

## The Impact of Opportunity Junction's Alumni Programs

**A New Program:** I hadn't seen Arcelia in almost a year. But as I poked my head into the office of our Manager of Alumni Programs, she turned and flashed a big smile. We hugged as I asked her what brought her in.

I sometimes hesitate to ask. Alumni of our Job Training and Placement Program (JTPP) could be visiting for any number of reasons, including losing a job. We're glad they know we're here to help, and it's even more satisfying when the visit is just to say hi, or because they are ready for something more in their careers.

For Arcelia, it was good news: to sign up for the career ladder program, our Alumni Advancement Academy (AAA). Piloted beginning in late 2013 with the support of the Y&H Soda Foundation, the AAA targets employed alumni earning less than \$18 per hour. "I'm still working," Arcelia told me, "but I want to earn a raise."

The AAA combines evening computer classes, individual career counseling, and weekend cohort meetings. There is funding for college classes, and we address the barriers our alumni tell us they face in attending an evening or weekend program. Our alumni are usually holding down a full-time job while also caring for children, so we've provided meals, dispensed gas cards, and hosted volunteer babysitting onsite.

**The Whole Offering:** The AAA joined a robust program of leadership, social, and support programs for alumni:

- The Alumni Council advises on program development and alumni social activities;
- Social activities include movie nights, bingo nights, and an annual holiday party;
- The Alumni Center is available during all office hours for job search, training, and Internet use; and
- The Active Alumni Job Seeker Program targets unemployed alumni and combines group meetings with individual counseling and job placement.

In 2015, we also added a Salesforce Community for our alumni – the MyOJ portal. Alumni can use the portal to track their job search, with automated messages to staff when an interview is scheduled, and they can use it to let us know about changes in employment or contact information.

**Measuring the Impact:** We measure our long-term outcomes **and** the effectiveness of our alumni programs using traditional measures (retention snapshot at 6-, 12-, and 18-months) and newer measures. The AAA has moved the needle substantially on one of these newer measures: the employment persistence rate.

We define employment persistence as having maintained employment during at least 15 of the first 18 months post-placement (more precisely: 465 days of the first 548). During the two years before the introduction of the AAA, 59% of alumni hit that target. During the following two years, upon the introduction of the AAA, the rate jumped to 88%.

The connection isn't obvious, since the AAA targets alumni who are already employed. The impact, though, is too large to ignore. Possible explanations include:

1. Employees engaged in professional growth training and earning raises are less likely to resign from a "dead end" job; and/or
2. Evening trainings offered as part of the AAA are open to all alumni, including those unemployed, and serves an important outreach function for all alumni.

**Challenges:** With pilot funding in place, our biggest challenge has been developing a weekly training calendar that draws large numbers of participants. The evening sessions are rarely well attended, even when babysitting is offered: we typically draw between 3 and 6 participants. Our alumni lead busy lives and may not be as available for advancement opportunities as we would like them to be.

**Moving forward:** We are committed to remaining flexible and nimble as we create the best program to serve our alumni. The meta-communication of providing alumni what they've asked for is, on its own, quite powerful. For example, our alumni are our most committed volunteers. Our alumni know we're here for them, and not just to capture outcomes data. They appreciate having evening hours when they know staff will be available. In addition, our outcomes data shows that the investment of the extra resources in supporting alumni career growth provides an excellent return on investment.