

# When Commitment Leads to Transformative Change: How Partnerships Pave the Road to Careers for High-Need Students

In Austin, Texas, Erica Davila was a first-generation high school graduate and wanted more for herself. Her job at McDonald's couldn't pay the bills and she realized that going back to school was her best opportunity to make a positive change. Erica attended the orientation and enrolled in College Prep Academy, a program developed through a partnership between Austin Community College (ACC) and Capital IDEA, a community-based organization (CBO) that supports low-income learners. Erica received stopgap financial support and financial counseling from Capital IDEA. With that assistance, Erica completed the College Prep Academy and continued on to college-level courses at ACC. She completed her Certified Nurse Aide (CNA) certification and began working at the Seton Medical Center. After a few months with the help of the ACC career navigator, Erica returned to ACC to pursue her Medical Laboratory Technician (med tech) certification—a 60-hour associate of applied science (AAS) degree.



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*The From Programs to Systems series highlights community college programs and innovations that were initially funded through the U.S. Department of Labor's TAACCCT program but sustained beyond the life of the grant and scaled for greater reach, through changes to systems within colleges, between colleges and partnering organizations, and across colleges within a state.<sup>1</sup> By systems, we are referring to practices, policies, and processes within and between organizations.*

After graduation, an employer coordinator at Capital IDEA assisted her in preparing for interviews and applying for jobs as a med tech in the area. The Southwest Austin Regional Clinic offered her a job as a med tech and, after almost two years, she is still working for the clinic. Erica is proud to not only be the first in her family to graduate from high school, but also to attend and graduate from college. Erica has also served as role model to her younger sister, who is graduating this year and attending college in the fall. According to Erica, “without Capital Idea and all the support they have given me, I wouldn’t have had the opportunity to attend college and make a better life for myself.”<sup>2</sup>

Erica benefited from a career pathway design that relies on strong partnerships between colleges and CBOs. Erica’s story illustrates the power of the relationships with CBOs that were built by the colleges that were part of Credentials to Careers (C2C), a TAACCCT consortium of seven colleges across five states. C2C colleges sought to increase credential attainment through curriculum redesign and technologies, to successfully prepare adult learners for fast-growing STEM occupational clusters. Colleges within the C2C consortium, in addition to ACC, include Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA), Shoreline Community College, Los Angeles Trade Technical

College, Virginia Western Community College, Muskegon Community College, and Mott Community College.<sup>3</sup>

This case study outlines the specific steps that the colleges of the C2C consortium and their CBO partners undertook to sustain and scale the programs they built. Together, these organizations created enduring partnerships and growing programs that will continue to support more people like Erica to attain industry-recognized credentials and build their careers. C2C’s steps included:

- 1** Serving high-need learners through CBO partnerships;
- 2** Building sustainable on-ramps;
- 3** Demonstrating the impact of new program designs; and
- 4** Leveraging alternative resources.

## Guiding Principles for Scaling Transformative Change

The development of career pathway programs, which were undertaken by most TAACCCT grantees, and the strategies that the C2C colleges used to sustain and scale their career pathways from programs to systems, align with several of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership's (OCCRL) eight Guiding Principles for Scaling Transformative Change. Those strategies are as follows:

- Adoption and adaptation
- Dissemination
- Evidence
- Leadership
- Networks
- Spread and endurance
- Storytelling
- Technology

The purpose of the guiding principles is to help community colleges sustain and scale change initiatives, whether those initiatives occur within the college itself or are broader regional or statewide undertakings.

The OCCRL developed the Guiding Principles for Scaling Transformative Change as part of the Transformative Change Initiative, which also produced a number of strategy briefs highlighting the work of TAACCCT consortia. Tools and briefs related to the guiding principles are available on the OCCRL website: <http://occrll.illinois.edu/tci/principles>.

## SERVING HIGH-NEED LEARNERS THROUGH CBO PARTNERSHIPS

Colleges often serve students who struggle to access postsecondary education by partnering with local CBOs that can assist with issues like financial assistance, wraparound student support services, college preparation, and career guidance. Some of these students have barriers to employment, others are working full time jobs, but lack the college-ready skills, funds and time to pursue the education

that would help them advance in a career. Because TAACCCT prioritized adult learners as an important population, many TAACCCT grantees built partnerships with CBOs to help these learners overcome challenges to completion and job placement.

For these partnerships to be effective and lasting, systems must change to support

new ways for community colleges, workforce systems, CBOs, and other stakeholders to collaborate and deliver services. Processes and procedures that institutionalize this collaboration among stakeholders help to ensure that the partnerships endure. The systems that are built to support ongoing partnerships are essential to sustain initiatives that create opportunities for disadvantaged populations to succeed in today's economy, and provide the foundations for scaling to larger numbers of participants. This case study uses aspects of the career pathway initiatives of the C2C consortium colleges to illustrate how they built these systems in partnership with CBOs.

The unique strategies the C2C colleges highlighted here moved the efforts of the colleges and their partners from isolated programs of study and programmatic linkages (such as adult learners simply completing a program at a CBO, then moving on to a related college program to advance in their career) to systems that encompass shared outcomes. These systems established institutionalized changes to the way the colleges and their partnering organizations operate. And they reflect their mutual commitment to the success of adult learners, which the C2C colleges and their partners viewed as an essential population that had to be reached to meet their regions' workforce needs.

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**While community colleges contribute to the economic vitality of their regions, the role of a community college is to reach into underserved populations and create opportunities for postsecondary education and training leading to individuals with good wages. The client is the learner.<sup>4</sup>**

- Dr. Robert G. Templin, Jr.  
President emeritus, NOVA

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## BUILDING SUSTAINABLE ON-RAMPS

Partnerships between community colleges and CBOs are critical to the development of “on-ramps”—access points and services that allow the colleges to open their doors to diverse populations. The CBO partnerships developed by C2C consortium colleges were designed for sustainability and ensured that the on-ramps they built to help students embark on career pathways would endure. To build sustainable partnerships, the colleges adopted strategies that required their colleges to alter their policies and processes in ways that improved their ability to engage in future partnerships, such as:

- Funding the CBO staff salaries and operating costs with TAACCCT grant money to serve TAACCCT participants at the CBO.<sup>5</sup> This required creating new institutionalized mechanisms for sharing financial resources with partners.<sup>6</sup> These mechanisms could then support similar cost-sharing arrangements in the future.<sup>7</sup>
- Co-locating services on campus or at CBO offices, which often entailed shifting college academic calendars to accommodate participants from CBOs and expanding faculty purview

beyond the campus.<sup>8</sup> The C2C offered classes and services outside of the campus walls to help meet the students in locations convenient and comfortable for them. These arrangements created a mutually beneficial relationship by leveraging each other’s resources and also required significant administrative effort from the partnering organizations.<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Robert Templin, president emeritus of NOVA, was the college’s president when C2C began. He observed several shared characteristics among the partnerships that remained following C2C. First, they were built on relationships between leaders at colleges and CBOs. He stressed the importance of engaging executive leaders in partnership building. He also noted that the partnerships were most successful when both parties saw clearly that the partnership furthered their institutional goals. For the colleges, that meant the partnership helped increase the enrollment of adult learners in college programs; and for the CBOs, it furthered their ability to provide comprehensive services to their clients.<sup>10</sup>



Dr. Milan Hayward, the national director of C2C, also recalled that when the organizations did not have existing relationships, building a partnership was time-consuming and the result

was generally more of a contractual arrangement, not an authentic relationship. Those partnerships were least likely to survive.<sup>11</sup>

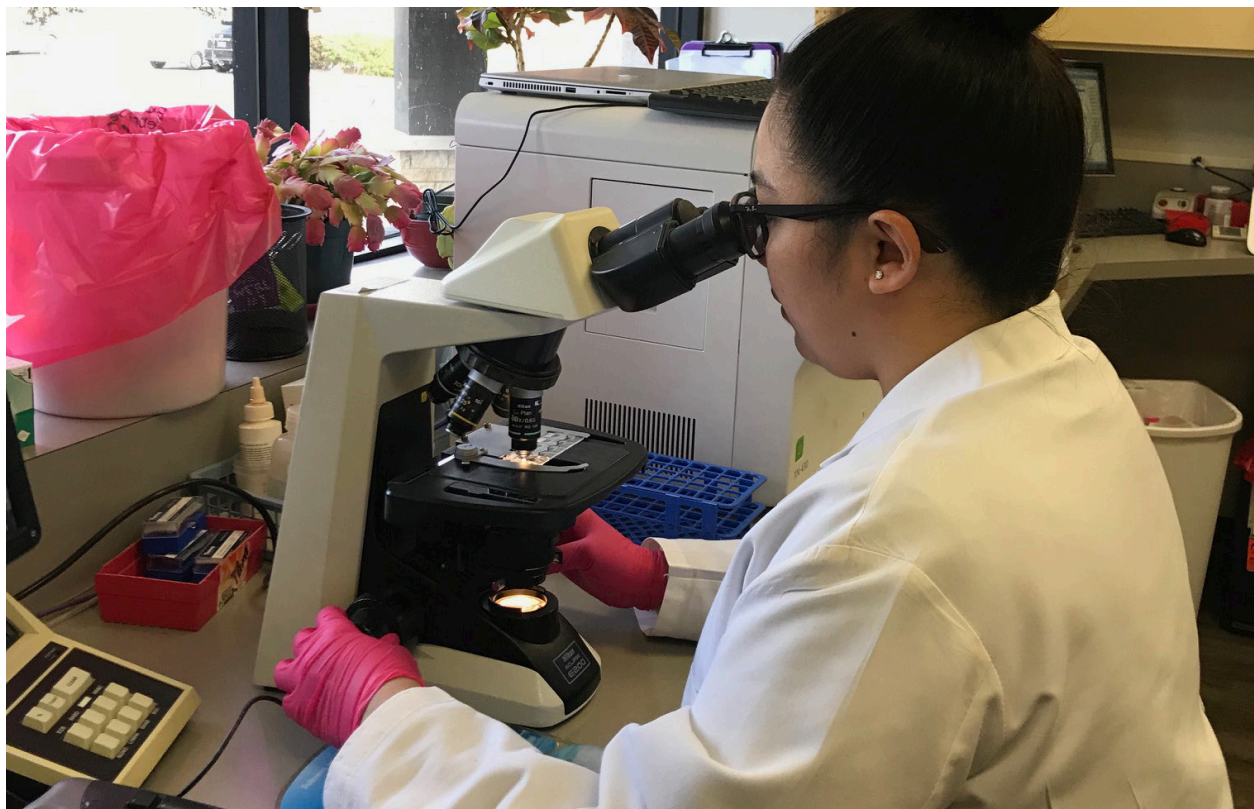
## Guiding Principle for Networks

*“Scaling of transformative change will occur when individuals engage in **networks** to gain access to expertise, professional development, and other vital resources.”*

—OCCRL [“Scaling Transformative Change”](#)

C2C leaders made partnership strategies the focus of the consortium’s efforts, allowing colleges to perfect their own partnership practices. This is consistent with the OCCRL’s Guiding Principles for Scaling Transformative Change, one of which emphasizes the role that networks of diverse practitioners can play in supporting change efforts.<sup>12</sup>

See <https://occril.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider4/tci/coverpage.pdf> for more information



# DEMONSTRATING THE IMPACT OF NEW PROGRAM DESIGNS

The C2C consortium colleges also used positive outcomes data to build a case for sustaining and scaling their career pathway models and their key features, such as student supports and alternative models of course delivery. It was essential that the C2C colleges could demonstrate an increase in student retention and completion rates to continue and grow the programs they had built with their CBO partners.

For example, the final evaluation report of C2C highlighted that Virginia Western Community College's CBO partner, Goodwill Industries of the Valleys, had an average of 85 percent of students complete the Microsoft Office Suite training, with a 69 percent job placement rate for completers.<sup>12</sup>

In the case of the College Prep Academy offered by ACC and Capital IDEA, the program continues to this day and, according to Capital IDEA, 84 percent of the College Prep Academy students pass the Texas Success Initiative college-readiness assessment.<sup>13</sup>

The consortium's student success data was also key to sustaining the new course

designs that were developed with adult students in mind. The success of the “flipped-classroom” or blended model adopted by ACC is a case in point. ACC developed the model with the goal of increasing the success rates of adults in gateway biology courses in response to feedback from its CBO partner, Capital IDEA. The model almost entirely eliminates classroom lectures. Instead, students spend class time in student-led classroom activities. In addition, they have access to new open computer labs where they can access the online course content with instructors and tutors available to assist them. Consistent with student feedback gathered by Capital IDEA, faculty describe this combination of self-paced initial learning, group work, and individual attention as particularly effective for returning adult learners. In a comparison of the blended biology course versus the traditional course, 81 percent of the students in the blended course in the spring of 2015 passed the exam to enter the next course in the sequence (anatomy and physiology), versus 68 percent of students in the traditional course. And 68 percent of blended classroom students passed the exam the first time they took it, versus

50 percent of the traditional classroom students.<sup>14</sup> An earlier pilot of the model at ACC showed similar results, with adult students in the blended classroom earning grades of A and B at a higher

rate than adult students in the traditional classroom. The model has also become popular among all students, not just those referred by Capital IDEA. ACC is planning to expand the model to other programs.<sup>15</sup>



## Guiding Principle for Dissemination

*“Scaling of transformative change will occur when leaders envision, encourage, and support innovation that supports all learners.”*—OCCRL [“Scaling Transformative Change”](#)

Leaders of C2C colleges worked with their CBO counterparts to design new approaches to retaining adult learners in career pathway programs. In alignment with the Transformative Change Initiative’s principle of Leadership, C2C leaders made bold changes in organizational structures and allocated considerable resources to helping learners who were previously underserved.<sup>16</sup>

See <https://occril.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider4/tci/coverpage.pdf> for more information



## LEVERAGING ALTERNATIVE RESOURCES

The colleges of the C2C consortium were also able to sustain and scale their work by leveraging unique financial opportunities and expertise that were made available through their partnerships. For example, CBOs partnering with NOVA, Goodwill Industries of the Valleys, and Virginia Western Community College (VWCC) used co-enrollment of participants in college and in what were then Workforce Investment Act (now Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, or WIOA) programs to provide wraparound supports and additional employability skills training.<sup>17</sup> Accessing WIOA-funded services in this way helped the colleges reach expanded populations and allowed the CBOs to help their customers attain college credentials.

In another example, a partnership between Goodwill Industries of the Valleys and VWCC helped each institution leverage one another's financial resources and expertise to expand opportunities for more adult learners than they could individually. During the C2C grant period, VWCC began conducting classes at Goodwill Industries. The college brought its Microsoft Office Specialist program to Goodwill, and Goodwill offered support services and its expertise in employability

skills instruction. VWCC now has a licensing agreement with Goodwill to use its facilities at a discounted rate to teach manufacturing programs, with Goodwill providing wraparound services.<sup>18</sup> VWCC and Goodwill also collaborate on proposals for funding.

Financially, this partnership helped VWCC access support for the benefit of its students from funds to which it would not typically have access. “Goodwill Industries had revenue from its retail operations that was completely separate; we were not competing with them for any of that funding,” says Dr. Robert G. Templin, president emeritus of NOVA.<sup>19</sup>

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**“When the president of Virginia Western Community College and the CEO of Goodwill Industries of the Valleys co-present at conferences today, they say ‘It doesn’t matter who gets the credit—let’s just enjoy the results.’”**

—Dr. Milan Hayward  
former national director of the C2C consortium and current vice president of workforce development services at VWCC<sup>20</sup>

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This example highlights not only the reciprocal sharing of resources that define the strong CBO-college partnerships of the C2C consortium, but also reflects the commitment to regional economic success shared by leaders of the organizations involved in the C2C partnerships.

One last example of alternative funding strategies is illustrated by Mott Community College in Michigan. MCC set out to make its noncredit programs eligible for Pell Grant funding. At MCC, as in most community colleges, funding is a challenge for learners enrolled in noncredit programs. Yet Mott had a particularly large proportion of noncredit students from low-income backgrounds compared to other colleges in the consortium. In addition, Mott leaders had considerable expertise in complying with the requirements of federal workforce funding programs due to their longstanding work with the state workforce development system. This combination of factors allowed them to invest the time and resources needed to make certain noncredit programs eligible for Pell Grant funding. The process involved numerous changes to the college's administrative procedures and systems in order to access Pell Grants via the "clock hours" formula allowed by federal financial aid regulations. As a result, tuition for almost half of the students in the health programs created through C2C was supported by Pell Grants.<sup>21</sup>

Implementing new funding schemes did involve challenges. For example, it could take a long time to co-enroll students into WIOA programs.<sup>22</sup> And changing financial aid practices is a very complex process that requires commitment from college leadership and multiple administrative offices. Despite the hurdles, the experience of collaborating with partners led to lasting changes in the way leaders of CBOs and colleges thought about funding their programs.



## Guiding Principle for Adoption and Adaptation

*“Scaling of transformative change will occur when **adoption and adaptation** honor and influence the cultures of the settings involved.”*

—OCCRL “[Scaling Transformative Change](#)”

The organizations within C2C did not attempt the wholesale replication of financing strategies across every site. Each organization took advantage of opportunities that arose as a result of its unique circumstances—and that’s one way they exhibited the Transformative Change Initiative’s Guiding Principle of Adoption and Adaptation.<sup>23</sup>

For example, the unique capacities and circumstances for Mott Community Colleges led them to pursue Pell Grant funding for noncredit programs, opening up a large source of tuition for many noncredit students and a source of revenue for the college. The approach worked for Mott, but might prove more challenging for colleges with a different set of capacities, expertise, and student population.

See <https://occril.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider4/tci/coverpage.pdf> for more information

## ACHIEVING TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

Beginning with a commitment to the success of adult learners, leaders of colleges and CBOs in the C2C consortium found ways to reconfigure their organizations and co-own the outcomes they generated together. C2C built on the success of past collaborations but allowed

for adaptation to local circumstances. All leaders interviewed for this case study believe that the strategies the organizations devised had positive impacts in the regions where partnerships flourished, translating to viable and readily accessible career pathways for learners.

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## RESOURCES

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3. “Credentials to Careers Consortium,” Skills Commons, U.S. Department of Labor, n.d., <https://www.skillscommons.org/handle/taaccct/445>.
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## ENDNOTES & CREDITS

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2. Written statement to the Austin Community College program staff from Erica Davila.
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4. Dr. Robert G. Templin, Jr., president emeritus, Northern Virginia Community College, interview with the author, September 12, 2018.
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6. Templin, interview.
7. Templin, interview.
8. Skilton-Sylvester et al., *Final Evaluation Report*, 205; Interview with Dr. Robert G. Templin, Jr.
9. Skilton-Sylvester et al., *Final Evaluation Report*, 205.
10. Templin, interview.
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*Stock photography courtesy of JFF.*

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