

College Navigator Report

BACKGROUND

Introduction

In late 2010, SkillWorks received a Social Innovation Fund (SIF) grant awarded through the National Fund for Workforce Solutions. The SIF grant provided SkillWorks with \$600,000 over two years to expand its existing activities and infrastructure as well as to add some new services for participants. SkillWorks allocated most of the SIF funds within its existing partnerships, using the funds to integrate digital literacy into the curriculum at the Hotel Training Center (HTC) and to expand academic coaching at the Healthcare Training Institute (HTI). In addition, the grant supported a brand-new component of work for the initiative that cut across all workforce partnerships and strategies. This investment, the “college navigator,” is a new position focused on improving college outcomes for SkillWorks’ program participants. SkillWorks’ workforce partnerships have long noted that their participants, who generally have limited individual or even family experience with postsecondary education, struggle with both entering and completing postsecondary degree and certificate programs. Responding to this challenge, the goal of the investment in the college navigator was to increase college retention rates, credential attainment rates, and credit accumulation for SkillWorks’ participants by providing new support for participants from any SkillWorks partnership transitioning from partnership services to college classes offered at Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC).

The SkillWorks college navigator’s clients are working adults who are pursuing postsecondary certificates or degrees in order to advance in their career. Most are seeking to advance within the sectors in which they are currently employed: hospitality, financial services, information technology, or healthcare. These fields reflect the orientation of the three SkillWorks partnerships from which students matriculate: BEST Corp’s Hotel Training Center, Year Up, and JVS’s Healthcare Training Institute.

The new grant for the college navigator was made to the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC), a public-private partnership that serves as Boston’s workforce investment board and its school-to-career intermediary. The PIC’s mission is to strengthen Boston’s communities and its workforce by connecting youth and adults with education and employment opportunities that prepare them to meet the skill demands of employers. A longtime collaborative partner of SkillWorks, the PIC was selected to oversee the new navigator position based on the organization’s alignment with the goals of the navigator role and the organization’s experience managing similar positions. The college navigator role is actually an adaptation of the PIC’s work supporting recent Boston Public Schools’ graduates at local community colleges with “success coaches,” who connect them to campus support services and employment opportunities while coaching them through the college transition. The idea to build on that work emerged following focus groups of SkillWorks partnership staff, convened as part of the Boston Foundation’s community college research in mid-2010. In those focus groups,

partnership staff spoke about the need for a person on campus to help their students. The SIF funding then provided the opportunity to SkillWorks to address that need.

The navigator's focus in the first year has been on students enrolled at or seeking enrollment at Bunker Hill Community College in Charlestown. While the SkillWorks college navigator has an office at the PIC, she is unofficially situated on the BHCC campus where she spends the majority of her work hours.

The Need: Students Require Support and Direction

SkillWorks participants, like many community college students, face a broad array of potential obstacles as they go back to school to earn a degree or certificate. Some of these obstacles are long-term challenges, like family responsibilities, balancing full-time work with an academic schedule, or insufficient academic preparedness. Other obstacles are more easily overcome with some experience and guidance. Two major categories of challenges can impede student success:

- *Navigating academic pathways.* Many students, particularly first-generation college students and non-native English speakers, begin college with very little understanding of how to succeed in an academic environment. They have trouble deciphering the college “code,” a set of explicit and implicit rules that need to be understood in order to advance on an academic pathway efficiently. Planning a program of study at the outset is critical in expediting the process with a goal of rapid completion. This requires understanding the differences between elective and required courses, assembling the best sequence of classes based on required prerequisites, building a work-friendly schedule, and understanding the expectations of their instructors. When students hit a roadblock, they sometimes lack the know-how or the confidence to advocate for their cause. In the past, some SkillWorks participants squandered time and resources taking non-credit developmental classes when they could have placed out of them by retaking the assessment or transferring credit. For students with full-time jobs and significant family obligations, additional challenges at school can lower their motivation or ability to persist with their educational goals.
- *Navigating the institution's administrative systems.* Separate from their course of study, students must find their way through the college's administrative system in order to access classes. Tasks, such as registering, applying for financial aid, paying tuition, sending transcripts, or changing majors, play a role in preventing some students, who may have to miss a day of work to turn in a form or get a question answered, from progressing in their studies. One coach described the problems that participants encountered in the recent past:

“We would send people to get enrolled and register, and there was a lot of anxiety and confusion. Because of this, sometimes people didn't follow through. It was overwhelming before they even got through the front door.”

Coaches at SkillWorks partnerships would try to offer guidance to participants to ease the process, but coaches have difficulty staying current with changing policies, procedures, and guidelines at the colleges when they are not on campus regularly.

The experience of past participants suggests that an intensive intervention is needed to support students through the college transition. A short-term intervention, like a pre-enrollment tour of the college or workshop for new students, does not provide sufficient support to address the complex set of challenges that working students with limited postsecondary experience face when transitioning to college.

The Need: Insufficient Support through Existing Systems

The existing support infrastructure at both the workforce partnerships and the college itself are inadequate to meet the student need. Students had trouble navigating the system of on-campus assistance, and within the partnerships there were varying levels of capacity to support students pursuing postsecondary education. Even at partnerships with more robust capacity, the coaches were stretched to deliver effective support. Coaches within the SkillWorks workforce partnerships were limited by a lack of institutional knowledge, lack of on-site presence, and lack of time. Some partnerships employ career coaches who focus primarily on job search and placement; while their knowledge of how credentials fit into career pathways is substantial, their knowledge about the educational pathway to receive that credential is basic. There were multiple instances in which coaches had offered advice on educational pathways to their students, which they later found was ill-advised. To learn about the specifics of resources and policies at individual schools and programs, partnership staff would need to make multiple calls or make in-person visits to secure answers, a laborious process given that their participants are, in most cases, spread among several Boston area colleges. One coach interviewed shared an experience in which he had tried to contact a department at an area community college, but his phone calls and emails were never returned. At least one partnership had to rely solely on secondhand student reports when it came to recommending student resources on campus:

“We didn’t have time to go in with them to figure out the system.”

SkillWorks coaches at some partnerships end regular contact as soon as the so-called “*steady state*” of college begins, speaking to students only when they reached out on their own.

Advising services at colleges are generally not well-funded functions. There are centralized academic counseling and advising services, but only for students who have already been accepted. Prospective students must rely on general information and contact with enrollment services staff, who often refer them to evening information sessions and tours. New student orientation does include an advising component, but the advisors do not maintain contact with the student. Students have regular advising in their first semester as part of their Learning Communities. After the first semester, regular advising is optional or based at the department level. Departmental advisors are less equipped to guide students with administrative functions and campus resources outside their department.

The findings on college support services from Success Boston's May 2011 report, *Getting Through*, capture some of the challenges:

“Support services frequently are developed in response to a student problem rather than as a result of a systemic look at campus-wide student achievement data; services tend to be compartmentalized so that, for example, academic advising is offered separately from personal counseling even though academic difficulties are often caused by personal problems; and the offices providing different support services operate with considerable autonomy. There is little coordination across service components or emphasis on shared objectives and accountability.”

Implementation

In the spring of 2011, Zeida Santos was hired as the first SkillWorks college navigator. Ms. Santos brought a unique combination of experience to the position having worked both within a community college and within a SkillWorks workforce partnership as a teacher and coach. While this formative memo is intended to provide evaluative input to SkillWorks on the navigator role, as the first person to hold the position, and by virtue of her experience and personal characteristics, it is difficult to entirely separate the activities and impact of the navigator role from the individual; therefore, the report will at times refer specifically to Ms. Santos, both her work and her accomplishments.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE COLLEGE NAVIGATOR

The college navigator takes on several different roles in the course of her work. Her primary role is to serve as a coach, advisor, and advocate for her students. Behind the scenes, she serves as a liaison between SkillWorks partnerships and the college, connecting partnership staff to college staff when needed, educating and updating partnership staff on college policy, and helping both sides better understand the particular challenges faced by working students.

Academic and Career Coaching Services

The college navigator supports and guides working students so that they can earn credentials and find jobs or internships that fit into their career plans. In the course of coaching and advising each student, the college navigator works to get to know the student as a person so that she can develop a relationship of trust and better tailor her services to their needs. Since beginning her work as college navigator in May 2011, Ms. Santos has enrolled 42 BHCC students in her intensive, ongoing services. Ms. Santos maintains regular contact with these students, actively tracking their progress. In addition, Ms. Santos has served a substantial number of “walk-in” clients, those who have heard about her services from SkillWorks coaches or other students and approached her for episodic assistance on an as-needed basis. While Ms. Santos did not track these walk-ins systematically at the outset, as it has become clear that there is growing demand for this type of assistance, she has begun to track that activity, which she currently estimates at around 34 individuals.

While working with individual students, the college navigator has several responsibilities, including:

- assess students' skills, interests, and previous academic and work experience;
- work with students to develop academic and career plans and adjust them as needed;
- locate resources for financial aid and other forms of tuition assistance;
- help students navigate admissions, financial aid, credit transfer, assessment, course registration, etc.;
- identify obstacles to success and provide ongoing academic and career coaching;
- connect students to useful campus resources or outside support services; and
- maintain contact with students, monitor their progress, and ensure that they are staying on track.

A representative of the Boston PIC summed up the college navigator's role in this area by stating, “Her job is to coach students to ask the right questions when they have the opportunity—it’s really a job of teaching and translating the code.” In reality, Ms. Santos does a lot more than this for her students, advocating for them through interactions with college employees and helping them with personal and academic problems. Her focus is still on the student's personal growth, confidence, and independence, not on providing quick fixes.

Capacity Building

For partners, including the PIC, the college, and particularly the partnerships, the college navigator serves as an intermediary, an educator, and a catalyst of change. While much of this work is informal, the college navigator has several specific capacity-building responsibilities. She is expected to:

- coordinate with training programs to find students who may need support and arrange services for the transition;
- build relationships with community college staff to gather information and contacts that can be used to help students and programs;
- coordinate with departments that have advising services, such as the Allied Health Department;
- develop knowledge of student needs and college resources, then do a side-by-side analysis to assess whether the supply of services matches the need;
- collect and share data;

- communicate regularly with SkillWorks and partnership staff;
- participate in monthly SkillWorks career coach meetings and other capacity-building activities;
- attend BHCC “success coach” meetings and take advantage of BHCC professional development opportunities; and
- at the request of one SkillWorks partnership, create a tutoring program for students.

The hope is that the college navigator becomes a conduit for information and a liaison between stakeholders, connecting people who previously had no contact, and laying the groundwork for a more coordinated, aligned system.

BENEFITS

To find out more about the work the college navigator was doing and the success she was having, we reviewed reporting documents and spoke to Ms. Santos, several of her advisees, BHCC faculty and staff, her manager at the PIC, and coaches from three SkillWorks partnerships. Each person we interviewed was highly positive about the value of the college navigator role generally, and overwhelmingly positive about Ms. Santos and her specific capabilities in making the most of the position.

BHCC Perspective

Ms. Santos was quite proactive initially about reaching out and engaging with a variety of stakeholders at the college. With some baseline relationships established, she knew with whom to start to answer the myriad of specific questions that arose for individual students. In addition, she has participated in more formal interactions with college staff, such as a breakfast for guidance counselors. Because Ms. Santos is hard-working and personable, BHCC faculty and staff were very accepting of Ms. Santos’ role on campus:

“There’s a willingness to put in the work to understand our programs. She met with just about everybody in the department—she’s willing to spend time, get to know people.”

They were also impressed by her knowledge, her coaching skills, and her dedication to her students. Some at BHCC actually used her as a resource, exchanging favors on an informal basis:

“She really understands what needs to be done and has a really good understanding of the students. I like having her in here. She is someone I can go to.”

They also credited her with introducing them to new ways of thinking about the students they were serving, saying that before Ms. Santos spoke at a guidance counselor breakfast,

"[...]we were really focused on high school students taking less time in developmental education. We weren't thinking about adults coming back to school."

Her input at the meeting led them to change their plans about how summer academic "Boot Camps" would be offered to students. Overall, Ms. Santos seems to have built several strong relationships with BHCC employees, improved some policies and practices, and, perhaps most importantly, she has avoided alienating anyone. Her smooth interactions with faculty and staff were an important factor in her general success with students and partnerships.

Workforce Partnership Perspective

SkillWorks coaches interact with the navigator in several ways. The coaches reach out to the navigator at the referral stage; once a student is established at the college, the navigator provides updates on student progress. The navigator has also attended SkillWorks coaches' meetings regularly, and has presented on several topics including:

- A presentation in the fall with coaches to share her experience in the first six months as navigator and to pass on lessons learned working with BHCC students. The coaches found tremendous value in hearing about the experience. Coaches received copies of her presentation, a financial aid guide, and the PIC Community College Student Checklist.
- A presentation in early 2012 to coaches on "Tips for Career Planning," addressing the questions around how to help students decide which course of study to choose and then detailing how coaches can help them once they have decided. The presentation included scenarios based on her experience with students entering BHCC.
- Ms. Santos arranged for partnership staff to attend a preview of the new BHCC website "My Life Map," a coaching tool to be used by both students and coaches.

One coach commented on her experience of the navigator coming to speak with coaches and other staff at her program:

"It was great [...] She talked about enrollment, red flags, special situations that might come up. She talked about how the system worked, her role. She talked about the financial process, financial aid, working with the administrative offices. She has helped us get the bigger picture."

Coaches all agreed that the navigator taught them important things about their students and helped them do their jobs better. Some coaches also talked about the way that Ms. Santos has connected them to BHCC:

"It made the whole institution more approachable. And that's what it does for the students as well."

Based on discussions emerging from the navigator’s presentation to partnership coaches, the group of coaches decided to tackle an exercise to map career pathways and the accompanying coursework in three majors of particular interest to SkillWorks participants: information technology, nursing, and culinary arts. In addition, Year Up is identifying pathways in business with a focus on accounting and finance. Year Up will share this information with the coaches’ group and Success Boston. Ms. Santos is also coordinating with the Success Boston coaches, who will identify pathways in some additional common majors such as engineering, sociology, psychology, general education, criminal justice, education, and human services.

Participant Perspective

Participants were hugely appreciative of the college navigator as a resource and Ms. Santos as a person. Students tended to focus less on themselves and the obstacles they faced and looked more towards Ms. Santos and her supportive personality. To many of these students, Ms. Santos is not just an advisor, but a teacher, a therapist, an advocate, or even a friend:

“She’s almost like a friend...she’s more than just ‘that person you see for help in college’.”

Some students felt that Ms. Santos’ friendly regular presence impacted their ability to adapt and cope with a new environment:

“It’s always good to know somebody is there, to know that you’re not alone.”

Several students from different cultural backgrounds took special care to note that Ms. Santos was respectful and sensitive, a “sincere” person who was “patient” with her students. One student said that with Ms. Santos,

“You’re not embarrassed to ask her about very simple stuff—like how to pick the classes. I had no idea how to do that!”

Dealing with students from young adults all the way up to older middle-age students, Ms. Santos has the ability to understand each student’s situation, and is able to adapt to the student’s way of doing things, whether communicating by phone, in person, or by text, depending on the preference of the student. Ms. Santos has clearly been able to build relationships of trust with her students, something that is required for the success of most of the services she offers. She is also proactive about seeking out students, checking on them, and planning meetings. One student noted,

“She makes it easy—‘let’s go, let’s talk’.”

Though their comments tended to emphasize the general support Ms. Santos offered, students were able to cite several specific instances where they benefited from Ms. Santos’ help. This assistance ranged from help in finding internships to using the library, but the most common tangible benefits mentioned by students had to do with the standard academic tasks of registering, taking assessments, transferring credits, choosing classes, and applying to programs. With regard to this aspect of Ms. Santos’ coaching, students were impressed by her

depth of knowledge and ability to answer questions, but they particularly emphasized Ms. Santos' relationships with BHCC employees and her hands-on work advocating for them. In places where students felt they had reached dead-ends with professors or administrators, Ms. Santos was sometimes able to "work magic" to get the students what they needed. Students also noted that Ms. Santos would go above and beyond in other ways, helping them write resumes and cover letters, getting their transcripts translated, or simply listening to their personal problems. One student called Ms. Santos a "godsend" for her ability to get things done for her that may have been impossible otherwise.

When asked how their overall BHCC experience would have been different without Ms. Santos, several students noted that they would not have had a BHCC experience at all without her help. Due to lack of information, confusion, or, in some cases, procrastination, they would not have been able to register on time and would have had to put off their academic plans for at least another semester. One student thought that most students would benefit from a college navigator, not just students in SkillWorks partnerships:

"I've referred so many people to her...I tell people 'that's the only way you're going to get through if you're working'."

It is too early to tell whether students benefitting from navigator support will have greater success on their academic and career goals relative to similar students not working with a navigator, but student interviews suggest that Ms. Santos has already made a serious impact on the trajectories of many of their academic careers and even their lives.

KEY LESSONS TO DATE AND OUTSTANDING QUESTIONS

Being an outsider working on the inside is enormously valuable.

Several respondents cited the college navigator's "inside-outside" third-party role as a fundamental factor in the success of the position. Working at the college but not for it, the college navigator is able to operate flexibly within the relationships and rules that govern the institution without being bound by them. Being employed by an outside organization with a strong outcomes focus ensures that there is a short direct line of accountability. The navigator's physical presence at the school is quite valuable, but this value could be compromised if the navigator were asked to split her time between BHCC and a second college. If she were not stationed at a single school, the college navigator would need to expend much more effort to develop relationships with staff for whom face-to-face contact is crucial, and these staff might not perceive the navigator as part of their "team." Just being in the lobby every day gives faculty, staff, and students the sense that Ms. Santos is part of their community rather than an outside force—familiarity tends to breed trust. For students, her regular physical presence is especially important for the practical reason that passively ignoring emails, phone calls, and texts is easy, but it is difficult to ignore the coach that greets you in the hall on the way to class.

If the navigator were a college employee, the benefits of being part of a community would come with several drawbacks. As a college employee, she would most likely be assigned to a

department. Once assigned to a department, it becomes more difficult to cross the departmental silos that appear to exist within the college. As Ms. Santos noted,

“If I was working in the financial aid office, I would not be able to take the student to another place to get him the help he needs. I couldn’t stop my work to take the student to the Dean’s office for help. If you have 20 people waiting, you can’t help the individual.”

Since the navigator is not part of any program with standardized rules and regulations, she has flexibility that allows her to make exceptions and deal with all her students as individuals, whether that means meeting them at non-standard times, buying them a T pass, or talking to their professor personally. Because Ms. Santos has no official authority on campus, her inquiries to various departments are less likely to be perceived as threatening. Ms. Santos is quite clear that she is not there to pass judgment on how systems work, only to understand the system so as to help her students successfully navigate it. That approach appears to help Ms. Santos form relationships without having mistrust be an issue, and, as a result, she can cut through the bureaucracy in a way that has huge direct benefits to her students. As one respondent put it, “She can move like water through the organization.” If she was a BHCC employee or even a coach at a partnership, she could face much more resistance than she has as a “neutral” outside force.

Ms. Santos’ performance by all accounts is exceptional. Her individual success actually creates a challenge, making it difficult to separate the value of the navigator role from the value of the individual. This raises some concern for replication with the same level of success seen with the SkillWorks position.

The Boston PIC staff member we interviewed noted that for a college navigator, “*The key is finding the right person,*” and Ms. Santos was, by virtually all accounts, the right person to serve as college navigator for BHCC. In many ways, she has actually surpassed expectations. She has been exceptional in terms of her dedication to helping her students, the ease with which students relate to her, and her ability to form relationships and get things done at the college without alienating the varied stakeholders within the college. She has been considered “relentless” in her efforts to resolve problems for students, but does so with a disarming charm that appears to keep people willing to help.

The problem with “exceptional” performance is that it is, by definition, an exception. One must consider how the outcomes would be different if this role were filled by someone without the unique combination of experience and personal characteristics that has made Ms. Santos so successful. Some of the characteristics that would be essential to replicate the success seen by Ms. Santos, according to her manager, include:

- a passion for coaching and helping students succeed;
- a willingness to listen, observe, and hold back judgment when dealing with students. Part of Ms. Santos’ success comes from understanding all the different places that students are coming from; and

- a similar ability to also never pass judgment on the college system. Ms. Santos is credited for never jumping to negative conclusions about college practices. As a result, college partners are not threatened by her.

Some of these characteristics will be difficult for other institutions to identify in a resume or even in a job interview.

Additional consideration should be given to maximizing the number of students able to benefit from college navigator support. This will require thinking about throughput of students on the college navigator's caseload as well as thinking about the time and value associated with the navigator's support to students not specifically on her caseload.

The scale of impact of the college navigator will depend on the quantity of students served and the time invested in serving them. Ideally, as students progress, they will get into a “groove,” as one coach put it, requiring less support and freeing Ms. Santos to take on new students and do more coordinating work. There are signs that students are becoming more confident, knowledgeable, and independent. While most participants interviewed for this evaluation meet with Ms. Santos less often than they did at the beginning of their first semester, it is still unclear whether Ms. Santos will be able to shift her focus away from the first cohort without affecting student success. Data suggest that few students have “graduated” from the college navigator's caseload yet, although it is still quite early. Taking on new student cohorts would mean greatly increasing her caseload or scaling back support for students who are judged less likely to need it.

As demand for the navigator's services increases, perhaps additional thought will be needed in deciding who is added to her caseload. Current students who are so pleased with the support provided by Ms. Santos are referring family and friends regardless of whether they are coming from SkillWorks programs. As the caseload expands, there will need to be more rigorous standards and clear rationale as to who is added to the caseload.

One challenge to managing the caseload currently is that the navigator works at varying levels of intensity with different individuals, in many cases with people who do not even make it onto her roster of participants, but who cumulatively consume a significant portion of her time. For instance, many HTI participants continue to work closely with the partnership's academic coach. They may only meet with the navigator at the college a few times to resolve specific issues to help with the initial transition. In some cases, the navigator may be directed to resolve specific issues at the request of the coach rather than the participant directly. These meetings and requests are not recognized in the totals for her caseload, and it is difficult in the current system to understand how much of her time is spent on these participants as opposed to those officially connected to her services. This combination of formal and informal services for participants makes it harder to determine the maximum number the navigator can serve, but it also means that current records do not fully track the extent of her activities or impact.

Does the college navigator role build the capacity of stakeholders at the college and partnerships so as to make the navigator position unnecessary in the future or does it build reliance on a new resource without a clear plan for sustainability?

There is a risk that, operating under the assumption that the college navigator is a permanent role, the college and the providers leading the workforce partnerships might decrease attention to developing solutions to the challenges SkillWorks participants face in the transition to college. While the presence of the college navigator has made visible the need to better connect stakeholders along different parts of the continuum of workforce services, greater systemic capacity is needed to sustain ongoing cross-sector collaboration. If the college navigator is, in fact, the long-term solution to connecting stakeholders across different points on the continuum, there needs to be more attention paid to how this position is supported once the SIF grant ends. One administrator at BHCC said that the school is trying to make things easier for students by improving the availability of information, but she also noted that she did not see the college navigator position going away. A faculty member similarly spoke about how the college navigator has helped her and her colleagues look more closely at the difficulties low-income working adults face and then said, “She’s like a member of the department to us.” There is clearly some thinking going on at BHCC about how rules and practices could change to work better for groups like low-income students, working adult students, students in workforce development programs, and immigrant students, and Ms. Santos has focused and sharpened this thinking at BHCC, at least in some quarters. But if administrators are assuming that there will always be a college navigator or college navigator-like role that closes the ultimate gap between the institution and its “underserved” students, then they may be missing an opportunity to address underlying issues.

Similar questions regarding capacity could be raised at the workforce partnerships, although SkillWorks is focused on avoiding this concern. SkillWorks has been quite intentional that a piece of the navigator’s work is explicitly focused on building the partnerships’ and other organizations’ understanding of the college and how to help their students, using the coaches network as tool to deliver information. There have been significant benefits for most providers in terms of their knowledge of BHCC and community colleges in general, but the benefits in terms of new direct relationships with BHCC have been relatively small, and, overall, the effect on program capacity is unclear. Coaches we interviewed spoke about how Ms. Santos expanded their understanding and how she helped them reflect on and, in some cases, change their practices. In a few instances, they also made statements indicating that they were relying on the college navigator and would continue to do so indefinitely. For example, one coach lost confidence in her degree of understanding when something she learned from Ms. Santos invalidated some of the advice she had been giving. Instead of taking the initiative to become a better advisor herself, the coach decided to contact Ms. Santos as the “first step” in every case. Ms. Santos serves as a great resource for these coaches, and some coaches fully trust her and were comfortable simply handing students off to her and hoping that they succeeded:

“Zeida has been providing a service that [our program] does not have the capacity to give. My role has been to prep them for college and initial steps, and now if they are

interested in BHCC, I refer them to Zeida and she takes over. If they want to be in touch with me, they stay in touch."

At another program, however, coaches stayed in contact with students and had a different attitude about Ms. Santos' role and her value to them:

"I check in with them all the time. Zeida just gets us over that hump so that the process isn't so overwhelming, and she knows people. That is such a gift. [...] [The program] gave me a good tool book, but I learn through example, and 'seeing it', and she provided that help to me. She gave me a framework to use to advise my students."

The fact that the partnerships have such different ideas about their roles is an issue for additional exploration. Data on the college navigator's current caseload show that 75 percent of the navigator's students are from Year Up. Few HTI students surface on her caseload, even though many are BHCC students, because HTI has developed significant internal capacity to provide academic coaching to its postsecondary students. While the navigator provides sporadic assistance to these students who do not appear on her caseload, HTI maintains the primary relationship with its participants. At some point, it is worth asking the question of whether the college navigator is to some degree substituting for capacity that should eventually reside within Year Up given the significant ongoing need of its participants.

SkillWorks has quickly demonstrated tremendous value in the college navigator role. The question now becomes "What's next? What is the end game SkillWorks is trying to reach in piloting the college navigator role?"

While the college navigator is delivering an incredibly valued service to dozens of students, BHCC enrolls over 11,000 students, many of whom could benefit from a similar level of support. That does not even consider the demand at other area colleges such as Roxbury Community College. In that context, SkillWorks should consider the long-term goal of creating the college navigator position:

- Is the college navigator simply a program to increase postsecondary outcomes of a group of SkillWorks participants?
- Is the college navigator position meant as a pilot to demonstrate its value with the expectation that it would be expanded at BHCC and/or replicated at other colleges?
- Is the college navigator expected to be improving systems at the college in ways that would eventually make the navigator position unnecessary?

Currently, the college navigator is a promising program, but it is unclear how it fits into a larger strategy to address the systems at the community college that are so difficult for students to manage. The navigator's current role is primarily about helping select students to negotiate the complex college systems and is not significantly focused on instigating change to the systems causing students trouble. The Boston PIC had ideas about possible system change related to the navigator role, including some specific to the navigator such as dedicated space on campus

provided by the college and data sharing of student records with the navigator. The PIC had other system change ideas emerging from the navigator's work, including the addition of a career exploration class offered for credit, more upfront advising for students provided by the college, and embedding career center services in the job placement functions of the college. What was unclear was what strategies the navigator could pursue that would lead to these types of system change. Part of Ms. Santos' strength as an advocate for participants has come because she does not judge existing processes, just understands and works within them to benefit her students. Her role as an advocate could be compromised if she started recommending changes to existing systems. Furthermore, her regular contacts on campus are with the various staff members who interact with students, not necessarily the administrative leadership who would have the authority to change institutional policies and procedures.

If system change is not a goal of the navigator, one path to achieving a broader scale of impact is replicating the role many times over at BHCC and other community colleges. A U.S. Department of Labor Trade Adjustment Assistance grant to the Massachusetts community colleges provides funding for a navigator at each college, a step in the right direction, but scale and sustainable, ongoing funding remain outstanding questions.

Another possibility for greater, or at least more sustainable, impact is related to the college navigator's current work around expanding the awareness, knowledge, and skill sets of SkillWorks partnership staff so that the programs can better serve their participants at community college. As mentioned earlier in this report, there have been clear gains in the partnerships' understanding of BHCC processes. However, a strategy that relies on capacity building of a small set of individuals rather than focusing on systems is risky as staff turnover can dilute the capacity that Ms. Santos has built at the organizations.

It may be that expressing a precise strategy for producing lasting outcomes or achieving system change is unnecessary at this point. One of the most important goals of the college navigator has been about learning from the unique experiment—learning not just for partnership coaches, but for SkillWorks staff, SkillWorks funders, the PIC, and other interested stakeholders. As all parties continue to learn from the experiment, SkillWorks might consider convening a set of the interested stakeholders to discuss how the value of the position could best be spread to benefit a larger number of students through some combination of capacity building, system change, and replication.

CONCLUSION

As the college navigator completes her first year of work, all accounts suggest that the new position has been enormously successful. All stakeholders value her work and see benefits for all concerned. The success is, in part, a result of SkillWorks good fortune in finding the "right person" for the job. Interviews suggest that Ms. Santos has set a standard for the role that would be hard for others to match.

While the early success of the navigator role is to be lauded, SkillWorks and its partner in this collaboration, the Boston PIC, should think carefully about how to build on this success. They need to consider how to best manage the current navigator's caseload so as to maximize the

number of students benefitting from services. Even more importantly, they need to consider how this successful pilot can serve as a building block to either broader adoption of the model or be a seed to system change within the college that would lessen the need for the college navigator role in the first place.