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Best Practices: Career Pathways for Low Income Young Adults

In August 2010, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation awarded a grant to the Center for Energy Workforce Development (CEWD) to pilot specific components of the Get Into Energy Career Pathways (GIECP) model in eight states. The grant funded the development and implementation of a student support system and industry-recognized postsecondary credentials specifically focused on low income young adults (LIYA) ages 16-26 over a three-year period. Our hypothesis was that a focused system of assessments, credentials, coaching, and monitoring implemented by State Energy Workforce Consortia will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of moving LIYA into energy careers. Find out the results and recommendation based on this hypothesis in the Get Into Energy Career Pathways for Low Income Young Adults Lessons Learned and Project Summary on the CEWD homepage.

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NWI® Academy: Helping the Savannah River Region Grow Its Own

Over the next 10 years, the Savannah River region—which straddles central South Carolina and Georgia—will need 10,000 new nuclear workers to fill key jobs, including those at four new reactors and at the Department of Energy's Savannah River Site.

That's a tall order to fill, which is why energy industry stakeholders in both states came together to create the Nuclear Workforce Initiative (NWI®) Academies, which offer training programs at Aiken Technical College in South Carolina and Augusta Technical College in Georgia, to begin training potential applicants. Part of the Get Into Energy Career Pathways projects funded by CEWD through a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grant, NWI® Academies target low income young adults, who might otherwise be unaware of job opportunities in the nuclear industry in this region. NWI® Academies are one part of the robust

approach to nuclear workforce development taking place in the region through the Nuclear Workforce Initiative, a program of the Savannah River Site Community Reuse Organization.

“Some people don’t even know these opportunities exist,” said Mindy Mets, NWI® Program Manager for the Savannah River Site Community Reuse Organization. “You don’t drive by them every day. But we’d like people in the region to get these jobs. We just have to make sure that they have the right skills.”

So last year, the consortium launched an NWI® Academy in coordination with Aiken Technical College, where seven students completed a six-week program that provided them with everything from basic employability skills to HAZWOPER training, and they earned six hours of college credit. Ten more went through this year, along with another 10 at Augusta Technical College, which runs a similar—though not identical—program. In total, participants earned more than 60 industry-recognized credentials. Credentials from both programs include WorkReady and Energy Employability Skills Certification. The Augusta Tech program includes 10-Hour OSHA and First Aid/CPR Certification. Aiken Tech’s program includes 40-Hour HAZWOPER Certification and six hours of college credit applicable toward nuclear training programs at the college.

Of the 10 students who completed the Augusta Tech program, nine continued on in studies related to nuclear energy. The response among Aiken Tech programs has been similar. “It’s a big jumpstart for some of these students to move into college,” Mets said.

“The goal of this program is to get people to a point where they can enter into a nuclear training program,” she said, and to make people in the region aware that these career opportunities exist, because the nuclear power plants are not visible to most people and they often don’t know there are job opportunities so close by. “If you open an opportunity for someone to enter a new field, the ripple effect for that person or even their family can be pretty grand.”

Students are recruited to the programs through high school counselors and local workforce investment boards. The consortium has had to educate many of these as well, Mets said, about the types of opportunities that exist in their region.

“Before this program, I was only planning on getting a nursing degree,” said Bianca Bradley, who went through the NWI® Academy at Aiken Tech this year. “However, now that I know about the nuclear industry, I want to focus on Radiation Protection Nursing and work at the Savannah River Site as a nurse specializing in radiation protection.”

Harry Basket, who attended the Aiken Tech program last year, said he was initially interested in earning an automotive degree. “Attending the Academy helped me to set a long-term goal of becoming a nuclear engineer,” he said. “I would eventually like to become a manager at a nuclear power plant in South Carolina. I am continuing my education at Aiken Technical College as a step to accomplishing this long-term goal.”

“This initiative gave students the unique opportunity to gain insight into a career in the nuclear industry, and we hope they move in that direction!” said Nora Swanson, Southern Nuclear Workforce Development Coordinator, and a member of GEICC and CEWD. “But, more importantly, what I saw during the program was the focus on choosing an individual career path wisely, and then providing the students with the skills to succeed in whatever career they choose. If they pursue a career in nuclear, that is great and we know they are headed in a great direction—but whatever path they choose, they are now prepared to be successful.”

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Partnerships Making a Difference: The Carolinas Experience

The Career Pathways model relies upon the ability of industry, government workforce investment boards, educators, and other key stakeholders to work together as a team to prepare low income young adults for careers in the energy industry.

Two laudable examples of how strong partnerships can lead to successful programs can be found in the experiences of the Carolinas Energy Workforce Consortium.

The Workforce Investment Board

“When the Pathways model rolled out and the consortia were identified to work on these programs, we really had no idea how we were going to fund all of this,” said Leilani Bush, former Project Manager for the Carolinas Energy Workforce Consortium, one of nine energy consortia implementing GIECP pilot programs in the U.S. “Not only was funding an issue, but finding the staffing to make it work was going to be a challenge.”

Those hurdles were quickly overcome, however, when the state’s workforce investment board representative stood up and offered to take a leadership role.

“‘We can pay for that,’” Bush remembers the representative, Janice Ivey, telling everyone at the consortia meeting. Not only did the state’s workforce investment board cover the cost of career coaching and assessments for the program, Ivey was able to help guide the consortia toward applicable grants, she said. What’s more, she was able to bring local workforce investment

board staff on board and secure their commitment to the GIECP program, so that each of the regions in which training and education were occurring would have the support they needed.

“Had it not been for her, we couldn’t have gotten this off the ground,” Bush said.

Ivey said she was encouraged by the way the GIECP model was set up: It brought employers, trainers, and workforce development boards together and made the needs and expectations of employers clear, something that is often lacking in training programs.

“Too many times it seems we just train to train,” said Ivey, Business Services Coordinator for the North Carolina Department of Commerce. “In this case, CEWD had developed the curriculum to fit the specific needs of utilities. The consortium already had the local employers at the table when we arrived. So we were able to take that and show local workforce investment boards how they fit in. We could do the assessments with candidates and match their skills and interests directly to the specific needs of employers. When you can do that, you can make a really good match and provide employees who are going to meet the expectations of that employer. CEWD gave us the tools to do this appropriately. We were glad to be involved and it’s been a very positive learning experience for us.”

Bush said representatives from their two educational partners, Forsyth Tech and Gaston College, were also instrumental in making the training programs a success. “They said, ‘Here are your contacts, and here’s what you can expect from them.’ We were then able to really connect the dots.”

Working together, the community colleges and workforce investment boards were able to identify and recruit potential candidates for the lineworker and nuclear technology programs. The schools reserved spaces for GIECP participants in their classes and the workforce investment boards provided students with the coaching and other assistance they needed to complete the programs. Industry partners, who helped create and support the training programs at Forsyth and Gaston, then interviewed and were able to hire some of the graduates.

In all, 229 students were recruited, 21 students completed the programs, seven were interviewed for jobs, and five were hired, Bush said. Now, she said, they are working on how to make the programs sustainable so they can expand the model to prepare students for jobs in advanced manufacturing and welding, skills also needed in the energy industry.

“We’ve got a lot of work to do,” Bush said.

York Tech

Another successful partnership that increased participation in the GIECP program was one developed between the Carolinas consortium and York Technical College in South Carolina, where a lineworker training program was already being used to feed applicants into energy jobs in both North and South Carolina, Bush said.

The consortium wanted to establish a summer program for teaching the Energy Industry Fundamentals course developed by CEWD, but there was no funding available for the program through the South Carolina Workforce Board. The consortium came up with the money, and the North Carolina Workforce System joined with York Tech to recruit the students.

Six students enrolled in the program, said Bush, and all six not only successfully completed it, they went on to enroll in full-time energy training programs after they did. Four are training in the lineworker program and two have enrolled in the electrical engineering technician program.

“The Energy Industry Fundamentals course gives them a comprehensive understanding of what the industry is about and the types of jobs available to them in energy,” Bush said, adding that students were recruited through a career fair attended by representatives from the energy industry.

While they had hoped to recruit a larger number of students for the program, she said, one challenge was that students would be attending school instead of holding down summer jobs, which many could not afford to do. The consortium is looking for ways to provide financial incentives to students through stipends for next summer’s program.

The consortium already covers the cost of tuition for eligible students who enroll. To be eligible, students must be 18 years old, in their senior year of high school, maintain a cumulative grade point average of 2.0 or above, have a clean background and be able to pass a drug screen, and be interested in a career in energy.

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Dawn Battram: Drawn to Power Plant Work Through a GIE Career Fair

Dawn Battram isn’t the type to sit still and doesn’t want a job that begins to feel predictable or mundane. So when her father suggested she look into a program at Ivy Tech Community College for power plant operators, she listened to what he had to

But what really sold her was a Get Into Energy career fair put on by Ivy Tech and several energy companies in the region near her home in Oakland City, Indiana, including AEP, Vectren, and Duke Energy.

“I didn’t know a whole lot about what my options were, what classes I still needed to take,” said the now-26-year-old single mom who had started a degree in public relations but decided she needed a higher-paying job to support her daughter. “There were some very helpful people at the career fair from Ivy Tech,” she said. “They walked me through what I would still need and how my other classes would transfer over.”

Battram started taking classes again in August 2010 and by December had finished her associate’s degree in Power Plant Technology. After an internship with AEP, the company hired her full-time.

Battram said working in a power plant has been a perfect fit. “In operations, we have daily checks of equipment during which we look for anything that’s not functioning properly. Is a motor vibrating too much? Are there air leaks? Is water dripping somewhere? It’s never routine,” she said. “You never know what you’re going to walk into but that’s part of the excitement of it. There is a lot of problem-solving. I love it.”

Another thing that appealed to her, said Battram, was that jobs at the plant are stable; she doesn’t have to worry about them being sent overseas or massive layoffs eliminating the work that she does.

The program at Ivy Tech taught her how power plants work, as well as how energy is made and distributed, she said. “Having that basic introduction made a huge difference; I did not understand any of that at the time.”

She also appreciated learning some of the basics of welding, along with maintenance and installation. “It’s hard to figure out what’s wrong if you don’t know how something works. And as an added benefit,” she noted, “it helped me learn how to fix things around the house.”

Having an internship at AEP further solidified her decision to enter the field, she said, because she was able to get hands-on, paid experience while completing her studies under a Pell Grant. The program helps the company, she added, because AEP can tell if potential employees are learning the skills they need before they commit to hiring them.

The program is working well, Battram said. Of nine interns, eight were given full-time, permanent jobs.

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Math Boot Camp Boosts CAST Pass Rate at North Georgia Tech

After five years of teaching an electrical lineworker course at North Georgia Tech (NGTC) and watching students struggle to pass the math section of the CAST test, Hoyt Winkler knew there had to be a better way.

So when Debra Howell of Georgia Power, one of the lineworker program’s biggest sponsors, met with him and asked if there was anything the company could provide to help better prepare students for jobs in the energy industry, he knew just what to ask for: More practice material for the math test.

Howell directed him to a math boot camp available on CEWD’s website: <http://www.cewd.org/mathbootcamp.asp>. Hoyt immediately introduced the program to his students, showing them how to access the material in his classroom and walking them through it. They located sample tests online that were similar to those on the CAST and he showed the students how to use them on a screen in the classroom. He also created handouts to send home with his students related to the work they’d be doing through the boot camp.

“With this boot camp, they can see how to solve a problem and then it gives them more problems to solve that are like it, and they can go back and look at the answers,” he said. His students, many of whom hadn’t taken a math class in years, immediately caught on.

The boot camp, he noted, is free. More importantly, it works. Winkler’s first class to use the online math boot camp achieved a significantly higher pass rate than previous classes.

“We have used other websites and other curriculum,” he said. “But so far this has been the most helpful.”

Howell said she was excited about the new boot camp and its potential to help other students improve as well.

“We have many students at all four of our Electrical Lineworker Apprentice Certificate (ELAC) programs across Georgia that struggle with basic math and passing the CAST test. The new math boot camp is free and, by the NGTC results, it will be beneficial to all students to prepare,” she said.

Winkler will continue to use the boot camp with his students, who can apply for jobs at Georgia Power and other utilities after

passing the CAST and other pre-employment tests, as well as a background check.

Howell said Georgia Power had recently interviewed graduates from Winkler's most recent class and would consider hiring them for future openings.

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The Role of the GIECP Coach

Eriann Faris, Youth Program Manager for the Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council, knows what it takes to keep low income young adults in school and on track for a career.

It takes money for gasoline. It takes a list of reliable daycare providers. And sometimes, it takes four new tires.

Low income young adults face a wide range of challenges when it comes to applying for, enrolling in, and completing postsecondary education and applying for jobs. Obstacles such as a lack of daycare, gas money or other transportation issues, and even a lack of knowledge about how systems work can derail their efforts to complete their education and stay on a career path.

The Get Into Energy Career Pathways model recognizes this, and provides coaches to support students throughout the entire pathway. Eriann Faris is one of those coaches.

"The role of the coach is to really develop the relationship with the participants and give them the resources and information they need as they go down this career pathway for energy-related careers," she said. "It is to be that person to point them in the direction as to whom they need to speak with at the school, and where to locate the training providers they chose for the degrees they want. It is to help motivate them to keep going through the program until they reach the end, to let them know there is someone there when there are hard times, to be there and let them know there are wraparound services available to them."

Faris said her organization was so impressed with the GIECP model that they are replicating it to provide services in other high-demand occupations. "We were recently awarded a healthcare careers grant, and I feel strongly that it's because of this model," she said.

Not every GIECP program uses coaches in precisely the same way, though all see them as a critical support to the students.

Gary Kiger, a teacher at Lakeland Electric Power Academy in Florida, incorporates many aspects of the coach's job into what he's doing in the high school classroom. "We help the kids learn to complete job applications and teach them to write resumes," he said. "My kids leave here with a wonderful resume. We teach them how to interview for jobs. They each get four professional interviews during their time with me."

Sometimes, Kiger literally goes the extra mile to help his students. "They have a lot of problems, to be honest," he said. "A lot of kids can't get a driver's license because of the cost of insurance. That makes it difficult for them to go to Lakeland Electric to job shadow. I've ended up driving some of the kids to and from job shadowing."

At the Northwest Piedmont Workforce Development Board in North Carolina, Donald Stowe spent most of his time as a coach recruiting students and helping them through a job readiness program to prepare them for participation in a local lineman school at Forsyth Technical Community College.

"Some of them didn't know about work ethic, or how to behave on the job," he said.

So Stowe spent four weeks prior to the start of the lineman program helping students earn their National Career Readiness Certificate. When they started the lineman program, he checked on them periodically and let them know they could speak to him about any problems they encountered.

Likewise, Jessica Cato, WorkSource Specialist for the Next Generation Zone, which partners with the Spokane Area Workforce Development Council, focused her work as a coach on getting students ready for a pre-apprentice lineworker training program.

She provided remedial math instruction and helped them through the SkillsUSA assessment, as well as the NCRC credential. She helped them prepare resumes and took them on a tour of the Avista lineworker training facility.

"I got them up to speed, so they could apply for the program," she said.

Cato said she spoke with 900 students about energy careers, raising awareness of the industry as well as recruiting for the program. Over a two-year period, 200 registered for services with her program. Of those, 37 completed the NCRC portion of the program and 14 completed the entire pathway and applied for lineworker training. Six were accepted into the lineworker program. Four have finished and two more will be finished in October.

Others went on to college or found jobs in construction or manufacturing, she said. "I think for the students who went through

Others went on to college or found jobs in construction or manufacturing, she said. "I think for the students who went through, the program was a success."

Kiger said he had a higher than 90 percent success rate for his students, who found jobs with Lakeland Electric, Duke Energy, Tampa Electric, and several electrical contracting companies, as well as jobs in other fields. Nine have gone on to study engineering in college.

Seeing them doing so well is what keeps him coming back to teach year after year.

"I view it as my job to help prepare these kids with the skills they need for employment in the electrical energy industry," he said.

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