
Career Pathways Initiative

Southern Bancorp Community Partners

Southern Bancorp Community Partners (SBCP, formerly Southern Good Faith Fund) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit affiliate of Southern Bancorp (collectively, “Southern”), one of the nation’s largest rural development banks. Southern works to impact poverty by improving educational and economic opportunities for children and working families in high-poverty communities in Arkansas and Mississippi. Within the broader effort, SBCP builds communities through its community-driven strategic planning and implementation process. SBCP changes lives by helping low-income families learn economic skills, build assets, improve credit histories, find employment opportunities, and achieve stronger financial futures through a range of direct services. SBCP reinforces this comprehensive approach with policy efforts and system-level initiatives. SBCP’s public policy program has worked to develop a housing trust fund, facilitate a ban on predatory payday lenders, and create policy initiatives to expand rural VITA services.

Career Pathways Changes Lives

Southern established the initial pilot Career Pathways program at Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas in 2004. Career Pathways is an innovative workforce development program aimed at increasing access to and successful completion of higher education credentials among the adult workforce, particularly relatively low-income adults. The program inspired the Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative, described below, which is a statewide effort to implement career pathways



programs at 22 two-year colleges in Arkansas. The Career Pathways program has proven so successful that Southern has begun to explore the potential for replicating this workforce development program in Mississippi. Southern’s experience in establishing the pilot program and its successful adoption as a statewide, state-funded program provides the framework for other states seeking to create similar programs.

Career Pathways is designed to help adult students, particularly low-income adults, overcome the unique challenges they face in terms of enrolling in and completing postsecondary training. By helping adults overcome these challenges, the project embodies an alternative higher education service delivery model geared toward adults, which are often collectively described as “non-traditional” students. Much of the conceptual framework for the career pathways program can be attributed to a

report from the Workforce Strategy Center titled “Building a Career Pathways System: Promising Practices in Community College-Centered Workforce Development.” (This report is available through: http://www.workforcestrategy.org/images/pdfs/publications/AR_CPI_Report_YR3_Final_2009.pdf.) This report was among the first to define “career pathways” programs and offer examples of such programs across the country.

A key characteristic of the Career Pathways design includes mapping pathways of noncredit and college credit programs tied to high-demand occupations. A prime example is nursing and allied health. This pathway begins with a noncredit Employability Certificate or a college credit Nursing Assistant Certificate of Proficiency that qualifies students for various entry-level jobs in the health care field. The pathway continues on to advanced college credit programs, including Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) and various allied health certificate and degree programs. Multiple career pathways are offered in careers where there are real job opportunities in the local labor market. In addition to academic services, the Career Pathways program provides funding for a variety of services—like transportation and childcare—that enable single parents to participate in higher education programs. The impact of the program is most clearly seen in how the program has changed the lives of participants.



Melissa Beaver is a single mother of three who recently achieved her long-term goal of becoming a Registered Nurse. This has been a long process for Ms. Beaver, but a very rewarding one. Along the way to graduation, she attained many accolades including: National Dean’s List, President’s Scholar, Above National Average on CAPP Exam (Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency), and RN Faculty Award for Critical Thinking all the while keeping a 3.63 GPA. Ms. Beaver is also a CPR instructor, and a Certified Instructor of ACTS Program (Alcohol/Chemical Treatment Series).

Ms. Beaver feels without Career Pathways coming along when it did she would not have been able to finish her goal. She had to travel an hour each way to attend class and the rising cost of transportation had put too much strain on a struggling family’s resources. She was able to access Career Pathway’s transportation assistance and continue through the end to graduation, also receiving help to pay for her costly certification and year-end tests.

DeLoris Baker was beginning to see her dream of completing her education being put on hold a second time until she saw an article in the newspaper about the Career Pathways program. At the time, this mother of four young adults was in between jobs, and this seemed like the perfect opportunity to continue her education. Career Pathways assisted Ms. Baker by paying her tuition and providing books and gas vouchers for transportation assistance. She stated that her participation in the program has helped make a brighter future possible.



Ms. Baker graduated from Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas in May 2006 with an Associate Degree in Early Childhood education. She is currently doing her student teaching at J F Wahl Elementary school. In May 2008, Ms. Baker received her Bachelor Degree in Early Childhood education along with one of her daughters, to whom she also recommended Career Pathways. Ms. Baker's goal was to become a teacher plans to teach in the Helena-West Helena school district and go on to get her Master Degree in Education.

"My advice to others," says Ms Baker, "is to take advantage of this program and don't give up. If there are problems, talk to the program advisors who are always there to help by giving advice and support." She encourages students to hang in there and work with the program to help make change in your life possible.

As the benefit of the Career Pathways program became clear, Southern's policy team began to network with officials at the Arkansas Department of Higher Education to explore the potential of expanding the program throughout the state. Funded through the state's Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funds, the Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative is currently available through 22 two-year colleges throughout the state. Since inception, program grants have surpassed \$70 million and served 21,000 students who have earned almost 19,000 certificates and degrees. Southern is now working to explore the potential of replicating the Career Pathways program concept in Mississippi.

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