

# RITA highlights 2013-2015

Ridgewater College and its Rural Information Technology Alliance (RITA) consortium partners have reached the midpoint of the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant period. The third party evaluator, The Improve Group, has prepared this short report to highlight the successes Ridgewater College has achieved in implementing the programs supported by the grant and the challenges it continues to face. The information in this summary aims to assist in decision-making for program improvements. As of August 11, 2015, 129 students had enrolled in the RITA program at Ridgewater College.

## Successes

### Ridgewater College is implementing core grant objectives and meeting benchmarks.

Ridgewater College is doing its part to support the consortium in meetings its grant objectives. Of the 19 Year 2 benchmarks, Ridgewater College is meeting 18. These benchmarks relate to the following objectives: 1) developing a grant management structure, 2) developing communications strategy and materials, 3) installing new technology infrastructure, 4) supporting students, 5) engaging industry partners, 6) preparing students for employment and 7) participating in program evaluation and improvement.

### RITA staff are creating new, real-world experiences for students outside of the college environment.

RITA staff designed and held a weekend long learning event called Hack20 with community partners. Students who attended collaborated with IT practitioners to develop applications aimed at solving community problems. For example, students created apps to allow community members to fill out a fire permit online and to report broken or abandoned city yellow bikes. In addition to practicing application development skills and giving back to the community, students gained project management skills and developed relationships with IT role models.

**RITA staff are giving so much support to students. They are both helping to retain them and supporting them to be successful. – Ridgewater College Staff**

## Additional highlights

- RITA staff helped recruit industry leaders to attend employer advisory meetings. Participating business representatives increased from less than 10 to more than 20.
- EEAs support students by visiting classes and faculty members have acknowledged EEAs as a valuable addition to Ridgewater College.
- RITA funding is available for staff and faculty professional development opportunities.

### RITA grant manager co-led the virtualization technology purchasing process; Ridgewater College will host and support the lab.

Virtualization is cutting edge technology and interviewees believe it has generated industry interest in the colleges participating in RITA. Ridgewater College will be hosting and supporting the technology for the four consortium schools. As a result, RITA staff will be able to leverage the short and long-term opportunities that this new infrastructure can bring to the college, its current and future students, and to the local community.

### RITA staff are developing and implementing new recruitment strategies.

Employment and Education Advisors (EEAs) are implementing new recruitment strategies by addressing bottlenecks in the application process. For instance, they are texting and calling individuals who had missing information on college applications, took one class without enrolling, experienced complications in the financial aid process, or indicated their interest through Ridgewater College's website. Their goal is to send texts within 2 days of the prospective student's initial inquiry. EEAs then follow-up with a call within two weeks of the text to ask prospective students if they would like to discuss the program or need any additional information. RITA staff are hopeful that this practice will become widespread throughout applicable departments.



# Challenges

## 🚧 Reluctance to change

According to best practices for implementation, quality programs require policies or procedures that foster a supportive climate and conditions. Ridgewater College does not appear to have regular procedures for addressing stakeholders' reluctance to change, enhancing accountability, or fostering shared decision-making. During interviews, participants shared that Ridgewater College administrators need to develop and refine additional leadership skills that can help to create a supportive climate. In particular, interviewees said Ridgewater College leaders need to better demonstrate the willingness or capacity to create change within the organization. For instance, informants indicated that strategic planning does not appear to be a high priority at Ridgewater College and that more attention needs to be given to coordinating across departments. In addition, faculty and staff reported that when they draw leadership's attention to problems, they rarely see leadership take action.

## 🚧 A need for greater focus on students

Interviewees shared that Ridgewater College programs do not adequately address or meet student needs. For instance, when students have problems with their computers, or are unaware of the standard operating procedures within various offices, Ridgewater staff do not always prioritize doing what it takes to offer students' with needed support. Interviewees also expressed concern that when staff are unkind to students or course content lacks value, these issues go unaddressed. Faculty and staff need to be held accountable to ensure that Ridgewater College has a truly student-centered environment.

## Looking ahead: ideas for enhancing RITA's benefits

- RITA staff say professional development opportunities are a key benefit of the RITA grant. **College leadership should work with the RITA grant manager to identify** professional development opportunities for non-RITA staff, as RITA funds are intended to benefit anyone who works with RITA participants.
- RITA funding can be used to hire new staff if they work with RITA students. If Ridgewater College staff need extra support, **college leadership should consider hiring** new staff with RITA funding.
- During interviews a number of RITA stakeholders expressed that some non-RITA college staff are not adequately supportive of students. **College leadership should ensure that they and other staff are putting students' needs first.** They can do this by building leadership capacity and holding everyone accountable to creating a student-centered environment.

## 🚧 Curriculum enhancements lacking

Ridgewater College is behind on meeting only one grant objective: working with faculty and instructional designers to make changes to curriculum. To comply with grant requirements, Ridgewater College should hire instruction designers to review and enhance courses.

Informants voiced that faculty are grappling with how to put courses online, and explained that they do not feel prepared to do so. Leadership should explore ways to use RITA funding to build staff's skills in online instruction.

Students are in need of coaching on soft skills, such as maintaining eye contact and shaking hands, and there is not curriculum in place to address their skill gap. Faculty and other staff agree this is a significant challenge to adequately prepare students for the workforce. Curriculum enhancements could incorporate best practices in fostering soft skills.

