

NEBRASKA'S PROJECT HELP HPOG "PROMISING PRACTICE" CASE STUDY

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Project HELP's Relationship Management Strategy Deepens Employers' Reliance on HPOG Program

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By Bill Browning

Introduction and Overview

Project HELP, the HPOG program at Nebraska's Central Community College (CCC), has formed, strengthened and documented more than 60 employer relationships that have deepened regional employers' reliance on the program for skilled entry level health care talent. Two Career Coaches have led this effort, managing a growing number of employer relationships statewide. This case study describes the foundational capacities that underpin employer engagement, and provides a step-by-step process to attract and progressively deepen employer partnerships, beginning with the first call on a new employer. It also describes how Project HELP's team uses employer information to guide HPOG participants on a successful job search. Lastly, the case study explains how Career Coaches use class presentations, facility tours, and mock interviews to further engage with employer representatives and generate job applications from interested HPOG participants. At the end of this document, there is an appendix of tools based on Project HELP documents for other HPOG programs to adapt and use.

Bringing an Effective Sectoral and Employer Engagement Strategy to Life

As an HPOG grantee, Project HELP exemplifies a [sector strategy](#) that simultaneously addresses the needs of both its targeted employers and low-income participants. As recommended in The Aspen Institute's [Sectoral Strategies for Low-Income Workers: Lessons From the Field](#), Project HELP's staff members develop (and document) deep industry expertise by interviewing employer representatives about their needs for skilled workers and their institutional processes for acquiring and developing skilled frontline workers. This allows them to collect information that isn't generally found in labor market studies. They deploy this knowledge in multiple ways to help prepare and support HPOG participants to successfully compete for high-demand career opportunities in health care occupations.

Project HELP showcases a systematic employer engagement methodology to build and advance business partnerships with a range of health care employers that lead directly to positive outcomes for both employers and program participants. Project HELP aims for deeper levels of engagement in employer relationships where employers look to Project HELP to achieve their talent acquisition goals, as described in Jobs for the Futures' [A Resource Guide to Engaging Employers](#) (see the description of the

ladder of employer engagement, pages 3-5). The Project HELP team also developed its approach to employer engagement over time to address many typical employer engagement challenges as outlined in The Urban Institute's [The Goals and Dimensions of Employer Engagement in Workforce Development Programs](#) (see pages 3-4).

Introducing Project HELP and its Operating Environment

CCC, led by Project Director Becky Fausett, is a second time HPOG grantee, having participated in the first round of HPOG grants (HPOG 1.0). During HPOG 1.0, Project HELP focused on CCC's service area of 25 counties, which includes three campuses and three learning centers and enrolls just shy of 6,000 for credit students. In its second HPOG grant, Project HELP expanded to include three other community colleges, Midplains Community College, Northeast Community College, and Southeast Community College, covering most of the state. As a more rural state, Nebraska's community colleges face less competition from other training providers in serving the demand for skilled healthcare workers. This case study focuses primarily upon employer engagement activities and relationships within the original Central Community College region, including the towns of Grand Isle, Hastings, Columbus, and Kearny in the central part of the state. The CCC service area is comparable in size to the state of Maryland. Since this region was the focus of the HPOG 1.0 grant, it has had a longer period of time for trial-and-error experiments to lead towards an effective strategy to develop and manage a large number of employer-partners.

In FY 2017, Project HELP surpassed its healthcare training goals, enrolling 326 participants, and met its training completion goals, with 208 participants finishing their healthcare training courses. Also in FY 2017, 161 participants obtained first time employment, just shy of the annual goal, and average wages came in at a solid \$14.34 an hour. As with many other HPOG programs, nursing assistant training attracted the largest share of its participants. Next in enrollment volume was another short-term certification program, medication aide, followed by longer registered nursing and licensed practical nursing training programs.

Building a Foundation for Successful Employer Engagement

A solid foundation is necessary to execute a successful employer engagement strategy. The Project HELP case study suggests several capacities that constitute this groundwork: (1) capable staff with clear relationship management accountabilities, (2) a strategic focus to guide their efforts, and (3) a knowledge management system to preserve and maintain the program team's industry expertise.

1. Establish Clear Relationship Management Accountabilities

- **Project HELP's Career Coach/Recruiter Role:** Project HELP has two full time Career Coaches, and each one has specific geographic responsibilities, covering about half the state. The Career Coach role includes three equally important areas of responsibility:
 - **Manage employer relationships** – Develop new relationships and engage employer representatives in various ways to support the program and the hiring of HPOG participants.
 - **Deliver job search support services for HPOG participants** – Deliver job readiness workshops and individualized resume/job search coaching, upon request, to prepare participants for a successful job search.

- **Recruit new HPOG participants into the program** – Market HPOG and its affiliated training and career opportunities at career fairs, and via partner organizations such as TANF agencies and area high schools, to achieve enrollment goals.

[Note: Please see Appendix A for a sample Career Coach job description.]

- **How to Succeed in the Career Coach Role:** In order to be successful in calling on businesses, it is helpful to have prior business-to-business sales or relationship management experience, in order to be comfortable in making what are essentially sales calls to help employer representatives solve business problems. However, many workforce development leaders have also learned effective business development practices while on the job. CCC’s Career Coach for the CCC region, Christina Miotke, has been with Project HELP since 2016. Miotke previously worked as a social worker, and also had a sales job where she made cold calls to grocery store managers and chefs to sell organic grains, giving her prior experience to bridge the needs of both participant and employer audiences. When she started with Project HELP, the staff had formed relationships with about two dozen health care employer-partners. However, following the departure of a previous team member, there was little information formally documented for these relationships, so it felt a little “like starting from scratch”.

2. Determine the Focus for Employer Engagement Efforts

According to Miotke, “it was tricky at first to determine how to divide time,” to achieve her goals in all three areas of responsibility. After a while, she began to recognize seasonal patterns and fluctuations, and learned when more intense efforts in a specific area of responsibility were necessary. For example, Fall requires more time devoted to recruiting participants, so that they can start HPOG training programs at partner colleges in January. Miotke sometimes spends two or three days per week on the road during this season, going to recruiting and partner events in her region. She usually books employer meetings when she travels and prepares for them by researching each area’s overall health care employer network and labor market information. In the Spring, as program completion for these courses approaches, she turns her attention to career coaching with participants to help prepare them for a successful job search. In this employment support role, Miotke provides expert guidance based on her direct knowledge of the regional employment marketplace and individual employers’ hiring processes. In contrast, employer engagement activities are more of a year-round role. However, there are smaller bursts of activity often tied to special events. For example, in the Fall 2017 she needed to call and confirm a number of employers to serve as mock interviewers at a job preparation event to give nursing assistant students interviewing experience with employers to help them perform at their best during actual interviews. Because Miotke has developed an extensive employer network, she had an excellent response rate, with 8 of the 10 employers agreeing to provide someone to conduct the mock interviews. Moreover, several of them followed up later with Miotke to commend the students’ professionalism, and all 8 agreed to participate at similar events in the future.

As Miotke and her Project HELP colleagues reviewed the array of training programs that serve HPOG participants, they determined that some healthcare training programs needed more employer development than others. For example, RN and LPN programs often include a required clinical component that frequently results in job offers, so were less in need of additional employer relationship development. On the other hand, nursing assistant training programs, which serve many more HPOG

participants, did not have a similar requirement, and therefore were ripe for employer development. Project HELP's CCC colleagues who run these short-term courses generally welcome the participation of employers during the training program, and had space within the curriculum for guest speakers booked by Miotke. Local employers often reach out to the college's Director of the Nursing Assistant program or to Miotke to request a classroom visit with speaking time in front of the students.

3. Create and Maintain Employer Knowledge Management Systems

Several years ago, Project HELP leaders recognized the importance of providing real-time guidance for HPOG participants about job openings and hiring practices. Participants with this information are more likely to be better-fit applicants for health care recruiters. The Project HELP team decided to create a guide for applicants based on the information they collected from employer visits. The resulting "Job Leads" resource, updated monthly, is available on the Project HELP website [here](#).

As Project HELP's employer network has grown, so has the need to create a knowledge management system to preserve this important asset. In the summer of 2017, Miotke began to enter her employer notes into an Excel-based database that she regularly updates. "However," she cautions, "it's still a work in process". As of December 2017, there are 66 individual employer entries in the database. Career Coaches consult these notes before reaching out to previous contacts in order to refresh their memories of these relationships, the employer's hiring processes, and engagement interests. This tool is also available for other Project HELP staff to use, but they mostly rely on the Career Coaches to answer questions or requests related to employers. In the event of a future staff transition, whoever steps into this role next will have a treasure trove of valuable employer information to learn from and build upon.

Step-by-Step Process for Growing a Network of Employer-Partners

When she began, Miotke estimates that Project HELP had around two dozen documented employer partnerships. Since then, she has expanded her region's employer partner network to more than 60 different employers in a large region within central Nebraska, encompassing seven locations where Project HELP delivers healthcare training programs. She prefers to have at least two individual relationships with most employers – an operational management representative, such as the director of nursing at a hospital or administrator at a nursing home, as well as a Human Resources representative. Management relationships are often more stable than those with human resource staff and recruiters, who tend to turn over fairly frequently. However, human resource recruiters are often eager to work with Project HELP as a way to promote their organizations and attract quality job applicants, especially for hard-to-fill positions.

This next sections describes the step-by-step process of how Project HELP works to build and maintain an active network of employer-partners.

- **Prospecting:** Career Coaches reach out to health care employers that are likely to have talent needs that match Project HELP's training programs of focus, such as hospitals, long-term care facilities, and clinics/medical practices. They also keep an eye out for any new healthcare facilities that open. Before the Career Coach contacts or visits with a new health care employer

representative, they prepare by reviewing the organization's website to search for names and contact information. If the employer has an online job posting and application system, they also note which entry-level positions have openings posted that match Project HELP's array of training programs, along with any other information posted online about the hiring process.

- **First Phone Contact:** Miotke prefers a telephone call to make an initial contact. If she cannot find a specific contact online, she calls the facility's main number. For a hospital, she asks for a director of nursing, and for a nursing home or other facility, an administrator. She explains the Project HELP program and its mission to train skilled health care workers, confirms that the person has a role and interest in recruiting and hiring, and asks for an in-person meeting to learn more about the organization's hiring process and recruiting priorities.
- **First Meeting:** For new employer contacts, Career Coaches use an interview guide to systematically gather information about the employer's talent needs, hiring processes, and engagement interests. When describing Project HELP, Miotke often focuses on the participant training scholarships, support services, and especially the intensive coaching, which she reports are "the features that are most appealing to employers". Her main goal in this first meeting is to learn more about the employer's needs, and establish an interest in further engagement with the Project HELP program. The career coaches also bring multiple program brochures and a poster with them as resources for interested employers. [Note: Please see Appendix B for an interview guide based upon the Project Help tool.]
- **Initial Program Engagement:** Often, the first point of engagement for new employer partners is to make a presentation to a class of trainees in a health care program that matches a hiring interest of the employer, with a focus on short-term training programs. The Career Coaches have a suggested list of topics for employer representatives to cover in a presentation, such as giving an overview of their facility and describing the application process. Miotke encourages employer representatives to pitch their organizations and encourage applications. With this clear business benefit of using class presentations to help generate quality applications, employers "nearly always jump at the chance to do in-class presentations." Most of the time, at least one or two class participants will choose to apply for jobs as a result of these presentations, representing a win-win-win for individual participants and participating employers. Some employers have even begun to initiate contact with the Career Coaches to request opportunities to make classroom presentations. [Note: Please see Appendix C for an outline of suggested employer presentation topics.]
- **Moving Up the Employer Engagement Continuum:** For employer contacts who express an interest in working with Project HELP, Miotke actively seeks new ways to engage them in other beneficial opportunities. In addition to class presentations, she asks interested employers to host facility tours or to conduct mock interviews at job readiness events. For facility tours, she will book the college's van and bring students to see an employer's facility. This helps the training programs come alive by giving students a direct experience at a potential work site, which is especially important for direct care positions in health care. All of these engagements connect participants with employers with the hope that a few will result in employment.

An Example of the Process in Action **Moving from Initial Meeting to an Engaged Employer with Hiring Results**

Miotke attended a March 2017 nursing care job fair as a way to catch up with several of her employer-contacts and to meet new potential employer partners. While at the event, she met the CEO of a nursing home business that had multiple facilities in her region; she described Project HELP, and learned about the company. The CEO expressed interest in working with Project HELP. She quickly followed up by email to invite the nursing home company to present in one of the nursing assistant classes. The CEO asked the Executive Director of the nursing home near the college's main campus to give the presentation. After learning more about Project HELP, the administrator was eager to participate, and the presentation was scheduled for June 2017. Not only did his facility need these trained caregivers, but as the son of a migrant worker, the administrator also had a more personal motivation to participate. He saw Project HELP as an opportunity to open doors for participants just as others did for him. He shared his personal story with the class, described the career opportunities in his organization, and even provided lunch for the students. He has repeated this same generosity with two other classroom presentations, and his facility has interviewed several HPOG nursing assistant applicants who applied as a result of these appearances.

Translating Employer Data into Training Support Services: Miotke estimates that she delivers approximately 5 job readiness workshops each year, benefiting an annual total of 75-100 participants. These workshops are an ideal way to share her knowledge about employers' hiring processes, recruiting needs, starting pay, and about specific nearby employers of interest to each group.

Additionally, she uses the Project HELP website to distribute information about specific health care employers' needs, current openings, and other key hiring process information for participants and other job-seekers. For example, she regularly updates the [Job Leads](#) database that is posted on the website. As of late 2017, the job postings list includes information on over 100 health care employers in seven communities within the service area of Central Community College, a large geographic area that spans 25 counties. In the future, Project HELP aims to expand this resource to areas served by its partner colleges as well. This resource is beneficial to both employers and job seekers. Employers have another channel to promote their career opportunities to attract qualified candidates, and job seekers get up-to-date information about opportunities to aid their job search.

What's Next for Nebraska Project HELP's Employer Engagement Strategy?

The Project HELP team plans to develop a series of regional job fairs in various cities. The pilot event will be held in Spring 2018 at one of the Central Community College learning centers. At these fairs, local employers will staff booths to discuss opportunities with job seekers. The team will invite Project HELP participants, as well as other health care job-seekers and other students at participating community colleges. They plan to offer semi-private space where employers can conduct interviews, and offer resume review assistance for participants.

Summary – Employer Engagement Framework and Planning Questions

This HPOG case study of Project HELP outlines one example of an effective framework for developing an employer engagement strategy. Below is a step-by-step employer engagement framework and process as described in this case study, along with planning questions to guide others in adapting this framework to fit their regional health employer stakeholders, organizational assets, partnerships, and their specific HPOG participants and programs.

Foundation-Building Framework and Planning Questions

1. **Clarify Employer Relationship Management Accountabilities:** Who has employer relationship management responsibilities? How are these “accounts” assigned? How are results tracked and measured?
2. **Identify a Focus for Employer Engagement Efforts:** What criteria will be used to decide which employers on which to focus relationship-building efforts? For example, which nearby employers have the largest number of quality career opportunities? Which training programs with significant volumes of HPOG participants could achieve stronger employment outcomes with sustained employer engagement efforts?
3. **Create and Maintain Employer Knowledge Management System:** What information learned from employers isn’t already available in labor market data that can help advance your participants’ job search and career goals? How will the organization deploy this information within its programs and services for use by staff and/or participants? What type of data system will best accommodate the information collected and your intended uses?

Relationship Management Framework and Planning Questions

1. **Develop and Refine a Process and Goals for Initial Employer Calls:** What do your “relationship managers” need to know about each employer prospect before they call on new employers, in order to establish their credibility and value in identifying and presenting solutions to talent acquisition challenges? What is your program’s most effective “elevator speech” to quickly present a strong value proposition to employers? What are the 1-2 most attractive win-win employer engagement activities that meets their needs and can also benefit HPOG job-seekers?
2. **Deepen Employer Reliance on and Engagement with HPOG:** What additional engagement activities will advance mutually beneficial opportunities and deepen your relationships with employers? For example, how can your organization help create stronger work-based learning opportunities? How might you customize specific programs/services together with larger employer-partners to address high-volume talent acquisition needs?
3. **Use Employer Knowledge to Strengthen Participant Employment Support Services:** Given the program’s geography, mix of students, personnel strengths and partnerships, what communication channels can be used to deliver regional health care employment knowledge to prepare participants for a successful job search? How can the program best package key information learned from employers so that it is most useful to help participants?

CASE STUDY APPENDIX

ADAPTABLE TOOLS TO USE FOR EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

This case study includes tools developed and used by Project Help that have been revised for more general use by other HPOG programs. These tools can be further adapted to fit the unique needs of other operating environments and programs. Please review the following:

- Appendix A: Sample Career Coach Job Description
- Appendix B: Interview Guide for Initial Meeting
- Appendix C: Employer Class Presentation Outline

APPENDIX A: SAMPLE JOB DESCRIPTION FOR CAREER COACH ROLE

General Summary: Under direction of [Insert title of Supervisor], coordinates, plans, and facilitates career and employment services for [Insert HPOG project name] participants. Services including, but not limited to: job skills development, placement and support services to participants. Provide advising and counseling to students about careers, jobs, and internships. Work with numerous community entities in identification and recruitment of potential grant participants. Facilitate job trainings and workshops to participants. Develop relationships with key employer-partners, and engage employer representatives in project activities. Provide and coordinate services between local TANF partners, employers and project participants. Will perform duties and responsibilities in accordance with [Insert name of hiring organization] policies and procedures, and other duties as assigned.

Job Specifications and Related Position Requirements:

1. High level of general education and professional ability to administer student service programs, conduct correspondence, deliver presentations and workshops, and counsel and advise students normally acquired through a Bachelor's degree. Ability to communicate detailed grant admissions, registration, instructional, and curriculum information in a simple and concise manner.
2. Requires excellent oral and written communication skills to give recruiting presentations to community agencies, business/industry personnel and external grant partners.
3. Knowledge of career and job market information needed to develop job opportunities for students and high level of organizational skills needed to develop and implement special projects normally acquired through two years of experience.
4. Knowledge of business development with organizations of various types, which is normally acquired through previous business-to-business direct sales or partnership development, with preferred prior experience in the health care sector.
5. High level of analytical skills needed to analyze employment placement data and revise placement and data collection services as well as to scheduled and coordinate recruiting activities.
6. Substantial interpersonal skills needed to work with employers and TANF agencies to develop employment opportunities for students and graduates and to persuasively interact with students, faculty, staff, and the general public.
7. Requires familiarity with Microsoft Office software to be able to work and produce with HELP grant, and typical office documents, presentations, and email.
8. Must possess a valid driver's license and be able to drive between various locations within the project service area.

Essential Functions

Essential Functions 1. Develops, implements and evaluates outreach strategies to local TANF partners and potential employers for job opportunities available to [Insert HPOG project name] participants.

Essential Functions 2. Plans and implements procedures related to identification and recruiting of potential students who meet the qualifications to participate in the project activities and classes.

Essential Functions 3. Develops, implements, coordinates and evaluates job skills training workshops for participants. Topics included but not limited to: job search techniques, resume & cover letter development, interview preparation, workplace communication, problem-solving skills, portfolio development, etc.

Essential Functions 4. Works in conjunction with Admissions to make presentations to potential students. Also presents to organizations to include: service clubs, community agencies, Chambers of commerce, business/industry sites and other organizations.

Essential Functions 5. Assess student career needs and provide career and guidance and training for students as needed to obtain a career in health care.

Essential Functions 6. Makes presentations relative to targeted health care careers and job seeking skills, at college activities, in classes, at TANF partner opportunities, and to health care employers and community groups.

Essential Functions 7. Meets with employers and TANF agencies to develop job opportunities for [Insert HPOG project name] students. Coordinates with [Insert name of organization] departments and project partners on employer visits in support of project activities and events.

Essential Functions 8. Represents the [Insert name of organization and HPOG project name] at community meetings relevant to economic and community development.

Essential Functions 9. Conducts outreach to provide employers, prospective students and others information about opportunities within [Insert HPOG project name].

Appendix B: Initial Employer Informational Interview Guide

Directions: Use this interview guide when meeting with a new employer partner for the first time. The questions below can be used to collect information about hiring needs, employment and hiring process, job quality information, and engagement interests. The information gathered with this interview guide can be included in your employer database.

Employment/Recruiting Priorities

1. About the facility; types of services offered/range of care provided:
2. Entry-level positions typically hiring/positions available now:
3. Of the positions above, which are harder-to-fill?

Recruiting Process and Job Quality/Flexibility

4. Experience; type, amount preferred, diploma or GED required/training program:
5. Minimum hiring age:
6. Resume; preferred? What do you look for, what don't you want to see on it?
7. View on criminal history and type of background check conducted:
8. Apply online/in person:
9. Starting wages/hiring bonuses/shift differential:
10. Scheduling flexibility:
11. Tuition Assistance Policy:
12. Uniforms; type, colors, provided by company?

Potential Engagement Interests

13. Interest in making classroom presentations and hosting facility tours?

14. Job shadowing/internships available? If yes, which positions:

15. Serve on Advisory Committee.

Appendix C: Suggested Employer Presentation Topics

Feel free to use these questions and topics as a guide for discussion. Be sure to encourage lots of questions!

Organization/Facility Overview

- *Give an overview of your organization or facility; type of organization, location(s), services provided, and entry-level positions currently available for hire.*

Job Application and Resume

- *Describe the application process; can this be done online, does a person come in and request an application?*
- *Discuss the importance of a professional looking/complete application and resume. If you require a resume, what do you like to see on one?*
- *Will you consider an application from a successful student who is not yet registered or licensed with the State for a specific skilled health care occupation with this requirement?*
- *Address the topic of experience – if a student is lacking in work experience in this field, what are their chances of being hired? What do you recommend?*
- *What would be a red flag on an application which would cause an applicant to be screened out?*
- *What features or qualities are most impressive in an applicant's application/resume? What helps make an applicant stand out?*
- *Give examples of appropriate job references.*

Job Interview

- *If an applicant has been terminated from a previous job, how should they address this during the interview?*
- *If an applicant has worked at multiple jobs for short periods of time, how do you as an employer perceive this?*
- *What is appropriate attire for an interview at your facility?*
- *Would it be acceptable for an applicant to bring children to wait in a lobby during an interview?*
- *Does a person need to disclose a disability to you?*
- *Give a few examples of typical interview questions.*
- *What impresses/un-impresses you most during an interview?*
- *Do you check social media before you hire someone?*
- *Do you do background checks?*

Employment Details

- *Describe your shifts, hours for entry-level positions at your facility.*
- *Describe your dress code.*
- *Starting wage, raises, shift differentials, working on holidays?*
- *What are your benefits?*
- *Does your facility have PRN's?*
- *Describe your sick leave/vacation time policies.*
- *Are your NA's required to become MA's? Is there a time period?*
- *Describe your policies on cell phones, smoking, tattoos, and piercings.*
- *Does your facility promote from within? What qualities would make an employee most likely to be promoted?*
- *Do you offer tuition assistance for those who want to advance internally?*
- *Do you have periodic evaluations?*
- *Anything else you would like to add?*