



Partners for Impact, LLC

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NextGen Career Center Redesign: Initial Assessment and Engagement Plan

BACKGROUND

The Capital Area Workforce Development Board (CAWDB) hired Partners for Impact, LLC to contract services to improve the hub of career readiness services available to youth throughout Wake and Johnston County. The CAWDB has successfully been reaching a number of young people across both of these counties and providing them with job readiness skills and connections to employment opportunities. Yet there are still eligible young people not being served and there are gaps in the current services.

This document outlines the result of two initial meetings held with key staff from both Johnston and Wake Counties. It includes initial themes, stakeholder questions to be addressed, process recommendations and additional considerations for the project. It serves as the first deliverable of the contract between Partners for Impact and the Capital Area Workforce Development Board.

INITIAL MEETINGS

Two meetings have been held that begin to define key issues for the project to address. The first was a background meeting with staff leadership and the second included project staff as well. The first meeting was held on June 29th and the second on July 10th.

The agenda on the 29th focused on discussion of the project including hopes, barriers, and activities that would propel the group forward. We created the agenda for the second meeting from the discussion results of the first meeting. On July 10th, the group focused on eight areas: feel, flow, accessibility, technology, relationships, basic needs, employment services, and partners. We assessed what was working and what needed improving and identified key questions to use in the design of the stakeholder meetings.

The rest of this document organizes key themes based on the discussions, along with key questions to be addressed in the stakeholder sessions. The themes, while listed separately, have a great deal of overlap. The attachments contain both the agenda and the notes from each of the meetings.

THEME 1: PURPOSE

One of the discussion topics focused on the purpose for the project. All participants on July 10th were asked to describe the purpose in order to improve their connection with the overall project.

Originally, the primary outcomes of the project were to increase the number of participants in the Next Gen Career Center program and to increase the success rate of those who are using the Next Gen Career Center¹.

These two goals were confirmed. However, with the discussions at the second meeting, we uncovered some additional elements that support a larger theory of change for the project. First and foremost is the addition of complimentary services that are easily accessible for youth so that their success is not compromised by other factors. Most of these can be characterized as basic needs services and include, but are not limited to child care, housing and food assistance.

Another discovery was around the perception of the Next Gen Center. Project staff felt that youth perceive this either as a “staffing agency” or as “an alternative to alternative programs” that they were not eligible for or had already completed. The group discussed the fact that the limited experience of this age group may be what was driving these perceptions; maybe all they know and understand is a “staffing agency.”

Finally, matching employers with youth is very different in this generation compared to those generations represented in the room. Employers have changed in the last decade, and their needs and expectations have changed. The keys to appropriate matches between employers and young people are likely to be very different than they were in the past and may challenge our own mental models of what we believe will work now.

THEME 2: RELATIONSHIPS

Regardless of whether you label youth who are not in school and/or unemployed as “opportunity youth,” “at-risk youth” or “under resourced youth,” a key factor to their long-term success is a relationship with an adult.² In fact, those with the fewest resources are likely to be more influenced by an adult in their lives than youth with more resources. At the July 10th meeting, the group discussed the challenges of **staff turnover** among the providers, and how this prohibits the development of supportive, long-term relationships with the young people. They discussed high rates of **burnout** associated with “wearing multiple hats.” The meeting participants acknowledged those who were long term employees and had **strong relationships with the youth**, also know exactly who

¹ Need to define what success at the client level means.

² Ungar, Michael. (2013). The impact of youth-adult relationships on resilience. International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies. 4. 328-336.

they are and what their challenges have been. They are good at figuring out activities for the cohorts that they serve.

Relationships with external partners was also an important discussion. There are good partners and **communication between organizations is relatively good**. However, the meeting participants felt like some system efficiencies could be gained by developing **common intake forms** and **figuring out how to communicate who is receiving which services**. Wake County participants felt like there were too many partners to keep track of at this point. Furthermore, there were several comments that having some of these **partners on-site** could improve the communication and accessibility of these services and this would compliment and support the success of the youth program participants.

Employers are a specific type of partner and relationships are strong. Group participants identified a need for **more diverse employers** to meet the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the young people. Meeting participants wanted to **engage employers in discussions about barriers** that might be present with the youth who are employed through the NextGen Career Center. Finally, there is a **shortage of entry level jobs** with a long term career path.

THEME 3: SPACE

As part of the redesign process the space that young people access is critical. As Partners for Impact staff reflected on the notes from the July 10th meeting, the strengths identified were largely associated with things that program staff could control themselves. For example, they all believed that **students feel safe, supported, are not treated like a number, and appreciated that the setting is not like school**. **Electronic communication**, including web access, Facebook and texting, were also listed as a strength. These are all things that the **staff can influence**.

The biggest challenge is that the space is **not “owned” by the youth**. There are some open spaces and individual private spaces; although Wake County needs more of both. There needs to be **more signage**, and **more comfortable space** where mobile phones and tablets can be used. Staff desired a **self sign-in process** so the youth could come independently to the site, begin doing what they need to do, and notify the staff they are on-site. **Outdated walls, decorations and furniture** do not help the young people feel as if they can “hang out.” There is a desire to **create a sense of community with the space** in order to improve relationships between youth participants and adult program staff, employers, and mentors.

The big questions that still need to be grappled with are: Whether or not there needs to be **more than one site in each county**? How do we add **complimentary basic needs** services that fit the intention and flow of the employment program and its space? What type of space lends itself to community building and a focus on accessing employment?

THEME 4: SERVICES

Both Johnston and Wake Counties provide employment services to young people through funding from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. JCI and EDSI provide these services in Johnston and Wake counties, respectively. The services provided for young people are based on five components that include the following: education, career pathways, career experiences, leadership development and mentoring.

As staff reflected on employment services at the July 10th meeting, some of the key strengths identified were the **availability of assessments, tools, and resources** for program participants. The group agreed that **employers across both counties are engaged**. There are already **good work-based learning opportunities**, ie., internships. However, there is a **lack of funding for these work-based learning opportunities**. There also needs to be more **diverse employers** and **entry level jobs that lead to a career path**.

This is one area where notable differences between Wake and Johnston were discussed and documented. For example, Wake County has access to a **wide variety of educational resources**, Johnston County does not. On the other hand, Johnston County has **job shadowing opportunities** that Wake County does not.

One of the assumptions in this process is that young people need additional services to succeed. These additional services fall into the category of basic needs including **food, housing, transportation, and child care**.

Across both counties there was an agreement that **referrals were easy**. Strengths in Wake County included the availability of bus passes and access to mass transit. In Johnston County services are spread out and transportation is limited. Child care and housing are available, but there are **long waiting lists** to access the assistance. There is a sense that staff are providing the support and advocacy needed for these additional services, however, it takes away from their work with the student, creates a barrier to employee success, and may increase turnover in staff. Once again, this undermines the relationship between the young people and their participation in the program.

Technology repeatedly came up as a need, both from the standpoint of direct services for the young people, and in the whole space redesign. Program participants have **access to NC Works** and a plethora of **online resources**, including training. The technology challenges were associated with being **up-to-date, and allowing mobility for the young people**. NC Works was seen as a weakness, in part because of the skill needed to identify key search terms for appropriate jobs and navigate the system efficiently. There is a desire to have technology that **improves communication between program participants and providers, and between providers**.

ENGAGEMENT PLAN

As of this writing, plans are being made to gather data from stakeholders in both Johnston and Wake County. We will have four meetings of young people. One hour with a group of youth at an already scheduled meeting is equally as valuable as trying to get them together for a two hour focus group conversation. Therefore we will utilize existing group opportunities when possible.

There will be two meetings in Johnston County, one in the Benson area and the other in the Selma/Smithfield area of the county. Both will include a mix of providers and employers who support youth in the NextGen Career Centers. In Wake County we will have a group of partners and a group of employers who will participate in two stakeholder meetings.

SOME KEY PROCESS RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are important for the integrity of the process moving forward

1. Begin getting the youth voice in the room during these discussions.
2. Engage more Wake County program staff.
3. Continue to clarify the target population for the redesign.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. What specific messaging is needed to help change the perception of the Next Gen Career Centers?
2. Is there a need to dig deeper into evaluating the components of the WIOA funded activities? Are there certain strengths and weaknesses within those activities, that could make a significant change?