

**Summer 2016 Evaluation Report on the Transit Training
Program at Georgia Piedmont Technical College: Qualitative
Data from Staff and Students**

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As part of our ongoing evaluation efforts in support of Georgia Piedmont Technical College's Transit Training Program (TTP), the Center for Evaluation and Research Services conducted interviews with different groups of stakeholders to learn how the staff delivering the program and how the students participating in the program perceived it.

In July and August 2016, CERS staff interviewed three instructors and four administrators who worked with transit training program students and two students enrolled in the programs. The interviews took place at Georgia Piedmont Technical College in two conference rooms, and interviews were conducted individually by two different interviewers.

Because we have analyzed the interview data qualitatively (using thematic analysis), our results are not generalizable to a larger population of TTP instructors and administrators. Instead, our findings illustrate the themes we found among the responses of these instructors and administrators. Our goal was to describe some of the perceptions of this population, emphasizing different possibilities rather than searching for most prevalent concepts. However, with our small sample size, we found little differentiation in how these interviewees discussed the several topics that recurred through the interviews. To illustrate some of the discussion around these topics, we provide quotations from the interviews.

Students

Students' interest in the programs stemmed largely from their desire to prepare themselves for work in the transit field. One of the students told us that the program "gives me the hands-on experience that . . . the job market needs," and one of the instructors told us, "Usually, the first thing [the students] want to know is, Is MARTA hiring? Off the bat, they want to know if they've got a job or career" opportunity after completing the program. Another student told us, "This particular program has given me the knowledge that I think I [need to] be successful."

Instructors had positive assessments of the quality of the students in the program. One instructor described them as "definitely students who want to learn, students who want to succeed." However, he noted that "In general, they're typical students. You have to prod them a little bit on the out-of-class work." According to the participants, the students come to the program from different work backgrounds. One instructor told us,

Our average demographic is probably mid-30s, . . . and it is probably a mix between unemployed, underemployed, or employed looking to further their skill set.

Another described the students he worked with as about half students preparing for their first career and about half potential career changers.

Many parts of the program are delivered online through computer technology, and the administrators and instructors felt that the students were able to access learning through these means with relative ease. According to one instructor, technology skills were not an issue with younger students: “The younger students grow up with the smartphone. With a lot of the older students, we typically have to coach them along a little bit.” One of the administrators told us that the transit management program included an introductory level computer course so all of the students received training in their use. The technical college looks to identify individuals who are having trouble with technology issues as soon as possible, one administrator told us. Once identified, the individuals receive face-to-face assistance to help them with whatever problems they may be having.

Recruitment Efforts

GPTC has used a number of approaches to market the transit program to the community, according to participants. This marketing included advertising in a local magazine, billboards, local TV and radio ads, and use of Facebook and Twitter. One of the administrators told us that faculty members and administrators carry cards to give out to potential program applicants, including students in other programs who may want to add the transit certification. Participants pointed to the dual major program, the possibility for students to earn certificates in multiple areas that takes advantage of similar program requirements for different programs, as one means of effective recruitment for the program. One administrator told us that this possibility has been effective in attracting students in some areas (“It gives them more latitude of what they can do.”), but other areas have not found it as effective because they require several additional courses and, consequently, more time in the programs.

One administrator suggested the nature of the potential job sometimes got in the way of recruitment efforts. Using the example of a particular repair and maintenance program, she told us, “It’s hard to attract [students] when they think they can go sit in a computer lab and do that instead of having to work on diesel [engines].” In addition to their marketing efforts, the program staff “have done some networking nights to invite people from the industry, for them to come and talk to the students to share with them what they can indeed do with that degree,” an administrator told us. She also reported that program had hosted multiple “open houses” to get more students interested in the transit programs.

Despite various efforts, “enrollment in the program has not been great,” as one administrator reported, although she also said that staff were happy with a small increase observed during the summer of the interviews. Another administrator told us that, while enrollment had been low initially, program enrollment had been improving as the program matured.

Instruction

Students spoke highly of the quality of instruction provided in the programs. Of his instructors, one student told us,

They’ve been very responsive at giving us answers, getting us the right information, giving us direction on how to perform the process of the different courses. . . . They’ve been very, very helpful.

Another student told us the instructors were “really open to help you [with] what you need to learn.” Students agreed that the instructors were enthusiastic about their subjects (e.g., “They have been fantastic.”), and instructors described the students as enthusiastic about learning. One instructor told us, “[The students] really enjoy the hands-on aspect of it.”

One way that program staff have sought to meet students’ needs is with flexibility, particularly with regard to scheduling. One of the administrators described how the staff had tried multiple ways of offering the courses—during the day, at night, in blocks, as a cohort—to provide students’ as many opportunities to participate in the programs. One of the instructors explained, “Some work [during the day] and can only come in the evenings, so we have to adapt.” Another instructor told us that in his department,

We teach day and night, so if they can’t come in the morning, they can always come at night. If they can’t come at night, they can come in the morning.

Instructors also reported that their regular class sizes were appropriate for the content and level of learning in their classes.

Missing from the current program are opportunities for internships for the students, where they can engage in authentic learning experiences at government or corporate transportation sites. Participants indicated that they had been looking into the possibility of incorporating internship opportunities in the programs. One administrator told us, “We have been recruiting persons to sit on our advisory board [who] can provide our students with opportunities for . . . internships or . . . maybe



The operator simulator gives students a safe opportunity to learn how to drive a large vehicle in simulated traffic conditions before they have to get behind the wheel of an actual vehicle. (Photo courtesy of Consuelo Espinoza-Godden)

some job leads.” Another administrator told us there had been some early talks with MARTA about creating some trial employment positions, possibly at a reduced pay rate, so that hirers could assess a graduate’s readiness before hiring him or her on full-time; however, this idea never developed to fruition.

Facilities

Participants spoke highly of the facilities provided to support the transit programs. One student praised the “up-to-date labs available to students” to help them succeed. One of the instructors felt the programs’ including good quality equipment for students to use was one of the programs’ assets.

A specific facilities improvement implemented to support the transit programs was the building of a computer simulator which provides students the

opportunity to gain practice driving a large commercial vehicle before actually taking such a vehicle out onto the road. The simulator and other facilities to support the programs are located at GPTC's Lithonia site. The transit center director told us that the program originally had included a plan to lease space with bays for buses and other vehicles but no space was available that would provide space cost-effectively while adhering to state purchasing restrictions. Consequently, a pavilion at the transit center was replaced with a garage with bays for buses and other light vehicles for students in the mechanic training program to use. The center director reported that students were pleased with the "state-of-the-art equipment" provided at the center.

Partners

Initially, the local transit authority, MARTA, was a close partner to the programs, and there was discussion of their providing buses, engines, and cut-away transmissions for students to work, one administrator told us. However, a dramatic change in administration at MARTA made it difficult to continue those discussions. Program administration has reached out to other organizations as potential partners, including the Georgia Regional Transit Authority, which had members on the advisory board for some programs. MARTA representatives are still advising the program, but not in the capacity originally envisioned by the programs' developers.

The advisory boards review curriculum to let program administrators and instructors know what the industry needs in future transit workers. "They come to talk to us about what they would like to see us do and . . . helping guide the curriculum as to what we need to be doing to prepare the students for the industry," an administrator told us.

Future Needs

If the programs continue and enrollment continues to increase, instructors and administrators see the need to expand the program. This expansion could include increasing offerings on other campuses (per one of the instructors), increasing learning and lab space (per another of the instructors and the transit center director), and creating additional courses specific to the transit programs, such as a management course that one of the instructors is looking into adapting. At the transit center, the director would like to see another proper building because "we're growing out of the trailers that we're in." She also called for additional bus bays and truck bays to accommodate the number of students who need to make use of them.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The past three years have been rocky ones for the TAACCCT programs at Georgia Piedmont Technical College. Changes in staff at GPTC and at its key partner have slowed the smooth implementation of the programs. Enrollments have been low, growing by a small amount from Year 2 to Year 3, as reported by one of the administrators.

Students appear excited about the opportunities the programs offer them in terms of future employment, and they praised the instructors and the support they receive at GPTC. Both students agreed that they would recommend the program to a friend interested in the field, and one said that he had already done so. Students were satisfied with their learning experiences and grateful for the up-to-date equipment and facilities that support the program.

Instructors and administrators appeared enthusiastic about the program, and they are eager to see it continue at GPTC. While extensive efforts have been put into marketing the program, the program's administrators need to identify more opportunities to get the word out about the program to draw more students. These efforts should be coordinated with partners, who may have access to an extant group of employees who seek additional training and certification. GPTC might enlist program completers to visit area high schools to talk about the program and their careers to students who are interested in transit careers themselves.

The transit programs offer high-quality opportunities for people interested in learning about transit careers and embarking on their own career. GPTC's progress in implementing the program has not been as swift as originally planned, but it has made progress and has provided useful educational experiences for over 100 students.

