



"Community College–Workforce System Relationships: New Jersey Health Professions Pathways to Regional Excellence Project (NJ-PREP)" by Michelle Van Noy, Heather McKay, and Sofia Javed, Rutgers University, Education and Employment Research Center, NJ PREP, TAACCCT Grant is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0)

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**New Jersey Health Professions Consortium:
A Collaboration of
Community Colleges**

**Issue Brief
Community College–Workforce System
Relationships:
New Jersey Health Professions Pathways to
Regional Excellence Project (NJ-PREP)**

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Community College–Workforce System Relationships: New Jersey Health Professions Pathways to Regional Excellence Project (NJ-PREP)

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In 2010, the Northern NJ Health Professions Consortium (NNJHPC) received a Health Professions Opportunity Grant from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The 10 college consortium from across Northern NJ had a mission to create pathways in Health Professions education leading to gainful employment. In 2014, The Consortium received a TAACCCT grant from the USDOL and became known as the New Jersey Health Professions Consortium (NJHPC). At this time the Consortium grew to 12 colleges¹ across the State of NJ and broadened its career pathways focus to include non-credit – credit credentials, prior learning assessment and employment. Overall, NJHPC has represented and continually connects with the community colleges in the State. Its focus is to build, develop and foster communication and collaboration to ensure students enter and complete educational programs in the health professions leading to family sustaining wages in this high-demand sector. The TAACCCT grant ended in 2018 after serving 3,500 New Jersey residents. NJHPC has commissioned Rutgers to prepare this brief describing lessons learned throughout the Consortium.

At the heart of the missions of both community colleges and local workforce development boards is the mandate to serve their communities by helping people achieve economic success. As a result, strong relationships between community colleges and the public workforce system create the potential for effective community actions that generate positive results for constituents. For many reasons, however, collaboration between these two organizations does not always occur, and even when it does, it does not always meet its potential. Despite these challenges, some colleges and their workforce counterparts have developed strategies designed to promote collaboration and better serve their communities; these strategies offer examples for practice in other local areas.

The nation's One-Stop workforce centers also known as American Job Centers (AJCs) are designed as centralized locations where job seekers can access a variety of government employment services. Many of the guiding policies for workforce centers are set by local workforce development boards (WDBs), whose membership is comprised of local business, education, and community leaders. One-Stops play a role in upskilling the workforce in their communities to meet local employer demands; each is a tool in its community's arsenal that helps to ensure that the local labor market can offer a sufficient supply of workers to meet employer needs. Community colleges also play an important role in educating and upskilling the workforce to meet local employer demands by offering both credit and noncredit programs of study in relevant fields.

A 2008 General Accounting Office study identified several ways for community colleges and One-Stops to work together productively.² They include community college operation of a One-Stop, co-location of community college staff at a One-Stop, and the participation of college leaders in local WDBs. Community college operation of a One-Stop involves overseeing its day-to-day functioning and, in some cases, acting as the fiscal agent for the WDB

operation funds. Co-location of staff helps to promote better communication between college and One-Stop staff, resulting in better client services and potentially reducing duplication of services. The report also identified other, more easily achieved strategies for collaboration like sharing data on workforce services, engaging in strategic planning with regard to workforce development, and cross-training of staff.

Many possible benefits may emerge from these collaborative efforts. Collaboration can lead to increased communication across these programs as well as to potential savings related to cost sharing and the elimination of redundancies.³ The importance of collaborative relationships between local One-Stops and community colleges is illustrated by evidence that suggests that when these organizations work together, it may benefit workers. One-Stops have the potential to work with community colleges to play a central role in providing education and training advice.⁴ The infrastructure of the One-Stop system provides an opportunity to help participants both to set educational goals and to obtain the supports needed to pursue them.⁵ While collaboration has value, however, many local One-Stops and community colleges have limited ties with each other and do not effectively work together.⁶ In fact, collaboration is not always promoted by policy and practice despite evidence that it works. To realize these benefits and further promote these collaborative relationships, further research is needed to uncover the specific ways in which these partnerships function and can be promoted.

In this brief, we discuss the experiences with college–workforce relationships among the 12 New Jersey colleges that were part of the NJ-PREP Consortium TAACCCT grant, which was designed to promote pathways development in the health professions. As part of the NJ-PREP grant, the Consortium colleges sought to engage and collaborate with the public workforce system, including local workforce development boards and their associated One-Stops.⁷ This goal followed TAACCCT-grant guidelines for grantees to work with the public workforce system in a variety of ways, including recruiting participants and sharing labor market information; job placement information; and access to data, including wage records, for tracking the employment outcomes of participants.⁸

METHODS

This brief draws on data from a third-party research evaluation of the NJ-PREP program conducted by the Education & Employment Research Center at Rutgers University. It encompasses data from interviews and focus groups conducted over a period of three years (2015 through 2018) during multiple site visits. Interviews were audio recorded, and notes were taken either on-site or from the audio recordings. Notes were uploaded, coded, and analyzed using NVivo 11, a qualitative data management system. Data were first divided into themes and categories and later sub-coded to further define data categories. A total of 274 interviews and focus groups were conducted over the entire grant period (Fall 2015 through Spring 2018), including 111 interviews with college leadership (e.g., presidents, vice presidents, deans, associate deans, the grant leadership team, etc.), 109 interviews with staff (e.g., program staff, student counselors, and advisors), 23 interviews with instructors, 13 interviews with employers, four interviews with workforce partners, and 16 focus groups of 3 to 10 students each.

FINDINGS

This brief examines the relationships between NJ-PREP Consortium colleges and their local workforce systems. It focuses on existing relationships, seeking to identify both promising strategies for building strong relationships and potential pitfalls to avoid. Some common strategies for collaboration emerged across colleges; some unique approaches and challenges emerged as well. We describe each of the strategies and the challenges we identified among the individual Consortium colleges and their One-Stop offices. Additionally, we briefly examine the Consortium-level efforts to promote these relationships through grant activities. Finally, we discuss the various ways that the colleges and their workforce partners cultivated collaborative working relationships along with the challenges involved in these relationships.

Colleges with strong workforce relationships reported a history of collaborative efforts and open communication. While these relationships took shape in a variety of ways, they all manifested in familiarity among staff members of both organizations and in each staff becoming knowledgeable about the other organization. This capacity was developed over time and was maintained across staff members. Several of the Consortium colleges reported these types of relationships and offered examples for ways to develop and maintain them

Passaic and its local One-Stop have historically had a strong relationship. College staff report that they have an open line of communication and can contact One-Stop staff with questions about anything. This relationship was built over time, and staff have both personal and professional relationships that were fostered as the organizations worked on various projects together. Their work on a directly preceding grant increased their engagement when the One-Stop was funded to administer the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) to clients for placement into community college programs. The NJ-PREP site coordinator from the college continued that relationship with the TAACCCT grant. The close relationship is facilitated by their physical co-location in the same building and frequent communication through monthly meetings. The staff are in agreement concerning how to share information and money. The college also updates the One-Stop on new courses by e-mail and, on occasion, they are in touch to discuss the status of students who were referred through Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA). The two organizations also maintain a strong relationship at a strategic level by coordinating work on career pathways and capitalizing shared resources.

Middlesex and its local One-Stop also have a long history of working well together. Building off this relationship, the TAACCCT staff had an easy and strong connection. The former One-Stop director used to be a county legislator and helped the staff get started. Staff occasionally visit and deliver presentations with their clients, and the two organizations communicate through e-mails and phone calls. The college's continuing education programs regularly enroll students who receive funding through One-Stop authorized Individual Training Accounts (ITA).

Likewise, Essex has historically had a strong relationship with the local One-Stop, with the noncredit arm of the college engaging in a variety of activities with the center. Noncredit staff from Essex have served on the WDB, and staff from both organizations have written grant proposals together, given each other letters of support, and held meetings at each other's offices. Some of the staff have worked together for many years, developing strong and trusting relationships. The strong relationship is bolstered by each staff's deep knowledge of the other's system. In fact, one staff member on the college team was previously employed at the One-Stop. There is good communication between the two agencies; they can just pick up the phone and call each other. The staff at each agency work together in a variety of ways: They refer people to the each others' programs; they help each other by sharing data through their data system for tracking; and they share job openings with each other. Their relationship remained strong through the TAACCCT grant. The One-Stop referred many clients to the TAACCCT programs, and grant staff used information on job openings provided by the workforce system to help place their clients.

Similarly, Bergen staff report a strong relationship with the One-Stop that existed from before the TAACCCT grant, from the immediately preceding grant. The NJ-PREP site coordinator gave monthly presentations at the One-Stop to their clients and communicated regularly with their staff. They make presentations to a variety of potential participants, including to those who are unemployed, on TANF, or on general assistance. The presentations are the main way that they coordinate efforts, share information, and generate referrals. According to grant staff, referrals are the main way that the college and the One-Stop engage. The challenge with these types of relationships is maintaining them when there is staff turnover.

One notable relationship between a college and the local One-Stop exists in Monmouth County. Brookdale and its local One-Stop historically have had a close relationship and in recent years have shared a staff member. This staff person's work was continued through the TAACCCT grant. This arrangement is described in more detail in the text box below.

Shared Staffing—Case Study of Brookdale Community College

For the past five years, Brookdale has had a notable partnership with its local workforce development board: The two entities share a staff person who conducts job placement activities and provides job development support to students who have been referred to the college by the One-Stop. The staff person is an employee of the college and splits time between the two organizations, spending two days per week on-site at the One-Stop and attending regular One-Stop staff meetings as part of the business services group. The staff person participates in the One-Stop's orientation sessions and conducts one-on-one meetings with clients about potential programs. The primary focus of this position is providing job development services to students with an emphasis on placing students that have been funded through the Workforce Development Board.

The two organizations have a contract in place that guides the staff person's work. The contract stipulates the hours and times the staff person is on-site at the One-Stop and at Brookdale. The shared staff person truly acts as a hybrid employee, however, working with the college on job placement and business engagement through the TAACCCT grant while also serving as part of the One-Stop's business services team with specialized knowledge of healthcare industry careers. Sharing an employee has also led to the One-Stop and the college sharing employer contacts, which has been made easier now that the college and the One-Stop have worked together to address issues using the state data information system. (At one time, because the job developer was employed by the college rather than the state, the person holding the position had not been able to access the state computer system needed to track participants.)

The shared staff person benefits both organizations. For the One-Stop, the job developer is an "insurance policy," guaranteeing that workforce system customers will get additional support and placement assistance, increasing the odds of positive outcomes. It also gives them another person in their business services department who is experienced and connected with the employer community and helps to reduce redundancies in employer outreach across the organizations. For the college, the additional staff person builds job placement capacity in their workforce programs and helps promote success in meeting the workforce system's performance requirements.

The college and the local One-Stop are able to employ this shared-staff funding model using "holdback" funds. Typically, when a One-Stop refers an individual to a college program, it pays the college 80 percent of the cost of any training received by that person out of his or her individual training account (ITA) and retains the remainder until a successful placement outcome is attained. Instead, the local Workforce Development Board gives Brookdale 100 percent of these funds up front, which the college uses to support the employee who helps counsel clients in both locations and build employer contacts for the benefit of both organizations.

The county in general is collaborative and has a history of benefitting from positive working relationships among organizational partners. In this way, Brookdale has historically had a good relationship with the local One-Stop. Despite the close relationship, however, the focus for the One-Stop is on customer choice. Staff at the One-Stop discuss the full range of training-provider options with clients; the client then indicates their provider of choice, which may or may not be Brookdale.

In some colleges, closer referral relationships have emerged or been maintained with a focus on intake and recruitment as well as information-sharing and referrals. Through their outreach efforts, Mercer staff have begun to work closely with local One-Stop staff to promote its programs, and those efforts have led to more referrals. Additionally, staff members at the college are developing a better grasp on how to navigate the relationship, specifically in terms of communication. Just knowing who to call can be a crucial factor in whether connections between the organizations are made successfully. Likewise, Sussex has begun referring students to its local One-Stop to see if they are eligible for WIOA funding. Other colleges, including Raritan Valley and Union, report both

getting referrals from the One-Stop and referring students to the One-Stop to check on WIOA funding eligibility. At Ocean, a high number – even as many as 60 percent – of noncredit students come from the One-Stop. They have a strong referral relationship and make triannual presentations about their offerings at One-Stop staff meetings. They have also been sharing information about a new capacity developed under the grant that allows credits to be awarded for some noncredit coursework.

In some colleges, referrals have declined in the absence of financial support. Consortium schools that had participated in the previous a grant with the Consortium were given funding for a staff person at the workforce center who was paid to do recruiting for the grant. However, with the TAACCCT grant, the responsibility of recruiting was shifted to the college, and this transition caused confusion at some colleges that led to decreases in collaboration across the two organizations. This shift shows how defining a relationship between the two entities can be very dependent on formalized relationships and on funding. With one college, the end of the prior grant led to an end in their working relationship; that relationship would not be reestablished until later in the TAACCCT grant when the Consortium promoted more direct efforts for collaboration. Another college continued working with the One-Stop but reported that the level of their communication had declined since the shift in funding and grant expectations.

College staff reported the need for ongoing efforts to maintain relationships with their local One-Stop partners. Staff at Mercer, for example, ensure relationships remain strong by maintaining communication every semester and by co-coordinating events, such as lunches, to ensure familiarity and a routine. Mercer staff also place calls every semester to their One-Stop contacts and send them brochures regarding their programs. Additionally, they make presentations about Mercer and offer anything that may bolster the counseling process. This provides an ongoing source of information for One-Stop staff that allows them to see the options available to their clients. These regular routines are particularly important, as they help to address any challenge that may arise related to potential turnover among One-Stop staff. With this type of strong, collaborative relationship, these changes could be weathered through ongoing active engagement.

At some colleges, leadership helped build stronger connections between the college and the One-Stop. At Raritan Valley, for example, the new college leadership came with strong connections to the workforce system at the state level, and through those connections, the college was able to facilitate introductions that helped it increase collaboration between the two entities. With these new connections, they are working to increase referrals and to coordinate more interorganizational staff meetings. Historically, Morris did not have a strong relationship with their local One-Stop. However, the new workforce board director has strong ties to the college as a former college leader, so they are looking toward a better relationship moving forward. There is more information-sharing across staff regarding both college offerings and labor market needs based on employer data and projections. They are also more aware of the challenge to the college posed by the reporting requirements of the “holdback” funds.

Collaborative efforts toward meeting grant outcomes and goals helped develop positive working relationships. The Consortium contracted with North Jersey Partners (NJP), a network of WDB Directors in the northern part of the state, to assist the project in building connections with the workforce system. The focus of their work was helping the colleges gain access to outcomes data on TAACCCT participants through the workforce system. NJP staff convened meetings with the colleges and their workforce staff to discuss issues regarding employment and wage data sharing and to promote a county-based job development network. All job developers and business services representatives were encouraged to attend these meetings. In a few instances, developing processes for sharing data on participant outcomes resulted in conversations between colleges and their workforce partners that had not occurred before. These conversations began collaborative efforts to improve data reporting for this grant that may lead to ongoing collaborative efforts. The consultant also worked to create a customized job board that listed healthcare occupations for every county. The new county-by-county job board allowed some staff to see job postings that were previously overlooked. More detail about these developments can be found in the project’s final evaluation report.

Some colleges gained industry insights from their relationship with the workforce system. Mercer staff are regularly engaged with the workforce system through attendance at bimonthly industry meetings convened by the One-Stop office and a large county-wide health system. The meetings provide a valuable opportunity for the college to engage with industry to discuss emerging trends, immediate hiring needs among participating hospitals, externships for students, and best practices for advising students. Morris staff reported the importance of gaining information on the labor market from the workforce system. The workforce system staff reported that it is also important to share labor market information with the college to inform program development and help them better determine what programs are most needed.

Some colleges sought to increase their programs' quality and alignment with workforce system needs through their grant. Mercer, through its work on the grant, gained an increased awareness of the importance of incorporating certificates directly into its programs. Specifically, more staff are encouraged to suggest students get certifications relevant to their career goals. Likewise, Hudson staff reported they thought the TAACCCT grant helped them advance their standing with their One-Stop partner because of the opportunity it provided them to improve the quality of Hudson's programs to make them more rigorous and more directly tied to employment opportunities.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Relationships between the colleges and their local workforce partners are reflected in their ongoing efforts to work together. Many of these relationships are rooted in past ties between the two agencies. Some key qualities of successful relationships include:

- Open communication and regular contact between the colleges and their workforce system partners.
- Regular meetings – both formal and informal – that help keep connections alive.
- Tangible efforts to work together toward a common goal, such as recruiting participants (as in their prior grant efforts) or in collecting outcomes data on participants (as in the TAACCCT grant) to help lay a foundation for their work together.
- Development of plans and strategies to maintain relationships through employee turnover.

Maintaining these relationships requires that both systems continue to invest time and attention in preserving their synergies. Ultimately, these efforts to promote collaboration can help better serve students and job seekers.

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¹ The colleges funded through the TAACCT Round 4 grant, whose activities are the subject of this brief include: Bergen Community College (Lead Agency), Brookdale Community College, County College of Morris, Essex County College, Hudson County Community College, Mercer County Community College, Ocean County College, Passaic County Community College, Raritan Valley Community College, Sussex County Community College, and Union County College.

² Government Accounting Office. (2008). *Community colleges and One-Stop centers collaborate to meet 21st century workforce needs* (GAO Publication No. 08-547). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

³ Government Accounting Office, 2008.

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⁸ Cohen, et al., 2017.

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