



TRANSFORMING U.S. WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES FOR THE 21st CENTURY

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The Plus 50 Initiative

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The Plus 50 Initiative is a project of the American Association of Community Colleges that supports the development, refinement, and replication of a workforce development program model for community college students 50 and older. When the initiative launched in 2008 by making its first grants to 15 colleges, it actually focused on two additional “tracks” beyond workforce development: volunteering and lifelong learning/enrichment. Each grantee was required to build its program on *any* two of the three tracks. But the initiative soon shifted direction, homing in specifically on workforce development as it responded to historical events (the Great Recession), and to a programming gap discovered through its research.

THE GREAT RECESSION

The recession hit older workers especially hard. When older people are laid off they tend to stay unemployed for much longer periods of time than younger workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). In addition, the financial crash devastated retirement accounts, and older workers have fewer years than younger workers to rebuild their savings. For these reasons, people 50 and older had a more urgent need for workforce development programs. Grantee colleges learned about these needs as their program participants shared with program staff stories of layoffs, of the need to unexpectedly return to the workforce, or of their desire

to learn new skills to stay competitive in the job market. Responding to local needs, many colleges shifted a greater share of program resources to the workforce track (LFA Group 2012).

A PROGRAMMING GAP

In 2008, the Plus 50 Initiative commissioned a national survey of community colleges to learn about the programs and services that colleges were offering to students 50 and older (LFA Group 2009). The findings from this study highlighted what was missing from workforce development programming for plus 50 students. Almost half of the colleges reported that they did not offer workforce development programs geared to students in this age cohort. And of the colleges that did, “offering programs” usually meant that they simply marketed their standard programs to this age group; they did not develop programs to address the particular needs and challenges that plus 50 students face.

Community college enrollment for plus 50 students had been on a slow but steady rise through 2009 (Mullin 2012), and, given the recession’s impact, at least some were likely to be coming to campus looking for career support. Judging from the survey results, however, community colleges were not prepared to meet these students’ needs for workforce programming. Beginning in 2009, Plus 50 got down to the business of developing a Plus 50 workforce development program model that could help community colleges across the United States fill this gap. This case study first shares the key program components, and then describes Plus 50’s unique approach to scaling the model.

THE PLUS 50 PROGRAM MODEL

The model does not have strict requirements; each college customizes their Plus 50 program to its local context. However, over the years its colleges have accumulated knowledge about what effective implementation looks like for each of the program components.

Workforce Training

At the core of every Plus 50 program is a workforce training program (or a set of programs) that the college offers. As program directors identify particular training programs for Plus 50 participants to enroll in, they leverage the work that the Workforce Development Departments have already done to develop programs that lead to credentials with “workforce value”: credentials that can function as on-ramps to jobs with local employers or in growth industries. To tailor the set of workforce programs offered as part of the Plus 50 program, program directors also

- conduct a needs assessment among plus 50 students at the college to learn which training programs will align well with students’ career interests and skill-building needs;
- focus on accelerated programs or short-term certificates because older students typically seek to move through the program quickly and efficiently; and
- offer professional development workshops designed to build faculty skills and knowledge about the appropriate pedagogical strategies to address the needs, interests, challenges, and learning styles of plus 50 students. Some examples of these strategies are in lectures, including real-life examples beyond those aimed at the 18–34 demographic; setting up a meet-and-greet with older students before the first class meets so that students feel comfortable with instructors; encouraging older students to share from their life experience—without referring to them condescendingly as “old-timers teaching the young-uns”; using 14-point font on handouts; putting together cross-generational working groups (without explicitly pointing to age diversity); and going out of one’s way to encourage plus 50 students in casual conversations after class, because although plus 50 students are often highly motivated and excellent students, they can be nervous about returning to the classroom.

Credit for Prior Learning

Because plus 50 students often want to complete as quickly as possible, Plus 50 colleges offer a range of services that help students cap-

ture credits either for prior learning gained through work or life experience, or from earlier educational experiences. Methods of awarding credits for prior learning include standardized testing and evaluation of past work using published guides (such as the American Council on Education's guide for industrial and corporate training programs).

Math and English Refresher Courses and Supports

For students entering a program that includes math and English requirements, these subject areas often become a threat to completion. Students unprepared for college-level math and English are routed to remedial courses—and research shows that remedial education is associated with taking longer to complete and with lack of completion (for students of all ages) (Rath, Rock, and Laferriere 2013). Plus 50 programs can offer refresher courses or other supports that can help students reacquaint with topics they may not have studied for many years. Examples of tailored math or English refresher courses include short courses or workshops that help students to place out of the developmental or remedial courses, supplemental courses in math or English that are taken along with the primary workforce course, and courses designed for students to take concurrently with a developmental or remedial course to ensure they don't get stuck at the remedial level.

Computer Skills Building

Plus 50 colleges have found that many of their program participants need supports to build computer skills. They may have previously had jobs that did not require working with programs such as Excel or PowerPoint, and they need to learn these applications to advance their careers or switch fields. Colleges sometimes offer basic and intermediate computer courses tailored to plus 50 students, and also they steer plus 50 students to courses designed for those (of all ages) who have little or no familiarity with computers. They also offer computer tutoring or other individualized help. Individualized support can be especially helpful because older students can feel stigmatized by a lack of knowledge in our tech-savvy culture.

Advising

Advising is another core component of the program. “High-touch” guidance and counseling is typically a critical element of programs that support students who are at risk of noncompletion (College Board 2012). When students feel that they do not fit in, they are likely to interpret challenges as signs of “nonbelongingness” and thus lose the motivation to persevere (Yeager and Walton 2011). Since plus 50 students are a nontypical age group for college, they can often feel out of place. Personalized guidance, then, is an important part of helping these students rise to the challenges of postsecondary education. But if the advisor treats a plus 50 student just like any other student, this treatment can actually reinforce feelings of alienation and lack of belonging. It is therefore important that the advisor provide empathetic guidance, with an understanding of the challenges an older student could face, and also with knowledge of additional resources available to plus 50 students. Plus 50 programs may hire advisors to work only with plus 50 students, but they often partner with the advising and counseling departments to leverage the time of existing advising staff. Plus 50 programs either identify staff that have the knowledge and skills to work with their program participants or they provide professional development to counselors.

Career Services

These services support plus 50 students in finding work and advancing their careers. Services are sometimes individualized, and in this case the career counselor needs the same types of specialized skills that the Plus 50 advisor has. In addition, colleges hold group workshops tailored to plus 50 students looking to advance their careers. Workshop topics are typical (e.g., career assessment and planning, job search, resume writing, interviewing skills, and networking). However, when it has been many years since people have conducted a job search, they often need additional orientation to current job search and networking approaches (e.g., LinkedIn). Some colleges have a physical space dedicated to the career needs of plus 50 students.

THE PLUS 50 INITIATIVE'S APPROACH TO SCALING

Ever since the Plus 50 Initiative's shift to the focus on workforce development, it has worked to continually develop and refine the Plus 50 program model by learning from the experiences of its grantees. As colleges have experimented, learned by doing, and shared their learnings with one another and Plus 50 staff, the Plus 50 Initiative has created and curated an extensive knowledge base stored online. From the beginning, the vision for the Web site has been to provide the field with a knowledge base of research, tools, templates, presentations, promising practice examples, and other resources that colleges can use to implement Plus 50 programming on their own campuses.

While the site is a rich resource for colleges seeking to implement a Plus 50 program, colleges also benefit from the high-touch involvement of experienced colleges that act as "mentor colleges."¹ The mentoring approach was used for the first Plus 50 grantees, and the mentor colleges worked closely with their mentee colleges, meeting often by phone and conducting site visits. While mentee colleges found this personalized, high-engagement approach very helpful, this model places a natural limit on the rate at which Plus 50 programs can replicate across the nation, because a mentor college can work with only a few colleges at a time.

In 2012, the Plus 50 Initiative opened a new chapter in scaling the model. Supported by funding from Deerbrook Charitable Trust, the initiative set the goal of replicating the Plus 50 program at 100 new colleges.² To achieve this goal, Plus 50 has built an online, interactive program development platform called C-PAD (College Progress Assessment Database), which guides colleges through the five phases of program development and continuous improvement.³ There are five phases in the Program Implementation Map (with associated tasks for each phase):

- 1) Readiness: Identify resources and mobilize support
 - Convene the Plus 50 team and begin planning
 - Secure internal support
 - Establish advisory committee
 - Identify internal resources
 - Identify external resources

- 2) Needs assessment: Data collection and diagnosis
 - Prepare for needs assessment
 - Conduct needs assessment
 - Share results with key stakeholders
- 3) Program development: Design Plus 50 programming
 - Prepare for program development
 - Establish Plus 50 Program vision and mission
 - Establish Plus 50 Program goals
 - Design Plus 50 Program
- 4) Implementation planning: Develop detailed action plan
 - Develop marketing strategy
 - Develop or update action plan
 - Develop the Plus 50 program budget
 - Establish mechanisms for continuous improvement
- 5) Continuous improvement: Assess and improve program design
 - Collect process and outcome data
 - Gather feedback from program participants and partners
 - Share results with key stakeholders
 - Plan for program improvement

On C-PAD, the steps to complete each phase are articulated, and tools and resources for completing each step are provided. It does not, however, function simply as a self-guided tour through an online map; in fact, C-PAD couples its high-tech platform with a high-touch coaching model. Plus 50 central office staff assign “mentor colleges” to the new “replication colleges.” The replication colleges can work with their mentors *through* the map, by submitting deliverables associated with each phase and getting feedback. C-PAD also provides a quality rubric that outlines what counts as a high-quality deliverable. Once the replication college has incorporated the mentor’s feedback and completed a deliverable, the mentor signs off and the replication college continues on through the phases of program implementation. This way, an experienced Plus 50 college provides guidance, encouragement, and accountability throughout the program-building process.

The conundrum of scaling for Plus 50 has been that colleges have had great success with an intensive, high-engagement approach, but the time demands that come with high engagement limit the rate of repli-

cation. C-PAD creates scale economies, opening up the possibility of “high-touch at scale.” Currently, the database allows mentor colleges to work closely with up to nine replication colleges at a time.

C-PAD—and how mentor colleges can maximize its ability to create efficiencies—is still a work in progress. Mentors have found that not all colleges are using it as much as they had hoped. However, mentor colleges have identified strategies that may boost usage of the database: Mentor colleges sending out e-mails to all their colleges at once to encourage them to use C-PAD, periodically pointing the replication colleges to the online C-PAD training, and hosting a screen-sharing session showing how to use it. Mentors agree that for the colleges that are using C-PAD, they progress very fast in getting the program up and running, and the time that it takes mentors to support replication colleges is reduced. The future will no doubt continue to bring additional improvements in facilitating the use of C-PAD, and continue to support the scaling of high-quality Plus 50 programming.

Notes

1. Colleges must apply to be mentors, and the Plus 50 Initiative director reviews applications to determine if they have sufficient experience to coach other colleges. Currently, many of the mentor colleges are colleges that were Plus 50 grantees in the past.
2. Deerbrook Charitable Trust is the third funder of the Plus 50 Initiative; the first two were the Atlantic Philanthropies and Lumina Foundation. Without the generous support of the first two funders, Plus 50 would not currently be in a position to pursue its scaling efforts.
3. Plus 50 worked with the Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship at Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business to create the Program and Implementation Map.

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