

Success Stories: Miami Dade College

The WBF 2.0 Project Back-to-Work Center departs from a traditional workforce service program in that this program is a compendium of ancillary services available to a wide range of job seekers who have not been able to overcome barriers to success, such as lack of skills and education. Through a variety of hand-on services and training options, this initiative provides low-income, low-skilled workers the opportunity to improve their skills and education and join the 21st century job market.

Back-to-Work Center staff are multilingual; use of English, Spanish, Creole, French, and Portuguese languages make it easier for many community candidates to obtain services in the language they feel most comfortable using. The multilingual approach make it easier for candidates to request information about learning English, obtaining a GED, registering for college or continuing education, improving skills, getting a job, and learning about other programs and services, both public and governmental. Perhaps the most successful approach is understanding that each individual is different and has different needs to satisfy.

Returning to school is a challenge for most program participants. For that reason, they start with short training sessions at the Back-To-Work computer lab, where they learn not just computer skills but skills in customer service, personal care, and typing. The computer-based training is user friendly and participants learn at their own pace. They often comment about how scared they were to start taking classes and how they now look forward to studying and learning more. Within a few weeks, participants are more confident and ready to undertake more traditional classes. The Back-to-Work computer lab is open to participants with a flextime, helpful, and supportive atmosphere, making their introduction to school quite smooth.

This program is proud to have a closed monitoring structure of participants in training. The staff, through an intensive case management approach, is credited with MDC's high training completion rate of 92 percent. We keep close tabs on students with face-to-face, telephone, and email communication. Rather than dispersing these students into different classes, we have created unique classes just for them. We have learned that many participants have been out of school for a long period of time. Most prefer to attend day-long classes on Saturdays and Sundays for a few weeks. Some are afraid to fail their training and do not want to commit for longer periods of times. Others think they might miss job offers if not available during the week, or simply need to keep the low-paying jobs they already have.

Because of the long classes, a supportive atmosphere emerges in the cohorts. Students share during breaks, which nurtures conversations and the exchange information and experiences. In this way, participants find areas of similarity, despite racial and social differences.

The success of the program is the result of ongoing monitoring and adaptation of techniques and procedures to foster cohesiveness, support, understanding, help, consideration, and respect among individuals integrating the cohorts. Project staff is always ready to assist with free transportation, clothing, and referrals to other programs in the community such as low-cost health and mental services, legal advices, and family counseling.