

**Central Piedmont Community College**  
**Pathways to Employment & ESL Pathways**  
Charlotte, North Carolina

**Organizational Background**

Central Piedmont Community College's (CPCC) Community Development Department initiated Pathways to Employment in 1998. Using innovation and flexibility, the college designed credit-based vocational training in targeted industries in order to better serve adults facing "work first" welfare reform. Students in the Pathways program who are recipients of public benefits, learn new technical and employability skills through integrated basic education and for-credit technical college curricula. Through the English as a Second Language (ESL) Pathways program, developed in 2004, the college also addresses the needs of under-skilled limited English proficient adults who do not have incomes that support self-sufficiency, and yet do not qualify for public benefits or the Basic Pathways program.

**Strategy and Services**

Basic Pathways students are mainly recipients of public benefits (including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), housing, child care credits, etc.) and ESL Pathways students are immigrants from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Based on industry research and input from Charlotte business representatives, training is provided in seven high-growth job fields. This profile highlights the two industries with the highest number of students: health and applied electrical. Basic Pathways participants primarily train as medical office administrators and medical reimbursement specialists, and ESL Pathways participants train as Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs) and electrician assistants.

Basic Pathways provides 450 hours of instruction over an average of 15 weeks, 32 hours per week. Participants finish with nine to 12 credits towards an 18-credit continuing education occupational certificate. ESL Pathways students typically take courses part time up to 24 weeks, to accommodate work schedules. CNA students must complete the 192 hours of instruction required by North Carolina law to take the licensure exam. Applied electrical encompasses three courses. ESL Pathways begins with a one- to two-week intensive ESL contextualized course, followed by skills training with a contextualized adjunct course.

The college's Community Development Department houses Pathways, and partners with short-term training, continuing education, and curriculum departments for electrical, medical billing, welding, HVAC and other technical material. Pathways utilizes variations of contextualized, integrated basic skills and technical ("I-BEST") instruction. For example, the basic skills instructor learns the technical material and integrates it into

**Distinguishing features**

- Community college leverages public and private funding
- Public and private partnerships provide student social supports
- Integrated curricula – basic and technical skills, or contextualized English as a Second Language – for simultaneous basic skills, English *and* occupational skill development
- Working students supported beyond entry-level training
- Institutional change

**Industries**

- Health: medical office administrators, medical reimbursement specialists, Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs)
- Electrical: commercial and residential wiring 'helper'

adjunct class time, often contextualizing the basic skills curricula to reiterate the technical material, while building or reinforcing basic or academic skills in reading, math, financial literacy, communication and other employability/life skills. For ESL Pathways, the ESL instructor uses “English for Specific Purposes” course development, developing language and literacy skills in the context of the technical material, and reviews discourse and vocabulary specific to the technical material.

The college strives to make Pathways accessible, regardless of educational history or status. For example, students who are not seeking degrees are not required to take the college placement test. Pathways students who later choose to pursue an associate degree may then be exempt from the college placement test, having demonstrated their aptitude by successfully completing the Pathways coursework. Students who do not have a diploma or GED may enroll in Pathways, if they are assessed to be within six months of a GED or qualifying admissions score. Basic Pathways students studying medical billing and administration must minimally test at a 9<sup>th</sup> grade reading level on Test for Adult Basic Education. Students testing below that are offered Adult Basic Education courses at Central Piedmont’s learning lab. ESL Pathways students are screened and low-performers are placed in a pre-CNA or pre-electrical contextual ESL course.

### **Critical Partners**

CPCC works in partnership with public and private organizations to recruit, manage and retain Pathways students. A full-time Pathways coordinator develops and manages all aspects of each program, including liaising with faculty, meeting frequently with students and monitoring their progress, and connecting students to educational supports. Student success is further supported by a member of the CPCC faculty, who meets with the Department of Social Services social worker, counselors and job developers, and knows about student needs and the supports that can be offered.

For Basic Pathways, the coordinator directly accesses students’ Mecklenburg County DSS social worker, who arranges services to alleviate child care, transportation or other situations identified as possible barriers to student success. For ESL Pathways, the college partners with the members of the Latino Pathways consortium for outreach and recruitment, and the Latin American Coalition provides program orientations in Spanish, student screening and social supports for these working students. This partnership between CPCC and these Hispanic organizations significantly increases awareness among Charlotte’s Spanish-speaking population that the college has accessible vocational offerings, and enhances CPCC’s service to Charlotte businesses looking to diversify into the Spanish-speaking labor pool.

CPCC leverages other community partnerships and resources to fortify services to Pathways participants and make student scholarships available (see the “Financing” section below and the CPCC Web site for a full list).

### **Relationship with Business**

In designing Pathways, CPCC and DSS researched local industry and employment needs, and talked with businesses. This focused research ensured that designed programs representing the first rung of a career ladder that was above minimum wage, and in an

employment field with continued growth potential. CPCC boasts a reputation as the place to go for short-term occupational training in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area, and Pathways occupational training is in direct response to businesses' hiring needs, or their plans to upgrade and promote employees. For example, ESL Pathways applied electrical training was launched at the request of a Charlotte utility company that wished to upgrade its employees and provided scholarships for tuition, books and tools.

The college has relationships with prominent local employers, and several placement agencies, to help Pathways students obtain employment upon graduation (see the CPCC Web site for a complete listing). Participating businesses provide opportunities for field trips, clinical experiences, job shadowing and guest speakers. At Pathways inception in the tight labor market eight years ago, participating businesses gave preferential hiring consideration to graduates. In the current softer labor market, partner businesses maintain a strong connection with CPCC for employment opportunities, participating in job fairs for the graduating classes, and making time to consider program participants for employment. These in-person contacts provide an advantage over other applicants in the increasingly computerized and on-line employment-application process.

### Outcomes

Pathways results are tracked by Pathways staff and DSS. CPCC reports impressive results for Pathways:

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| <b>Retention</b>               | Pathways student retention is 80 percent. As one example, 100 Basic Pathways students typically enroll each semester for medical reimbursement and medical office administrative procedures, and 80 complete.  |
| <b>Enrollment</b>              | ESL Pathways CNA graduated three cohorts totaling 42 students (15, 13 and 14) in its first three semesters; in Winter 2005 the cohort was capped at 20 students with a waiting list.   |
| <b>Educational advancement</b> | 50 percent of students enrolling without a GED earned it while in the program. Within 12 months of Pathways graduation, more than 25 percent of participants continue studies at CPCC.   |
| <b>Employment and earnings</b> | On average across all seven Pathways programs, 72percent of graduates find work in their chosen profession within six months of graduation. According to one report, 81 percent of 343 participants were employed after six months; and 77 percent were employed after one year. Seventy-five percent of graduates no longer receive TANF benefits, and the average wage is \$10.50 an hour. |
| <b>Meeting business needs</b>  | Pathways participants represent 60-70 percent of the administrative staff of participating allied health businesses, the majority of which are small medical offices.  |

Pathways success is not intended to be a one-time event for CPCC. The Pathways approach to serving disadvantaged students is becoming a more frequent way of operating at CPCC. There are several indicators of structural or “systems change.”

Program growth: CPCC Pathways began in the fall of 1998 with one course and grew over five years to eight programs. As of Spring 2006, there were more than 1,000 Pathways graduates. The Pathways approach has led to cooperation with at least four academic curriculum departments. The horticultural department is connecting with ESL Pathways to meet training needs for Charlotte-area businesses, and the financial services department is working with continuing education on a mortgage finance skills program.

Addressing new challenges: CPCC is tackling the next ‘rung’ of a career ladder approach – supporting working students to further their education, in order to continue progressing economically. Basic Pathways participants graduate with nine to 12 credits, short of a full occupational certificate. If a Pathways participant is able to continue studying full time once Pathways support ends, they may be eligible for need-based student aid, and can apply for CPCC’s self-funded “JumpStart” program. ESL Pathways students enroll in a 13-credit occupational certificate. They also are referred to the “JumpStart” program.

However, the majority of Pathways graduates need employment to support their families, and must work, rather than finish the occupational certificate or study to pass certifying exams. Once working, students struggle to finance their tuition on entry-level incomes, and may not be able to get tuition assistance when they can only study part time. For example, a medical reimbursement specialist must pass an advanced coding exam for certification. The course is only \$75, but the books can be \$300-600 and it costs \$300 for the exam. Entry-level working students may not have income available for these costs.

Policies and practices: At CPCC, policies and working cultures that used to stand in the way of innovation toward serving new populations are being addressed. Generally, “policies were not put in place to be a barrier, they just became a barrier” over time, and were not modified as times and students changed. Increasingly, there is spontaneous collaboration in new ways.

A training partnership between CPCC and the City of Charlotte highlights another way policies may be outdated or unintentionally restrictive. The city wants to “grow its own supervisors” and create career ladders for entry-level staff. CPCC provides basic skills and for-credit management, communication, procurement and computer training to utility, street maintenance and solid waste employees. This training partnership is supported under the basic skills Pathways grant, with the YMCA hosting the space, the CPCC Foundation contributing, and the city reimbursing students’ tuition. But, CPCC learned during planning meetings with city managers that according to employee regulations, employees only can get tuition reimbursement if they have a high school diploma (or higher). This makes a large number of the entry-level employees ineligible for tuition reimbursement. CPCC is working with the mayor to change the tuition reimbursement policy, and does not expect it to be controversial or face much resistance.

## Financing

Pathways partner organizations – public, nonprofit and private business – share the costs of running the program with cash and in-kind contributions. As a primary source of support, CPCC has received \$475,196 since 1998 in Pathways to Employment grants from the North Carolina Community College System, for program operations and student support. Other financing includes:

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| <b>Student scholarships</b>           | Between 2000 and 2004, Pathways received more than \$170,000 in grants from the United Way of the Central Carolinas, and in 2003 received a five-year, \$125,000 grant from Christ Episcopal Church in Charlotte, to fund student scholarships. The CPCC Foundation and President’s Fund also raise funds for “JumpStart” scholarships to complete technical certifications. ESL Pathways CNA tuition is supported by a research grant from University of North Carolina Charlotte, funded by the Alzheimer’s Association.                                   |
| <b>Program and curriculum support</b> | CPCC employs a full-time Pathways coordinator, and an academic specialist, and a full-time social worker is provided through a partnership with DSS. In 2002, Pathways received \$15,000 from Freddie Mac for tuition and books to provide credit education using the CreditSmart consumer credit education curriculum. Development of applied electrical was accomplished through financing from a Charlotte utility company. Ongoing development of the CNA program is being funded in part by a North Carolina Community College System ESL Civics Grant. |
| <b>Materials and space</b>            | In December 1999, Mecklenburg County DSS provided \$41,670 to fund a 20-station computer lab at the central campus for the Pathways program.   |
| <b>In-kind support</b>                | CPCC is estimated to have contributed approximately \$260,000 toward Pathways over a five-year period  |

The Pathways program also has been a benefit to the community college financially by generating an additional \$4.6 million in state enrollment funds over six years. That is, by hosting Pathways, the college not only has provided economically valuable training and credentials to a population traditionally underserved by colleges, but it also has tapped into a new population of students, who attract revenue to the college.

**To Learn More**

Visit the Central Piedmont Community College Web site at:  
<http://www.cpcc.edu/pathways/de.htmm>.