

# How Two Universities Are Building Community Partnerships to Strengthen Local Hiring

Colleges and universities strengthen and support the communities they call home in myriad ways — one of which is providing jobs for local residents. Although institutions often must cast a wide net in order to find the most qualified faculty and high-level administrative talent, the majority of staff and many professional-level positions can be filled by tapping into the local labor market. While many institutions do a great job of reaching qualified candidates in their own backyard, others struggle to identify and bring local talent into their candidate pools.

By collaborating with local economic-inclusion and community-development organizations, two institutions — Towson University in Baltimore and Drexel University in Philadelphia — have paved the way for economically disadvantaged individuals in their communities to get training, an education and jobs with their institutions.



## Towson University's Approach to Leveraging Local Talent

By Jennifer Stano

After years of only modest success tapping into the local labor market, Towson University changed the way it identifies and recruits local talent by partnering with community organizations whose mission is to provide professional, learning and training opportunities for economically disadvantaged Baltimore residents.

### Lacking in Local Talent and Diversity

In 2015, Towson University (TU)'s HR office conducted an analysis of two years' worth of applicant data. Specifically, we were looking to learn more about our qualified applicants — where they were coming from, their demographics, how far they progressed in our recruitment process. The findings were surprising. Despite Towson being situated on the Baltimore County/Baltimore City line, the majority of our qualified applicants came from all over Maryland and the surrounding states. In addition, the diversity of qualified candidates was far less than the reported availability from our census data in our affirmative action plan. It was evident that passive recruiting efforts were not making an impact on our local community.

We quickly realized as an institution that we needed to conduct more outreach and develop stronger partnerships to reach qualified applicants in the Greater Baltimore region. We wanted our residents to not only know about TU, but to consider us an employer of choice. To increase our presence as a viable option for employment in the Baltimore area, we partnered with the Baltimore Integration Partnership (BIP) and Humanim. BIP serves as a collaborative of anchor institutions, funders, nonprofits and public organizations focused on establishing economic inclusion as the business culture of norm in Greater Baltimore. Humanim's mission is to support and empower individuals with disabilities and socio-economic challenges throughout Maryland and Delaware by building pathways to economic equity, opportunity and independence.

### A Partnership That Makes Sense

BIP connects local anchor institutions to a variety of programs and efforts and allows anchors to provide feedback and support for the effort. BIP sees anchors as the region's most powerful allies, providing the strongest opportunities to advance economic inclusion and positive economic growth for local citizens and small business owners. BIP is not unique; there are close to 20 existing and emerging anchor institution collaborations across

the country. For HR professionals, these partnerships are particularly important for organizations focused on workforce training and placement.

Shortly after we connected with BIP, Humanim presented to a local hiring anchor group. They were looking for support for their administrative assistant training program, a nine-week course that delivers occupational skills training in the administrative field, specifically targeting economically distressed communities across Baltimore City. The organization was looking for HR representatives to participate on their steering committee, to guide curriculum and to commit to consider graduates for hire.

I was intrigued, but unsure. Our recruitments for administrative assistant positions typically gather 100+ applicants within a few weeks of posting and are highly competitive. In addition, many of our job requirements include several years of administrative experience, and in some cases a bachelor's degree. I committed TU's support to Humanim, although I was uncertain in what way. As HR professionals, we are often tapped into opportunities to provide resume reviews or conduct mock interviews. At the time, I resigned to the idea that this may be the only way TU's HR team could contribute.

BIP and Humanim served as leaders for the administrative assistant training program work. BIP coordinated meetings between the anchor institutions and provided insight into best practices and additional information sessions on new or potential partnerships. Humanim continuously recruited hundreds of potential candidates for the program, ensured quality instruction, designed and executed the program, and worked closely with anchors on placement. Initially, my role in HR was limited to providing feedback on the curriculum, attending mock interviews and coordinating visits to TU's campus. Throughout the time I supported the effort, I met dozens of diverse, highly qualified administrative assistants and recognized that they got lost in the large candidate pools for our open positions. I knew I had to find a way to better connect the candidates to our hiring managers so that they could be considered for positions at our university.

### The Temp Pool

Human resources at TU traditionally engaged in temporary services from different agencies in Baltimore. When we occasionally needed outside temporary support, we would contact and hire from an agency, with mixed levels of success and with a lot of infrequency. When a colleague suggested that we create our own temp pool, I had a light bulb moment.



We posted an ongoing requisition on our jobs website for administrative support. The minimum requirements were a high school diploma and no experience, but an applicant may be placed in a higher level depending on the needs of the unit and the individual experience and education. The job posting explained that TU was building a pool of potential candidates for temporary and part-time administrative positions who would be interviewed and placed once the need arrived. We pitched the idea to the group at Humanim and were met with enthusiasm. While we highly support the goal of getting permanent employment, Humanim trainees could continue to gather experience, and a paycheck, from TU while conducting their job search.

TU staff and faculty quickly embraced the idea of the temp pool, and we saw the number of requests for temporary support rise. Our first Humanim hire was only at the university for a few months before being selected for permanent employment at another anchor institution, but another Humanim program graduate was hired into the permanent position for her TU department after serving in the temporary role for only three months. Subsequent hires have supported various departments and continued their learning through continuous temporary employment. In addition, we have engaged our faculty and staff in the process earlier in the training program by inviting them to meet and interact with the Humanim cohort at an onsite visit prior to graduation. Faculty and staff have remarked that these events help them to think differently about how they are recruiting and selecting their final candidates.

### **The Talent**

These efforts also create a valuable experience for the Humanim trainees. By encouraging interaction between hiring managers and the trainees, we've seen greater buy-in for the program. In addition, the trainees build confidence in their ability to demonstrate value and secure employment. After three years of a successful partnership between BIP, Humanim and TU, I have witnessed firsthand the pride and excitement of the cohort when they graduate the program. By the time members from the anchor institutions attend the graduation ceremony, they have already established relationships with the trainees, and many of them already have jobs in place. I met one of the Humanim trainees during a mock interview session. I was immediately struck by her positive attitude and friendly approach. She had entered the Humanim program to better establish herself professionally and to gain the

support and experience so that she could get her foot in the door. Almost immediately after graduating from the Humanim program, she joined TU's HR team as a temporary employee. For her, the temporary role was a time to build confidence in working at a university and better prepared her for her interview to a permanent administrative assistant position.

### **Replication**

It didn't take long for TU to replicate these efforts with other community partners. The Workforce and Technology Center through the Department of Rehabilitation Services offers opportunities to work with their trainees and provide guidance throughout their training program. This 24-week program focuses on keyboarding skill development, Microsoft Office and business etiquette. While conducting a mock interview session, I was approached by one of the clients who had already prepared a cover letter and resume in expectation of my arrival, which led to her being placed in a part-time temporary role at TU while she continued the program. As a temporary employee, she attended every training class she could and made it a point to network within the university in preparation for applying for a permanent position.

### **Successes and Opportunities**

Over the past year, we've hired six employees from our community partnerships and have prospective graduates that we are looking to bring on in the future. When we hire from one of our partners, we know that we are getting an employee that is prepared, hungry for success and ready to carry on the momentum of our fast-growing university.

For TU, the experience is rewarding on all levels. I'm honored to have the opportunity to bring together our employees and our community partners in a way that creates opportunities for everyone. The more I listen to Baltimore residents share their valuable experience and the struggles they have faced, the more I intimately understand the barriers to employment for many in our community. At the end of the day, I get to do what most HR professionals seek to do — help others. The long-term goal is to replicate the program for other areas and functions so that our university can continue to leverage the talent that our city has to offer. The qualified and eager candidate is there, and our community partnerships help to bridge the gap.

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## Drexel University's "Hire Local" Strategy

By Jennifer Britton

Drexel University's main campus straddles two very different Philadelphias. The campus sits in the southeastern corner of the West Philadelphia Promise Zone, a designation for a set of neighborhoods facing the challenges resulting from urban disinvestment, generational poverty, violence and persistent unemployment. Directly to the east of campus, just across the Schuylkill River from Center City Philadelphia, groundbreaking has recently begun for the Schuylkill Yards innovation neighborhood, a science-and-tech economic development whose benefits have remained out of reach for Promise Zone residents.

Drexel and several community partners have been working together on a vision to integrate these two seemingly polar opposite areas, with the goal of ensuring that children born today in the Promise Zone have the education opportunities they need to become scientists at Schuylkill Yards, while their parents and caregivers have access today to jobs with family-sustaining wages.

### Why Hire Local?

Drexel's motivation behind its "Hire Local" strategy is the same one driving the university's broader civic engagement and anchor mission work. The notion of working for the greater good is embedded in the mission of higher education, and as such we identify an obligation to collaborate with university neighbors to address issues of shared concern — and economic inclusion is high on the list of concerns that local communities articulate.

There is also a business case to be made about the value of being an engaged anchor — for example, civic engagement is an appealing form of applied learning for students, and faculty recruits increasingly value this spirit of inclusion as an institutional feature. As far as local hiring and recruitment goes, we can experience salary savings by tapping into federal workforce development dollars; we can improve retention in high-turnover positions; and initiatives like placing local jobseekers into temporary positions can reduce costs associated with temp agencies (with additional benefits realized when we can transition local temporary employees into permanent positions).

Additionally, turning our attention to a previously untapped network of jobseekers is a path to building a more diverse, talented and creative university workforce.

### Our Partners in the Effort

Drexel's office of university and community partnerships worked diligently to bring a diverse team together around the issue of local recruitment and hiring. Internally, creating this strategy called for a blessing from the chief financial officer along with active collaboration with human resources. The data study to come would also identify as important internal partners managers in departments experiencing high turnover.

**We realized that turning our attention to a previously untapped network of jobseekers is a path to building a more diverse, talented and creative university workforce.**

External to the university, we linked with Philadelphia Works, the regional workforce intermediary and a source of federal workforce dollars. We also worked closely with West Philadelphia Skills Initiative (WPSI), an organization that connects West Philadelphia employers seeking talent to West Philadelphians seeking jobs. WPSI brought expertise in connecting jobseekers to hiring organizations and a deep familiarity with the strengths and needs of West Philadelphia workers.

We also teed up working relationships with respected adult education providers in Philadelphia to help us devise mechanisms for addressing gaps between minimum education credentials required for entry-level jobs in the university and the education attainment levels of neighborhood jobseekers.

### What the Data Told Us

Rather than relying on assumptions and guesswork to drive our strategy, we took time to understand our data, with the analysis deriving from questions about:

1. Jobseekers: How can we characterize the job readiness and qualifications of local residents, and what jobs are the university's neighbors applying to in our institution? Additionally, what are the gaps between the university's minimum job requirements and the average local education attainment and literacy?



2. Internal opportunities: In which positions are we experiencing higher-than-average rates of turnover? High-turnover positions offer a locus for customized on-the-job training that can solve problems for internal managers while also generating employment for local residents.

## Cohort-based training — walking a group of recruits through on-the-job training together — is an intentional aspect of our Hire Local effort.

Some findings:

- While Drexel requires a high school diploma or GED as a minimum education requirement for all jobs entry-level and up, around one-third of Promise Zone residents have not finished high school.
- The average adult literacy level in the Promise Zone is a fourth-grade capacity.
- Medical practices connected to Drexel's College of Medicine were experiencing exceptionally high turnover rates in their medical assistant positions.
- Many West Philadelphia residents hold medical assistant certificates but are unemployed or under-employed because the private, for-profit, certificate-granting institutes where they received training do not provide students with enough practical internship experience to meet the job requirements for most medical assistant positions in regional medical systems.

These findings informed two programmatic initiatives at Drexel:

- 1) A community-based adult education program that would support literacy, digital access and diploma completion, helping residents with eligibility for and access to jobs with Drexel and its major vendors.
- 2) A customized, cohort-based recruitment and training program that would pull West Philadelphia residents into medical assistant positions.

### Adult Education Programming

In 2013, Drexel's office of university and community partnerships launched the Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships, a community resource center inspired by the tradition of cooperative extension. Located off campus, the Dornsife Center houses programming from Drexel academic departments and the administrative office, along with select nonprofit organizations, around themes identified through an ongoing stakeholder engagement process.

One of the programmatic areas consistently identified as a priority by neighborhood residents is jobs access, and as a result one of the earliest programs established at the Dornsife Center was an open-access computer lab. Because job listings and applications are almost exclusively online these days, digital literacy and digital access are important tools for jobseekers. And in a low-income neighborhood where only about one-third of homes have WiFi access, opening the lab at the Dornsife Center effectively doubled the public internet resource that was already available at the nearby public library branch. The lab is consistently busy each day, with participants taking advantage of digital skills training, setting up email accounts, learning to use social media, and getting more advanced training in commonly used office software.

In response to the education-attainment gap experienced by many neighborhood residents, the Dornsife Center set up a partnership with Goodwill Industries of New Jersey and Philadelphia to bring their Helms Academy program to the site. First piloted in southern New Jersey, Helms Academy (named for the founder of Goodwill Industries) walks participants through their high school diploma completion while simultaneously offering 30 free-of-charge community college credits, all accompanied by career support and counseling.

The link to community college credits is an innovative answer to a challenge many community college students face when they start their first year not entirely prepared — completing necessary remedial courses can take up all of their available federal grant support before they even begin completing credits that count toward an associate's degree, and this is a driver of community college dropout rates.



Helms Academy gives participants access to free community college courses without the work taking a bite out of education grant money. At the Dornsife Center, the Community College of Philadelphia is the community college partner with Helms Academy. Another important aspect of the Dornsife Center's adult education suite of programming is HR Open Hours. Once each week, a specialist from Drexel's HR office holds walk-in hours connected to the open lab. During the HR Open Hours, neighborhood jobseekers can get help searching job announcements (whether inside Drexel, with Drexel's major vendors or around the city), working on resumes and cover letters, and practicing interview skills.

### **On-the-Job Cohort Training for Medical Assistants**

Since 2014, Drexel has run several cohort-based recruitment and training programs, primarily to fill medical assistant (MA) positions with medical practices affiliated with the College of Medicine — where we realized from data analysis that we were experiencing higher-than-average turnover.

Cohort-based training — walking a group of recruits through on-the-job training together — is an intentional aspect of our Hire Local effort for two reasons: (1) the cohort framework offers a network of support and accountability among trainee peers that has been shown to support success in job placements, and (2) cohort training is substantially more cost effective than carrying out numerous unconnected training processes for individuals.

In the MA training program, Drexel's office of university and community partnerships coordinated with human resources and the West Philadelphia Skills Initiative (WPSI) to guide trainees and their practice managers through a six-month process to permanent placement in full-time MA positions, with benefits.

Working with WPSI, we used what we learned in focus groups with medical practice managers to design a training curriculum. Before a cohort ever starts, personnel from the office of university and community partnerships and HR spend time talking with medical practice managers to ensure that there will be training site placements and open positions available for each successful participant, as we feel strongly about ensuring opportunities for employment for those who successfully complete the program.

### ***The MA Training Model***

The MA training model features substantial classroom time with the training partner, with phased-in and increasing amounts of time for trainees in their placement practices. Classroom time is used to cover some of the topics that most for-profit MA certificate-granting institutes do not, including intercultural competence, problem-solving skills and financial education.

One of the key aspects of the training plan ensures that trainees come out of the program with the skills hiring managers need most. MA trainees get substantial time working with the proprietary software that Drexel's medical practices use, so they arrive in their placements already comfortable with everyday records-management tasks. The program also makes use of the College of Medicine's hands-on training labs so that trainees have ample opportunity to build clinical skills. The MA cohorts initially split their time between the job placement site and a training classroom. A gradual transition to a full workweek at the placement site allows time for trainees to continually reflect with trainers and peers on their workplace experiences and allows trainers to make real-time corrections in the cohort's learning objectives based on performance early in the program. In our structure, trainees go from three to four to five days a week in the job site over the course of six months as they take on increasing responsibilities and gain knowledge and skills. As trainees hit specific performance milestones throughout the program, they receive wage increases as incentive and reward.

We have found it important to not neglect support for managers as we train and place new MAs in positions in Drexel's medical practices. Other employees in these practices may feel resentful about new hires who appear to spend so much time away from the practice, so we work with managers to prepare them to discuss the program with transparency with all employees in order to create a welcoming work environment for trainees. Additionally, where gaps in managers' skills may have contributed to MA turnover, we offer support and training for managers in better navigating and supervising workers in a culturally diverse workplace.

### ***Trial by Error***

As part of the classroom training time, MA trainees are encouraged to build their professional networks, and through that network building they often receive outside



job offers. In at least two of our MA cohorts, our recruits were being poached by medical practices outside of the Drexel system because they were such good candidates. Early in the design of the program, we had failed to consider where our hourly wages for trainees should start, and as a result of losing promising recruits, we revised our starting wages in order to be a more competitive workplace for trainees.

Our MA recruits are unemployed for an average of 56 weeks prior to beginning their employment through the cohort program. As they transition into a new workplace, their needs around supervision and support may be a little different from MAs who are hired through traditional routes. We realized after the first cohort that frontline managers represented one of the most substantial challenges for new MA recruits and that managers needed more training than we initially realized.

We worked with WPSI to develop manager training that specifically addresses issues like racial and class consciousness, locus of control and conflict management. We also found that managers needed support in messaging about the program. Medical practices are staffed with other medical assistants hired in a more traditional way, and by taking time with managers to prepare them to talk about the program, we could ensure the cohort MAs would be better able to integrate with the rest of the staff as a fully realized team member.

### ***Benefits to Drexel's Medical Practices***


The MA trainees have been an asset to the medical practices in which they are placed. Says Vanessa Stepney, director of quality management and patient safety at Drexel's College of Medicine, "Most of the clinical sites have a need for additional staff to support their daily activities. The MA trainees bring enthusiasm and willingness to work, and they see the program as a great opportunity to work at Drexel. Many of the participants have been out of work or unable to find work in their field due to their lack of experience, but the program acts as a bridge for many to continue their education and further their career in healthcare."

The medical practices likewise get support, solving a resource and recruitment issue — the MA cohort program has substantially reduced turnover among MAs in Drexel's medical practices. For the university more generally, the less quantifiable benefit to the program is that when local residents have a good experience with access, recruitment, training and employment, they become enthusiastic ambassadors for the institution.

### **Paving the Way for Success, Now and in the Future**

Drexel's medical assistant cohort training program along with the adult education programming out of the Dornsife Center have resulted in a substantial increase over the past five years in the percentage of university employees living in West Philadelphia, from under 8 percent to more than 12 percent.

In fiscal year 2018, the university paid \$30 million in salary dollars into West Philadelphia. These numbers represent some of the building blocks of a long-term commitment by Drexel to contribute to community wealth building. Not only are we counting salary dollars, but we are also beginning to track the extent to which our newly-hired local employees take advantage of benefits like tuition remission, more-than-minimal retirement savings contributions and the homeownership benefit that provides forgivable loans for home purchase or renovation inside a specific local footprint.

Our intent is that by supporting West Philadelphia adults in career pathways, we may contribute to the kinds of family-sustaining wages and family security that will pay off in children's education and health outcomes — children that we hope will one day become our colleagues and our leaders. 

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