encourage students to take advantage of the services available at the college. However, only walk-in counseling is available at the college so the students don't benefit in the same way that they do from working closely with the same Counselor over the course of their time in school. In addition, the Capital IDEA Counselors are skilled in dealing with the issues that are specific to the student population served.

What steps would a program or practitioner need to replicate this practice?

The program was designed in response to community needs, so it's important to determine precisely what the needs are among community members and area businesses. Capital IDEA has a broad base of support because the founders assessed community and business needs and developed very strong partnerships as a result. These partnerships with community organizations, human service providers, and businesses are key to our ability to provide comprehensive support services to students. We are also able to find people jobs because we learn directly from employers which skills and training people need to succeed in the sectors where jobs are available.

What staff and skills were required?

A program like ours needs to have Counselors who can be very supportive and also firm and directive. Counselors need to have the determination and drive to see their students through and not to let them fall through the cracks. This requires a great deal of patience and the ability to recognize warning signs when someone is falling off course.

We don't have any structured allocation of professional development hours for our staff, but professional development is very much supported and encouraged and now tuition reimbursement is available. Counseling staff members do a lot of self-training, attend seminars, bring in speakers and do whatever it takes to keep themselves up to date on the fields that our students are preparing to enter. We have to be continually learning.

Staff feels very supported and counseling staff share resources with each other and problem solve collaboratively. Counselors don't stand alone but work with colleagues and no one has to recreate the wheel.

What do you consider to be innovative about your practice?

Both the services we provide and the way that our staff works are innovative. The level of counseling that we provide and the way we pair students with Counselors is unique. We match students with Counselors based on their career interests and they work together throughout the entire educational process. We provide a lot to students and also ask a lot of them in return. We have every student sign an enrollment agreement form (*sample available for download at <http://collegetransition.org/promising/practice9.html>*) so they are clear from the beginning about what we provide and what we expect from them. For example, students are expected to attend all scheduled classes, counseling sessions, and VIP meetings and if they are absent from more than two VIP sessions or training classes, they have to meet with the Capital IDEA Director to continue enrollment in the program. They are also expected to complete all the classes required for their occupational career path and to earn a grade of B or better.

When participants graduate from the program, they are also expected to give back to the community in a tangible way, through volunteering or donating to a non-profit, or developing their own community project. There is a Capital IDEA Alumni Association that recruits alumni as tutors, mentors, and members of the Capital IDEA speakers' bureau. To learn more about the activities of the Capital IDEA Alumni Association, see <http://www.capitalidea.org/alumni/>

As a staff, we work hard at staying up to date technologically. This helps Counselors maintain records and files and enables Counselors to stay in touch with students. Our day-to-day work life

is also very good. We work in a nice building that is downtown and very accessible to public transportation. A great working environment really helps morale when Counselors feel that they are respected and supported in doing such hard and demanding work. We also have strong leadership that is willing to change and try new things if something isn't working.

Challenges

Like any startup, it takes time to gain recognition and to raise and sustain the funding, but this is beginning to happen. At first, we encountered mistrust from students because the program and services seem too good to be true. Now that we have a proven track record, word is spreading, and this is not such an issue.

Cost and Funding

On average, it costs about \$6000/year per student to provide all of the educational and support services included in the program. Funding comes through a broad mix of city, county, federal and private funds.

Evidence of Impact and Effectiveness

Our retention rates are quite high, in the last 3 college prep cycles (Spring 2006 - Spring 2007):

- completion rates ranged from 75-100 percent.

Student pass rates for the math portion of the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA) are also quite high, in the last 3 college prep cycles:

- 64-86 percent met the minimum score of 230 and placed directly into college-level courses
- 82-100 percent met the Texas Success Initiative¹ minimum math score of 207, which enables them to take 2 prerequisite classes while they are enrolled in a developmental education course to improve math scores
- 67-73 percent achieved the minimum reading score of 230 and were eligible for college-level courses
- 57-77 percent achieved the minimum writing score of 220 and were eligible for college-level courses

What might be the implications for programs and practitioners in our field?

The collaboration between government, business, church, educators, and community organizations has been key to our success. Everything that we do is a collaboration - recruitment, identifying high demand careers, developing curriculum, and fundraising. Our work also crosses political boundaries and we have generated support from all ends of the political spectrum.

How scaleable do you think the practice is?

The Wrap Around services model to support academic success and career advancement is very scalable, although it is expensive. But each community is different, so the specifics of the program and the educational, training and career paths would vary.

¹ The Texas Success Initiative (formerly TASP) is a state-legislated program designed to improve student success in college through diagnostic assessment of basic skills and developmental instruction. <http://www.utexas.edu/academic/tsi/>

Research on Wrap-Around Services

It is unusual to hear the term, “wrap-around services,” outside of human service or health care settings. Thinking in terms of adult transition to postsecondary education, it might represent individualized and coordinated services and supports across a wide variety of departments and systems. Purnell and Blank (2004) describe elements of wrap-around services for postsecondary education that are similar to those discussed in this promising practice. Coordinated access to:

- *Academic guidance and counseling*, through which students gain information on educational and courses planning and graduation requirements;
- *Academic supports*, such as tutoring, through which students receive additional help in meeting their academic goals;
- *Personal guidance and counseling*, such as mental health counseling or crisis intervention;
- *Career counseling*, through which students receive information on careers; and,
- *Supplemental services*, such as childcare or transportation assistance. (p. 7).

Karp, O’Gara, and Hughes (2008), in their exploratory study of access to support services at two community colleges, found that -- although support services technically are open to all students, only those who come to the community college with pre-existing “social and cultural resources” can take full advantage of the services. This makes it particularly important for students without family and social networks familiar with college (and its support services) to collaborate with others, like the Career Counselors mentioned in this promising practice, in order to truly access support services.

Karp, M.M., O-Gara, L., & Hughes, K.L. (2008). *Do support services at community colleges encourage success or reproduce disadvantage? An exploratory study of students in two community colleges*. New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University, Community College Research Center.

Purnell, R. & Blank, S. (2004). *Supporting success: Services that may help low-income students succeed in community college*. New York: MDRC.

About the Author

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