



Highlights 2013-2015

Central Lakes College (CLC) and its Rural Information Technology Alliance (RITA) consortium partners have reached the mid-point of the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College & Career Training (TAACCCT) grant period. The third party evaluator, The Improve Group, has prepared this short report to highlight the successes CLC has achieved in implementing the grant and the challenges it continues to face. The evaluation process is formative; CLC has already started to address some of the findings. A review of the methodology can be found in the larger Consortium report. As of August 11, 2015, 247 students have benefitted directly from RITA investments and initiatives at CLC.



Successes

CLC is strengthening ties to the Information Technology industry and preparing students to enter the workforce.

Central Lakes College has established employer advisory committees to build partnerships with local employers in the Information Technology (IT) sector. RITA staff and CLC faculty are working with the Brainerd Chamber of Commerce to build interest in RITA programs among local IT employers. CLC's work with the Chamber has served as an effective strategy to recruit new RITA students and assist current students with job placement. For example, RITA staff partnered with the Chamber to host an IT symposium. The event brought together local employers to learn more about CLC's innovative IT curriculum and connected students with prospective employers. In addition, to help RITA students prepare to enter the workforce, Education & Employment Advisors (EEAs) have focused on helping students to develop their soft skills, such as maintaining eye contact during job interviews.

Additional highlights

- EEAs provide students with individualized support and build trust between students and faculty to ensure academic challenges are addressed quickly. In some cases EEAs pair students with tutors for additional support. EEAs also review CLC's internal academic alert system to monitor student progress. Their work helped contribute to a 50 percent decrease in student attrition over the last year.
- RITA and CLC staff and faculty are using the RITA consortium to connect students to online programs at other RITA schools.
- RITA funding allowed CLC to design and implement a marketing plan that allows staff to more efficiently track and reach out to prospective students. This marketing plan has allowed CLC to conduct targeted outreach to underrepresented student groups and could be associated with the unusual gender parity in CLC's IT program enrollment.

RITA staff are building capacity by providing faculty with professional development opportunities.

The RITA grant has funded significant professional development opportunities for veteran and new faculty. Participants reported that these professional development experiences strengthened their commitment to CLC's IT programs and encouraged them to update their curricula. Some faculty members participated in face to face meetings with other consortium staff and reported feeling supported by a strong network of colleagues. Professional development opportunities included attending conferences on cyber security and training to be certified in the new Cisco program. As a result of this training, CLC was formally establishing the Cisco program with the assistance of a trained and qualified instructor.



- RITA staff have developed communications materials to help IT students better understand industry certifications and the classes that will prepare them for the exam.
- EEAs work with students on developing effective resumes and interview skills. In addition, EEAs created a monthly newsletter for students that includes area job postings. EEAs' work helped to ensure that all spring 2015 IT graduates found employment or internships in the industry.

Challenges

Coordinating marketing and outreach poses difficulties.

At CLC, program-specific marketing is not standard practice. While RITA staff have made some significant progress in marketing new IT programs online, there has been some disagreement on the approach to social media promotion. Some RITA staff raised concerns about the efficacy of social media efforts while others felt it was an effective strategy for reaching potential students.

Additionally, CLC's limited capacity to track potential student inquiries meant that RITA staff were not able to follow up with some interested candidates. Solutions to these challenges are presented below.

Other Challenges

Although the RITA consortium is intended to increase exchange between colleges, RITA staff shared that there have been some difficulties establishing a process to enroll students in Pine Technical & Community College's Cybersecurity program.

RITA staff report that the number of students taking IT certification exams is still low, despite the fact that local employers recognize the value of these certifications.

RITA staff and CLC leaders shared that it is challenging to attract qualified faculty with salaries that are lower than the private sector and as a result of slow hiring processes.

Systemic barriers to implementation persist.

Respondents shared that extensive time is needed to implement new education and training programs. In addition, RITA program staff and faculty remarked that college and MnSCU approval processes contributed to delays in rolling out new programs and buying the technology needed to support them. Research shows that full implementation of programs occurs after five years of roll out while the TAACCCT grant allows for just 3 years. Nevertheless, CLC is on schedule to launch new RITA offerings once appropriate approvals are obtained.

We've figured [many of our milestones] out, but **it takes time** to do that. It is good though because it **challenges the college to be flexible.**

- RITA grant staff

Looking ahead: CLC is developing innovative solutions to address challenges.

RITA staff are developing new strategies to attract incumbent workers by combining customized training with traditional degree programs. Incumbent workers are a primary target for RITA IT programs, and targeted outreach to these workers will help meet TAACCCT goals and expand the qualified IT workforce. RITA staff are working to make their programs more attractive to these workers by marketing certificates that only require a few courses to complete and offer an immediate credential.

RITA funding for professional development is helping to train existing faculty and prepare them for teaching new IT programs. While recruiting new, qualified professionals to teach RITA courses remains a challenge, RITA staff report that professional

development opportunities are increasing teaching capacity through offering certifications and increasing efficiency in matching faculty to new courses.

RITA stakeholders shared that the consortium-wide push to prioritize recruitment has improved outreach and marketing efforts. For example, in coordinate efforts to market RITA programs, all RITA grant staff now attend a monthly meeting with the RITA marketing coordinator for a briefing on key outreach activities. In addition, EEAs have developed processes to ensure consistent and regular follow up with individuals who have inquired about IT program offerings.