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Implementation Lessons from a Pilot Career-Planning Partnership for Recent High School Graduates in Bridgeport, Connecticut

INTRODUCTION

Data from past economic downturns show that “recession graduates”—those graduating from high school or college during a recession—may have worse outcomes in earnings and health for years or even decades to come.¹ Young people from families with low incomes and young people of color are shown to be disproportionately affected in terms of lifetime earnings loss and adverse health outcomes. Many economists predict that the “COVID recession” will have even more severe repercussions for recent graduates than past recessions, as so-called youth jobs in the retail, food, and hospitality sectors were in short supply and the shift to virtual learning left many students less prepared for postsecondary education.

Indeed, data from 2020 and 2021 showed a decline in the number of young people enrolling in college or entering the workforce compared with pre-pandemic years. In June 2020, the unemployment rate for 16- to 19-year-olds was almost two times higher than the year before.² In fall 2020, college enrollment dropped by 6.8 percent, about 4.5 times the year-over-year decline in fall 2019. The enrollment decline was even more pronounced among graduates from high schools where at least 50 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and from high schools serving predominantly Black and Hispanic students.³

This picture is changing as the country enters the postpandemic period. While fall 2021 college enrollment data show an additional 2.5 percent drop in enrollment compared with fall 2020,⁴ labor market data are showing a much more favorable labor market to graduate into. The unemployment rate for 16- to 19-year-olds has returned to pre-pandemic levels, though employment continues to lag for some subgroups, particularly African American and Black 16- to 19-year-olds.⁵ In addition, labor shortages in some sectors and a forthcoming investment of federal infrastructure funding may provide greater opportunity for high school graduates to find jobs that pay a living wage. Nevertheless, gaps in support remain for young people who are making the transition from high school to postsecondary education or the workforce, offering organizations that serve them an opportunity to step in.

MDRC—with initial funding from Bloomberg Philanthropies—sought to work with stakeholders in several cities to better understand the challenges recent graduates are facing in the current context and to plan initiatives to help them succeed. Ultimately, MDRC was

able to set up an initiative only with partners in Bridgeport. In early 2021, MDRC partnered with the Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership (RYASAP), an organization that serves young people in the Greater Bridgeport, Connecticut, region. See Box 1 for more information on Bridgeport. RYASAP worked to bring together key local stakeholders in K-12 education, postsecondary education, and the workforce to identify and address gaps in the support and guidance available to recent high school graduates and to help them move on to further education and employment. In May 2021, RYASAP started a new career planning program, Park City Career Pathways (PCCP), which aimed to enroll 300 to 400 Bridgeport public high school graduates and nongraduates from the “pandemic-recession classes” of 2020 and 2021. The program offers young people assistance in formulating a career plan, enrolling in postsecondary education, and identifying work-based learning, training, or employment opportunities consistent with their conceived pathway. PCCP staff also conducted a scan of local education and employment resources and connected with local youth councils to supplement their referral and recruitment efforts.

BOX 1

BRIDGEPORT, CONNECTICUT

Bridgeport, Connecticut, is the largest city in the state with an estimated population of 148,654.* The city is 40.8 percent Hispanic or Latino, 40.4 percent White, and 35.1 percent Black or African American.† This demographic breakdown is reflected in its school district, which is 83.7 percent Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino.‡ There are seven public high schools in the school district, which, in the year before the pandemic, had a four-year graduation rate of 75.1 percent.§ Though located in the vibrant and growing regional labor market of Fairfield County, Bridgeport is Connecticut’s third poorest city, with a 21.8 percent poverty rate.|| The regional economy, coupled with the presence of local universities and community colleges, provides many opportunities for young people to make the transition to employment or postsecondary education.

NOTES: *U.S. Census Bureau, “Quick Facts: Bridgeport city, Connecticut,” website: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/bridgeportcityconnecticut>, n.d.

†U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.).

‡Connecticut State Department of Education, “District Profile and Performance Report for School Year 2019-20: Bridgeport School District,” website: https://edsight.ct.gov/Output/District/HighSchool/0150011_201920.pdf, 2021.

§Connecticut State Department of Education, “District Profile and Performance Report for School Year 2018-19: Bridgeport School District,” website: https://edsight.ct.gov/Output/District/HighSchool/0150011_201819.pdf, 2020.

||U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.).

MDRC provided technical assistance to RYASAP, PCCP, and the partner organizations and studied the efforts with the broader goal of identifying solutions to systemic gaps for young people in the transition from high school to postsecondary education and careers. This brief highlights lessons from the implementation of the initiative in Bridgeport that may be useful for other communities that are interested in launching similar initiatives.

LESSON 1

Building Partnerships Requires Identifying Win-Win Opportunities.

Delivering on the vision for the pilot began with the selection of the local intermediary. MDRC looked for an intermediary with the standing and ability to bring together a partnership of agencies and organizations that could complementarily pursue the initiative's goals. RYASAP was an attractive intermediary because it was well-positioned to bring together and maintain the engagement of key providers in the K-12 education, postsecondary education, and workforce systems. As a recognized local leader in providing services to young people, RYASAP had existing connections with key players—the city government, the school district, colleges, workforce development organizations, and local employers—as well as local nonprofit organizations that supplement public agency services. Through its preexisting programming, it also had connections with youth councils and messengers who would be credible to young people in the community.

To gain the participation of partners, RYASAP decided not to set up a formal collaborative structure and instead secured some partners' cooperation by demonstrating the ways they could benefit from joining the partnership. It recognized that some organizations that serve young people had unfilled slots and explained that joining the partnership could help them fill their enrollment openings, take advantage of underused resources, and meet performance goals. RYASAP also offered to assist partners to sustain the engagement of young people in their programs. It would maintain contact with participants and provide additional coaching while they were enrolled in partner organizations' programs. In addition, RYASAP offered to elicit the views of young people about the programs and convey them to providers.

Educational institutions (Bridgeport Public Schools, local community colleges and universities, and a local nonprofit organization, Bridgeport Public Education Fund) recognized that the goals of the initiative coincided with their institutional goals of helping place young people on educational paths after high school graduation. For these institutional partners, the extra one-on-one support RYASAP could offer graduates was a valuable resource that schools were not always able to provide. High school counselors, for example, had average caseloads of 250 students.

Even though the cooperation between PCCP and the schools was mutually beneficial, counselors' large caseloads and consequent lack of time precluded greater engagement with the program. With more time, counselors could have linked more of their students to PCCP and shared information about them so that PCCP staff members could offer more personalized support. Had PCCP staff members connected with school counselors earlier in the year—they were not able to work with them until April 2021—they could have spread out their coordination with the counselors over a longer period of time, reducing the strain on counselors' schedules.

It was not just the school counselors: RYASAP had challenges engaging other partners who were not able to contribute to the initiative with their existing resources. The vision for the partnership included enlisting a local youth council to help make the design of PCCP more responsive to the needs of young people. RYASAP reached out to a youth council with which it had a preexisting relationship, but the council was not able to participate because it lacked resources.

The lesson from this experience is that during a pilot phase, a formal partnership may not be necessary. Instead, identifying and acting on ways organizations can help one another meet mutual goals can bring a partnership together. Still, as an initiative matures and begins to expand, lead organizations may need to find ways to structure their partnerships more formally and bring to the table additional organizations or entities that could make a valuable contribution but are reluctant or lack the resources to participate.

LESSON 2

Recruiting Young People Requires Persistence and the Use of a Variety of Strategies.

Bringing partners to the table, while time-consuming, pales in comparison with the effort required to identify and recruit young people. Recruiting young participants is a work in progress, and RYASAP has learned that it requires sustained attention and using a variety of strategies. Recruitment was complicated because the target population for PCCP was students from the class of 2020 and 2021, and the initiative did not begin until early 2021. With students from the class of 2020 already out of school, RYASAP had to use different methods to reach both groups.

RYASAP approached recruitment in partnership with the high school district. Though the school district did help connect RYASAP with students in the class of 2020, it was most helpful in connecting RYASAP with young people who were still enrolled—seniors in the class of 2021. The school district got in touch with the classes of 2020 and 2021, using the contact information it had on file, shared information about PCCP with students and families, and asked questions about students' postsecondary plans in a survey. The district shared the contact information and survey responses of those who did not have plans with RYASAP, which then contacted the students to engage them in PCCP. Though some responded, the partners presumed that outdated or incorrect contact information and a possible lack of interest in the offer inhibited a higher response rate to the survey. To avoid this problem, a partnership looking to assess local high school graduates' postsecondary enrollment and persistence might consider budgeting for use of the StudentTracker® from the National Education Clearinghouse. It provides high schools and school districts with data on their former students' college attendance and persistence.

The school district also contributed to the partnership by enlisting its school counselors to refer students to PCCP and give feedback to RYASAP about its recruitment and service strategies. More recently, RYASAP has asked counselors to request that high school–age siblings of recent graduates or nongraduates send information about PCCP to their older siblings.

In addition to efforts to contact students referred by the school district, PCCP staff members designed and executed many of their own outreach efforts. They went on the radio with a participant to promote the program, pitched it in person at the high schools and at summer school, used social media, and made home visits. When staff members did reach young people, they would repeatedly follow up via text and phone, encouraging them to attend PCCP's weekly Thursday meeting. Staff members said that this multifaceted approach was key to a successful recruitment campaign, as one

strategy would not reach everyone. They also cited the importance of continuing to get in touch with potential participants, as failure to engage young people with one contact did not mean that they were not or would never be interested. Sometimes staff members happened to reach potential participants at just the right moment, when they were more amenable to the offer to enroll in the program.

Staff members arrived at these lessons through trial and error and by consulting with early PCCP participants. Participants suggested that there was no cost to repeatedly contacting young people—that any contact was a chance for someone to take up the offer. When participants recommended Facebook as the best social media platform for recruitment and advertising, staff members created a Facebook page. Many participants said that they had enrolled in the program on the urging of their parents or guardians and suggested that outreach to parent-age populations could be a fruitful recruitment strategy. This helpful advice from PCCP participants made clear the value of consulting with members of the target population in designing a program.

The lesson from PCCP's recruitment experience is that it is important to use multifaceted and continual outreach strategies. A single strategy will not be enough to recruit an entire target population, and even when it does not yield immediate returns, continuing to use it may bring later success. Still, outcomes should be monitored and a strategy can be discarded if it is showing no success. Beginning outreach as early as possible—to get the program offer in front of a young person as many times as possible—is also a good idea. This is especially true for young people who are still in school. When recruitment starts early in the school year, there are more opportunities for students to hear about the program. Finally, programs engaging in recruitment should be prepared for the fact that using multiple and continual recruitment strategies is labor- and resource-intensive.

LESSON 3

The Choice of the Message and the Messenger Affects Recruitment Success.

In conducting outreach through the school district, RYASAP learned that the message and the messenger are both important. After the survey sent by the school (a known messenger) to students did not result in the expected response rate, RYASAP hypothesized that there were several reasons why. There may have been survey fatigue on the part of students, as the district acknowledged that it sent out surveys all the time. The timing of the survey was not good, as it was sent out toward the end of the school year when seniors were focused on graduating. And the survey may have used the wrong messenger. For students who are good candidates for PCCP but may not be particularly connected to school or counselors, getting a message from a school administrator may not resonate. The partnership also realized that the message itself—the program offer—may not have been sufficiently appealing to its target audience.

To address these challenges, RYASAP is exploring enlisting a more trusted messenger, like a popular alumnus or classmate, to persuade students to respond to the offer. RYASAP is also working with MDRC's Center for Applied Behavioral Science (CABS) to integrate principles of behavioral science into communication about the program offer.⁶ CABS has been encouraging RYASAP staff members to explicitly and succinctly state what they are reaching out to young people about—for

example, inviting them to a session to learn about job and postsecondary education options. CABS is also advising staff members to provide clear instructions in communications about what young people need to do next—concisely giving them a time, location, and reason to show up at a scheduled event—and following up to remind them about the upcoming appointment.

The lesson here is that even with a great program offer, how the offer is conveyed and who conveys it can determine the success of recruitment to an extent. Related to the more general recruitment lessons described in Lesson 2, a single message or a single messenger will not be enough to recruit an entire target population, but following certain principles of communication informed by behavioral science may increase recruitment success. In addition, recruitment outcomes of various messages and messengers should be monitored to enable programs to continually adjust their strategies.

LESSON 4

Developing Relationships Between Staff Members and Participants Is a Prerequisite for Career Planning.

PCCP staff members begin by engaging with participants, learning more about them, and building a trusting relationship over the course of multiple meetings. PCCP staff members are learning that building trust takes time and requires communicating frequently with participants and being available to them outside business hours. Being accessible can make a difference in developing positive relationships and in helping participants formulate long-term plans and make strides toward achieving them.

Even after young people enroll in PCCP, it often requires a lot of outreach to encourage them to show up and engage in PCCP's coaching services. Staff members understand that in-person time with a young person is important in developing a relationship. They set up weekly meetings—and meetings every other week during the evening for those with daytime conflicts—and encourage all participants to attend. Staff members bring in partners to describe what their institutions or places of employment have to offer. The weekly sessions also offer an opportunity to check in individually with participants.

These check-ins provide a setting for staff members to better understand participants' history and current environment, the support services they could use, and their goals for participating in the program. The rapport PCCP staff members build with young people is a precursor to future participation, especially as it is not possible for participants to arrive at a career plan in one session. There is variation in how well-formulated participants' plans are—from those who do not have any plans to those who do but are unsure about what to do next. Regardless, many participants are initially uncomfortable sharing their interests or goals. Over time, staff members can work with them to gain their trust and develop a long-term plan. As participants formulate and communicate their goals, staff members help them divide their goals into short-, medium-, and long-term steps.

PCCP staff members remain in touch with participants between meetings. Mainly via text message, they regularly remind participants about upcoming meetings, appointments, interviews, or applica-

tion deadlines. Some report answering calls or texts from participants at all hours, describing their role as “another family member.” Box 2 describes one participant’s goal-setting experience.

BOX 2

A PCCP PARTICIPANT’S GOAL-SETTING EXPERIENCE

A class of 2020 graduate entered the program with many interests—she wanted to join the armed services, go to college, and get a job—but needed help mapping out a pathway. PCCP staff members worked with her to organize her plan, helped her achieve a short-term goal of getting a job, and set the expectation that she would enroll at Housatonic Community College the next fall. Staff members said that achieving this short-term goal was a boost to the participant’s confidence. They have continued to follow up with her about how she is doing, how her job is going, and to check in to make sure she is working toward her longer-term goals.

In addition to communication and continuing staff support, co-locating services has proved to be a program design choice that is critical for maintaining participants’ engagement. PCCP conducts its weekly meetings on Housatonic Community College’s (HCC) campus, making it easy for staff members to connect participants with opportunities at the college. On one occasion, for example, after learning that an enrollee who wanted to attend college did not know that financial aid was available at HCC, staff members brought the participant to the college’s financial aid and admissions office to sign up for courses on the spot. Co-location allows staff members to hold referral appointments right away, which eliminates the possibility that participants will not show up for a scheduled appointment at another location on another day.

The lesson here is that staff members must design their support services with the understanding that developing a young person’s career plan does not occur in one session. It is crucial to find ways to maintain engagement—through frequent outreach via text and in-person check-ins. Developing continuing, trusting relationships that encourage young people to share their visions for the future is key to helping them find the career pathways that are best for them.

LESSON 5

Support from Staff Should Persist After Participants Are Referred to and Enroll in College or a Program, or Take a Job.

Developing a plan provides participants with direction, but PCCP found that additional support services from staff members are required for participants to take the steps to carry out their plans. Scaffolding support—structuring staff assistance with increasing degrees of independence—helps participants follow through on each next step.

Rather than simply referring participants to partner agencies, PCCP staff members often remind them about upcoming appointments or application deadlines, accompany them or provide trans-

portation to appointments, or vouch for participants to employers or educational institutions. This extra support helps participants feel more comfortable and minimizes their shyness or nervousness in meeting with service providers or employers. It can also make it more likely that an employer will hire them.

An important early finding of PCCP staff members is that many young people lack identification. State IDs are typically required to apply for a job or enroll in postsecondary education institutions. Instead of just referring participants to the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to get their IDs, PCCP staff members instituted weekly trips to accompany groups of students to the DMV office.

Coaching and support services do not end after participants have been referred to a provider. Staff members continue to help participants address obstacles even after they are enrolled in school or a program or hired by an employer. One participant whom PCCP helped enroll in a culinary program became overwhelmed by personal circumstances—the birth of a child—in the months leading up to her training start date. Rather than simply not showing up because she felt embarrassed or uncomfortable trying to reschedule, she got in touch with PCCP staff members. They assisted her to reschedule for a training cohort beginning a few months later.

The lesson here is that another way PCCP adds value to programs that serve young people is the extra-institutional support it provides—in mapping out educational and career plans, connecting young people to opportunities, and continuing to help them overcome any barriers they may face as they begin their transition to college, training, or the labor market.

CONCLUSION

The Bridgeport initiative yielded several lessons about what it takes to supplement the opportunities and support services available to recent high school graduates in the wake of the pandemic. As public health and labor market conditions continue to shift, the Bridgeport initiative will have to remain flexible in its practices. Even though its preliminary efforts have been positive, its continued success in mitigating the lasting health and earnings effects on those who graduated during a recession will hinge on the partnership's capacity to adapt to changing circumstances.

Given the research on these long-term negative effects, initiatives of the kind implemented in Bridgeport will be crucial for avoiding these outcomes in other locales around the country. Other cities and jurisdictions are sure to have similarly struggled to increase opportunities for young people who graduated or left school during the pandemic and should consider implementing similar initiatives of their own. While contexts and institutional delivery structures may vary, the lessons from Bridgeport on partnerships, recruitment, persistence, and service delivery are broadly applicable.

Furthermore, gaps in support services for recent graduates pre-dated the pandemic and will remain, even as the pandemic's recessionary effects recede from view. At any point, partnerships and organizations will benefit their young people by working to close these gaps—it is not necessary to wait until the next recession.

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