



**MDC**

## **How Community Colleges Can Respond to Economic Crisis**

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### **Lessons from MDC's Career Pathways for a Green South**

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## Introduction

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Community colleges are increasingly expected to solve some of our most intractable problems. These institutions have historically played an important role in helping individuals move up the career ladder and into the middle class through job training and educational credentials. However, the financial collapse of 2008 brought extraordinary levels of unemployment, foreclosure, and declining income, and with it the need for a different approach to retraining—especially for those most in need. A report from the Joint Economic Committee of the United States Congress found that “households across the income distribution have suffered losses but the pain has been the greatest among the poorest households.”<sup>1</sup> The report also notes that the trauma was most severe in the South, where an additional 3.3 million people fell into poverty.

In response, Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009<sup>2</sup>. As part of that legislation, the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL) authorized several grant programs. MDC, a nonprofit organization located in Durham, North Carolina, received one of the USDOL’s Pathways Out of Poverty grants to help individuals facing significant barriers to employment obtain jobs in energy efficiency and renewable energy industries. The grant focused on jobseekers who were either low-income, high-school dropouts, unemployed, or had a criminal record. The Pathways Out of Poverty grant aimed to help those most in need of employment, while at the same time stimulating the emerging green sector. With its Career Pathways for a Green South project MDC worked to meet both of these goals by partnering with four community colleges:

- Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, North Carolina
- Mountain Empire Community College in Big Stone Gap, Virginia
- Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College in Orangeburg, South Carolina
- Trident Technical College in North Charleston, South Carolina

Community colleges are uniquely suited to connect workers to green jobs through occupational training programs. In the United States, community colleges are considered to be “second-chance” institutions that can help individuals make personal and professional course corrections and obtain the skills to improve their economic situation.<sup>3</sup>

MDC has a long history of working with community colleges, beginning in the 1970s with the creation of a work-readiness program called Human Resource Development (HRD) that is still in use throughout the North Carolina Community College System. Over the succeeding decades MDC has returned to colleges again and again—building workforce alliances in the Mississippi

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<sup>1</sup> *Fact Sheet: Income and Poverty Across the States, 2010*. September 26, 2011. Joint Economic Committee, United States Congress

<sup>2</sup> “Career Pathways for a Green South” was funded through a \$3,780,816 grant from the U.S. Department of Labor’s Pathways Out of Poverty program, authorized by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009

<sup>3</sup> Edelman, P. 2012. *So Rich, So Poor: Why it’s so hard to end poverty in America*. New York: The New Press.

Delta, pursuing rural economic development in Appalachia and on tribal lands, and designing and managing national initiatives that increase success for low-income and minority students.<sup>4</sup>

What has MDC learned from these efforts? Among other things, we've learned that:

- Colleges represent a rare resource that can respond to regional economic problems and needs
- College faculty and staff members are innovative and motivated to help students overcome barriers
- With committed leadership, colleges can convene local efforts and align resources
- Colleges can have a direct effect on many people and families that seek to stabilize their economic situation and move forward. During the Career Pathways for a Green South project, the four colleges trained more than 400 individuals who received a degree or credential and are on track to place more than 300 of those students in jobs

While community colleges are experts at education, they are less accustomed to roles that include community-based recruitment, non-academic supports, and job placement activities. In order to assist the colleges in their efforts, MDC provided coaching, program-design assistance, data analysis, cross-site learning opportunities, participant tracking, and administrative support. Through its ongoing work with the colleges, MDC identified and documented three important capacities needed for successfully engaging high-poverty populations: recruitment, case management and support services, and job placement.

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## The Three Capacities

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### Capacity #1: Recruitment

Recruiting participants for this initiative was a challenge for the colleges, particularly due to the stringent eligibility requirements of the Pathways Out of Poverty grant. Each applicant was required to provide evidence that s/he was a high-school dropout, low-income, unemployed, or had a criminal record. While community colleges serve a broad population, most are not accustomed to targeted outreach to individuals in these four categories.

The colleges responded to the recruitment challenges in different ways:

- **Mountain Empire Community College (MECC)** worked closely with community agencies to get the word out about their green energy training offerings. Organizations such as the local public housing authority, county social services departments, and adult education agencies posted information about the training opportunities and referred individuals as a part of their own case management. MECC program staff held information sessions and interviewed prospective participants at the different agencies. Nancy Townsend, project director for Career Pathways for a Green South at MECC, said this type

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<sup>4</sup> For more details, see [www.mdcinc.org](http://www.mdcinc.org).

of community outreach and recruitment was “totally beyond what the college normally provides.” Internally, Townsend and her team met with college instructors to inform them of the project, explain the eligibility requirements, and describe the support services and individual assistance the students would receive. In this way, faculty could identify potential students who could benefit from program offerings, even if the student had initially enrolled in a different MECC program.

- **Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College (OCtech)** took extra measures to recruit individuals both inside and outside the campus. Within the college, instructors in green technology-related programs received information about the Career Pathways for a Green South program and recruited additional students through class announcements and one-on-one referrals. Orientations were regularly held in the Adult Education and Career Training and Development office, and there was active recruitment at Orangeburg job fairs. To extend their reach even further, the OCtech Pathways team facilitated a series of expungement workshops to help individuals clear up criminal records. The expungement workshops presented information about OCtech green technology programs to individuals being released from penal institutions. Each participant had their case record assessed by an expungement team that included representatives from the South Carolina Commission on Minority Affairs, the Orangeburg County Solicitors Office, and South Carolina Legal Services.

As the above examples illustrate, though colleges were not accustomed to this type of outreach, they found ways to extend information and personal contacts. The result was an increased ability to recruit and enroll individuals that are often on the periphery of higher education. New partners were needed, both within and outside the college, who could develop a rapport with potential students, introduce them to the requirements and benefits of the program, and offer additional resources that prospective participants might need to be successful in their programs.

In MDC’s experience, community colleges often look to relationships with local agencies to provide contacts beyond the walls of the campus. But the Career Pathways for a Green South grantees did more than just establish a referral network as they engaged—and, in some cases, contracted—with outside organizations to deliver needed services that would help the students complete their coursework and stay on the job. Project staff and leadership at all of the colleges also increased their own understanding of what was required to recruit and support low-income students and gradually built up their own capacity to conduct outreach.

## **Capacity #2: Case management and support services**

The students that enrolled in Career Pathways for a Green South training often faced multiple barriers: few financial resources, lack of employment, and limited experience navigating college systems. Community colleges typically provide academic counseling and assistance with applying for financial aid, but do not work with students one-on-one to help them overcome the economic, family, or life issues that may present significant hurdles. Keeping Career Pathways for a Green South students in school and progressing through the training required deeper engagement with individuals to weave together available support services.

As part of their Career Pathways for a Green South effort, **Trident Technical College (TTC)** hired a green job coach to help individual students complete their training and get prepared for employment. The green job coach developed referral networks with churches and organizations such as Goodwill, Father to Father (a parent support group,) and halfway houses for ex-offenders. After enrollment, the green job coach and TTC support team met periodically with each student during training to address barriers to completion and create an employment plan. Community agencies such as Trident Literacy provided computer skills and support for students enrolled in the green training classes. The Sustainability Institute was another major partner in the overall implementation of TTC's green skills program, managing the recruitment-to-job placement process. The Sustainability Institute, an environmental nonprofit that promotes energy conservation, ensured day-to-day communication between TTC, project team members, and community partners. Because of their residential home weatherization projects and close connections to local contractors, the Sustainability Institute provided students with a realistic end goal of employment that motivated the students to stay in school.

The community partnerships developed by TTC show how a community college can serve as a hub of information and resources and knit together a system of supports that help students overcome the inevitable economic hurdles along the way. The outstanding feature of the TTC program is that the students experienced their training, supports, and career path as a fluid and coordinated team effort, without gaps or distinction among the partner organizations. This achievement required TTC to invest significant meeting and planning time with community partners and to maintain a strong system for ongoing communications.

How easy is this for a college to accomplish? College staff members who act as coaches or case managers are usually not in the institutional funding formula. Most college resources are tied to student enrollment and activities that are directly related to education. Colleges are often uneasy extending themselves into functions that are perceived to be in the social-services realm. The result is that most of the experimentation with broad-based support activities and community partnerships occurs within temporary grant-funded programs. The challenge for TTC and other colleges seeking to establish consistent capacity in this area is to gather evidence that support services increase student outcomes such as term-to-term persistence and degree or credential completion. It is only then that college leadership can justify ongoing operational investments and institutionalization of case management practices and partnerships.

### **Capacity #3: Job placement**

Perhaps the greatest challenge that the colleges face is ensuring that graduating students are eventually employed. The success of the Pathways Out of Poverty initiative, and of the Recovery Act as a whole, will largely be measured by job placement. Employment in an occupation related to the training received is particularly important. While community colleges are critical players in workforce development, most do not consider job placement to be their responsibility, neither is it an activity that they are funded to perform. In addition, colleges rarely have the tracking systems in place to allow them to follow students past graduation.

In order to make the connection to employment, project staff at **Central Piedmont Community College (CPCC)** expanded their capacity in two areas. First, they made extra efforts to engage

local employers. Keith Ratliff, CPCC’s project director, created an employer advisory group consisting of several green industry and construction representatives. These employers provided critical input into curriculum design, but also were important contacts for students when they completed training. Keith and the project staff at CPCC also met with employers on an individual basis and collected information about job openings. Employers were notified through a variety of marketing materials about hiring incentives and the skills participants received in CPPC training programs.

CPCC’s second approach to job development was to enhance students’ understanding of how to get a job. According to program director Keith Ratliff, “Our staff had to become employment specialists.” Through a series of employment workshops, the CPCC project team taught students how to find job openings, how to get an interview, and how to impress the hiring manager. Employers participated in workshops and roundtable discussions about key factors in getting a job. By asking employers to share their knowledge with the students, the CPCC staff built additional relationships with industry that created stronger job search networks.

Colleges often maintain a career development office, but often limit their assistance to resumé development and job postings. The CPCC example demonstrates how college project and instructional staff can more fully engage industry and potential employers earlier in the process and throughout a student’s educational experience. For low-income job seekers these ties to the labor market make all the difference in finding good employment.

Another strength of Career Pathways for a Green South was the industry sector focus on green construction and green energy. Recent research indicates that training projects that concentrate on particular sectors produce better results for participants—including significantly higher rates of job placement and earnings gains.<sup>5</sup> As CPCC exemplified, the Career Pathways for a Green South colleges took advantage of the sector orientation of the project to develop closer ties to businesses and industry groups that offered green-related employment. While many colleges typically receive industry feedback through advisory panels or round tables, they may only meet once a year without time for meaningful engagement. CPPC and the other colleges reached out to employers for more meaningful involvement in program design, student interaction, and assistance with job searches.

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## Conclusion

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The Lumina Foundation, a philanthropy focused entirely on higher education, articulates the formidable challenge facing community colleges this way:

The 21st century student population is dizzyingly diverse—racially, ethnically, socially, economically, and in terms of age and family situation. Clearly, no one-size-fits-all system will work for these students, and it won’t serve us as a nation. So the higher education

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<sup>5</sup> Maguire, S., Freely, J., Clymer, C., Conway, M., and Schwartz, D. July 2012. “Tuning In to Local Labor Markets: Findings from the Sectoral Employment Impact Study.” P/PV. New York, NY.

system must be retooled and redesigned to meet the needs of *all types* of students because we need these 21st century students to succeed—without delay and in far greater numbers.<sup>6</sup>

The training and support provided through Career Pathways for a Green South produced important economic gains for hundreds of low-income jobseekers and their families. In addition to these immediate and direct outcomes, the participating colleges were also able to test and improve new methods for helping students in poverty succeed in gaining new skills and making their way into the labor market.

Career Pathways for a Green South created new institutional capacities by requiring participating colleges to stretch to reach students most in need of education and employment opportunities. In many respects, the colleges are meeting this challenge by developing new and innovative approaches for serving these students and closely partnering with community agencies. At the final project convening of all four colleges, participants shared several ways that they are maintaining these new capacities. Examples included redefining staff roles to allow for more one-on-one interaction, gathering and analyzing data to link efforts to improve student retention and completion, and building and formalizing ongoing partnerships with community agencies. The stories and profiles in this paper suggest an expanded boundary for community colleges and provide some insight into effective practices. Defining this boundary and implementing these practices more broadly will be essential if we are to meet the needs of the 21st century student and economy.

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<sup>6</sup> “A Stronger Nation Through Higher Education.” March 2012. Lumina Foundation. Indianapolis, Indiana.