

Featured Tale

Empowering the Future Workforce: The STaR Network at Montgomery College

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The [Student Training and Resource \(STaR\) Network](#) at Montgomery College (MC) is an innovative initiative designed to provide comprehensive professional development opportunities to students. Launched by the Office of E-Learning Innovation and Teaching Excellence (ELITE), the STaR Network aims to equip students with essential skills needed for career readiness, supporting their academic and professional growth. Funded by an MC Foundation Innovation grant in 2023 with \$11,000, the program's primary goal is to prepare students for future employment. In particular it aims to enhance students' essential skills including communication, leadership, and teamwork, in alignment with the [National Association of Colleges and Employer's career readiness competencies](#).

Initially aimed at student employees, the program was expanded to all MC students due to high demand and regulatory limitations affecting Federal work-study employment. Professional development is crucial for students as it bridges the gap between academic knowledge and practical workplace skills. It ensures that students are prepared to work in diverse teams and can thrive in professional environments. This training helps students develop essential skills highly valued by employers. Additionally, it builds confidence and encourages a proactive approach to career development. This paper explores the program's structure, key themes, measurable outcomes, and impact on student success while highlighting the essential skills necessary for career readiness.

Program Overview

The STaR Network at MC is a comprehensive program that provides paid professional development and career readiness opportunities to degree-seeking students. By providing a structured, supportive environment for skill development, the program ensures that students are well-prepared to meet the demands of their current roles and future careers. The primary goal of the STaR Network is to equip students with essential skills and knowledge that will help them excel in their current roles and future careers, supporting MC's mission to provide a high-quality education and prepare students for post-graduation success. The program's structure includes 2-3 monthly virtual professional development sessions, ensuring accessibility and inclusivity for all participants. Each session is designed to cater to the diverse needs of the student body, providing valuable resources and training without the barriers of physical attendance.

In its first year, the STaR Network attracted tremendous interest—over 600 applications were received for a total of 360 program seats across the 15 scheduled sessions, and several sessions filled to capacity within an hour of application launch time. Since students can register for unlimited sessions, many students registered for multiple sessions throughout the program. Ultimately, the program served over 100 individual students and awarded a total of 295 attendance credits to participants in its inaugural year.

The impact of the STaR Network on these student employees has been significant in several ways:

Improved Job Performance

Students reported enhanced abilities in their current roles, with noticeable improvements in communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills.

Increased Confidence

The structured training and supportive environment helped students build confidence in their abilities, contributing to better performance and job satisfaction.

Enhanced Academic Engagement

By learning effective time management and critical thinking skills, students were able to balance their work and studies more efficiently, leading to better academic outcomes.

Career Preparation

The program facilitated connections with industry professionals and provided insights into various career paths, helping students make informed decisions about their future careers.

Overall, the STaR Network's comprehensive approach to professional development ensures that student employees are well-equipped to meet the demands of their current job roles and are prepared for future career opportunities. The program's success in its first year has laid a strong foundation for its continued evolution and expansion, aiming to make an even greater impact on student success and career readiness in the years to come.

Key Themes & Objectives

The STaR Network is built around several key themes and objectives that align with MC's strategic priorities. These themes ensure the program not only enhances students' professional skills, but also supports their academic success and personal growth.

1. Student Success

The STaR Network fosters student success by providing comprehensive professional development opportunities. By enhancing essential skills such as communication, leadership, and teamwork, the program helps students excel in their current roles and prepares them for future career opportunities. This holistic approach ensures that students are well-rounded, confident, and capable of navigating the complexities of the modern workforce.

2. Graduation, Completion, and Retention Goals

Professional development is critical in increasing student motivation and engagement, directly impacting academic performance and retention rates. The STaR Network supports MC's goals of improving graduation and completion rates by equipping students with the skills and confidence they need to persist and succeed in their academic endeavors. The program's focus on practical, real-world skills helps students see the value of their education, encouraging them to complete their degrees.

3. Transfer Goals

The STaR Network prepares students for successful transfers to 4-year institutions by providing transferable skills and industry-specific knowledge. This preparation ensures that students are academically

prepared and possess the soft skills needed to thrive in new educational environments. The program's emphasis on career readiness further supports students as they transition to higher levels of education or enter the workforce directly.

4. Equity and Inclusion

Promoting equity and inclusion is a cornerstone of the STaR Network. The program is designed to provide equal opportunities for all students, including those from underrepresented groups. The STaR Network helps create a more equitable and supportive campus environment by fostering cultural competency and inclusive practices. This commitment to inclusion ensures that every student can benefit from professional development and achieve their full potential.

5. Support for Part-Time and Newly Enrolled Students

The STaR Network recognizes the unique challenges part-time and newly enrolled students face. The program offers tailored professional development opportunities to help these students balance their academic and work responsibilities. By providing flexible, accessible training sessions, the STaR Network supports the integration and success of part-time and newly enrolled students, ensuring they have the tools they need to thrive at MC.

6. Building a Culture of Critical Thinking

The STaR Network is committed to fostering a culture of evidence-based decision-making, information literacy and continuous improvement. By instilling this mindset in students, the STaR Network encourages a proactive approach to professional development and personal growth, helping students develop the skills necessary to evaluate and improve their performance critically.

7. Civility and Social Justice

The STaR Network emphasizes the importance of civility and social justice in the workplace and the broader community. The program fosters a respectful and inclusive campus environment through targeted training sessions. By promoting ethical decision-making, cultural competency, and social awareness, the STaR Network prepares students to be advocates for change and leaders in creating a more just and equitable society.

Implementation

The STaR Network is structured to provide comprehensive and accessible professional development opportunities for students at MC. The program's design ensures that all participants can benefit from its offerings, regardless of their schedules or locations.

Program Structure & Delivery

The STaR Network offers 2-3 virtual professional development sessions per month. These sessions are designed to be interactive and engaging and cover a wide range of topics relevant to career readiness and personal development. Each session typically lasts 1 hour and focuses on a specific skill or competency, such as time management, conflict resolution, resume writing, and leadership skills.

To ensure maximum accessibility and convenience, all sessions are conducted via Zoom. This virtual format allows students to participate from anywhere, eliminating the need for physical attendance and accommodating various schedules. Each session can accommodate up to 24 participants, providing an intimate and interactive learning environment.

Students can register for unlimited sessions, and registration is processed on a first-come, first-served basis. To participate, students complete an online registration form at least 24 hours before the session starts. For each session attended, a \$25 credit is applied to the student's MC account, providing a tangible incentive for participation.

Collaboration Between Departments and Stakeholders

The success of the STaR Network is the result of collaborative efforts between various departments and stakeholders within MC. ELITE spearheaded the program and coordinated the delivery of all the sessions. ELITE's expertise in professional development and e-learning ensures that the program is of high quality and meets the needs of the students.

Close collaboration between ELITE and the Office of Financial Aid ensures that the student account credit incentives for participation are processed smoothly and efficiently. By working together, these departments provide a seamless experience for the students, from registration to receiving the attendance credit and final certificate of participation.

Additionally, faculty and staff across the college are encouraged to support the STaR Network by volunteering to participate in sessions. Their involvement adds value to the program, offering students diverse perspectives and expertise. Faculty and staff participation also fosters a sense of community and support, enhancing the overall learning experience.

The program's structure and collaborative approach ensure that the STaR Network effectively supports students in their professional development journey. By leveraging the strengths and resources of various departments and stakeholders, the STaR Network provides a robust and supportive environment for student success.

Sustainability Plan & Future Opportunities

The STaR Network is designed with a strong focus on sustainability to ensure its long-term impact on student professional development at MC. This sustainability plan includes innovative strategies to maintain and expand the program despite potential funding challenges.

A key component of the STaR Network's sustainability plan is the introduction of a Student Employee Badge. This badge is modelled after the [University of Maryland's Students Transitioning into Effective Professionals \(STEP\) Program](#). The digital microcredential badge is designed to recognize students' participation and achievements in the program formally and motivates students to engage fully with the program. To earn the badge, students must complete a percentage of all professional development sessions and submit an ePortfolio demonstrating their acquired skills and competencies. The microcredential badge further supports sustainability by providing a structured pathway for students to showcase their professional development. By earning these credentials, students can demonstrate their commitment to continuous learning and skill development, making them more attractive to potential employers.

In addition to the microcredential badge, the STaR Network's virtual delivery model contributes to its sustainability. Using Zoom for sessions minimizes logistical costs and allows for greater flexibility in scheduling and participation. This model ensures that the program can continue to operate efficiently, even with limited physical resources.

Alignment with College Priorities & Mission

The STaR Network aligns closely with MC's mission and strategic priorities. The program supports MC's commitment to providing high-quality education and preparing students for the workforce and post-graduation success. By offering comprehensive professional development opportunities, the STaR Network enhances students' career readiness and academic success, directly contributing to MC's goals of improving graduation, completion, and retention rates.

The program's focus on equity and inclusion aligns with MC's dedication to fostering a diverse and supportive learning environment. By providing equal access to professional development for all degree-seeking students, including those from underrepresented groups, the STaR Network promotes cultural competency and inclusivity.

The program's emphasis on critical thinking and continuous improvement resonates with MC's strategic initiatives. By using data to assess the program's effectiveness and inform its practices, the STaR Network ensures that it remains responsive to the evolving needs of students and the job market. The STaR Network's innovative approach to professional development, combined with its alignment with MC's mission, ensures that it remains a valuable asset to the MC community.

Program Outcomes

The effectiveness of the STaR Network is systematically evaluated through a comprehensive assessment strategy that includes pre-program assessments, data collection during program implementation, post-program assessments, and follow-up evaluations. This rigorous approach ensures that the program continuously improves and meets the evolving needs of student employees.

Pre-program Assessment

Before the start of the program, students participate in a pre-program assessment designed to gauge their initial skill levels, knowledge, and expectations. This assessment helps identify areas where students need the most development and sets a baseline for measuring progress. By understanding each participant's starting point, the program can tailor its sessions to address the specific needs of the students better.

Data Collection During Program Implementation

Throughout the duration of the STaR Network, data is collected to monitor student participation, engagement, and progress. Attendance

records, session feedback, and participation in discussions and activities are tracked to ensure that students are actively involved and benefiting from the program. This ongoing data collection allows the program coordinators to make real-time adjustments and improvements to enhance the learning experience.

Post-program & Follow-up Assessments

At the end of the program, students complete a post-program assessment to evaluate the knowledge and skills they have acquired. This assessment measures the effectiveness of the training sessions and identifies the impact on students' job performance, confidence, and career readiness.

Data Analysis & Reporting

The collected data are thoroughly analyzed to assess the overall effectiveness of the STaR Network. This analysis includes quantitative data, such as attendance rates and assessment scores, and qualitative data, such as student testimonials and feedback. Detailed reports are generated to summarize the findings and provide insights into areas for improvement.

Quantitative Data Supporting Program Effectiveness in Year One

High Demand and Application Volume

The STaR Network had a total of 360 program seats available across 15 scheduled sessions. Over 600 student applications were received for these seats, and several sessions filled to capacity within an hour of application launch time.

Attendance and Completion Rates

The STaR Network awarded 295 attendance credits to over 100 individual students who participated in the program. Many individual students attended multiple sessions, which further underscores the value of these unique professional development opportunities.

Success Stories & Student Testimonials

Feedback from students has been overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the significant impact of the STaR Network on their professional and academic development. Success stories include students securing internships and improving their job performance due to the skills gained

from the program. Testimonials highlight the program's transformative impact on their personal and professional development in a variety of ways:

Improved Job Performance

Feedback from supervisors indicates that student employees who participated in the STaR Network demonstrated noticeable improvements in their job performance, particularly in areas such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving.

The STaR Network sessions were incredibly helpful. I improved my communication skills and gained confidence in my job. The time management session, in particular, helped me balance my work and studies better

— Josue D, Student Employee

Enhanced Career Readiness

Many students reported feeling more prepared for job interviews and career opportunities after completing the program. The practical skills gained through the STaR Network sessions, such as resume writing and interview techniques, have directly contributed to their success in securing internships and job offers.

Participating in the STaR Network was a game-changer for me. The resume writing and interview skills session prepared me for my job search, and I recently secured an internship thanks to the skills I learned.

— Azeb P, Student Employee

Increased Confidence and Academic Engagement

Students noted a boost in confidence and a greater sense of belonging within the college community. The program's emphasis on inclusivity and cultural competency has empowered students to engage more actively in both their academic and professional environments.

The diversity and inclusion session opened my eyes to the importance of cultural competency in the workplace. I feel more equipped to contribute positively to a diverse work environment.

— Salima M, Student Employee

What's Next for the STaR Network?

Building on the success of its inaugural year, the STaR Network has secured additional funding to enhance and expand the program. The second year of the STaR Network will be marked by significant improvements and strategic changes designed further to support student employees' professional and academic growth.

Refunding

The STaR Network has been refunded through MC's Innovation grant, securing \$11,000 for the upcoming year. This funding will enable the program to offer more sessions, reach a broader audience, and introduce new resources and tools to enhance the student experience. The commitment to sustaining and expanding the STaR Network reflects MC's dedication to providing high-quality professional development opportunities for its students.

Program Changes

Expanded Eligibility and Participation

- The program will also allow more participants per session, increasing the maximum number of attendees from 24 to 30 students per session.

Enhanced Session Offerings

- The STaR Network will introduce new topics and workshops based on student feedback and emerging industry trends. Upcoming sessions will cover digital literacy, entrepreneurship, advanced leadership skills, and generative artificial intelligence.
- More frequent sessions will be scheduled to accommodate the growing interest and demand, with some topics being offered multiple times throughout the year to ensure all interested students can participate.

Launch of the Student Employee Badge

- A key enhancement to the program will be the rollout of the digital microcredential badge, modeled after the University of Maryland's Students Transitioning into Effective Professionals Program. This microcredential will be awarded to students who complete a series of professional development sessions and submit an ePortfolio demonstrating their skills and knowledge.
- The badge will provide formal recognition of students' efforts and achievements, enhancing their resumes and increasing their

employability.

Customized Professional Development Pathways

- Utilizing tools like Career Coach, the STaR Network will offer personalized learning pathways tailored to individual career goals and interests. This customization ensures that each student receives relevant and targeted training that aligns with their professional aspirations.
- Students will work with mentors to develop personalized development plans, helping them navigate their career trajectories more effectively.

Greater Collaboration and Support

- The program will strengthen its collaboration with various departments and stakeholders within MC, including the Office of Financial Aid, as well as faculty and staff. This increased cooperation will ensure a more integrated and supportive environment for student development.
- Faculty and staff will be encouraged to volunteer as session facilitators, providing their expertise and enhancing the learning experience for students.

Improved Data Collection and Feedback Mechanisms

- The STaR Network will implement more robust data collection and feedback mechanisms to continuously assess the program's effectiveness and identify areas for improvement.
- Regular surveys and focus groups will be conducted to gather insights from participants, allowing for real-time adjustments and enhancements to the program.
- Follow-up assessments of program effectiveness will be conducted 6 months and 1 year after the program to gauge the long-term benefits and application of learned skills.

The refunding and strategic changes to the STaR Network underscore MC's commitment to innovation and excellence in student professional development. By expanding eligibility, introducing new topics, and offering personalized learning pathways, the STaR Network is poised to make an even greater impact on student success and career readiness in the coming year.

Conclusion

The STaR Network at MC has proven to be a transformative initiative, providing students with comprehensive professional development and career readiness opportunities. The program has successfully engaged over 100 students, significantly enhancing their skills in communication, leadership, teamwork, and more. Focusing on essential skills is crucial for career readiness. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, the top skills employers seek include problem-solving, teamwork, communication, and leadership. The STaR Network aligns with these competencies, ensuring students are well-prepared for the job market. By developing these skills, students improve their immediate job performance and gain a competitive edge in their future career pursuits. The positive feedback and high attendance rates underscore the program's relevance and impact. This initiative prepares students for immediate job roles and equips them with lifelong skills essential for their future careers, making a lasting impact on their professional journeys. As the program continues to evolve and expand, it will remain a cornerstone of student professional development, fostering a capable and confident future workforce.