COMMONWEALTH CORPORATION

Case Study: **Greenfield Community College, Early Care and Education Training Program**

RE: **Engaging with employers in the design phase**

Sector: **Early Childhood Education**

When Greenfield Community College's (GCC) Early Childhood Education (ECE) faculty began receiving consistent feedback from employers about a lack of work-skill readiness among new employees, the college responded. GCC leveraged employer input by surveying practicum employers as to their interest in meeting both hiring and advancement needs of early childhood educators together. By engaging employers as thought partners, GCC developed an ECE training program that benefits employers, participants, and GCC.

As a first step, GCC outlined a scaffolded program model to share with the employers based on their survey responses. Then, they held a series of digital meetings with employers in small groups along with as many in-person meetings as possible. In developing their response to WCTF's RFP, GCC developed a draft apprenticeship program model and included a program design period in their funding request to allow GCC to hold more employer convenings prior to program launch. This was essential in ensuring that the program design would align with employer and industry needs. From these meetings, a consortium of interested and engaged employers was formed.

Next, GCC worked with employers one-on-one to discuss gaps and needs. This created safety for employers to share their challenges. Then GCC compiled and shared the overall findings with the full employer group to highlight overlapping challenges as well as common themes and trends specific to the industry in their region. The initial consortium comprised five highly engaged employers, some with multiple sites, who had the time and capacity to work with GCC. Upon receiving WCTF funding, the employer consortium expanded to two more employers as GCC has continued to engage an array of employers over the first year of the program's implementation, including those not in the consortium.

Initially, the program design was tailored to the higher education academic calendar following a cohort model with twelve to fifteen apprentices who were to be trained and placed at employer sites all on the same timeline, with some employers taking multiple apprentices at once. While that design can work well for a longstanding program with an existing pool of prospective candidates, pilot programs often require a more hands-on, individualized approach with both students and external stakeholders to build a strong referral pipeline and to establish a functional system for something as complicated and nuanced as match-making between student-apprentices and employers. In the program model, GCC matches students to an employer, but the employer is not obligated to take the student; they interview the prospective student-apprentice and assess them for fit prior to hiring them on as an apprentice for the duration of the training period. If a student is determined not to be the right fit, GCC finds them an alternate placement with a different employer.

For this program to work, GCC needed employers to embrace the apprenticeship model, so they had to create a program structure that aligned with both industry needs and the students' education and training needs. After some programmatic changes, GCC now offers two to three training cohorts per year, and while the education component of the program is cohort-based, the apprenticeship (work-based learning) component allows for continuous open enrollment, which is more aligned with

industry standards. This shift allows GCC to place apprentices with employers as positions open up, rather than holding back placements to await the start of a new cohort. Apprentices also attend a weekly seminar with a GCC instructor to discuss how classroom learning is applied on the job, thus reinforcing the relevance of the classroom content.

GCC's WCTF grant funds a 30-hour per week position to coordinate the cohorts and to invest in ongoing work of building relationships with employers and supporting students in their job placements. This work is relationship-dependent and labor intensive – it would not be possible without a deeply invested and hands-on coordinator.

GCC, in conjunction with its employers, is diligent in tracking pathways to certification for ECE students who need 450 hours of on-the-job training over nine months. Potential students for the ECE credential can start working in a teacher assistant position after completing the EEC Essentials training, which GCC helps facilitate for all apprentices. The students then complete their teacher certification coursework with GCC while building toward the work hours requirement via their apprenticeship placements. Students are eligible to advance to a higher role upon successful completion of coursework and their required hours of supervised experience in the classroom. The program creates a win-win as the employers can hire people into non-certified roles and then refer them to GCC for the support needed to earn their EEC teacher certification. Meanwhile, those students have already begun earning the work experience in a non-certified role that they can apply to the on-the-job training requirement.

In addition, GCC provides training and support to select existing staff at the employer sites who serve as mentors and support student-apprentices. GCC connects the mentors through a community of practice.

For programs with this many moving parts, GCC learned that a best practice when working with employers is clarity in communication starting with the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). By using a standard MOU across the employer consortium, they ensured everyone was on the same page. Each employer's MOU included granular and clear roles and responsibilities which were key to its success. Without such close attention to what goes in the MOU, tiny details can become a stumbling block. With explicit MOUs, there are no surprises as to what each entity both contributes to and needs from the partnership. By actively involving employers in the design phase of the ECE training program, GCC set the stage for success for both the employers and the participants.

With GCC's pilot cohort drawing to a close in spring 2026, four apprentices are already preparing for EEC certification with four more ready by mid-autumn upon completion of their nine-month supervised work requirement. The second cohort begins summer 2026.

For more information about the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Program offered by Greenfield Community College, visit: https://train.gcc.mass.edu/workshops/early-childhood-education-ece-apprenticeship/