

*Promising Practices Brief:*

# Northern Virginia Community College's Comprehensive Solution to the Adult College Completion Challenge

## Introduction

This *Promising Practices* brief is one of a series of reports jointly published by the Aspen Institute Workforce Strategies Initiative and Achieving the Dream based on cases from a U.S. Department of Labor Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grant consortium. Led by Northern Virginia Community College, the consortium includes seven colleges. This report focuses on how the Department of Labor grant helped NOVA build out its Adult Career Pathway initiative to better serve more low-income adult students who otherwise might not access college-credential programs or succeed in earning a college credential.

AspenWSI and Achieving the Dream chose the topics of these reports based on our observations as managers of the consortium's peer learning community. Earlier versions of the reports, based on interviews, data, and document reviews at each site, were used as learning cases to benefit grant project leaders and staff within the consortium. AspenWSI and Achieving the Dream are publishing the revised reports as examples of innovative capacity development initiatives that better serve more students as a result of a major, multiyear investment.

## The Adult College Completion Challenge

In 2010, the leaders of Northern Virginia Community College, faced with a projection of declining local high school graduates, began exploring strategies to enroll more adult students and serve them effectively. One challenge for NOVA, as for community colleges nationally, is that adults, who often juggle work and family responsibilities along with college, struggle to persist in and complete college. According to NOVA's Achieving the Dream baseline data, college persistence and completion rates of adults over age 24 lagged those of their 18- to 21-year-old counterparts by more than 50 percent.

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## Building from Success

Also in 2010, NOVA and its nonprofit job-training partner, Northern Virginia Workforce Center, were participating in the final year of a three-year demonstration project to learn about effective partnerships between community colleges and nonprofit workforce programs to train low-income adults for new careers. With grant support to hire cross-trained college navigators/advisors, NOVA's Courses to Employment project delivered ongoing college access and counseling support to a pilot cohort of 47 adults, helping them continue their college coursework at NOVA after completing a five-month, off-campus Training Futures program. The results from this cohort were persuasive when compared with 200 students from previous cohorts studied by AspenWSI. Within nine months of completing Training Futures, students in the pilot cohort registered for additional NOVA college courses of all types (transfer, non-transfer, and developmental) at a rate 155 percent higher than did students in previous cohorts. In addition, 94 percent succeeded in their subsequent term of NOVA courses, compared with 72 percent for previous cohorts. They tripled the intensity of college coursework, registering for a median of three post-Training Futures NOVA courses, compared with one for previous cohorts. Moreover, a business analysis of the pilot cohort students showed that NOVA's investment of \$3,000 in counselors' wages helped generate an additional \$19,000 in tuition revenue.

Equipped with compelling student outcomes and this business data, staff from NOVA's workforce development division came together with academic leaders to develop the Adult Career Pathways initiative. In December 2010, that team proposed the initiative to the college's administrative council, which endorsed it. Robert G. Templin Jr., then president of NOVA, allocated \$250,000 to launch the initiative in 2011.

## (ACP) Program Design and Results

The team that designed ACP modeled it largely after NOVA's successful strategy to provide ongoing, comprehensive advising services to help at-risk high school students access and complete college. Pathway to the Baccalaureate partners with high schools for college access bridging services; similarly, ACP partners with community-based nonprofit organizations and public social service agencies to enroll and support low- and moderate-income adults who want to earn credentials to advance in their careers and better support themselves and their families.

By design, ACP serves older students with multiple demographic characteristics that are often associated with lower college success rates. For example, the average age of ACP participants was 36, according to 2014 data. In addition, 68 percent worked, 55 percent were non-native English speakers, and 61 percent supported children on household incomes that were typically less than 200 percent of federal poverty guidelines. Over the first three years, the program grew to serve over 1,000 students. Despite multiple risk factors, ACP students consistently achieved high rates of college success and persistence toward a credential, as shown in table 1, excerpted from the **reports** for 2012 and 2015.

## Systematic Service and Staffing Strategies

The ACP program management team adapted successful college access and college completion support services from its sister Pathway to Baccalaureate program and systematized a comprehensive sequence of services to improve college access and success. The program model features a "fading support" strategy that aims to equip ACP students with the knowledge, skills, and habits needed to succeed with less support over time: students become gradually more self-reliant in navigating college services and less dependent on guidance from the ACP advisor. Together with additional group workshops and the use of technology-enabled services (e.g.,

**Table 1: ACP Student Demographics and College Success Data**

Academic Year 2011-12	Academic Year 2014-15
<b>ACP Student Service Volume</b>	
<b>296</b> Students Served	<b>1,122</b> Students Served
<b>First Term Course/Program Successful Completion</b>	
<b>87%</b> 104 of 120 students completed initial course term with <b>2.0 GPA</b> or higher	<b>83%</b> 185 of 222 students completed initial course term with <b>2.0 GPA</b> or higher
<b>Retention and Persistence</b>	
<b>80%</b> 65 of 81 first-term students enrolled in the next term	<b>81%</b> 95 of 117 first-term students enrolled in the next term
<b>College Credentials Earned</b>	
<b>N/A</b> Too early to measure	<b>111</b> Credentials earned by ACP students

required webinars on key college success skills), the fading-support strategy enabled NOVA to double the average student caseload for advisors from 75 at the start of the program to 150 in 2014, while preserving high outcomes for student success.

The Adult Career Pathways program is led by NOVA's executive director of college and career pathways, who also leads the Pathway to Baccalaureate program. The ACP program management team includes an associate director, a program manager, assistant coordinators for student access and student success, and a data manager. ACP advisors are all trained to be the single point of contact, delivering academic advising, financial aid, and counseling/referral information and guidance to their students.

The direct-service team of counselors and advisors is organized according to specific phases of the student experience. Two full-time and two part-time counselors provide services to students in the "college access" phase to support them when they enter the program and the college. In the next "college success" phase, each student is assigned to one of five success counselors/advisors; their role is to guide the student through to completion of a chosen credential. ACP also added a career and internship counselor who facilitates employer internships and provides assistance to degree-completing students who are directly entering the workforce in a new career field. Table 2 shows the core sequence of services that ACP offers in its two phases and the goals for each of these services.

**Table 2. Core Sequence of ACP Services**

COLLEGE ACCESS			COLLEGE SUCCESS					
Open House Recruiting Sessions	College Access Workshops	Students' Individual Action Checklist	Orientation Workshop	Initial Success Advisor Meeting	First Semester Advisor Check-In	Drop-Add Period Advisor Check-In	Mid-Semester Support Services	Second Semester Support
<b>Goals and Sample Activities</b>								
Attract targeted adult students	Enroll students & access financial aid	Ensure student motivation & successful matriculation	Impart basic success skills & introduce success counselor/ advisor	Build advising relationships & establish academic plan	Successful start on academic plan	Ensure course fit for the semester before the drop-add period ends	Address difficulties to help ensure successful semester	Continue progress towards academic plan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Held mostly at partner sites</li> <li>■ Special NOVA campus events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Held at rotating sites with computer labs</li> <li>■ Complete NOVA college &amp; financial aid applications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Placement test prep webinar</li> <li>■ Review prior learning credit options</li> <li>■ Financial planning webinar</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ College 101 workshop session</li> <li>■ Sign ACP agreement</li> <li>■ Schedule success advisor intro meeting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Discuss career goal</li> <li>■ Identify potential barriers</li> <li>■ 1st semester plan</li> <li>■ Financial aid review</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Preview semester schedule</li> <li>■ Discuss books and parking, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Review course start</li> <li>■ Advise regarding drop/add</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Student support service webinar</li> <li>■ Faculty mid-semester progress reports</li> <li>■ Advisor check-in to plan next semester</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Advisor check-in meeting after grades posted</li> <li>■ Repeat sequence for most first semester services</li> </ul>

### Customized Database and Management Information System

After migrating data from a previous Excel database, the ACP data manager uses FileMaker Pro software to capture student demographic and program activity data in a customized database developed in 2014. The program management team and the data manager use the database as a management information system to generate standardized reports on key steps of the program, enabling program managers and advisors to adjust ACP's processes and services continuously based on results. For example, the college access team uses reports on results of outreach events to determine which locations/partners consistently attract the most students to the program, fine-tuning the timing and location of outreach events to maximize student intake results. Once new students complete the steps needed to enter the ACP program, the system generates a report with their names, and the associate director invites them to an orientation event and assigns each to a success advisor. At the end of each term, the data manager downloads all ACP student grades from the college's student information system into the ACP database. Each success advisor accesses a report to review the academic progress for all of his/her students and takes appropriate actions based on that report. ACP staff members can also request data queries; in many cases, the database manager produces a customized report within a few minutes.

### Funding and Sustainability

The 2010 pilot demonstrated to college administrators that ACP services were partially

self-funding. NOVA's president, following a sustainability formula for Pathway to Baccalaureate, agreed to fund 60 percent of ACP costs from the college's budget, which amounted to \$250,000 the first year. Program staff identified external funding sources for the remaining 40 percent of program costs: \$95,000 in renewable public funding from Fairfax County, along with several smaller philanthropic grants. Since then, NOVA has allocated funding to ACP every year, with the amount rising to over \$600,000 in 2015. ACP students' high rates of college success and persistence, along with the program's continued ability to attract external funding, has facilitated the college's support for the program.

ACP's rapid growth has been partly powered by a U.S. Department of Labor Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grant, awarded to NOVA in fall 2012. That grant has funded 2.5 additional advisor positions, enabling the program to accept several hundred additional students. The grant also has funded the database manager, who developed the customized program database and management information system that enables program managers to continuously assess the results of all major ACP services. Additionally, the grant has brought about a focus during outreach and recruiting on students interested in pursuing fast-growing IT jobs and other technical careers in high demand among Northern Virginia's employers. And it has enabled ACP to add new career services for students who were beginning to graduate in higher numbers as the program matured.

By the 2016-17 academic year, after the federal grant ends, the college needs to identify resources

to replace this funding with new investments and maintain the college's sustainability funding formula and ACP's program capacity. Program leaders are exploring new grant opportunities and operational efficiencies to help sustain its service capacity and effectiveness.

## Future Plans

NOVA's executive director of college and career pathways has outlined two areas of focus for further strengthening the ACP initiative:

- ▶ **Dual-generation services:** NOVA will leverage existing programming and explore new services to simultaneously benefit parents and their children. A proposed family resource center near the college's largest campus would provide a place for students and parents to study and to access specialized support services. Through a proposed tutoring service, students in the Pathway to Baccalaureate program would assist the school-age children of the older ACP students.
- ▶ **Financial literacy services:** NOVA will seek to leverage its community-based partners' financial literacy and asset-building support services to a greater extent. It will also increase support that helps ACP students apply for and receive public benefits, especially SNAP benefits (formerly known as Food Stamps).

## Keys to Success

The ACP program demonstrates that community colleges can successfully serve low-income adult students with lower levels of education, and that this can be done on a significant scale without compromising success rates. Its keys to success include the following:

- ▶ **Set ambitious, clear goals for participation and success:** From its inception, ACP has focused college access services on attracting traditionally harder-to-serve older adults and established ambitious, meaningful, and measurable college success outcomes. These have kept program staff focused on meeting goals.
- ▶ **Design a student-focused sequence of services:** ACP has systematized a sequence of college access and college success support services that were developed specifically to support low-income adults with working families.
- ▶ **Cross-train staff to deliver comprehensive services within an ongoing advising relationship:** ACP hires and trains advisors to serve as a single point of contact for students. Thus, students can conveniently access what they need to succeed, when they need it, through a trusted advisor during each phase of the program.
- ▶ **Build upon successful practices and performance data:** ACP modified successful practices from the Pathway to Baccalaureate program and uses data to continually adapt its model of service delivery.
- ▶ **Build with scale in mind:** From the start, ACP's management team established a scalable business model, and the program uses a variety of strategies to make service delivery more efficient, gradually reducing the cost per student. The program combines college and external resources to expand and deepen its services.

**For more information** about NOVA's Adult Career Pathways Program, or to request an ACP Procedures Guide, contact

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