An interview with Rodney Brutton, director of workforce development at New Community Corporation

New Community Corporation in Newark, New Jersey, has a long track record of helping people. Since it was founded in 1968, NCC has offered housing, health care, child care, education, job training, and a myriad other supportive services in a one-stop format. In 2016, Rodney Brutton, NCC’s director of workforce development, led the effort to gain accreditation for NCC’s postsecondary career and technical programs. Although accreditation—in which a third party certifies that academic and training programs meet specific standards—may seem like a somewhat obscure, bureaucratic endeavor, it is actually an essential strategy for expanding access to education and training programs and for ensuring program sustainability.

JFF What prompted you to seek accreditation?

RB Two things in particular: accreditation provides a direct connection to program and financial sustainability; workforce development can’t rely solely on state, federal grants, foundations, and so on. Those funds are limited in time and must be renewed continually. Accreditation brought about financial sustainability. But even before that—the accreditation process helps ensure that programs, curriculum, facilitators, partnerships, and outcomes are vetted and reviewed by an outside party. Accreditation provides external validation of the work and brings credibility to our programs.

JFF Why is external validation important?

RB When employers know that programs are validated, they take them seriously. And for accreditation you must have employer engagement: employers help write curriculum, ensure that facilities and tools are up to date. They also provide employment opportunities to our students. Employer involvement in the accreditation is important; it’s also important to jobseekers—tells them the program is of real value.

A group of NCC graduates at Sansone Automall with Governor Chris Christie.

Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics (TDL) is a critical sector to the U.S. economy, employing over 4.6 million workers who track orders, ensure the safety of goods during transit, and manage the logistics of planning and executing shipments using different modes of transportation.

Through JFF’s Delivering the TDL Workforce, a two-year initiative generously supported by the Walmart Foundation, 10 regions across the country scaled up their TDL training programs to provide low- to middle-skilled workers with occupational training that led to industry recognized credentials, offered them supportive services, and placed them into good jobs.

This series highlights the innovative ways three grant recipients used this initiative to expand training access to incarcerated women, spur employer investment in TDL training, and secure steady funding to sustain programs.
JFF How long did it take to receive the accreditation?

RB The entire process takes 12–18 months, but it’s divided into two stages. We are currently in a stage called “candidacy for accreditation status”—it’s the first status a school applying for accreditation receives. It takes 3–6 months to receive “candidacy” status, and then another 9–12 months to complete the remaining steps of the accreditation process.

JFF How does accreditation give NCC students access to federal financial aid?

RB Our accreditor, the Council on Occupational Education (COE), is unique in that it is the only national accreditor that allows schools to access federal financial aid during the candidacy process. So, once a school has candidacy status with COE, it can apply to participate in Title IV Federal Student Aid (FSA) programs, which provide access to federally subsidized Stafford Loans and Pell Grants. Only accredited schools can participate in FSA, so it’s a two-step process—first we had to go through the accreditation and enter the candidacy stage; then we applied to participate in Title IV with the Department of Education (DoED). That was more challenging than the accreditation—it took 6–9 months after we submitted the application to DoED to participate in the Title IV program.

JFF What did it take, from an organizational perspective, to get the accreditation?

RB It’s a very strenuous, comprehensive process that required sustained institutional commitment. We had organizational involvement at every level: the CEO and special assistant to the CEO were the real drivers behind the application. In addition, the CFO, myself, our director of human resources, director of facilities and maintenance, director of IT, and instructional staff (approximately seven) were all involved to varying degrees. In total, around 20 full-time staff members were part of the process.

JFF What has the impact of Title IV been so far?

RB Over 125 students have applied, and approximately 80 have received financial aid; those students are enrolled in the current session. We can offer both Pell Grants and federal student loans (Stafford Loans)—both subsidized and unsubsidized.

We have found a number of students who weren’t eligible for Pell for one of two reasons: some are in default from another school they attended; others already have a college degree and are seeking additional training at NCC. For those students, we do have other funding sources.

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**THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS**

NCC’s accreditor is the Council on Occupational Education, a Georgia-based national accreditor with a 40-year track record. Receiving accreditation is a costly, time-consuming process that includes the following main steps:

- Identify the accreditors available and choose the one that best fits your program.
- Submit a letter of intent to seek accreditation.
- Submit an application and fee.
- Attend a three-day workshop for candidates.
- Submit a self-study report that includes detailed program and financial information.
- Host a two-day site visit for three accreditors. Visitors review curriculum, inspect facilities, meet staff, and take steps to ensure that the information submitted in the application is true and accurate.
Driven to Innovate at New Community Corporation

JFF What did you learn through the process that would be useful to other community-based organizations considering accreditation?

RB You must find an accreditor that fits your scope of work—there are a number of accreditors out there, but they don’t necessarily match what you’re doing; postsecondary vocational training needs a particular accreditor.

You must have a good track record/history of providing postsecondary education/training—not just six months on the scene.

Do your homework to be sure your course offerings are eligible—this is very important. Course offerings must be at least 600 hours in length in order to be eligible for Title IV—an 80-hour home health aide course isn’t going to be eligible.

Finally, you must have strong connections with employers. We’ve had to work hard to deepen relationships with employers around the accreditation process. Previously, employers had accepted job candidates, but that’s about it. I spend a lot of my time building relationships with local employers: Ford is the primary partner with automotive, along with Sansone Auto Group; we also have relationships with hospitals such as Newark Beth Israel Medical Center, union and non-union employers/contractors; and with food service providers in airports, hotels, and restaurants.

JFF What was the most challenging part of the accreditation process?

RB The challenge was administrative rather than programmatic. The institution must document and have supporting documentation for everything it does, from admissions to orientation to education programs to relationships with employers to facilities. The accreditors’ motto could be “trust but verify.” They need a piece of paper to verify that everything is actually happening.

JFF How does JFF’s Delivering the TDL Workforce initiative, funded by the Walmart Foundation, fit into NCC’s decision to pursue accreditation?

RB The TDL grant, which was part of a CareerWorks grant NCC received, was critical to building up our automotive program. The program had existed for years, thanks to state funding, but the grant allowed us to expand it significantly. That, in turn, gave us a strong foundation from which to reinvigorate some of our other education and training programs. We already had a number of programs in place in allied health, culinary arts, and other fields, but we could only offer them intermittently, when funding was available.

Expanding the automotive program allowed us to apply for accreditation, and with accreditation we can offer each of the programs regularly, and because we have access to Title IV funds we can offer funding to a much wider range of students. Grants tend to be very limited in who can be funded: there are residency requirements, age requirements, limits on including people with criminal histories—all kinds of barriers.

NCC’s Programs

NCC offers five training programs that meet the 600-hour minimum required for federal financial aid eligibility and provide nationally recognized certifications.

Certified Medical Assistant

790 Hours

National Certification Career Association or National Center for Competency Testing

Patient Care Technician

640 Hours

National Certification Career Association or National Center for Competency Testing

Construction Building Trades

900 Hours

OSHA-10 Construction Safety

Ford Automotive Technician

1,200 Hours

ASE certification, Ford certification

Culinary Arts

900 Hours

ServSafe certification
At the end of the day, was the accreditation process worthwhile?

Absolutely! The return on investment is endless. Accreditation enables NCC to reach a whole host of people we couldn’t serve before. Serving this broader group of people is a direct return on the investment it took to get accredited. Not only are we serving more people, we’re able to compete directly with for-profit schools and offer our community an affordable alternative.

By becoming accredited and giving students access to federal financial aid, we are doing what for-profit schools have been doing for decades, but at a much lower cost to students. We price our programs so that tuition costs 85 percent of the full Pell Grant amount ($5,815 in 2017). Not all students are eligible for the full grant—eligibility depends on family income—but for those who are, the Pell Grant covers 85 percent of the cost of school, and students don’t have to go into debt to get the education and training they need.

Finally, shifting away from relying on grant funding and one-stops is huge—it allows you to build long-term institutional sustainability. We can now spend more time developing and providing services and less time chasing funding. It’s a win-win for everyone: our students, local employers, and the community that we all share.

A STUDENT’S STORY

Warren Best wants to be an engineer. But after graduating high school, he couldn’t afford college and didn’t know what to do next. A friend told him about NCC’s automotive training program. Warren was skeptical—he already knew a lot about fixing cars, his dad is a mechanic, and Warren has worked on cars for years. But an NCC staff member encouraged him to enroll, and he hasn’t looked back.

Two weeks into his internship placement at Sansone Auto Mall, a large local car dealer, Warren was hired into a full-time job working on Nissans. Eighteen months later, Warren is still there.

“NCC gave me a lot,” Warren says. “I was basically doing nothing; sitting around for a couple of months. When I heard about the program I didn’t want to do it; thought it might be a waste my time. But it helped me accomplish a lot; made me a mature person. The job makes me get up and be on time. I bought my first car. It definitely was a good choice.”

The NCC program allowed Warren to convert his considerable prior knowledge into certifiable skills in high demand by a local employer. Warren didn’t receive federal financial aid because he attended the program before NCC received accreditation. Instead, NCC subsidized Warren’s training with funds from the JFF’s Delivering the TDL Workforce initiative, which ended after two years. Now NCC is able to help even more students.

“Warren’s story is multiplied by hundreds of local residents,” Rodney Brutton observes. “NCC is honored to be able to provide these services, and although the accreditation process was challenging, it was well worth it.”
### QUICK FACTS

**Delivering the TDL Workforce**

**WHAT** A two-year initiative supported by the Walmart Foundation and administered by JFF.

**WHO** Ten regions across the country received grants. JFF provided technical assistance to sites to adopt national best practices in training program design, participant recruitment and retention, curriculum delivery, employer engagement, local partnership development, and job placement strategies. JFF and the sites particularly focused on recruiting and connecting women to this predominantly male sector.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact of the initiative over two years</th>
<th>Impact at NCC</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3,697</strong> Jobseekers served, including 781 women</td>
<td><strong>1,200 Hours</strong> Auto mechanic training</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2,150</strong> Jobseekers placed into jobs with an average placement wage of <strong>$15.59</strong> per hour</td>
<td><strong>178</strong> Students trained</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>768</strong> Incumbent TDL workers trained, including 224 women</td>
<td><strong>14</strong> Women trained</td>
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<td>Generated pay raises for <strong>371</strong> incumbent workers</td>
<td><strong>89</strong> Graduates employed</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>52</strong> Graduates employed for at least 180 days</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>$15.25</strong> Average wage</td>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>82</strong> Incumbent workers served</td>
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Acknowledgments

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Jobs for the Future (JFF) is a national nonprofit that builds educational and economic opportunity for underserved populations in the United States. JFF develops innovative programs and public policies that increase college readiness and career success and build a more highly skilled, competitive workforce. With over 30 years of experience, JFF is a recognized national leader in bridging education and work to increase economic mobility and strengthen our economy. Learn more at www.jff.org.

ACCESS TO HIGH-PAYING CAREERS

Many occupations that provide family sustaining wages without a college degree are in male-dominated industries. It takes careful planning to break these gender barriers and successfully connect women to these jobs. Training providers can draw on resources from the Adding a Gender Lens to Nontraditional Jobs Training toolkit, for strategies to recruit women into their programs, enhance job training to address critical issues such as safety for women, and prepare women for job interviews and other components of career success.