Scaling the Impact of the Career Pathways for a Green South Program

Lessons from MDC's Career Pathways for a Green South

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Introduction

MDC was one of eight national and 30 local organizations to receive a total of $150 million in USDOL Employment and Training Administration Pathways Out of Poverty grants to support programs that help low-income and disadvantaged populations attain economic self-sufficiency through good jobs in energy efficiency and renewable energy industries. The funds were authorized as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Through Career Pathways for a Green South (CPGS), MDC facilitated the activities of community colleges and their partners in four communities as they trained workers for the green economy: Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, N.C.; Trident Technical College in North Charleston, S.C.; Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College in Orangeburg, S.C.; and Mountain Empire Community College in Big Stone Gap, V.A. This paper is the final in a series of lessons learned over the course of the initiative, ranging from community college responses to economic crises to effective use of performance data. Visit mdcinc.org to download the other papers in the series.

Scaling Impact

Community colleges play a vital role in advancing educational and economic opportunity for many Americans, especially low-income students and students of color. Without these institutions, our higher education system would be inaccessible to a large portion of our citizenry. Career Pathways for a Green South (CPGS) was designed to take advantage of the strengths of community colleges to address two goals of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act: to secure employment for those who had been particularly hard hit by the recession and to stimulate job growth in the emerging green sector. The four community college sub-grantees developed new or refined existing curricula related to various green industries. Colleges used the grant funds to implement successful training programs in a variety of disciplines, from integrated systems technology to weatherization to wind turbine construction.

While we celebrate the success of these small programs, these colleges won’t be able to address the significant employment and training gaps in their communities if the programs remain small. In fact, more and more, our nation is counting on community colleges to increase the number of individuals with credentials and to meet industry retraining needs. Community colleges are spending more time in the spotlight—and facing increased scrutiny—given the current status of the economy, low national college completion rates, and an increasing mismatch between available jobs and the skills of those available to work. Institutions across the country are responding in innovative ways, like the Career Pathways for a Green South colleges, but sustaining the services and training to meet these challenges will require colleges to move beyond short-term pilot programs; in other words, innovators across the college are expected find a way to scale up. But what does “scale” mean?
Some, More, Most

The late Greg Dees, founder and faculty director at Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business’ Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship (CASE), offered this helpful definition of scale: “increasing the impact a social-purpose organization produces to better match the magnitude of the social need or problem it seeks to address.”

Though the term is certainly more popular these days, the concept is not new; scaling up is part of continuous improvement and systems change. The goal must be not just short-term training projects, but changing institutional practices so that colleges go from serving some students with effective programs to expanding those practices so they’re serving more students, and finally serving most (if not all) of those who can benefit from the program—and meeting local demand for a skilled workforce.

The Challenge of Scale

There is no “one best way” to scale. Magnifying the impact of a successful program is more complicated than simply signing up more participants; the growth happens within a larger system. Local labor markets, available resources, student population, delivery method, and time constraints all insist on a unique approach. And even a well-designed, effective program needs the right positioning and allies or it will languish instead of grow. Institutional culture and politics can either smother or strengthen promising innovation. Navigating the politics of this sort of change is difficult within any organization, but a community college presents particular challenges of competing and interconnected systems. Colleges must determine what services to provide for whom, and how to do that equitably, not to mention how the institution is going to fund those services. CPGS colleges experienced some of these challenges long before they were thinking about possible expansion.

- **Deciding what services to offer.** Any workforce training program must be responsive to local labor markets and maintain up-to-date technology, equipment, and methods; this is particularly complicated in the green sector, where markets are still being defined. Central Piedmont Community College’s experience provides a good example. The college originally planned for their green builder program participants to complete a curriculum certificate and qualify to take the exam for LEED Green Associate certification. After consultation with their employer advisory committee, they determined that the Green Advantage certification was a more appropriate credential. The Green Advantage certification is designed for workers and craftsmen in the trades who construct and maintain buildings, while the LEED Green Associate certification emphasizes green design principles and management. While the LEED certification remained a possibility for trainees that pursued additional education, the Green Advantage certificate was a better match for the participants’ skills at program entry, directly related to the construction training curriculum, and better aligned with the needs of potential employers in the construction industry.

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• **Deciding whom to serve.** The Pathways Out of Poverty grant program had particularly prescriptive eligibility requirements: participants were to be residents of high-poverty neighborhoods as determined by U.S. Census data. In addition, there were specific demographic requirements related to income, educational attainment, or criminal record. Some colleges initially struggled to fill classes. Often students lived within the geographic boundaries, but didn’t fall into the demographic categories; in other instances, students met all the demographic requirements, but lived just outside the geographic boundary. All of the CPGS colleges had to develop targeted recruitment strategies and invest significant contact hours with community organizations in order to maintain full classes. The lesson here: without a recruitment plan in place—or the flexibility to change eligibility requirements—it could be difficult to find enough participants for a pilot, let alone a scaled-up program.

• **Deciding how to fund.** All of the CPGS colleges used grant funds to cover tuition costs for program participants. This was a great opportunity for participants (and a useful recruitment tool), but it isn’t sustainable long-term. However, using grant funds this way enabled colleges to enroll full classes and test out curriculum modifications and a variety of support services. They now have a better idea of what program elements are vital to participant success and are therefore best suited for further investment beyond the grant.

**First Steps to Scale**

Often, these challenges lead organizations to design small pilots, especially when resources are limited or of a short duration. While pilots can have positive outcomes for those who are able to take advantage of them, it is sometimes difficult to make that advantage available to all of the individuals who could benefit. The limited scope of pilots can be addressed by more intentional program design, in which the institution considers the feasibility of expansion from the very beginning, and makes plans to develop the organizational sophistication necessary to scale up. Such scalable program design requires organizational (and often external) support for risk-taking and possible failure.

The limited planning time and short, two-year grant period of Career Pathways for a Green South made this kind of scalable program design difficult. While the CPGS colleges were not able to immediately expand the grant-funded programs into campus-wide offerings at grant’s end, they identified opportunities to maintain elements of CPGS programs and thus scale and sustain the impact of this work at their institutions. In part, it’s a matter of definitions: what does “scale” mean for a particular college and for a particular program? It may begin with organizational changes that take a practice from some students to more students. Those efforts can generate evidence and support for additional incremental change that eventually brings the practice to all eligible students.

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Breadth and Depth
Scale can occur on two dimensions. An institution could go broad, reaching a larger number of individuals with the chosen program; the same institution could go deep, increasing the intensity of a program in order to increase the positive outcomes for a targeted group of individuals. The strategy—a combination of program, practices, and policy—depends on:

- the program aim (an employment pipeline issue vs. an effort to create demand for a new industry)
- the complexity of the program (a specialized industry niche vs. a program that integrates foundational skills that can apply to multiple sectors)
- an institution’s culture (integrated CTE and degree programs vs. distinct non-credit and credit offerings)
- the needs of the students participating (training incumbent workers vs. training ex-offenders in a re-entry program).

These two dimensions of scale played out in different ways among the CPGS colleges. There were some instances of a broad approach, with Mountain Empire Community College (MECC) refining an existing GED curriculum for a new weatherization content focus and new associate degree options, and Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College (OCtech) organizing new career tracks to bring more students into green technology programs. Trident Technical College (TTC) also explored ways to take their short-term weatherization training into the credit-side engineering program to reach more students. Examples of scaling deep include Central Piedmont Community College’s (CPCC) addition of green content to existing integrated systems technology and construction program tracks. TTC also enhanced their curricula with a Building Performance Institute (BPI) certification option for mobile homes and historic homes. OCtech expanded the supportive services available by offering expungement workshops to students with criminal records.

Going from More to Most
There is more to scaling impact than just breadth, depth, and making small changes at the margins of short-term programs. MDC has developed a guide for community colleges that are expanding pilot programs into larger, sustainable efforts: More to Most: Scaling Effective Community College Practices. CPGS colleges used some of the tools in this guidebook to identify which program elements to expand and how to incorporate these elements into existing institutional practices. The comprehensive process outlined in More to Most helps colleges assess which programs are ripe for expansion, and gives direction on how to create a scale-up plan—and it’s all designed to dovetail with planning structures already in place.
More to Most includes ready-to-use guides to help rally support, evaluate programs, and select a scaling strategy that’s appropriate for the institution, including:

- a stakeholder analysis to determine the appropriate team composition
- guidelines for reflection on past successes or failures and consideration of current supports and constraints
- templates for building logic models, designing evaluation plans, and comparing/contrasting program outcomes
- guiding questions to set up a scaling strategy and a feasibility assessment to help prioritize the actions necessary for implementation

The flowchart on the next page presents an approach to making the scale-up decision. More to Most explores these steps in detail, with suggestions about how to make these decisions at an institution. A brief description of each step follows.
Making the Scale-up Decision

1. Choose Program for Possible Expansion
2. Determine Program Value
3. Determine Scaling Strategy
4. Determine Feasibility
5. Make the Go/No-Go Decision

- **GO**: Make the work plan
- **NO GO**: Rethink scaling strategy or consider alternative program
Determine program value: Begin by defining the problem and the desired outcome; then, determine the value of a particular response. The program slated for scale should have shown promise in addressing the problem, and it should align with institutional priorities. This would also be the time to look at local labor market information to verify that there is sufficient demand (current or projected) to warrant additional training. More to Most includes a look at logic models, return-on-investment calculations, and a case example from Kingsborough Community College.

Determine scaling strategy: Next, select a scaling strategy, considering the questions of breadth and depth described earlier (expanding the number of individuals reached vs. increasing the intensity of a program). Again, this might involve adding sections at an existing location, taking effective practices to additional sites, or offering professional development that increases the number of individuals who can teach a particular course or use a particular methodology. This section of More to Most considers how different scaling strategies intersect, how to evaluate strategies through an equity lens, and a case example from the Academy for College Excellence.

Determine feasibility: Each strategy will have unique institutional implications, so it’s important to carefully consider the resources (human and financial), relationships, and infrastructure required to begin and sustain expansion. To help make this assessment, More to Most includes the SCALERS framework. Created by Paul Bloom of Duke University’s Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship, SCALERS identifies seven organizational capabilities that support successful expansion: staffing, communication, alliance-building, lobbying, earnings generation, replicating impact, and stimulating market forces³. MDC has translated the model for community colleges. The following table displays our modified definitions:

SCALERS at the Community College

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<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Staffing</td>
<td>The effectiveness of the implementation team at assembling resources at their disposal to meet staffing needs, including administration, faculty, staff, and student employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating</td>
<td>The effectiveness with which the college is able to articulate clear goals and persuade faculty, staff, students, and community stakeholders to adopt and support the strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alliance-Building</td>
<td>The effectiveness with which the college is able to engage the necessary parties, forming alliances that support the strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobbying/Demonstrating Impact</td>
<td>The effectiveness with which the college is able to demonstrate to institutional, state, and federal decision makers that strategies have substantial benefits relative to costs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Earnings Generation/Resource Generation</td>
<td>The effectiveness with which the college manages and secures resources to sustain the strategy’s infrastructure—revenue, planning, staffing, space, technology, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Replicating Impact</td>
<td>The effectiveness with which the college develops institutional expertise and commitment to support quality implementation and continuation of an expanded strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulating Market Forces/Sustaining Engagement</td>
<td>The effectiveness with which the college can create incentives that encourage college leadership, faculty, staff, and students to participate in and value the strategy</td>
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*More to Most* includes a case example that applies the framework to a program expansion effort at Chaffey College; we can also look at how the SCALERS were deployed at CPGS colleges:

- **Staffing:** CPCC made changes to their staffing plan early on when they realized they needed dedicated recruitment staff to identify individuals that met eligibility requirements for the USDOL grant.

- **Communicating:** MECC found additional resources for their program participants by joining a local employer advisory council; while current participants benefited, this relationship will continue beyond the grant period and establish new connections for the college as a whole.

- **Alliance-building:** OCtech worked with a variety of local community-based organizations and state agencies to provide expungement workshops; these workshops have now been opened to students outside of the green technology program.

- **Lobbying:** OCtech demonstrated the impact of the green technology programs and was able to secure funding and support for a new energy park, opening additional training opportunities for their students.

- **Earnings Generation:** TTC used the success of their weatherization training program to secure additional grant funding for related programs, including the weatherization of historic homes, a significant part of the housing stock in Charleston.
• Replicating Impact: CPCC explored ways to incorporate job search and career coaching techniques they provided for their program participants into the college’s career center.

• Stimulating Market Forces: TTC worked closely with the Sustainability Institute and local contractors to generate demand for weatherization services—and thus, generate demand for their program graduates.

Each driver can influence the expansion process, though one may be more important than another in a particular situation. The SCALERS also overlap during the design and execution of a scaling strategy. More to Most suggests ways to strengthen organizational capacity if the initial assessment of the institution’s facility with a certain driver uncovers gaps.

Scaling as Sustainability

In order to see long-term change in credential attainment and employment numbers, institutions must be able to sustain quality programming while reaching more people. CPGS colleges showed that even short-term programs can be testing grounds for improved policies and practices that have long-lasting effect on institutions and students. Incorporating this learning into current practice and future planning can become a continuous improvement process that allows them to scale the impact of innovative Career Pathways for a Green South programming—strengthening both the colleges and their local economies. The colleges did this by:

• Taking CPGS program elements to a broader student body

• Continuing to offer curriculum enhanced with “green” skills

• Establishing new career tracks that continue beyond the grant

• Exploring ways to integrate curricula from short-term, non-credit programs into semester-based programs in the college’s credit programs

If approached thoughtfully, the process of scaling up can lead to reflection about the expertise that an institution develops in the midst of expansion. Here are some questions to consider:

• What has the institution learned in going from serving some students to reaching more students that will help get to most students who can benefit?

• What new organizational capacities have been developed? What capacities have been strengthened?

• How will this kind of planning be institutionalized so that it becomes a part of the way the college approaches any new program?
Scaling impact within the complex system of a community college requires continued adaptation, incorporation of new ideas, and refinement of existing programs. The lessons from CPGS colleges and the tools in *More to Most* can be integrated into program review structures, budget allocation procedures, and design processes to fundamentally change the way a college approaches any new endeavor. We hope that this reflection will enable institutions to respond effectively to the next challenge, the next seemingly intractable problem, and the next solution that generates positive outcomes for community college students.