

Final Evaluation Report of the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving’s Career Pathways Initiative

Executive Summary

The premise behind the initiative

In January 2016, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving (the Foundation) launched the Career Pathways Initiative (CPI), providing three-year grants (2016-2018) to nine partnerships that represented a diversity of geography, population served, partnership scale, and programming. The goal of the initiative was to increase the employment of residents of the Greater Hartford region with limited literacy and job skills who historically lacked access to career services and opportunities for advancement. The premise behind the cross-sector design of CPI was that – through partnerships among community colleges, workforce development and adult education organizations, and employers – the programs would address the educational, job training, and employment needs of disenfranchised residents and help them succeed on a career pathway. In particular, the Foundation sought to steer these residents into the region’s middle-skill jobs – those requiring education and training beyond high school (an associate’s degree, occupational certificate, or apprenticeship), but less than a four-year college degree – that consistently went unfilled because of a shortage of qualified candidates.

The implementation of CPI

Most CPI sites defined “people with limited literacy and employment skills” as those individuals whose skills were below the requirements of specific workforce programs, but close enough that they might gain access to those programs with some basic-skills remediation. Even those programs requiring high school credentials targeted participants with significant barriers to jobs offering living wages and opportunities for progression, for example, English-language learners, individuals transitioning from homelessness, or single mothers. About one-third of CPI participants had dependent children and around half were not employed at the time of enrollment. Most CPI participants were women between the ages of 25 and 44; about four-fifths were of Hispanic origin or black/African American.

Lead Partner and CPI Project Name
Capitol Region Education Council , Contextualized ELL/Medical Office Assistant Program
Chrysalis Center , Chrysalis/Urban League Career Pathways Initiative
Community Partners in Action , STARR Training to Work 2
Goodwin College , Manufacturing Career Pathway
Hartford Public Library , Immigrant Career Pathways
Journey Home , Aerospace Employment Placement Program
Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford , Business Plan for Success
Our Piece of the Pie , Opportunity Academy College Scholars (Year 1); Pathways to Careers Initiative Online (starting Year 2)
YWCA Hartford Region , YW Career Women at Manchester Community College

Because the Foundation sought to test different models and serve a diverse population, the nine CPI programs varied considerably in terms of how they were structured and what elements received emphasis over others. Whether sites focused on one or several career pathways depended on both practical and mission-based considerations. Four of the sites focused their CPI efforts on single career pathways: CREC on health care; Hartford Public Library (HPL) on

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culinary arts; and Goodwin and Journey Home on manufacturing. The rest of the sites chose to provide more training options for participants.

How long participants would be in the program – including technical training, basic-, soft-, and life-skills training, and internships – presented tradeoffs for sites. On the one hand, their target populations needed considerable training and support to be on even footing with others in the workforce. On the other, the opportunity costs of remaining out of the workforce for an extended period of time posed a disincentive both to enrolling and to persisting in the programs. The longer CPI programs (approximately 6-12 months) were those associated with community colleges, which followed the academic semester schedule. Programs with medium-length technical training components (approx. 6-12 weeks) included the initiative's three culinary arts programs. A few sites also offered shorter options – to build literacy skills, workforce skills, or gain quick, skill-based credentials – allowing them to serve more participants by minimizing the burden placed on their time.

All sites launched implementation with a mix of services and approaches – basic skills remediation and contextualization, case management, workforce skills training, technical training, internships, job development, post-employment supports – based on their own expertise and their understanding of best practices in the field. With the expectation that the grantees would learn and refine their models as they implemented, the Foundation invested in a developmental evaluation of the initiative, emphasizing ongoing feedback to inform the work as it evolved. Over time, as sites learned through implementation, all made numerous adjustments, both minor and major, to the mix of services provided through CPI. As emerging findings pointed to additional programming and service needs, in Year 2 the Foundation provided sites with the opportunity to apply for supplemental funds to address identified gaps and enhance their programs. Several sites took advantage of this opportunity, using additional funds to cover additional needs such as child care costs for participants.

Ultimately, the elements that proved most critical in helping CPI's population succeed were: basic skills remediation; individualized case-management supports; training in work-readiness ("soft") skills; access to internships (or other hands-on training in a work setting); an assertive approach to job development; and continued supports post-employment.

Managing programs and building partnerships

The Foundation chose CPI lead organizations based on their long-established, solid track-records in the region and their expertise in workforce development, adult education, and/or post-secondary education. Ultimately, however, success depended less on track record and expertise than on the quality of the team brought together to manage the program and the commitment of the organization's leadership, with the most important factor being the presence of an effective program manager.

Seeing cross-sector collaboration as critical to providing a seamless experience for participants, the Foundation required CPI lead organizations to partner with other organizations with expertise complementary to their own. Within this framework, some CPI sites worked as collaborative partnerships, making programmatic decisions jointly. Others relied primarily on transactional

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partnerships, where a lead agency made decisions independently and taps partners for specific services. While both modalities could contribute positively to outcomes, the collaborative partnerships were more likely to be sustainable and to foster the cross-sector approach envisioned by the Foundation.

In their CPI proposals, the Foundation also required sites to show that they had specific employers lined up as partners, or that they had the capacity – through their own networks or partners’ networks – to engage employers in their targeted industries. Although many of the sites struggled with this element early on, many eventually were able to secure strong employer relationships, or at least to make notable progress towards this end. The most successful sites engaged employer partners at all stages of implementation, from informing the program curriculum, to orienting participants on the expectations of – and opportunities in – the field, to hosting interns, to providing job placements. The most engaged employer partners were committed – from top leadership to direct supervisors – to integrating CPI participants fully into the workplace and providing opportunities for continuing education and career advancement.

The Impact of CPI

By October 1, 2019, the evaluation’s final data collection point, nearly 1,000 individuals had completed at least one¹ CPI program. The most important programmatic factors in retaining participants through program completion were: careful screening for readiness and interest; basic skills remediation and academic support (particularly for the more academically demanding, college-based programs); social and emotional supports from peers, case managers, and other program staff; convenience of program location and of hours; and paid internships (which helped participants justify delaying paid work).

CPI Participant Employment & Education Outcomes (2016-2019)				
	One Month Outcomes ¹		Six Month Outcomes ²	
	Total	%	Total	%
Completed Training³	606	100%	447	100%
Employment				
Employed	368	61%	250	56%
Unemployed	179	30%	76	17%
Unknown	59	10%	121	27%
Education				
Enrolled in Education Program ⁴	131	22%	76	17%

1) Of all participants who completed CPI core training (as defined by site) no later than 9/1/19. See Appendix B for site-specific dates.
 2) Of all participants who completed CPI core training (as defined by site) no later than 3/1/19. See Appendix B for site-specific dates.
 3) For LVGH, includes only those participants in the Sodexo and early childhood ed cohorts.
 4) Not exclusive of "employed"

A tangible impact of completion were the industry credentials, certificates, and college credits participants received on graduation, enhancing previously modest educational and employment histories on resumes. Along with technical skills, CPI participants gained important transferable skills. Most importantly, participants improved basic literacy, math, and/or digital skills needed to access, and advance in, any career pathway. Training in soft skills likewise built capacities applicable in any work or educational setting. Participants themselves expressed confidence that the skills they gained through the programs, both technical and soft, would benefit them no matter the course their careers ultimately took.

Sixty-one percent of CPI graduates were employed within one month of program completion, exceeding the Foundation’s goal of a 50% employment rate; twenty-two percent were enrolled in

¹ At four of the sites – Chrysalis, CPA, HPL, and LVGH – individuals sometimes trained in more than one program.

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education programs.² Although six-month employment data were incomplete³, available data suggested that the six-month employment rate of CPI graduates was slightly lower than the one-month rate (56%).

Four-fifths of CPI graduates were trained in the following four career clusters⁴ (in descending order by number of graduates trained): 1) hospitality and tourism (consisting of graduates from the initiative's culinary arts programs); 2) health sciences (consisting primarily of participants in CREC's Medical Office Assistant program); 3) public safety and security (consisting exclusively of participants in Chrysalis' CT Guard Card program); and manufacturing. Of these four training clusters, manufacturing had the highest rate of employment, with 97% of graduates trained in this cluster employed at one month and 77% employed at six months. Public safety and security had the lowest rate of employment: 40% at one month and 61% at 6 months. Hospitality and tourism, the largest training cluster, saw two-thirds (68%) of graduates employed at one month, falling to 51% at six months. Fifty-five percent of health sciences graduates were employed at one month, a rate that improved considerably after six months (69%).

Employers expressed satisfaction with the skills their CPI employees acquired through the programs; gratitude for the ongoing, post-employment support they received from program staff; and interest in continuing to partner with the programs. Although acknowledging that CPI employees needed significant support once on the job, employer partners were confident that they could resolve most issues with the support of program staff.

Factors that contributed positively to participants' employment outcomes included: participants' genuine interest in employment in the sector; committed employer partners; well-prepared candidates (with sufficient language skills and soft skills, among others, to succeed in the workplace); ongoing support post-employment (for program graduates, as well as employers); internships (allowing employers to assess candidates before extending job offers); careful matching of participants to internship and/or employment placements; experienced and qualified staff performing job development functions.

Lessons and Implications

Through the Career Pathways Initiative, the Foundation tested a variety of models for addressing the Hartford region's lack of workforce development services aimed at residents with limited literacy and employment skills. After four years, CPI yielded rich lessons about what it takes to help individuals within this heterogeneous population prepare for, access, and succeed in employment and about the characteristics of organizations and partnerships that facilitate success. Below we present CPI's most important lessons and note implications for future philanthropic investment.

² Includes individuals who were both employed and enrolled in education.

³ Six-month employment outcomes were "unknown" for 27% (121/447) of participants who completed the programs.

⁴ We grouped CPI programs among the sixteen career clusters described in the Connecticut Career Paths 2017 Report. Our analysis of cluster trained in only includes individuals who completed the programs.

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Helping adults with limited literacy and employment skills access and succeed in the workforce

LESSON #1. Serving adults with limited literacy and employment skills requires intensive case-management, academic remediation, and robust training in work-readiness (“soft”) skills.

LESSON #2. Maximizing persistence requires carefully screening participants for readiness and interest, as well as a thorough orientation to both the program and the career pathway.

LESSON #3. Programs must reduce participants’ opportunity costs (real or perceived) by: offering shorter programs; contextualizing instruction (to move the curriculum more quickly by combining basic skills and technical content); offering training at night or weekends (to allow participants to hold day jobs); offering training at different locations (to minimize commute times); and providing paid internships (to help participants justify delaying paid work).

LESSON #4. Helping individuals with limited literacy and employment skills secure a career pathway job requires proactive and personalized job development; traditional job placement assistance – resume writing, interviewing strategies, job database search – is not sufficient.

LESSON #5. When it comes to program implementation, the most important factor is the presence of an effective program manager.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUNDERS:

- Be prepared to make a long-term (3-5 years) investment and to fund staff and organizational capacity adequately, allowing flexibility in terms of how the program is staffed and implemented over time.
- To encourage efficiencies, fund programs that focus narrowly on a single career pathway. Not only can training resources be delivered more cost-effectively when concentrated in one pathway, but the intensive job development required to find good job placements for this population is simplified when focused within one career sector.
- For very low literate individuals and those not ready to commit to a specific pathway, consider funding less intensive, open-ended programs focused on skill remediation, career readiness, and developing career goals. Such programs would not carry the pressure of expected employment outcomes, but could potentially serve as pipelines for the more employment-focused programs in the medium or long term.

Building effective partnerships

LESSON #6. While collaborative partnerships (typically between two organizations with complementary expertise) are ideally suited for implementing ambitious, cross-sector initiatives, transactional partnerships – which provide complementary expertise and can evolve into collaborative partnerships – also serve an important role in cross-sector initiatives.

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LESSON #7. Employer engagement must be purposeful and systematic, requiring dedicated effort at every stage of implementation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUNDERS:

- Funders can foster – but not force – collaborative partnerships. A history of joint work can be a good indicator of collaboration, as can a genuine interest in pursuing the goals of the initiative together. To hedge against possible disruption caused by staff transitions, funders can look for evidence of working relationships at the leadership and operational levels or encourage such relationships if not yet present. Funders can also encourage transactional partnerships among partners with different strengths and expertise. These types of partnerships may be more successful for newly collaborating entities.
- When assessing a proposed partnership, funders should look for evidence of: an MOU or contract formalizing the relationship; grant resources being shared; clarity around the specific staff persons who will be managing the partner relationship and how possible staff transitions will be handled.
- Funders can look for evidence of true employer partnerships and of plans to engage employers at every stage of implementation.

Conclusion

From 2016-2019, the Career Pathways Initiative (CPI) succeeded in training and supporting over 1,000 individuals who – because of limited literacy or English-language skills, gaps in employment history, criminal records and substance abuse, homelessness, and other poverty-related barriers – would not have qualified for conventional workforce development programs in the Hartford region. Six-hundred six individuals completed technical training courses, obtaining industry-recognized credentials, certificates, and/or college credits; of these, 368 were employed upon completion in fields such as hospitality and tourism, health sciences, public safety and security, and manufacturing. One-hundred thirty-one individuals enrolled in additional education programs after completing CPI. In addition to the impact on individuals, CPI also produced several sustainable programs and lasting positive impacts on the organizations that participated. Finally, CPI yielded important lessons for the fields of adult education and workforce development that promise to inform future cross-sector career pathways efforts.