



A key Lumina Foundation commitment to increasing adult college completion

POLICY EXCHANGES

Collaboration and Coordination to Improve Adult College Completion Efforts

April 2015

Note: This brief is adapted from “Effective Collaboration and Coordination: Lessons from Research and Practice,” written by Patrick Lane and published by WICHE in January 2014. That brief focused on efforts to increase postsecondary access and success for low-income students, but the research and lessons it contained apply to adult college completion as well.

The Adult College Completion Network – funded by Lumina Foundation and facilitated by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) – brings together and supports entities working to increase college and certificate completion by adults with prior postsecondary credits but no degree. The network was founded in part on the premise that improving outcomes for such individuals would require robust collaboration among diverse stakeholders: the workforce system, state higher education agencies, postsecondary institutions, businesses and employers, local governments, community-based organizations, and others.

This brief provides examples and research that can help stakeholders working in this sphere to forge new relationships and strengthen current partnerships. It begins with a look at general research on the

coordinated delivery of public services to identify some of the common characteristics of highly effective collaborations. Then, it focuses on three noteworthy efforts: a consortium to increase degree attainment by adults in Georgia, a citywide effort to increase degree attainment in Louisville by 2020, and a healthcare collaborative designed to meet workforce needs in the Cincinnati area.

With limited funding available for degree-completion efforts, improving coordination with other entities is an essential strategy for leveraging existing resources and building program sustainability. No matter what the future landscape of adult degree and certificate

completion looks like, the need to develop and implement effective mechanisms to coordinate programs and policy will remain.

For more information on the Adult College Completion Network, please see www.adultcollegecompletion.org.

Research on Coordination and Collaboration

Recent research into the “collective impact” approach to addressing significant social challenges has identified a range of examples in which broad collaborative efforts have yielded progress on problems in education, the environment, economic development, and community health.¹ Researchers from Stanford University looking at successful examples of collective impact have identified five necessary commonalities:

- ▲ **A common agenda:** Participating entities must share a common view of the problem and the steps necessary to solve it.
- ▲ **Shared metrics:** Collaborative efforts must have a common method of measuring and evaluating progress.
- ▲ **Mutually reinforcing activities:** The various entities in a collective effort should undertake complementary activities playing to their own strengths, while taking care to avoid redundant or competitive efforts.
- ▲ **Continuous communication:** All those participating in collective efforts must develop trust and appreciation for the others involved. Effective initiatives require frequent and regular formal interaction as well as informal communications among partners.
- ▲ **Backbone support organizations:** Effective collective efforts require an organizing entity to serve as a hub for facilitation, cooperative planning, and managing the flow of information – including measurement data – among all partners.²

In addition to these commonalities, researchers have identified three crucial precursors to successful collective impact efforts: garnering the support of highly influential champions, securing financial resources necessary for two to three years of operation, and developing an argument that urgent change is needed.³

The research also suggests a progressive, three-stage approach to developing broad collaborative efforts: initiating, organizing, and sustaining.⁴ During the initiation phase, research suggests focusing on making the case for why the change sought is important.

During the second phase, partners must unite around shared goals and metrics. The final phase emphasizes undertaking sustainable actions and setting up processes to track progress toward established goals.

This straightforward model provides a reasonable framework for developing collaborative approaches to difficult problems. The researchers suggest discrete steps for each of the five commonalities. For the common measures of success, for example, they suggest identifying and gathering baseline data as part of the initiation step, developing common metrics in the

organization phase, and collecting data and providing progress reports during the sustaining phase.⁵

Other research has taken note of the rise in networks as a common means for governments to deliver public services. While networks can take many forms, they typically involve actors from multiple levels of government, nonprofits, and the private sector.⁶ Understandably, research into the factors that can lead to effective collaborative networks has become an important topic for those studying government performance and for those looking into specific policy areas such as education, health, and the environment.

One review of the academic literature on collaborative networks looked at 92 separate studies of the factors that help determine their effectiveness.⁷ The findings echo some of the characteristics identified above. In particular, the literature shows the following factors are associated with positive outcomes:

- ▲ Having a central coordinating agency and stable, long-term leadership of the collaborative network.
- ▲ Developing a steering committee.
- ▲ Using common outcome measures.
- ▲ Establishing trust and cooperation among partners.
- ▲ Devoting time to joint planning activities involving staff of the multiple entities.
- ▲ Having network partners interact with the target population.⁸

Additionally, this research has examined the factors associated with networks' sustainability and capacity to reach goals, including:

- ▲ Exhibiting strong leadership in establishing the network and its goals.
- ▲ Providing suitable financial resources.
- ▲ Devoting time to joint planning activities involving staff of the multiple entities.
- ▲ Using common outcome measures.
- ▲ Incorporating diverse community partners.
- ▲ Establishing trust and cooperation among partners.
- ▲ Providing technical assistance to network partners.⁹

The overlap between these lists of factors and the research cited earlier suggests several important considerations for those working collaboratively to increase access and success for returning adults. Clearly, state higher education agencies are well-positioned to take a strong coordinating and leadership role in developing networks. This process can start by establishing goals for the collaborative effort, backed by data demonstrating their urgency.

The importance of using common metrics is also clear. While college-going and completion rates seem to be a logical starting point for this type of collaboration, ensuring that there is commonality in definitions and metrics is not necessarily easy. As a hypothetical example, consider the definition of a “returning adult student.” Some partners may focus only on age, while others may set a credit threshold, GPA limit, or other qualifying criteria. Still other programs may focus on a particular subpopulation of adult students, such as active-duty military or veterans, low-income adults, or single parents.

College progress and completion is another deceptively difficult metric to define. The traditional federal definition, used by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), currently relies on first-time, full-time status, which leaves out returning adults, as well as those attending classes part time. This points to the necessity of developing new data reporting mechanisms that can accurately track the population of interest.

Coordinating Whom?

Turning more specifically to adult degree completion programs, a first step in developing a successful collaborative network is to identify potential partners. Partnerships can include a variety of local, state, and national entities from the public, nonprofit, and private sectors. Examples of potential partners are listed in Table 1.

Clearly, there are numerous and diverse stakeholders with widely differing mandates and interests. Attempting to immediately engage all these potential partners would likely result in an unwieldy effort that is too complex to focus on the activities necessary to yield improvement. It is important to recognize that coordination and cooperation are not cost-free

activities. Staff time to initiate and attend meetings is substantial, involving multiple organizations and agencies can slow program development and implementation, and differing missions and goals can lead to complications. Yet with thoughtful and strategic planning, relationships can be developed that reduce overlaps, leverage resources, fill unmet needs, and lead to improved services and outcomes for adult students. This investment of effort at the outset can help save time and resources in the long run.

Table 1: Potential Collaborative Partners to Increase Access and Success for Adult Learners

National/Multistate Level

- Federal agencies (Education, Labor, Health and Human Services departments)
- National foundations
- National access and success organizations
- National employers and employer organizations/associations
- Student support service providers
- Interstate organizations (regional higher education compacts, multistate partnerships)

State Level

- State agencies (labor, corrections, workforce, motor vehicles)
- Systems of higher education
- Governors and staff; state legislators and staff
- State P-16/20 councils
- Federally-supported programs and statewide grants and initiatives (TRIO, Complete College America)
- State-focused foundations
- Statewide employers

Local Level

- Institutions of higher education
- Mayors
- Regional government councils
- Local workforce investment boards
- Community-based nonprofits
- Local P-16/20 councils
- Chambers of commerce
- Employers
- Local foundations

Research also suggests that the size of a network has an influence on its success and failure. The best guidance here seems to approximate “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” – that is, the size of a network needs to be “just right.” The network must be big enough to take advantage of the resources and talents of diverse partners, but not so big that it becomes difficult to manage. Some researchers have found that effective networks cap their membership or establish strict criteria for participation to ensure a cohesive and effective operation.¹⁰

There are numerous examples of effective collaboration among those working to increase adult degree and certificate completion. This brief focuses on three efforts: one based at the metropolitan level, another led by a state agency, and a third that developed within the private sector.

Louisville, Kentucky: 55,000 Degrees

In 2008 Jerry Abramson, then-mayor of Louisville, brought together a group of civic leaders, presidents of higher education institutions, K-12 superintendents, and business leaders to develop a path to significantly improve educational outcomes in metropolitan Louisville. This group developed the Greater Louisville Education Commitment, which they signed in 2010.¹¹ The commitment has five key objectives:

- ▲ Create and support a college-going culture.
- ▲ Use the business community’s unique points of leverage to accelerate attainment.
- ▲ Prepare students for success in college, career, citizenship, and life.
- ▲ Make postsecondary education accessible and affordable.
- ▲ Increase educational persistence, performance, and progress.¹²

The Louisville leaders established a specific goal of increasing the number of working-age adults with postsecondary degrees by 55,000 by 2020 – raising degree attainment in the metropolitan area from 33 percent to 50 percent. They established a public-private partnership (aptly named 55,000 Degrees) to spearhead the effort, including reporting progress toward the main goal, as well as data measuring the collaborative’s

efforts to accomplish the five key objectives. These intermediate metrics are an important piece that connects the broad, top-level goal with the activities and policy and practice changes that members of the collaborative are implementing to reach that goal.

Although the latest report from 55,000 Degrees shows that the effort is behind the pace necessary to reach its goal on a linear trajectory, collected data suggest that the effort is making progress. Overall degree production has increased steadily since 2008, with 22,000 degree holders being added over this period.¹³ However, a post-recession trend of declining postsecondary enrollments for traditional – and particularly adult – students suggests that the Louisville program must accelerate efforts to attract students in the face of a recovering job market.¹⁴

Other data support the conclusion that 55,000 Degrees is making substantial progress on a number of intermediate indicators. Under the effort’s first objective – creating and supporting a college-going culture – the initiative reports that Jefferson County’s public high schools increased the number of high school graduates to 79 percent in 2014, a 2.5 percent increase from the previous year.¹⁵ College preparedness has also increased among K-12 students, with one measure of students who are college- and career-ready (defined as meeting state standards for English, math, and reading) increasing 30 percentage points from 2009-10 to 2013-14, putting Louisville on track to meet its goal of 66 percent readiness by 2015.¹⁶

Additionally, the effort is targeting the nearly 100,000 Louisville residents with some college credit but no degree to provide pathways for them to return to postsecondary education and complete a credential.¹⁷ In collaboration with seven local colleges and universities and numerous community partners, the Degrees Matter program offers resources and coaching to adult learners seeking to complete a postsecondary credential.¹⁸ Adult learners also benefit from the Degrees at Work program, which collaborates with local employers and employees to promote and facilitate college attendance and completion among the workforce.¹⁹

The Louisville effort has benefited from a strong collaborative structure that shares many of the same characteristics identified above:

- ▲ **Strong backbone organization:** 55,000 Degrees coordinates the different components of the effort, helps share information, and provides data-driven reports on key metrics.
- ▲ **Shared outcome measures:** For each of the five objectives, there are common measures that partners can track and report.
- ▲ **Common agenda:** One strength of the effort is the relative simplicity of the overarching goal – producing 55,000 more working-age adults with a postsecondary degree. All of the signatories and project partners understand the goal and are motivated to work toward it.
- ▲ **Stable leadership:** Although the effort started under a previous administration, the current mayor, Greg Fischer, has also made it a priority. Establishing a separate public-private partnership has proved advantageous, easing the transition between administrations, but the current mayor’s support has been a key factor in the initiative’s continuing progress.
- ▲ **Strong steering committee:** The board of directors of 55,000 Degrees includes representatives from the business community, presidents of higher education institutions, community foundations, and other key stakeholders who can provide effective guidance.

Georgia Adult Learning Consortium

The University System of Georgia launched its Adult Learning Consortium in 2008 to increase the number of low-income adults with some college credit but no degree who return to finish a credential.²⁰ The effort represents a collaboration between the state system of higher education and public higher education institutions. Participation in the consortium is voluntary and the 13 institutions that are members joined at different times.

The consortium has funded a broad outreach campaign to encourage adults with prior postsecondary credit to return to complete degrees. The university system operates a website with information for returning adults that links to programs at state institutions that have agreed to adopt specified policies, such as acceptance of credit for prior learning. The system also

provides professional development and networking opportunities for staff and faculty.

Based on interim measures, the effort shows promise. Adult enrollments in the state increased significantly since the program began. To assess the impact of the initiative, project leaders compared adult enrollments at member institutions with those at institutions that are not members. Institutions that are consortium members have seen increases of almost 5 percent in adult enrollment, compared to a 1 percent increase in enrollment for nonmembers through 2013.²¹ Those institutions that have been members the longest have seen the largest increases in adult enrollment.

More recently, Georgia has embarked on an expanded program called *Go Back. Move Ahead.* – championed by the governor – that includes both the two- and four-year sectors and that markets degree completion programs to adults throughout the state.

This effort also shows several of the characteristics of effective collaborative efforts identified above:

- ▲ **Strong backbone organization:** The University System of Georgia has led the effort from the outset, providing a strong backing organization while also acting as a partner with other participating institutions. Staff from a participating institution share leadership with system staff, creating a sense of dual ownership. The system leads the marketing campaign that undergirds the effort, maintains a statewide website, and organizes networking meetings of institutional staff and faculty.
- ▲ **Shared outcome measures:** The Adult Learning Consortium is focused on increasing adult degree attainment. The effort is tracking adult enrollments as an interim measure and will continue to track degrees granted in coming years.
- ▲ **Common agenda:** The consortium has a general agenda focused on achieving the goal established as part of a broader state program, but the institutions that are part of the collaborative effort are also united behind the common adult-friendly practices that are required for membership.

- ▲ **Stable leadership:** Although the long-term funding picture for the program is uncertain, it has had strong and consistent joint leadership by the university system and key institutional staff, who co-manage the consortium.
- ▲ **Continuous communication:** The consortium organizes opportunities, including an annual meeting, to bring together key individuals from the institutions working to serve adult learners. This not only provides professional development opportunities but also allows the individuals to develop strong relationships and networks that can ultimately benefit the students they serve.

Cincinnati Health Careers Collaborative

The Cincinnati Health Careers Collaborative officially began in 2005 with a relatively modest grant from the KnowledgeWorks Foundation. The start-up funding allowed the collaborative to develop an effective model for developing a strong pipeline of well-educated and trained health care workers.²² The collaborative developed as a partnership between area medical care providers, featuring particularly strong representation from hospitals.

Through the collaborative, students can access a wide range of academic and career support services to help them persist to complete credentials. Data from the project show that participants' completion rate is more than 80 percent, well above the national average for degree programs in the health field.²³ In addition to academic and career support, employers provide significant tuition assistance to participants, which contributes to the high completion rate.

Analyses show a positive return on investment for these expenditures, suggesting that there is a strong business imperative behind the tuition assistance.²⁴ The main driver of the positive return on investment is reduced recruiting costs, since employers can promote qualified employees from within as they complete more advanced credentials and degrees.²⁵ Strong partnerships with institutions of higher education have helped make the program successful.

The Cincinnati effort shows how initial seed funding can grow into a long-term sustainable collaborative effort. The collaborative has continued to attract external grant funds but the majority of current funding comes from private-sector partners who recognize the benefits of

supporting it. While external seed funding is crucial to launching large-scale collaborative efforts, building a sustainable funding source by demonstrating value to potential partners is necessary for long-term success.

In relation to strategies for the development of effective collaborations, the Cincinnati effort shows several important characteristics:

- ▲ **Common measures:** The collaborative tracks the number and type of postsecondary credentials completed and analyzes the return on investment for partner companies.
- ▲ **Common agenda:** The collaborative has a two-part agenda – helping employers meet workforce needs and helping individuals earn valuable postsecondary credentials that translate into job stability and higher incomes.
- ▲ **Backbone organization:** The collaborative has developed its own internal structure, funded by grants and partner contributions. This helps strengthen collaboration between employers and higher education institutions, as well as support services for students.
- ▲ **Strong steering committee:** The employer partners participate on a policy committee that helps steer the collaborative and support its continued growth and development.

Conclusion: Developing Effective Collaborative Education Efforts

More and more local, state, and national leaders are focusing on the fact that ambitious postsecondary attainment goals are unreachable without significant increases in adult credential completion. The environment is now ripe for developing strong collaborative networks that can improve outcomes, increase sustainability, and reduce redundancy. Developing collaborative networks cannot be done in a haphazard manner, but rather must be intentional and well-planned. It is hoped that the research and examples cited above will serve as a useful guide for embarking on this approach or for improving existing efforts.

Endnotes

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