# H-1B TECHHIRE

## SUCCESS STORY

# MIDLANDS TECHHIRE

A 'Many Hands' Approach to Student Support

## INTRODUCTION

There is wide agreement that economic mobility requires schooling and credentials beyond a high school diploma.[1] One of the most promising fields in which students can attain career-boosting credentials is information technology. Training in IT-related disciplines can launch people into well-paying jobs without the time and expense of a four-year college degree.

The U.S. Department of Labor's H-1B TechHire Partnership grants program responds to that opportunity by supporting accelerated training in IT skills and credentials for individuals facing barriers to employment. To date, the experience of the 39 TechHire Partnership sites is promising, with thousands of participants throughout the United States earning IT credentials and landing jobs or internships. But technical preparation is only part of the formula for success. A participant's ability to surmount barriers is just as important.

This brief describes promising practices in participant support at one H-1B TechHire site, Midlands Technical College (MTC) in Columbia, South Carolina. MTC's experience demonstrates that jump-starting a career in IT requires more than access to coursework and credentials. It requires a holistic approach to supporting participants on multiple levels with multiple "touches." MTC's TechHire program illustrates how such an approach can aid persistence, retention, and success.

Providing participants with intensive support is an accepted practice in many fields, from workforce development, higher education, incumbent worker training and career services, to human services. The people who provide such support have many titles, including coach, case

manager, counselor, mentor, and navigator. Whatever title they use, they all share a commitment to engaging with individuals to identify barriers, build on strengths, and foster persistence. Such support practices, performed effectively, contribute to economic mobility and educational success.[2]

Support practices have evolved to better ensure that nontraditional students and disadvantaged workers achieve labor market success. They address barriers arising from low incomes, negative educational experiences, and inequalities associated with race, gender, and/or socioeconomic class. People who need support may lack the confidence to persist in challenging educational or training programs and often don't have role models, such as friends or relatives who have had success in higher education or professional employment. They may also be preoccupied with immediate concerns, such as housing, health care, and utility bills, and longer-term challenges, such as raising families or caring for elderly relatives.

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Midlands Technical College operates six campuses in the three-county region surrounding South Carolina's capital, Columbia. Its noncredit Corporate and Continuing Education division administers its H-1B TechHire program, Midlands TechHire. The program provides training for computer technical support and network programming occupations through accelerated "boot camp" sessions lasting 8 to 32 weeks. It also offers interpersonal skills training, preparation for IT certification exams, and internships. As with other TechHire grant sites, it primarily serves young people between the ages of 17 and 29 who face barriers to training and employment. It is also open to a smaller population of employed low-wage adults who need to upgrade their skills. A four-person team runs the program, augmented by industry-based instructors and a range of partners, including employer-advisors, nonprofit service providers, the region's workforce development board, and a nonprofit workforce intermediary organization, IT-ology.

The student support services that Midlands TechHire provides are distinguished by these features:

- **Comprehensiveness.** The MTC team connects with students at every stage of the training process, from recruitment and application through orientation, instruction, examinations, career counseling, job placement, and beyond.

- **Contact.** At each stage, team members actively engage with students, instructors, internship sponsors, and employers. They stress early communication to identify challenges and ways to address them. They emphasize face-to-face contact because it provides an opportunity to motivate students and promote self-confidence, but they also employ other modes of communication, including email, texts, phone calls, and group messages.

- **Community.** Participants are enrolled in cohorts, and they are encouraged to study for courses and certification exams together and support one another.

- **Multiple "touches."** Each member of the support team has a distinct role to play, but collectively, their activities in support of students overlap.

- **Message**. When team members engage with students, they try to encourage them, but also remind them that they are expected to take personal responsibility for their performance. In describing their work, team members echo common themes of empathy, humility, and support for participants. One described the approach as "servant leadership."

- **Continuous improvement.** The team members frequently discuss ways to enhance student success. They share updates on students' struggles and consider changes to the program.

The Midlands TechHire team members take a holistic approach to serving participants. They recognize that the students are not just participants in an IT boot camp but also people who have lives outside of the classroom. It is also holistic in that all stages of the process are interconnected and make up a continuum of support. The team members strengthen that web of support with an overlapping and collaborative "many hands" approach to working with the students.

## ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITIES

The Midlands TechHire team is built to maximize student support, as reflected in the job titles and responsibilities of each role. The four team member roles are comprised of a project director, a retention advocate, and two job readiness coaches. The titles "job readiness coach" and "retention advocate" reflect workforce expertise and service responsibilities.

In addition to serving as team leader and grant manager, the Project Director engages directly with students, counseling individuals and leading group information sessions. The Retention Advocate plays a lead role in assessing and advising applicants. This role also provides intensive services to participants, including case management and referrals, as well as coaching to help them address challenges. The Job Readiness Coaches provide career coaching and counseling, résumé development, job search assistance, exam preparation, and internship and job search services. In addition, one of the job readiness coaches teaches interpersonal skills classes and some IT courses. This person also recruits employers for mock interviews and résumé workshops.

While the team members have specific duties, they emphasize that "no one sits in a silo." All four of them work with students individually, and they all have prior experience in workforce development. Two have worked in public workforce agencies and one Job Readiness Coach is a former high school career coach and recruiter. They take turns leading information and orientation sessions, and they all take part in team meetings to review applicants, address participants' challenges, and fine-tune the program.

Midlands TechHire staff members take advantage of what the college has to offer. In addition to enlisting IT faculty members to teach classes, they draw upon MTC's counseling and career services. They are supported by the provost and vice provost, and by the school's Corporate and Continuing Education (CCE) division. The academic program director of the CCE division is on the leadership team for the grant and serves as a TechHire instructor.

The four staff members say it's important to have empathy for the participants, and they draw on their individual life stories to fulfill that responsibility. For example, one staff member thinks "I am that student" when he looks at participants and recalls the challenges he faced as a young man who became a father before completing high school and, later, as an injured veteran. Another staff member says "college wasn't in the picture" when he was growing up in a working class family. After working in sales, he returned to school and earned an IT degree, taking the same computer tech certification course offered to Midlands TechHire students (which he now

teaches). Meanwhile, the Retention Advocate was a human resource professional and worked in a career center helping people with diverse needs.

## TECHHIRE SERVICE CONTINUUM

The TechHire team members maintain a holistic, participant-centered focus as the students progress through the program. Here's a look at the things they do at each stage to encourage persistence, retention, and successful entry into an IT career path:

### Application and Assessment

Midlands TechHire recruits participants through a variety of channels, including community information sessions. The team works with regional partners, including the workforce system, vocational rehabilitation and nonprofit organizations, business associations, and schools to disseminate information, locate candidates, and identify contacts who are trusted by youth. Graduates of previous programs serve as peer recruiters. Team members screen applicants for basic eligibility and previous experience or interest in IT. The applicants also complete an assessment to gauge their aptitude for IT and their ability to persist through the program.

Applicants who do well on the assessment are invited in for one-on-one advisement sessions. The Retention Advocate sees those meetings as ice-breakers that offer a way to assess candidates' motivation and interest levels, and identify potential barriers, such as homelessness or transportation issues. The team then puts together a service strategy, and participants define their goals and develop individual education plans based on their backgrounds, education and training goals, and preferred IT courses of study.

Team members acknowledge that accepting some candidates can be a gamble. They may, for example, be extremely introverted, lack detailed career goals, or have previous involvement with the criminal justice system. But given time, most participants blossom and enjoy success.

### Orientation

Candidates who are accepted attend mandatory orientation sessions where they are introduced to the curriculum and the support services. They also learn about the program's rules and behavioral expectations. They must agree to attend at least 75 percent of the classes and to treat class "like going to work"—meaning they're even expected to show up early. The message to students is "It's about your goals," but they are also assured that the TechHire team will support them. Moreover, because the program is cohort-based, the orientation gives the participants a chance to meet one another and begin making connections.

The next steps along the continuum, the training itself and the intensive support services, work in tandem and are mutually supportive. That's because the team recognizes that students who encounter personal or academic challenges may need support to complete the training. The team conducts training and provides supports in the same spirit: meeting students where they are.

## Training

MTC's TechHire boot camp programs are challenging, particularly for students who lack prior IT experience or education, and those with little or no college coursework. Some participants have had negative experiences with school. As an instructor, the Job Readiness Coaches try to address those barriers engaging participants before and after class to get to know them and determine where they might need assistance. They also observe student behavior patterns, such as attendance and engagement with the curriculum, and share updates with the team members, who can intervene to address problems. In addition, all of the team members visit the classrooms "to let them know we're here."

## Supportive Services

The most common challenges that Midlands TechHire students encounter involve a lack of motivation or self-confidence. The program's Retention Advocate says students typically enter the program filled with optimism, but later feel overwhelmed. Brief conversations with any of the team members can help, giving the staffers insight into the students' struggles and reminding the students that they have people looking out for them. One Job Readiness Coach once had to counsel a participant experiencing a death in the family. Other problems are more straightforward. Students with demanding work schedules can shift from day to evening classes. Students who get sick or suffer medical emergencies can make up a course at a later time. Others may need referrals to college counselors or outside services, such as legal aid, housing assistance, child care, or mental health resources.

## Training Follow-Up

As students finish up their IT classes, the Job Readiness Coach helps them identify gaps in their understanding and leads study sessions to help them brush up on topics they are struggling with. He offers this assistance because completion of the coursework represents a pivotal point for Midlands TechHire students—particularly for those enrolled in computer technician courses, who must pass certification exams in order to land jobs or internships.

Keeping participants motivated to take the certification exams, and then helping them pass, has been a challenge. At one point, just 40 percent of the students were taking the exams, so MTC put recruitment on pause to focus on retention and exam success. Team members asked the students why they weren't signing up for the exam. The students cited test anxiety and career uncertainty and added that they needed more structure. To provide structure, the team set a 30-day deadline for taking the initial exam and offered the students intensive support. The Job Readiness Coach designed study sessions focused on specific objectives and knowledge areas, and students studied with peers. Students who experience testing anxiety can take a practice test. The team members also give the students "cram books" and suggest helpful Youtube videos and other resources. Some students audit classes to brush up on the material.

The changes seem to have helped: 60 percent of the students now take the test.

In another move designed to improve the transition from classroom to career launch—and to maintain connections with participants—the team made follow-up meetings mandatory. These meetings include students from multiple cohorts, including successful graduates who can serve as role models. The meetings also give the team members a chance to brief more recent students on the importance of the certification exams and make them aware of the services

available to help them pass the exams. And participants can use the follow-up sessions to re-evaluate their progress and reconnect with peers to set up study groups.

## Employment Services

While participants can receive career assistance at any time, the team delivers most employment services after course completion. The Job Readiness Coach is the primary contact for "career success advisement," though the other team members assist. The services include help with goal-setting, résumé workshops, mock interview sessions, and assistance with job and internship searches. Employer partners sometimes participate in career fairs, mock interview sessions, and résumé workshops. And as is the case in all phases of the program, the team members also coach participants to help them confront their anxieties, identify challenges, and "unveil the value within themselves," as one coach puts it. The team encourages students to tout their TechHire accomplishments when they pitch themselves to employers.

## CONCLUSION

Midlands TechHire is currently on target to achieve its performance goals for year 3 of the program, which wraps up in June 2019. As of December 2018, the program had reached 79% of their benchmark target for *individuals served* with another 6 months to go in the program year. In addition, the program had already met 88% of its benchmark for *participants entered into training or job training* and 81% of its benchmark for *credentials obtained*. Local employers say that people who complete the program are more grounded and have more relevant skills than graduates of four-year institutions. While those outcomes cannot be attributed directly to the team's support practices, they speak to the quality of the program.

Participants' stories also reflect the program's quality: One participant received a job offer 9 weeks into a 12-week internship. Another launched an IT startup that the local Chamber of Commerce recognized as a top new small business. She is now hiring TechHire interns.

Midlands team members acknowledge that TechHire remains a work in progress. They still struggle to ensure that participants take, and pass, the certification exam. Motivation is also an ongoing challenge. And because their positions, and the program itself, are limited by grant funding, they are looking for ways to sustain their efforts within the college. Despite those constraints—which are typical of workforce and educational programs—Midlands TechHire illustrates how a holistic "many hands," or multiple-touch, participant-centered approach to student support yields promising results.

This is not the first Midlands initiative to weave wraparound support services into program design. In September 2017, a full evaluation report of another initiative, BOOST (Better Occupational Outcomes with Simulation Training), was completed. The evaluation closely examined the impact of support services on participant success and found that those individuals receiving support services completed more courses and earned more credentials than those that did not. BOOST was funded through the DOL-ETA's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) program, To read the full report click here.

For additional resources focused on the importance of support services to participant success and how to build partnerships to effectively integrate these into program design, please see Appendix A.

## APPENDIX A – Additional TAACCCT Publications and Resources

The following resources provide additional examples of a variety of approaches to incorporate comprehensive support services into program design to help students and program participants overcome barriers to education and employment. Many of these examples stem from success stories and lessons learned throughout the TAACCCT initiative. To learn more about TAACCCT and access TAACCCT's technical assistance resources on WorkforceGPS, please click here.

### TAACCCT TA Resources

The Case for Expanding Navigators in Mississippi to Support Adult Learners. In addition to telling a great story about scaling and sustaining the navigator model across a state (in part through alignment with WIOA), this case study also contains useful resources, such as consortium member "student support toolkits and plans" (see Resources section, pp. 14-15).

SkillsCommons showcase on TAACCCT innovations (Field Guide of TAACCCT Innovations) organizes 30 innovations/projects into three categories, one of which includes "Strengthening Student Support Services to Student & Worker Outcomes.

### TAACCCT Project Highlights:

**Retraining the Gulf Coast through Information Technology Pathways (Gulf Coast IT):**
- Baldwin, G., & Richie, D. (2016). Strategies for transformative change: Using navigators to support student success. Champaign, IL: Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, https://occrl.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider4/tci/strategies-for-transformative-change/gulf-coast-it.pdf?sfvrsn=5d2db689_4
- Final Implementation Evaluation Report (2016), which includes a chapter titled "Comprehensive Student Supports and the Provision/Coordination of Services": https://www.skillscommons.org/handle/taaccct/15559

**Gulf Coast IT, TRAC-7, and Colorado Online Energy Training Consortium (COETC)**: Kirby, C. L. (2016). Building capacity: Expanding student support services. Champaign, IL: Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED574529.pdf

**MoHealthWINs**
- Kirby, C. L. (2016). Expanding student support services. Champaign, IL: Office of Community College Research and Leadership, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED574597.pdf
- Richie, D., & Fox, H. L. (2014). Strategies for transformative change: Intrusive student support and contextualized developmental education. Champaign, IL: Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, https://occrl.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider4/tci/strategies-for-transformative-change/intrusive-support.pdf?sfvrsn=98e6b289_6

**Oregon CASE**: Andrews, C. & Peacock, M. (2015). Strategies for transformative change: Building intentional partnerships to sustain student success. Champaign, IL: Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. https://occrl.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider4/tci/strategies-for-transformative-change/case.pdf

**Air Washington**: Simmons, D., Cox, D., Lyons-Holstine, K., & Richie, D. (2015). Strategies for transformative change: Collaborating on a sectoral approach to strengthen workforce training. Champaign, IL: Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. https://occrl.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider4/tci/strategies-for-transformative-change/air-washington.pdf

**Colorado Online Energy Training Consortium**: Fox, H. L., & Richie, D. (2014). Strategies for transformative change: Developmental education redesign. Champaign, IL: Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. https://occrl.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider4/tci/strategies-for-transformative-change/dev-ed-redesign.pdf?sfvrsn=a4e6b289_4

*Lessons from TAACCCT Round One Consortia: The Community College Transformative Change Initiative (TCI).* Includes case studies of several grantees providing student support services. https://occrl.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider4/tci/scalingprofiles.pdf

**SkillsCommons Resources:**

SkillsCommons is the world's largest free, online library of Open Educational Resources (OER) containing learning and program support materials for job-driven workforce development.

Created by the TAACCCT program in partnership with California State University/MERLOT, the SkillsCommons repository includes industry-aligned curricula, career maps, outreach materials, and more. These materials are licensed under Creative Commons (CC BY) to be freely reused, adapted, and distributed.

SkillsCommons contains more than 12,000 materials from a wide range of industries and programs, and has seen more than 1.5 million downloads to date. The repository continues through Cal State/MERLOT.

A good place to start exploring the extensive collection of OER on SkillsCommons is on the site's Showcases page, which organizes an array of resources around such categories as work-based learning and apprenticeship, effective employer engagement strategies, project outcomes, and a field guide of TAACCCT innovations.

## ENDNOTES

[1] Anthony P.Carnavale, Jeff Strohl, Neil Ridley, and Artem Gulish, "Three Educational Pathways to Good Jobs: High School, Middle Skills, and Bachelor's Degree," Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2018.

[2] There is a broad literature on outcomes from coaching and related supports. For example, a randomized evaluation of Inside Track, a method of individualized coaching of college students focusing on the students' lives outside of school, found coaching to be the "leading influencer on student persistence and retention." Coached students were 5 percentage points more likely to persist in college, and the effects were found to continue for 18 to 24 months after the coaching ended, resulting in a 15 percent increase in retention among the three-college sample. Eric P. Bettinger and Rachel B. Baker, "The Effects of Student Coaching in College: An Evaluation of a Randomized Experiment in Student Mentoring," Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis 36, No. 1 (March 1, 2014): 3-19. And an evaluation of Oregon CASE (Credentials, Acceleration, and Support for Employment), a training initiative at a consortium of community colleges, found that CASE students receiving classroom-based coaching and support services had an 89 percent completion rate, compared to 67 percent for other participants. Bob Watrus and Heather Fercho, "Oregon Credentials, Acceleration and Support for Employment (CASE) Evaluation Report: Results, Key Issues and Implications for Policy, Practice and Systems," September 2015.