

Success Factors for Effective Partnerships:

A Case Study of a Community and College Collaboration to Support the Employment Readiness and Access Needs of Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Introduction

There is no doubt that partnerships often require a lot of effort and time. Starting a partnership might also seem complicated because of:

- Limited resources
- Limited capacity
- Layers of management that must be kept informed

However, a successful partnership can enhance both parties' organizational effectiveness and efficiency by:

- Allowing the sharing of expertise
- Exchanging knowledge
- Filling gaps in services and programs

This case study highlights a successful partnership between a:

- Post-secondary institution — George Brown College
- Community-based employment service provider — Pathway to Possibilities (PTP)

Initiated in 2021, the partnership aimed to enhance the outcomes of the [College Vocational](#) program at [George Brown College](#) — a one-year Ontario College Certificate program in the [Centre for Preparatory and Liberal Studies](#), for students with intellectual disabilities — and fill a gap these students experienced during the transition from school to work.

By evaluating this partnership roadmap, this case study explores the success factors of the partnership and how the partnership enhanced the program, student success, and the operation of the partner organizations.

To produce this case study, Ontario Disability Employment Network (ODEN) interviewed:

- **Aleksandra Popovic**, Communications Professor / Academic Upgrading Assessor at George Brown College
- **Bernadette Beaupre**, Project Consultant at PTP Adult Learning and Employment Programs
- **Nick Lorraway**, a Job Developer from PTP

These conversations were critical for exploring the factors of a successful and sustainable partnership, and the positive outcomes produced by such a partnership.

Background on the partners — PTP Adult Learning and Employment Programs and George Brown College

Pathway to Possibilities had its beginnings as a project under Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy during a period of labour adjustment. Incorporated in 1998 as a not-for-profit community-based organization, PTP was grounded in providing literacy and basic skills programming. PTP has been recognized as leaders in workforce literacy and essentials skills program development.

This Toronto-based organization has a national reach with PTP working across Canada, collaborating with others from coast to coast to coast¹. Over the last 30 years, they have served more than 22,000 job seekers finding meaningful employment². By developing diverse programs with specific focuses and innovative approaches, PTP continues expanding and serving more individuals from diverse communities.

George Brown College was founded in 1967 through the amalgamation of the Provincial Institute of Trades and the Provincial Institute of Trades and Occupations. It began operations on March 1, 1968³. George Brown is one of the top post-secondary institutions in Toronto, Ontario, and is now recognized for its focus on and commitment to career-oriented education and experiential learning. In 2021–2022 academic year, George Brown offered more than 170 full-time programs in diverse fields and served more than 20,000 full-time students each year⁴.

In addition, George Brown offers the long-running College Vocational program, under the Centre for Preparatory and Liberal Studies. It is designed to “address employment barriers and meet the employment preparation needs of students who are neurodiverse or who live with a mild intellectual disability.”⁵

The College Vocational program is a supportive program that helps bridge the gap for students who have graduated from high school with predominantly workplace, but possibly college credits. Using a cohort model, the program helps students develop academic, practical and social skills. It also offers assessment through the use of vocational tools. Students participate in career planning, communication and professional skills training. As part of program, students participate in a work-integrated learning experience⁶.

¹ Community and College Collaboration to Support Employment Readiness and Access Needs of Students with Intellectual Disabilities. Presentation November 14, 2023. ODEN Rethinking Disability Conference November 2023.

² Leading Strategy: PTP Strategic Vision. <https://ptp.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ptp-strategic-vision-jan-2016.pdf>

³ “1960-The Creation of George Brown College”. About Us, Milestones, History. Accessed August 13, 2023 - <https://www.georgebrown.ca/about/history>

⁴ Impact Report. Accessed August 17, 2023 - <https://www.georgebrown.ca/impact-report/2021-2022/programs-and-partnerships>

⁵ Program Description. Vocational Program. <https://www.georgebrown.ca/programs/college-vocational-program-a101>

⁶ Rethinking Disability Conference November 2023. Community and College Collaboration to Support Employment Readiness and Access Needs of Students with Intellectual Disabilities. Presentation November 14, 2023.

Elevating school-to-work transition — the College Vocational program partnership

George Brown College conducted research to determine the best post-secondary programs that were successful in transitioning youth who have a disability into the workplace. The research found many gaps on how programs were preparing students for the transition from school to work.

The biggest finding was the lack of support for students **once they left** the educational system and entered the employment service system. These findings led the leadership at George Brown and PTP to start conversations about finding ways to do better and increase support for students leaving the educational system.

Due to the COVID-19 restrictions in 2020 the College Vocational program had to be paused. For participants and educational staff of the College Vocational program, transitioning to online learning was not successful; they completely stopped delivery. This provided an opportunity for staff to:

- Re-envision the program
- Re-focus on employment readiness more fully
- Rethink the operation and delivery

to better serve students who are neurodiverse or who live with a mild intellectual disability.

According to Susan Toews, Dean of the Centre for Preparatory and Liberal Studies, in her co-presentation at the ODEN Rethinking Disability Conference (RDC) 2023, the pause also allowed the revamping of the curriculum to utilize Universal Design for Learning and best practices in teaching neurodiverse students.

The College Vocational program prepared students to enter the workforce, providing them with the soft skills needed, through intensive support. But it was evident that these intensive supports stopped once students graduated from the program. This sudden and abrupt lack of school-to-work transition support had become a barrier for these prepared job seekers. The PTP partnership integrated their employment services and expertise into the program **throughout school year** and **well before** students leave.

George Brown established the partnership with PTP to elevate the quality of:

- Employment-readiness preparation
- Work experience placement during the program
- Job-finding success after graduation

The most tangible addition to the program was the introduction of Job Developers and Employment Counsellors from PTP to meet with students regularly at the beginning of the program.

In this updated version of the program, students were not only taking courses and attending co-op opportunities but also working with employment service professionals for additional support.

Meeting the PTP staff regularly became a major program element that facilitated students' job readiness and employment success. This partnership built a continuum of support from academic skills to employment services with workplace readiness attained before students leave the school and enter the workforce.

Each year the program welcomes 35 students. In the 2022–2023 academic year, as presented during the RDC Conference:

- The program had 11 graduates pursuing further education
- Nine found suitable employment upon graduation
- Twelve continued looking for employment with support from PTP

In year one of the partnership, PTP had one Job Developer supporting the students.

In year two, two Job Developers were available for the student cohort.

The program received positive feedback, with 92% of students responding that they are highly satisfied with the overall learning experience and would refer other people to the program.

The partnership began with no external funding or dedicated financial support. Both PTP and George Brown were committed to the partnership because they had a clear vision of how this collaboration would break employment barriers for students who are neurodiverse or who live with a mild intellectual disability. Such commitment has led to the success of their partnership and the program.

After a year, and with an operating framework that was replicable, PTP applied for provincial funding through Ontario's Skills Development Fund⁷ to sustain and expand the work. To date, the partnership continues to grow as it enters its third year, its second year of receiving dedicated funding.

⁷ "Ontario Launches Free Job Training for People with Disabilities". Ontario Newsroom. Accessed August 2023. <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1003114/ontario-launches-free-job-training-for-people-with-disabilities>

Success factors for effective partnerships

When the partnership team was asked to name the success factors for a successful partnership, their number one-response was **relationship building** — which requires several factors or “ingredients” to make it successful.

Since day one, both organizations have dedicated effort and time to build a strong relationship for ensuring all stakeholders are ready to embark on the work it takes to build a successful partnership. Both George Brown and PTP shared seven factors that have facilitated the collaboration and this relationship-building process.

These are explored in detail in this case study. Because of these factors, George Brown and PTP were able to build an effective working relationship and hence a successful partnership.

Figure 1 illustrates the factors that contributed to building a strong working relationship between PTP and George Brown College.



Figure 1. Relationship-building success factors

Strong leadership

This partnership was initially proposed by the leadership of both organizations. Both leaders understood how the collaboration would enhance their organizational effectiveness and efficiency.

For George Brown, the partnership would address the gap in the post-graduation transition by providing continuous support to students until they found meaningful employment.

For PTP, the partnership would serve as an opportunity to expand its client base and increase staff’s knowledge by working with jobseekers who are neurodiverse or who have a mild intellectual disability.

With strong commitment and aligned vision, PTP and George Brown were able to make executive decisions collaboratively and mobilize the teams. This created a solid foundation for the relationship-building process and the partnership.

Support from staff

Support from staff, or “buy-in,” is another essential element identified to building this relationship and bringing success to this partnership. It was noted that organizational teams were supportive

when they learned about the partnership. Under strong leadership, the staff from both organizations understood how the vision for this partnership aligned with their respective work. These teams were motivated and ready to “hit the ground” running.

Having buy-in from staff was also important so that activities could start in a timely manner, with responsibilities assigned and tasks completed on time and within the existing budget as no external funding was available.

The leadership at both organizations actively communicated the importance of this partnership with their staff and created a welcoming space to address any concerns or questions the teams had.

Trust

Trust enhanced the day-to-day communication as well as the executive decision-making process. When asked if there had been any conflict or miscommunication, the partnership teams responded without any doubt: none. They added that both partners trusted each other to fulfill assigned responsibilities and make decisions with everyone’s best interest in mind. They built trust from day one and have become one collaborative team that serves the partnership.

Knowledge of each other

Another element that facilitated the partnership between George Brown and PTP was their detailed and effective knowledge of each organization. Staff involved in creating the partnership had been employed in the past by one or both organizations and understood how they operated. These partners acknowledged that post-secondary institutions can be less nimble than community organizations, and this deep understanding of their organizations’ strengths, operating challenges, and differences helped them set reasonable but achievable expectations for the partnership.

To continue to facilitate knowledge exchange, a Partnership Liaison was hired to act as the bridge between George Brown and PTP. The Partnership Liaison has extensive knowledge and rapport in both organizations. This role has been vital in facilitating the communications between both organizations.

In addition, to ensure that issues are addressed as quickly as possible, George Brown and PTP conduct regular weekly meetings to keep each organization informed on the partnership and the progress. Through these regular check-ins, both organizations increase their knowledge about each other and have streamlined the administrative and communication processes.

Effective documentation

Another success factor for George Brown and PTP was the use of documentation to:

- Streamline the implementation of the partnership activities
- Expedite the process

They:

- Communicated expectations

- Created a clear distribution of tasks and responsibilities, and a list of partnership targets

These tasks, responsibilities and targets reflect their vision, commitment and passion to measure the growth and success of the partnership.

The partnership created a formal, effective communication process for reporting on activity delivery. Their practice of “documentation further eliminates any potential confusion and allows continuity through changes.”⁸

When organizations make an intentional effort and take the time required to build a meaningful working relationship, they can establish strong foundations for successful partnerships. The College Vocational program is an excellent example of this.

Relationship building between partners and clients

As mentioned in Part Two of [the ODEN Partnership Guidebook](#), a “successful partnership can enhance program outcomes and organizational efficiency.”⁹ This enhancement can directly impact the service quality and the relationship rapport built between front-line staff and clients, in this case, students.

The Job Developer from PTP who works with students in the College Vocational program was invited to provide feedback for this case study. The Job Developer is involved in providing a range of employment services to the students. He participates in:

- Teaching opportunities in the program
- Co-ordinating the co-op activities
- Connecting students with potential employers
- Providing ongoing employment support after graduation

With all these tasks and responsibilities, the Job Developer describes this role as a “bridge” for the students in the College Vocational program to connect to employment. By building rapport from the beginning of the semester, the Job Developer can:

- Connect students with resources
- Provide technical support
- Connect the students to mental health support

Growth mindset — sustaining partnerships for the long term

George Brown and PTP shared one last piece of advice as they reflected on the success of this partnership: **a growth mindset.**

⁸ ODEN Partnership Guidebook. The benefit of documenting partnerships. Page 2.

<https://www.odenetwork.com/employment-service-providers/resources-for-employment-service-providers-esps/>

⁹ ODEN Partnership Guidebook. What is a Partnership. Page 3. <https://www.odenetwork.com/employment-service-providers/resources-for-employment-service-providers-esps/>

A growth mindset is a value system that embraces challenges, personal growth and lifelong learning. The fact that these two organizations embrace growth mindset thinking has been crucial to the development of this partnership, the stakeholders embrace change and that has led to improvement, growth, and expansion in their operations.

In fact, having a growth-mindset culture has been proven to be of great benefit to advance collaborations and partnerships. Research by Carol Dweck, a psychology professor at Stanford, published in [an article in the Harvard Business Review in 2014](#), tells us that “employees in a ‘growth mindset’ company are:

- 47% likelier to say that their colleagues are trustworthy,
- 34% likelier to feel a strong sense of ownership and commitment to the company,
- 65% likelier to say that the company supports risk taking, and
- 49% likelier to say that the company fosters innovation.”¹⁰

A growth mindset and flexible thinking are essential for career professionals who work closely with job seekers who have a disability because there **is no one-size-fits-all approach** or roadmap to serve this population. PTP staff clearly exemplify this mindset; they support students considering their unique skills. They are career professionals who foster innovation in serving job seekers who have a disability, and support them in achieving their individual career goals.

Conclusion

The College Vocational program at George Brown College has benefited from a successful partnership between George Brown and PTP. Since 2021, the program goals have advanced significantly because of dedicated funding and a strong partnership that has impacted program outcomes.

The partnership was built on a strong understanding and focus on relationship building, allowing these organizations to work together in an effective and timely manner.

Buy-in from leadership and staff — who understood the importance of this working relationship, even when external funding was not available — was crucial for the relationship-building process. Trust and knowledge of how each organization operates and navigates challenges fostered collaboration and streamlined the daily operations of the partnership.

These factors contributed to an excellent working relationship between these two organizations and in turn between front-line staff and the students.

Additionally, documentation was required throughout the relationship building process to clearly lay out the partnership and streamlined the ongoing communication process. This avoided any confusion during the relationship-building process. Lastly, a growth mindset and flexible thinking

¹⁰ How Companies Can Profit from a "Growth Mindset". Harvard Business Review, Accessed August 2023. <https://hbr.org/2014/11/how-companies-can-profit-from-a-growth-mindset>

have proven to be essential to the partnership's sustainability as challenges and changes are confronted on the road to success.

We acknowledge that how partnerships develop can be different from what has been described in this case study, depending on the organizations partnering. Each partnership will have its unique roadmap.

This case study demonstrates that relationship building is fundamental and key to the success of every partnership. Organizations would benefit from adapting and developing the factors described in this case study when building partnerships with stakeholders in their communities.

If you have any questions regarding the information presented in this case study, please email us at info@odenetwork.com.