COLLEGE PREPARATION:
JOB CORPS SUPPORTING STUDENTS
WITH HIGHER EDUCATION GOALS
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College Preparation: Job Corps Supporting Students with Higher Education Goals
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Management & Training Corporation (MTC) is an international corporation dedicated to helping people realize their learning potential. MTC creates nurturing environments in which education is encouraged and rehabilitation is recognized. MTC manages and/or operates 26 Job Corps centers in 19 states for the U.S. Department of Labor, preparing disadvantaged youth for meaningful careers. MTC also operates 16 contracted correctional facilities across the country with approximately 19,000 beds under contract. In addition, MTC has expanded its education and vocational expertise into the international arena, working in countries such as Iraq, Sudan, Tunisia, China and Mongolia. The MTC Institute is the research division of MTC, which is dedicated to promoting innovations and exemplary practices and projecting trends that are relevant to job training and corrections. The work of the Institute is geared toward a broad audience including policy makers, educators, researchers, practitioners, state and federal officials, workforce development entities, correctional agencies, and Job Corps centers.
INTRODUCTION

As the economy continues to slowly improve, many Americans are finding themselves back in college. Many are updating their current skills, while others are learning a completely new trade. The people that are going back to college are doing so to make themselves more marketable in one of the toughest job markets seen in decades. Colleges usually see an increase in applications during tough economic times. However, education is needed more no matter the economic condition of the country, as pay growth and smaller unemployment are based in large part on increased post-secondary educational attainment. This is even truer for the under-served populations of the US, especially at-risk youth.

When the US was in the heights of the economic boom many warned of retirees leaving the work place and not enough people to fill their vacant positions. While this trend has slowed it is still true that once baby boomers retire there will be a shortage of skilled workers to take their place. The workforce of America’s future cannot come from the shrinking middle class but must come from the lower economic classes that have been typically left behind by the education system. The fastest growing ethnic groups in the US are also the ones that have typically had a very ineffective experience with the school system, either dropping out and/or failing to achieve significant competence.

The demographics of college enrollment show a stark difference by ethnicity. By far, whites make up the largest group enrolled in postsecondary education and training (PSET) (here after referred to as college); unfortunately they are also the ethnic group growing the slowest.¹ The majority of at-risk youth, who are also economically disadvantaged, are ethnic minorities; these groups are growing much faster than their white counterparts.² By continuing to focus on educating predominately white students the US will still find itself with an enormous worker gap. College enrollment has expanded in the last 30 years for all ethnic groups moving college enrollment from 9 million students in the 1980-81 school year to over 20 million in the 2007-08 school year.³ However, that expansion needs to grow to meet demands of employers and to better mirror the US ethnic makeup.

What does the economy need to help it recover? The answer: An educated and well trained workforce. The answer is a simple one. Employers want educated employees. Not only because they might be trained in the specific field they will be working but because they are more adaptable, and can adjust to changes quickly. A college education has constantly grown in value in the job market. It is projected that 78% of jobs will require some form of college by 2014.⁴ Even students who get a high school diploma but go no further are finding it harder to gain employment. Unemployment rates during February 2010 for those with no high school diploma was 15.6%; for those with a diploma it was 10.5% and those with some college it was 8.0%.⁵ Even in good economic times, the unemployment rate for dropouts and diploma earners are much higher than those with some college, which include certificates, college credits and degrees of various levels.⁶
US STUDENTS NEED HELP AND MORE ACADEMIC PREPARATION

At-risk youth, including most of those in Job Corps, tend to lag behind in academics. This in many cases is not due to the fact that at-risk youth cannot do the work, but other factors that impact their abilities to succeed. These factors include but are not limited to, a belief they can’t succeed, lack of parental/adult support, home environment, learning differences or disabilities and an inadequate foundational education. The typical areas that at-risk youth are lacking are reading and math skills. These two content areas are vital for any college level success because all courses are based on either the ability to read and or solve math problems. Unfortunately, as can be seen in the two graphs, which depict a continuation of earlier results, the majority of 8th grade students test at or below basic skill level in both reading and math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Deficiencies in these two areas lead many students to eventually drop out of school.

![2009 NAEP Reading Results for 8th Grade](chart)

![2009 NAEP Math Results for 8th Grade](chart)
Dropouts in the US have been steadily increasing. For the 2005-2006 school year, it has been reported that 24% of white students failed to graduate. While this number is high, 45% and 49% of Black and Hispanic students respectively failed to graduate. These two ethnic groups represent the largest at-risk populations. In fact, minority groups (32%) are more likely to attend “Dropout Factories”, a high school where 60% of freshmen fail to graduate, than their white student (8%) counterparts.

Though these students hurt themselves by dropping out, they also affects the economy. If the dropout rate could be reduced by 50% in the largest cities in the US, about 300,000 students, these new graduates would earn $4.1 billion in additional wages and increase tax revenues by $536 million a year compared to those who did not gain a diploma.

Colleges have seen an increase in enrollment; however, more and more students do not finish with a degree or certificate. Some of the reasoning for students not finishing college is due to remediation that needs to take place to have students be college ready. Even with a diploma, only half of graduates leaving high school are prepared to succeed in college. It is reported that 42% of community college freshmen and 20% of freshmen in four-year institutions enroll in at least one remedial course.

More needs to be done to advance at-risk students through K-12 and prepare them for success in college so they will have futures that are brighter than they would ever have without their education. There are many programs that are having great success preparing and supporting at-risk youth with their college goals.

If we are going to significantly increase the academic outcomes, the programs that help at-risk youth, including Job Corps, will have to raise expectations, refocus and use resources more effectively in programs and practices that have been proven to work. Job Corps has a long history of academic and training success with at-risk youth, and like other educational institutions – public schools, private schools, colleges and universities -- Job Corps can and will do more.

FACTORS LEADING TO COLLEGE SUCCESS WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS

As a successful national workforce development program, Job Corps is continually increasing the number of students gaining high school diplomas, Career Technical Training, industry-recognized credentials and in many cases college credits. However, meeting the demands of the labor market and employers will require many more students to be encouraged and supported in their acquisition of college level work, especially in light of current job markets. The research is clear that there are five fundamental factors which significantly enhance retention and success of students, similar to Job Corps enrollees, in other educational environments. Some areas proven to help the most include the following:

• Building an environment that raises student expectations and knowledge about college
• Tutoring, mentoring, and academic counselore
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- Community partnerships
- Alternative college credit options
- Provide greater assistance

BUILDING AN ENVIRONMENT THAT RAISES STUDENT EXPECTATIONS AND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT COLLEGE

Increase Academic Rigor

Increasing academic rigor is one of best ways that early college high schools (ECHS) have demonstrated success in preparing and retaining at-risk youth for college. These are high schools that are very demanding of their students; the curriculum is at or near the college level of rigor. Though the conventional wisdom would lead some to think that at-risk youth would do horrible in this type of an environment, they are not only staying in school, but are thriving and achieving more than they ever did in a conventional high school setting. Further, they are in most cases earning college credit and are better prepared than non ECHS students for college.

Not only does ECHS provide increased rigor by enrolling students in college level classes but they provide a college type experience and enhance the student’s belief in their ability to succeed in college level work and in some cases at a college environment. This provides the demystification discussed later and makes the college campus a more comfortable place to be.

Demystifying the Process

Research emanating from Jobs For the Future, describe many ECHS students who are at-risk youth having grown up in an environment that has marginalized their capabilities, noting the majority of them ultimately are the first in their families to attend college. The major hurdle is encouraging youth to believe in themselves. College expectations are communicated in every facet of the ECHS experience, from application and placement interview, through ninth-grade orientation, and later through college planning. After overcoming the initial disbelief that they can ever go to college, at-risk youth need to be oriented to college and guided through the processes that create obstacles to success. Common activities for freshmen and sophomores need to include participation in on-campus activities and services, intensive academic boot-camp sessions, development of strategies for college success, interactions with college students and professors, and opportunities to sit in on or take college classes.

Some of the hurdles that need to be overcome to successfully be admitted to a college program are:

- **The application process.** This does not seem too hard, but many times it requires getting transcripts or records, and paying an application fee.
- **The financial aid process.** This is daunting for anyone let alone an at-risk youth that has to get documents to prove his or her income, including the income of a family member.
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- The understanding of deadlines. Most first time college students fail to fully understand the importance of deadlines. Application and financial aid deadlines are pretty firm and if missed so does the opportunity to get enrolled and possibly obtain grant funding or other sources to pay for college.

Ultimately the more academic preparation, understanding and exposure students can get to college prior to enrollment, greatly demystifies college and helps students believe that they can succeed at post-secondary education and training.

Measure College Activities

To create a college preparation program that works for at-risk youth, the key is tracking results to make sure the program truly works. Tracking of students success and failures have assisted in creating programs for at-risk youth that work, work better. Tracking of programs also leads to innovations to achieve more. Because tracking of success is at the backbone of Job Corps, there is a need to incentivize the attainment of college credits by students at all Job Corps centers. Students need to be encouraged to prepare themselves for lifelong learning through college attendance.

Because college is so important in the job market and to Job Corps student success, it should be measured by Job Corps. Labor market data shows time after time that those with some college are much more marketable in the job market than those without. The earnings gap for some college verses no college has continually grown further and further apart. Progress also needs to be monitored and measured by the Job Corps National Office, thus making sure that because it is measured it will get the full attention of Job Corps center staff much like the current measures do.

TUTORING, MENTORING, AND ACADEMIC COUNSELORS

Research has proven many of the difficulties at-risk youth face while preparing for and attending college can be overcome with help from tutors, mentors, or academic advisors. Though Job Corps has successfully implemented these types of programs, the results of these efforts will be increased by providing specific training to tutors, mentors, and counselors. Unfortunately many college programs that provide assistance to students go underutilized because of the stigma associated with getting help. Successful college preparation programs for at-risk youth need to include planned involvement with tutors, counselors, and or advisors. Students are able to come to a setting they are more comfortable with and seek help from people they already know.

For any at-risk youth college preparation program to have success, counseling must be provided. Counseling is a very broad term. Most students need an academic counselor to help them navigate school and college, while others just need someone to talk to about their daily lives, formally or informally. Regardless, it is incumbent upon staff to walk with or otherwise assist the student in getting the information and support they need. Tutoring and mentoring needs at ECHS and Job Corps centers are most often filled by community members, staff, or college students, and the student’s peers.
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One of the most important aspects of any college preparation program that has been established for at-risk youth is support. There are many programs that assist in getting at-risk to the college door, where they are left to fend for themselves. There are, however, a growing number of programs that start early in the students’ academic career, prepares them for college, assists them in entering a program and offers support once they are attending classes. Job Corps is one of these. Once a Job Corps student completes their academic and Career Technical Training program, some are encouraged to stay in the program and attend college. This allows students to have the resources of not only the college, but also the Job Corps center, increasing the amount of tutoring, and counseling a Job corps student can receive and allowing the student to seek out assistance from the people he or she trusts.

Tutoring has taken a huge leap forward with the availability of online tutoring. By enabling students to access tutoring wherever there is a computer is a huge step in breaking down the stigmatism of seeking assistance. There are many 24/7 tutoring services in any subject. Because of the advances in interactive websites, these services have become very sophisticated and supportive of student success.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

The strength of a community to rally around students can be stronger than any one program that stands alone. “Through on-the-ground partnerships between high school teachers and college faculty, early college schools draw from this work in establishing aligned sequences of high school classes and supports that lead to and include college coursework.” It is increasingly vital to partner with other organizations that can give students even more preparation and assistance before and once they are enrolled in college. Partners can, but are not limited to, provide assistance such as, student ambassadors, tutoring services, housing assistance, financial assistance, college readiness courses, and mentors. The suggestions listed are only some of what partners can accomplish for at-risk youth in college preparation, but provides some ideas that can be expanded upon.

ALTERNATIVE CREDIT OPTIONS

When thinking about college, most would think of sitting in a classroom at a college, completing a course with a professor to get college credits. However, this is actually becoming less the case. There are many alternative ways of gaining college credit that do not include a lecture hall, or in many cases stepping onto a campus at all. Some of the alternatives discussed in this section are by no means inclusive of the various ways to gain college credit but represent some to stimulate the discussion and thinking about what can be done to expand access to college credits. Many of the methods discussed also help eliminate doubt in students that they are ready for college. By gaining their confidence, at-risk students are more likely to stay and complete their given program.

Concurrent enrollment

Many high schools have begun to offer concurrent enrollment, which enables a student to receive credit from a college that is affiliated with the school. Students attend college courses that satisfy both high school requirements and general electives in college. Students who gain credits,
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usually free of charge, ultimately leave the class with credits that can provide them with advanced standing when they enter college. This is a key strategy that directly impacts student retention, demystification, and college enrollment when a student completes Job Corps. While concurrent enrollment is found in the typical high school the type of partnership can be applied to many different programs as well as Job Corps. Like that found at the Sierra Nevada Job Corps Center and Truckee Meadows Community College which provides up to 15 credits for Job Corps students who are being trained in a variety of career and technical education programs at the center. Ultimately, these students gain both the benefit of believing they can do college work and completing academic and technical education at the same time.

Articulation Agreements

While many Job Corps centers have articulation agreements with local community colleges for college credit to be earned by students still more can be established.\(^{25}\) This allows students to earn college level credit while working towards completing their training in Job Corps. The benefit of this type of arrangement is that students will see that they already have credit at a local community college and stay in Job Corps to attend that college through Job Corps’ Advanced Career Training program, or transfer credits earned to their local community college.

Though not a college campus, many Job Corps centers have the space needed to provide college courses not only for students but for staff and to some extent the community at large. College instructors could easily come to a Job Corps center and teach a course for students and staff. In some cases, the center may have more up to date equipment than the community college, providing a better learning environment than a community college. It is possible that some Job Corps instructors may currently qualify as Adjunct Faculty and more may be able to become certified with encouragement and support from the center.

Industry Recognized Certificates

Job Corps has been moving to provide industry recognized certificates to its students. Many industries are beginning to have their certificates and the training to gain the certificate reviewed by colleges so that once a certificate is gained, college credit accompanies it as well. This type of arrangement provides the student with confidence that they can actually perform work that is at college level, and can not only perform, but succeed.

This is the goal behind the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) initiative.\(^{26}\) This initiative provides certification training that is integrated into a community college curriculum.\(^{27}\) This allows students who are gaining a manufacturing certification to also gain college credit.\(^{28}\) The more certifications, the more college credit earned until all certifications are complete and work is done to complete a college degree in the specific industry.\(^{29}\) This type of credential is referred to as a “stackable credential” because every new certification gained is based on what was gained previously, building to more and more education and knowledge. This type of certification allows for a variety of start and stop locations in gaining new knowledge in a field, and not just the typical two to four year program that needs to be completed to gain a degree.

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the North Carolina Community College System have a statewide articulation agreement in which students may be eligible to receive college credit after completion of identified Career - Technical Education (CTE) courses in high school. This creates a systematic and seamless process in which students can move from high school to community college without having to duplicate efforts or repeat courses.

Wake County Public School System

“Moving these industry-recognized skills certifications into community college programs will provide meaningful, relevant education for students and ultimately produce a highly skilled and mobile workforce – making us more competitive in the global economy.”

National Association of Manufacturers
President John Engler
Online

The internet has opened up college like never before. Anyone can access college courses from anywhere as long as they have a computer and an internet connection. Job Corps is constantly trying to stay ahead of the electronic teaching curve; many centers host new computer labs so that students can continue studying and learning during off hours. These labs can easily be used by students to access online courses as well as increasing the prospect of free tutoring. Because most community colleges offer some online courses, students can take courses from their local community college, thereby accumulating credits so they can continue a program when they return home.

GREATER ASSISTANCE

As mentioned in the previous section, assistance can come in the form of tutors and mentors. But that is just the tip of the iceberg. At-risk youth are typically the first in their families to enter college, thus putting them at even a greater disadvantage to ever enter the college system or stay involved once enrolled. Assistance that can be provided may include:

• Filling out forms, which are complicated even for students with several generations of college students in their families.
• Not just talking about tutoring, but showing them and introducing them to the tutoring staff on campus. A prescheduled meeting can be arranged where a student is left to meet with a tutor to discuss the assistance needed.
• Encouraging students to shadow a college student for a day. This will allow new students to see how things work, where things are located, and make them feel more comfortable on campus.
• Providing peer support. Students are always apprehensive to seek guidance from an adult authoritative figure. However, they are more open to seek help from a peer that has gone or is going through similar trials. Peer support can be as simple as answering basic questions, showing new students around campus, or helping them get to school on public transportation, etc.

Ultimately at-risk youth just need someone to be there for them to help them through the processes and day to day of college life.

TO INCREASE SUCCESS

As has been mentioned throughout this paper there are many program models that are working to prepare at-risk youth for college. Many of these started as small initiatives that have grown to much larger success, such as the early college high school. As Job Corps moves to increase the number of students it sends to college, Job Corps must evaluate what needs to be done to create an environment focused on students achieving more during their time at the center and improving the processes which lead to recognition and successful transition to college. While Job Corps is doing well at preparing students for college, it can and must do better. To this end it is recommended that Job Corps:
1. Enhance the environment which raises student expectations and knowledge about college. Job Corps should eliminate the notion among staff and students that attainment of a GED, high school diploma or a certain score on the Test of Adult Basic Learning (TABE) equates to no more academics needed. The culture at the center needs to stress the continuation of additional academics, integrated with the chosen occupation or in preparation for continuing onto college. This is one way in which centers can increase the rigor of its academics and better align the program to college courses. One thing that the early college high schools show, when placed in an environment which raises that academic bar, setting higher expectations, students, even at-risk students, achieve success. Furthermore, Job Corps needs to stress college to students during and throughout their stay at the center so they can visualize the notion of being prepared, believing in themselves succeeding and staying at the center to pursue college courses.

2. The culture on the centers has long focused on creating positive relationships and a “Believe It Or Not I Care” (BIONIC) culture with students. Beyond that, teachers need to recognize, respect and treat students fairly, eliminating excuses for students not succeeding. Students must be motivated and inspired to excel. “A successful teacher believes that her students can and will achieve excellence in her classroom. Such an attitude is a key component for student achievement.” This attitude needs to permeate the center beyond educators to all staff.

3. As we work on improvements to the center culture, strive to encourage students and staff to view tutoring, mentoring, and engagement with the college academic counselors as a normal part of the students’ everyday life. With these contacts not only will students achieve more, but they will be in contact with people that can give them guidance and be an example for them to go on to college.

4. Expand the number and quality of current and future community partners to demonstrate a focus on the importance of college. Currently community partners are not fully involved in selling college to Job Corps students. By having an industry representative speak to students about college and its importance, gives a real reason for going into college.

5. Explore and use every possible alternative college credit option so that students obtain as much in the way of credit while at the center as possible. As listed above, the number of ways to gain academic college credit is growing by leaps and bounds. Job Corps needs to harness these alternatives and give students the base they need to find success in college and seek that as an option to gaining more skills and training.

6. Track and incentivize student involvement in college. Not only should Job Corps track who is going on to college, but monitor how they are doing in college and what they might need to succeed. These types of measures then need to be included into Job Corps’ OMS, which is used to track performance and ultimately ranks all centers from 1 to 123. By tracking and holding Job Corps Centers accountable for meeting goals to get more students in college, it will focus centers and contractors to get more students into college.
7. Increase college opportunities (slots) and funding. By increasing the number of slots allotted to each center, more Job Corps students will be able to attend college. Further, though many Job Corps students qualify for Pell Grants, some do not and others have difficulty obtaining required information. Job Corps needs to establish a funding mechanism that will allow centers to petition for additional funding to greatly expand the number of college students.

CONCLUSION

As the global economy puts greater emphasis on the completion of some form of post-secondary education and training, it is imperative for the United States to increase the number of diplomas, certificates, and degrees. Further, the focus should be placed on at-risk youth gaining college credit to improve retention, placement, and earning potential as well as meeting the demands of employers. Newly enrolled college students, as well as at-risk youth, need to increase their academic achievement. The US is slipping from where it once stood internationally when it comes to college. This is not because we are doing a bad job of preparing and teaching students in college, it simply means that the rest of the world figured out how to teach and prepare students and in some cases teach and prepare them better. As a nation, there is a need to minimize the challenges and maximize the opportunities which engage at-risk youth and give them the courage and knowledge needed to rise and overcome obstacles they encounter. In Job Corps, students do this every day.

Factors leading to college success for at-risk youth are simple but are often not followed. These include providing an environment that has high expectations and knowledge of college, tutoring, mentoring, and academic counselors, community partnerships, alternative options to gaining college credit and providing greater assistance to students. It is imperative that at-risk youth be provided programs that support their preparation, enrollment, and successful completion of college level certifications or degrees. This is not only an imperative for our nation’s prosperity, but also for the future generation of at-risk students who can rise above their current situation and have a brighter future.
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2. Ibid
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17. Ibid. Nationally there are currently 201 ECHS. Though this seems small these high schools are preparing at-risk youth for college better than their regular school counterparts. In fact 74% of students enrolled, 2008-09 school year, in ECHS were represented ethnic minorities. 56% of students were eligible for free or reduced lunch, and 10% were English language learners. Even with the population that many have left behind, 89% ECHS graduates enroll in college immediately after graduation, compared to the national average of 66%.
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Federal Trio Program and Youth Build – College Tips and Learning Styles.
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