At the Helm: Gail Champlin ’66 (right), director of Hartford College for Women’s Career Counseling Center, and Eleta Jones (left), director of career counseling and assistant director of the center.
A little over a year ago, Aretha Duncan retreated into the Blue Mountains of Jamaica, where she was vacationing, to meditate. The Ashford, Conn., humanitarian had spent years traveling the world in her quest to help the needy. Frustrated with the arduous, often disappointing task of applying for grants, she was convinced of the need to develop a for-profit business to help fund her nonprofit causes as well as provide herself with a livelihood. As she meditated, an idea hit her: produce a line of gourmet Jamaican coffees and market it to hotels, supermarkets, airlines, and other such establishments in the United States. Great idea. Now what?

“I went to the local office of the SBA [Small Business Administration] to get some information, and I came across a brochure for a program that helps people start their own businesses,” recalls Duncan. “I ended up enrolling in the program.” That program was The Entrepreneurial Center—a comprehensive four-part training program for aspiring entrepreneurs that includes an intensive, two-session self-assessment workshop to determine an individual’s readiness for self-employment; a 16-week comprehensive, training course on how to start and run one’s own business; one-on-one business counseling; and help in raising business capital.

Since it was established in 1985, The Entrepreneurial Center has helped hundreds of men and women like Aretha Duncan start their own businesses. But its story is just one chapter in the highly successful history of its parent body, The Career Counseling Center, the innovative community-outreach division of Hartford College for Women at the University of Hartford.

“The Career Counseling Center is itself a very entrepreneurial endeavor,” notes the center’s longtime director, Gail C. Champlin. Indeed, in 1967 economic currents were rapidly shifting. Sensitive to those shifts and the impact they might have on the lives of women, families, and society as a whole, Laura A. Johnson, then president of the Hartford College for Women, launched a project to study the need for employment and education of women living in Greater Hartford. The project identified a strong need for counseling and training to help women return to work. In the fall of 1968, The Career Counseling Center was formed and became the first career counseling service for women in Connecticut, and one of the very first in the nation.

Over the years its focus has changed, and people seeking the center’s services now include men and women from all over Connecticut, of all ages and backgrounds. Clients are assisted in assessing their personal strengths as they relate to new career goals and plans. They receive guidance in completing résumés, preparing for interviews, and developing job-search strategies. The center helps clients develop self-confidence and a sense of hope for the future while they are learning to communicate their strengths to current and future managers.

To help local corporations respond to the increasing human-resource challenges of the 21st century, The Career Counseling Center also provides career development services on site. Corporate customers have included Pratt & Whitney, United Technologies corporate headquarters, American Eagle Federal Credit Union, Aetna, Hamilton Sundstrand, and Northeast Utilities. This fall, the center is offering a new Human Resources Institute for Talent Development and Retention to help human resource professionals nurture in-house talent.

A year ago, Sunsheray Turner, the oldest of four children in a single-parent family, enrolled in the center’s After-School Computer Academy, a program that enhances young women’s computer skills and prepares them for the work world. An outstanding student, Turner then enrolled in Project CRECER, a Career Counseling Center summer program that enhances the math, language arts, and computer skills of economically disadvantaged minority women who are in high school and then opens their eyes to career possibilities through its affiliation with the Capital
Region Workforce Development Board’s Summer Youth Employment and Training Program. Through these two programs, Turner, who graduated ninth in her class from the Albert I. Prince Technical School in Hartford, received two internships—one at the University of Hartford and the other at Northeast Utilities.

“The internships,” says Turner, “gave me a chance to see what kinds of jobs are out there. I knew that I wanted to major in finance and minor in international business, and these internships helped me to focus on what I wanted to do.” This year, she will begin classes as a freshman at Central Connecticut State University.

Amy Parks was a young homemaker with two sons, ages 10 and 11, when her husband died suddenly two years ago. She found transition counseling, life skills workshops, and plain old support through Look Forward, a Career Counseling Center program aimed specifically at displaced homemakers who may be divorced, widowed, or separated and are seeking help with steps toward emotional and financial self-sufficiency. “They helped me figure out where I wanted to be and what I wanted to do,” says the Burlington, Conn., mom. “I was in a group with 10 other women who met twice a week for 12 weeks. We had career counseling, help with our résumés, and we even learned word processing. But we also focused on our personal selves.” Today, Parks is a library media specialist in the Harwinton, Conn., school system. A graduate of the University of Hartford, she is also back in school at Southern Connecticut State University, where she hopes to earn a master’s degree in that same subject.

The Career Counseling Center also offers one-on-one career-counseling services, a litany of career development seminars, a Child-Care Training program for child-care workers, the Youth Development Practitioner Academy to help adults who work with youth to upgrade their skills; the Certified Nurse Assistant Training program; and continuing and professional education in such fields as real estate and construction.

“The Career Counseling Center was formed to respond to a community need, and we are still doing just that,” says Champlin. “When we see a need for a new program, we add it. When a program has run its course and a need no longer exists, we discontinue it and move on. We strive to offer the highest-quality service by hiring the best staff, and we measure outcomes by checking back with people to see how they are doing.”

Over the past 35 years, the center has made a major difference in the lives of thousands of people across Connecticut. Prospects for the next 35 seem every bit as good.