We Created a Pathway to a Brighter Future: How the Pursuit of Student Success and Service Excellence in Healthcare Came Together.

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Creating the Pathway (or Paving the Road)

Every secondary school teacher can identify with this one—the glazed-over distant look of a student who really is not engaged in classroom learning and does not understand the relevance of the instructor’s pearls of wisdom. While at first glance, this could be an esteem challenging moment for a beginning teacher. Our combined experience as teachers and healthcare instructors taught us that we need to examine why our students do not understand. For many of our students, the rationale for this behaviour may, in fact, result from not being engaged in the process of learning and an inability to see how the teacher’s wisdom may be of value to them in the future. Statistics about student career choices show that 24% of students enter directly into the workforce on completion of secondary school and, alarmingly, 25% of students leaving school prior to completion of OSSD (Dr. Alan J.C. King, Principal Investigator, “Double Cohort Study: Phase 2 Report for the Ontario Ministry of Education”, Social Program Education Group, Queen’s University, October 17, 2002, p.18). The need for relevant, innovative programs which tap into students’ interests and strengths and provide a clear pathway for success for all is a well-known doctrine in education today. Enter, Student Success and a funding mechanism to enable the creation of such a vehicle to remove the glazed-over look of students and transform it into a renewed passion for learning. The challenge was how to parlay this vision into a reality for students who express an interest in a rewarding career yet lack a clear pathway, and furthermore, may not, despite our grand efforts, stay in school? Underscore ‘rewarding’—while flipping burgers is not beneath anyone; generally, it does not hold any allure for an eighteen year old as a permanent career destination (incidentally, our grandparents had another term for flipping burgers—they called it “opportunity”!).

The Road Map: A Partnership is Struck

While Hamilton is long regarded as a steel town, in fact we are a healthcare city. Healthcare is the single largest employer in our region and Hamilton Health Sciences is the region’s largest employer with nearly 10 000 employees (see Figure 1). Surely, not all of these individuals are doctors and nurses? While seated at a task force meeting with regional healthcare leaders and educators, it became apparent that there are over 200 healthcare related careers. The epiphany moment! Customer Support Services employs over 500 entry-level positions that are directly accessible from secondary school. The two positions that fit best with the vision of providing a meaningful cooperative education experience for students and exposure to entry-level positions in healthcare were the Environmental Aide and Porter positions. At Hamilton Health Sciences (HHS), Environmental Aides are assigned to inpatient clinical units. They are responsible for creating and maintaining a clean, comfortable environment for patients, visitors and staff and for the creation of a pleasant mealtime experience for patients.

Hamilton Health Sciences
- Hamilton Health Sciences operates more than 1,000 beds and 24 bassinettes
- More than 3,000 births a year
- Approximately 108,000 emergency visits a year, including more than 19,000 emergency visits at the McMaster Children’s Hospital
- More than 40,000 inpatient admissions a year including acute, rehabilitation and chronic care cases
- More than 40,000 inpatient and outpatient OR cases each year
- The Child and Family Centre at HHS sees more than 104,000 patients each year
- The catheterization labs at Hamilton Health Sciences are the second busiest labs in Ontario
- Hamilton Health Sciences serves approximately 2.2 million people in Hamilton, central south and central west Ontario
- There are more than 800 physicians working at HHS
- HHS has approximately 1,300 volunteers, 450 of whom are students

Figure 1. Hamilton Health Sciences
Porters are responsible for the transportation of inpatients between departments and for the internal delivery of charts, linen, meal carts and other items needed to facilitate patient care. Both positions offered students the opportunity to experience productive, meaningful cooperative education placements—i.e., do (with supervision, support and guidance) rather than just observe (often the case), when students are paired with regulated health professionals. Exemplary Environmental Aides and Porters from each of the four hospital sites were selected to act as coaches to participating secondary school students. Students worked alongside support staff and developed technical skills through direct involvement in housekeeping and/or partnering tasks and interpersonal skills as a result of direct interaction with patients, visitors and hospital staff. Students also had the opportunity to network with regulated care providers and observe some clinical procedures.

Highlights of the Journey
The courses offered form a School-Work transition program designed to enhance student retention by providing students with an opportunity to earn secondary school credits, develop employability and industry-specific skills and obtain experience in the workplace. Curriculum focuses on:
- The healthcare industry and career exploration
- Clinical and customer service skill development
- Service excellence (including quality management, professionalism, confidentiality and communication skills)
- Principles of infection control
- Body mechanics
- An overview of human anatomy and physiology
- Basic medical terminology
- Health and safety issues in healthcare

To be eligible for this unique program students must be 16 years of age or older and have successfully completed a minimum of 16 credits (although student needs are assessed on a per case basis).

The program exemplifies a true working partnership between Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) and Hamilton Health Sciences. The journey from concept to reality involved almost two years of planning meetings with key stakeholders from HWDSB and HHS. The result was the creation of a Locally Developed Course which bridged industry standards with education mandates. Spearheading the expedition were a secondary school teacher from HWDSB and the Service Excellence Coach from HHS. The role of the secondary school teacher is well known. Less known, but no less important, is the role of the hospital educator. We all know that learning does not stop after graduation. Hence, there are a variety of hospital educator positions at HHS. The majority work with regulated health professionals to ensure ongoing clinical competence and professional development, but there are a number who support the learning needs of non-clinical staff. In Customer Support Services the educator position was customized to meet the unique learning needs of support staff as well as other priorities in the service. Besides supporting this program, the accountabilities of the Service Excellence Coach are listed in Figure 2. Both stakeholders have collaborated to ensure curriculum and experiential learning opportunities which will prepare students for work in healthcare. Students earn two secondary school technological education credits in Healthcare Support Services and two co-operative education credits in a semester-long program taught entirely within a hospital environment. Upon successful completion of the program, students earn certification in Healthcare Support Services as endorsed by Hamilton Health Sciences and the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board.

The in-class program is delivered in a classroom within a Hamilton Health Sciences hospital site. In addition, students have access to a skills lab within the same hospital site, which is fully equipped with authentic hospital equipment. Within the skills lab, students learn and practice clinical and support services skills. Furthermore, students have access to a state of the art computer lab at Hamilton Health Sciences and are permitted to use the learning resources. By design, students complete the in-class component of the program up front in preparation for immersion into the hospital environment for their co-operative education placements. Students are given the opportunity to experience three different clinical settings within the semester-long program. This feature enables students to observe and experience a wide-range of authentic healthcare practices. The journey to the bedside is something students will never forget—and it’s nothing like “ER” on television. Imagine a student reporting to you... “Today, a patient told me I made her day by taking the time to talk with her... Today, I saw a patient having his thumb sutured back on... Today, I spoke with a cardiologist about pacemakers because I was in the operating room.
Accountability Statement

Service Excellence Coach

Purpose: The role of the Service Excellence Coach is to provide leadership and support for selection, training, curriculum development, organizational effectiveness, communication and facilitation of organizational interventions to improve effectiveness. As a member of the Human Resources and Hospital Services management team, this key support role will assist to:

- Accomplish successful, sustainable change
- Enhance organizational health and performance
- Continuously learn and improve
- Manage "the people side of change" to increase individual readiness, commitment and performance

Reporting to: Director Customer Support Services

Responsibilities:

- Model positive change by:
  - Assessing current situations and culture to determine readiness and capacity for change
  - Creating conditions necessary for effective change
  - Recommending a roadmap for change
  - Implementing practical and proven change process utilizing a variety of change methodologies, approaches and products that support a transfer of knowledge and skill
  - Integrating systems, services, process and roles
  - Aligning culture and practices
  - Managing the "people side" of change to increase individual readiness, commitment and performance
  - Developing the competencies required for change
  - Contributing to clarity, context and problem solving
  - Providing education, development and coaching that leads to new behaviours
  - Supporting people through the burden of change
  - Monitoring progress and evaluating impacts
- Assist in the development, implementation, and evaluation of the operational vision for the service within the context of the corporate mission, vision, and strategic direction.
- Communicate the corporate mission, vision, values and strategic direction.
- Demonstrate and facilitate the development of staff behaviours that are consistent with the mission and vision of both the hospital and the service.
- Facilitate the development, implementation, and evaluation of service goals and objectives.
- Demonstrate behaviours that support a customer focused team approach.
- Foster an environment that supports active participation in decision-making.
- Facilitate ongoing development of team functioning.
- Support an environment for personal development so that members of the service can maximize their potential.
- Create an environment that supports creativity and innovation in the delivery of services.
- Collaborate with appropriate internal and external groups to plan resource allocation, and deliver services within that allocation.
- Communicate effectively with customers, service providers, other programs and services and community and regional partners for information sharing and networking.
- Establish and identify with the service team the performance objectives, professional development goals and the strategies to facilitate continual growth.
- Create an environment that supports and facilitates educational endeavours and the needs of learners.
- Develop curriculum, learning plans and evaluation tools.
- Develop new dimensions of leadership, creativity and collaboration.
- Improve work life and relationships.

Requirements:

- Academic preparation with competencies in
  - Behavioural Science or Adult Education/Adult Learning
  - Psychology
  - Management Science
  - Business
  - Organization Behaviour
  - Human Resources Development
- Commitment to Hamilton Health Sciences’ mission, vision and values.
- Previous experiences with change management preferably in a health care setting.
- Demonstrated leadership ability.
- Demonstrated excellence in interpersonal skills, team building and the ability to initiate and model positive change.
- Excellent presentation, writing and communication skills
- Ability to assess and identify learning needs
- Ability to design curriculum, learning plans and evaluation tools
- Demonstrated teaching and coaching skills
- Ability to facilitate and participate as part of a team.
- Solid understanding of customer service and client centered care
- Ability to prioritize and handle multiple tasks and expectations
- Excellent problem solving and facilitation skills.
where they perform cardiac procedures... Today, I went to the morgue... Today, today,...” For an educator, it’s a very humbling experience to observe that for students who participated in this project, real world learning is important and was appreciated. It was exhilarating for us to comprehend that we, as instructors, were part of a unique process which provided our learners with a rich and rewarding school experience.

**Tales from the Trip: Lessons Learned**

Naturally, if educators are involved there must be a lesson for all. As we ventured out together the lessons were plentiful. Most lessons were firmly seated in commitment i.e. of people, time, and everyone’s favourite, money. First, and foremost, it is essential to assess the level of stakeholder commitment. Once the partnership is started, if senior level collaboration and support is not provided, the journey could be difficult. In our case, we were very fortunate to have the blessing and support of the key stakeholders within both organizations. This is no easy task when one considers there are in excess of 15 000 employees across Hamilton Health Sciences and the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board.

Furthermore, the success of the program rests on communicating with front line staff who served as coaches for students. These individuals are truly the tour guides of the program and the unsung heroes in our success. The “coach” concept was new to the staff of Customer Support Services. Parallels were drawn between the Customer Support Services coach role and the clinical placements that were part of the education of regulated health professionals at Hamilton Health Sciences, as support staff were aware of these and knew that hospital staff served as preceptors/mentors/coaches to these students. Key to their ultimate support of the role were assurances that:

- Students would not be taking work away from unionized staff
- Students would not be paid
- Staff would still be replaced if they called in sick/go on vacation—students would not be used as employees
- If interested in seeking employment at the end of their placements, students would still have to apply and go through the same screening and interview process as any candidate seeking employment with Customer Support Services.

Once they recognized that the students were not a threat, but rather a group genuinely interested in learning about the Environmental Aide and Porter roles, the staff became intensely interested in and protective of “their” students.

Staff selected to serve as formal “coaches” to students were chosen because of their availability (days/afternoons), interest in the role and ability to model the technical and interpersonal skills to be developed by the students as part of their learning. In total, in-service was provided on five occasions prior to going live to introduce the program, provide an overview of student and coach expectations and to field questions. There was an evaluative component to the placements. For many of the coaches, this was the first time that they had been formally asked to evaluate the performance of another person (although this sometimes occurred informally and not always constructively within the ranks of Environmental Aides and Porters!).

Evaluation was daunting for some but with the help of the secondary school teacher, HHS staff were able to give some very constructive feedback to the students—feedback on both technical skills development and work ethic/service excellence. Not all students found the transition from classroom to busy work environment seamless, and some of the coaches worked very diligently, along with the teacher, to facilitate student success.

With each subsequent term, more and more staff became involved with the students—some as formal coaches and others as helpers when the formal coach was on days off. The Healthcare Support Services Program, initially viewed with suspicion by some staff, became a very eagerly anticipated time each semester. Staff walked a little taller because they knew they had touched the lives of students. Coaches benefited by seeing their jobs with “new eyes”. What may have become routine and unrewarding became novel and exciting again when seen through the eyes of students.

None of this would be possible, of course, without the commitment of students! Therefore, it’s absolutely essential to survey students in order to determine whether they will buy into the process. The unique features of the program which add value are, also, barriers if students do not recognize the intrinsic worth. By design, students from the entire school board can access this program. Hence, for some, they travel in excess of an hour to reach the classroom. Furthermore, they leave the familiarity of their home school and peers for the semester to attend. Make no mistake – this is a BIG commitment for students at a time when many of their decisions are driven by their peer groups. As
When Paths Merge

Sometimes the same path can be traversed to arrive at different destinations. Several such serendipitous events occurred when we least expected it. On one such occasion, the teacher described instructing the students in resume preparation and interview skills as part of the classroom component of the Healthcare Support Services Program. The Service Excellence Coach was lamenting the need to hire a large number of occasional part-time staff to cover the busy summer holiday season. After some discussion, a win-win solution evolved. The Service Excellence Coach agreed to interview all of the secondary school students as part of their education program using the process that is used for applicants at Hamilton Health Sciences. The HHS interview team (Service Excellence Coach and Site Manager) would provide feedback to all of the students on their resumes and performance in the interview. Beyond that, any student meeting the criteria for hire would be offered an occasional part-time position as an Environmental Aide or Porter. This plan led to a very successful experience. Secondary school students had the opportunity to experience a “real” job interview. Their resume and performance in the interview were evaluated using a “real” HHS tool. The students were also evaluated using a tool provided by the secondary school teacher (see figure 3). Even students who were not successful learned some valuable lessons:

- Excuses should never be made in an interview (e.g., “I would have brought a copy of my resume, but my printer broke”)
- Dress is important
- An interview is a time to brag, not be bashful. Speak up and describe what you have to offer the employer!

Figure 3. HHS Customer Support Services Interview Checklist

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Another Merging of Paths

Another serendipitous plan evolved because the Service Excellence Coach had been working to
enhance new employee orientation and was trying to simulate, as closely as possible, the realities of the work environment for participants. The secondary school teacher saw value in exposing the students to components of this orientation as part of their classroom learning experience. Suddenly, the plan unfolded. Students in the Healthcare Support Services program were invited to be part of new employee orientation. They played the role of patients while new Porters practiced introducing themselves, transferring the student/patient from bed to a stretcher or wheelchair and taking the patient down the elevator and through a series of corridors to radiology and back. The students benefited by seeing the skills they had, to this point, only practiced in the classroom, and by having the opportunity to share feedback on the experience from the point of view of a patient. The new staff benefited by having “real” patients to move—some uncooperative, some with communication difficulties, some with mobility issues—all reflecting the types of patients they might encounter in the “real” world.

**Celebrate Successes**
The biggest lesson of all is to savour the successes and celebrate those individuals who were part of the process. Each year the school board hosts appreciation events for Environmental Aide and Porter Coaches. This year, in response to feedback from staff, the school board hosted these events at each of the hospital sites. This dramatically increased the ability for staff to attend, with over 40 individuals members attending one function, alone. More impressive, however, is the number of staff who came in on days off or from their vacation to rekindle relationships forged with students during the semester. The lesson here was everyone needs and deserves recognition for their contributions and a gesture of kindness and appreciation are very potent ways to ensure the sustainability of a program. Consider the buzz and empowerment created by this event as our Coaches returned to their units proudly touting their certificates of appreciation.

Other causes for celebration include an authentic pathway to work. Nineteen students, from the three cohorts of students who have completed the program, have been offered occasional part-time employment with Hamilton Health Sciences. These students were successfully chosen from over five hundred applicants! Ultimately, success can be measured in terms of the accomplishment of goal achievement. When surveyed, 75% of students stated the SchoolWork Program helped them stay in school, 97% responded the program enabled them to connect classroom learning to the workplace and all students surveyed felt the experience helped them become more aware of the training and education required for their future career and helped them to acquire useful work skills.

**All Roads Lead to Success**
Where have we arrived? We’ve arrived in a world where students who were considered ‘at risk’ are excited about life long learning. We’ve arrived in a world where students have clarity about what they envision as a career focus. And finally, our destination has led to a place where both students and coaches approach each day with passion, energy and a genuine desire to do a good job better together.

- Other school boards are taking notice. Two school boards hosted conferences in Spring 2005 to share best practice model in design and partnership development
- Without prompting, students became engaged in hospital-based employee task force for Customer Support Services staff (FISH Network - Fresh Ideas Start Here) and attended meetings as part of their placement activities
- Students initiated participation in a Hamilton Health Sciences exhibitort booth for Customer Support Services at a regional conference highlighting career opportunities in healthcare, “Explore the HHYPE”

We invite all teachers to emulate this project and find ways to adapt its intent and scope to other scenarios.

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**Gail Cipriani, RN, BScN, BEd** brings her extensive experience as a clinician, nurse manager, and clinical educator to the classroom to provide authentic learning opportunities for her students. In addition to her nursing expertise, she holds qualifications as a secondary school teacher and has taught senior level Science, Healthcare and Co-operative Education for the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board.

**Kathryn McInnes Adams, RN, BScN, MScN** brings her extensive experience as a nurse, hospital educator, team builder and motivational speaker to her current role as a Service Excellence Coach with Hamilton Health Sciences. She works with hospital support staff to create a culture of Service Excellence in healthcare.