



A Partnership Model for Better Jobs: A View from the Field

By Colin Austin

Connecting low-income people with good jobs is complex work.¹ In workforce development, there are many well-meaning projects that deliver training and framed certificates but fall short of getting people into actual jobs. Even if a project achieves job placement it faces the hurdle of breaking the living-wage barrier, which often requires long-term, concerted effort. And for most projects, career advancement is still little more than boxes and arrows on a piece of paper.

Securing well-paying employment is a daunting task. Those on the economic margins face multiple and often historic divides. A program design may promise a vista of opportunity while the job seeker sees only opposition and frustration in the labor market. Professor Clarence Stone calls this a “disparity in world views” and cautions against the tendency to use an uplifting example of success as evidence that anyone can cross into promising careers.

We are often told about cases of success by individuals who come from backgrounds of severe poverty. But whatever comfort the larger society takes from such examples, they do little to bridge the two worlds.²

Workforce development often focuses on patching up individuals and boosting their job skills. This can be accomplished relatively easily with small, usually temporary, pockets of funding and short-term training programs. Producing lasting and significant gains in economic opportunity requires a systemic approach that improves the way people find jobs in a community, including identification, assessment, training, and support. To achieve positive change, a coalition of actors must be able to create new social infrastructure.

MDC theory of change

¹ William P. Ryan, "The Final Act: The Challenge of Implementing Workforce Development Policy via Nonprofit Organizations," Robert P. Giloth, ed. *Workforce Intermediaries for the Twenty-first Century* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004). Ryan writes that equipping workers and filling local employment needs requires multiple capacities: programmatic, administrative, and adaptive.

² Clarence Stone, "Comments on the Local Politics of Workforce Development," AECF Jobs Initiative Research Conference, February 27-28, 2003.

MDC, Inc. promotes a team-based approach to community change that relies on local leadership. In MDC's model, a critical mass of community leaders willing to commit to change and to pool their resources is necessary in order to respond to complex social and economic problems.³ MDC has witnessed the short lifespan of many community development efforts that are built solely around charismatic individuals.⁴

Who needs to be at the table? When selecting the core team, MDC suggests using these basic principles:

- For the workforce system, work with all levels of those involved; this includes workers and employers, service agencies and political decision-makers;
- Pay attention to the diversity of voices from a perspective of race, gender, geography, and class;
- Involve people with power as well as people who represent the disadvantaged.

Additionally, MDC works with teams to build knowledge and skills. As learning groups, the teams are then able to adapt their approaches to the task at hand as well as to take on future challenges. With regard to workforce development, MDC advocates the creation and maintenance of what are now called "workforce intermediaries" – entrepreneurial teams of civic leaders that organize their activities and funding streams and design innovative programming.⁵

Connecting People to Jobs – a workforce demonstration project

The Connecting People to Jobs (CPTJ) program is an example of a partnership approach that was originally conceived in the wake of welfare reform as a way to move people into living-wage jobs. The Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation took the lead in the initial research, and contracted with MDC to survey best practices from successful job training programs. MDC recommended a collaborative model with strong employer involvement, as well as reforming the operations of mainstream workforce programs and institutions.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation then joined the effort to establish a Southern jobs program, and the Center for Community Change worked with MDC to identify potential sites. The cities of Charleston, West Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, and Columbia, South Carolina were selected because of the presence of "a grassroots organization committed to working on employment issues, a college motivated to partner with the grassroots organization, and employers interested in participating."⁶

³ David Dodson, Julie Thomasson, and Leah Totten, *Building Community by Design*, Introduction and Chapter 1 (MDC, Inc., 2002).

⁴ See Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001) for a discussion of the liability of the "Genius with a Thousand Helpers" model of corporate leadership.

⁵ "Keeping America in Business: Advancing Workers, Businesses, and Economic Growth," The 102nd American Assembly Report, The American Assembly at Columbia University, February 2003.

⁶ "Connecting People to Jobs: A Proposal to the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation," May 2001, in MDC files.

In the beginning of the project, the grassroots organizations and the colleges were seen as the critical partners around which to build a coalition. As the project developed, it became clear that other organizations were just as important to team success. The following is a list of the key partners in Connecting People to Jobs, and a description of how their respective roles emerged during the project:

Community colleges

Many community colleges have a mission to reach out and provide services to all segments of society. MDC works with community colleges because of their ability to provide flexible training opportunities and customized approaches to workforce development. In many rural towns and poor neighborhoods, a community college is the paramount institutional resource.

The participating colleges at the CPTJ sites were all interested in the opportunity to expand their services to underserved populations. While the college representatives were committed to reaching low-income neighborhoods, they were not used to working as members of partnership teams. This is a surprising finding, given that most colleges partner on a number of fronts with agencies and businesses. But each of the colleges in CPTJ struggled to find its role in a broader coalition. During the planning phase, the colleges believed that they could operate the project as one of their own programs. Like other community colleges across the country, the CPTJ colleges were slow to recognize the challenge of recruitment, pretraining preparation, and support during training and job retention.⁷ The colleges weren't prepared for the task of navigating the organizational interplay that resulted from dividing programmatic functions among the partners.

During project implementation, it became clear that the colleges were not well-equipped to provide the soft skills and short-term training that CPTJ enrollees required. The colleges were prepared to offer standard vocational training, but CPTJ participants were not ready to make the jump to semester-based coursework. The CPTJ partnership teams responded by developing pre-employment training outside the college, usually delivered by the grassroots organization. This approach was costly in terms of the partnership. In Columbia, the college dropped out of the team. In Charlottesville, the college was sidelined even though they also operated the local One-Stop Center. In Charleston, the college stepped in to help with project administration but did not lead the training process. The colleges were not pushed to reform their own ways of delivering training and opportunities for positive institutional change were lost.

Grassroots organizations

The grassroots organizations in all three of the sites successfully identified and recruited participants. Because of their connections and understanding of the community, they were able to help create safe spaces for intake and follow-up. The grassroots

⁷ Brandon Roberts, "The Best of Both: Community Colleges and Community-Based Organizations Partner to Better Serve Low-Income Workers and Employers," Public/Private Ventures, January 2002.

organizations also demonstrated that they could provide pre-employment training, although job placement for graduates proved to be a challenge.

During the project launch, the Center for Community Change staff argued persuasively that the grassroots organizations should be the local administrative agents for the grant funding. The reasoning was that the grassroots organizations were relatively new to the workforce table, and they needed a strong operational position to ensure that the community had a voice. In effect, the grassroots partners became the conveners for the planning phase and positioned themselves as the lead organizations for implementation.

As a consequence, the grassroots organizations took on a comprehensive role, administering the grant, handling the finances, conducting community outreach, completing intake, delivering pre-employment training, and handling case management. Project staff members were employees of the grassroots organizations. This amount of responsibility was too much for the relatively small grassroots organizations in Connecting People to Jobs.

In Charleston, the partnership imbalance surfaced quickly. By the end of the planning stage, it was clear to most of the local partners and MDC and CCC staff that the grassroots organization could not lead the effort. In this case, the grassroots organization lacked the capacity to manage the partnership and administer project finances. Consequently, the partnership group decided to shift the administrative role to the participating college and recruit another grassroots organization to provide services.

Connecting People to Jobs was a big budget item for each of the grassroots organizations that administered the local grant. In some cases, the CPTJ funds accounted for more than half of their income. During the course of the project, the resource portfolio of the grassroots organizations waxed and waned. Basic organizational survivability became an ongoing issue. Even though the Center for Community Change provided organizational development assistance, the stability of these small nonprofits fluctuated greatly.

Employers

Partnerships often have difficulty engaging local industry. Employers may avoid longer-term teamwork if they do not perceive direct cost benefits and are not comfortable with partnership goals and values. At the same time, recent evaluations of the field of sectoral development demonstrate the positive effect of business involvement. Programs that work closely with employers increase demand for job-seeking clients and create change within industry.⁸

In CPTJ, relationships with employers grew slowly. Several initial industry representatives found it difficult to participate throughout the six-month planning stage

⁸ Linda Dworak-Muñoz, Workforce Strategies Initiative "Building Effective Employer Relations," Aspen Institute, May 2004.

and lost interest when the partnerships were struggling with an extended implementation process. Exceptions to this experience were two of the industry partners in Charleston: the Charleston Area Medical Center (CAMC) and BB&T banking. Both of these partners stayed at the table in part because their leadership was needed and requested. Employers took an active role in order for the partnership to survive, including revising the team structure and chairing the partnership. When the employer partners understood that it was okay to participate actively and shape the program to their own needs, CPTJ had the benefit of customized training and job placement.

Public workforce agencies

Local One-Stop centers and the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) programs can be a productive base for operations. One-Stop Centers are designed to consolidate and streamline the public workforce system. One-Stop staff members can assist with intake and follow-up and generally accelerate the implementation of employment programming.

Among the three CPTJ sites, the Columbia site is achieving the highest level of outcomes. Much of this success can be attributed to their co-location at the One-Stop Center and their ability to serve Spanish-speaking clients. The manager of the One-Stop Center understood the potential of CPTJ and offered the project office space. The project in turn helped to establish the One-Stop Center as a safe and responsive place for Latino residents seeking better employment. The partnership made an early decision to maintain a full-time presence at the One-Stop to coordinate intake, process applications, and follow up with participants.

Supportive civic leaders

Local leaders not connected to the participating institutions advanced the work of the partnerships in CPTJ. At each of the sites, these individuals provided energy and filled in gaps during critical transitions. In Charleston, a community activist from a prominent family provided connections to the local newspaper and spurred the team towards a more innovative approach. In Charlottesville, the mayor has demonstrated support as well as leaders from other nonprofit organizations that are not involved in workforce development. A key partner in Columbia is a local Hispanic pastor who also sits on the state Workforce Board. In each case, a committed civic leader was able to fit partnership efforts into a larger framework and validate the project to others in the community. If anything, CPTJ needed more civic leadership to balance out the inevitable institutional interests and organizational limitations.

What did we learn about working with partnerships?

Partnership building is long-term and fluid. The roles of the partners evolved throughout the life of a project. Different partners led progress at different times. In CPTJ, the key partners varied according to the personal commitment of the organizational representatives and the existing system of connections and relationships. This was almost impossible to understand during initial visits and site selection. The site

coaches from MDC and CCC had to unpack these realities with the group over a long period of meetings and trial activities. The planning phase was only the beginning of a process of understanding partner roles, learning to work collaboratively, and building trust. The expectations for partners and the long-term nature of the team commitment needed to be more explicit at the beginning of the program.⁹

Recommendations for grantmakers:

- Devote resources to partnership building activities. Meet with important stakeholders individually even before the partnership group convenes for planning efforts. Make sure that key institutions are at the table and that they understand the nature of the partnership work to be undertaken.
- New partnerships need to be managed. Partnerships typically hire a program coordinator as their first staff member. The skill sets of operating a program are different from the ability to facilitate and strengthen a partnership, and staff may be overwhelmed by the team-building work. During the planning process the partnerships should prepare for not only launching a program, but also identify organizations or individuals that will be responsible for managing the partnership itself.

Each partner should contribute what they do best. A partnership team brings many strengths to the table.¹⁰ Recognize team members for their expertise and ability to accomplish specific tasks. An early objective of the Connecting People to Jobs project was to build the capacity of the colleges and the grassroots organizations to run an effective jobs program. Too much emphasis was placed on expanding the activities of the grassroots organizations rather than building on their strengths. And other partners with significant resources such as the colleges, employers, and public agencies, were left wondering if they had a role.

Recommendations for grantmakers:

- Insert a program design phase between planning and implementation. Take the time to discuss what each partner has to offer regarding outreach, assessment, training, and follow-up. Most grant-funded programs are accustomed to moving directly from strategic plan to enrolling participants without deliberate attention given to negotiating program roles. The program design process is critical for a partnership approach, both for successful implementation and longer-term sustainability.

⁹ Tara Kumar, "Sectoral Development Partnerships: A Review of the Connecting People to Jobs Program," Course Paper, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Fall 2002 (on file at MDC).

¹⁰ Julian L. Alssid, David Gruber, Davis Jenkins, Christopher Mazzeo, Brandon Roberts, Regina Stanback-Stroud, *Building a Career Pathways System: Promising Practices in Community College-Centered Workforce Development*, Section Three (Workforce Strategy Center, October 2002). The Workforce Strategy Center also notes that through collaboration, institutional partners can enhance their strengths and benefit the overall system.

- Seek local funding support and leverage the resources of the local partners. In addition to listing in-kind support in a project budget, partnerships can get more specific, sooner, about institutional commitments (both staff time and resources) and drawing down local funding in dollars. Much of this work can be accomplished during a program design phase.

Leadership must be vested in the partnership team in a structured way. If systemic change is a desired result, then no one partner should dominate project development and implementation. Designating an organization as the fiscal and administrative agent places ultimate responsibility with one party, which poses a challenge to team building. Another ongoing temptation is to heap expectations on project staff to make decisions, take risks, and move the work forward.¹¹ To counteract this problem, team structures need to be established early on. Each partner must be clear about their roles and about how the team is to operate. Actual incorporation is not necessary, but agreements and documents similar to by-laws proved to be helpful in Connecting People to Jobs.

Recommendations for grantmakers:

- Even after a planning process, most partnerships are not ready to be governing bodies on the ground. Before implementation, establish basic structures of partnership leadership. Partners can also identify activities that promote the development of their work as a collaborative.
- Develop common standards for local fiscal management. Carefully evaluate the experience and established procedures of proposed fiscal agents. Also consider requiring a Memorandum of Agreement between the fiscal agent and the partnership, outlining specifics of what is expected of both parties.

Colin Austin is a Senior Associate at MDC, Inc. and is currently the Program Manager of Connecting People to Jobs. He can be reached by telephone at (919) 968-4531 or by email at caustin@mdcinc.org.

¹¹ Bob Giloth, the Director of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jobs Initiative, refers to the dependence on entrepreneurial staff members as "Flying without a net." Giloth writes that the six Jobs Initiative sites turned over project directors at least 20 times – often "pushed out by the crosscurrents and chaos of implementation." Robert Giloth, "Mistakes, Learning, and Adaptation: Philanthropy and the Jobs Initiative," Annie E. Casey Foundation, March 2004, page 36.

