

Case Study Summary

Northern Virginia Community College’s Training Futures Steps to Success Initiative

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Introducing the NOVA-NVFS Steps to Success Partnership

Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) is an open door, public community college offering credit programs through the associate level, as well as workforce development programs. Serving 75,000 students in academic programs and 20,000 in workforce development courses, NOVA is the third largest and among the most ethnically-diverse community colleges in the U.S.

For over 80 years, Northern Virginia Family Service (NVFS), a community-based 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, has risen to the demands, challenges, and needs of the Northern Virginia community. NVFS has accepted community challenges that range from health and housing issues to economic concerns and traumatic crises. The Training Futures (TF) program was established by NVFS in 1996 to bridge the career aspirations of underemployed and unemployed Northern Virginia family breadwinners with area employers who need new office administrative talent. Guided by an advisory council of employer partners, TF delivers a 25-week comprehensive training and internship program targeted at entry-level health care administrative jobs with career advancement potential. TF offers a business immersion approach that resembles actual work practices, and includes comprehensive support services such as access to counseling, accent reduction, a support community of peers, interaction with 50+ corporate volunteers, and individualized tutoring and coaching. Training Futures’ 90+% graduation rate, 80+% employment rate and 100%+ long-term wage gains rank it among the top-performing workforce development programs serving low-income adults across America.

Over the past 7 years, Northern Virginia Community College and NVFS Training Futures have pioneered and deepened a unique Steps to Success partnership. Through this community college-nonprofit workforce development partnership, over 600 low-income trainees at Training Futures have enrolled at NOVA and earned college credits to help them launch and advance new professional careers. Through this partnership, NOVA has accelerated achievement of its Strategic Vision 2015 goals to “secure partnerships with community-based organizations” and “double the attendance rate of underserved populations by establishing minority and New American outreach programs.” In late 2007, NOVA and NVFS’ Training Futures’ alliance was one of 6 college and community-based organization partnerships out of 87 applicants selected by The Aspen Institute for a three-year national demonstration project, called “Courses to Employment”.

Below is a diagram illustrating the Steps to Success pathway for participating adult trainees. Within the model, NOVA and NVFS Training Futures contributes what each organization does best to help participants achieve each step towards their dreams and goals.

STEPS TO SUCCESS

Step 5	Continuing Education & Career Advancement
Step 4	New Career-Track Jobs
Step 3	Comprehensive Job Training with College Credit
Step 2	Foundation Literacy Skills/ESL
Step 1	Outreach into Low-Income Communities

“Living poor in America slowly beats your dreams down. I came to Training Futures to lift my dreams back up.”

With this powerfully simple statement, Gladys Mejia, an immigrant from El Salvador, introduced herself on her first day at Training Futures in 2003.

After she graduated from the 5-month-long program and launched a successful new career, Gladys was invited by NOVA and Training Futures to share her story with 60 case managers from area nonprofit and governmental agencies at NOVA’s Alexandria campus. *When I came to this country,*”she told the audience, *“I had a tremendous dream in my heart.”* Then, as Gladys shared what happened next, tears began to glisten in the corners of her eyes. *“But I buried my dream. I forgot about my dream because I worked and worked so hard.”*

Next, Gladys described how, because of the partnership between Training Futures and NOVA, she was able to *“make the jump from Training Futures to college.”* After graduating from Training Futures and starting her new job at an Arlington professional association, Gladys completed three consecutive evening courses that NOVA delivered at the Training Futures site. Combined with her 7 NOVA transfer credits earned by completing the TF program, these three additional courses were enough for her to earn NOVA’s 15-credit Business Information Technology Certificate. *“One of the tremendous experiences of my life was when I walked across the stage at NOVA’s graduation, shook Dr. Templin’s hand, and got my NOVA certificate.”*

Gladys concluded her story of how the NOVA-Training Futures partnership has helped launch many fellow program graduates back on track to reach their goals. *“Now, we don’t forget about our dreams.”*

Target Audience

The majority of trainees are stuck in dead end retail, service and manual labor jobs paying an average wage of \$10.00 an hour with no benefits. Since two-thirds of these trainees are supporting children, they are trying to raise families with an annual income of \$16,000. Many of these family breadwinners wake up every day knowing they may be just one missed paycheck from receiving an eviction notice. Without upgrading their skills for new jobs, these working poor among us can remain stuck for years living on the edge of homelessness.

Approximately 75% of Training Futures participants, overlapping with other trainee groups, are legal immigrants who came to America in search of the American dream, just as nearly all Americans’ ancestors did. (Training Futures screens all applicants to ensure that they have valid U.S. work authorization.) Many left solid careers in their home countries as medical practitioners, lawyers,

public servants or journalists. They found, to their dismay, that their credentials were not accepted in the U.S and they often lack computer skills. Left with no alternative, they join the ranks of the working poor and often become stuck for years. At Training Futures, they hope to revive the American dream that guided them here.

Around 40-50% are unemployed adults. Many of them were laid off from businesses shedding workers. They arrive at Training Futures with their confidence shaken, but with hopes of converting their misfortune into new opportunity. They embark on forging a more secure career by mastering a complete package of office administration skills.

A few are young people in their early 20s who know they can do better than remaining in minimum-wage jobs. Some are single parents. But with only a high school education, they lack the skills, experience, and credentials to launch themselves onto a career track. They see Training Futures as their launching pad for an office management or IT career, especially now that Training Futures graduates receive college credit from Northern Virginia Community College.

Deepening a Community College – Nonprofit Partnership

Glady's story above illustrates the power of the Steps to Success partnership to help transform the lives of low-income family breadwinners. Over the 5 years of this partnership, the two organizations have continually deepened the partnership and integrated their operations as outlined below to more fully realize a shared partnership vision.

1. **Confirm the target audience's interest in college credit:** The NOVA-TF initiative began in late 2002, after a survey of TF trainees and recent graduates indicated that 90% had "high interest" in college, but only 14% had completed any college courses.
2. **Evaluate TF courses for NOVA advance placement credit:** The TF program's courses were evaluated by NOVA faculty. It was determined that two of the Training Futures courses corresponded to two NOVA credit courses – Keyboarding and Introduction to Computers. NOVA approved Advanced Standing for these two courses, enabling TF graduates to earn 6 NOVA transfer credits.
3. **Confirm and commit to a shared leadership vision:** Leaders in both organizations recognized that they shared a common goal: to improve the lives of unemployed and underemployed Northern Virginians through education and training. In 2003, executive officers of NOVA and NVFS signed the Steps to Success partnership agreement.
4. **Offer dual enrollment and integrate a College Orientation course within the TF program:** Beginning in 2003, TF trainees applied to NOVA and took the college English placement test. A special section of NOVA's one-credit college orientation course was offered exclusively for TF trainees. By completing this course, trainees could receive a NOVA transcript with 7 credits upon graduation from the program.
5. **Offer NOVA continuing education courses for program graduates at TF's site to accelerate graduates' career advancement:** A survey of graduates indicated that many would more readily enroll in NOVA courses if offered at one of the familiar TF locations. Beginning in Fall of 2003, a series of 4 NOVA courses were offered during evening hours at Training Futures sites. Combined with their TF transfer credits, only three of these courses were needed to achieve NOVA's Business Technology Certificate.
6. **Focus on a growth employment sector with high demand:** In 2005, with support from NOVA's Medical and Alexandria Campuses and over a dozen health care employers, TF re-designed its general administrative training curriculum to add NOVA-delivered health care training components such as Medical Terminology so that graduates could secure entry-level health care administrative positions. By joining with NOVA's region-wide HealthForce employer

coalition, this new sector focus helped to create a new workforce pipeline of 100 newly-trained professionals annually to help address a widening regional shortfall of several thousand health care professionals.

7. **Offer an industry-specific ESL feeder program:** In 2005, NVFS and NOVA teamed up to secure a grant to pilot “Health Care ESL” courses delivered by NOVA to improve the language skills of applicants turned away from Training Futures due to limited English proficiency. Participants completing this course could re-apply for TF or for programs offered by NOVA’s Medical campus.
8. **Align entire TF curriculum with existing NOVA courses.** In Summer 2006, NOVA faculty reviewed the entire TF curriculum and determined that three additional TF courses could be revised and aligned with NOVA courses: Office Procedures, Records Management, and Professional Development. The College had previously granted advanced standing credit for Keyboarding and Introduction to Computers. The College’s one-credit Medical Terminology and College Orientation courses, already included in the TF curriculum, rounded out 17 credits, more than a full semester load.
9. **Hire TF trainers as adjunct NOVA faculty.** TF staff trainers were hired as adjunct faculty members in the Business Technologies Division of NOVA’s Alexandria Campus.
10. **Sign Memorandum of Understanding.** A new Memorandum of Understanding was signed in Fall 2006 by leaders of both organizations. The MOU spells out the specific arrangements—faculty, class schedules, student applications and enrollments, financial aid applications, tuition, use and payment of TF facilities—between both organizations. The MOU is structured similar to dual enrollment agreements with area school systems.
11. **Facilitate financial aid application process.** Trainees in the Fall, 2006 TF cycle were encouraged and supported in applying for financial aid to fund their 18 credits of college coursework. The majority of TF applicants were approved for Pell grants and other financial aid support.

Outcomes Achieved

Key findings from The Aspen Institute’s study of 253 Training Futures participants from 2007-2010 suggest that this transformational learning experience helps them chart a new career path:

- 94% of enrolled participants successfully completed the 25-week program, one of the nation’s top success rates for job training programs serving low-income workers
- 84% of participants successfully completed a median of 17 NOVA college credit hours while at Training Futures, more than a full-time semester course load
- 84% of program graduates secured new jobs following the program, a strong outcome that held up favorably through the recession
- Newly-employed participants reported average initial wage gains of \$3 per hour over previous earnings in their first new job (29% increase), equivalent to a \$6,000 annualized earnings increase

After their initial jobs, most trainees continued to accelerate their careers, according to the results of the 2010 survey of 176 program graduates. Over 80% reported continued employment, 76% received “above average” or higher performance reviews, and two-thirds have earned promotions. A total of 28% of survey respondents continued their career education and completed a degree or certificate program at NOVA or elsewhere. Their job performance and ongoing career education paid off – program graduates reported a 44% increase in earnings following their first post-Training Futures job. The average current

wage for graduates completing the survey was \$19.27 per hour, equivalent to annual full-time earnings of \$38,500.

Challenges and Sustainability

The Training Futures program is funded by a complex mix of foundation, corporate, government, and individual grants and donations. NOVA shares a portion of the tuition revenues with NVFS for its trainers and facilities. One constant challenge is keeping the curriculum up-to-date to address employers' hiring needs, and continually building employer relationships.

Suddenly, Beyond the Barriers

“You are already doing the work of a college student. From this moment on, you’re in college,” TF trainer Susan Craver announces to the trainees at Training Futures.

When Susan Craver asks the group of 33 trainees how they feel about hearing the news about NOVA college credit at Training Futures, they respond in unison with the same word, as if this news tapped into similar script in each life: *“Excited!”*

“This college credit helps us get unstuck,” Cassandra says. *“It’s like a launching pad.”*

Others report on various ways they became stuck. Pedro is one of those. He started college, but had to quit school to work. For another foreign-born trainee, the world of US higher education is yet another foreign place in a foreign land: *“I wanted to go to college, but didn’t know how or where to start.”* Amani joins in: *“I always wanted to go to college, but didn’t think I’d be able to afford it.”*

Ghenet echoes Amani’s comment: *“My friend told me – In America, it costs too much to go to college. You’ll never afford it.”* Then she turns up the volume on her smile and her voice: *“God bless America!”*

This news – you’re already in college! – begins to resonate beyond the room to touch others. One trainee talks about her son who is graduating from high school. She plans to go home today and tell him: *‘Mom is going to college. Why not you?’* Another said *“this makes a bright future that’s crystal clear. It’s a good lesson for my children. Today, I’m going to tell them ‘I’m in college!’”*

For Connie, the 2nd-born of 9 children in her family, this news has the potential to raise the educational bar for her siblings, too. *“Me and my brother are the only ones who have graduated from high school. I guess we have low standards. No one cared when I quit high school. But I went back and got my diploma. I don’t want my brothers and sisters to end up like me – 26 years old with few skills.”* And she doesn’t want her siblings to stop with just a high school diploma. *“You can’t even make it with a high school education!”* She says this with an urgent tone in her voice. She wants to convert her own past struggle and current success into a new educational lesson for her family.

In American culture, “college” carries a special status. It’s also a ticket to the American dream, as Connie and other trainees know. Before today, college dreams for these trainees seemed faint and distant, while tall and imposing barriers surrounded them with a feeling of being stuck. With the stroke of a pen – signatures on a partnership agreement between Training Futures and NOVA – the doors to college have flung open and these trainees find that they are already studying - and succeeding - on a campus of higher education.

Today, all the barriers seem to melt away with Susan’s pronouncement -- *‘From this moment on, you’re already in college’*.

For how can barriers prevent you from getting to a place where you already are?