



Bay Area Tech Career Advancement Initiative — Final Report —

April 2015

Overview

Addressing the twin challenges of economically disconnected workers and a lack of diversity in the tech talent supply pipeline, NOVA, a Silicon Valley-based workforce investment board, is partnering with The Stride Center (TSC) of Oakland to promote tech career mobility and advancement for low- and moderate-income TSC students.

This partnership blossomed under a one-year Regional Prosperity Plan grant led in the San Francisco Bay Area by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and the Association of Bay Area Governments on behalf of the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The prosperity plan initiative addressed the challenge of economically disconnected workers by:

- creating and delivering a career navigation curriculum for TSC pilot A+ and Cisco Certified Network Associate certification classes; and
- forming a TSC Alumni Leadership Council to provide project oversight and promote personal agency, career development skills, and a professional network to serve past, current, and future Stride students.

The NOVA/TSC pilot project succeeded in both of these projects. After positive feedback from instructors and most students, TSC adopted the pilot career navigation curriculum for all five of its “regular” A+ classes. The Alumni Leadership Council (ALC) has seven members and the TSC board of directors has just committed to expanding the number of board seats to provide two additional seats on the board specifically for ALC representation.

Context

NOVA and TSC are leaders of TechLadder, a national alliance of organizations focused on expanding access to tech career ladders, creating a more inclusive tech workforce, fostering family economic sustainability and enhancing regional economic competitiveness by preparing workers to fill critical skill gaps. Other TechLadder partners are: Economic Advancement Research Institute (EARI), a non-profit think tank, Creating IT Futures Foundation, the philanthropic arm of CompTIA, Molly Clark of the consultancy Schwarcz and Clark and San Jose State University's program in applied anthropology.

TechLadder is addressing the following problem:

Due to the global, tech-fueled economy, many San Francisco Bay Area populations are increasingly disconnected from the fast-shifting economic mainstream. Those populations include members of underrepresented groups and low-wage, low-skill workers. This disconnection leads to restricted economic mobility for workers as well as continued challenges for employers seeking qualified candidates from varied backgrounds to fill their positions and offer a greater diversity of perspectives and markets.

Over its 14-year history, TSC has developed a nationwide reputation for training and placing a population of tech workers from different demographic backgrounds than the industry as a whole. The roughly 350 students that Stride trains each year have the following profile:

- 81 percent unemployed
- Average age of 41 with some college experience
- 43 percent African American, 21 percent white, 16 percent Latino, 11 percent Asian and 9 percent other
- 25 percent women
- 53 percent extremely low income, 18 percent very low income and 30 percent low income

About three-quarters of TSC students graduate from the training programs and, of that total, about 80 percent pass industry certification exams and 69 percent find tech jobs upon graduation. The average starting wage for TSC students is \$16 to \$18 per hour for entry-level positions such as help desk and computer repair. With experience and additional certifications, some TSC alumni eventually earn as much as \$40 an hour.

While TSC has a proven track record of connecting its students with jobs in the growing technology sector, TechLadder research has concluded that tech sector jobs and skill requirements are constantly changing. Workers must continually upgrade their technical

skills and develop strong personal brands and professional networks to remain relevant in a very mobile economic environment.

Getting a job is only part of the battle. Economic sustainability requires a career focus and the ability to continually grow and adapt to new technological and economic challenges.

Successful tech workers must have career navigation skills. In its April 2014 report, *Bridge to Career Success*, TechLadder identified five key factors for career success that extend beyond technical skill proficiency, which are:

- **Self-awareness:** Understanding where you are on your career path, where your passion is driving you, and what you need in order to get there.
- **Networking:** Engaging existing contacts and strategically reaching beyond that base to increase the number of professional relationships.
- **Relationship management:** Ensuring that you are well regarded by those around you by managing your workplace relationships, your reputation and your desired performance results.
- **Organizational reading:** Analyzing behaviors of the organization, the industry and the economy in order to make better-informed career decisions and to be proactive in managing your employment situation.
- **Mentorship:** Establishing and accessing a relationship with a more-experienced person or serving as mentor to a less-experienced individual.

These “Five Truths of Career Success” are building blocks for developing personal leadership, entrepreneurship, confidence and self-efficacy, the traits that tech employers value. One tech employer told a NOVA/Stride employer roundtable that “if you can tell me that (Stride graduates) have all of these things, then I will come” to a Stride job fair. “That reduces risk.”

The Pilot Project

The *Bridge to Career Success* report was foundational to this initiative. The project team blended the report findings with relevant sections of the existing TSC and NOVA curriculums to create a new career navigation curriculum tailored specifically for TSC students.

The initiative also surveyed tech employers to determine the characteristics, skills and attributes that are most important in the workers they ultimately hire. The survey found that employers most valued experience, positive attitudes, customer-service, customer-awareness, confidence, the ability to be a self-starter and a commitment themselves to continuous learning.

With these sources, NOVA created a curriculum that was organized around the “five truths of career success” revealed in the *Bridge to Career Success* research. The 67-page curriculum features interactive lessons addressing self-assessment/self-awareness, networking and social media, relationship management, mentorship and organizational reading and communication skills.

The overview provides students several foundational understandings. Those include appreciating the importance of:

- taking charge of one’s own career management;
- having a positive attitude, being self-reliant and demonstrating a strong work ethic;
- focusing on understanding and harnessing the power of relationships and networks;
- being flexible and adaptable to technology and employer needs;
- understanding the “five truths of career success”; and
- possessing and demonstrating the **5 ‘C’s** — curious, coachable, collaborative, confident, and customer-focused.

TSC instructors delivered this curriculum to the two pilot classes over several months in the second half of 2014. There were 13 students in the A+ class and ten in the CCNA class.

Concurrent with the curriculum development and delivery process, the initiative formed the Alumni Leadership Council (ALC) to address the need for constituent participation – the voice of the Stride student/alumni – to inform the grant project. The ALC’s other goals have been to create a sustaining Stride professional network and to promote a greater career-focus within the organization.

The ALC has made progress in its first six months of existence. The seven members represent a cross-section of Stride alumni and include gender, racial and ethnic diversity as well as individuals with a range of employment experience. Two are tech managers/supervisors, two are employed in tech and three are seeking tech positions.

The ALC has created its own mission, vision and values statements and has outlined an ambitious set of goals through June 2016:

- Promoting career advancement of TSC alumni and students through establishment of an active alumni network.
- Giving back to and strengthening The Stride Center through formal relationships with the TSC board and staff.
- Advancing capacity of ALC and its members for maximum impact through the development of applied communications (within the group and to the public), teamwork and project management skills.

This grant enabled the initiative to engage consultant Molly Clark who created parallel structures to support ALC development. She established training workshops as well as meetings where ALC members could apply their new skills. The monthly workshops focused on personal leadership qualities and skills, meeting facilitation, social network and social capital theory, organizational development theory and practice as well as using LinkedIn as a networking tool.

During the monthly meetings, Clark helped the ALC grow into a self-governing body that provided input into the career navigation curriculum and has laid the groundwork for forming an alumni professional network.

The initiative evaluation process included student quantitative and qualitative surveys, interviews with pilot class instructors and TSC executive director Barrie Hathaway and supplemental ethnographic interviews of students conducted by anthropology graduate students from San Jose State University.

Outcomes and Next Steps

The clearest signs of initiative success are that TSC has adopted the A+ pilot curriculum for all five of its regular classes and that the ALC is committed to continue meeting and learning at least through mid-2016. In addition, the sustainability of the initiative has enhanced funder return on investment.

Speaking of the career navigation curriculum, TSC instructor Deana Lawrence said its applicability ranges far beyond TSC students or even tech workers in general. “Every person who ever wants to work should go through this program,” she said.

The initiative partners are currently developing a Theory of Change to attract additional funding to sustain and strengthen this work. The expected outcomes of these additional investments are as follows for various stakeholders.

Current and prospective TSC students and alumni

- A growing pool of career-ready workers from the under-valued TSC talent pool.
- Higher retention of TSC alumni in tech careers.
- Increasing numbers of TSC students who are advancing in their careers and able to meet current and future tech industry challenges.
- A robust, sustained vehicle for leadership development within TSC and the tech industry.
- Increasing demand in marginalized communities for ICT training and careers.

TSC as an institution

- High-functioning institutionalized vehicles for cultivating and leveraging the insights and initiative of students and alumni (e.g. integration with the TSC board of directors, collaboration with TSC staff).
- TSC's refining its career development focus, thus promoting its regional and national leadership as a training organization preparing workers for long-term success in the mobile and global tech economy.

The ALC and its members

- Increasing leadership and management skill levels among ALC members.
- Career advancement in tech among ALC members.
- A robust and influential ALC and alumni network with influence within TSC, in the community and in the tech economy.
- ALC as a pipeline of leadership development in TSC, tech workplaces and marginalized communities.

Workforce Development and Technology Industries

- Greater regional employers awareness of and access to a new talent pool, particularly those who see the benefit of workforce diversity, and are searching for pathways to achieve this.
- Increasing numbers of TSC alumni as tech entrepreneurs.
- Increasing diversity in local and regional tech workplaces.
- A national model that is replicable in other regions and industries.