

Promising Practice: Foundational Skills Program Southwestern Connecticut's Health CareeR_x Academy

To take advantage of the training and support services that HPOG programs offer, participants typically need to learn or brush up on work readiness skills and other “soft” skills—the foundational skills they need to get, keep, and do well in a job. These skills are important for everyone, but especially for those with little work history, troubled backgrounds, or other barriers to employment. Southwestern Connecticut's Health CareeR_x Academy focuses on these skills at the very beginning of the participants' HPOG experience to help them understand what will be expected of them in the training as well as in the workplace.

In the Academy's mandatory workshops, students are required to treat their training as a job and practice the same skills, actions, and attitudes that they will demonstrate in the workplace. This expectation helps them realize from the beginning that the end goal is a job. Workshops offer information about conducting a job search, preparing a resume, practicing interviews, and learning new job skills. In addition, they give participants a broad picture of the workplace and what it means to be on a career pathway.

The workshops are designed to be interactive and provide concrete examples typically found in work and healthcare settings. Some vendors provide teaching materials and assessments. All are required to provide opportunities for student evaluation of the sessions they offer.

Teaching these work readiness skills in the context of healthcare helps participants see the personal connection on multiple levels. For example, they are introduced to *why customer service matters in healthcare, learning to know your patient and the patient's family, building trust and empathy, and leveraging your compassion*. Trainers from the Connecticut League for Nursing inform them that while in training they are expected to demonstrate good personal habits and show up to class on time, dressed appropriately and ready to work. When Academy participants enter their technical training, they more readily understand the importance of getting along with others and making good decisions. They learn that they need to get along with fellow students, workers, and supervisors who come from many backgrounds.

It's hard to overemphasize the role that attitude will have in their future success. Displaying interest and willingness to learn motivates others to help mentor and guide participants in the classroom and in their future careers. Students are encouraged to think of themselves as part of a team responsible for the success of the group. By teaching and modeling these behaviors from the beginning of the program and insisting that participants use them during training, the Academy helps its graduates shine well before they get into the workplace.

Steps taken to implement this Foundational Skills Program:

1. Talk with local employers who identify these foundational skills as critical for people to get hired.
2. Issue a Request for Qualifications to create a list of qualified outside vendors from which to procure services for covered topics and delivery methods. Select vendors with a range of experience, with some working with TANF clients and others with health professionals or corporate clients.

3. Run workshops between three and five hours in length. Typically 10 to 14 students attend each workshop, enabling interaction with instructors and with other students.
3. Recognizing the need to develop soft skills is so important, require students to attend workshops.
4. Have workforce specialists determine which workshop topic and which vendor would most benefit each student. Students then sign a form indicating the workshops they will attend.

An ongoing challenge: Even with this requirement, Academy workshop attendance has not been where it should be. One reason may be timing: workshops were started during July and August, and students may have struggled with school vacations and other summer demands. So far the Academy has offered the workshops in mornings and afternoons, but it may try evenings or weekends. The vendors have been resourceful in trying to build attendance: some provide refreshments, and at least one texts students the day before to remind them to attend. Academy staff also make reminder phone calls and send emails and will soon begin texting reminders as well.