

# Better Data, Better College Workforce Programs

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## Introduction

In our series of papers focused on federal workforce training programs like the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant and Health Profession Opportunity Grant (HPOG) programs, we discussed the practices that institutions and other training providers adopt, how the programs are operated, and potential policy solutions that could improve the success of future federal initiatives to support community college-based workforce training. Our previous papers noted the disconnect between training programs and other programming at institutions, as well as the lack of coordination between funding sources and the training programs' requirements.

The federal government's ultimate goals for investing in large-scale job training initiatives are to help educate more students and support them in attaining successful outcomes, such as finding a job that pays a family-supporting wage. These programs should be accountable for achieving their desired completion and employment outcomes, particularly for non-traditional students and those living in poverty. For low-income individuals, the best protection against falling back, or further, into poverty is gaining skills that allow them to get a job in demand in their local labor market.

Too often, however, these programs are measured based on such inputs as the number of students enrolled, rather than on outcomes. And the input data is not always of great quality; many training programs are unable to demonstrate how often or how well students with non-traditional characteristics are participating in training programs, and how training providers might mitigate the additional barriers to completion faced by many of these students. Some colleges have been able to determine positive outcomes using administrative data—such as a northern Midwest college that found 97 percent of its HPOG students passed the nursing licensing exam on the first try.

To promote success, future investments in such programs should include provisions enabling the reporting of more rigorous data on outcomes. This paper recommends several policy solutions to this problem:

- Institutions must be actively engaged with their local workforce development board (WDB) and connected with employers. This facilitates the development of relevant training programs, job placements for students, and monitoring of former student success—all activities that support future program improvements.
- Training programs must incentivize career pathway students' efforts to upskill while consciously including opportunities for low-skilled individuals, rather than churning students through the program as quickly as possible. Moreover, federal funding for these initiatives should require that high school-level credentials earned as part of the training program's career pathway count toward institutional outcomes.

- Allow a student-level data collection. This would provide, for instance, a foundation for a more robust federal education and workforce data construct that allows federal investments across programs and agencies to be evaluated and given better consideration for potential future investments.
- Training programs should be able to determine student employment and earnings outcomes by being allowed to compare their student data with wage record data from the state's Unemployment Insurance (UI) system, with appropriate privacy safeguards.

As this paper underscores, these solutions are not just abstract ideas; they would directly address issues that institutions are struggling with as they implement the TAACCCT grant and HPOG programs. Current attempts by workforce programs to innovate around the limitations created by the federal Higher Education Act (HEA) have caused an undue burden on these programs' ability to effectively operate and evaluate success.

How do we get the data to show the value of these training programs? And how can these data be used to improve student outcomes and refine the programs' design?

To answer these questions, our discussions with community colleges, evaluators, and federal officials identified two potential areas of inquiry: efforts to build employer and institutional connections to reach low-skilled individuals; and program innovations institutions have undertaken with data that is available to them, along with suggestions for reform to meet institutional data needs that go beyond the limit of what currently accessible data can do.

## Influencing student-facing outcomes by building employer relationships and career pathways

Workforce training programs can both connect institutions with individuals who might never have been engaged in postsecondary education and strengthen the local community using enhanced relationships between colleges and employers. Good relationships can mean cooperative, mutually beneficial partnerships where both parties collaborate on key operational elements like program design, equipment purchases, and student recruitment. This collaboration creates an environment that supports strong programmatic achievements.

In practice, however, otherwise productive partnerships between colleges and businesses did not always create optimal conditions for reducing barriers to student success. In the first paper<sup>1</sup>, we discussed the role employers play in building community college training programs that provide in-demand skills. We noted a common preference among employers for offering noncredit training that rapidly meets their workforce needs. Such programs are faster and easier to set up and enable prospective employees to complete the program more quickly. However, this can create a conflict between employers' immediate need for trained employees and the optimal solution allowing program participants to benefit more from for-credit education that offers long-term academic and skill benefits, even after their job with the program's employer-partner ends. This becomes even more important if the employer is not willing to commit to hiring all who successfully complete the program.

Other consequences may be even more substantial, such as employer-partners who undermine, rather than support, the goals of the training program. One site allowed employers to assist in evaluating candidates they would hire from the training program. In this instance, the employer cherry-picked students at program entry, sometimes actively discouraging individuals from starting the training who they deemed suitable to be hired right away without the training, and in other cases rejecting students outright and disapproving their enrollment because of biases about prior criminal history or for other reasons. The training provider worked to revise that employer's expectations, suggesting that the training could bring out the potential of the students.

Effective relationships between colleges and employers are the best way to bridge the gap from merely connecting students to employment to reaching further and building strategic employer engagement. Such arrangements provide mutual benefits to both the institution and the employer beyond merely training potential employees. For instance, some institutions have found a way to mitigate their lack of data access (as discussed further in the next section) by agreeing to a data-sharing agreement in which employers provide data about program graduates' retention in their job and wage increases after a given period of time. Such data partnerships help institutions quantify the economic value of their programs. Employers commonly benefit not only from opportunities to obtain new, well-trained employees, but also through programs that upskill their incumbent workers, enabling current employees to advance in their careers, which can create backfill opportunities for lower-skilled new hires. If the training is part of a well-designed career pathway, employees could return to school at later points and continue to advance their training.

The nation's workforce training policies under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) place an increased emphasis on collaboration across federal programs, in particular those addressing the workforce system; adult education; education and training under the HEA and Perkins Career and Technical Education Act; financial support programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); and others. WIOA also requires local workforce development boards (WDBs) to have representation from institutions of higher education. To support deeper employer-institutional relationships, grantees in future workforce training programs should be actively serving in the role of WDB member, or should be otherwise actively connected with their local WDB. Should institutions not know where to look for employers in particular fields or industries, the WDB could be their best opportunity to connect to engaged, knowledgeable employer-partners. Institutions that remain engaged with employers can reap benefits in building, improving, and measuring their training programs.

During the first round of HPOG grants, the program had a particular focus on career pathway programs. These first grants were time limited and governed by separate performance metrics. These grant requirements led some institutions to feel a tension between quality programs that were able to serve only a few people through several levels of a career pathway—requiring greater time and resource investment that may have reduced their capacity to meet their enrollment targets—and those designed to produce many program graduates who only completed the lowest-level credential(s) offered. Federal HPOG administrators made some changes between the first and second

### ROADBLOCK FOR LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

Program designs or elements that might better serve students were sometimes overlooked as a result of trying to meet every employer expectation.

### SOLUTION

Grantees can better support the goals of themselves, the employer-partner, and students by engaging in strategic partnerships, which can build long-term benefits, for instance by adapting programs to meet emerging needs over time. Working with the local WDB and staying connected with employers can help make that possible.

rounds of grants to discourage the latter strategy of spreading the funding “thinly.” Still, we spoke with at least one site in the Southwest that permanently moved away from “long-term tracks” (those that culminate in an Associate’s degree, which would be considered a robust career pathway) after round one because of their concern about meeting performance measures. Workforce training programs must be particularly cognizant of this tension and should avoid program designs that, for instance, exclude stackable credentials that make it more difficult for individuals to return to, or remain enrolled in, skills training. This prohibits longer-term success and may limit individuals’ ability to break the cycle of poverty.

Employers can play an important role: some engaged with HPOG or TAACCCT programs offered tuition reimbursement for incumbent workers to upgrade their skills and occasionally offered reimbursement for newly hired individuals to build skills, as well. These employer-partners saw the value in helping individuals advance their training and increase their job skills. However, employers are not uniform in information, knowledge, or engagement; therefore institutions may need to educate employers about the benefits of a tuition reimbursement program or find other ways to leverage their cooperation. Ultimately, future federal programs should have clear rules to encourage long-term participation in career pathways, because that message will influence conversations between institutions and employers as they develop training programs and consider students for enrollment.

Low-skilled adults—those who lack a high school diploma or equivalency (HSD/E) or those who place into remedial developmental education courses—are a student population particularly in need of access to career pathways<sup>2</sup>. This is because career pathways provide foundational skill building in context and concurrent with postsecondary learning, allowing students to complete remedial classes, which could be cost and time<sup>3</sup> deterrents to postsecondary progress, simultaneously with postsecondary coursework. In the context of reporting outcomes for TAACCCT, a student’s attainment of a HSD/E was not considered a credential. This is despite the fact that a HSD/E, when compared with no high school credential, has demonstrable value<sup>4</sup> in the workforce and could serve as an interim measure of a student’s progress toward postsecondary credential. The Higher Education Act allows for financial assistance to students who are enrolled in a career pathway that provides complementary academic and workforce training activities, which includes academic work at a high school level, and to students who have shown an ‘ability to benefit’<sup>5</sup> from such education or training.

Conversely, by placing greater value on postsecondary credentials, the rules incentivized institutions to count even very short-term programs—some as short as four weeks—toward their outcomes. If the attainment of a HSD/E is not allowed to count for the institutions’ outcome measures, it minimizes the importance of this credential, while also subtly discouraging institutions from extending their recruitment to lower-skilled individuals. Workforce training programs must be able to show support for these initiatives by: allowing HSD/E to count as a credential in institutional reporting as long as it was obtained during the student’s participation in a career pathway, and encouraging employer partnerships that focus on new and incumbent workers with lower skills.

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The pressure to meet grant performance metrics sometimes conflicted with program designs that were more supportive of low-income and low-skilled students.

### SOLUTIONS

Future workforce development initiatives should encourage career pathway programs, wherever possible, to support students’ long-term educational achievement. Further, these initiatives should allow for the attainment of a high school diploma or equivalency to count toward a grantee’s performance goals.

## The limits to administrative data

Another barrier that limits the performance measurement of workforce training programs is institutional access to data, or lack thereof. Despite having limited administrative data, officials we interviewed at institutions and workforce boards were able to innovate. Program improvements ranged from service delivery to student outreach, including the following:

### Evaluating the local market

One Midwest workforce board analyzed UI claims to identify businesses or industries in distress, or individuals whose UI benefits were running out. Administrators used this analysis to develop a target list for engagement with their training programs. They then were also able to check on the retention and employment of those individuals a year later.

### Evaluating the offering, or improvement, of specific programs

A large Southwestern state had access to high-quality data, enabling administrators to evaluate the outcomes for students in a year-long program with multiple support services and compare these outcomes with those of students who go through a program that is only three months long and lacks many of those services. In another example, one Midwest state looked at data on the certificates they awarded and determined that, compared to documented employer demand, some programs appeared to be turning out far more graduates than the labor market required. Upon further analysis, the state agency learned that the high attainment of a nursing assistant credential, compared with demand, was not so troublesome because students were obtaining it as a prerequisite for nursing in their progression to higher levels of training. This provided important context for understanding student patterns through their programs.

### Determining characteristics of participants to make programs more equitable

An institution in the Northeast reviewed accessible employment data and verified that employers found it consistent with the market's needs. Since the data showed enrollment in their programs was disproportionately female, the institution started offering programs, including emergency services and in other health care fields, that would attract more males.

### Improving student engagement and success

One Northeastern state system reviewed the data students provided in the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), searching for specific student characteristics, such as students who were also parents, and used that information to determine if, for instance, night classes would be a good option to offer based on the needs of the relevant populations.

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Some institutions were able to creatively innovate around a lack of data, or leverage what high-quality data they had to great effect. However, data access and facility is uneven across institutions, and the training initiatives would benefit from a longer-term solution.

#### SOLUTIONS

Allow for a student-level data collection, which could provide a better understanding of who today's students are and how they interact with postsecondary education. Additionally, states should be more forthcoming with access to UI wage data, so institutions are able to evaluate and reform workforce training programs.

These examples show the analytical capability that is possible when high-quality data is readily available. Mandates from a future federal workforce training program may be difficult to achieve so long as the HEA places specific limitations on data collection. Overturning the ban on a federal student-level data collection would impact higher education more broadly. This change would be a strong federal signal for a more intentional focus on high-quality outcome data to understand program performance and student achievement. Such a collection would allow institutions to get “credit” for completers beyond the first-time, full-time enrolled population for which data collection is currently limited. Students at community colleges, in particular, are more likely to attend more than one institution and have a less-traditional enrollment pattern, which means their educational experience is not captured in the current data collections. Institutions should, in turn, be held accountable<sup>6</sup> for those outcomes. The college and workforce system officials we interviewed were unanimous in their support for such a data collection, with many noting that it would be very helpful in evaluating and improving their programs. One WDB official noted that a student-level data collection has great potential for reducing its burden in establishing and maintaining data-sharing agreements.

In lieu of a student-level data collection, and without access to quality state-level data, some institutions had to rely on agreements with employers, as discussed in the previous section, or use other proxies for the information. Some institutions also sought access to UI wage record data, but this access varied widely by state. Even in states where UI wage record data is available for workforce training evaluation purposes, the college may receive it with a delay of two or more calendar quarters—in some cases, as many as 18 months later. Some states include UI wage record data in their Statewide Longitudinal Education Data Systems (SLEDS). Because SLEDS can be beneficial to researchers, program evaluators, and others, by offering data suitable for many needs and available in one place, it will be important to sustain federal support for SLEDS. In a few states, high-level state officials restricted access to UI data for program evaluators. But even with access, state UI wage record data does not provide information about program completers who are employed across state lines. In many cases, the absence of a student-level data collection means that UI wage record data is the best outcome data readily available. Therefore, to properly evaluate programs designed to build skills for long-term employment success, these workforce training programs must have access to UI wage record data.

## Conclusion

Data influences how programs are designed, improved, and evaluated. Institutions may have chosen one strategy, or avoided another, because of the data elements they had to report, or the accessibility of outcome information. The restriction of current postsecondary education data collection to first-time, full-time students overlooks many of the students who are engaged in “traditional” higher education programs, and this restricted data collection is particularly ill-suited to measuring those involved in career pathway programs and other workforce training. Engaging with employers through high-quality partnerships creates opportunities for the most relevant training subjects, but cannot substitute for data provided through a comprehensive data collection. Workforce training is a significant, relevant mission of community colleges; the data currently available to measure student long-term success limits a broader understanding of a significant part of community colleges’ success.

## Why We Wrote This Series of Papers

### Building Skills *Remodeling the HEA*

Well-designed workforce development or occupational training programs at postsecondary institutions allow individuals who earn credentials to connect their academic achievements directly with local employers in that field. Such training programs ideally provide a pipeline directly to employers, or teach skills that are in demand in the regional labor market. These programs are most often found at community colleges, which often serve as workforce training centers for people to build their skills to enter the workforce: in the most recent academic year, 86 percent<sup>7</sup> of all certificates to graduates with no prior credentials were awarded at these institutions. Community colleges generally, and their workforce training programs in particular, are a critical part of the college completion agenda.

When employers are engaged as partners in designing such training, whether by informing the creation of new programs or modifying existing programs, low-income individuals have a better chance of gaining employment in the specific field for which they are trained. One of the best opportunities for these workers to advance economically is to gain the skills vital to family-supporting jobs that can be found in the local economy. Such job-driven training programs should also ensure low-income students can seamlessly connect their work and credentials to further their education and training in the postsecondary setting at a later date. Those responsible for creating these programs—at the local, state, and federal levels—must not only respond to employer demand but also help workers advance along a career pathway. Today's students<sup>8</sup> are increasingly older and juggling work, family, and school, not supported financially by their parents, and often are enrolled in training programs to build skills or change career paths<sup>9</sup>. The challenges these students (in particular) have in navigating training programs are not just concerns around the periphery; as this series of papers underscores, they are at the heart of the issues both institutions and students struggle with while attempting to implement and participate in these programs.

For the past several decades, the federal government has offered a series of competitive grant-funded workforce training programs at postsecondary institutions: from those supported by the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982, to the High-Growth Job Training Initiative that began in 2002, to the multiple rounds of Community-Based Job Training Grants awarded to community colleges between 2005 and 2008, and more recently through programs like Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) and Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grants. With the concluding round of TAACCCT grants now awarded, we anticipate that policymakers will seek in the future to continue this bipartisan trend of dedicating funding to focused investments in postsecondary education institutions (especially community colleges) as providers of job training. CLASP has identified best practices for the design of any successor program along these lines, which are applicable both to address real barriers to student success and to consider changes in the next reauthorization of the Higher Education Act that would better coordinate federal higher education policy with occupational training programs at postsecondary institutions.

These training programs offer great promise: employers can recruit and build a skilled workforce, institutions can strengthen relationships and relevance to the labor market in their communities, and low-income students can learn skills that will help get them a job. But have training programs been able to keep up with the changing demographic and attendance patterns of today's students? If not, what can we learn from how are they failing to do so and, particularly, how can they better lift low-income people out of poverty?

These are the questions we set out to answer as part of this series of papers, of which this is the third CLASP conducted extensive conversations with two dozen federal officials, program evaluators, and grantees (which included institutions, consortia of institutions, workforce investment boards, tribal entities, and state-level government agencies) involved in four discretionary grant programs: TAACCCT, HPOG, Workforce Innovation Fund (WIF), and First In The World (FITW). This project was made possible through funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

## General summary of programs discussed in this series

### **Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) Grant Program**

TAACCCT is administered by the Employment and Training Administration (ETA) in the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). Grants are provided to community colleges (and other institutions) to help them partner with local employers to provide education and training to participants—TAA-eligible workers, in particular—for employment in high-wage, high-skill occupations. The program was funded at \$500 million annually in 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014. In the first three rounds of grants, more than 800 institutions were awarded funds either as individual institutions or as part of consortia.<sup>10</sup>

### **Health Profession Opportunity Grant (HPOG)**

HPOG is administered by the Office of the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). This program provides education and training to low-income individuals to prepare them for jobs in health care fields that are expected to be in high demand or experience labor shortages. Grants go to postsecondary institutions, community-based organizations, local workforce investment boards, state or local government agencies, and tribal organizations. The program has been appropriated \$85 million each year from 2010 through 2017. HPOG has 32 grantees, which, over the program's first four years, have enrolled more than 32,000 individuals.<sup>11</sup>

### **First in the World (FITW)**

FITW is administered by the Office of Postsecondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education (ED). It is designed to support the development and dissemination of ideas that work to address common challenges in postsecondary education for many populations of students, such as adult learners, students of color, first-generation students, and working students. To support the development of best practices, grants go to institutions, combinations of institutions, public and private non-profit institutions, and agencies. ED awarded \$74.6 million in development grants in 2014 to 24 grantees, and an additional \$60 million in development and validation grants to 18 grantees in 2015.<sup>12</sup>

### **Workforce Innovation Fund (WIF)**

WIF is also administered by the ETA office at DOL. Grants were provided to state workforce agencies, local workforce investment boards, and tribal entities to improve service delivery and evaluate the improvements. The intent was to better align programs in the fields of education, workforce development, human services, and economic development. In Round 1 (2012), DOL awarded \$146.9 million in grants; in Round 2 (2014), DOL awarded \$50.7 million; and in Round 3 (2015) the Department awarded \$35.6 million. In all, there have been nearly 50 grantee recipients.<sup>13</sup>



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lauren Walizer, *No Educational Experience Should Be an Island*, CLASP, May 2016, <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/NoEducationalExperienceShouldBeAnIsland.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> The Alliance for Quality Career Pathways, *The Alliance for Quality Career Pathways Approach: Developing Criteria and Metrics for Quality Career Pathways*, CLASP, February 2013, <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/files/CLASP-The-AQCP-Approach-Feb-2013.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Danielle Douglas-Gabriel, “Remedial Classes Have Become a Hidden Cost of College,” April 6, 2016, *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/04/06/remedial-classes-have-become-a-hidden-cost-of-college/>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Education Still Pays,” September 2014, <http://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2014/data-on-display/education-still-pays.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Resource page on Ability to Benefit, CLASP, <http://www.clasp.org/issues/postsecondary/pages/resources-on-ability-to-benefit>.

<sup>6</sup> Testimony of Anna Cielinski to the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance on Consumer Information and Data Transparency, September 11, 2015, <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/CLASP-testimony-ACSFA-hearing.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, *2014-15 Undergraduate Degree Earners Report: First Time Graduates and Graduates with Prior Awards*, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014-15UndergradDegreeEarnersRpt.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> *Yesterday’s Non-Traditional Student is Today’s Traditional Student*, CLASP, January 2015, <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/CPES-Nontraditional-students-pdf.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Rachel Fishman, *2015 College Decisions Survey: Part I, Deciding to Go to College*, New America, May 2015, <http://dev-edcentral.pantheon.io/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/FINAL-College-Decisions-Survey-528.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, [http://doleta.gov/taaccct/pdf/TAACCCT\\_One\\_Pagers\\_All.pdf](http://doleta.gov/taaccct/pdf/TAACCCT_One_Pagers_All.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Human Services, [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/year\\_four\\_annual\\_report\\_final\\_b508\\_0.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/year_four_annual_report_final_b508_0.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Education, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/fitw/awards.html>.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, <http://www.dol.gov/opa/media/press/eta/ETA20151913.htm>.