

Issue BRIEF

Career Coaching and Student Success: Michigan's M-CAM Experience



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ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The lessons in this brief are drawn from Social Policy Research Associates' (SPR's) evaluation of the Michigan Coalition for Advanced Manufacturing (M-CAM) TAACCCT grant. M-CAM is a coalition of eight community colleges in Michigan that used grant funds to strengthen four career pathways—Welding/Fabrication, Production, Multi-Skilled/Mechatronics, and CNC Machining.



ABOUT THE TAACCCT GRANTS

The Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grants were funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. TAACCCT funding assists community colleges in expanding and improving training programs that can be completed in two years or less for high-demand, high-skilled occupations.

There is growing consensus among researchers and educators that enhanced student coaching and support can play an important role in helping students successfully navigate the college enrollment process, complete training and transition to employment. The need for this kind of support appears especially vital for nontraditional students balancing work and family commitments and first-time college attendees. Several research studies have shown that counseling, for example, is an effective way to improve student performance and increase completion rates.¹ There is a wide range of services from which students with varied backgrounds and needs may benefit.

This brief draws on data from eight community colleges in Michigan that participated in the Michigan Coalition for Advanced Manufacturing (M-CAM) from 2014-2017. Nearly 4,000 students were enrolled in M-CAM programs over a three-year period. The colleges decided to use the M-CAM initiative as an opportunity to improve student services functions that serve both credit and non-credit students in their industrial trades programs. This brief explores the role career coaches played in the M-CAM program, the types of services they provided, and the challenges encountered and successes realized by the colleges as they implemented the career coaching model. M-CAM is a case study of how vital these advising and student support services are, particularly for nontraditional students in industrial trades programs.

WHAT WE LEARNED

- Embedding one or more career coaches within each college's advanced manufacturing department helped improve the delivery of student coaching and support services.
- Successful student engagement strategies incorporated both academic (e.g., enrollment, assessment, financial aid, attendance, etc.) and non-academic features (e.g., transportation, housing, child care assistance, other help with addressing life issues).
- Building an extensive network that included external partners, such as the public workforce system, employer associations, chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, and community and faith-based organizations, helped programs recruit and support students and facilitated student placement into good jobs at program completion.
- Career coaches played a vital role in helping their institutions document student success, including training completion and employment-related outcomes.

Role of the Career Coaches

Each of the colleges instituted a proactive case management and career coaching model under which participants received a wide range of student support services, including assessment, academic advising, help with educational and financial aid planning, job search and job placement assistance, guidance in addressing life issues, and referrals for supportive services. These enhanced student counseling and support services represented a key strategy for improving access to college-level training programs for adult learners, helping these students achieve post-secondary credentials (e.g., industry certifications, college certificates, and degrees) and supporting their transitions to work and subsequent career advancement.

Proactive case management is a key component of the career coaching model. Coaches engaged with students frequently from the moment they expressed interest in the program, helping them establish goals and strategies, assisting with academic challenges including remediation, tutoring, and study skills, and supporting them in navigating life issues that could impact their success.

Core Features of the Proactive Career Coaching Model

- **Academic Advising.** Career coaches provided students with several types of academic support. They helped students select a career pathway and training program, navigate the college enrollment process (e.g., college paperwork, assessments, financial aid), choose courses, set up class schedules, improve study skills, and access college tutoring services. Some career coaches also helped students, especially veterans and older students, obtain credit for prior learning.
- **Career Coaching.** Career coaches helped students prepare for and transition to the labor market by assisting them with cover letters and personalized resumes, and by connecting them to work-based learning (WBL) opportunities, such as paid and unpaid internships and apprenticeships with local employers.
- **Job Search and Placement Assistance.** Career coaches helped students learn how to look for jobs using online search tools and social networks as well as how to identify the jobs best suited to their needs. They also helped students engage employers and prepare for interviews. Finally, they shared job announcements and coordinated and hosted hiring events and industry mixers.
- **Addressing Life Issues.** Career coaches also provided students with assistance in dealing with challenges related to finances, living arrangements, transportation, and family obligations. Career coaches reported that these life issues usually arose as emergency situations for students and required immediate attention. Career coaches provided referrals to college-funded programs and community and faith-based organizations supplied students with a wide range of essential supports including assistance with food, utility bills, child care, and transportation.

“Thanks to all the [career counselor’s] help through the TAACCCT grant, I had all the support and help I needed and now I am ready to go forward with a great resume and career help to get the job I want!”

- M-CAM student

Satisfaction with Career Coaching Services

Student satisfaction with career coaching services was strong among survey respondents with many students commenting that the additional assistance helped them persevere in their training programs and complete their coursework.ⁱⁱ Over 80 percent of participants reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the *counseling* and *job search* assistance they received and 90 percent or more reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the *personal help* and *academic support* from career coaches. Students

Service	Students Reporting Satisfaction
Counseling	85%
Academic support	91%
Personal help	90%
Job search assistance	83%

expressed surprise at the level of non-academic support—assistance with housing, transportation, and food—provided by the career coaches. One older student who had never attended college stated, *“It is always nice to have someone who is handling the little things for you and trying to make things easier. [The career coach] is always on it with emails and calling. If you don’t respond, she is on it and there is a comfort level to know[ing] someone has your back. I have never had that kind of support before.”* This data suggests that there was tremendous value in offering students a combination of academic and non-academic support. Even faculty were appreciative of efforts undertaken by the career coaches to assist and serve students, and some expressed relief that career coaches could help students with issues outside the expertise and comfort zone of faculty advisors.

Effective Coaching Strategies

The eight colleges faced several challenges implementing the proactive coaching model, but were diligent in documenting and responding to them. The result was the following list of effective practices born of the lessons learned throughout the project.

- ***Enlisting career coaches before the start of the academic year helps to better integrate them into the program design.*** Several colleges experienced delays in hiring career coaches, which resulted in initial disruptions in service delivery. Colleges that embedded career coaches directly into their service delivery model and housed career coaches within their academic departments found this created more robust opportunities for student engagement.
- ***Helping career coaches maintain manageable student-to-coach ratios provides additional time for coaches to engage students and serve them effectively.*** When career coaches’ caseloads were high, they were less likely to engage students proactively and less able to provide the personalized assistance students valued. Five colleges implemented both credit and noncredit training programs across multiple career pathways, which led to higher caseloads for career coaches in those colleges. In other instances, training programs increased their enrollments, leading to higher demand for career coaching services, increased workloads for career counselors, and less one-on-one support for students.
- ***Building solid working relationships with students is important, so encouraging open and honest communication is essential.*** Career coaches reported that establishing rapport—including honest and open lines of communication—with students was an essential component of creating productive working relationships. For example, career coaches from across the colleges reported that verifying student employment and wages was time-consuming and challenging, but the coaches who had strong personal relationships with students prior to training completion had an easier time completing the task.
- ***Requiring students to meet with a career coach ensures a minimum level of student engagement, which helps initiate the student-coach relationship.*** Open enrollment processes in credit training programs allowed some students to slip through the cracks—they were never assigned a career coach. But research suggests that it is precisely these students—those in low-commitment programs who do not seek out assistance—who most benefit from coaching and other support services. Requiring some level of engagement between career coaches and students may help increase service utilization rates and improve student success.
- ***Ensuring that career coaches are visible and services are easily accessible to students helps encourage students to use coaching services.*** Career coaches stated that having their offices near locations where students take classes, conduct labs, or congregate increased the visibility of coaching services and made it easier to initiate coaching services with students. Colleges that housed career coaches in separate buildings or on another campus found the distance impeded student interaction.
- ***Establishing student success tracking systems is important for documenting the valuable role that career coaches play in students’ lives.*** College presidents, administrators, staff, employers, and enrolled students stated that one of the most important aspects of the program was the additional support offered to advanced manufacturing students by career coaches. Consortium colleges unequivocally welcomed and supported the grant-funded

career coaches and saw the positive impact that career coaches had on student success, both for current students (e.g., in increased program completion rates) and for students who had completed training (e.g., in high rates of post-program employment rates and customer satisfaction). Several colleges used their data collection systems to document student interactions and job-related successes, which helped administrators and foundations see the importance of these services to student success. One college lead said, “now we have metrics like how many employers we’re interacting with and just the kind of things our president gets excited about.”

Implications

Community colleges can integrate student services into the heart of their programs, increasing the likelihood of student success. They can encourage career counselors to:

- **Adopt proactive approaches to engaging students.** Several career coaches stated that waiting for students to come to their offices was not effective. Rather, they had to be deliberate and creative about engaging students. Some coaches stated that they would “roam” or “hang out in the hallways” to develop rapport and let students know they were available. Other career coaches sought students out, even calling them during evening hours or waiting after class to talk with them.
- **Build rapport with students.** Spending time to establish rapport with students can help coaches increase the value of their interactions with students. Career coaches stated that it “takes time” to develop trust, and that simply walking with students to their classes, taking them to the bookstore, or introducing them directly to college personnel helped students realize that career coaches could be a very valuable resource.
- **Cultivate relationships with public, community- and faith-based organizations that serve current and potential students.** Many career coaches stated that developing a better understanding of the various organizations in their local communities helped them create relationships that benefitted students. Through their coordinated efforts, career coaches made appropriate and timely referrals and helped students navigate intake and enrollment processes at other organizations.

“She does not let me shrink back ... she tells me, “You need to do this and you need to go do that, we’re going to schedule time for you to come in and we will get stuff done.” It’s annoying, but it’s also helpful and I’m aware that it is helpful, so it’s good.”

- M-CAM Student

About This Series

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ⁱ Ibid. See also Eric Bettinger and Rachel Baker, “The Effects of Student Coaching in College: Evaluation of a Randomized Experiment in Student Mentoring,” NBER Working Paper 16881, www.nber.org/papers/w16881.pdf.

ⁱⁱ A customer satisfaction survey was sent to 2,065 M-CAM participants across all eight colleges who had either completed an M-CAM program (completers) or been “exited” from a program (non-completers). The survey response rate was 28 percent (575 respondents) with response by phone and by web.

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