

FIVE PROJECT LEADERSHIP PRACTICES TO ENGAGE EMPLOYERS AND IMPROVE EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

LESSONS FROM HPOG “PROMISING PRACTICE” CASE STUDIES

Observations by Bill Browning, March 2018

There are common patterns across all three of the HPOG “Promising Practices” case studies (Nebraska Central Community College, Volunteers of America Texas, and Pima Community College), which point towards a set of project leadership practices that are associated with strong employment outcomes.

All HPOG projects (not just these 3 cases) are examples of sector strategies that build ongoing relationships and expertise within a single business sector. Sector strategies have been established by [research studies](#) as an effective way to address the needs of both businesses and low-income workers. The decision-making options described in this briefing are only possible when using a sector approach.

In FY 2017, the three featured grantees in the case studies averaged 130 participants who achieved a “first-time employed in health care” outcome. This represented an average of 91% of each grantee’s projected 2017 result for this measure. As a point of reference, the 10 grantees in HPOG’s Employment VLC averaged 34 first-time health jobs in FY 2017, representing 29% of their FY 2017 projections. Strong employment outcomes provide evidence that the three case study grantees are doing something well! The goal of the case studies was to identify specific practices at these grant sites that were prominent drivers of their strong employment results.

There are five common project leadership practices observed in various forms across the three grantees that are associated with stronger employment outcomes.

- 1. Use Shortcomings to Energize Change Initiatives:** HPOG leaders at Volunteers of America (VOA) Texas and Pima Community College each described uncomfortable moments earlier in the project when they realized that their employment outcomes were falling short. They used these painful realizations to energize and focus team efforts to significantly change their practices. While the initiatives that each team chose differed greatly, they were both triggered by an honest acknowledgement that they were not achieving their goals, and an unwillingness to settle for mediocrity. The Nebraska Central Community College (CCC) team experienced a different kind of setback. They overcame the loss of institutional employer relationship knowledge following the departure of a staff member that left them “starting from scratch” in building employer relationships anew. Their rebuilding effort consisted of carefully documenting these relationships to preserve this knowledge. They have since built an employer database detailing insider knowledge of over 60 area employers.
- 2. Focus Team Efforts on High-Impact Employment Improvement Opportunities:** Leaders at the three case study organizations described a decision-making process by which they selected a specific (and different) set of occupational training programs and associated employers that they believed would yield significant employment results. In each case, they chose occupations with strong employer demand and a high volume of HPOG participants in related training programs. However, the programs selected all had room for improvement in employment outcomes and greater employer engagement. Nebraska CCC’s leaders focused on CNA programs and employers; VOA Texas focused on a single large employer’s critical need for Patient Care Technicians; Pima Community College focused on a series of high-volume programs, beginning with LPN.

- 3. Design Dual Customer “Translator” Job Role:** Each of the promising practice cases designed a critical “career navigator” position within the HPOG team that gathered employer intelligence and translated this insider knowledge to benefit participants. In each case, the job included an employer-facing “account management” role that gathered fresh and unpublished employer intelligence about talent priorities, hiring processes/practices and cultural values from personal conversations with targeted employer representatives. In various ways, this job also included a participant-facing role to share this knowledge with students to give them an edge in the job search and hiring process. Nebraska CCC’s Career Coach shared her expertise about employers’ CNA hiring practices in workshops (and also published portions of this information on the CCC website [here](#) for direct use by participants). Pima Community College’s Employment Advanced Program Coordinator focused on preparing participants for program-specific job fairs at the conclusion of their training programs. VOA Texas had an employment coach join employer meetings with CHI St. Luke’s hospital officials, which gave her first-hand knowledge to reinforce the employer’s cultural expectations in meetings with program participants.

- 4. Gather and Deploy Employer Knowledge:** Each of the three projects documented and managed the industry knowledge gained from employers in different ways. CCC’s team documented this information within a formal database with detailed entries for over 60 employers. Pima Community College engineered this knowledge into an extensive set of tools - many of which were program-specific - that its coaches use to guide participants in their career planning and job search process. VOA Texas’ single-employer customized program used a different approach. They engaged CHI St. Luke’s hospital staff to communicate cultural expectations and hiring tips with participants, which were reinforced in HPOG-led coaching conversations and workshops with participants.

- 5. Create Win-Win Employer Engagement Roles:** Each of the grantees offered a win-win opportunity for employers to actively engage in the program. These engagements provided value for participating employers who used the activities to identify high-quality applicants for hard-to-fill positions of special interest, as well as HPOG participants who discovered a great career fit and a gained an edge in applying with these employers. For example, both VOA Texas and CCC used employer presentations as their preferred engagement roles with employer representatives. For Pima Community College, program-specific job fairs attended by 6-9 employer representatives serve the same purpose, and their employment results show that 58% of successful participants get jobs with employers that attend these job fairs.

As these examples show, the specific employer engagement and employment support strategies differ greatly across the three promising practice grantees. However, each team of project leaders followed similar program/process improvement and decision-making patterns as described above. Strategies and tactics change based on each project’s unique operating environment, but effective program leadership practices look similar.