

History of SparkPoint at Skyline College

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With a declining economy, rising unemployment rates, and a rising number of people who do not earn a sufficient wage to make ends meet and hold on to homes that they are either renting or buying, Skyline College faculty and staff began to see students arriving with needs that ran much deeper than traditional academic needs. In the past, students might present with typical college challenges such as insufficient money to buy textbooks or concerns about paying fees. Today, more and more, students are presenting with a different level of need, such as not enough food to eat or inadequate shelter.

We realized that it was not enough to address academic needs, but that we had to shift our perspective and think of our vision in a different way—one that might lead to far-reaching changes in both instruction and student services. If we deconstruct our vision statement and highlight not only the notion of inspiring learners to achieve intellectual and social fulfillment (which is quite common in an institution of higher education), but to accomplish economic and personal fulfillment as well, then we can appreciate the need to re-think and broaden the ways in which we serve the community to include poverty reduction and enhancing overall personal and community economic sustainability.

Over the past three years we have been strengthening student services using a model that is based on the Annie E. Casey's Center for Working Families concept. This model is grounded in research related to its effectiveness in reducing poverty and increasing assets of the participants through the use of bundled services including career technical training, income and work supports (accessing public benefits) and financial services/asset building.¹ An evaluation of the effectiveness of programs that provide bundled services linked through a hub or center has found that participants are three to four times more likely to achieve major economic outcomes than are participants receiving non-bundled services². This means that the bundling of services is a more effective way to support participants in achieving career success. We partnered with the United Way of the Bay Area (UWBA) as they launched the regional SparkPoint Center initiative aimed at reducing poverty in the bay area by 50% by the year 2020. The SparkPoint initiative is modeled after the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Centers for Working Families. According to UWBA, they *"...represent a best practice model that shows great promise for significant and measurable community impact and a long term commitment to economic recovery."*³

We conceptualized the SparkPoint Center as both a retention strategy and a physical location. As a retention strategy, we recognized that seemingly minor economic challenges or inconveniences actually

¹ Abt Associates, Quantitative Evaluation: Center for Working Families, 2010

² Abt Associates, Annie E. Casey, Evaluation of Center for Working Families, 2007

³ UWBA, SparkPoint Initiative & Centers – Overview and Update, November 2009



have such a spiraling or cascading impact on students that they are not able to continue their studies. Additionally, insufficient living resources such as food, transportation, healthcare and shelter impact students' ability to complete the program. As a physical location, students and the public may enter the offices and work with designated faculty and staff. In this location, participants have access to public benefits, career training and education, micro enterprise, employment services and career development. Participants are supported with public benefits screening, assistance in applying for benefits, assistance in applying for scholarships, and financial education and individual financial coaching.

Here at Skyline College we have been able to connect the senior executive team to partners that led to the adoption and implementation of the SparkPoint initiative at Skyline College. As a result, the initiative has been incorporated in many institutional processes. Integration in the regular college processes supports both maximum leveraging of resources and sustainability after temporary or seed resources are depleted.

Skyline College participates in a regional community of practice led by the Bay Area Workforce Funding Collaborative under the National Fund for Workforce Solutions. We also participate in the Annie E. Casey Foundations' Centers for Working Families Community College Learning Network. We are working to connect the dots across a number of other initiatives that relate such as the Career Advancement Academy, other learning communities on campus and the Grove Scholars program. We want to share this model because of the increasing

concern for student success coupled with decreasing resources, increasing accountability, and significant cuts in categorical programs designed to support economically disadvantaged and historically

underrepresented students. Without these types of historical supports, we are concerned that poorer students and students who have been historically underrepresented are likely to be displaced.

SparkPoint at Skyline College is a good fit for Skyline College because the college already has a stance and perspective inherently integrated in the fabric of the college that is essential for this model of service. It has (1) a community service orientation, (2) a One-Stop/Students First Philosophy, (3) a climate for innovation, collaboration and success, (4) strong and committed faculty, staff and administration commitment to serving the community, (5) an intentional and deliberate focus on integrating instructional and student services such that the student experiences a

seamless, comprehensive, coordinated set of services and programs such that s/he can and does access, persist and exit successfully, (6) an integrated planning and budget process that is data driven, and (7) a strong culture of respect and hunger for sound research data upon which decisions are based, programs are modified and processes are implemented.

"The needs were far deeper than education, requiring the college to divert from traditional educational approaches and create programs and services that offer real opportunity for people struggling to get ahead. This includes bundled and integrated services, career pathways and pipelines that lead to meaningful wage work. These combined strategies can and will move families out of poverty and build the social fabric –more important than ever given the economic situations families are facing."

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