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Career Success Spotlight:

Partnership for the Future

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Introduction and Program History

Earlier this year, NCAN hosted a [Career Success Spotlight webinar \(slides\)](#) with Partnership for the Future (PFF), a member based in Glen Allen, Virginia. Charleita M. Richardson, PFF's President and CEO, presented on various facets of PFF's internship program, including how to make a successful experience for both students and businesses. NCAN presented the webinar to further [our work](#) with Strada Education Network on helping members integrate college and career success. This brief recounts the lessons learned from the webinar in hopes that other members will be able to incorporate or adapt some of these practices into their own work.

Alan Kirshner, CEO of Markel Corporation, started PFF in 1994. Kirshner saw a Wall Street Journal article on Cedric Jennings, an area student who attended a summer educational program at a college where it was determined that he was unprepared and lacked the "cultural capital" and professional skills to succeed. Kirshner wanted to fill that gap and began approaching businesses to host high school students as interns. Although most businesses said no, 12 students and three businesses comprised the first PFF cohort in 1994. Today the program serves an average of 200 students and 70 business partners. Its mission remains providing high-potential high school students from challenging circumstances in the metro-Richmond area with the tools and experiences necessary to attain a college degree. Ultimately, Richardson notes, PFF provides a holistic approach to life skills and education for students to convert their potential and prepare them for opportunities.

Student Participation

To participate in PFF, a student must be a freshman at one of 13 partner high schools in metro-Richmond and have a 3.0 minimum GPA. Through a very competitive process, students submit multiple essays that demonstrate leadership skills, career goals, and a desire to go to college. Of approximately 200 applicants annually, PFF selects 75 to 80 for a panel interview that includes a current PFF student, a staff member, and a board member or PFF parent. "It's about us pre-screening," says Richardson. "When you're talking about any career success program and from the standpoint of trying to develop internships with businesses, there has to be some type of pre-screening." The panel interview is critical for multiple reasons. First, it ensures that students are able to handle multiple conversations. Second, it engages both a current PFF student in the process and a staff member with the program's broader perspective. Finally, involving a board member or partner is part of the process of developing internships later because it earns buy-in from them up front. Board members and parents get excited about being involved in the program through these interviews.

PFF selects 50 students from these interviews. Once they are accepted, they make a three-year commitment to PFF (and vice versa). Then the training begins. "We have

made a commitment to our businesses that every student is going to be fully trained,” Richardson explains. “We have taken the time and invested the time to make sure [the students] can be successful.” Students undergo a whole year of training before being placed into an internship. The PFF Institute takes place in the summer between 9th and 10th grades and features a series of workshops focusing on soft skills. The weeklong institute takes place on a college campus, which exposes first-generation students and students from low-income families to this environment. At the institute, students learn about soft skills like time management, attitude, demeanor, and networking. PFF also gives students an opportunity to practice these skills by bringing in community members and pairing them with students over a professional conversation luncheon. Students also practice teambuilding skills. Given that there are just 50 students per cohort, the small core group can work together to develop the skills they will use in the workplace.

The week after the institute ends, a ritual begins, one that will become familiar to PFF students by the time they graduate high school: weekly Friday sessions. These gatherings teach “hard” workplace skills like Microsoft Office. PFF brings in a professional for these workshops, so that students learn Excel formulas or how to put together a good Powerpoint. Students also learn about resume writing and interview skills. Toastmasters classes build public speaking skills; students give presentations on a near-weekly basis to gain confidence in this area. They also perform a minimum of 24 hours of community service in the summer between 9th and 10th grade, which PFF believes gives them perspective about going out and asking for opportunities and networking with people. Finally, students engage in book-report writing, and each selected book focuses on making sound decisions. Once the school year begins, these Friday meetings shift to one-on-one mentoring meetings, where a dress code is enforced to reinforce sartorial expectations in students. At this pre-internship point, the focus for students is focusing on who they are as people and developing confidence that they can be successful.

Recruiting Businesses

“We can get the students trained, but if we don’t have the internships, what are we doing?” Richardson asked before discussing the other group of partners in the PFF internship system – businesses. There are three initial steps to securing businesses: identify your partners, determine needs and goals, and establish the early logistics.

Richardson identified school districts, transportation (generally public) partners, host sites for training (if necessary), and core “founding” businesses as some of the parties with which PFF maintains contact. After making initial contact, programs must then determine the need for an internship program and determine its goals. She suggests the following steps in this area:

- Review workforce data in your area: Ascertain what the in-demand jobs are in the area. This will help determine which business partners to focus on and which jobs can be filled later. If there are industry partners and demand around STEM careers and manufacturing, for example, it is sensible for that to be a focus for the program.
- Meet with partners.
- Know the competitive landscape: Richardson said that in the nonprofit sector, we often do not like to use the word “competition,” but she notes that she needs to be realistic. “We sometimes see it as competition,” she admits, adding that she needs to know which other organizations are placing high school students with businesses. This is because those businesses, unfortunately, do not always keep program names separate or distinguish between them, i.e., they may not think about their PFF interns differently than interns from other organizations. “I need to be able to say, ‘This is how we trained our students and this is what makes the difference,’” she explained.
- Create the buy-in: Programs really have to understand the businesses they are approaching and facilitate their understanding of the process for hosting an intern. To secure buy-in from businesses, PFF talks with them about the return on investment (ROI) they could earn from hosting an intern. The real ROI is not just about the common good, Richardson noted. “It’s really about workforce development.” The benefits to a business that decides to host an intern include additional staff support, especially during critical times; access to pre-screened, knowledgeable candidates who are prepared and taught the necessary skill sets; and finding future college interns, among others. This last point is especially important, and PFF has multiple examples of high school interns transitioning into college internships and eventually full-time positions.

So how does PFF develop business relationships? “Promoting the internships is key to receiving business support,” Richardson said. She suggests connecting with some or all of the following groups with whom PFF has built great relationships:

- Boards and volunteers
- The Society of Human Resource Management
- Local Chamber of Commerce
- Rotary & Kiwanis Club: The local Rotary Club wanted its own program. PFF adapted their programming and created “Rotary Fellows.” Those students are paid by Rotary funds and it yielded additional 10 internships for PFF.
- Media outlets: “A great editorial from the local newspaper opens a door,” either in terms of fundraising dollars or new internship placements.
- Other nonprofit directors: Consider other nonprofits as potential partners for placing interns. “They make excellent internship sites,” and PFF hosts an intern for that reason, Richardson said. Even if nonprofits cannot necessarily pay for those internships, they may have connections or donors who can, or they may have a donor willing to make a donation that will pay for a given number of

interns. “It’s a two-for-one, we’re happy about it, but so is the nonprofit where the student was placed.”

- Management roundtables: All of the CEOs of the metro-Richmond area’s major corporations get together periodically. Relationships with boards are important here. If you can get a board member to present, it may yield several connections that lead to other internship positions or funding.

Richardson advised that “cold calling” is not effective for securing internships for high school students and that it is best to work from the top. Remember that this is going to be a long-term process. Conversations for PFF’s 2017 cohort began in 2014, 2015, or 2016. “It may take several years to develop the relationship so that we’re able to host an intern,” Richardson explained. “In that timeframe, we are inviting businesses to our events, summer celebrations, and training sessions. At the end of the day, the more they are connected to the students, the more comfortable they feel having students come to their site.”

Program Logistics, the Matching Process, and the Internship

Richardson discussed the following early logistical points for an internship program: length of internship, number of hours per week, paid vs. unpaid internships, types of internships (e.g., office jobs, field jobs, etc.), expectations of sponsors, and transportation.

The paid vs. unpaid divide forces programs to think about the following questions: Who will handle payroll, timesheet reporting, and tax documents? How much do you pay each intern? Richardson notes that, “Unpaid is a lot simpler to secure; however, it does set a value expectation from the businesses on what kind of work the student will be able to deliver.” Unpaid positions also encounter higher student turnover. Although PFF’s students initially earn minimum wage, the program has lost students because the minimum wage was too low compared to other opportunities for work, Richardson explained. Students who were not paid at all would, and do, have even higher turnover rates.

“If you’re going to do paid internships, you have to embrace and understand that there’s going to be a challenge to that as well,” Richardson advised. Having committed to paying students, the question became, how much to pay them? “We say you start out with a standard. Students start out at minimum wage. Some organizations have a desire to pay more, and we tell them no.” Although the program teaches students not to talk about their paychecks, which generally is considered a sensitive area in the workplace, the reality is that students do discuss it with each other. If one student is earning more than another is, problems can arise. The minimum wage, with the opportunity to earn more as students progress, is the standard PFF sets. PFF handles some of the payroll in-house, but in other cases businesses put students on their payroll. In all cases, businesses sign off on timesheet approvals.

PFF provides each student with free transportation to the internship site. “We want them to understand the importance of getting to work on time,” Richardson explained. Students may not be able to depend on a ride from their parents.

PFF provides much of this information to businesses via a Business Sponsor Handbook, which includes information on everything the sponsor needs to know, from supervising students to mentor roles and responsibilities, and performance evaluations. Other aspects of business sponsor “training” include:

- providing a calendar of important dates
- offering ideas of how to fill “down-time” (the summer book report is particularly useful here)
- reviewing generational differences in the workplace (via a workshop for businesses on how to work with students from different generations)
- inviting businesses to share ideas via roundtables for new companies to hear from old companies to address concerns and brainstorm ideas

Once PFF secures business sponsors, they match students and sponsors.

“First things first, make sure your students understand the internship is earned, not given,” said Richardson. Let students know that they earn their internship through their grades, participation, and leadership. That fact established, students complete a profile questionnaire about their interests and skills that helps PFF staff get to know students beyond what they see on a daily basis. Businesses complete their own company culture form, from which PFF develops a quasi-Myers-Briggs score of the company’s culture to begin to understand the best place to place a student. The company form includes the kinds of projects to which students will be assigned to ensure skill alignment.

Before the start of the internship, PFF reminds students and parents to set realistic internship goals and reviews expectations and topics learned over the previous year. A May meet and greet with students, parents, and businesses kicks off the internship season and builds excitement, while also setting expectations early for open communication between all parties.

During the internship, both students and sponsors have access to a hotline staffed eight hours a day. PFF staff also perform site visits, provide email reminders, and are readily available should issues arise for either group. Further, students have additional access to staff during the weekly Friday training sessions. Business sponsors evaluate students at the middle and end of the internship. With each successive summer, students return to the same internship, but with increased responsibility. Students are eligible for a pay increase each summer, based on their performance evaluations.

Conclusion

Partnership for the Future has a documented ability to help students succeed in college and career. The Career Success Spotlight webinar, which is available via NCAN's webinar archives, offers a number of insights for programs starting to provide career success services, and an internship program in particular, and for programs wanting to do more in this area. As more and more members incorporate career success activities into their college access and success programming, it is important to continue to look toward members who have done this work and to learn from their successes.

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