



Innovative Strategies to Close Postsecondary Attainment Gaps

Neighbors Helping Neighbors Through
Nashville's Reconnect Ambassador Program

Recognizing the special relationship that exists between neighbors, communities across the nation are spearheading innovative programs to build, amplify, and leverage social networks in distressed communities to reach residents not yet enrolled in higher education.

Grounded in existing relationships and established trust, the Chamber of Commerce in Nashville, Tennessee is widening circles to close opportunity gaps by connecting potential students with the information and resources they need to guide their entry—or re-entry—into higher education. Such programs play a powerful role in disrupting a multi-generational cycle of lower enrollment and completion rates for students from lower-income, first-generation, adult, Black, and Latinx populations¹ and promoting upward mobility through more equitable postsecondary attainment in their region.

In **Nashville, Tennessee**, the local chamber of commerce has successfully developed an initiative to promote upward mobility by leveraging existing networks amongst the community's most underserved populations. Known as **Reconnect Ambassadors**, this program provides community members in the Nashville Promise Zone (NPZ) with the tools and information to meet students where they are—literally: Reconnect Ambassadors live and work in the same neighborhoods as potential students. In addition to providing encouragement and support, Reconnect Ambassadors provide concrete information about the benefits of postsecondary education and options available to potential students. Reconnect Ambassadors also help students navigate the complex and bureaucratic system of higher education and other barriers, such as lack of transportation. Once a resident has expressed interest in

enrolling—or re-enrolling—the Reconnect Ambassador refers them to a Reconnect Navigator for additional guidance and assistance with the actual enrollment process.

This guidebook outlines the goals, partnerships, implementation, and impact of the Nashville Reconnect Ambassador program as a strategy that leverages relationships to build meaningful connections across community networks and increase equity in postsecondary education. Following the interview portion of the guidebook, we provide an **Ambassador Program Planning Guide** for other communities interested in establishing their own ambassador program to help institutions engage students who otherwise might not have the support to connect—or reconnect—with higher education.



Reconnect Navigator, Sandra Timberlake, and Reconnector, Janice Beasley, chat outside Nashville State Community College's Reconnect Café in 2019. Reconnect Cafés provide connections to resources, lunch-and-learn seminars, academic advising, and overall support to-and-through a degree program for Reconnect students. Credit: Nathan Wingate, Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce

RECONNECT AMBASSADORS

Community-embedded “lead generators” who can share knowledge about postsecondary education and who will connect a prospective student to a Reconnect Navigator

RECONNECT NAVIGATOR

A single point of contact who will help a prospective student navigate the path to college

RECONNECTOR

A student who has been connected or reconnected to postsecondary education

RECONNECT GRANTS

A last-dollar grant that pays the remaining balance of tuition and mandatory fees after other state and federal financial aid have been applied

Nashville, Tennessee

- **Laura Ward** – Vice President of Talent Development, Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce

In 2013, Tennessee Governor Emeritus Bill Haslam announced the state’s new postsecondary completion initiative, Drive to 55, with the goal of raising completion rates from 32% to 55% by 2025² in order to meet projected workforce needs.³ In the years that followed, Tennessee launched several programs to increase postsecondary attainment, including Tennessee Reconnect, which focuses on helping adult students complete community or technical college credentials.⁴

In 2016, the Nashville Chamber of Commerce launched Middle Tennessee Reconnect, a regional Reconnect effort that included ten counties in the greater Nashville area. Middle Tennessee Reconnect began with the goal of reengaging over 260,000 local adults who had earned

some college credit but stopped out prior to graduation.⁵ In July 2018, oversight of Middle Tennessee Reconnect transitioned to the state, and the Chamber continued Reconnect efforts with a narrower focus on Nashville itself and renamed the initiative, Nashville Reconnect.

Nashville Reconnect primarily focuses on Nashville Promise Zone (NPZ) neighborhoods. In 2013, then-President Barack Obama established Promise Zones to bring opportunity to high-poverty communities through partnerships to increase economic activity, improve educational opportunities, leverage private investments, reduce violent crime, and enhance public health. NPZ neighborhoods encompass 46 square miles south, east, and north of downtown that are impacted by significant unemployment and poverty, coupled with low postsecondary attainment.⁶ Nearly 50% of adult NPZ residents lack a college degree and 47% of residents identify as individuals of color.⁷

COVID-19 Impact on Nashville

On the night of March 2, 2020, weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic changed daily life in Nashville, the city weathered a devastating tornado with a 75-mile track that tore through three counties, North and East Nashville, and the Promise Zone neighborhoods. The Promise Zone neighborhoods, which were already in distress, were further devastated. In the tornado's aftermath, people provided around-the-clock support, until the COVID-19 quarantine restrictions led to a shut down in recovery operations. On May 3, 2020, severe thunderstorms ravaged Nashville and left parts of the city without electricity for nearly two weeks.

In the midst of these back-to-back crises, Nashville's unemployment rate jumped from 2.7% to nearly 20%. Childcare and schooling also became major concerns as adults raising children cannot go to work or attend school without a safe place for their kids to go. In response, the Department of Health has undertaken a strategic planning initiative that will result in a better solution for the people who need childcare the most. During the recovery phase, the department also expanded childcare capacity for school-age children and children of essential workers. Reconnect Navigators use high-touch, intrusive advising, adapted from The Graduate! Network's model.

In 2017, Lumina Foundation designated Nashville as a Talent Hub based on the city's work to ensure equitable access to postsecondary credentials that lead to meaningful employment.⁸

The Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce leads the Talent Hub work and also leads the Reconnect Ambassador work of the Nashville Reconnect initiative, overseeing partner relationship development, ambassador recruitment, training, and ongoing support. The Nashville Chamber develops relationships with government agencies, employers, community-based organizations, and places of worship in NPZ neighborhoods.



Reconnect Navigator, Fred Frazier Jr., planning with Reconnector, Antwanette Smith, in his office on the Nashville State Community College campus. Reconnect Navigators assist students with academic advising, career planning, and supplemental supports, and provide students with Tennessee Reconnect strategies for success. Credit: Nathan Wingate, Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce

Using these relationships, the Chamber recruits and trains staff or members of these organizations as Reconnect Ambassadors. While in training, Reconnect Ambassadors learn about Tennessee Reconnect, how to have a dialogue about higher education, challenges and motivations for new or returning students, and helpful community resources. Ambassadors provide potential students with baseline information and encouragement and then connect them to a Reconnect Navigator for more detailed and robust support. Reconnect Navigators use high-touch, intrusive advising, adapted from The Graduate! Network's model.

Since the program's launch in January 2019, the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce has trained over 179 community members to serve as Reconnect Ambassadors, with 106 serving Promise Zone neighborhoods. To date, the program has successfully engaged or reengaged 960 adults in the greater Promise Zone area (the NPZ and the three adjacent zip codes) in higher education. Nashville community stakeholders believe the program has had a positive impact on access and completion for students underrepresented in higher education, pointing to the increase in students of color at Nashville State Community College as a promising outcome already achieved.

The following interview excerpts provide an in-depth look at how the Nashville Talent Hub has been able to connect and reconnect adults to higher education through the Reconnect Ambassador program. For those interested in implementing a similar community-based approach to building social capital, IHEP's **Ambassador Program Planning Guide** outlines steps to build an ambassador program.



GOALS

IHEP: Why is equipping local networks effective in promoting postsecondary attainment?

People make decisions based on what is happening within a two-mile radius of their home and tend to listen to advice from someone with whom they are close before taking the advice of someone they don't really know. Similarly, asking a neighbor for help is easier than making a phone call and waiting for someone to return your call. If you can literally go next door and say, "my childcare fell through today and I am not sure what to do," and receive assistance from your neighbor, that interaction builds trust.

When one of our Reconnect Ambassadors is able to share knowledge about higher education and resources with another community member, the act of sharing knowledge empowers both people. Building social capital is really about the idea that every individual should have access to the information and resources necessary to overcome their unique challenges. If a person knows they need additional education to lead to a better job, they should be able to ask their neighbor or someone in their community for guidance on how to connect to education.

IHEP: Why was the Reconnect Ambassador role created?

Our city understood the need to reconnect our more than 260,000 adult residents, who had earned some

college credit but had no degree to show for it, back to higher education. The Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce became involved when we learned that while many adults who wanted to return to school to complete their degrees were employed,⁹ they were often under-employed or lacked a clear career path. A 2016 survey of over 8,000 regional employees conducted by Middle Tennessee Reconnect showed that approximately 25% had no college credential and 50% of those without a 2-year degree earned less than \$50,000 annually.¹⁰ Our community partners recognized that completing a postsecondary credential could lead to a higher wage and upward mobility for these adults.

Building social capital is really about the idea that every individual should have access to the information and resources necessary to overcome their unique challenges.

Tennessee originally created the Reconnect Ambassador role and we made adjustments to training and other processes to fit our local context in Nashville. Early in our planning, we discovered human resources staff and state employees were a natural fit to become Reconnect Ambassadors in their jobs. Because of this, we focused a few of our initial trainings on the Metro Nashville Department of Human Resources, American Job Centers, and Airport Authority staff. In some cases, we went into a company or agency to train their entire human resources team, who could then connect the company's or agency's employees with higher education.

IHEP: Why did the Nashville Chamber implement the Reconnect Ambassador program specifically within NPZ neighborhoods?

Despite Nashville’s overall strong economy, we realized that prosperity was not accessible to all of our community members, particularly those in NPZ neighborhoods. We understood the connection between low postsecondary attainment rates and the need for postsecondary credentials to qualify for many of Nashville’s higher wage and high demand occupations. Although Tennessee was providing tuition funding for residents to attend 2-year institutions for free, Promise Zone neighborhood residents still faced other barriers to

access, beginning with a lack of information. We thought collaboration with NPZ neighborhood communities through the Reconnect Ambassador program would be a good starting point to close the information gap and promote postsecondary attainment.

As more residents in NPZ neighborhoods are connected to higher education and have positive experiences through the Reconnect Ambassador program, they will naturally tell their family members, co-workers, and friends. The Reconnectors—adults who have been reconnected to education—will be able to describe their personal experiences and, in turn, share the message with others about the promise of higher education, thus widening the circle.

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT – CITY OF LIFE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (CDC)

Names: Mary Maynard and Janice Kelly

Roles: Program Committee Chair and Program Committee Member

Mission: To maximize the potential of individuals, families, and the local community

Nashville Area: Bordeaux Community

IHEP: Why did the City of Life CDC want to be involved with the Reconnect Ambassadors program?

We are always looking for ways to contribute to community revitalization efforts. The CDC focuses on developing strategic relationships with organizations, providing services in the areas of education, health, economic development, and housing. When Tennessee Reconnect was first publicized, we read about it and quickly learned how we could use the Reconnect Ambassador role as a vehicle to help empower the community.

IHEP: How does connecting with higher education benefit the neighborhood you serve?

Individuals in college see a future and view life differently than they did before college. They may have been kicked around and not valued in the past; no one may have encouraged them. We need to be sensitive to the challenges people in our neighborhood have faced and provide the encouragement they need. In order to improve quality of life, not just for us but for future generations, we need more people enrolled in school.



PARTNERSHIPS

IHEP: From where do you recruit Reconnect Ambassadors?

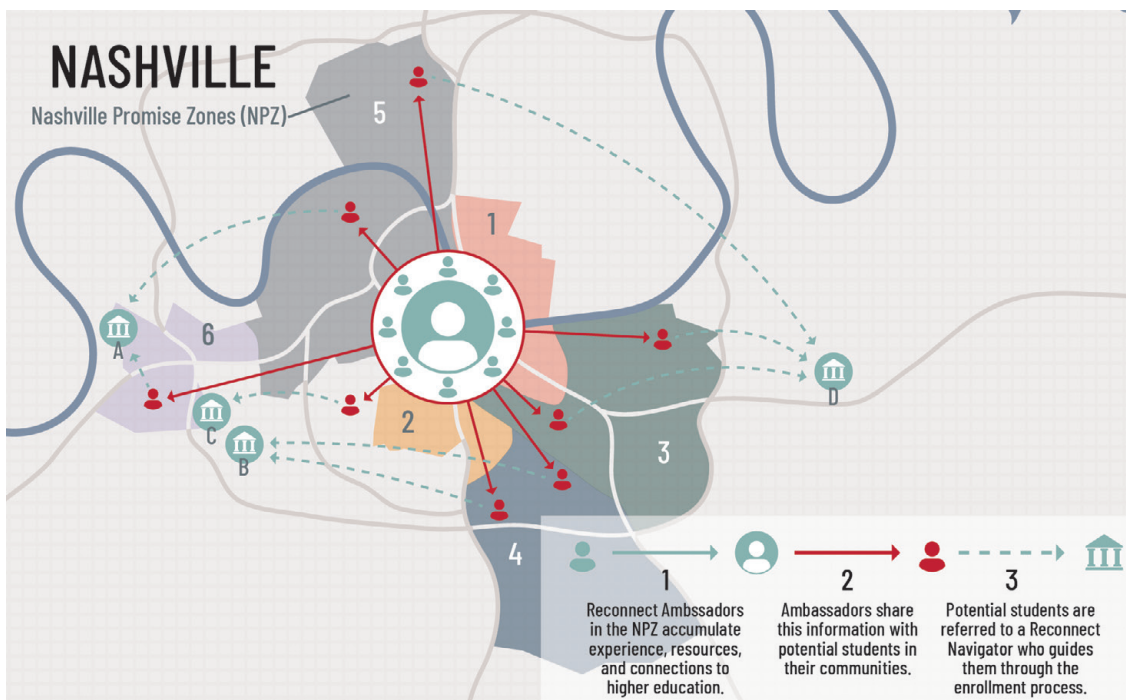
Early on, we conducted an environmental scan to determine which community-based organizations and agencies were in our ecosystem. Now, when we schedule a Reconnect Ambassador training, we use that scan as a tool to strategize where we should conduct outreach to recruit new ambassadors. Another key recruitment method is word-of-mouth through our current and past Reconnect Ambassadors. Often, Reconnect Ambassador training participants will be co-workers, neighbors, or friends of current ambassadors. Of the 179 ambassadors we currently have, about 25% were recruited by other ambassadors.

We also partner with public school systems and community colleges for recruiting. I'm conducting Reconnect Ambassador trainings at Nashville State Community College because we know that returning students are underutilizing the resources available to them. For instance, although we were assisting nearly 400 enrolled students at Nashville State Community College, we learned almost 90% of students eligible for



Employees from local companies and government agencies participated in another successful Reconnect Ambassador training at the Thistle Farms Nashville Training Center in 2019. Reconnect Ambassadors provide encouragement and support to adults in their communities interested in

Reconnect Grants were not registered for the free accompanying services. We are training faculty members to be ambassadors because they really have the most contact with students. We want to ensure that if a faculty member sees a student struggling, they know how to connect that student with an expert who can help. We believe this simple act can positively impact retention.



PARTNER INSTITUTION CAMPUSES

- A = TCAT Nashville, Cockrill Bend Campus
- B = NSCC, White Bridge Campus
- C = TCAT Nashville, Main Campus
- D = NSCC, East Davidson Campus

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT – MARTHA O'BRYAN CENTER

Full Name: Kent Miller

Role: Chief Program Officer

Mission: On a foundation of Christian faith, we empower children, youth, and adults in poverty to transform their lives through work, education, employment, and fellowship.

Nashville Area: East Nashville



IHEP: What inspires you to continue partnering with the Reconnect Ambassador initiative?

Across the country, we're starting to see more institutions really embracing adult learners, which is important because success breeds success. When you provide a caregiver or parent the opportunity to go back to school and a pathway they can navigate, not only does it help that family economically, but it also models the importance of postsecondary education for the children. When those children graduate high school and move on to postsecondary education, it's not foreign because they've seen someone else do it before. In many ways, their caregiver becomes the new ambassador and that can literally change the trajectory of a family for generations.

IHEP: What recommendations do you have for institutions and communities who would like to start an ambassador program?

The most important thing is to not undervalue the power of a relationship. We can have great programs, great branding, and even great opportunities, but what matters most is the person-to-person connection. Reconnect Ambassadors have been successful because these are real people with lived experience who connect and inspire our community members. Ultimately, people don't follow programs; they connect with relationships. I would tell other cities considering implementing a community ambassador program to ensure relationships are central to whatever program they develop.

IHEP: Which partners have been critical to the implementation and success of the Reconnect Ambassador program?

While information can be found at libraries and on the internet, the faith community can be influential in the communities we serve. When we launched Middle Tennessee Reconnect in 2016, one of the first community partners to reach out to us was the City of Life Community Development Corporation, a nonprofit striving to affect positive community change with strong ties to the Cathedral of Praise Church. Both organizations have an overarching mission of education and access and were fully invested in Reconnect from the beginning. We have offered three Reconnect Ambassador trainings to the Cathedral of Praise congregation, with the last training drawing 40 church members.

Project Return, a nonprofit dedicated to helping individuals successfully return to the community after incarceration, is another important partner. Individuals leaving incarceration have many competing priorities, like housing and employment, but all Project Return staff are trained as Reconnect Ambassadors so they know exactly how to connect the individuals they serve to education when each person is ready.

What makes this program so successful is that Reconnect Ambassadors are a regular part of community members' lives; if an individual is not ready for school today, their ambassador will still be there in a week, a month, or a year when they *are* ready.

IMPLEMENTATION

IHEP: How do you build the importance of a social network into Reconnect Ambassador training?

One of the goals of ambassador training is to build a social network in order to provide the support students—and potential students—need to succeed. We describe how a social network is foundational to the ambassador role and we intentionally facilitate the building of community relationships among the participants in each training group. For instance, if a staff member from a partner like Metro Action Commission attends a training, we ensure other trainees are aware of the services and resources that Metro Action Commission provides so they can refer community members to those supports.

IHEP: How do you coordinate with the NPZ neighborhoods?

The 46-square-mile NPZ is divided into six sub-zones, each with its own lead agency. Captains of each sub-zone lead agency have been vital partners from the beginning of the Reconnect Ambassador program's development. When we conducted our listening tour to hear directly from adult NPZ residents about their barriers to educational access, NPZ captains assisted in identifying which community convenings to attend.



Lead agencies also allow us to leverage their space by hosting Reconnect Ambassador training at their locations.

For example, we collaborate with Martha O'Bryan Center, an anti-poverty non-profit organization located in Cayce Place, one of Nashville's most distressed communities. One of our Reconnect Navigators works out of Martha O'Bryan Center once a month and meets with Reconnectors literally where they live: just across the street. Having a regular presence at the center and participating in its activities and events allows us to develop real relationships in the community.

IMPACT

IHEP: How has the Reconnect Ambassador program made a difference in Nashville, particularly in the Promise Zone neighborhoods?

Since January 2019, the Reconnect Ambassador program has trained over 179 Nashville community members as Reconnect Ambassadors, with 106 serving Promise Zone neighborhoods. Of these, 34 were recruited from community-based organizations, 43 from faith-based organizations, 49 from the education field, 47 from employers, and 6 from government agencies. We have also trained 14 case managers with Project Return and 20 Adult Education instructors in the Davidson County Jail as Reconnect Ambassadors. These numbers are proof of trust in the ambassador program and greater engagement and investment in communities by their own members.

Over 950 adults in NPZ neighborhoods and the three adjacent zip codes are classified as Tennessee Reconnectors, or as students who have returned to pursue a postsecondary degree. Of the Reconnectors,

approximately one-third are enrolled, and two-thirds are pre-enrolled, meaning they are at a stage leading to enrollment, such as applying for financial aid or receiving academic advising with a Reconnect Navigator.

We've also seen an increase in students of color at Nashville State Community College. As of September 2020, 54% of our enrolled students are Black and 56% of our pre-enrolled students identify as Black. While we can't directly attribute that increase to Reconnect Ambassadors, I do believe the program has had a positive impact on access and completion for students typically underrepresented in higher education.

IHEP: How have you ensured that Reconnect Ambassadors will continue to make a difference in Nashville?

We believe that our neighborhood-level, grassroots approach is a sustainable model for encouraging neighbors to pursue education and have kept our processes as simple as possible. After an individual shows interest in entering or returning to school, a Reconnect Ambassador directs them to fill out an online form and someone from Nashville Reconnect follows-up with the potential student. If the online form presents a barrier, a Reconnect Navigator can step in to assist students directly. I really see this program evolving into something that community members can take continued ownership over and begin to conduct Reconnect Ambassador trainings themselves in their community centers and places of worship.

AMBASSADOR SPOTLIGHT – LYNN BOOKER



Nashville Area: Midtown

Ambassador Affiliated Role: Senior Talent Consultant, Vanderbilt University Medical Center

Length of Nashville Residence: 25 years

IHEP: What made you decide to volunteer as a Reconnect Ambassador?

I immediately recognized this as an opportunity that I could incorporate into my job and have a positive impact on others. I assumed that since many of my fellow human resource colleagues had not heard of Tennessee Reconnect, most likely our employees and future employees had not either. I grew up with limited resources, so I have been in the shoes of some of the people in the Nashville Promise Zone neighborhoods. Someone helped me see college as being an option and I want to be able to pay that forward as much as I can.

IHEP: Why do you feel it is important to encourage your neighbors to complete a college diploma?

I encourage people to complete a college credential because education not only improves your salary outlook but, in my opinion, also provides more job satisfaction. When you have access to upward mobility and perform work of a more difficult nature—something you have been trained to do—you will experience increased satisfaction. You will feel more accomplished and positive about yourself and more excited about your work.



LOOKING AHEAD

IHEP: Have you learned any lessons that you'd like to share with other organizations interested in implementing an ambassador initiative?

Do not try to control the fun! We tend to approach situations thinking we already know the answer, so we try to control every detail of the process. However, some circumstances are beyond our control. I think we all get better through experience and probably learn the most while facing challenging circumstances, so we just need to continue trying, especially on the difficult days when you feel you are not making progress.

Remember that things move at the speed of trust . If your relationships are not based on trust, then you need to work on those relationships or identify someone who is willing and able to work on the problems. We learned early on the importance of being willing and able. Someone who is able, but unwilling, is someone who may have to be invited in later in the process; however, the door is always open for people who become willing. Someone who is unable, but willing, is someone who should be included in the work.

It's critical to ensure community members are sitting at the table to co-create their solution because, eventually, they will need to take ownership.

IHEP: How would you advise communities to drive this type of equitable systemic change in their own cities or regions?

Begin by building trust and by being a good listener. Be a reliable partner and follow through with what you say you are going to do. You can't create an equitable solution without the people you are trying to help, so you need to figure out how to embed their voices in the solution in a meaningful way. It's critical to ensure community members are sitting at the table to co-create their solution because, eventually, they will need to take ownership.

AMBASSADOR SPOTLIGHT – SYBIL PRUITT

Nashville Area: Downtown and Southeast Precincts

Ambassador Affiliated Role: Education Manager, Nashville Sheriff's Office

Sheriff's Office Tenure: 15 years



IHEP: What advantages do you, as a Reconnect Ambassador, have over college representatives when talking to students in Nashville Sheriff's Office educational programs about enrolling in higher education?

Ambassadors have the advantage of time to develop a relationship and trust. Also, I think I have a clearer understanding of how difficult life can be without a high school or postsecondary credential and the obstacles individuals who have been incarcerated will face after release. I encourage my students to continue their education after release because I know learning a skill, becoming an expert in something, or understanding how to open your own business will be crucial to their future success. I believe the community must work as a village to uplift one another; it is too hard, there are too many people, and too many needs to do it any other way.

IHEP: Can you share an example of one of your students whom you helped enroll in college?

I shared with Laura Ward that many individuals in our programs have defaulted on loans and this was a barrier to their accessing higher education. After our conversation, Laura brought in an expert on loan default who now helps our students on a regular basis. With this help, one student recently was able to work out a payment plan of around \$5 a month for six months while he was still in the justice system and then immediately enroll in college after his release. He is still enrolled; it's a real success story.

Adjusting to COVID-19

IHEP: How has the Nashville Reconnect work changed in response to COVID-19?

Students who were hurting before are hurting a lot more now. Many of our Reconnectors are frontline workers and they are scared for the health and wellbeing of themselves and their families. They work 12-hour days in a Kroger, in an Amazon warehouse, or in a similar position and then come home to do their schoolwork. We have moved to a more intrusive advising model to check-in with our students and have started using video chat technology because we've found that our students need us to look them in the eye and demonstrate that we're focused on them. Prior to COVID-19, we would conduct outreach to our over 900 Reconnectors seven times a semester; now we are communicating with them at least once a week. Our team has also started meeting more frequently to troubleshoot the complex challenges our students face. Before, we would try to assist a student with technical issues over the phone or by asking them to come into the office. Now, we leverage technology by using video and sharing screens to show students how to do something or diagnose the problem. COVID-19 is forcing us to sharpen our technology skills in order to retain students.

Keeping students enrolled and on-track is vital to their long-term success. The Tennessee Reconnect Grant is the only way some of our students can pay for college, so we need to help them meet eligibility criteria, such as enrollment in at least six credits and meeting a GPA threshold.

Has the digital divide affected student access and success during the pandemic?

Prior to COVID-19, students without computers at home would come into the Reconnect Café, library, or computer labs on campus to access a computer. After the pandemic hit, these students no longer had computer access, and at the same time, their classes had been moved online. Before the pandemic, Reconnectors without broadband internet access at home could access it on campus or at a local library. Now, those options no longer exist. Although many students have internet access on their phones, that is typically insufficient for coursework, and not all students qualify for inexpensive internet programs.

We found an interim solution. Nashville State Community College will use their CARES Act funding to buy 300 loaner laptops and the Chamber devised a process that allows Reconnectors eligible for Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding to purchase laptops through their college bookstores. The Chamber finalized an MOU with community partners, the community college, and the workforce board to implement the process.

This is really a broader policy issue. Without internet access you are behind the curve, whether for work, education, or running your house. The pandemic has forced the Chamber to be more deliberate in our collaboration and to use our collective voice to help solve community problems. With this in mind, we organized a digital access collaborative to systemically look at broadband and device access gaps in the Nashville area.

Have you been able to continue Reconnect Ambassador recruitment and training during COVID-19?

We will be hosting virtual Reconnect Ambassador trainings this winter using Zoom. In our in-person training, we bring people together from all different parts of our community to talk about what it takes to be successful in college, and ambassadors see how every stakeholder—Reconnect Navigators, community-based organizations, technical college staff, and employers—plays a part in keeping people successful. We plan to replicate that in our virtual training using interactive breakout rooms to encourage participants from various backgrounds to form relationships and start to build social capital. We replicated that in our virtual training using interactive breakout rooms to encourage participants from various backgrounds to form relationships and start to build social capital.



Conclusion

Community-based programs that connect people across networks to leverage existing social ties can play powerful roles in breaking multi-generational cycles and promoting more equitable access to higher education. Work at a neighborhood level can provide community members with the information and resources they need to enter or return to higher education. Ambassador programs utilize community partnerships to intentionally recruit within existing networks and foster a sense of local ownership by involving community members in the planning, implementation, and oversight of the program.

As Nashville's Reconnect Ambassadors demonstrate, these programs can serve as a bridge between community members and higher education toward more equitable educational outcomes. By leveraging existing networks to reach prospective students in communities that have been historically and systematically discriminated against, community members can collectively strengthen social networks leading to higher levels of employment, educational attainment, and economic growth.

Ambassador Program Planning Tool

DRAFT MISSION STATEMENT

Example:

Reengage adults living in our community, encourage their return to postsecondary education, and provide them with the initial information necessary to reconnect.

DESIGN PROGRAM STRUCTURE

SUBTASK: DETERMINE CORE ELEMENTS

Examples:

- Identify community partners
- Recruit ambassadors
- Train ambassadors
- Provide continued ambassador support
- Develop partner relationships

DEFINE MEASURABLE OBJECTIVES BASED ON LOCAL DATA

Examples:

- 50 ambassadors will be recruited by March 1st
- Ambassadors will reengage 250 students in the community by December 31st
- 70% of students reengaged by an ambassador will enroll in classes
- 80% of students reenrolled will be Pell-eligible

IDENTIFY NEEDED RESOURCES

Suggestions:

- Leverage space and equipment through partner relationships
- Recruit expert volunteers for tasks like development of outreach materials
- Arrange for unpaid interns to perform program functions that align with their program of study: marketing, business, social work, education, etc.
- Approach local business for donations like paper and ink to print flyers or bring food for events in exchange for recognition of their contributions
- Apply to grants for staff and other expenditures
- Continue to develop community buy-in for eventual ownership of certain tasks like ambassador trainings

IDENTIFY COMMUNITY PARTNERS

SUBTASK: PERFORM ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

Suggestions:

- Access higher education institutional data to determine what zip codes stopped-out students primarily live in
- Utilize Census Bureau or local government data to identify which zip codes, cities, or counties have the most residents without a college credential
- Scan identified areas to determine where target partners are located: community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, government agencies, employers, adult education programs, etc.
- Ask yourself whether the identified target partners have access to the potential students you hope to engage

SUBTASK: ESTABLISH OUTREACH METHODS

Suggestions:

- Contact your local Chamber of Commerce
- Connect with your state association member of the National Council of Nonprofits
- Look for religious and inter-religious networks and alliances in your community
- Attend community and networking events
- Serve on community committees and volunteer
- Reach out directly to target partners identified in your environmental scan

RECRUIT AMBASSADORS

SUBTASK: IDENTIFY TARGET POPULATIONS

Suggestions:

- Partner staff, volunteers, and members
- Higher education institution faculty, staff, existing students, and alumni
- Retired educators
- Employer human resources staff

RECRUIT AMBASSADORS (CONT.)

SUBTASK: ESTABLISH OUTREACH METHODS

Suggestions:

- ❑ Posters and flyers at partner sites and community locations like libraries, bus stops, and grocery stores
- ❑ Partner newsletters, eblasts, and social media
- ❑ Tabling or speaking at partner/community events
- ❑ Higher education faculty and staff gatherings, newsletters, or eblasts
- ❑ Existing higher education alumni campaigns or communications
- ❑ Campus posters, flyers, closed circuit TV, chalking, student newspaper, tabling, and student organizations
- ❑ Connect with local chapters of associations for human resources or retired educators
- ❑ Ask local K-12 system, adult education programs, and higher education institutions if they will send a message out to retirees
- ❑ Local newspapers, radio, and television channels
- ❑ Communicate with current and past ambassadors asking them to refer friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors

TRAIN AMBASSADORS

Suggestions:

- ❑ Locate training in accessible community spaces with available public transportation
- ❑ Connect training with pre-set events, such as partner staff meetings, bible study, or other trainings, to boost attendance
- ❑ Develop a training manual that ambassadors can reference while mentoring community members
- ❑ Consider your audience and tailor your training appropriately

PROVIDE CONTINUED SUPPORT

Suggestions:

- ❑ Ensure ambassadors have direct information for college/university staff contacts
- ❑ Send out monthly or quarterly e-newsletter with new resources, events, and announcements
- ❑ Build a shared resource repository that ambassadors can access with higher education and community information
- ❑ Create an ambassador social media platform for regular communication
- ❑ Hold semi-annual or annual ambassador “thank you” event(s)

DEVELOP PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

Suggestions:

- ❑ Send a monthly or quarterly program e-newsletter
- ❑ Schedule a regular time for a program or college/university representative to hold “advising” onsite when applicable
- ❑ Participate in partner events or activities
- ❑ Work on a mutually beneficial relationship; a partner’s staff are trained as ambassadors and college students spend their volunteer hours assisting at partner’s site (stocking items in a food pantry for example)
- ❑ Ask a partner representative to join your committee(s) and vice versa
- ❑ Reach out to partners for their feedback

ASSESS AND IMPROVE

Suggestions:

- ❑ Provide training participants with a method for delivering feedback like a post-training survey to ensure continued improvement
- ❑ Add questions for feedback to student intake form
- ❑ Conduct focus groups and/or send surveys for feedback to current ambassadors
- ❑ Conduct focus groups and/or send surveys for feedback to students who were reengaged through the program
- ❑ Convene community partners or send them surveys for feedback

Endnotes

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Talent Hubs are communities that have shown the ability and commitment to significantly increase college-level learning among residents of all backgrounds. Talent Hubs are officially designated as such by Lumina Foundation, with support from the Kresge Foundation.

Areas that have earned a designation as a Talent Hub work as a community, meaning businesses, education leaders, and civic organizations work as one unit to attract, cultivate, and retain skilled and knowledgeable workers. Aligned and organized around this shared goal, they create multiple ways for individuals to earn college degrees, certificates, and other quality credentials beyond a high school diploma.

Each hub has a backbone organization, a nonprofit entity that organizes and coordinates the work of the various local stakeholders. The hubs span the country, from New York City to Shasta County, California, from St. Louis to the Rio Grande Valley, and from Boston to Albuquerque.

The Talent Hubs serve various populations. Some focus on African American residents, some on Latinxs, others on Native Americans. Some Talent Hubs target traditional college students, while others zero in on older students who left school before finishing degrees. All share a commitment to eliminating disparities in educational outcomes among students of color.

As part of IHEP's role in the Talent Hubs effort, IHEP documents the implementation of innovative policies and practices within the Talent Hubs and develops tools to create and/or assess postsecondary policy with an emphasis on equity.

For more about the Talent Hubs effort, visit: www.luminafoundation.org/talent-hubs

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. It envisions a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's need for talent through a broad range of credentials. Its goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and for success in a global economy.

Lumina takes a range of approaches to effect change in federal and state policy. It supports the conditions to create and sustain the political will for change. It also provides policy leaders with nonpartisan research and advice, points them toward potential policy options, and supports advocacy efforts.

