

# Expanding Access *and* Success Through Community Partnerships

CBOS AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE POSITIONED TO PLAY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS AND BOLSTERING WORKFORCE READINESS.

By Evon W. Walters



Community-based organizations possess a deep understanding of the issues, barriers, and needs of their surrounding communities. Given their established credibility in serving marginalized and historically underrepresented populations, they serve as an ideal and strategic partner for community colleges.

LABOR ECONOMISTS HAVE OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES WARNED OF THE necessity of expanding the country's talent pipeline in building a well-trained and job-ready workforce for the 21st century. This national imperative has been accentuated by the impact of the skills gap, technology, and the more recent COVID pandemic, which has fast tracked what had been many long-term visionary goals into present day realities.

Now more than ever, the United States is in the midst of a renaissance of changing population demographics. Much of this change is reflected in the growth of our country's historically underrepresented and economically disadvantaged population groups, which, as history and socioeconomic reality inform us, have contributed to existing disparities in postsecondary access and the labor market gaps. This demographic shift is a reality that will challenge the country and its policymakers to realize foresight and entrepreneurial spirit through intentional and sustainable cross-sector collaboration.

By virtue of its mission, the community college sector has been and remains a central player in meeting the immediate and long-term workforce training needs of the nation through an assortment of credit, non-credit, short-term, employer-sponsored, and grant program offerings. In recent years, partnership initiatives have evolved into the development of career pathways aimed at expanding awareness, access, and success. As such, one strategic partner that aligns well with this mission are community-based organizations (CBOs).

CBOs possess a deep understanding of the issues, barriers, and needs of their surrounding communities. Given their established credibility in serving marginalized and historically underrepresented populations, they serve as an ideal and strategic partner for community colleges. From an institutional lens, CBOs are a viable alternative source in expanding and diversifying the enrollment funnel of an institution.

The Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC), a multi-campus institution located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has embraced this opportunity with an aggressive approach to engaging and partnering with community-based organizations. These partnerships have yielded a wide range of life-transforming outcomes in the form of career-awareness programs, short-term certification, and career pathways that lead to postsecondary education and training opportunities. Central to the success of these partnerships has been the college's consistent level of engagement and visibility as a credible thought partner and ally in advancing many of the region's workforce needs.

### High School U: A High-Impact Partnership

One such example of a high-impact partnership at CCAC is the High School U initiative with the Neighborhood Learning Alliance (NLA). NLA is a local non-profit in Pittsburgh that aspires to enhance educational opportunities for lower-income families from kindergarten through college. This five-year dual-enrollment collaborative targets the city's historically underrepresented and economically disadvantaged high school students. NLA, which actively recruits and sponsors the students, also provides ongoing support services, including access to career exploration, paid internships, and support for the college application process. It's a partnership that Sharmyn Straughters, who is the director of one of the college's centers and one of the key architects in launching this partnership, describes as "providing equal access, with the potential to positively impact today's youth and generations to come."

"It is about transformative learning and education, where it primes, positions, and supports the launch of disadvantaged and underrepresented populations into life-changing careers that would otherwise be inaccessible," Straughters says.



As part of the planning process, CCAC's faculty members, administrators, and NLA partners engaged in deep conversations exploring active learning approaches, deliberating on developing intrusive student support systems around the unique characteristics of the students.

## Keys to Success

From the program's inception, success has been reflective of a collaborative and entrepreneurial spirit in its planning process and execution of the partnership objectives. This has been anchored by the strong belief that all students can learn, provided that they receive a learning environment that supports, inspires, and challenges them.

As part of the planning process, the college's faculty members, administrators, and NLA partners engaged in deep conversations exploring active learning approaches, deliberating on developing intrusive student support systems around the unique characteristics of the students. The development of the support programs and the system involved candid conversations in not only challenging traditional approaches in student support and teaching/learning, but also in embracing a best practices mindset in determining what teaching and learning strategies would best advance student success. As a result, over a five-year period from 2017 to 2021, the success of the program has been evident. The 442 student participants had a 90 percent success rate in completing and passing their courses, earning a total of 1,259 college credits.

Core elements to program's success include:

**A strong planning process.** In response to the initial outreach of NLA, planning involved the upfront and ongoing engagement of faculty and enrollment services administrators. Collectively with NLA, they conceptualized the pathways, identified the gateway courses, and developed the student support system.

**A customized student support system.** Central to the student's success was the development of an intrusive student support system based on the premise of building relationships and having a strong coaching and support system in place. Much of this was informed and shaped by NLA, and specific supports included:

- Embedded student success coaches/tutors who worked with students within and outside of the classroom.



- Mandatory tutoring.
- Material needs support such as transportation.
- A "Learn and Earn" summer component sponsored by a local workforce entity.

**Assessment.** This was and remains an integral component in the planning and strengthening of the program.

## An Imperative for Access and Equity

Access to higher education is not only a moral and economic imperative, but also an issue of equity. As institutions look to diversify and expand their own enrollment pipelines, partnerships such as these represent a mission-centric, low-cost, and high-return investment in building an institution's capacity to attract, to enroll, and — most importantly — to retain students.

With their mutual interests and common vision of increasing awareness and access to careers, CBOs and community colleges are positioned to play a significant role in closing the decade's achievement gaps by providing a more streamlined pathway from education to career, while contributing to workforce readiness.



*Dr. Evon W. Walters is Northwest Region president of the Community College of Allegheny County in Pennsylvania.*