



Case Study The College of Health Care Professions

CREATING EQUITY AT SCALE

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Adaptive Learning and Stackable Credentials Lift Students Out of Poverty and Into the Workforce

THE COLLEGE OF HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONS

FOREWORD

*Jane Oates, president,
WorkingNation, and former
assistant secretary of the
Department of Labor for
Employment and Training*

Ten years ago, when I was appointed assistant secretary of the Department of Labor for Employment and Training by President Obama, our nation's economy was suffering. Double-digit unemployment, mass dislocations, and closing businesses were the norm. Millions of unemployed and underemployed

Americans needed to be reskilled for jobs in new sectors. Local areas, states, and the federal government worked together to create new strategies to respond to the changing workforce, rebuild the economy, and anticipate future opportunities. We concentrated on labor market information to inform new educational priorities, increased accountability, and focused on outcomes. And we worked together, across cabinet offices and across regions, assessing what worked and adjusting things that did not.

Fast-forward to 2019, and we find ourselves with record low unemployment in one of the longest-lasting periods of economic growth in our nation's history. The tight labor market has shifted the burden on employers from innovation to talent shortages. New best practices are developing, and proven practices are being taken to scale. But more needs to be done.

Forty-four million Americans are unemployed or lack the skills, industry-recognized credentials, and networks they need to earn family-sustaining wages. This paper highlights a promising scalable model to help Americans in different communities struggling at the economic margins to enter the middle class and thrive. It provides insights into how colleges and training providers might think differently about workforce preparation and engage new approaches, while expanding proven practices.

Health care education has long been a leader in integrating theory and clinical practice, stackable credentials, and career pathways. The college highlighted in this report has shown the remarkable economic and professional gains that individuals are able to see when they work hard at institutions that fully deploy proven strategies.

This is just one case study, and each institution is unique; all models and approaches need to be customized to meet the local needs of employers and talents of the students. As leaders in education, health care, and government, we need to continue to share best and promising practices, as well as learn from one another as we commit to preparing every student of any age for success in our changing economy.

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- Nate Anderson, *senior director, JFF*
- Jim Benitez, *director of radiology, Southwest General Hospital*
- Eric Bing, *CEO and president, CHCP*
- Yvette Burks, *student advisor, CHCP*
- Julia Denny, *lead registered nurse, MHMR Fort Worth*
- Valerie Esparza, *director of workforce development, Diversity & Inclusion, Ascension Texas*
- Sonja Gee, *president and CEO, Houston's Memorial Assistance Ministries*
- Joycelyn Gordon, *COO, Calvary Urgent Care*
- Evan McLendon, *human resources generalist, People's Community Clinic*
- Cynthia Sakulenzki, *president and CEO, Rio Grande Valley Hispanic Chamber of Commerce*

JESTINA KING'S NEW FUTURE

Years ago, Jestina King was struggling to find full-time work and support her first child. She had started college before becoming pregnant but dropped out when she could no longer balance raising a child and working full-time with the demands of school. After continually switching jobs from employers like PetSmart to McDonalds to a local car wash, she realized that it was time for a change. But, she was unsure of what she wanted to do. It was only after she became pregnant with her second child and went in for a sonogram that she had an epiphany—medical imaging would be an interesting profession. She studied at The College of Health Care Professions (CHCP) in Houston, Texas, and became a licensed limited medical radiologic technologist (LMRT).

Through CHCP's stackable degree option, King recently walked across the graduation stage for

a second time, receiving her associate's degree in radiologic technology (RT). King passed all her coursework, met all her lab requirements, and completed her clinical externship, all while working full time and taking care of her children. With her new degree, King has been promoted at Calvary Urgent Care, a national health care company, and she is earning over twenty-one dollars an hour, or the equivalent of \$43,680 a year (not including overtime) plus a full benefits package. King went from earning minimum wage doing part-time work to having a job with benefits through her RT degree and certification. It's a life-altering improvement: she moved herself and her family out of poverty.

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SHORTER PATHWAYS TO EVER-INCREASING SOCIAL MOBILITY

CHCP's bachelor's degree program is designed as a series of stackable credentials that are accumulated over time as the student's schedule allows—typically not in one four-year stay at CHCP. This allows the student to build up workforce qualifications that will help them move up a career ladder to higher paying jobs. The career pathways that CHCP builds consist of a clear sequence of coursework that support skill attainment and employment. The credentials are precisely aligned with employer needs. Similar to building blocks, the sequential pieces begin with a certificate and can lead to a full bachelor's degree. In this way, CHCP helps create shorter pathways to educational success and improved earnings.

For instance, a student can move from a certification as a limited medical radiologic technologist, as King did, and go out and find viable work opportunities. Then the same student can return, when life allows, to become a certified radiologic technologist in as few as sixteen months; and finally, attain a radiologic science management bachelor's degree in as little as two additional years.

Students do not have to earn a bachelor's degree in four years—they can take a decade or longer, earning more credentials and degrees as they work and move up in a company. This allows CHCP to better meet the needs of their diverse student body, most of whom cannot take long breaks from work to pursue additional education.

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Since 1988, CHCP has helped improve the lives of more than 20,000 people in Texas—providing economic mobility and stability and giving individuals a new, more hopeful perspective on life that economic opportunity affords. CHCP serves as an innovative model of how higher education and regional employers can work together to create equity and economic mobility for underserved students. “The LMRT role (that King held) is a critical one for our practices, ensuring that patients get excellent frontline care, but it’s also a terrific stepping-stone to a meaningful and rewarding career,” says Joycelyn Gordon from Calvary Urgent Care. “We believe that for many technologists, like Jestina King, this is the first step in a progression of increasingly senior roles. We believe in the power of supporting employees to help

them achieve their goals, including allowing them to craft a schedule that allows them to work and go back to school at the same time.”

Stackable credentials are a way of responding to the need for “life-long learning” agrees Nate Anderson of Jobs for the Future (JFF), a national nonprofit that brings the private and public sectors together in partnerships to create greater equity in employment. Anderson notes: “Stackable credentials allow students to take shorter time away from working while continuing to progress to a degree. It is important these credentials have real labor market value, allowing learners to not just earn a degree, but advance their career. They often work best for professional training programs where credentials are endorsed by employers.”



MEASURING ECONOMIC PRECARIOUSNESS

The majority of CHCP's incoming students live near or below the poverty line, unemployed or eking out a living at low-paying jobs. More than 80 percent of the institution's students are Pell Grant eligible. The majority of CHCP's students are living in poverty, making on average between \$9,000 and \$15,000 a year before starting the program. In other words, CHCP's student population is part of a growing demographic of working-age adults, estimated at approximately 44 million Americans, who do not have a degree and are struggling to make a living wage.¹

In recent years, several national studies by The United Way have offered a new metric—Asset

Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE)—to supersede the federal poverty line and more accurately describe the true extent of economic precariousness in the country. Nearly 51 million American households with a working adult—or 43 percent of total households—do not earn enough to afford rent, childcare, health care, transportation, and cell phone use.²

“Our students come to us truly living on the economic margins,” says Eric Bing, CEO and president of CHCP. “They are living day to day, struggling to earn enough to feed their families, keep a home, and meet even the most basic health care needs. And we are committed

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¹ <https://www.stradaeducation.org/innovation-in-work-and-learning/our-why-the-future-of-workers/>

² “Working Hard, But Struggling to Survive,” The United Way, 2019, <https://www.unitedforalice.org/>



to helping them break out of the cycle and build a better life.”

Students often double their salaries within a year of starting at CHCP, and doing so brings them much closer to the state’s median per capita income: \$29,525. “That difference is profound,” says Cynthia Sakulenzki, CEO and president of the Rio Grande Valley Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. “Programs like those offered at CHCP allow people to stabilize their lives and more actively and consistently participate in our region’s labor force. They are not only able to begin health care careers but also are able to balance life and work without being scared about where the next meal will come from.”

There’s also mind-set to consider. “Many CHCP students, moreover, have never worked in a professional setting, such as a clinic or hospital, and have no reference point for how to be successful in these jobs,” says Evan McLendon at People’s Community Clinic in Austin. “They have overcome experiences with personal trauma that most of us can’t even imagine—experiences where crime, violence, and domestic abuse are common. Through on-ramps like CHCP they can get back on their feet and gain the confidence and understanding that they have what it takes to be a professional.”

JUMP-STARTING COMMUNITIES THROUGH WORK- BASED LEARNING

Getting to the Houston Northwest campus entrance of CHCP requires a drive across the empty parking lot of a decommissioned shopping mall. The college has grown fast. With an average of 4,000 students across Texas at any given time, and 38 percent of the students coming from referrals, the school has doubled in size since 2014. The mall presented itself as an affordable way to repurpose space into an accessible spacious, contemporary, career-focused campus.

CHCP has seven additional established campuses across Texas, but it's here, at this old shopping mall, amid the acres of broken asphalt and the roar of a nearby

freeway; near an abandoned, sun-blasted couch sitting in tall grass with crickets clicking away; at the failure point of an old economic order that a new economic order, a new sense of growth and possibility, is emerging—one student at a time.

Inside, on any given day, students in blue hospital scrubs can be seen walking between classes or participating in lab work. In one such lab, future medical assistants cluster in small groups practicing for the first time the delicate art of phlebotomy. Students bare their arms for each other and follow the procedures for drawing blood samples under the watchful eye of their teacher, Dr. Brett Brinkley,



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who circulates among the groups, offering encouragement and stepping in as needed, to help students guide the needle to its mark. In another lab down the hall, future dental assistants recline in dental chairs, their mouths open wide for their fellow blue-scrubbed students to practice their skills. In a few weeks, most of the dental students will begin their externships, which will require them to assist dentists with diverse procedures on complete strangers. In the surgical tech lab, students in full sterile operating-room attire—mask, eye protection, scrubs, gown, and gloves—are able to tell the difference between a pertinent instrumentation like Halsted Kelly, Crile, or Babcock forceps at fifty paces. The level of attention, focus, and good humor in each of the labs is high.

And so are the stakes. Whether they are a surgical or radiologic technologist in the making or whether they are learning to navigate the arcane world of

medical billing and coding, most of the students are women, most are minority women—Hispanic or African American—and most are gamely shouldering the economic responsibilities for their families.

“We find many people in our disadvantaged communities are unaware that these professions exist, let alone understand what a day in the life of that job looks like. Through work-based learning and partnerships with K-12 districts, we can help increase awareness of these great career opportunities,” says Valerie Esparza of Ascension Texas. “Creating opportunities for students to have work-based learning is critical because it ensures students are prepared with hands-on experience for high-demand careers that help them continue to afford to live in our community.”

MEETING STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE

A willingness to innovate to meet students' needs has become a core institutional value. In 2015, CHCP implemented an adaptive learning system,³ which helped allow for a blended education model. Students, the majority of whom work more than one job, only need to be in school for two days a week (Monday/Wednesday or Tuesday/Thursday) and can participate remotely the rest of the time. This helps both entry-level students who may be balancing numerous jobs, and those returning for a stackable credential who want to learn and earn.

When it became apparent that a significant number of CHCP students were single mothers, Bing asked Ann Eady, MD, to revise the school's curriculum to facilitate a

medical assistant (MA) certificate program that would accommodate the unpredictable schedules of single moms. "Dr. Eady created a new MA program where all the didactic was online and the clinical components are in three Friday and Saturday bootcamps. We've refashioned our approach," says Bing, "around people's lives."

Research shows that graduation rates at community colleges increase when courses are provided that show a direct link between students' needs and their success^{4,5}. In September 2019, the Lumina Foundation released a report from a new Quality Credentials Task Force that seeks to strengthen quality and advance equity by rethinking the framework of credentials, noting

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³ The College of Health Care Professionals adopted McGraw-Hill Connect in 2015 across all of its courses

⁴ <http://blog.aais.com/webinars/bending-the-curve>

⁵ <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/implementing-guided-pathways-aacc.pdf>



that “expanding quality credentials requires student-centered institutions.”⁶

Through their robust commitment to meeting students’ and employers’ needs, CHCP’s average retention rates are 82 percent for residential

programs and 78 percent for online programs. Job placement rates are more than 80 percent. An overall 98 percent student satisfaction score for both courses and instructors contributed to the high retention, graduation, and placement rates.⁷

⁶ <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/unlocking-the-nations-potential.pdf>

⁷ The College of Health Care Professionals independent research, 2018

INTERVENTIONS HELP STUDENTS GET THROUGH

Perhaps the biggest institutional innovation at CHCP comes in the form of the school's operational mandate to intervene and assist students who are struggling or are at risk. Such intervention comes in many forms and is woven into the fabric of daily life at CHCP.

Every morning, for example, in every classroom at CHCP, faculty enter student attendance into the school's computer system, which flags the names of students with any absences. For the residential programs, the students are called by their faculty during the morning break; for those in the online programs, names are referred to student advisors, who, each day, reach out to contact those students. At CHCP's Houston headquarters, student advisors like Yvette Burks work their way through student

contact lists—some days the lists are longer than others. “We reach out through texts or email. We call them on the phone; we check in to see how they're doing,” says Burks, “and if there's anything we can do to help, we try to do it.”

The most common reasons for student absences are trying to balance school with work and personal commitments. A report of days since last attendance is kept, and each day, Burks and a team of advisors work their way through their allotted list of students who need to be contacted to prepare a plan for moving forward. Because most of CHCP online students are working adults with families, trying to find a healthy balance for them can be challenging.

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According to Sonja Gee, CEO and president at Houston's Memorial Assistance Ministries, which helps Houston families bounce back from crisis and learn new skills to improve their lives, "Equity starts with belief and mind-set. Challenges happen to us all, but we also recognize that for many people, difficult situations can become the breaking point. It is imperative that we show students a picture of the future to give them hope."

On Wednesdays, another opportunity for intervention happens—weekly grade reports. Burks and the team of advisors receive lists of students who are at risk academically. They work their way through those lists, texting, emailing and speaking encouragingly to students on the phone to assist in providing resolution to student issues to help facilitate re-engagement in coursework or provide tutoring or other services, if needed.

"One phone call to a student can lead to another," says Burks. "I have a list of students with illnesses, and I reach out to them. And when a student reaches a goal, accomplishes a difficult task, well, we make those calls, too. We follow up. We help them see that they can overcome their obstacles and celebrate the wins."

Nearly every student knows their advisor by name and can tell a story about how that advisor helped them press forward and persevere through setbacks and challenges. This creates a far different atmosphere than most colleges, considering that the national average student-to-advisor ratio is 1:375.⁸ Bing points to the school's statement of core values, encapsulated in the acronym *I.C.A.R.E.* If the *I* stands for *innovation*, the *C*, according to Bing, stands for *compassion*. From compassion, Bing explains, flows all the other values. *A*, for *accountability*—"When you hold students accountable and have high expectations, it says you really do care about them and care if they are successful in their careers. If you don't hold students accountable—if you push students through—then the institution is really saying it doesn't care about what happens to them," says Bing. *R*, for *respect*. "There's no reason for me, or for our faculty, or for anyone who works here to think they're better than our students." *E*, for *excellence*, ties everything together. "If you innovate, if you craft a curriculum in a way that demands excellence but works with the complicated lives our students, if you hold students accountable to that expected level of quality, and if you do all this with the respect they deserve, there is nothing our students can't accomplish—nothing can stop them."

⁸ https://www.mlive.com/education/2014/07/dude_where_my_advisor.html

CAREER INSPIRATION

Inspiration, some have argued, is not an abstract thing—it helps to have a goal in mind, and nowhere is this more apparent than in CHCP’s efforts to orient students toward potential career paths. Once enrolled, the school’s nine-month certificates present students with a near-term, achievable goal. And the relationships the school has established with more than 6,000 employer partners in the medical field, from the largest hospital systems to the neighborhood clinics (and the school’s 80 percent-plus placement rate), presents another positive, achievable goal.

According to Julia Denny at MHMR in Fort Worth, a large hiring partner of CHCP, these relationships are quite robust: “Through day-to-day collaboration, CHCP has truly become an extension of our HR team. By understanding our individual needs, they are able to match prospective graduates that can be successful not only in their role but our culture. They provide a pipeline of diverse talent that help us not just fill jobs but start careers.”

A foundation practice that CHCP has long developed provides “wraparound services” for students. “From day one,” says Bing, “we’re orienting students to think about career readiness.” CHCP’s certificate programs offer students a clear sense of where they are headed academically and which academic subjects are most appropriate for each pathway. The school has also infused its courses with the “growth mindset”, and courses like Interpersonal Communications introduce students to the kinds of soft skills that prepare them for success in a professional environment.

As workforce skills change, so must curricula. CHCP works continually with health care employer partners across the state to understand the workforce skills that are most in demand and adjusts programs yearly, at a minimum.

“Health care imaging jobs are fast growing, with the required skills changing as quickly as the technology,” says Jim Benitez of

“FROM DAY ONE, WE’RE ORIENTING STUDENTS TO THINK ABOUT CAREER READINESS.”



Southwest General Hospital in San Antonio. Southwest General, similar to other CHCP employer partners, participates in program advisory boards that consistently reshape curricula to meet the dynamic needs of the workforce. The benefits are clear to Benitez: “Educational collaboration enables technologists to expand their practice in the art of radiologic science for x-ray, CT, and MRI. Providing stackable credentials creates an upward mobile career that benefits both technologists and hospital imaging departments. This solution leads to employee retention and enhanced overall operational service.”

Benitez sits on CHCP’s advisory board and keeps faculty apprised of changes, developments, and

oncoming needs in the medical field. Additionally, employers are a key part of every student’s clinical experience, with “hands-on externships” baked into the school’s curriculum. Once students have earned their certificates, the intimate relationship the school has established with both students and employers helps the school’s career services center find the perfect match for each student and each employer. “Our secret sauce,” says Bing, “is about student success and also the employers’ success. Both are our customers: busy adult learners and health care employers.”



“Our students are able to move up the economic ladder, and stabilize their lives and the lives of their families.”

–*Eric Bing, CEO, The College of Health Care Professions*

GRADUATION: A NEW BEGINNING

On a beautiful spring evening in Houston, thousands of students and families, like King and her children, file into Delmar-Tusa Sports Complex for CHCP's evening graduation ceremonies. By the time Bing takes to the podium to welcome everyone, thousands of people will be assembled in arena seats overlooking a sea of bright blue graduation gowns. Faculty, honored guests, and other speakers sit behind Bing on the dais over which the CHCP banner hangs.

Many students have decorated their mortar boards so that they resemble the tops of splendidly decorated cakes, each with some festive flourish of flowers or celebratory slogans; many sounding like mission statements all their own—"ALIVE, BLESSED, and GRATEFUL," "Took Care of Business!," "Not All Angels Have Wings. Some Have Stethoscopes!" Children run up and down the aisles. Families shout and wave. The graduates wave back, all smiles.

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