

Mt. Wachusett Community College

Profile of an Early Adopter of Career Ready 101

Overview

Mt. Wachusett Community College used Career Ready 101 in a TAACCCT- funded noncredit manufacturing program. The following is a summary from an interview and presentation given by Kerrie Griffin, Director, Devens Campus, in December, 2014.

Describe the setting, participants, programs, and tools used. What was your goal in using the tools?

We used KeyTrain as an intake assessment and remediation tool in a noncredit manufacturing program, in both our day and evening sections. We also had students sit for WorkKeys and National Career Readiness Certificate at the end of the program, as a requirement for program completion.

To enter the program, applicants had to score at least a Level 3 on the KeyTrain® pre-tests. If time didn't allow applicants to take all three tests before enrolling, we offered just Reading and Math for entrance, and then did the Locating Information pre-test on the first day of class. Initially, we used both the TABE and KeyTrain, but felt we were over-testing. So, in programs where the funding doesn't require the TABE, we prefer KeyTrain as a pre-assessment.

There were three components to the manufacturing program curriculum:

- 1) 40 hours of KeyTrain learning modules, including preparation for WorkKeys testing. Students had to log between 25-40 hours on KeyTrain (combined Reading for Information, Applied Math, Locating Information) before sitting for WorkKeys tests
- 2) 40 hours of Workplace Readiness classroom instruction, and
- 3) 100 hours of advanced manufacturing classroom instruction

What service gap or participant need were you trying to fill?

In all our meetings with manufacturers we were hearing their concerns that job candidates and employees need to have more basic academic skills, such as Reading, Writing, Math, and Locating Information. We wanted to supplement the manufacturing training and work readiness instruction with academic skill building, with limited program time.

How were the tools integrated into the program design?

The 6-week daytime program had the forty hours of KeyTrain lab time built into the classroom. In addition to the core academic content (Reading, Math, Locating Information) we used our Workplace Success curriculum for classroom instruction. Students could work on the modules at home or in the classroom, and I was available to help them if they had questions.

The students in the 5-week, 75 hour evening program were required to log 25 hours on KeyTrain independently, outside of class. But we found that they had a lot of questions, which they brought to the Work Readiness class. So we built 15 minutes into the class for KeyTrain review.



Every week I gave each student a note card with an update on where they were within the KeyTrain® modules and where they needed to aim for in the coming week. Sometimes the problem was technical – students getting locked out of the system. In cases where a student was repeatedly failing a unit quiz, I'd meet with them to go over the problem areas.

Sometimes I printed pages out of the workbook for extra practice. The content was similar, but students were sometimes more comfortable going over it first on paper, before going online.

Each instructor approached the system differently depending on the needs of the class. I was always in the lab when students had KeyTrain time. Towards the end of the program, I spent more time teaching test taking strategies, to help students prepare for WorkKeys.

I think it was valuable to have someone in the lab who had the answer key and can check in and help stuck students.

We set-up the system so that students had to score 80% on a module test in order to move to the next level. They could only take the module test twice before they got locked out. Students were frustrated when they got locked out of the system, but this setting ensured that they saw me for help before they went on.

If a student failed a test two times, I used the answer key to see where they were having trouble. Then I'd sit with them, present the correct answer, and together we'd figure out where they went wrong.

Sometimes students worked together in pairs. I gave teams the answer (from the key) and they'd figure out together where they went wrong. The answer key doesn't provide

explanations, but the workbook does spell things out and that's where I'd go if I needed further explanation. I might also write the problem on the board and ask students to explain how they'd tackle it.

What outcomes have you observed?

The outcomes, as far as progress through the KeyTrain levels and the final WorkKeys level scores (and attainment of the National Career Readiness Credential) were about the same for both the evening and the daytime students.

In general, the students in the evening group entered the program with higher scores on the KeyTrain® pre-test. These students worried that they'd progress through all the levels and finish before they'd put in the required number of hours. But this never happened because the higher levels are much more dense and challenging and take more time to complete than the lower levels. As a result, they didn't move through them as quickly as they thought they would. People often got stuck at Levels 6 & 7, which become substantially more difficult. Further, we encouraged people to brush up on earlier skills to be better prepared for the WorkKeys® test.

We tried to make it a big deal whenever someone passed a level, to build their confidence. When someone scored well, they did feel a sense of accomplishment and it reinforced the notion that they can challenge themselves and if you put in the effort, and do the work, you get a return. I think this means more to students than we know.

Students also gained new computer skills. They had to get on the computer and use it, learn different skills and overcome fears of using technology. In addition to improving their

academic skills, they can tool around a computer and feel more comfortable using it.

We had a group in the evening program that just wouldn't do it – they said they hadn't signed up for it when they enrolled and didn't see the relevance. But they had to put in the KeyTrain® hours to complete the program, and then did choose to take the WorkKeys® test to earn a National Career Readiness Certificate.

My observations has been that you need at least twenty hours, closer to 30-40 hours of remediation in KeyTrain to from a KeyTrain Level 3 (the required level to enter our program) and achieve a 3 on WorkKeys, which earns you a Bronze level National Career Readiness Certificate.

This is because the KeyTrain® pre-test is very different from the WorkKeys® test. Whereas the KeyTrain® pre-test is untimed and computer adaptive, the WorkKeys® test is timed, and is not computer adaptive, so there are a lot of questions to get through. Also, the added pressure of the timed test is a huge factor.

What are the strengths and limitations of the tools?

The gap between the KeyTrain® pre-test and remediation and the WorkKeys® test is a limitation. One example of the gap is the fact that KeyTrain is untimed and WorkKeys is timed. Another challenge in making the transition from KeyTrain to WorkKeys is that there is no KeyTrain® post-test. So, after you get your KeyTrain® assessment placement and work your way through the remediation levels, you have no way of knowing how you'll do on the WorkKeys® test, which is higher stakes. It would be helpful to have guidance from ACT on how to advise students when they're ready to sit for WK.

The National Career Readiness Certificate still has limited name recognition among employers in MA. We talk about the benefits of Career Ready 101 and the National Career Readiness Certificate whenever we do a presentation to employers on our workforce training curriculum. We get a positive response from employers, but still have a long way to go to get employers to recognize and value it.

For many of our students, NCRC is the first certification they've ever received, so regardless of whether employers are familiar with it, we encourage students to discuss it in interviews and promote the skills that it reflects. The electronic certificate breaks down the score and the skills, which is a benefit for our outreach to employers and students in their job search.

Do you have any thoughts about how you might expand the use of the tools?

I've noticed some correlation and similar question format between KeyTrain and the Test of Essential Academic Skills (TEAS) math. I may consider expanding it into our noncredit TEAS Prep course.

What sort of training or other assistance would you recommend for staff incorporating the tools into coaching and/or instruction?

Have staff do the KeyTrain® pre-test and some of the modules so they are familiar with the system and understand what the students are doing.

What suggestions do you have for other sites getting started?

Early on, we found that students focus first on Math and Reading, and save Locating Information until the end of the course. They would be frustrated that they didn't have enough time to spend on improving these skills. As a result this WorkKeys® test brought down their National Career Readiness Certificate level.

Now we recommend that students focus on one subject and level at a time. That is that they work through one KeyTrain level, including the final level quiz, in one subject before moving onto another subject, so that they aren't just jumping around. Essentially, you need a good forty-five minutes to an hour in a lesson to make it worthwhile.

At the same time, we recommend students do some work in all three subjects weekly, rather than work sequentially through one subject at a time, so that they have a similar amount of exposure to all subjects and don't get rusty in any, by the time they take the test.

When it comes time to sit for the WorkKeys® test for the National Career Readiness Certificate, we'd recommend having students take each of the WorkKeys® subject tests (Reading for Information, Locating Information, Applied Math) on different days, so that it's not so overwhelming. We offered one test per day over the last three days of class.

Prepare students for taking the WorkKeys® timed test. I told them every day of the semester that the WorkKeys® test was timed, but they were still surprised. Get them to practice under timed conditions. The KeyTrain pre-test is not timed, so they need to be prepared for that change. In one class we had

them redo the pre-test after they went through all the modules, under timed conditions, but students knew it didn't count and just clicked through it.

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