H-1B TECHHIRE PARTNERSHIP GRANT

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Brief: Designing Impactful Coaching and Intensive Service Models

Introduction

Several H-1B TechHire Partnership grantees utilized intensive coaching and other short-term, intensive services to assist participants who possessed some of the skills to be successful in H-1B occupations such as IT, advanced manufacturing, and health care, but needed additional assistance to prepare for and secure employment. Intensive coaching approaches are employment-focused, and coaches typically support students in setting individualized goals, provide motivation and feedback, promote accountability, and empower students to take ownership of their training and future careers. Coaches aim to help students use and strengthen executive skills, succeed in their training and in the workplace, and move toward economic security.[1] The approach can also include a variety of services, such as supplemental funds or referrals to partners, to help them meet basic needs like food, child care, or gasoline. These services aim to help individuals who may lack traditional qualifications, but have the skills necessary for employment in middle- and high-skill jobs.

This brief presents several key strategies for designing strong intensive-support models while highlighting core elements of this approach. It includes descriptions of successes and challenges TechHire grantees faced while implementing their coaching and other intensive service models. The brief ends with a grantee profile for **North Central Texas College** that provides deeper, on-the-ground insights into the implementation experience.

Promising Approaches to Designing Intensive Service Models

Coaching and other intensive service models are often developed to be flexible options that offer supportive services, coaching case management, and other intensive services to help individuals with barriers to employment to access, fully participate in, and complete education

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[1] Kristen Joyce and Sheena McConnell, *Employment Coaching: Working With Low-Income Populations to Use Self-Regulation Skills to Achieve Employment Goals* (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019), https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/employment-coaching-working-low-income-populations-use-self-regulation-skills-achieve.

and training opportunities. Models may rely on extensive community partnership networks that aid students in meeting basic needs such as transportation, child care, health care, housing, or food that may otherwise impede participation. In some programs, models incorporate research-informed coaching strategies to build trust and rapport between students and faculty. This approach can also help identify student needs early on, which can increase the likelihood of participation and retention in training opportunities.

A compilation of research and literature, and a synthesis of TechHire grantees' experiences, suggest that the following components play a key role in the success of coaching and other intensive support models:

- Efforts to build trust, rapport, and executive skills
- Student-centered goal setting and accountability measures
- Use of community partnerships to coordinate support services

Efforts to Build Trust, Rapport, and Executive Skills

Intensive coaching strategies focus on creating a sense of connection, rapport, and collaboration between coaches and students. Traditional program advisors, and in some cases faculty, are trained as coaches to act as motivators and supporters but do not direct students toward a specific path. Coaches aim to help students develop and strengthen their executive skills to succeed in the labor market. For TechHire grantees, trust building begins as soon as applicants walk through the door, through "get to know you" exercises and other types of assessments. These activities lay the groundwork to retain and engage students throughout training, as well as to learn of and address any challenges they may face along the way.[2] Key aspects of rapport building further include showing empathy, mentoring, and celebrating student accomplishments.

What Are Executive Skills?

Executive skills are the skills that individuals use to set and achieve goals. They include the ability to do the following:

- Plan
- Prioritize
- Initiate a task
- Manage one's time
- Get organized
- Sustain attention

See more in this document.

Emerging research suggests that self-regulatory or executive skills are a key component to entering and advancing in the workforce. These skills enable an individual to finish tasks, stay organized, and control emotions.[3] Stress, adversity, trauma, and/or poverty may impede one's ability to develop or call upon these skills.[4] While executive skills are developed in early

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[2] H-1B TechHire Program, *Engaging Youth TechHire Participants to Increase Retention* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 2019), https://h1btechhire.workforcegps.org/resources/2019/11/19/15/59/Engaging-Youth-Participants-to-Increase-Retention.

[3] Joyce and McConnell, *Employment Coaching*.

[4] Elizabeth W. Cavadel et al., *Self-Regulation and Goal Attainment: A New Perspective for Employment Programs* (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S.

childhood, they are malleable and can be cultivated, learned, and developed through practice; the more they are used, the stronger they become.[5] Additionally, research indicates that interventions can strengthen these capacities, and workforce and human service programs have used coaching techniques to strengthen executive skills, support student-driven goals, and ultimately improve employment outcomes.[6]

To support strong employment outcomes, research and literature suggest that the best way to improve executive skills is to simply practice them.[7] This may be supported through coach-student interactions that build, implement, and track each student's training plan; identify and set employment goals *(see page 43)*; and help the student prepare for and conduct job searches. Each requires students to draw upon their executive skills to avoid distractions, regulate emotions, initiate and complete tasks, organize and prioritize their thinking, and plan ahead.

An intensive coaching model is a foundational aspect of the TechHire program implemented by grantee **North Central Texas College (NCTC)**, based in Gainesville, Texas. Coaches at NCTC act as mentors to students and help them identify and navigate their chosen training paths. NCTC uses motivational interviewing techniques to build trust with participants and surface their needs. They attribute the success of this approach to a high degree of student engagement and retention, particularly among young people ages 17 to 29 *(see the grantee profile on page 31 for more information)*.

> **Motivational interviewing** is a goal-oriented, participant-centered approach to help students overcome obstacles to achieve positive behavior change. Coaches use conversational tactics—such as reflective listening, open-ended questions, empathy, and affirmations—to help motivate participants to achieve their goals.
>
> See more in this guide.

Student-Centered Goal Setting and Accountability Measures

Recognizing the need to build executive skills, especially among people who have experienced trauma or poverty, many TechHire grantees applied student-centered approaches to their coaching models. Such approaches challenge the more typical case management activities, which tend to focus on removing barriers and placing participants into training. Goal setting and accountability measures that are student-centered can help programs offer systematic guidance and support while building personal agency and an increased sense of responsibility and achievement. When students are challenged and

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Department of Health and Human Services, 2017), https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/self-regulation-and-goal-attainment-new-perspective-employment-programs.

[5] LaDonna Pavetti, *Using Executive Function and Related Principles to Improve the Design and Delivery of Assistance Programs for Disadvantaged Families.* (Washington, DC: Building Better Programs, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2015), https://socialinnovation.usc.edu/files/2014/12/Pavetti-Executive-Function.pdf.

[6] Nina Castells and James A. Riccio, *Executive Skills Coaching Plus Incentives in a Workforce Program*, (Washington, DC: MDRC, 2020), https://www.mdrc.org/publication/executive-skills-coaching-plus-incentives-workforce-program; Joyce and McConnell, *Employment Coaching*.

[7] Joyce and McConnell, *Employment Coaching*.

receive support to take control of their plans and track their own progress, they also build skills that can help them succeed in the workplace.[8]

Midlands Technical College, based in Columbia, South Carolina, holds students accountable for their own success from the moment they become engaged in the program. Staff members focus on developing trusting relationships with students through one-on-one advising sessions. These sessions occur early in the program so that staff members can learn more about students' goals, discuss any supportive services they may need (such as transportation or child care), and provide referrals for those services.[9]

Similarly, **NCTC** builds student agency through coaching sessions that encourage students to create their own paths to success based on long-term goals. Sessions focus on identifying skills, discovering interests, and setting educational and career goals for the grant period and beyond. Coaches and students work together to identify challenges, and coaches make connections to supportive services to address them. Within the TechHire program, NCTC offers funds for child care and supplies, among other needs. Coaches also help match students to internship opportunities and prepare them for interviews and employment.

Leveraging Community Partnerships to Coordinate Support Services

Recent research on workforce training programs has revealed that common challenges to participant retention and success include financial difficulties, a lack of child care, scheduling conflicts, caring for a family member, health concerns, and transportation. Such hurdles are consistent with the challenges that individuals with barriers to employment often experience.[10] While it is important for TechHire grantees to acknowledge and address these needs, they cannot address them alone or in a vacuum. As prior U.S. Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration grantees have found, establishing relationships with trusted community partners can help TechHire grantees connect participants with the supports needed to overcome challenges to participation and, later, employment. Partners may include community-based organizations or public agencies that provide specialized services such as accessible transportation, cash assistance, affordable housing, child care, and more. Partnerships are a two-way street and require time, effort, and coordination, but forming mutually beneficial partnerships makes for a more robust, high-value, and sustainable relationship.[11]

State Technical College of Missouri, based in Linn, Missouri, formed the partnerships needed to support students through their participation in a local group called the *Unmet Needs*

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[8] Castells and Riccio, *Executive Skills Coaching*.

[9] H-1B TechHire Program, Engaging Youth Participants.

[10] Institute for Women's Policy Research, *Supportive Services in Workforce Development Programs: Administrator Perspectives on Availability and Unmet Needs* (Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2020), https://iwpr.org/iwpr-general/supportive-services-in-workforce-development-programs-administrator-perspectives-on-availability-and-unmet-needs/.

[11] Jacqueline Rhodes and Amy Laura Arnold, *Tips for Integration: It Takes Two (or More!) to Make a Thing Go Right* (Washington, DC: National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families, 2019), https://healthymarriageandfamilies.org/library-resource/tips-integration-it-takes-two-or-more-make-thing-go-right.

Committee. This committee, which consists of about 50 member organizations, includes nonprofits, public agencies, and business entities. It provides members with an opportunity to come together to focus on how they can collaboratively serve common participants more effectively. Members look for mutually beneficial ways to work together. For example, one partner may provide case management services to participants who need training, and another may be able to offer a pipeline to a training program that fits their needs. Working together makes both partners stronger, and drawing on their combined resources enables them to offer more incentives to employers and other potential partners.[12]

Conclusion

As both workers and training providers adjust to the economic shifts brought on by COVID-19, intensive coaching and support services are more important than ever. Many training participants are struggling to make ends meet while also facing challenges related to physical health, mental health, and child care, among others. The strategies outlined in this brief demonstrate how a range of organizations, including community colleges, nonprofits, and workforce boards, can take steps to implement and/or enhance offerings to help participants identify their own barriers and challenges, develop agency to take control of those challenges, connect to needed supports, persist through training, and secure a job that enables them to achieve their career goals.

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[12] H-1B TechHire Program, *Sustaining and Leveraging Community Partnerships: H-1B TechHire Peer Learning Group Call Summary* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 2019), https://h1btechhire.workforcegps.org/resources/2019/04/30/19/46/TechHire-Peer-Learning-Group-Call-Summary.

GRANTEE PROFILE

North Central Texas College
Coaching Participants into Careers

The North Texas TechHire Partnership is led by North Central Texas College (NCTC) and includes partnerships with its local workforce board, education and training providers, chambers of commerce, and a small-business development center. The college provides advanced manufacturing and IT training to target populations that include out-of-school youth and young adults ages 17 to 29 who face barriers to training and employment, as well as adults who are unemployed and underemployed. NCTC offers all participants supportive services as needed, including college transition courses, transfer preparation, peer tutoring, child care assistance, and coaching services, which are offered by InsideTrack, a nonprofit based in Portland, Oregon.

> **About InsideTrack**
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> InsideTrack's proprietary coaching model is targeted to college students and designed to increase retention and program completion. Learn more on the organization's website: insidetrack.org/coaching.

This profile focuses on a key feature of NCTC's program design: the grantee's coaching component, which is based on the InsideTrack model. NCTC's TechHire leaders are longtime advocates of coaching, which is used as a strategy to help students navigate their program of choice and identify solutions to address barriers along the way. The InsideTrack model is an appreciative inquiry coaching strategy focused on participant-driven goal setting and intensified engagement between staff members and participants.

Coaching Implementation Strategies

Reflecting on their TechHire experience, NCTC leaders shared several key lessons learned related to coaching and other intensive services. Here's a look at five best practices that emerged from NCTC's TechHire initiative.

Create a Culture of Coaching

In rolling out the coaching model, NCTC leaders worked with staff members in several departments to increase buy-in across the college. In doing so, the leadership team was careful to introduce coaching as a "different" (as opposed to "better") model, and it shared data-driven examples of the positive impacts coaching can have on students to help overcome this resistance. Before the coaching approach was implemented, advisor-student interactions were a series of transactional meetings, with the occasional transformational meeting. Now, transactional interactions are the exception to the rule. Previous interactions often included students asking questions of advisors, with advisors providing answers. With coaching, when students have questions, coaches respond with questions and support students in coming up with the answers. This allows students to develop the necessary skills to process their situations, explore the options, and make decisions, developing lifelong skills. College leaders

are advocates of the model, and all faculty who interact with students complete training. This has allowed NCTC to create a culture of caring at the institution, where all student interactions are intended to be transformational versus transactional.

Frequency and Consistency Are Critical

NCTC highlights the importance of having consistent meetings with students. Coaches meet with each student at the start of their training. At that time, the student and coach decide together how often they will meet and both commit to maintaining that schedule. NCTC has found that more frequent sessions contribute to both stronger relationships and more effective engagement, and they help students stay attached to their long-term goals. Having coaches serve as accountability partners makes it more difficult for students to walk away.

> *"The TechHire program has been the turning point in reaching my educational goals. Not just through the monetary support but the coaching, encouragement, and resources provided have helped me achieve not only the certifications I hoped to gain but also finish my first official degree. I almost quit after my second semester, I had bitten off more than I could chew. After the end of the semester, I received a call from my new coach asking how I was doing, if I was planning to come back to school, and how they could assist me. Through the last year, they have played an even bigger role in my completion of school, as I had to quit working and needed extra financial assistance to do this. On top of all the boot camps and coaching offered, TechHire has given me the support and assistance that I have never received before in a school environment, and I will be forever grateful."*
>
> **—NCTC TechHire participant**

Active Listening Helps Identify and Mitigate Barriers to Completion

The heart of the coaching model is asking open-ended questions and listening rather than offering advice right away. This approach gives students an opportunity to explore career options by thinking through them aloud, with the coach as a guide. Through active listening and motivational interviewing, the coach builds trust, understands various aspects of a student's life, and gains insight into internal and external factors that may impact participant retention and completion. With this approach, coaches are proactive and can anticipate student challenges before they interfere with participation.[13]

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[13] H-1B TechHire Program, *Engaging Youth Participants.*

Adopt Student-Centered Goal Setting

The goal of NCTC's coaching approach is to help students clearly connect their current activities (e.g., going to class) with their longer-term goals. This approach helps students think beyond simply completing their training program and instead consider how their current activities connect to a personal reason (known as a *heart reason*) for why they are enrolled in a program. By attaching to that reason, students are able to persevere and navigate through challenges over the course of their education.

> **Goal Example**
> *"To complete my degree, which will get me a better job. The job will allow me to make more money, which means I will have more freedom and therefore more time to spend with my family."*

Design Models That Can Easily Adapt to Changing Circumstances

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, NCTC, like so many other TechHire grantees, quickly pivoted to using videoconferencing technology, since students and coaches were unable to meet face to face. The coaching approach has remained consistent despite this change, though the grantee now focuses more on helping students identify and navigate potential barriers stemming from the pandemic. In general, NCTC suggests that other providers pursue a model that is thoughtfully and strategically designed to be adaptable. The success of a model will ultimately be determined by its ability to quickly respond to changing circumstances and conditions without jeopardizing its integrity or disrupting the consistency of student interactions.

Conclusion

NCTC staff members have consistently seen the coaching approach result in increased engagement and retention, particularly for youth and young adults. When its TechHire grant ends, the college plans to hire a director of coaching. NCTC will aim to centralize the coaching approach, and the director will oversee its implementation across the college. Investment in this position will promote more consistent use of the coaching strategy while also allowing NCTC to integrate the model into its day-to-day practice as part of its culture and strategic vision.