Using Performance Measurement to Inform:
A look at the Recovery Act data system

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 $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 its Career Pathways for a Green South (CPGS) initiative, MDC coordinated a learning network and provided technical assistance to community colleges and their partners in four communities training 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 second in a series of lessons learned over the course of the initiative, ranging from community college responses to economic crises to scaling the impact of effective programming. Visit mdcinc.org to download the other papers in the series.

Moving Toward Outcomes

The four community colleges in MDC’s Career Pathways for a Green South (CPGS) developed occupational training programs to train people living in poverty and disconnected from the workforce for green jobs. The crux of CPGS, however, involved the expansion of services offered by community colleges by connecting occupational training programs to support services and job placement activities—roles with which colleges are less familiar. Community colleges were asked to recruit from communities that are often left behind by economic opportunity—people who did not think college was a viable option—and provide tuition and additional supports to help them enroll and complete an educational program.

To measure student outcomes and identify interventions, MDC and our partner colleges used a web-based data system developed by the USDOL Employment and Training Administration that collected individual participant data. The Recovery Act Database, or RAD, as it is commonly referred, is an administrative records database that tracks an individual from enrollment in a green training program to employment. The measures collected in the database are one way to show the connection between the money spent on training and employment outcomes. The RAD system, however, is much more than a grant requirement. Over the life of the grant, MDC used RAD to inform and guide the processes used to achieve the proposed outcomes of the grant. The RAD helped MDC and its partner colleges look at participant trends, measure progress toward goals, assess resources needed to fulfill grant requirements, and document accomplishments. An exploration of how Career Pathways for a Green South used these data reinforces the importance of data-informed design and decision making in any community college program.
An Aggregated View

The RAD system provided MDC and its partner colleges with a snapshot of how close we were to meeting the proposed outcomes during various stages of the project. During the course of the grant, the USDOL Pathways Out of Poverty program funded training and services for 671 participants across the four CPGS college campuses. Figure 1 shows the final participant level outcomes of the grant against the targets identified in the grant proposal.

Figure 1 - Comparison of Participant Level Outcome Measures: Actual vs. Goals

Source: Recovery Act Database and MDC

One of our major goals was to provide support services, education, and training that resulted in at least 82 percent of the Pathways participants completing a green training program that led to an occupational credential. Although our final results were less than anticipated, several factors artificially depressed the numbers presented in Figure 1. When the grant wrapped up in early 2013, slightly more than 60 percent of the 671 participants had completed training; this outcome is only half of the story. While RAD presents a snapshot of where we were in terms of meeting our proposed grant outcomes, it unfortunately does not provide context for what went on behind the scenes at each college. For example, two of the colleges offered participants longer-term green training programs that led to associate’s degrees. Due to timing of the grant and program length, several students at Mountain Empire Community College and Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College completed training after the grant period ended. Thus, some 80 Pathways participants (20 students at Mountain Empire Community College and 60 students at Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College) continued working toward the completion of their associate’s degree after the completion of the grant.
Final outcomes related to obtaining and retaining employment is especially hard for most colleges to collect after a student graduates. Community colleges are organized to provide education and training, not to monitor outcomes of graduates for a prolonged period of time. Our partner colleges found it very difficult to maintain contact with students once they graduated, especially when dealing with a population that faced several economic challenges that often resulted in housing insecurity and lack of consistent phone or internet services. Through the RAD, the four colleges in our program reported similar findings: program graduates often moved without leaving a forwarding phone number or address, which made follow-up on employment and retention difficult. After several attempts by college and MDC staff to follow up with green job training graduates, our Career Pathways for a Green South team decided to approach employment follow-up a different way.

College staff reached out to training instructors and other classmates, who often maintained a relationship with recent graduates, to reconnect with green jobs graduates. Two of our partner colleges worked with state agencies to determine if a student was (1) employed and (2) maintained employment for two subsequent quarters. Follow-up services for Central Piedmont Community College were outsourced to the North Carolina Department of Commerce Division of Employment Security. This agreement allowed CPCC to track student employment if they obtained a job covered under the unemployment insurance laws of the state. Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College also worked with their state labor department to identify employment and retention outcomes for their students. Because some of the retention and follow-up information is done off-site, and because employment data is reported on a quarterly basis, there is a considerable lag in the documentation of this information. Based on information available at the end of the grant period, 52 percent of the program graduates obtained employment. Of those that found jobs, more than half retained their job status for at least two quarters after their initial hire.

**Assessing Resources**

The RAD system also provided us with an aggregated look at the participants being served throughout the life of the program. Colleges documented participants’ demographic characteristics to ensure that everyone receiving services met eligibility requirements. This information allowed us to better understand who was being served in the training programs. RAD captured nine demographic categories: high school dropout, eligible veteran, unemployed, disadvantaged worker within areas of poverty, person with a disability, limited English proficiency, dislocated workers, incumbent workers, and individuals with a criminal record). Among Career Pathways for a Green South colleges, the average student served was male, black or African American, between the ages of 18 and 34, unemployed at the time of enrollment, and was likely to have a criminal record.

The detailed demographic data on enrollees gave grantees the ability to anticipate the types of supportive services the participants would need in order to stay in school and complete a training program. For example, high school dropouts were likely to need basic skills training to sit for the general equivalency diploma, while dislocated workers often required intensive case management in order to transition the skills used in their last job to an entirely new industry. More than two-thirds of the participants in the RAD system received some type of supportive service. The number of
services any one participant received was dependent on each person’s circumstance; the most frequently provided service was transportation assistance, such as commuting to and from school and job interviews. At times, supportive services included preparing students for training and employment by providing appropriate work boots, safety equipment, and tools. Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College noticed early on that many students had criminal records. The college offered expungement assessments and, where applicable, funds were used to expunge criminal records of participants to increase their employability.

At Central Piedmont Community College, every new Career Pathways for a Green South entrant received the same set of foundational services: assessment, basic skills training, and case management. The type of service varied with the participant and changes in the economy. During periods when gas prices were increasing, Central Piedmont Community College used funds to purchase gas cards to assist students traveling to and from training classes. Between July and September 2011, the college found a significant increase in students requiring transportation support. Based on past trends in supportive services and expecting to see an increase in need, the staff at the college looked for other ways to assist students. Central Piedmont Community College reached out to the Department of Social Services Transportation Support program and, as a result, 15 of the Career Pathways for a Green South students were enrolled in the DSS program during that quarter; qualifying program participants are eligible for bus passes, gas cards, car registration fees, and mechanical repairs. Assessing these trends in supportive service needs helped colleges adjust to serving a disadvantaged population. By tracking services provided to the Career Pathways for a Green South students, the colleges could project the need for additional resources for similar services over the course of the grant.

**Measuring Progress**

As the colleges shifted their focus from recruitment and training to the final phase of the grant, more emphasis was placed on job development activities. The depressed job market, especially in the construction sector, made placement challenging. Employment numbers were substantially lower than expected. By the end of the grant, 222 participants were placed into unsubsidized employment. Half of those placed in unsubsidized employment obtained jobs in training-related fields. Many of the participants who found employment in the construction sector were working as energy efficiency building and retrofitting technicians.

This program helped more than 341 unemployed individuals gain skills to prepare them for employment in the green sector in their regions. Most of these individuals received a certificate and several attained an associate’s degree in a green-relevant instructional program. Over the course of the grant, 50 percent of those who were unemployed at the time of enrollment were placed into employment—a staggering accomplishment in regional economies with significant unemployment rates, still struggling to reconstruct after the Great Recession. These participants are better prepared to take advantage of “greening” occupations—existing occupations that require enhanced skills, knowledge, and credentials due to the impact of the green economy activities and changes in technologies. Table 1 on the next page lists the outcomes for participants who completed a training program at one of the four Career Pathways for a Green South institutions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th># Completed</th>
<th>Associate's Degree</th>
<th>Certificate</th>
<th>Received Additional Credential</th>
<th># Placed in Employment</th>
<th># Placed in Training-Related Employment</th>
<th>% of Completed Placed in Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eligible Veterans</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>59</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limited English Proficient</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persons with a Disability</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployment Individuals</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dislocated Workers</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent Workers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals with a Criminal Record</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>43</td>
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<tr>
<td>High-School Dropouts</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>68</td>
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<td>Disadvantaged Workers within Areas of High Poverty</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These numbers cannot be summed across demographics as many of the participants fall into several categories and are counted more than once.

Source: Recovery Act Database and MDC
The RAD system, as with many performance measurement databases, is concerned with measuring the outcomes identified during the design of the grant program. The limitation of the RAD system is that intermediate outcomes or indicators are not considered during program design and, therefore, aren’t recognized successful outcomes. In RAD, the outcome measures for participants who completed a training program are captured and quantified, but students that choose to continue their education, a positive choice that will hopefully result in higher earnings in the long-run, are not included in the final counts.

There is a similar conundrum when it comes to employment outcomes. In RAD, a job is a job—either training-related or not training-related. The system doesn’t capture career advancement or entrepreneurial ventures as measurable outcomes. The lesson MDC will take from this: no database will ever be able to tell the whole story. It’s important to know what the data can tell and then ensure that, when necessary, you find complementary ways to fill in the blanks to complete the picture of your program and results.

**Documenting Accomplishments**
While RAD was intended primarily as a way for the USDOL to track grantee performance, another great benefit has been the ability to document and share success stories. MDC, as the administrative and fiscal agent of the grant, relied on colleges to fill in the details regarding program participants outside of the grant outcomes. Colleges often used the notes feature in RAD to inform us of student success stories not revealed in the numbers. For example, colleges were diligent in the documentation of additional credentials earned and decisions to embark on new educational opportunities. This was an invaluable way to highlight the real purpose of this grant: to help those often left behind by economic crisis and give them an opportunity to rebuild their lives.

**Conclusion**
Overall, the RAD system allowed our multisite team to track each individual’s journey through a green training program to credentialing and employment while documenting some key milestones along the way. Using the system was instrumental for reviewing our performance on key measures outlined in our proposal as well as identifying where we needed to focus our efforts during each phase of the project. RAD also strengthened communication about performance measures and shared successes between sub-grantee and grantee. While the system was not perfect, its key function of helping grantees document performance helped MDC and our partner colleges describe aggregate and individual progress toward the ultimate goal of getting individuals trained for and employed in the green sector.

Although the use of RAD was specific to this USDOL grant, the lessons learned about measuring program performance can be carried over to other efforts. Capturing demographic information, setting performance metrics, measuring our progress toward goals, and documenting quantitative and qualitative outcomes may seem like overwhelming tasks, but aggregating this information will
help to improve how organizations collaborate and best manage resources. This approach to performance measurement can help organizations communicate the full story of how their programs improved the lives of those often left behind and separated from opportunity.