

# *Northeast Resiliency Consortium*

## **Final Evaluation Report Executive Summary**

**September 2017**

**Submitted to Passaic County Community College**

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This evaluation report was funded by a grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration. The report was created by the third-party evaluator and does not necessarily reflect the official position of the U.S. Department of Labor. The U.S. Department of Labor makes no guarantees, warranties, or assurances of any kind, express or implied, with respect to such information, including any information on linked sites and including, but not limited to, accuracy of the information or its completeness, timeliness, usefulness, adequacy, continued availability, or ownership.

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## **About DVP-PRAXIS LTD**

DVP-PRAXIS LTD is an action-oriented consulting firm focused on higher education and the workforce. We specialize in mixed method formative and summative evaluation services to inform implementation and measure impact. We also provide strategic advising services for project development and implementation, and conduct research and policy analysis on critical issues facing higher education and the economy. We listen with a keen ear to client's needs, and leverage our experience and knowledge to support foundations, non-profit organizations, state agencies, and colleges and universities committed to improving postsecondary education and skills-development practices and public policies.

## **About Equal Measure**

Headquartered in Philadelphia, PA, Equal Measure provides evaluation and philanthropic services to social sector organizations. For more than 30 years, our clients have been major private, corporate, and community foundations, government agencies, and national and regional nonprofits. We have deep experience with network collaborative initiatives that improve educational outcomes, and build career pathways, for young adults to live better economic qualities of life. To that end, we have worked on an array of major national and regional programs for organizations such as the Citi Foundation, the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions, the James Irvine Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Strive Together, RISE for Boys and Men of Color, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and U.S. Department of Labor-funded grants in Wisconsin and the Northeast U.S.

### The Northeast Resiliency Consortium

Driven by a series of natural and man-made disasters that took place in the northeast in 2012 and early 2013, including the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, the Boston Marathon bombings, and Hurricane Sandy, seven community colleges in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York formed the *Northeast Resiliency Consortium* (NRC) to address the acute need for resilience in their communities, and were awarded a Round III TAACCCT grant from the U.S. Department of Labor. The NRC sought to take strategic action to build a highly skilled and qualified workforce to help mitigate their communities' short- and long-term vulnerabilities and risks, and build resilient workers, institutions, and communities. The NRC used this grant to expand and enhance its programs to close the skills gap in healthcare, information technology, hospitality, and environmental science. Through these training programs, the NRC would cultivate resiliency for participants to rapidly and effectively adapt and respond to internal or external opportunities, disruptions, or threats. Resiliency also refers to helping workers and employers develop advanced skills that facilitate adaptation to global competition, evolving technologies, and workforce demands.

The NRC prioritized efforts focused on credential completion and employment in sectors that are critical to the functioning of communities, including in healthcare, where remaining adept at responding to emergencies and crises is critical for survival; information technology, where data networks must remain functional during catastrophes; and environmental technologies, where resilient infrastructures can help states and communities prevent and recover from disasters. In total, NRC colleges offered 84 programs of study to participants, with 44 continuing education programs and 40 credit programs. The NRC aimed to serve more than 3,462 unique participants during the three-year period of the grant. Preliminary performance numbers indicate the consortium surpassed its original goal by 15% – serving 3,987 unique participants. This final evaluation report documents findings from the impact and implementation studies, with an emphasis on the consortium's approach to creating pathways from continuing education to credit programs, and colleges' provision of comprehensive career, personal, and academic support services to participants.

### Evaluation Design

The comprehensive evaluation of the NRC included regular, formative feedback on the implementation progress among the NRC colleges, a quantitative analysis of the impact of two core strategies on NRC participants on educational outcomes, and a comparative analysis of employment outcomes.

The **implementation evaluation** was designed to provide formative feedback on program implementation at each community college during the first two years of the initiative. Key elements of program implementation were documented and assessed – ranging from efforts to establish continuing education to credit pathways to sustaining and institutionalizing key grant-supported strategies like comprehensive support service upon conclusion of the TAACCCT grant. Key research questions for the implementation study included:

- *How were non-credit and credit-based curricula developed and implemented at each site, especially the connection between continuing education/workforce development programs and credit programs? Did progress vary across sectors? How were regional standards for Prior Learning Assessment developed and implemented across sites?*

- *What kinds of comprehensive support services were offered to participants? How were these services provided? How do these services differ from traditional services provided by sites and/or local partners? How were the core resiliency competencies developed and implemented across sites?*
- *How were employers engaged at each site and/or consortium-wide through local advisory councils? What were important contributions of employers, such as work-based learning opportunities or priority job placement for participants?*

Over the course of more than three years, the evaluation team engaged in several data collection activities to assess and document implementation among the NRC colleges. These data collection efforts included interviews with key stakeholders, such as college administrators, faculty, and support staff, as well as external stakeholders, such as employers and workforce groups. The team conducted qualitative interviews and focus groups either in-person during site visits or via telephone. Overall, the evaluation team conducted 17 in-depth site visits – visiting each NRC college at least twice and three colleges thrice during the grant, in sum interviewing more than 225 stakeholders. The evaluation team also conducted two rounds of in-depth structured interviews with each college. The team conducted approximately 95 phone interviews with the key consortium strategy partners engaged in the work. Finally, the evaluation team developed two on-line surveys that were administered to site leads. The first survey was developed as a pre-site visit assessment to ensure the evaluation team had a clear understanding of the strategies being implemented at each college. The second survey was developed to gather information on the continuing education to credit pathways that were created or modified under the grant.

At the outset of the NRC, the evaluation team conducted implementation interviews with stakeholders from each college, reviewed background documents, attended two consortium-wide meetings, and conducted a literature review. These activities informed the development of an overall evaluation framework to assess implementation progress. This early implementation data collection phase reaffirmed many assumptions embedded in the initial evaluation design, and provided greater clarity and specificity with respect to key lines of inquiry for the evaluation. The evaluation was further refined based on data collected during the first two years of the initiative to focus on three cross-cutting strategies that appeared most prevalent across the consortium colleges and that had the most potential for affecting student outcomes: pathways from continuing education to credit programs; comprehensive student support services; and expanded role for employers. Through subsequent implementation data collection, the evaluation team documented how these strategies were institutionalized and sustained by the colleges.

The participant **impact study** focused on continuing education participants, and examined six student-level outcomes: program completion, credential attainment, banking credits, transitioning to credit programs, employment, and earnings. The impact study addressed the two most common strategies implemented across the NRC consortium: comprehensive support services and articulated continuing education to credit pathways. The four research questions for the impact study are listed below:

- *Do participants who received comprehensive support services (career, personal, academic) complete programs, earn credentials, earn or bank credits, and/or transition to credit programs at higher rates than a matched group of participants who did not receive comprehensive support services?*
- *Do participants who enroll in articulated continuing education to credit pathways earn or bank credits, transition to credit programs, complete programs, and/or earn credentials at higher rates than a matched group of participants who did not enroll in articulated pathways?*

- *Are participants who were not employed at the start of their NRC program, and who received comprehensive support services or who enrolled in articulated continuing education to credit pathways, employed one quarter after program exit and retained in employment three quarters after program exit at higher rates than non-incumbent participants who did not experience these strategies?*
- *Are participants who were incumbent workers at the start of their NRC program, and who received comprehensive support services or who enrolled in articulated continuing education to credit pathways, have a higher rate of receiving an increase in earnings than incumbent participants who did not experience these strategies?*

To answer these research questions, the evaluation team obtained administrative data from each consortium college for the entire grant period (fall 2013 through summer 2017). The team also utilized data collected and entered by colleges into a centralized NRC participant database, which was managed by the consortium lead college. The team collected unemployment insurance (UI) data for the three states in which these data were available, and established data sharing agreements with each college, as well as with the state agencies and organizations that provided UI data.

The evaluation team used Propensity Score Matching (PSM) to generate a matched comparison group that allows for assessment of the impact of (1) enrolling in a *continuing education to credit pathway* and (2) receiving *comprehensive support services* on educational outcomes. PSM is an increasingly common approach to accounting for factors that may influence the receipt of treatment, and thus confound analysis of impact. By generating a comparison group that resembles the treatment group on all variables thought to affect likelihood of receiving treatment, researchers can mimic a randomized controlled trial. Although the sample members were not randomly assigned to the treatment and comparison groups, PSM allows researchers to infer – within bounds – that differences in outcomes between the two groups are the result of the treatment, and not the result of differences in individual characteristics. This approach aligns with the standards for non-experimental research studies generated by the Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research (CLEAR) and the Institute of Education Sciences What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). According to these sources, PSM can achieve a moderate rating from CLEAR as well as meet WWC standards with reservations.

The evaluation team conducted exploratory analyses of NRC strategies to examine educational outcomes of continuing education participants based on the support services received, including career, academic, and personal supports. The team also examined different types of continuing education to credit pathways.

Additionally, the evaluation team used a descriptive analysis to examine employment outcomes, as variation in data availability and access to employment records across the NRC consortium limited the ability to conduct more rigorous comparative analyses.

### **Implementation Findings**

The NRC prioritized its grant strategies on building a resilient workforce in sectors that are critical to the functioning of communities, including healthcare, information technology, hospitality, and environmental sciences. The colleges' approach to enhancing education and training opportunities spanned continuing education and credit-based programs, and included the provision of comprehensive career, personal, and academic support services. In addition, participating colleges sought to engage employers in new ways to ensure that programs would meet the need for skilled workers in high-demand industry sectors.

The summative implementation assessment for the Northeast Resiliency Consortium addressed key research questions around: 1) new and enhanced programs and curriculum; 2) support services; and 3) employer engagement. The implementation evaluation documented the following findings:

- NRC colleges offered a total of 84 unique programs of study to participants, with 44 continuing education programs and 40 credit programs; in almost all programs, colleges sought to provide stacked and latticed credentials.
- NRC colleges implemented three primary approaches to new and modified curriculum and instruction:
  - Three colleges developed 25 new credit-based educational pathways that served participants and included shorter-term credentials that stacked to Associate degrees.
  - Six colleges developed 25 formal continuing education to credit program links, building on-ramps to credit programs of study from non-credit, shorter-term training opportunities.
  - Leveraging a consortium-wide focus on Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), all colleges modified institutional PLA policies, and in a few instances formally approved new PLA policies and processes, particularly for students taking continuing education courses.
- NRC colleges provided support services across three primary content areas: career, personal, and academic. Career supports include assistance in job or internship placement, interviewing skills, and resume development. Personal supports include assistance with life challenges that are interfering with academic progress, such as food security, housing issues, transportation, and childcare. Academic supports address content-specific assistance in courses or programs to help students master the skills and competencies needed to advance in the program and earn industry-recognized or postsecondary credentials.
  - The NRC Resiliency Competency Model facilitated the modification and development of support services among participating colleges.
  - Colleges delivered support services to groups of NRC participants both inside and outside the classroom.
  - Colleges delivered personalized, 1:1 support services to participants, though these were rarely required.
  - 70% of all NRC participants received at least one type of support service, with career supports being the most common, and academic the least common; 41% of all participants received comprehensive support services, which means they received supports in two or three content areas.
- NRC Colleges developed new relationships and leveraged existing relationships with employers, who were involved in NRC in various ways. Employers aided in development of NRC programs and provided work-based learning opportunities for NRC students.
  - Colleges created and strengthened sector-based employer advisory boards to guide the development of new and enhanced programs that met the requirements and needs of employers.
  - Colleges responded quickly to employers by modifying programs to provide urgently needed pipelines of entry-level workers.
  - Four colleges hired staff to focus on employer relations.
  - Colleges invited employers to campus events and career fairs to interview students, and to observe students demonstrating job-related competencies.

The summative implementation results indicate the curriculum and instructional practices implemented by NRC colleges will be sustained, while the delivery of comprehensive support services

will not be sustained, including, with few exceptions, the career-related staff positions charged with expanding employer engagement.

### Participant Impact

The NRC impact study focused on continuing education participants, and examined the relationship between two primary NRC strategies – comprehensive support services (e.g., a combination of career, personal, and/or academic supports) and continuing education to credit pathways – and academic and employment outcomes that include program completion, credential attainment, credit accumulation, matriculation into credit programs, employment after training for previously unemployed participants, and gains in earnings for incumbent worker participants.

Although NRC colleges offered continuing education and credit programs for participants, 70% of participants enrolled in shorter-term continuing education training programs. More than half (57%) of these continuing education participants enrolled in continuing education and workforce development programs that had a transparent, articulated pathway to credit programs at the college. In addition, 50% of continuing education participants received comprehensive support services that entailed at least two of the following supports: career, personal, and academic.

The impact study documented these key findings:

- Continuing education participants who received comprehensive support services have better educational outcomes than the matched comparison group:
  - 82% of continuing education participants who receive comprehensive support services completed their programs, compared with 44% of the matched comparison group.
  - 74% of continuing education participants who receive comprehensive support services earned an industry-recognized or college awarded credential, compared with 37% of the matched comparison group.
  - 41% earned or banked credits from their continuing education program that can be applied to additional educational pursuits, compared with 24% of the matched comparison group.
  - 24% of continuing education participants who received comprehensive support services transitioned into a credit program, although this outcome was not statistically higher than the matched comparison group (20%).
- Participants enrolled in continuing education to credit pathway had similar program completion and credential attainment rates, significantly more banked credits, and higher transition rates into credit-based programs than the matched comparison group:
  - 75% of continuing education participants who enrolled in a continuing education to credit pathway completed their programs, compared with 76% of the matched comparison group.
  - 60% of continuing education participants who enrolled in a continuing education to credit pathway earned an industry-recognized or college awarded credential, compared with 56% of the matched comparison group.
  - 41% of continuing education participants who enrolled in a continuing education to credit pathway earned or banked credits that can be applied to additional educational pursuits, compared with 14% of the matched comparison group.
  - 26% of continuing education participants who enrolled in a continuing education to credit pathway transitioned into a credit-based program, compared with 14% of the matched comparison group.

- 41% of continuing education participants who were unemployed when they enrolled in the NRC program, and who received comprehensive support services, were employed one quarter after program exit, and 67% were retained in employment three quarters after program exit. These results are higher than the 19% employment and 50% retention rates for participants who did not receive comprehensive support services.
- 36% of participants who were unemployed when they enrolled in the NRC program, and who enrolled in a continuing education to credit pathway, were employed one quarter after program exit, and 66% were retained in employment three quarters after exit. These results are higher than the 27% employment and 51% retention rates for participants who did not enroll in these pathways.
- 87% of incumbent workers who received comprehensive support services had an increase in earnings at some point after enrolling in an NRC continuing education program, which is significantly higher than the 76% of incumbent workers who had an increase in earnings and did not receive comprehensive support services.
- 81% of incumbent workers who enrolled in a continuing education to credit pathway had an increase in earnings at some point after enrolling in an NRC continuing education program, which is slightly higher than the 79% of incumbent workers who had an increase in earnings and did not enroll in a continuing education to credit pathway.

In sum, *comprehensive support services* and *continuing education to credit pathways* had significant positive impacts on the educational outcomes for NRC participants; and appear to positively influence employment outcomes and earnings gains.

### **An Assessment of Sustainability and Institutionalization of NRC Strategies**

The final evaluation report provides an assessment of the sustainability and institutionalization of the NRC work. As noted, the curriculum and instructional practices implemented by NRC colleges will be sustained, while the delivery of comprehensive support services will not be sustained, including, with few exceptions, the career-related staff positions charged with expanding employer engagement. The following factors were identified to explain why curriculum and instructional innovations were sustained, while comprehensive support services were not sustained.

#### ***Institutional Leadership and Commitment***

- Executive leaders supported the departmental processes to develop new curriculum and instructional approaches; these changes required administrators, faculty, and staff to engage in structured and intentional processes that were designed for curriculum to be formally approved and institutionalized.
- Executive leaders, divisional and departmental administrators, and project managers did not perceive grant-funded support services as a demonstration of a more effective model of support service delivery for the college to consider adopting institution-wide; rather, these comprehensive supports were implemented as a special service for grant participants, and thus a temporary enhancement.

- Executive leaders, divisional and departmental administrators, and project managers embraced the grant-funded outreach and relationship building with employers, especially the resulting expansion of work-based learning opportunities.

### ***Financial and Administrative Prioritization***

- Divisional and departmental administrators successfully transitioned grant-funded instructors who developed new credit curriculum, programs, and credentials into permanent positions at many colleges; thus, signaling that these new credit programs of study were an institutional priority.
- Executive leaders used the NRC grant to raise the stature of continuing education programs at the college and the importance of articulating transparent pathways between continuing education/workforce development programs and credit programs.
- Executive leaders, including senior-level divisional and departmental administrators, did not allocate institutional resources to sustain the support services positions funded through the grant.

### ***Transparent and Supportive Policies and Practices***

- Senior administrators clarified policies and practices to formalize links between continuing education programs, including internal articulation agreements and institutional Credit for Prior Learning procedures.
- Faculty embedded resiliency competencies into program courses by mapping course curriculum to the NRC resiliency model; yet, formal curriculum changes were rare, creating uncertainty about the institutionalization of resiliency competencies.
- Although senior administrative leaders praised the comprehensive support services provided during the NRC, they did not adapt the roles and responsibilities of existing support services staff at the college to align with the more in-depth, proactive, and program-specific services offered to NRC participants.

### ***Professional Development***

- Colleges provided professional development sessions for faculty about Prior Learning Assessment, though opportunities to engage administrators, faculty, and staff more generally around continuing education programs, formally linking these programs with credit programs, and the need for comprehensive support services were not widespread.

### ***Use of Data and Evidence***

- Project leaders collected data on NRC participants, including the support services they received and industry credentials earned, though colleges did not analyze these data to document the effectiveness of grant strategies or use data to advocate for sustaining grant-funded strategies and positions.

## Implications for Education and Training Programs at Community Colleges

The evaluative assessment of institutionalization and sustainability, as well as the implementation and impact findings documented in this final NRC evaluation report, point to four implications for community colleges who want to expand opportunities for education and training to “non-traditional” student populations, leverage and align resources with the workforce development system, and strengthen relationships with employers.

1. Break down institutional siloes between continuing education/workforce development programs and credit programs.
2. Reallocate institutional resources and revamp support services, so that comprehensive support services are provided proactively to students that encompass career, personal, and academic supports.
3. Create formal and strategic partnerships with the workforce development system around WIOA - leveraging its emphasis on career pathways, and on providing integrated education and training programs.
4. Recommit to their community as an “anchor institution” with a priority to serve the local population, who are often the poorest members of their communities, and to align community assets with local employer needs.