

Building a Pipeline to Postsecondary Success: A Promising Workforce and Education Initiative Takes Root in California

Vivian Figueredo 25 June 2013

In Philadelphia, there are several initiatives and campaigns underway that seek to forge a link between education and workforce development. These programs include:

Philadelphia Academies, Inc., which creates specialized learning environments and career-focused programming to better prepare high school students for postsecondary and employment opportunities; and the Philadelphia Youth Network, a youth workforce development program in which students design their postsecondary readiness programs. In addition, the Team Pennsylvania Foundation has developed the PA STEM Initiative, the goal of which is to dramatically increase the number of students (especially females, minorities and the underrepresented) entering STEM-related careers while recruiting and retraining the incumbent workforce in these critical fields.

In the spirit of sharing lessons and practices from similar initiatives in different states, we are offering an overview of the Career Advancement Academies (CAA), an initiative

in California that is currently in its sixth year. CAA is funded by the California Governor's Career and Technical Education (CTE) Initiative, with the Career Ladders Project providing technical assistance to the participating California Community Colleges.

Background

In a 2001 policy statement entitled *Ladders of Opportunity* (Board of Governors of California's Community Colleges, 2001) the Board of Governors of California's Community Colleges acknowledged concerns with the quality of the state's basic-skills education:

- To remain competitive, California's workforce must adjust to the demands of emerging and evolving industries.
- Higher-wage jobs in these industries routinely go to workers with postsecondary education and training.
- Underserved Californians—those who are minority, low-income, or first in their families to pursue postsecondary education—often lack the basic skills necessary to access and succeed in postsecondary programs.

To address these challenges, the Board envisioned a community college system that offered under-served Californians opportunities to "climb from low-paying work, to jobs with a future." It mapped out an initiative to strengthen the contribution of community colleges to the

state's labor force needs, and established the Career Ladders Project (CLP) to carry out its vision.

In 2004, with funding from the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, CLP launched the California Gateway Project in 12 colleges. The Gateway programs built partnerships among community colleges, workforce investment boards (WIBs), social service organizations and community-based organizations to provide transitioning foster youth with bridges to postsecondary training in high-wage, high-growth fields.

Witnessing Gateway's positive results, then-Community College Chancellor Mark Drummond conceived of the idea of applying the Gateway strategies broadly across the community college system. In 2006, CLP prepared a concept paper for the new initiative, while Chancellor Drummond took the lead in identifying resources for what would become the Career Advancement Academies (CAA). The resulting initiative was funded using SB70 funds from the Governor's Career Technical Education Initiative, and matched with dollars from private philanthropies, primarily those of the William and Flora Hewlett, James Irvine and Walter S. Johnson Foundations.

Launched in late 2007, CAA modified the Gateway model to make it practicable on a larger scale. While maintaining the focus on public/private partnerships and on targeting industries with unmet demand for workers, CAA broadened the population of interest to include all

underprepared young adults (ages 18-30) whose insufficient grasp of basic skills in reading, writing and mathematics shut them out of high-wage jobs. In addition, the initiative combined technical training and basic skills content into contextualized offerings so that students might acquire basic skills in a format relevant to their careers of interest. Finally, it grouped students in learning cohorts, provided them with intensive supports and facilitated their career transitions. In combination, these elements would expectedly build pipelines—or pathways—for students, leading from the CAA programs to careers or continued higher education.

The CAA Framework

In designing the CAA framework, CLP incorporated various systemic elements to lay the groundwork for successful implementation and scaling of the initiative. On the programmatic side, CLP sought a framework that would accelerate student progress through the CAA program and into high-wage careers or additional postsecondary education.

Systemic Elements

- **Flexible framework**—CAA is not a “model” to be replicated uniformly across colleges. Instead, it is a framework with common elements that provides each college space for innovation in its interpretation and implementation.

- **Incentives for institutional change**—Rather than grafting programs onto existing infrastructures, or creating new infrastructures, the framework seeks to rework the system for delivering career education by integrating existing services. The framework expects faculty and administrators to work across silos—across the student support services and the instructional sides, for example—to provide comprehensive services to CAA students in a case management model. CAA also expects faculty to work together across disciplines.
- **Employer and community partnerships**—The success of the CAA programs depends on their ability to respond to the labor needs of local industries. To keep current on industry trends and ensure that students are trained in the requisite skills, CAA programs build partnerships with local employers and WIBs to anticipate and respond to their needs. Employer partnerships also facilitate students' access to internships and, ultimately, job placements.
- **Community of practice**—To support participating colleges in adapting CAA to their local contexts and institutional environments, CLP provides technical assistance, documents lessons learned and fosters a community of learners among sites.

Programmatic Elements

- **Industry-responsive technical training**—While

often building on existing CTE courses, CAA programs ensure the relevance of students' technical training by adapting and developing course content in consultation with local employers.

- **Contextualized basic skills**—In this innovation, CAA programs are expected to develop instructional approaches that contextualize basic reading and math skills with the technical skills in students' chosen fields. Few underserved students who start several levels below in basic skills actually get very far in postsecondary programs. For them, the opportunity costs of postsecondary education are high: their financial needs require them to enter the workforce as quickly as possible, a strong disincentive for spending time and money building up basic skills in pursuit of a certificate or diploma. In addition, basic skills can often seem irrelevant to students' career interests, decreasing their motivation. Combining foundational basic skills with technical training allows students to make immediate progress toward their goals, rather than having to wait until they have completed a succession of traditional basic skills courses.
- **Student cohorts**—CAA students take all or most classes together as a cohort throughout the duration of the program. This model allows students to form peer learning communities, helping each other learn the subject matter and supporting each other in dealing with stresses of school.

- **“Transitions” support**—To prepare students for success in the workplace, CAA programs offer transitions support, including career guidance, work-readiness skills, job fairs, internships and industry visits.
- **Intensive student support services**—CAA programs assist students in managing personal issues that might interfere with their ability to succeed in the program by working closely with the college’s counselors, integrating support services into the instructional program and coordinating with or referring students to outside service providers.

Implementation Progress

During its first phase (2007-2010), CAA expanded rapidly, operating in one-quarter of California Community Colleges (29 out of 112) across three regions: East Bay, Central Valley and El Camino. In 2011 the initiative was funded for a second phase (2011-2014), although given the state’s budget crisis, total funding was reduced from \$5 million (Phase I) to \$2.3 million annually. Phase II included 15 colleges and, with the addition of San Mateo, four regions. Of the 47 CAA programs surveyed early in Phase II, more than three-quarters (36) were expanding or continuing from existing programs; only 11 were newly-designed programs.

As the initiative entered its fifth year, the CAA programs remained aligned to the goals of the initiative. In a spring

2012 survey, nearly all CAA programs reported that they were preparing students for new careers (98%); moving them toward certificates (87%); and helping them improve basic skills in English, reading, math or writing (85%).

Most programs also reported that helping students gain confidence was an important goal of their program (85%).

Following are areas of progress and challenge—and factors influencing these—as reported by CAA program stakeholders surveyed and interviewed in 2012:

Institutional buy-in—critical for the changes necessary to integrate CAA's academic, technical and support components—has grown over time in CAA colleges. The support of administrators and instructors is crucial to allowing CAA program directors and coordinators to bring together departments on campus, and to exercise flexibility in establishing structures and processes that make sense for their programs. In interviews, CAA stakeholders agreed that top-down buy-in is important. The support of the college president, deans and vice-presidents is essential to removing barriers to systemic change. Yet for CAA programs' success, interviewees deemed the bottom-up champions—faculty and student support services staff and administrators who work directly with students—as equally important.

The greatest area of progress is the development of industry-responsive technical programs that

contextualize basic skills learning, so that it is relevant to students' career training. As a framework, CAA considers industry employers as primary customers, and seeks to respond to their demand for qualified workers. Currently, the CAA initiative includes pathways in 15 career sectors, which correspond to each region's most relevant industries. While many of the colleges based their CAA programs on existing CTE courses, the greatest value-add of the CAA program—at least among the most successful programs—has been providing basic skills instruction integrated with technical courses. Of the 220 CAA courses identified in the spring 2012 program survey, 65% had been contextualized for basic skills. The most noted factor in successful contextualization is the degree to which CAA programs are able to bring instructors together from academic and technical sides of the college to work together on a regular basis. In fact, the success of a CAA program may be closely linked to the strength of its instructional teams: CAA programs are strongest when instructors across areas are in agreement about what they are trying to achieve in terms of student outcomes, and when they have joint time to develop lessons and integrate their content.

Although progress differs greatly, the most successful CAA programs have strong partnerships with industry employers, and effectively support students' transition into the workforce. The spring 2012 program survey identified 174 employers as

partners, an average of four per program. Yet, interviews suggested that the quality of these relationships varies considerably across CAA programs. In the best of cases, the planning and development of curricula includes direct input from industry representatives, through advisory committees, for example. Other programs have faculty or administrators dedicated to employer outreach. Employer partnerships are also critical to programs' ability to support students' transitions into the workforce.

CAA programs have experienced challenges in defining their target populations and conducting outreach and recruitment. Some administrators and partners noted confusion over their CAA program's target population. Even those able to define a target group (for example, "unemployed, with low basic skills") admitted that outreach and recruitment do not always target the desired population very effectively. Because community college programs have to be open to all, reaching students with certain characteristics has to be accomplished through targeted recruitment. About two-thirds of programs report recruiting half of their students from within the college itself (69%); through the Workforce Investment Board (64%); with flyers (64%) and through community or faith-based organizations (60%).

Most CAA programs offer counseling and advising to students (87%) and group students in cohorts so that they take at least half of their classes together (77%). Administrators and instructors face difficulties in

figuring out how to embed counseling and support components into courses. Programs that have provided student supports most effectively have developed mechanisms for counselors and instructors to interact on issues related to their students, have offered counselor-led contextualized college success or career courses as part of the learning community and have helped connect students to other resources on campus or in the community including tutoring and financial aid. Yet, some CAA programs continue to struggle to provide supports and services to students effectively. Given budget cuts, many CAA programs do not have dedicated counselors, and the ways in which student supports are provided vary considerably, ranging from one-on-one advising to counselor-led contextualized success courses to group workshops on educational planning.

Implications and Innovations for the Field

Today, several initiatives in California have joined CAA in building education and employment pipelines. The California workforce system has joined the effort by incentivizing work with CAA-type approaches; additional colleges not directly funded by the CAA initiative have launched CAA program partnerships. In addition, the Obama Administration has acknowledged the role of community colleges in getting the national economy back on track and helping the unemployed return to the

workforce. With the richness of activity in the field, the time is right to share lessons across initiatives in order to promote the best outcomes for California's students and industries, as well as to highlight innovations that could benefit programs in other states.

Contextualized basic skills

Contextualization has allowed the CAA programs to provide students with alternate routes to the traditional developmental course series, which—with its strictly-defined and time-consuming levels—is believed to dissuade underprepared students from entering or continuing in college. With insights into how colleges can tackle contextualization within unique institutional contexts, the accomplishments of the CAA programs in this area will be an important source of instruction for other initiatives seeking to improve the basic skills of underprepared students, such as the Student Success Taskforce and the Basic Skills Initiative.

Relevant certificates

As an expectation of the initiative, all CAA pathways must end in a certificate, with an emphasis on short-unit certificates, given the accelerated goals of the framework.

Successful employer partnerships

In the strongest CAA programs, the planning and development of curricula includes direct input from industry representatives (e.g., through advisory committees, conventions, focus groups or in

collaboration with other workforce agencies). Such input is critical to ensure the relevance of students' technical training to local employers. CAA programs also develop strong partnerships with industry employers—sometimes through the efforts of an administrator dedicated to employer outreach—and support students' transition to employment.

Strong support services and student cohorts

Among CAA programs, providing students with opportunities for traditional and peer support is perceived as the most difficult element of the framework to sustain. Because these supports are expensive, stakeholders view them as particularly vulnerable to budget cuts. With smaller grants and the end of CAA funding on the horizon, CAA programs are experimenting with budget-neutral ways to provide these supports.

Conclusion

Six years into the initiative, CAA stakeholders are looking beyond 2014, when their Phase II grants end, and continue to work on figuring out how CAA—or at least its core elements—can be sustained. It was a clear goal of the initiative's design that, rather than grafting programs onto existing infrastructures or creating new infrastructures, CAA would create incentives for institutional change, prompting colleges to interlace their systems for delivering career education with those for providing basic skills instruction.

In many ways, CAA has been successful at provoking institutional change. Over the years, many CAA stakeholders have begun to see a shift in mindset on their campuses, and the bridging of historic divides between the academic and CTE sides of the college. Colleges are showing increased willingness to allow time for academic, CTE and support services departments to work together. They are allowing CAA programs to exercise flexibility in establishing structures and processes that make sense for their students and employer partners. Contextualized courses and revised programs of study have been approved by the requisite local and state approval processes and are now embedded in the regular offerings of the host colleges. CAA faculty have engaged in re-examining and restructuring their programs of study and certificates in order to create a more "stackable" design; participating colleges' faculty have had success in sparking wider uptake of contextualized teaching and learning beyond the core CAA offerings at their campus and in spreading the CAA approach beyond the funded departments.

CAA programs have begun experimenting with promising practices for institutionalization, and are generating ideas for embedding elements of the framework beyond the confines of the grant-funded "CAA program." Some of these ideas include:

- Migrating the responsibilities of CAA coordinators to faculty members, thus eliminating the cost of a full-

time position and increasing the program's credibility by putting it in the hands of a regular faculty member.

- Incorporating the CAA approach into the first-year experience (FYE) or other learning community programs, which many colleges already offer and which have similar components to the CAA bridge.
- Creating space for CAA in the colleges' regular marketing and communications materials, so that CAA programs are not bearing the entire cost of outreach.
- Expanding the CAA approach as a foundational entry point or on-ramp across multiple career technical programs on campus.
- Building on the CAA emphasis on smooth transition and continuing pathways to further update and streamline program offerings and certificates in ways that help students build competencies and credentials for a lifetime of advancement.

Finally, while continuing to explore ways to maintain the CAA programs themselves, another practical vehicle for expansion of the framework is for elements of CAA to be incorporated into other California higher-education initiatives. For example, many elements of the CAA framework dovetail well with the goals of the federal TAACCCT program; both the Central Valley and the East Bay CAAs used the CAA framework to develop their successful TAACCCT proposals. The California Workforce Investment Board has also supported efforts to link local

workforce boards to the CAA; community organizations working with local colleges have secured federal funds to use the CAA approach in building a community healthcare workforce needed to address implementation of the Affordable Care Act. As discussions around CAA's sustainability continue, it will be worthwhile to engage representatives of the various initiatives to tease out what lessons or elements of CAA are applicable and appropriate for them to consider.

Vivian Figueredo specializes in managing complex evaluations of national systems-change and partnership-building initiatives. For the Citi Foundation, Vivian is currently managing a five-year summative and formative evaluation of a multi-city initiative: the Citi Postsecondary Success Program. For the Knight Foundation, Vivian is also managing two multi-year evaluations of university-led community revitalization efforts: the College Hill Alliance in Macon, Georgia, and the University Park Alliance in Akron, Ohio. For the past four years, Vivian has been a lead trainer and coach in evaluation methods for the Robert Wood Johnson Evaluation Fellowship Program, a program co-led by the OMG Center and Duquesne University.

References

Board of Governors of California's Community Colleges. 2001. Ladders of Opportunity: A Board of Governors'

Initiative for Developing California's New Workforce.