A Case Study of the Colorado Community Health Network and Southern New Hampshire University’s College for America Program Partnership

Increased demand for and rising costs of health center services, stemming from an aging population\(^1\), rising chronic illness\(^2\), and increasing access to health care coverage\(^3\) has encouraged health centers to rethink care delivery. As healthcare delivery systems continue to evolve, community health centers must devise creative solutions to recruit and retain a workforce that can meet these needs. Simultaneously, the patient-centered medical home model expands the need for staff who can provide operational and enabling services\(^4,5\). As health centers prepare to participate in Accountable Care Organizations and value-based care delivery, the demands will only increase in the coming years\(^6\).

Health center-college partnerships are one promising approach to addressing these needs. This case study highlights a collaboration between a state primary care association, Colorado Community Health Network, and an educational institution, Southern New Hampshire University. Through their joint efforts, knowledge and skills of health center staff are strengthened; they are retained and their careers advanced at the health center, and they are better prepared to meet the pressing needs of vulnerable patients.

The Need for this Partnership

CCHN represents the state’s 20 community health centers, whose locations range from mountainous frontier towns to bustling metropolises. For the past three years CCHN has partnered with Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) through its College for America program to offer online, flexible, affordable, accredited Associate’s and Bachelor’s degrees to health center staff statewide. This partnership grew out of input from health centers and from CCHN’s “Employers of Choice” campaign. CCHN facilitates 10 different peer networks broken out by functional group, and both the Human Resources and Operations peer networks voiced interest in receiving additional support around career ladder development. The goal was to offer educational opportunities that allowed staff to continue working full-time, were affordable for students, and provided training in skills needed by health centers. “It helps the health center to have more professionally developed and educated staff and creates opportunities for staff to advance in their careers if they so choose,” says Angela Rose, former CCHN Health Center Workforce Manager.

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CCHN researched various options and SNHU’s College for America program quickly rose to the top for several reasons. College for America offers programs specifically geared toward students working at healthcare organizations, thus CCHN and health centers would not need to create a large internal infrastructure to support the program. CCHN could avoid creating preferred pricing options or overseeing multiple agreements. College for America also takes an active approach to relationship management and marketing campaigns, making this program an easier lift.

CCHN hosted a joint call between the two peer networks to present options and received support for the collaboration. Interested staff from several health centers learned details about the program through an informational webinar and employees at various health centers enrolled.

How this Partnership Works
College for America is a program of SNHU, a private non-profit accredited university with over 3,400 on-campus students and 102,000 online students. College for America offers Associate degrees, Bachelor’s degrees, and a certificate program. Their offerings are designed as an educational ladder, meaning a certificate can lead straight into an Associate degree, an Associate into a Bachelor’s (College for America also accepts transfer credits for Bachelor’s degrees). Last year, the program served 8,026 students, of which 95% worked full-time.

College for America helps organizations create internal career paths. Students demonstrate mastery of specific competencies by completing projects, with 120 competencies required for the Associate degree and another 120 for the Bachelor’s. It’s also quite affordable: tuition is currently just $5,000 per year under its partnership with CCHN and includes as many competencies as the student can complete. No textbooks are required, which reduces costs even more. Financial aid and financing options are available. Students are supported by an advisor, who helps them develop a study plan and provides regular check-ins, as well as an online student community and 24/7 access. The program is only offered through partnerships with organizations, and Southern New Hampshire University’s Partnerships division works with prospective partners to identify the appropriate offerings for employees.

Roles of Partners
CCHN’s Health Center Workforce Manager is the project lead, and College for America’s team of Strategic Partnership Directors develop and manage relationships with participating employers and community organizations. Most large employers and community partners receive regular check-ins by phone or email, as well as quarterly updates on the number of prospective, enrolled, and graduating students.

College for America also regularly creates marketing campaign materials. These include fresh talking points for email, social media, newsletter or intranet, and meeting announcements. The Health Center Workforce Manager incorporates these materials into CCHN’s Workforce Updates, which goes out to peer networks including the Human Resources and Operations networks three times per year.

Results of this Partnership
To date, at least 26 staff from at least eight health centers in Colorado are officially prospective, current, or former SNHU students. The health centers are geographically dispersed throughout the state, with both large and small health centers represented. The program is well-suited to rural and frontier locations as it does not mandate regular in-person meetings, unlike some other distance learning programs.

Karen’s Story
Karen Mizokami has worked for nearly six years at Valley-Wide Health Systems, which serves 15 rural counties in Colorado covering over 24,000 square miles. She currently serves as the Director of Dental Operations, a promotion made possible by the Bachelor’s of Arts in Healthcare Management she earned through College for America.

Mizokami began her career at Valley-Wide as a front desk staff member, as well as coordinating referrals for three medical providers. In response to changes prompted by health care reforms, she transitioned into outreach and enrollment (O&E), eventually becoming the health center’s O&E lead. Her ultimate goal is to step into an executive leadership role at Valley-Wide, and the next advancement opportunity she sought was to become a clinic manager.

Valley-Wide Health Systems is a federally qualified health center serving 15 rural counties in Colorado that cover over 24,000 square miles.
Mizokami admits it took her five tries to secure the clinic manager position. She had dropped out of college in her twenties and did not meet the educational requirements for the job. Her husband began encouraging her to look outside the organization for career advancement.

“I don’t want to be anywhere else,” she told him. “Valley-Wide has a piece of my heart, so I am going to prove to them I am the best choice.”

Although she was eventually able to move into the clinic manager position, Mizokami often felt she had to work harder than other clinic managers because she lacked a college degree. She also remained aware that unless she pursued additional schooling, her career prospects would remain limited. On a personal level, Mizokami wanted to set an example for her children. “I wanted them to see that even when you’re busy with everything else, you can still accomplish what you want to.”

Thus, on April 1, 2016, less than half a year into her new position, Mizokami began working on her Associate degree through College for America. She completed the program in just two-and-a-half months. By this point Mizokami was simultaneously managing the clinic and the call center, but she pushed forward with her education. On April 10, 2017, a mere one year and 10 days after starting her first project, she finished her Bachelor’s degree.

The timing was perfect. The Director of Dental Operations position opened right as she was working on her final assignment. A Bachelor’s degree was required. Mizokami scrambled to submit her last assignment and obtain administrative confirmation she’d completed the program. Just 48 hours before the position closed, she had everything she needed to submit her application.

“[Director-level] positions don’t come open very often,” she says. “If you miss them you could be waiting a while for another opportunity. I didn’t want to not be considered for the role because I hadn’t finished school.”

Mizokami is unusual; the average College for America student finishes their Associate in 2.4 years and their Bachelor’s in 3.1 years. Mizokami stayed motivated by focusing on her end goal. She dedicated time each day to work on school, and benefitted from support from her supervisor, colleagues, health center leadership, husband, family, and friends.

“I don’t want to be anywhere else,” she told him. “Valley-Wide has a piece of my heart, so I am going to prove to them I am the best choice.”

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Advice . . . from One Staff Member to Another

- Set a schedule . . . and stick to it. Schedule a set amount of time each week for school and don’t procrastinate. Tell friends and family when you will be studying. Avoid getting frustrated if projects take longer than expected; if you keep chipping away, you’ll get there.

- Build momentum. Rather than waiting for feedback on a completed project, Mizokami immediately started her next project. As soon as she got one assignment back from her instructor, she had another to submit. She never got discouraged by how long the program might take, because she was always working on the next project.

- Know your motivation. You might be getting a degree for yourself, for your family, for your organization, for a better life—whatever the reason, going back to school for school’s sake isn’t enough.

Advice . . . from One Health Center to Another

- Don’t underestimate the power of a personal invitation. Mizokami’s CEO personally told her about the program, and then asked her about it every time they saw each other. That support was a huge motivator.

- Offer ways to get involved. Staff will be learning skills and gaining knowledge, and will thus have new contributions to make. Mizokami’s COO heard she’d just completed a module on compliance and solicited her opinion on meeting certain health center requirements. She also sought opportunities to join committees.

- Extend education reimbursement to non-clinical staff. Although continuing education funds are typically included in benefits packages for clinical staff, offering this perk to non-clinical staff sends a strong message of support.
**Lessons Learned from this Partnership**

“I think College for America is filling its intended role,” says Rose. However, she notes that recruitment remains a challenge to increased enrollment, and thinks CCHN and health centers can improve outreach to staff who would benefit from the program.

For her part, Mizokami has applied to several Master’s programs, including at Southern New Hampshire University. Obtaining her Associate and Bachelor’s degrees helped her reach an important rung on the career ladder toward executive leadership. Although she is committed to staying in her position for the near future, she remains aware of the requirements necessary to reach the next step.

As health centers continue to adapt to the evolving needs of a changing healthcare delivery system, career ladders will play an increasingly important role in cultivating the workforce of tomorrow. Ascending these ladders requires enhanced job skills, increased education, or a combination of the two. Partnering with colleges and universities supports staff in making these transitions, and can help with retaining motivated mission-driven staff. Additional practices such as tuition assistance can further improve these programs. As this case study illustrates, support is required from all levels of the organization as much as commitment is required from the staff member.

**Contributing Factors**

- Buy-in from front-line staff up to senior leadership is vital. Mizokami was given support at all levels. Her supervisor offered to let her take time off to complete her assignments (she never did). Her colleagues continually asked about her progress. Top management recommended the program to her and extended opportunities to use her new knowledge and skills.

- Working adult students benefit from an education program that is: flexible, online, affordable, modular (designed to impart discrete skills), and supportive.

- Unlike training programs that target one type of health care worker (e.g., Medical Assistants), this program straddles the line between customized (designed to meet the needs of health care employers) and widely applicable (certificate, Associate degree, and Bachelor’s degree options available).

**Restricting Factors**

- Sustained recruitment and marketing are vital to program uptake. Program announcements can sometimes sit in one staff member’s inbox instead of reaching the entire health center, limiting enrollment. Staff benefit from regular reminders via multiple channels. Possible marketing avenues include email, intranet, staff meetings, and newsletters. Health centers might also consider surveying participants or graduates to identify promising outreach strategies.

- The course load and average time-to-completion can intimidate interested employees. One solution is to tap program graduates to champion the program and serve as role models. Mizokami tried to involve health center staff in her assignments (role plays, developing a quality improvement plan) and she encouraged others to enroll.

- College for America only offers a small menu of degree options. This decreases decision paralysis but may also deter potential students who wish to obtain in-depth training in an area not covered by the program. Depending on the health center’s needs, a workforce development program may ultimately include several partnerships or offerings.
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