

Charting the Course to a New Career: The Role of Navigators in the Colorado Helps Advanced Manufacturing Program

What was the Colorado Helps Advanced Manufacturing Program? The Colorado Helps Advanced Manufacturing Program (CHAMP) was a four-year, U.S. Department of Labor Trade Adjustment Act (TAA)-funded project under which nine Colorado colleges, including seven community colleges, worked with employers to align course offerings with industry needs and develop a pipeline of qualified advanced manufacturing workers.

What is the Rutgers University Education and Employment Research Center? The Rutgers University Education and Employment Research Center (EERC) provides research and evaluation on policy and practice to education, government, philanthropy, business, and workforce development organizations. As the third-party evaluator for CHAMP, EERC used a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures to assess how the program worked and how successful it was in meeting its goals.

What was the role of the navigator in CHAMP? The eight CHAMP community colleges each hired a “navigator” to provide some or all of the following services: student recruitment; orientation; skills training; advising and support to help students stay in and complete the program; help dealing with administrative processes, such as applying for financial aid; explanation of career paths; referrals for nonacademic needs, such as housing or childcare; development of internship, apprenticeship, and employment opportunities; job search assistance; and preparation for employment. Specific tasks varied from college to college, depending on the needs of the students and what services were already in place.

What were the navigators’ qualifications? All eight navigators had at least a bachelor’s degree. Several had master’s degrees, and one had a PhD in education leadership. All had substantial work experience either in manufacturing or primary/secondary education. Three of the navigators were hired from within, having held comparable positions at their respective colleges, all but one working under prior TAA grants.

Who were the students who contacted the navigators? Thirty-six percent of CHAMP students had at least one verified interaction with their navigator.

- Male students were more likely than female students to seek out their navigator. Navigators served 39 percent of males, compared to 23 percent of females.
- White and black students, and those who identified as “other,” were more likely than Hispanic students to seek out their navigator. Navigators served 33 percent of white students and 38 percent of black and other nonwhite students, compared to about 25 percent of Hispanic students. (The size of each racial or ethnic group—and the rate at which each group

interacted with a navigator—varied significantly from college to college; the evaluation team could not detect a pattern.)

- Students who were 25 or older were more likely than traditional-age students to seek out their navigator. Navigators served 41 percent of nontraditional-age students, compared to 32 percent of traditional-age students.
- Students who were not eligible for Pell grants (and therefore not in financial hardship) were more likely to seek out their navigator than students who were eligible. Navigators served 41 percent of non-eligible students, compared to 28 percent of eligible students.

How and how often did navigators interact with students? Forty-two percent of navigators' interactions with students happened in group sessions; 31 percent happened in face-to-face (mostly one-on-one) meetings. E-mail contacts accounted for about 14 percent, telephone contacts about 13 percent. At colleges where faculty played a major role in advising, navigators had far fewer interactions with students. At one college, by contrast, all CHAMP students were required to meet with their navigator at least once.

Why did students contact their navigator? According to logs kept by the navigators, 26 percent of their interactions with students were career related, involving job search, career planning, internship placement, resume writing, and the like. Another 26 percent were "check-in" or "catch-up" sessions with no specific agenda; 25 percent focused on academic issues, including course selection and referrals for mentoring and tutoring. Most of the remaining interactions were general information sessions about CHAMP (16 percent) or inquiries about nonacademic issues, including family problems, transportation, and financial assistance (3 percent). (From interviews with the navigators, the evaluation team concluded that nonacademic issues came up more frequently than the logs indicate.)

What type of advising did navigators offer students? Navigators practiced "intentional" advising, which involves getting to know students, helping them set academic and career goals and develop strategies for reaching those goals, identifying potential barriers to success, and connecting them to services to help address those barriers. Research shows that such advising can help increase students' motivation and make them feel more connected to the college experience.

What type of skills training did navigators offer? Navigators focused on the development of "soft skills" related to responsibility, flexibility, interpersonal communication, teamwork, leadership, and problem solving. Research shows that soft skills can make a significant difference in getting and keeping a job, as well as earning a promotion. In some colleges, navigators helped faculty incorporate soft skills training into academic classes. In others, they taught or co-taught courses specifically focused on soft skills.

What other activities did the navigators engage in? The navigators developed a massive open online course (MOOC) to help students build the basic skills employers look for. Most navigators, however, determined the MOOC was not a good fit for manufacturing students, who, as one put it, preferred "hands-on" learning.

How did navigators collaborate with each other? In addition to working together on the employability MOOC, navigators had monthly phone calls to discuss issues facing their students and the concerns of the manufacturing industry. They also held regular in-person meetings which included trainings and professional development workshops. Navigators also used the software platform Basecamp to share best practices and tools, support each other in dealing with challenges, and celebrate successes. Informal networking among navigators proved useful in helping students make decisions about transferring to other colleges and building relationships with regional employers. Navigators tended to work most closely with colleagues in the same region of the state.

Were the navigators effective in improving student outcomes? Because the role of the navigator varied significantly from college to college and a range of other factors at each college influenced student outcomes, it is difficult to draw a definitive conclusion about the navigators' effectiveness. There are, however, some promising indicators:

- Seventy-seven percent of students who entered CHAMP in spring 2014 and interacted with a navigator remained enrolled until at least the next semester, compared to 50 percent of those who did not interact with a navigator. Students in the fall 2014 and spring 2015 cohorts who interacted with a navigator also had higher retention rates than those who did not, but the difference was smaller. Students in the fall 2015 cohort who interacted with a navigator had the same retention rate as those who did not.
- Thirty-three percent of students who interacted with a navigator completed their course of study and earned a credential, compared to 28 percent of those who did not. (This was not true for all types of credentials. Students in associate degree programs who interacted with a navigator had a lower completion rate than those who did not.)
- Fifty-one percent of students who earned an associate's degree and interacted with a navigator earned at least one additional credential, compared to 36 percent of those who did not.

It is also worth noting that students who interacted with a navigator had a similar rate of employment after graduation (34 percent) as those who did not (37 percent). About 40 percent of incumbent workers in the program saw a wage increase of more than \$500 after graduation, regardless of whether or not they interacted with a navigator.

What challenges did the navigators face? A number of issues made it challenging for navigators to succeed in their work and for colleges to establish the position as a permanent part of their programs. These issues included:

- Lack of clarity about role and responsibilities
- Inadequate preparation for some tasks, such as development of the MOOC
- Not enough visibility at colleges with multiple campuses and evening classes
- Lack of private office space for student meetings
- Reluctance of students to seek help
- Lack of student interest in internships due to work and family demands
- Difficulty recruiting students in a region with low unemployment
- Turnover in the navigator position

- Difficulty establishing partnerships with workforce centers that survive staff turnover

What did the navigators do that could benefit similar programs in the future? The evaluation team identified a number of promising practices, including:

- Recruiting students through Craigslist, LinkedIn, and Facebook
- Including success stories that illustrate the benefits of CHAMP in marketing materials
- Developing a network of female mentors to encourage more women to enroll
- Seeking opportunities for crossover with liberal arts and humanities curricula
- Reaching out to high school students through career fairs, dual-enrollment programs, and relationships with guidance counselors
- Focusing orientation on the program, rather than general information about the college
- Making regular visits to classes and labs
- Making it mandatory for students to meet with their navigator at the start, midpoint, and end of the program
- Reviewing students' transcripts, past employment and military service for credentials they may have earned but not received
- Linking to information about potential employers on the CHAMP website
- Inviting potential employers to conduct mock interviews with students
- Publically recognizing employers and community groups that work with the colleges

To read EERC's full report on the digital badges and find out more about their evaluation of the program, visit <http://smlr.rutgers.edu/content/colorado-helps-advanced-manufacturing-program-champ-evaluation>.