Creating Pathways to Success:
Lessons Learned from a Multi-Tiered Partnership Grant

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ABSTRACT

This case study of a California Career Pathways Trust grant, the South Bay Digital Media Arts Consortium, which established key linkages between an urban high school district's pathway academies to local post-secondary institutions and community industry partners, provides learning lessons for other schools/organizations interested in establishing similar multi-tiered partnership grants.

Keywords: pathway academies, service learning, digital media arts, career tech ed, California Career Pathways Trust

While there are many pathways for student success, this article provides a clear road map for secondary schools interested in creating multi-tiered partnership grants by sharing the best practices and evidence of a California Career Pathways Trust (CCPT) grant, the South Bay Digital Media Arts Consortium (SBDMAC), which brought together an urban Southern Californian high school district's pathway academies with local post-secondary institutions and related community industry partners.

According to the California Department of Education, since the California Career Pathways Trust was created in 2013, more than $500 million has been awarded in one-time competitive state grants to districts developing or expanding career pathway programs intended to prepare students for high-skill, high-wage jobs in emerging industry sectors of local or regional economies. Among these CCPT grants was the SBDMAC, a three-year, multi-tiered partnership grant pairing the Academy of Media Arts at Lawndale High School and the Multimedia Careers Academy at Leuzinger High School—both of these from the diverse and socioeconomically disadvantaged

Centinela Valley Union High School District (CVUHSD)— with the two-year community college, El Camino College (ECC); the four-year university, California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH); and local community and industry partners, the South Bay Workforce Investment Board (SBWIB) and Career Ladders Project.

The primary aim of the grant was to establish a regional infrastructure for building collaborative relationships between these high schools and their post-secondary academic and industry partners. However, the fundamental objectives of the grant work included improving college- and career-ready pathways, industry engagement, and work-based learning opportunities for the 470 media arts academy students interested in developing skills and pursuing careers related to digital animation, design, photography, audio/video production, video game production, special effects, and digital filmmaking, to name just a few.

The pathway academies of the SBDMAC also prioritize high-impact teaching practices in their classrooms, including having students actively and collaboratively using emerging technologies to

produce studio television shows, commercials, video games, movies, and other multimedia productions. The curricula for these media arts academies were developed in alignment with the state's Career Tech Ed (CTE) standards and framework for the Arts, Media and Entertainment Industry Sector. The classes were taught by credentialed CTE teachers and these career pathways were selected based upon an analysis of labor market data, existing academy curricula, CTE career listings, a broad survey of interests from district parents, and the potential linkages with local post-secondary programs to develop articulation and dual-enrollment agreements.

This CCPT grant, which was awarded in 2014, received $578,968 in funding over three years and two collaboration components were implemented to build capacity for the project. The first component was to develop and implement annual regional pathway advisory board meetings that included secondary, postsecondary, and industry partners. The second key component focused on institutionalizing the interactions of the advisory partners through the development of multiple work-based learning opportunities (e.g., high school students showing their art at a college art event, producing multimedia content for and interning with local business partners). The consortium partners also agreed to collaborate around curriculum development and, eventually, identify opportunities for dual enrollment or articulation agreements for high school students attending credit-bearing college courses. The majority of grant funds was used to provide the resources necessary to initiate cooperation between the secondary and postsecondary institutions around developing these collaborative events, work-based opportunities, and credit-bearing options.

In the first year, the primary focus of the SBDMAC grant work was to build relationships between the secondary, postsecondary, and industry partners, including establishing a matrix of industry competencies and collaborative faculty partnerships based on research and teaching specialties. In the second year, the goal post was moved to create more guidance for students to navigate dual-enrollment opportunities and course articulations. Another accomplishment included establishing a tangible, collaborative activity that became the SBDMAC Showcase Event, a juried art show and awards ceremony where high school students' artwork was given critical feedback and subsequently selected by university professors for a variety of award categories, as well as students becoming eligible for job shadowing and internship opportunities with industry partners. The final year of the grant saw a strong focus on expanding relationships between partner institutions, collaborative presentations at regional educational conferences, and the formulation of pathway maps to guide students as they pursue a variety of academic and career paths.

This article further charts the lessons that were learned from this multi-year collaboration in an effort to model for other schools interested in establishing similar grants.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While much has been written about the essential components and strategies of service learning, career academies, career pathways, and career technical education (CTEs), or their effectiveness from the standpoint of student outcomes, there is a gap in the literature of what sorts of learning outcomes can be gained from the perspective of multi-tiered partnership grant administrators and stakeholders. This case study hopes to fill this gap by providing clear reflections, assessment of experience, and learning outcomes from the participating stakeholders of a multi-tiered CCPT partnership grant.

It has been shown that the integration of collaborative learning, new technologies, and high-impact practices has a profound effect on student engagement, graduation rates, and overall success (Beldarrain,

2006; Kilgo, Sheets, & Pascarella, 2015; Price & Tovar, 2014). Hands-on, experiential learning strategies and related learning communities, when taught by faculty specializing in the professional requirements of specific fields, have also shown themselves to be particularly effective in creating learning environments that enhance student engagement and learning outcomes (O'Meara, Sandmann, Saltmarsh, & Giles, 2011; Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011; Zepke & Leach, 2010).

In particular, service learning, experiential learning, and learning communities have been credited with positive student outcomes (Butin, 2003; Eyler, 2002; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). In their own meta-analysis, Celio, Durlak, and Dymnicki (2011) describe service learning as integrating academic curricula with community service, which they argue provides marked improvements in student attitudes toward self, learning, civic engagement, social skills, and academic performance. Other areas of student improvement shown through service learning include problem-solving skills, planning, civic knowledge, self-efficacy and strengthening community ties (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005; Morgan & Streb, 2001; Perry & Katula, 2001; Simons & Cleary, 2006).

But there is a growing body of evidence that career academies, career technical education (CTEs), and career pathways are equally providing students the academic, technical, and occupational knowledge they need to increase graduation rates and attain employment in specialized careers (Alssid et al., 2002; Brand, Valent, & Browning, 2013; Lewis, 2008; Passarella, 2018). Brand, Board, and Work (2009) define career academies as learning communities comprised of a cohort of students taking classes together, which are taught by interdisciplinary faculty, provide college preparatory curricula for specific career pathways, and typically include a variety of internships and service- and work-based learning opportunities. They also argue that among the benefits of this shared learning

approach are improvements in student attendance, earned credits, grade point averages, graduation rates, college attendance rates, and also on labor market outcomes.

There is also a growing consensus that CTEs offer students higher probabilities of academic success and careers in high-skill, high-demand labor markets (Dougherty, 2018; Dougherty, Brunner, & Ross, 2018; Dubois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011; Holzer, Linn, & Monthey, 2013; Kelly & Price, 2009; Neumark & Rothstein, 2006; Reed, Dougherty, Kurlaender, & Mathias, 2018). Similarly, career pathways programs have shown students to be more college- and career-ready when there is more alignment and collaboration through cluster skill development, classroom-based learning, and work-based learning (Clagett & Uhalde, 2012; Gandhi, Nandikolla, Youssef, & Bishay, 2016; Hamilton, 2012; Petersen, 2016; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). According to Jurmo (2011), key components of the career pathway system include the promise of rewarding careers, relevant credentials, accelerated learning, support systems, clear benchmarks, and collaboration among secondary and postsecondary stakeholders.

Combined, these high-impact educational strategies have been shown to be particularly effective in transitioning underrepresented, low-income, and minority students from high school to college and beyond (Bragg, Kim, & Rubin, 2005; Finley & McNair, 2013; Hall & O'Neil, 2016; Haycock & Huang, 2001), which demonstrates an essential element for the student demographic served by the SBDMAC. Additionally, the consortium partnership and career academy coursework made available through the SBDMAC incorporates measures of all these elements: collaborative learning, new technologies, high-impact practices, service learning, learning communities, experiential learning, career academies, career technical education, and career pathways. That is why the SBDMAC provides a comprehensive window into the

lessons that can be learned from such a case study for other school districts interested in pursuing similar multi-tiered partnership grants.

LESSONS LEARNED:
ASSESSING PROGRAM OUTCOMES

We used a variety of metrics to assess the overall program outcomes of the SBDMAC grant. One of the initial program outcomes came during the first year of the grant, when the collaboration resulted in the development of an industry competencies matrix for high school students in the digital media arts academies. The purpose of this matrix was to develop a hierarchy of values and skills that should be instilled in academy students as they develop their own creative processes through domain acquisition, reflection, and re-visitation. This industry competency matrix highlights the specific needs for students to demonstrate proficiency in foundational theory, fundamental/pathway-specific skills, technical programs, formal/performative expressions of technique, and professional applications, which are gradually integrated into the classroom experience as they progress through the curriculum. Thus, as academy students proceed through their individual pathways, they can use this matrix to balance knowledge with practice on their way to mastery and professional application.

Another program outcome measure was the development of academic and professional pathways maps for media arts academy high school students. The pathway maps were designed collaboratively by participating administrators, faculty members, and business leaders from the local South Bay Workforce Investment Board and Career Ladders Project. Identified were different routes students could take to pursue different college and university majors, trade certifications, and professional career opportunities. The pathway maps help to ensure academics and curricula are integrated throughout the pathway, as well as provide clear guidance for the specific route stu-dents could take as they pursue their own individual paths to success.

These industry competency matrices and pathway maps were important on two fronts. First, during the quarterly SBDMAC meetings, collaboratively working on these deliverables was an action item with the intent of helping to bring stakeholders from every institution together. Second, the deliverables helped to create more structure to the grant work, allowing greater likelihood of sustainability by focusing the work of the academies on agreed-upon skills, as well as how to proceed in providing specific skills for multi-directional career pathways.

Another essential component to the success of the grant was the opportunity for students to bridge the gap between their academic knowledge and "real world" practice through opportunities provided by industry partnerships. For example, the involvement of the South Bay Workforce Investment Board (SBWIB) and local business partners allowed students to gain access to more than 50 internships (some paid) and job shadowing opportunities with a variety of local media and non-media companies to give them authentic, hands-on, industry experience in their fields of interest. In addition, eight students were also able to apply for union membership into the Screen Actors Guild (SAG).

Attracting new industry partners and creating robust advisory boards for each pathway was also a continuing goal to broaden the scope and quality of work-based learning opportunities for students. Interestingly, one important lesson learned in developing such partnerships is that sometimes seemingly unaligned industry partners can yield unexpectedly rich connections and work-based learning opportunities. For example, media arts academy students ended up producing a strong portfolio of professional-quality multimedia and video content for a non-media partner, Kinecta Federal Credit Union.

Another outcome measure involved aspirational development by providing high school students with college and university

tours, as well as guest lectures and portfolio reviews by California State University, Dominguez Hills professors from the departments of Communications, Art and Design, and Digital Media Arts. In fact, CSUDH hosted more than 83 students in 2016 alone, where these high school students had the opportunity to visit the university campus, meet with faculty professors, look at the rigor of student work at the university level, and witness the defenses of university students' capstone art projects and portfolio reviews. In these cases, high school students were given a glimpse of what going to college would be like so they could envision themselves going down similar academic paths.

Another point that proved telling was how important collaborative pairing and partnerships were between faculty members of each partner institution. What this means is that one successful formula was having faculty who had particular research specialties and qualifications working together collaboratively on specific projects or in providing guidance to students in specific areas of graphic design, game design, photography, video production, etc. Not only was it found to be an essential component of pairing likeminded faculty together, but it was equally important to identify and recruit faculty from each institution that brought specific skills and research specialties to the table.

These collaborative efforts also translated into multi-institutional educational presentations at the California Career Pathways Trust Grantee Network Institute Conference in San Diego and Educating for Careers Conference in Sacramento for two consecutive years. During these conference presentations, faculty representing each of the institutions of the multi-tiered partnership grant shared their reflections, best practices, and evidence of collaborative events, and created action plans for roundtable participants from other secondary and post-secondary schools interested in creating similar grant partnerships. A panel of students also attended these conferences

to provide their own reflections and answer questions from other organizations and institutions about what they got out of the pathway academy experience.

Similarly, developing proactive partnerships with institutions that share the same core values is fundamental to success. Some of the qualities that should be shared include a strong focus on student achievement, transformative scholarship, commitment to diversity, excellence in practice, and dedication to community engagement. The partner institutions should also offer related academic programs and similar course offerings that create clear pathways, dual enrollment opportunities, course articulations, and specialized training for high school students as they proceed throughout their academic and professional careers.

Perhaps one of the most significant lessons learned in terms of program outcome measures was creating meaningful interaction between students and faculty at the partner high school academies, community college, and university levels. The establishment of collaborative events proved key to the success of this grant, particularly the establishment of the Showcase Event, which was held in the last two years of the SBDMAC grant period. In this event, digital media arts academy students had their art and portfolios judged by college and university faculty in a juried art show. Not only did students get invaluable feedback on their work by ECC college instructors and CSUDH university professors, they also had their work displayed for their community, participated in a juried art show, earned awards and, in some cases, received internship/career opportunities with partner community organizations and local businesses. These annual collaborative events, which were held in the ballrooms of El Camino College, provided students with a formal experience in venues beyond the confines of their own high schools that also involved invaluable interaction with the broader public.

Among the limitations that were found, one of the primary challenges was

how to pave new pathways for high school students interested in taking college-level courses and seeking higher educational degrees at the university level. While there are courses that more easily articulate between high schools and community colleges, it becomes more difficult to clear pathways of course articulation at the four-year university level so that credit-bearing options can be given for units taken. Developing dual and concurrent enrollment opportunities and agreements that articulate at the higher level is an optimum goal but requires a great deal of coordination between partner institutions that also takes more time than was allowed during this three-year grant period.

In addition to the ongoing challenges of maintaining partner cohesion and collaboration, another area that required constant attention and supervision by grant administrators was increasing student enrollment, outreach, and advising support throughout the grant duration. It was found that working with site counselors to build awareness of the pathway for incoming freshmen and among local industry circles eventually assisted in the recruiting efforts of the pathway and increased the strength of the programs. Additionally, both high school and college counselors gave input into the student supports section of the pathway maps to help ensure that there was a clear and comprehensive support plan undergoing ongoing maintenance and revision. Linking high school counselors with the counseling staff of El Camino College and CSUDH ultimately provided additional assurance that the academy students' transition to post-secondary would be smooth.

Another particular challenge was developing protocols for tracking data when high school students are not always choosing direct pathways after graduation. Many of the students who participated in the SBDMAC were "at-risk" students who were in search of non-traditional curricula or who did not take a traditional or straight path in their post-secondary career. As a result, additional plans are needed to con-

tinue beyond this three-year grant period to evolve the infrastructure and protocols for data collecting with post-secondary partners to better identify students in the pathway and track them after they graduate. It was also found that additional planning is needed to continue to improve the existing system for collecting data to help the pathway leadership make informed decisions about the quality and equity of their work-based learning experiences, ensuring that necessary data is consistently being inputted when work-based learning experiences occur.

Finally, over the course of the three-year grant period, faculty and staff turnover made for certain inconsistencies. During each year of the grant period, faculty turnover meant that valuable experience was lost or new participants had to buy into the grant's goals or be brought up to speed. The important lesson learned here was that strong relationships between organizations and clear structural goals ensure that whenever personnel turnover at individual institutions occurs, the cross-sector work will continue undisrupted.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the shared vision and purpose of the grant has outlived its funding, as many of the consortium relationships have extended beyond the conclusion of the grant period and continue to this day. The strategy of SBDMAC placing so much importance on building relationships and creating action-based activities has also moved the multi-tiered partnership grant toward remaining sustainable in the future.

The SBDMAC Showcase Event was expanded in scope to now include the development of professional portfolios and involve more student contributions, awards, and opportunities for work-based experience via job shadowing and internships. There continues to be stakeholder engagement through joint advisory board meetings and academic/business involvement events (e.g., partner recognition ceremonies). Ex-

pansion of dual enrollment college credit and certification also continues unabated with targeted intervention supports from ongoing collaboration between high school/college counselors, post-secondary faculty, and partner advisory boards so students have a higher likelihood of completing dual enrollment, graduation, and professional certificate programs.

Overall, this multi-tiered partnership grant provided high school media arts academy students with early college experience (including dual and concurrent enrollment opportunities); high-quality transitional programming (including early matriculation and enrollment for pathway students); alignment of work-based learning and curricula; and opportunities to strengthen the digital and media arts pathway transition to post-secondary institutions and beyond. The collaborative grant also assisted in the liaison work with industry partners to help identify critical needs for developing a local workforce with relevant competencies in the media arts. Lastly, the CCPT grant consortium fostered exchanges with other sites to share lessons and instructional strategies, build networks, and further develop a community of practice. Combined, all of these factors show clear alignment with both the aim and fundamental objectives of the grant work.

The result of the SBDMAC has also been a model for building partnerships. Among the many lessons learned, these sorts of multi-tiered grant partnerships can only work if there is an effective pairing of faculty and institutions in terms of similar specialties, values, goals, and shared commitment to engagement. Finding the right combination of partners can yield impressive results in professional collaborative opportunities, camaraderie, and purpose, while continuously investing in these relationships ensures that whenever personnel turnover at individual institutions occurs, the cross-sector work will continue.

Most important, this grant has given academy students a glimpse of what comes after high school. It cannot be overstated how important it is for high school students to get the opportunity to aspire to life after graduation by envisioning themselves in community college, a four-year university, or in specific careers. The SBDMAC grant did this by allowing academy students to visit college and university campuses, meet with guidance counselors, work with college instructors/university professors, receive critical feedback about their work, participate in juried art shows, develop portfolios, get job shadowing/internship opportunities, and be provided with such clear guideposts as industry competencies and career pathway maps.

In summary, the route to success in creating a multi-tiered partnership grant is to be thoughtful and precise in institutional and faculty pairings, as well as giving students aspirational goals and multiple opportunities to experience life beyond the high school campus at post-secondary institutions and within specific industries. Combined, addressing what has been learned in creating and managing this interdisciplinary, multi-institutional California Career Pathways Trust Grant should prove useful to other secondary and post-secondary institutions interested in establishing similar partnerships.

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