

Capital IDEA – Health Care Occupations¹ Occupational Skills Training

Austin, Texas

This profile describes some of Capital IDEA’s workforce development activities in the health care industry. The Austin metropolitan area, like most communities nationwide, is experiencing severe shortages in a variety of health care occupations. To address region-wide shortages, the industry has established the Health Care Industry Skills Collaborative, which includes representatives of the health care industry, the largest of which pay dues to the association, and representatives of the education and workforce development community, including Austin Community College, Skillpoint Alliance (another local workforce intermediary and the collaborative’s convener) and Capital IDEA, among others. Working both through the collaborative and more independently with the human resources departments of individual hospital systems and the program’s partners at Austin Community College, Capital IDEA has been cited as an important contributor to the design of workforce education solutions to alleviate health care worker shortages in Austin.

Distinguishing features

- Substantive involvement in collaboration with local hospitals, Health Industry Skills Collaborative (HISC), Austin Community College
- Fees paid by hospitals for high-demand occupation retention benchmarks
- Hospitals provide tours for Capital IDEA students
- Special tutoring in core academic subjects, resulting in high “pass rates” by Capital IDEA students
- Training for new workers and a small number of hospital-based incumbent workers

Industries

- Health Care, hospitals, wide range of high-wage occupations

Embedded in Health Care Sector Issues – Focused on Low-Income Participants

Capital IDEA is motivated to participate in health care industry forums because it wants to enhance the education, job placement and on-the-job employment experiences of the participants it serves through its program. Many of the issues that affect health care employment and the health care education community overall cannot be addressed by a single entity or actor – especially a comparatively small, community-based organization like Capital IDEA. Yet these issues directly affect the opportunities of Capital IDEA’s constituents. Complicated problems such as a high drop-out rate among students beginning health care occupational training, an insufficient number of slots in training programs and lack of capacity for students to complete required clinical training, when untangled, usually turn out to include a multitude of factors, barriers and resource constraints.

¹ For additional information illustrating the range of Capital IDEA’s activities, challenges and outcomes, please see separate profiles – Program Overview, which details its core activities, and brief profiles that detail its work with the electric utility industry and the Teacher Pipeline Project. These profiles are based on research conducted in July 2005 in Austin, Texas, where a large number of Capital IDEA staff and representatives of organizations, institutions and public agencies with which the program collaborates were interviewed in-person. It is highly notable that public officials such as the mayor of Austin and a county commissioner as well as the president and a number of vice presidents of Austin Community College, the deputy director of WorkSource, the public workforce agency, the chair of the Chamber of Commerce, a number of human resources directors and other business representatives all made themselves available to describe their experiences with and impressions of Capital IDEA. For a complete list of interviewees, please see the appendix at the end of the Program Overview profile.

In the health care sector, program leaders face a number of industry-related challenges that affect their ability to promote the education and employment interests of their constituency. They must have an intimate understanding of the training capacity issues facing education providers, the complicated workforce practices of large hospital systems that recruit nationally and internationally, and the challenges to increasing capacity in local health care education pipelines while decreasing the number of students who drop out of health care education programs. The hospital human resources representatives we interviewed uniformly referred to Capital IDEA as a valuable and well-versed facilitator in the community – knowledgeable about issues, thoughtful about proposing solutions that have win-win potential, but at the end of the day, fiercely tenacious about its mission.

Health Care Occupational Skills Training

In the Capital IDEA Program Overview, we described the range of participant supports – financial, personal and educational – provided to Capital IDEA students. We highlighted a special tutorial that successfully improved the pass rate of students taking anatomy and physiology – prerequisites to beginning health care occupational skills training at Austin Community College. Capital IDEA students study a range of health occupations, including registered nurse, licensed vocational nurse, surgical technology, diagnostic medical imaging, diagnostic medical sonography, medical laboratory technology, dental hygienist, occupational therapy assistant, physical therapy assistant, respiratory therapist, and emergency medical services. Based on continuous input from local health care employers, the collaborative, the experiences of recent graduates in the labor market and other trends, Capital IDEA tries to ensure that students pursue occupations with employment opportunity. They describe a few situations when timely information enabled students to switch programs mid-stream in response to changing labor market conditions. Program staff takes students on tours of local hospitals and other medical facilities so that they become aware of the different environments in which they might work after graduation.

Some of Capital IDEA’s participants are incumbent workers employed by Seton and St. David’s hospitals in occupations such as clinical assistant, housekeeping and clerical. Capital IDEA provides low-income students who qualify with the same level of supportive services provided to other participants. Hospital employees also can attend the tutorials offered by Capital IDEA.

Capital IDEA and Health Care Employers

Two of the collaborative’s most prominent hospital members (St. David’s HealthCare Partnership and Seton Family of Hospitals) see their work on employment and training issues as a way to increase the number of local health care workers in high-demand occupations. Jointly, they have invested in training facilities at Austin Community College, paid faculty salaries, and conducted regular meetings to plan a range of other activities in support of this goal. Representatives of both hospitals work actively with Capital IDEA – for example, serving on the board, assisting with strategic planning, reviewing fund-raising proposals, paying for graduation celebrations, and providing other in-kind and financial support. Sally Foster, representing Seton (and chair of the local Workforce Investment Board), described Capital IDEA as an important contributor to Seton’s goal of increasing diversity and cultural competency among its nursing workforce.

Randy Stone of St. David's reported in 2005 that the nurses it hires through Capital IDEA are "better than nurses we hire through agencies – more committed and more loyal."² Foster noted "there are no differences between graduates from Capital IDEA and other new graduates." She went on to describe new hires from Capital IDEA as staying in a "continuing education and learning mode." Both hospitals have formal agreements to pay fees for selected occupations at negotiated retention benchmarks. For example, the hospitals pay Capital IDEA \$5,000 over two years when a registered nurse hired through Capital IDEA stays with the system. The schedule of fees is re-negotiated as demand for workers in particular occupations increases or decreases.

Besides helping to alleviate critical staffing shortages, Foster described her hiring staff as saying it was "personally rewarding" to work with Capital IDEA. Like many hospitals, Seton has a social justice, community service mission. Just as students tour the hospital, the hospital's human resources staff is offered tours of Capital IDEA. Foster describes this relationship as enhancing job satisfaction for her staff.

² Capital IDEA augments this claim with data showing that 100 percent of newly graduated nurses placed with Austin-area hospitals stay on the job for at least one year.