Amanda Robins (MERS Missouri Goodwill Industries, The Excel Center, USA)

Empowering Excel Students Through Missouri Apprenticeships

Abstract

The Excel Center, through MERS-Goodwill, is a high school for adults that opened in Indiana in 2010. Eight years later, Missouri opened their own Excel Centers in St. Louis, Springfield, and Poplar Bluff. A year after that, Missouri opened a new center in Columbia. These centers were opened to help students 21 and older earn a certified high school diploma. The model these schools follow takes into consideration the barriers related to poverty that often keep adults from acquiring a high school education. Goodwill's mission is "Changing lives through the power of work." From the beginning, these centers were designed to help students become employable. The diploma itself is not the end goal. To measure Missouri's success, the Excel Center set four goals around persistence, higher education/industry recognized credentials, employment, and wage increases. Goals related to higher education and employment have been more difficult to meet, though each school is seeing gains and improvements. Investing in the apprenticeship programs that are growing in Missouri is one way these schools could achieve their goals and see more students employed and thriving. Missouri Excel Centers have a variety of options they could pursue regarding apprenticeships, including creating their very own pre-apprenticeship program designed to prepare students for the rigors of apprenticeship.

Keywords: *High School, Diploma, Barriers, Poverty, Apprenticeships*

1 Excel Centers in Missouri

1.1 Excel Beginnings

The Excel Center is a non-profit adult high school, operated by Goodwill Education Initiatives with the purpose of providing adult students the opportunity to earn a certified high school diploma. The very first Excel Center in the United States was established in 2010 in Indianapolis, Indiana. This school followed an online model with some limited success. That same year, the demand for more schools led to a waiting list, and the Indianapolis mayor approved two more schools to be opened (Delgado 2017, 8). Later iterations of the school emphasized in-person instruction and remediation courses in math and reading (ibid.)

Prior to this center's founding, there were very few schools or training facilities for adults in need of a high school diploma. Adults who had aged out of the public school system could pursue a HiSET or GED, but there was no way for them to earn the credits they needed to finish the high school diploma they had already started. Those credits, or the relevance of those earned credits, disappeared once they were too old to go back to school. The Excel Center made those credits relevant again for Indiana students.

Today, there are 15 Excel Centers in Indiana, and the model has expanded to other states including Texas, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Washington D.C. How each center is funded varies from state to state, depending on a variety of factors: education funding formulas and amounts, state funding laws, curriculum and accountability, charter laws, and union laws. (ibid., 5). However, all of the Excel Centers in the United States share key elements: enrollment open to adults, childcare, minimal online instruction, academic and life coaching, and barrier removal resources such as transportation and housing costs. Another key element is emphasis and access to dual credit courses and industry recognized credentials (IRC) (ibid.). All of these elements are important features of the school that help each center accomplish their shared goal: to train and educate a population of the workforce that was left behind by the traditional private and public-school systems in the United States.

In Missouri, there are four centers: Columbia, Springfield, St. Louis, and Poplar Bluff. These centers collaborate with one another regarding school policies, curriculum requirements, course offerings, and teacher/coach professional development opportunities. Students at these centers earn new credits by taking courses in language arts, social studies, math, science, fine arts, practical arts, physical education, health education, personal finance, and electives. Each course takes about 8 weeks, ranging from five to one credit, and students take any number of courses they need in order to meet Missouri's requirements for a high school diploma.

Because time has passed since their high school days, to ensure future success, students who need higher math and language arts courses may need to pass appropriate remediation courses in math and reading, determined by an intake process prior to enrollment. These remediation courses help students relearn what they may have forgotten since they left school, and they are counted for elective credit.

Each center makes great efforts to address barriers prohibiting students from earning their high school diploma. Students are assigned a Life Coach who helps link them to community resources: housing accommodations, transportation resources, food, and mental healthcare/rehabilitation. Life Coaches also provide mentorship via academic and emotional support. Just like Indiana centers, Missouri Excel Centers also provide drop-in childcare on location while students attend classes. Students at each site also have access to free dual credit courses at a variety of universities and community colleges. Individually, each school uses different approaches regarding work training, IRC achievement, and post-secondary opportunities for their students, depending on the needs of the area's workforce as well as the resources, courses, and training available in each area.

1.2 Excel's Impact: Changing Lives Through the Power of Work

The impact of Excel Centers on student success is far-reaching and supported by data. Some of the most extensive data collected about the Excel Center's impact was collected during a 2018 report conducted by the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities (LEO), between the years of 2013-2015. According to their study of Indiana centers, "14,143 individuals applied to The Excel Center. Of these, 5,261 applied but did not enroll, 7,062

enrolled but did not graduate, and 1,820 graduated" (Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities 2018) between the years 2013-2015. Regardless of which group students fell under, LEO found that enrollment at the Excel Center had a significant effect on earnings and employment. Of course, graduate earnings saw the highest increases, "17 to 22 percentage points" (ibid.) only two years after applying to The Excel Center. Their research also concluded that graduates were more likely than non-graduates to enroll in public colleges and universities, with 22% of graduates enrolling in college within the year after their graduation. (ibid.)

Similar conclusions have been drawn by other researchers. Two years after the first Excel Center was established in Indianapolis, Ball State University reported that Excel graduates saw a $9,000 increase in annual wage earnings. (Delgado 2017, 9) Furthermore, according the Aspen Institute, in 2019, 70% of Excel Center graduates are working and earning significantly more money than they were prior to enrollment, with students seeing an average wage increase of $17,393 three years after graduation, a 44% increase in earnings since before enrolling at The Excel Center (Management Performance Hub 2019).

These numbers indicate how Indiana Excel Centers have directly supported MERS Missouri Goodwill Industries' mission: changing lives through the power of work. The goal of these centers, from the very beginning, is to help impoverished community members find gainful employment. The barrier of a high school diploma keeps millions of United States citizens impoverished, stagnating their earnings potential and taking its toll on their identity as full citizens of their communities.

Teenagers who drop out of school do so for a plethora of reasons, many of which are logical and based on survival, and then are, by the rules and structures of society, setback for the rest of their lives. Those who dropped out due to academic struggles cannot pass the GED or HiSET exam without taking classes, and often adult obligations such as work and family get in the way. Students who dropped out for mental health or self-esteem reasons have the added burden and shame of being a "high school dropout," making it all the more difficult for them to even attempt the HiSET or GED. There is also the financial burden of these classes and exams, fees and time away from work, and if these students fail once, it is less likely they will make further attempts.

Furthermore, often earning a GED or HiSET does not result in more earnings. As of 2010, only 4 in 10 of the United States' 41 million high school dropouts pursued vocational/post-secondary training after acquiring an alternative credential such as the GED. This is an increase from the 1 in 10 dropouts who do not earn a GED, but this data still indicates that 60% of GED earners do not seek higher training (Fry 2010, 1). Additionally, students who acquire a GED in the US often report challenges related to bureaucracy/logistics, working with others, economic pressures, and family pressure once they move on to post-secondary training or college (Kist 2003, 13). These students do not often see themselves as fitting the image of a typical college student (ibid., 12) Passing the GED test is not enough for these

students to find pathways to success and financial stability. There are too many factors to consider, all of which are deeply connected to the problems of poverty.

The Excel Centers are designed to address the barriers their students face. Students have access to free classes, free drop-in childcare, and help with transportation costs. More than that, something the Excel Center does very well is give students a support group, people they can turn to while they journey through secondary and post-secondary/vocational training. During their enrollment at the Excel Center, they are assigned a Life Coach who is meant to be an ally and mentor. After graduation, students work with a Career and Readiness Coordinator to help them answer questions about post-secondary training, to apply for jobs, and to register for training courses. This professional remains a resource for Excel graduates after graduation.

Overall, the Excel Center is centered around gainful employment. Students who complete the program acquire a high school diploma, but this is not the "finish line". Students are encouraged early on to orient themselves around a career pathway, and they are in frequent communication with directors, Life Coaches, Skill Up Life Coaches, instructors, and Career and Readiness Coordinators to pursue IRC/secondary professional training.

Excel students gladly seize these opportunities. According to a 2020 survey of 162 Excel Center students from Springfield, Missouri, roughly 75% said that free industry/professional certificates were a moderately important factor or a very important factor in their decision to enroll. This center alone has linked their students to IRCs in a variety of job fields: Life Coach, Dental Assistant, Medical Administrative Assistant, Medical Billing and Coding, Pharmacy Technician, Phlebotomy, CompTIA A+, Paralegal, CMT (Chartered Market Technician), CEHRS (Certified Electronic Health Records Specialist), MOS (Microsoft Office Specialist), Customer Service, CDA (Child Development Associate), Vet Assistant, and EKG Technician.

Students who do not pursue higher degrees are encouraged to enter the workforce, where they will make better wages and have better opportunities for advancement than they would in careers that do not require a high school diploma. For Missouri Excel Centers, the diploma is the first step, not the end goal.

1.3 Missouri Excel Center Goals

In order to follow in Indiana's footsteps, Missouri Excel Centers outlined four specific goals to measure student success. Unlike Missouri public schools, success is not measured by graduation rates, or testing scores. Instead, success is measured by persistence, IRC/higher education, employment, and wages:

- Persistence: 75% of students each period will have either graduated or have taken at least one class within 5 Terms.
- IRC/higher education: 50% of graduates will attain an IRC or enroll in higher education or advanced skills training within 6 months of graduation

- Employment: 85% of graduates who don't enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training will be employed within 6 months of graduation.
- Wages: Graduates who enter the workforce shall have a wage rate at least 20% higher than the average MO wage rate for individuals without a HS degree. This translates to 120% of $11.76 an hour or $14.11 an hour.

Since 2018, when the first of the three Missouri schools (St. Louis, Springfield, and Poplar Bluff) opened, major efforts have been made to reach each of these goals. Unfortunately, not all goals have been reached at each center, and none have been reached district-wide. For example, in the 2019-2020 school year, two Missouri schools reached the 85% employment goal; of the graduates who did not enroll in higher education, 94% of Poplar Bluff graduates and 86% of Springfield graduates were employed within 6 months of graduation. 71% of St Louis graduates were employed in that time frame, with the district average being 81%, only 4 percentage points away from the goal.

Regarding the wage goals, the only center to meet or exceed $14.11 an hour was Springfield, with $15.16 an hour. The St. Louis graduate wage average was $13.86 and Poplar Bluff's was $11.06, below even the average Missouri rate for individuals without a high school diploma. This makes the district wage average for graduates entering the workforce only $13.76, which is close to the goal, but not quite there.

Similarly, Poplar Bluff and Springfield got very close to meeting the IRC/higher education goal, at 45% and 44% respectively. However, the St. Louis average was 36%, bringing the district average to 39%, showing that more needs to be done to link students to higher training opportunities.

Overall, there has been growth since the first year in 2018-2019, which is perhaps best exemplified by Missouri's persistence measurements. The district persistence average is 67% for the 2019-2020 school year, up from 55% in 2018-2019, which indicates that though this goal has not yet been met, current efforts are taking hold and all schools are making gains in this area.

Many of the reasons for these numbers center around the youth of Missouri schools; there has not been much time to establish all the relationships necessary to accomplish all of these goals, though much progress has been made. Difficulties vary from school to school, depending on the resources made available in each school's respective community, making the issue more complex than merely a problem of district policy.

Additionally, some of the relationships between employers and higher training facilities have been more difficult to establish early on because these institutions do not always understand the Excel model and purpose. Furthermore, many IRC credentials are not available to students in Missouri until they have already earned their high school diploma, or their training periods do not line up well with the Excel 8-week timeline, making partnerships more difficult at times. Finally, wage disparities and earnings potential vary from community to community, a barrier centers have had to address.

The pandemic has created its own challenges. From March 2020-July 2021, Missouri Excel Centers transitioned to an online format to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Since then, enrollment has decreased significantly. In 2021, Term 2 enrollment decreased by 26% compared to Term 2 enrollment in 2020. All centers are working on some district-wide and community-specific strategies to boost enrollment, and many centers are using gas card/gift card incentives to improve retention.

The impact that the pandemic has made on enrollment is significant, but there have been some benefits to the school after going online for so long. Due to the pandemic, all full-time instructors created online versions of their courses, and many were able to teach those online courses more than once, editing them and aligning them to curriculum Core Competencies. This allows the centers to have much more flexibility regarding course offerings in the future. Students approaching graduation now have the option of taking online versions of classes that are not offered on site, sometimes as an independent study option, sometimes as an extra offering that includes students from multiple schools.

Having a variety of online versions of courses established and ready to go will do much to boost persistence numbers over the next few years, because these courses make it easier to create schedules and reduce frustration among students who are close to graduation. Current incentive and recruitment measures will also make an impact. That said, boosting IRC/higher education, wages, and employment is more complex than using incentives or district-wide policies.

The work each center is already doing with universities and vocational colleges is wonderful and should continue. That said, not much has been accomplished in the area of apprenticeships, which are growing in Missouri. Strong partnerships with these programs have a lot of potential for Missouri Excel Centers moving forward and will directly contribute to their persistence, IRC/higher education, employment, and wage goals.

2 Apprenticeship Programs and Missouri Excel Centers

2.1 Apprenticeships in Missouri

In Missouri, an apprenticeship refers to “an industry-driven, high-quality career pathway in which workers can obtain paid work experience, classroom instruction, and a transferable credential while job creators develop and prepare their future workforce” (Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development 2021). These programs typically employ their students, and students typically end the training with a stackable and portable IRC. Afterwards, they continue to be employed and are qualified to work at other companies in the industry. The industries that use apprenticeships to train employees typically pay well above minimum wage, and they are often on track for scheduled raises after a probationary period. Using these programs to train Missouri Excel students would greatly help these centers hit all their marks.

In the state of Missouri, apprentices can start training as early as 16 years old and need only be in pursuit of a high school diploma or equivalent (Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development 2020a, 24). Some programs may have different requirements depending on the nature of the work, such as only taking students who are at least 18 or who have already earned their high school diploma.

If Missouri Excel Centers take advantage of the available apprenticeship programs or work to design their own program, many more Excel students could be earning IRCs or college credit before graduation. Furthermore, after graduation, students who have completed apprenticeships are all but guaranteed gainful employment and higher earning potential, as Missouri employees who complete apprenticeships earn an average $300,000 more over the course of their career (Missouri Office of Workforce Development 2021, 1). Overall, apprenticeships would provide a plethora of benefits for students: job-specific skills and IRCs, a sense of fulfillment, a paycheck during training, and no student debt.

The state of Missouri has demonstrated support of apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs; Missouri is currently second in the nation for establishing new apprenticeships and second in the nation for number of completed apprenticeships, with 3,614 completed apprenticeships in 2019 alone. Currently, Missouri already has 15,189 active apprenticeships, with 472 registered programs, and 3,600 employers. Governor Mike Parson has set a goal of 20,000 new apprentices by 2025 (Office of Governor Michael L. Parson 2019). Additionally, the Office of Workforce Development has set its own goals of establishing pathways to Registered Apprenticeships, setting aside 1 million dollars of federal funds to establish new pre-apprenticeships in Missouri. Pre-apprenticeship sponsors could qualify for up to $50,000 in grants to pilot a new program, which would help cover the cost of building the required curriculum (Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development 2021).

The U.S. Department of Labor deems about 1,300 occupations in Missouri as "apprenticeable" (Missouri Office of Workforce Development 2021, 2). There are currently 487 registered programs in Missouri (Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development 2020a, 5). Of those, 167 Registered Apprenticeship programs are located in St. Louis County, 26 are in Springfield, 3 in Columbia, and 1 is listed in Poplar Bluff (United States Department of Labor 2021).

2.2 Moving Forward

There are several routes Missouri Excel Centers could take regarding their relationship to Missouri Registered Apprenticeships:

1. Students enroll in a Registered Apprenticeship while they are also enrolled in their regular Excel courses. They would earn credits toward their high school diploma while also receiving training from an employer or sponsoring agency. The shifts they work and the training they receive, including the IRCs they earn, could be counted as elective credits toward their diploma.

2. Students are trained before entering a Registered Apprenticeship, possibly through an Excel pre-apprenticeship program/course. Such a course could be counted as elective credit toward graduation. After graduation or after completing the course, these students would enroll in a Registered Apprenticeship.
3. Students are frequently encouraged and educated about apprenticeship programs throughout their careers at Missouri Excel Centers but do not receive training while they are enrolled. Upon graduation, they work with their Career and Readiness Coordinator to enroll in a Registered Apprenticeship.

When establishing pathways to apprenticeships, the Excel Center should keep some guiding principles in mind, which are based on the 5 core components outlined by Missouri Apprenticeship. Strong apprenticeship programs should feature most if not all of the following:

- A mixture of on-the-job training and job-related classroom instruction
- Payment during training and no debt
- Training that results in an IRC that is both portable and stackable
- Employer driven and sponsored
- Lasts 1-2 years, with an average of 2,000 hours a year
- (Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development 2020a, 7)

2.2.1 A Mixture of On-the-Job Training and Job-Related Classroom Instruction

Much of the training that goes on during apprenticeships does not take place in a traditional academic setting. However, the academic instruction that does occur could be delivered at the Excel Center facilities, provided that a strong partnership is formed with the Registered Apprenticeship. A program might include a mixture of instructors, and could potentially include Excel staff such as a full-time or adjunct instructor or a Career and Readiness Coordinator who is employed by MERS Goodwill. Because a large majority of training will occur away from the Excel Center locations, communication with students regarding possible barriers is imperative. This could mean giving gas cards to students so that they can travel to training sites and/or providing drop-in childcare while students are training away from the Excel Center.

2.2.2 Payment During Training and No Debt

A true apprenticeship is inextricably linked to gainful employment. At the very least, if a program does not offer payment during training, the apprenticeship should lead to a job with the promise of a raise. Additionally, any IRCs or college credit the student earns should be paid for by a grant, the employer, or a sponsoring agency. Some grant sponsored programs may require applicants to qualify for benefits such as TANF before paying for IRCs or college courses. The goal should be to help students earn as much as possible during their time as apprentices without taking on any loans.

2.2.3 Training Results in an Industry Recognized Credential

A quality apprenticeship usually results in an IRC or college credit. These credentials are recognized widely throughout an industry. It is important that directors, Career and Readiness Coordinators, and other relevant staff stay informed about which credentials are the most valuable and which are recognized both regionally and nationally.

2.2.4 Employer Driven and Sponsored

Gainful employment is at the center of apprenticeship missions, so any program that the Excel Center chooses to partner with should be able to provide evidence and data about their ability to link students to career pathways and increased wages. Apprenticeship sponsors can be a single business, a consortium of businesses, an industry association, a joint-labor-management organization, a community college, or a community-based organization (Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development 2020a, 10). It is possible for Missouri Excel Centers to someday become a sponsoring agency.

2.2.5 Program Lasts 1-2 Years

Missouri Excel Center students generally take 13-15 months to earn their high school diploma, though many take several years. With this in mind, if Missouri Excel Centers wanted to pursue a dual-enrollment approach, it would be beneficial to enroll students early in their Excel career, provided that students are able to do both while also managing the added stress and obligations of everyday life. This would make it easier for students to earn IRCs prior to graduation.

If Excel chooses to link apprenticeship training with credits toward graduation, student training likely would not slow down their pursuit of a high school diploma. In this route, information about apprenticeships would need to be shared with students during the intake process, during iExcel orientation, and frequently throughout subsequent terms, via guest speakers, conversations with Life Coaches, Skill Up Life Coaches, directors, and Career and Readiness Coordinators.

This is not to say that there should be a cutoff point where it is “too late” for students to enter an apprenticeship while being enrolled at the Excel Center. Regardless of their course of action, if students finish the program while being enrolled at the Excel Center, begin the program just before their graduation, or enroll after graduation, access to information about these programs should be available to any and all interested applicants.

3 Pre-Apprenticeship Programs and Missouri Excel Centers

3.1 Serving Underrepresented Communities through the Power of Work

Pre-apprenticeships differ from apprenticeships in that they do not require that apprentices be hired or paid and they are much shorter in duration, around 1-4 weeks (Missouri Office of

Workforce Development 2021, 3). They serve primarily to prepare students for the rigors of a Registered Apprenticeship and to link underserved populations in Missouri to higher job training. Apprenticeship Missouri defines underrepresented populations as "a population that does not represent the majority, or a proportional share as indicated by appropriate data, of current participants in Registered Apprenticeship" (Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development 2020b, 3). Historically, apprenticeships in the United States have disproportionately served White, male apprentices. The hope is that establishing quality pre-apprenticeship programs will help link underserved communities to better job opportunities. Missouri Excel Centers can play a role in linking these underserved and underrepresented populations to gainful employment.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, of the 275,324 active apprentices in 2020, roughly 9% identified as female, and only 11% of new apprentices in 2020 were female (United States Department of Labor 2020). In St. Louis, Missouri, 5,213 apprentices in 2020 identified as male, while only 351 identified as female (Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development 2020b, 4). Missouri Excel Centers can help more women become apprentices. A majority of the Missouri Excel students enrolled during the 2019-2020 school year identified as female, around 75%. This percentage is fairly constant at all Missouri locations, with the highest percentage being 82% in St. Louis and the lowest being 71% in Columbia. The goal would be to have pre-apprenticeship program enrolment at these centers reflect current student populations, meaning that a large majority of Excel pre-apprentices would be women.

Additionally, in St. Louis, Missouri, 4,627 apprentices in 2020 were White, 636 were Black, 212 were Hispanic, 26 were Asian, and 26 were American Indian or Alaskan Native (United States Department of Labor 2020). In 2019, Black residents totalled about 46% of St. Louis's population, but did not make up 46% of St. Louis apprentices (United States Census Bureau 2019). Current apprenticeship enrolment numbers do not reflect local populations. Missouri Excel Centers can play a role here as well. During the 2019-2020 school year, 49% of students enrolled were Black, 43% were White, 3% were Hispanic, 1% were Asian, and less than 1% were American Indian or Alaskan Native. On the surface, these numbers indicate that Missouri Excel student populations consist of a fairly even split between White and Black students, however, a majority of Black students attend the St. Louis center, the largest Excel Center in Missouri. Of the 986 students enrolled at St. Louis, 888 were Black, around 90%. Since a large number of available Registered Apprenticeships are located in St. Louis, piloting a pre-apprenticeship program there would do so much to help more Black Missourians, a largely underrepresented population, become new apprentices and find gainful employment.

3.2 Designing an Excel Pre-Apprenticeship Course

The Excel Center offers 5 terms a year, each lasting about 8-9 weeks. It would be possible to create a course offering that follows the Jobs for the Future Framework for High Quality Pre-Apprenticeship Programs, allowing for 1-3 weeks at the beginning and end of the course for

applications, counseling, interviews, transportation, drug tests, safety training, and any required vetting and credentials needed for easy transition into a Registered Apprenticeship (Center for Apprenticeship and Work-Based Learning 2019, 2). The other weeks would be dedicated to training, job specific math and writing, and/or IRC completion. The idea is that students who complete this course would be able to walk into a specific Registered Apprenticeship, possibly having earned an IRC in the process.

This course could be offered as many times as needed to meet the needs of the student body, and the instructors could be a mixture of full-time and adjunct instructors depending on the nature of the partnered apprenticeship program(s). More than likely, these classes would be small, around 5-12 students, though larger schools may see larger classes, and they would differ slightly in curriculum depending on the apprenticeship focus.

Ideally, one course could serve as a pre-apprenticeship program for multiple Registered Apprenticeships in the same or similar career cluster. In the classroom, students would learn similar skills related to their career cluster, but they could go to different locations for tours, on-the-job training, and IRC testing. Schools like St. Louis, who have a large variety apprenticeship programs in the automotive industry, would, for example, develop a partnership with around 2-4 Registered Apprenticeships in that career cluster and design a pre-apprenticeship course that meets the needs of all involved partners. Students who take this course would be split among these different Registered Apprenticeship programs after completing the course, depending on their goals. Some weeks these students would be together in class, practicing job related math and writing, reviewing appropriate soft skills, and addressing the physical demands of the job. Other weeks these students would be at different locations, doing the actual work, touring facilities, or interviewing with managers and supervisors.

It is also possible for each school to focus their resources on the needs of only one Registered Apprenticeship at a time, designing a course that prepares students for careers with only one sponsor. If students were interested in entering a different Registered Apprenticeship in the same career cluster, they would not take the course, and their enrollment in that Registered Apprenticeship would occur independent of the course.

Early on, directors, Life Coaches, Career and Readiness Coordinators, and any initial instructors would need to be in frequent communication with sponsors and representatives of the partnered apprenticeship program(s) about curriculum, requirements, and student career goals. The implementation and success of these courses will require the participation of all staff.

3.3 The Excel Center and the Jobs for the Future Framework for High Quality Pre-Apprenticeship Programs

3.3.1 Transparent Entry and Success Requirements

- Life Coaches, Skill-Up Life Coaches, and Career and Readiness Coaches discuss the requirements and benefits of entering the Registered Apprenticeship and taking the pre-apprenticeship course, making sure to discuss appropriate soft skills (time management, body language, punctuality, professional dress, cellphone use, etc.) as well as academic requirements, including but not limited to prerequisite math, reading, and writing courses/scores.
- Courses like Senior Seminar and Cornerstone inform students of the benefits of entering the program or of entering Registered Apprenticeships after graduation.
- Prior to finishing the program, students meet with their Career and Readiness Coordinator to register/apply for the partnered Registered Apprenticeship. All requirements are addressed again, and a plan is created to make sure all credentials and paperwork are completed.
- Students are given frequent opportunities to talk to representatives and sponsors of the partnered apprenticeship program(s).
- Directors, Coaches, and instructors work together with students to remove any barriers that might hinder their progress or keep them from qualifying for the program(s).

3.3.2 Alignment with Skills Sought by Local Employers and High-Quality Apprenticeship Programs

- Instructors of the pre-apprenticeship course collaborate with apprenticeship sponsors to write Core Competencies and Component Skills based on skills required by the partnered apprenticeship program(s). Curriculum is then designed to help students meet the proficiency standards of those Core Competencies and Component Skills.
- Instructors work with representatives and sponsors of the partnered apprenticeship program(s) to design and determine appropriate assessments and other markers of completion. Together they will determine how students and instructors determine mastery of skills and determine which (if any) IRCs could be gained as a result of mastery.
- Students are instructed in necessary math, reading, and writing skills related to the apprenticeship career path and related fields.
- Instructors use their vast knowledge, training, and experience as educators, as well as the many supports provided at the Excel Center, to adapt and differentiate curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of the students they have.

3.3.3 Culmination in One or More Industry-Recognized Credential

- Excel directors and instructors are in frequent communication with sponsors/representatives of the partnered apprenticeship program(s) to determine which IRCs are recognized by regional and national employers, how students may acquire said IRC's, cost and accessibility, and other concerns regarding the merit and availability of IRCs in the area.
- Students receive instruction that appropriately prepares students to pass required exams.

- Instructors and students communicate progress and learning goals to ensure proper preparation.
- The Excel Center provides classroom space, computers, and other resources needed for students to take ay required exams, when possible.
- When necessary, the Excel Center provides transportation to testing sites when it is not possible to facilitate exams at the school and when students have identified transportation as a barrier.

3.3.4 Development of Skills Through Hands-On Activities and Work-Based Learning

- Students receive a mixture of direct instruction in a classroom setting and on-the job learning that directly relates to the partnered apprenticeship program(s).
- Program incorporates physical work that will be required of students after entering the partnered apprenticeship program(s) so that students are prepared physically.
- Instructors will regularly present learning goals and discuss Core Competencies and requirements with students, including how in-class instruction relates to these goals.
- Instructors predict situations students may encounter on the job site and attempt to simulate them in an academic setting.
- Students practice and master math, reading, and writing tasks related directly to job situations and common scenarios in the field. The math and reading situations are always placed in job-related contexts, not academic ones.
- Students receive some instruction from sponsors/representatives of the partnered apprenticeship program(s) and/or from employees working in the field.
- A portion of the program includes learning, practice, and assessment on real job sites through practical applications.

3.3.5 Offering of Academic, Career Exploration, and Wraparound Supports

- Students visit/tour job-sites and are informed of all available positions accessible to them upon completion of the program and any related industries.
- Students use Choices 360 to research wages, career pathways, availability, regional demands, and required schooling to advance in their chosen careers or related careers.
- Students work with instructors, sponsors/representatives, and Career and Readiness Coordinators to establish both short term and long-term goals and to design a plan for reaching these goals.
- Students are encouraged to take advantage of supports already in place at the Excel Center: drop-in childcare, Friday tutoring, transportation assistance, counseling, etc. Life Coaches, instructors, and directors remain in constant communication with students about any barriers that might hinder their goals.

3.3.6 Transition into a Registered Apprenticeship or Other High-Quality Apprenticeship Program

- Directors and Career and Readiness Coordinators partner with regional employers and apprenticeship programs to ensure students will have entry into the workforce upon completing the program, ensuring that regional employers will recognize the rigor, and quality of training provided by the Excel Center.
- Students are guaranteed seamless access to job placement, interviews, or post-secondary training upon completing the program.

(Center for Apprenticeship and Work-Based Learning 2019, 2ff.)

4 Conclusion

Missouri apprenticeships are growing and will continue to do so. Excel Centers are also seeing growth since their founding in Indianapolis in 2010. Currently, there are four Excel Centers in Missouri, with the first three opening in 2018 in St. Louis, Springfield, and Polar Bluff. These Missouri Excel Centers are designed to give adult students who live in poverty the proper supports they need to finish their education and to link them to better employment after graduation. Investing in Missouri apprenticeship opportunities is an approach Missouri Excel Centers should seriously consider if they wish to see more gains in persistence, IRC/higher education, employment, and wages. This could mean allowing students to count apprenticeship training as elective credit toward graduation or even designing a pre-apprenticeship program/course that could help students prepare for the training they will experience during a Registered Apprenticeship. Investing in these resources will require strong partnerships where all staff collaborate and communicate effectively with sponsors and apprenticeship representatives. If proper actions are taken, Missouri Excel Centers will see more employment opportunities for students and more overall success.

References

Ascend. (2019). Excel Economic Impact on Students. Washington D.C.: Aspen Institute. Online: https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Excel-Center-Economic-Impact-on-Students.pdf (retrieved 22.08.2021).

Center for Apprenticeship and Work-Based Learning. (2019). In: JFF's Framework for a High-Quality Pre-Apprenticeship Program. Online: https://jfforg-prod-new.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/JFF-Framework-HighQuality-PreApp-07232019.pdf (retrieved 6.10.2021).

Delgado, B. (2017). Exploring the Goodwill Network as an opportunity to grow The Excel Center. St. Louis: MERS Missouri Goodwill Industries.

Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development. (2020a). In: Apprenticeship Missouri 2020 Playbook. Online: https://dhewd.mo.gov/documents/apprenticeship_playbook.pdf (retrieved 10.10.2021).

Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development. (2020b). In: Missouri Apprentice Ready Principles and Framework. Online: https://dhewd.mo.gov/documents/MissouriApprenticeReadyPrinciplesandFramework.pdf (retrieved 08.09.2021).

Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development. (2021). In: Apprenticeship Missouri. Online: https://dhewd.mo.gov/apprenticeship_missouri.php (retrieved 22.8.2021).

Fry, Richard. (2010). Hispanics, High School Dropouts and the GED. Washington D.C.: Pew Hispanic Center.

Kist, W. (2003). Non-Academic Challenges Faced by GED Scholars: A Report of the GED Scholars Initiative. In: Adult Learning, 14 (3), 11-13.

Missouri Office of Workforce Development. (2021). Apprenticeship101 Tip Sheet. Online: https://jobs.mo.gov/sites/jobs/files/apprenticeship_101_ra_faq.pdf (retrieved 12.9.2021).

Office of Governor Michael L. Parson. (2019). Governor Parson Recognizes National Apprenticeship Week, Commends Missouri's Second in Nation Ranking for Apprenticeships. *mo.gov*, Online: https://governor.mo.gov/press-releases/archive/governor-parson-recognizes-national-apprenticeship-week-commends-missouris (retrieved 10.10.2021).

United States Census Bureau. (2019). QuickFacts St. Louis city, Missouri. Online: https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/stlouiscitymissouri (retrieved 22.11.2021).

United States Department of Labor. (2020). Registered Apprenticeship National Results Fiscal Year 2020. Online: https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/apprenticeship/about/statistics/2020 (retrieved 01.11.2021).

United States Department of Labor. (2021). U.S. Dept. of Labor Registered Apprenticeship Programs in Missouri. Online: https://jobs.mo.gov/sites/jobs/files/mo_rap_list_sorted_by_county_city_-_07-01-2021.pdf (retrieved 18.9.2021).

Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities. (2018). The Excel Center: Comparing Education and Employment Outcomes of Graduates and Non-Graduates. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame.

TVET@asia The Online Journal for Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Asia

CITATION:

Robins, A. (2022). Empowering Excel Students Through Missouri Apprenticeships. In: TVET@Asia, issue 18, 1-16. Online: http://tvet-online.asia/issue/18/empowering-excel-students-through-missouri-apprenticeships/ (retrieved 31.07.2021).

This document is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs3.0 License

Author Profile

Amanda Robins

The Excel Center

E-mail: arobins@mogoodwillexcel.org