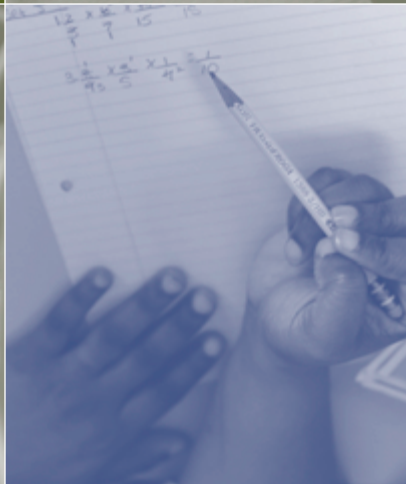




Skills to **Live** By:

Participant Reflections on the Value of their Sectoral Training Experience

by
MAUREEN CONWAY
AMY BLAIR



Workforce Strategies Initiative

The Aspen Institute

2006

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This publication clearly would not have been possible without the willing and open participation of the 26 individuals who participated in focus groups and individual interviews, and shared their work experiences and their lives with us. Our conversations with them have greatly enriched our understanding of the challenges low-income workers face in today's economy and the potential for sectoral employment programs to help them. Our first and deepest debt of gratitude is to them.

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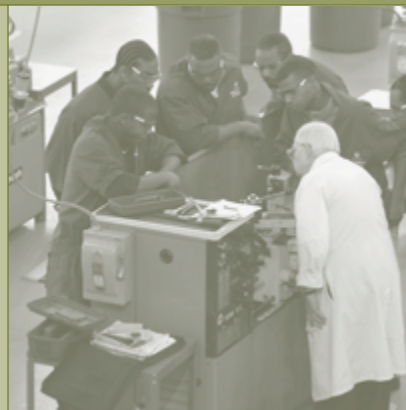
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I'm an electrical line designer. I really enjoy it. Of course, it pays more than the jobs that I've had in the past, but that's not what makes it really special. I feel like this is my career now, and this is the path that I'm going to follow – and that makes a big difference. — D A N I



I had two small kids. There was really no way I could go to college if I wanted to. I couldn't afford to put them in day care. Project QUEST helped with that. There was a lot more to it than just going to school. And if you had a problem or a conflict, you could call and talk to a counselor ... not only about school matters, but also with personal home life. They gave attention to both. — T Y R A



Cooperative [training program] helps you to be aware of your body language. I think that alone can help you in any field that you go into. — J A N E L L E



I N T R O D U C T I O N

It was like a training inside a training, because besides the skills, it was also a routine. Out of work for so many years, I had lacked all that.

– B R E N D A ¹

I still want to take more classes. But it's the time – my hours at work are 12 p.m. to 9 p.m. If I take any more time away from my baby, he won't even know who I am.

– M O N I Q U E

Reports on the outcomes of training programs generally focus on placement wages, hours worked, changes in annual earnings and other data indicating whether the training program led to a change in the participant's economic situation. Rarely heard are the voices of individuals themselves, describing what these changes mean for them and their families, how they view their outcomes themselves, and what they see as continuing barriers to their participation and success in the workforce. With the support of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Aspen Institute staff followed up on a past survey conducted with several hundred participants in sector programs – about which the Institute has released reports full of data on participant outcomes – and in 2002 conducted more intimate and in-depth discussions with 26 individuals who were part of that earlier study.

These personal conversations with training participants, who were at that time about four years into their post-training experience, were extremely rich. Individuals were eager to discuss their work and family lives, and to reflect upon the role that their training played in both. We heard about a wide range of successes – but celebration was tempered by discussion of a wide range of obstacles and challenges.

Several years have passed since we conducted this research, and we feel it is particularly timely now to provide a forum for the voices of these training participants and to reflect as a workforce development field on the lessons we can learn from them. Today in the field of workforce development, there is a strong emphasis on training providers' hearing the workforce needs of business and industry more clearly and developing new and better services for them, and we view this focus on understanding and meeting employer needs as an important positive development for the field. Our goal in this publication, however, is to remind us all, via the voices of training participants themselves, not to lose sight of the challenges low-income and low-skilled individuals continue to face. Our hope in organizing and presenting their comments and experiences in this publication is to identify the implications of their experiences for workforce development policy and program designers, program leaders, advocates and others who care about providing best practice in sectoral employment development training and services and about improving economic opportunity for low-income individuals.

¹To protect their privacy, we have changed the names of respondents in this study.

This publication is organized around themes that recurred throughout our discussions with participants. One theme is the influence that specific skills training had on graduates' abilities to get, keep and advance in jobs. Participants had much to say about the role that both hard-skills and soft-skills training played in their labor market experiences following training. Another theme is the role of support services – both formal supports, such as assistance with child care, transportation and individual counseling, and informal support from peers that was facilitated by the programs. A third theme is the range of issues that training does not address, but that are continuing impediments in these individuals' struggles to succeed in today's labor market. The overarching messages that surfaced in these discussions were:

- Participants strongly believe that acquiring technical skills has increased their confidence and facilitated access to jobs, while improved work readiness and communication skills have been instrumental to success on the job.
- Program design that incorporated understanding of participants' life situations was critical to program completion. Elements for program leaders to consider include length and structure of training, supports needed to succeed in training, and specific strategies to foster a sense of community among trainees that build participants' confidence and motivation.
- The range of issues that still confound even reasonably high-earning participants highlights the need for continuing post-placement services and public support systems that support work and workers. For instance, some of the highest-earning graduates continued to struggle with covering child-care and housing payments, providing care to elderly family members, maintaining reliable transportation, and accessing appropriate medical care for themselves and/or their families.

These themes and lessons, illustrated by remarks from participants themselves, are covered more fully in subsequent sections of this publication. First, however, we provide some background on the programs in which the individuals participated and information about the design of this follow-up study.

Training Programs

Participants in this study were drawn from three of the six programs that participated in the Aspen Institute's Sectoral Employment Development Learning Project (SEDLP) between 1997 and 2001. Sectoral employment development programs target a particular industry – and a set of occupations within it – to place disadvantaged people in quality jobs. The programs become knowledgeable participants in the targeted industry in which they work. They strive to influence industry practice on behalf of low-skilled or otherwise disadvantaged workers by pioneering labor-based innovations that benefit industry and workers. Sectoral employment projects utilize a range of strategies to achieve these ends, including: operating education and training programs; running for-profit businesses; forging institutional links with other education providers, employers, unions and industry associations; advocating for policy changes; and providing consulting or other services to businesses.

The three programs represented in this study had very different training models and client populations. These programs are described briefly in the box below.²

Sectoral Employment Development Learning Project Participating Programs³

Focus:HOPE enrolls inner-city youth and young adults in an intensive skills training program that prepares them for entry-level jobs in Detroit's automotive industry. Focus:HOPE's Machinist Training Institute curriculum, the course in which the respondents in this study participated, involves six to seven months of full-time training that combines classroom work in academic subjects and communications, with hands-on shop floor work in a simulated production environment. Because the training is long and intensive, Focus:HOPE carefully assesses each potential student for his or her levels of motivation and basic skills. All Focus:HOPE participants must have a high school diploma or a General Educational Development (GED) certificate to enter the training program.

Project QUEST was formed to address the acute skills mismatch that emerged in San Antonio as the city's economic base began shifting from manufacturing to service- and technology-driven industries. The organization developed a multi-sector strategy and works with several colleges to prepare students for employment in three target industry sectors: (1) health services; (2) business systems/information technology; and (3) industrial machine maintenance, repair and overhaul. Occupations are targeted based on their demand by local firms. Selection criteria also include wage rate, availability of benefits and career mobility potential. Training curricula vary in length from one to two years, with participants spending an average of 18 months in the program. Given the length of the program, participants are carefully screened for their ability to commit to the program, and must have a high school diploma or GED prior to starting one of the skills training components.

Cooperative Home Care Associates (CHCA) located in South Bronx, New York, employs very low-income women to become home health aides after a four- to five-week training that is roughly double the industry standard. CHCA's objective is to improve the quality of employment and the working experience of home health aides. To do this, CHCA designed its own training curriculum and formed a for-profit business cooperative. After three months of employment with CHCA, an employee is eligible to become a worker-owner of the company. CHCA carefully screens its employees for their capacity and desire to work in a care-giving profession, but there are no academic requirements. Most of CHCA's new hires are very low-income immigrants or women transitioning off public assistance, and many do not have a high school diploma or GED.

²For further information on each of these programs, see the Sectoral Case Studies, available for download at <http://www.aspenwsi.org/publications.asp?cid=1>; Internet.

³These descriptions reflect the program environment at the time that research participants were enrolled.

Study Design

This publication is based on interviews with participants of the three sectoral employment programs that took place roughly four years after they graduated from training. The participants were previously surveyed in a longitudinal study conducted as part of the Sectoral Employment Development Learning Project. For the follow-up research informing this publication, we spoke with 26 previous participants working or seeking work in three metropolitan areas. Through focus groups and individual interviews, participants reflected on the aspects of their training that were useful to them in the labor market since graduating. In addition, participants described their career paths since leaving the program, the aspects of their personal lives that aided or impeded their progress, and their thoughts about what constitutes a good job for them. Nine of the 26 individuals participated in even more in-depth one-on-one interviews during which they described their lives, both before and after their training experience, and the ways in which they think the training made a difference.

The research was guided by questions that remained after analyzing the results of the original longitudinal SEDLP survey. For that survey, participants were interviewed at the time of their enrollment in a sectoral employment development program and then again one and two years later. The results of the SEDLP survey showed that like Dani, whose comment opens this publication, a majority of participants had made substantial progress in the labor market – they worked more hours, had higher earnings per hour, and had greater access to employment benefits than prior to their participation with the sector program. Highlights of the results of the original survey are shown in the box below.⁴

Research Highlights from the Original SEDLP Participant Survey⁵

- Two years after training, participants' hourly wages rose 31 percent on average.
- After two years of training, two-thirds of participants were employed year-round – almost triple the proportion before training.
- The quality of jobs held by participants improved significantly: 78 percent of trainees reported that they had access to employer-provided health insurance after one year (compared with 50 percent the year prior).
- Participant confidence and ambition grew over time, prompting reports of greater desire for more education and training.

Although data on overall employment outcomes among SEDLP study participants showed great progress, research findings raised a number of questions that could not be addressed satisfactorily within the original SEDLP evaluation methodology and study timeframe. The first of these findings was unexpected:

*A number of participants indicated that they had made substantial employment progress **outside** the sectors for which they were trained.* A hypothesis underlying SEDLP was that sectoral training would help participants succeed in the labor market by giving them a useful set of technical or occupation-specific skills that would

⁴For further information about the survey and its findings, see the SEDLP research series available for download at <http://www.aspenwsi.org/publications?cid=2>; Internet.

⁵This research compared employment and earnings of 332 low-income participants of six-industry specific training programs, including Focus:HOPE, Project QUEST and Cooperative Home Care Associates, before and after training. The survey tracked the same individuals annually from 1998 to 2001.

form the basis for advancement *within* an industry sector. Post-training information gathered from graduates showed that for many this proved true. However, a substantial minority of participants appeared to have advanced by moving into employment *outside* the industry sector for which they were trained. Yet, for both groups, the vast majority reported that the sectoral training had improved career prospects. Therefore, it is important to recognize that, at least for some participants, the sector-specific skills training may not have been the only important aspect of their experience with the program. We believe that a better understanding of the specific elements of the training that helped participants after training and their overall sense of the role of training in their post-training employment experience could inform effective program design.

A second finding was not as surprising, but we wanted to learn more about it, because it presents a continuing challenge.

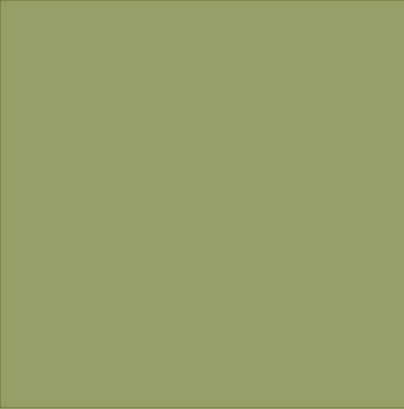
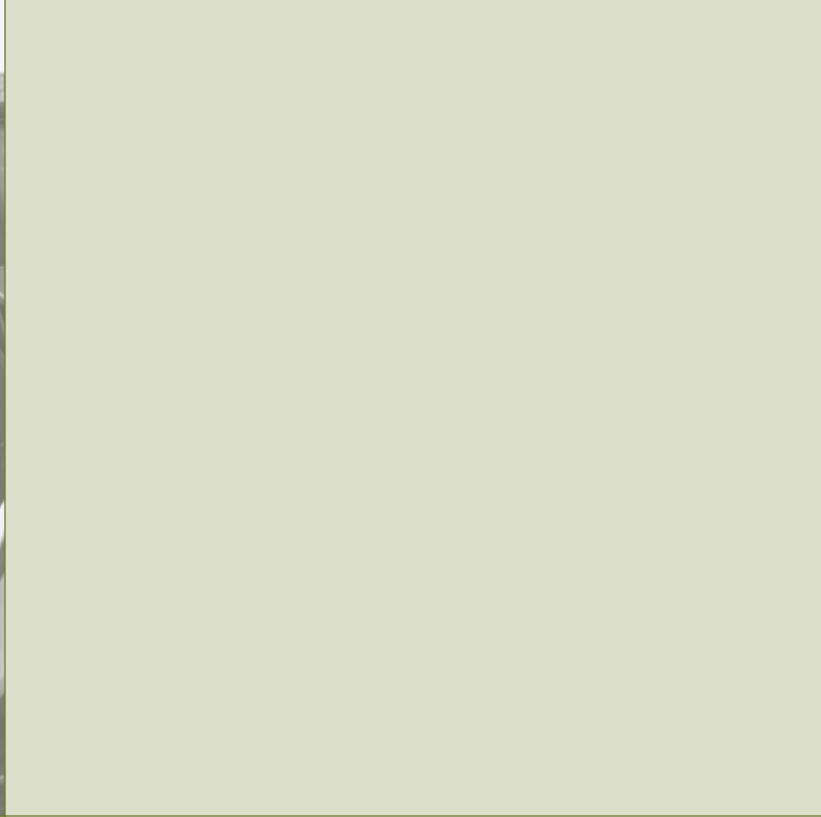
Despite positive employment experiences (that often included access to health insurance benefits), research participants noted that health and family issues remained serious barriers to maintaining employment and advancing in their careers. Getting a “good” job with benefits, it is often said, enables workers to overcome these types of personal barriers. SEDLP data offered little detail regarding the nature of health and family issues and the ways in which they related to employment decisions. Understanding these issues more clearly could prompt new program strategies designed to help participants overcome barriers to job retention and advancement, and shed light on the factors that affect participants’ potential for making lasting change and achieving positive, long-term employment outcomes.

A third finding was that many interviewees noted plans to continue their education, but two years after training, few had. Given that the individuals in the SEDLP study had largely demonstrated success in completing rigorous training, and reported a renewed sense of confidence that they could learn and advance, we wanted to learn whether, four years after training, participants still had plans to enroll or had enrolled, whether this goal was still important, and whether there were continuing obstacles keeping them from pursuing formal education.

We constructed the guides and interview protocols for follow-up focus groups and interviews to explore the above three issues in more depth. As is typical with this type of research, the numbers of focus group participants and interview subjects were not sufficient for them to be representative of the larger group of participants studied in the original SEDLP survey – which was designed to be statistically representative of all participants in training at that time. In constructing the focus groups, we selected only three of the six original programs and sought participants with a mix of experiences. For each of the three programs, we attempted to construct two groups – one for people who remained in the sector for which they trained, and one for people who left the sector.⁶ We were interested in understanding whether the two groups would identify the same factors as critical to helping them in their work life, and for both groups, we were curious about the participants’ perceptions of those factors.

Despite these caveats regarding the sample, we feel confident that many of the messages we heard, and the pressing questions and issues that were raised in these follow-up discussions, will be of great interest to sectoral program leaders and investors. Our hope is that this publication will contribute to a better understanding of what participants feel was important about their training experience and the range of factors that affect our ability to understand employment outcomes.

⁶Primarily because most participants were working in the health care sector, the focus group of participants from the Cooperative Home Care Associates training merged into one group.



Reflections on the Acquisition of Hard Skills and Soft Skills

After four years on welfare, Amber went to work for a janitorial service, eventually moving up to supervisor. But, she could not earn enough to support herself and her two children and knew she could do better. She completed training at Focus:HOPE and obtained work as a Quality Control Technician for a prototype automotive engineering center. She reported that what stands out with regard to her Focus:HOPE training and her success in the workplace now are: *“being on time; safety; teamwork; respecting your supervisors, coordinators and management; and paying attention and doing your job.”* These are very different from the skills that she said helped her land that first job: *“blueprint reading and knowing how to use calipers and micrometers.”* – AMBER

Brenda, another study participant, noted that CHCA’s training helped her to earn a promotion from home health aide to a job performing kidney dialysis. *“There were five of us up for the job. Cooperative taught me ... body mechanics – how to lift patients out of their wheelchairs. I was doing it and my supervisor said, ‘You can do that by yourself? Where did you get your training?’ I felt very proud. I trained for a whole month learning how to do this.”* – BRENDA

Paula, who trained through Project QUEST to become a database and network manager, commented that *“... acquiring that training, it gave me an edge on the market ... you needed the schooling. Because of the degree, I’m able to have a job now, which has just provided so much training in the corporate world.”* – PAULA

One of the questions we were most interested in hearing respondents discuss was what they learned in the sector training program that had helped them subsequently at work. Unsurprisingly, the individuals who continued working in the sector for which they were trained more frequently cited the value of the technical skills they learned. Like Amber, Brenda and Paula, participants often described their importance in terms of qualifying for or meeting minimum job requirements. For the occupations for which these individuals were trained – nurses, computer network technicians, machinists, and home health aides – a credential or some level of occupation-specific skill is almost always required for employment.

Specific occupational skills were clearly critical to qualifying for, obtaining and retaining jobs. Yet, throughout the focus groups and interviews, respondents were generally much more eager to discuss the non-technical skills they reported have helped them to persist and succeed in the workplace more

long-term. They frequently commented on the behaviors of fellow workers who were not “professional” and compared these to their own behavior. They described specific examples of differences, such as how they manage trying situations at work, and specifically attributed their new inter-personal skills to their training curriculum.

The emphasis on these “soft” skills was notable and in marked contrast to the tenor of focus groups we had conducted previously with individuals while still in training.⁷ At that time respondents were highly motivated by and were much more interested in talking about acquiring technical skills. Four years later, like Amber, most were very specific about the ways in which improved “soft skills” such as communications, conflict resolution and self-confidence have changed their ability to navigate and succeed in a variety of work environments. Skills for dealing with difficult and contentious co-workers and situations were cited again and again as critical to these respondents’ ability to persevere and succeed at work. Jackie’s comment reflects remarks made by graduates of all three training programs:

I think the biggest thing that Focus:HOPE taught me is to improve my people-coping skills. I learned to walk away and turn the other cheek and not to sweat the small stuff. If it’s a situation that you can’t deal with, sometimes you have to walk away and then come back to it. You can’t always react to another individual’s actions at a particular time.

– JACKIE

Participants expressed awareness of the many dimensions to professional communication – the importance of attitude, body language, and how one presents oneself. They described how these aspects of professional communication were as important as the words one uses. Echoing Janelle’s comment in the opening of this publication about the importance of body language training she received at CHCA, many expressed the belief that these communication skills will continue to be important to them in their careers, regardless of the type of job they might eventually hold.

[Working in a surgical health care setting] ... It’s all about body language, because the doctor sees that. When he hires somebody, he notices right off the jump the body language they have. How they stand, how they think. Automatically he knows if they’re the ones to hire or not because of the body language.

– LATEISHA

In some cases, participants discussed how the communications skills and self-confidence they acquired from the training program helped them to operate in an environment that was ethnically or culturally different from the environment to which they were accustomed. As noted by Roger, another graduate of Focus:HOPE:

⁷Although the respondents in this follow-up study attended the same training programs at a similar point in time, they were not the same individuals who participated in previous focus groups as part of the original SEDLP study.

[In my job] I will be the only African American in a meeting of about 20 or 25 people. I might get asked a question or I might have something to say and I have to have confidence. I have to have communication skills to talk in an uncomfortable environment.

– R O G E R

In addition to communication skills, another important skill set that a number of respondents mentioned had to do with “work readiness.” The specific skill mentioned varied depending on the types of jobs for which people were preparing and the experience they brought to the program, but included such issues as safety, punctuality, and asking in advance if time off is needed. Particularly for respondents like Brenda, who had not recently held a steady job, these issues were very important for making a successful transition into the workplace.

Little things that they instilled in their [CHCA] training program I still use today. I make it my duty to be prepared the night before. I make it my duty to get up in enough time so that if I forget something, I have time to go back and get it. Even as far as, you know, simple everyday things, like if you can't make it, you call in.

– B R E N D A

Attributes of the Training Program that Facilitate Learning

The ways in which the three programs provided both hard and soft skills training in their curricula varied to reflect the experience levels and types of employment barriers that were typical of their participants, as well as the variety of workplace environments for which individuals were preparing. Although the training programs were quite different, study participants’ comments nevertheless highlighted some important common characteristics that they considered critical to their success as learners, and later, while on the job.

Focus on specific, achievable occupational goal

Well, they [CHCA] helped me because they focused on something that had a goal. They told you that from the beginning – that this is the goal. This is what you can do. You can get this learning experience and you can land a job in the medical profession. And, from that, there is no telling where you can go. And they were right.

– B R E N D A

I tried to get so many jobs before I trained through CHCA and I didn't have skills. ... With CHCA you got the skills ... you knew that once you reached this goal you were going to be employed.

– L A T E I S H A

The connection to a specific and achievable occupational goal was a common factor in motivating respondents to participate in and succeed in the training programs. Many respondents talked about how self-confidence they gained from being successful in training – learning from mistakes; giving and getting constructive feedback; and receiving encouragement from peers, instructors and counselors – helped them to realistically understand what they were working to achieve and to rationally overcome fears about their capabilities. Participants noted that the training programs made it clear how each element the program addressed, from learning necessary communication and technical skills to finding reliable child care and dressing appropriately, all worked toward the specific occupational goal. They valued how programs reinforced accountability within a very clear occupation-focused framework.

Tough but realistic standards for training that prepared students for industry and occupational context

You cannot miss a lot of days at the company that I work for. You could not miss any days in the first year. A lot of people were released because they missed days. I'm like, oh, that's nothing. At Focus:HOPE, you couldn't come in late. You couldn't.

– D A N I

A counselor would say, well, the reason for this [tracking attendance and punctuality at classes and Project QUEST meetings] is so you can get used to punching in or making sure that you're there on time. Because employees, when you get a real job, you can't show up whenever you want.

– T Y R A

Industry-based workforce development programs design their curricula not only to teach students the skills needed to do a job, but also to provide the context for learning about the norms and culture of the environment where they will work after graduation. To the extent possible, programs try to replicate the workplace where trainees are expected to find and retain jobs. They incorporate specific strategies for coping with some of the more difficult aspects of an industry's culture.

Many interviewees commented on the rigors of their job training experience. They reported that it was the focus not only on accountability, but also on what being accountable in a specific work context really meant that fully prepared them for the demands of employment.

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that this program attribute, which was so valued by many participants in terms of preparing them for their future occupations, also presented a significant downside for some. A few respondents noted that they had to delay their training or drop out of training altogether because they needed to work to pay bills.

I think the program is a lot tougher than [working] – not the actual classroom part, but the life situation. Adjusting your life so that you can go to school as if you were going to work, but you're not really getting paid, that's really, really tough.

– D A M O N

I stopped going because I needed money. I had to give up my apartment so I could afford my car note, my insurance and still go [to training]. But, I still needed extra money. That's why I had to go to a temp service to find work at night. The temp service was sending me way out and I would get off at midnight and then turn back around and come back. ... I had plans for coming back [to training]. As soon as I got enough money, I was going to come back. And then once I got in the job, I was like – I don't have time now.

– M O N I Q U E

Programs, particularly those offering longer-term training, face difficulties simulating a demanding work setting that adequately prepares participants for employment while, at the same time, accommodating their current life situations – most of which include very limited financial resources. Recognizing this, these programs seek to balance rigor and high standards with various types of supports to promote student success (approaches to student supports are discussed later in this publication), but it is important to recognize that for many individuals, the challenge of working (or not working and forgoing income) and completing a rigorous training program may be too difficult. It is important to acknowledge that it is extremely challenging for programs to find the resources to pay for participant supports. Nevertheless, for long-term programs with a mission to serve economically disadvantaged individuals, such supports are crucial for their success.

Learning laboratories that provide hands-on training

The shop was to me probably the best hands-on training that you can give anybody. ... Everybody would have to make a part of a machine. That was a big turning point as far as experience.

– R O G E R

... It [CHCA] was very different. Everything was so hands-on it made learning so wonderful. We did role play. I acted like the patient one day; the next day, my partner was the patient and I was the provider. I loved going to school. I looked forward to doing it. I couldn't wait to have my first client.

– B R E N D A

Something about making those parts was really fulfilling ... I really didn't care for the book stuff, because you'd read about the tools and how to use a tool. ... But, to actually get on a lathe and make a hammer ... grind those tools to perfection with a grinder, that was something.

– HARLAN

Effectively mirroring the workplace where students will be employed requires delivering training that allows for as much hands-on practice as is possible. Respondents reported that learning skills in environments that simulated situations they might encounter at work was key to their ability to incorporate new skills and concepts in a thorough and meaningful way while simultaneously building confidence in their new abilities.

For some respondents, the hands-on nature of the training also reinforced the specific occupational goal of the training and their own personal employment goals. In particular, hands-on training was important in building confidence among the trainees that they could do the job and succeed. This aspect was particularly important for individuals with very limited work experience or work experience that was unrelated to the targeted field.

Fitting training to the student

I have to say Cooperative was the best training that I have had. ... With Cooperative it was more thorough. They explain it so you really understand it. You had to get it right or you couldn't go on to the next step. I didn't go through that before with other companies or with other training.

– PAM

In an effort to make training accessible and to create conditions that promote participant confidence and success, some programs have developed training modules that break learning and skill development into manageable units. People who come to the program with different levels of skill and experience can progress through these steps at a pace that is appropriate to their needs and capabilities. In this way, training programs can keep their participants engaged in the process and create opportunities for bringing a diverse group along from remedial to more advanced skill levels. For individuals who associate past education and training experiences with failure, this approach has proven effective at changing their outlook about learning. Curricula that supported the positive iterative practice of skills, where a skill must be mastered before moving on, was cited as empowering and confidence-building.

Then I failed out of nursing school. But, I was still going to the [Project QUEST] meetings to stay on top of what everybody else was doing. Project QUEST could have dropped me from the program. But ... after talking with me, evaluating me, they sat with me and they told me what they thought [about when and how to get back on track with school].

– REBA

For some areas of study, the program's ability to alter the academic curriculum is limited. For example, Project QUEST offers individualized counseling to students who, like Reba, who are pursuing a degree in nursing, which is credentialed, licensed, and not readily tailored to an individual. Participants noted the importance of this individualized attention in helping them to manage and complete long programs.

Critical Role of Support Services

Programs set out to establish a workplace environment that provides a context for concrete learning about the responsibilities that graduates will face on the job. But, they also explicitly recognize that the majority of trainees enter programs with a host of barriers that limited their ability to succeed in the past. The program context that appears to be most suited to helping disadvantaged individuals obtain the hard and soft skills necessary to find and keep a good job is that which balances rigor within a supportive environment. That balance depends on the types of experiences participants bring to training, as well as the work environment for which they are preparing. Support services ran the gamut from informal peer support groups to formal counseling to financial assistance with child care, transportation and school supplies. Support service needs are addressed differently across programs. Some provide services directly, while others develop relationships with external agencies that can meet specific needs.

Participants described a number of ways that programs helped them overcome difficult obstacles while in training. Program staff often provided needed counseling and support, through both formal and informal mechanisms. In addition, programs had various means of encouraging peer support among the students. This emotional support and encouragement was often cited as important to success in the program, and in the case of peer networks, some of these relationships continued to be important in reinforcing success on the job. Programs varied with respect to provision of direct support services, such as child care, transportation, housing, etc., but such assistance, when available, was highly prized. When it was not available, it was cited as a reason for difficulty with completing a course of study.

Counseling and Case Management

Project QUEST helped me out quite a bit. I was at a point in my life, I had just moved back home from being divorced ... and I just felt like I couldn't do anything. I had tried to go to school. I had done a lot of course work down at San Antonio College, but it was such a struggle. Literally, they helped me pull through and asked me if that's what I really wanted to do. They encouraged me and asked me tough questions. Why do you want to do this now? Why are you changing now? They helped me reprioritize my studies. Now I see that they kind of taught me that if I wanted it, I could get it.

— VANESSA

A recurring theme among focus group and interview participants was that their life circumstances had made pursuing education difficult. Given the different program designs and population groups with which the three programs worked, the methods of addressing personal barriers varied, but all had provided some level of staff counseling or encouragement, and they all encouraged peer support and interaction.

Peer Networks

Five of us stuck together (at Focus:HOPE) and encouraged one another. We had study groups. We'd meet up at each other's house, just to stick it on out.

– W A N D A

When you're taking the test (at Cooperative), you're working with other women, so you're making friends. It's like networking. But, just talking amongst each other – you're encouraging each other.

– B R E N D A

Participants described peer networks – both formal and informal – as being key to their ability to stick with and complete training successfully. They reported that their programs encouraged them to reach out to each other for support and motivation. Programs approached building peer networks in different ways, depending on the environment of the training. At CHCA, a relatively small cohort of participants (about 20) trains together full time for four to five weeks. The program encourages teamwork and group study, and in this way, encourages the students to get to know and support one another. At Focus:HOPE, students may not be with the same cohort for all of their classes. For example, shop classes are limited to about 10 students, but math classes may have more than 30 and are fairly conventional in terms of instruction technique. Focus:HOPE's approach is to work with and actively encourage students to form small study groups that can work together to master content and provide mutual support and encouragement. Project QUEST's students are dispersed in different courses of study on a college campus, and thus, they have adopted the most formal approach to developing peer support with required weekly “VIP” (Vision, Initiative, Perseverance) meetings. During these sessions, counselors lead discussions of issues, such as work ethics, financial planning, self-esteem, study habits and job interview skills, as well as generally check in with the group – listening for any personal or academic problems that arise.

Direct Supports

A lot of them would come in crying ... 'They're going to turn off my lights.' ... They're not going to let that happen. If you really want to go to school, they'd figure something out. They would get on the phone and start calling and say, 'Hey, this person is going to class. We need to keep a light on in this house.' I had a good 40-minute drive to come to class ... so, they would help [with gas money]. It's an allowance of so much per week. As long as you got to class and did your academics and the family was fine, then you would make it ... And, they'd get with the food bank and they'd get with a different outfit that had supplies. When you have somebody this big backing you up, it's kind of hard to fall unless you just don't want it.

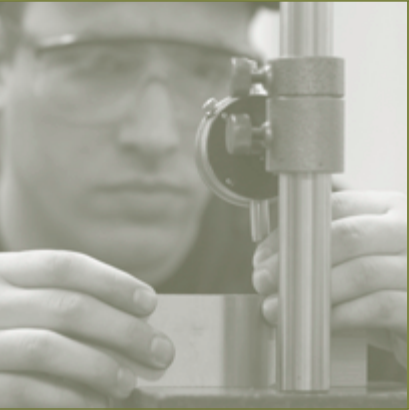
– ROSA

[CHCA] gave me papers to take to public assistance to get them to pay for child care.

– MARIA

The barriers that many low-income participants face require more than moral support, camaraderie or motivation to overcome. Program participants Rosa, Maria and Tyra noted the financial and logistical support they received. For example, some participants received help finding and financing affordable, appropriate child care. Many mentioned how valuable it was for programs to cover the costs of school supplies, uniforms and transportation.

Project QUEST, with the longest training program, provided the highest level of individualized counseling and the most formal system for accessing support services such as child-care subsidies and housing and transportation financial assistance. The program also supplemented what was available from public sources with its own emergency funds for participants. Students from that program in particular recognized how critical these services were to their success in the program. Focus:HOPE and CHCA, on the other hand, worked with trainees over a shorter time period and relied more heavily on helping participants navigate an external support system. At CHCA in particular, many clients were receiving public assistance and helping them work within that system to obtain resources for which they were eligible often was the most affordable path to obtaining assistance.





W O R K L I F E :

Jobs, Family Cares, Future Goals

In surveying participants of sector programs one and two years after they completed training, the data showed that most program participants were earning substantially more than they did before training, and that many had greater access to employment benefits such as health insurance and paid vacation. Yet, there were also differences in their experiences. Some seemed to continue to advance after training, while others plateaued; most stayed within the sector for which they were trained, but some changed sectors; and a number still cited issues related to health and family as barriers to advancement. In our conversations with participants, we were interested in learning what participants themselves thought about their ability to succeed in the labor market and whether training had changed their career trajectory. In so doing, however, we started with how participants viewed success in the labor market.

Factors that Mark a “Good Job”

I never thought I would have this type of job coming in to Focus:HOPE. I never would have thought that I could make a ton of money doing a non-structured, fun job that is also a ‘responsibility job.’ This job is a lot more challenging than the ones I’ve had in the past. But, it’s really rewarding when you’ve designed [the electrical distribution system for] this wonderful subdivision on land where there was just dirt and then you go out there and see kids riding their bikes, and houses, and everything is up. I really enjoy it.

– DANI

It’s something I always wanted to do ... to work for a company that I could be a part of and help out. When I see a car I helped create, I can tell you everything I did to it. That’s the fun part. I put the tailpipe in there or I put the roof in there. I did the hood. I did the wheels.

– ROGER

Individuals in the study identified a range of factors that make jobs they hold now better than jobs they held prior to training. Like Dani, some stated that money and benefits are important, but not their only consideration. A number of participants, like Roger, had found work where they felt they could make a meaningful contribution. Participants who expressed this level of satisfaction had found work in an enterprise in which they believed in the organizational purpose, whether that was caring for patients, building cars, providing computer services to a college, or designing power grids. They also recognized that they had developed a skill set that allowed them to make a meaningful contribution to the work.

This personal “fit” with a job is an obvious element of job satisfaction that nearly every person who works strives to achieve. Of the individuals with whom we spoke who were working in the sector for which they were trained, the majority seemed to feel this sort of personal satisfaction with the work they were doing. While the sample is neither large nor strictly representative of all the trainees of the three programs, it is nonetheless worth noting that this personal fit is something all three programs seek to address up front as part of their screening process. Cooperative Home Care Associates has an extensive interviewing process to ascertain whether individuals would find work in a care-giving profession rewarding. Focus:HOPE requires job-specific aptitude tests and an initial interview, but also created a short “Introduction to Machining” course that gives participants a hands-on feel for this type of work to help them make an informed decision about whether they want to invest in six more months of training. Project QUEST conducts individual career counseling with all participants prior to their selecting a particular course of study. All three organizations work to ensure that participants choose occupations that they will find rewarding, and in which they will be able to succeed. Given that Focus:HOPE and CHCA have fairly narrow occupational foci and even the broader focused Project QUEST trains for a limited number of occupations, this also means that these programs must make difficult decisions *not* to admit individuals for whom they think the training services they offer are not a good fit, or for whom the timing is not right, depending on life circumstances.

All my life I've had jobs where I worked in settings where people were always watching over me like I was under a microscope. To work out in the field, I feel like I can do this, nobody's watching me. I know what I have to do. I go do it. That's what makes me feel like I'm reliable.

— M A R I A

In all five of the focus groups, participants raised the issue of the level of autonomy and supervision of their work on a job. Like Maria, many of the former trainees noted discomfort in previous jobs at having been under continuous close scrutiny. Not having to punch a time clock and being able to work without constant supervision were cited as positive job attributes that reduced job stress. Participants who had found jobs with greater autonomy also appeared to feel both more trusted and more valued as workers.

I like it. It's a clean atmosphere; it's laid back. I can walk in with all white on from top to bottom and walk out in all white from top to bottom.

— A M B E R

A few participants expressed strong feelings about the physical characteristics of the workplace. These comments were particularly prominent among Focus:HOPE respondents, who had a wide range of experiences working in production environments. As illustrated by Amber's comment, facilities in which workers remain clean were highly valued, and this factor was important in distinguishing among jobs. Participants also discussed whether the job allowed them to sit and whether it was climate controlled. Participants who were working in health facilities commented less on this particular job

issue, which may be due to the more uniform work environment of health facilities as compared to manufacturing environments.

I just wanted to work a daytime job, have a day shift. With a two-year-old at that time, a job like that was the best thing in the world.

– DANI

Many participants made comments like Dani – judging jobs by how well they meshed with their family life. Of particular note was the importance of schedules and hours. Participants also commented on whether earnings were sufficient to meet family needs, with many commenting on the increased expenses that come from working, as well as the tendency to increase spending in general as income goes up. It was clear from the discussion that work hours and the overall fit of a job with family life were important factors in making work-related decisions. We discuss how these factors relate to work choices in more detail in the section below.

Real Life: Private Challenges and How They Influence Job Choices

[If I changed jobs] that's the only thing that I would miss is the flexibility. But, to be making \$2 more, I would have to do that. I don't think in the next year I'll do anything, because I need to see how things are at home. My mom depends on me a lot more now – more than before.

– TYRA

A notable finding from the earlier SEDLP longitudinal study of participants was that, among those who voluntarily left jobs, two main reasons were cited – health-related issues and family-related issues. Understanding this relationship between individuals' employment decisions and health and family circumstances seemed important to understanding programmatic outcomes overall, and how they might be improved. In particular, we wanted to learn whether there were other avenues programs might pursue, such as referring individuals with these types of issues to other agencies before they enter a program, or providing enhanced supports during or immediately following training. Our impression from these interviews, however, is that the variety, intensity and unpredictable timing of these life situations puts them well beyond the scope of an employment training program. Individual participants' experiences, when described in detail, underlined for us how very intimate, multi-faceted and changeable this connection between home and work life is.

Like Tyra, key job decisions for many of the study participants were closely connected to their responsibilities for attending to the health and special needs of family members – predominantly children and elderly parents. Some participants struggled to establish a work schedule that allowed them to care for a sick family member. Some, similar to Tyra, stayed in jobs that provided flexibility and security, at the expense of promotion and wage advancement. And, some reduced their work hours or left the workforce altogether.

Many of the individuals with whom we talked were able to make ends meet in large part because of informal and/or subsidized housing and child-care arrangements. These individuals, although employed full time in better jobs than they had held prior to training, could not maintain their current living standard solely on their earnings from employment. Indeed participants described their struggles with the high cost and limited availability of family care and housing as a major source of worry, and they expressed their fears about being able to “make it” without subsidies or informal support in these essential areas. Such problems and concerns were shared by both single and married interviewees, but were expressed more acutely among single parents.

Child Care

Child care – that is so painful. It hurts really bad. Every summer it's such a struggle. Even though my salary range is pretty high – remember that I have four kids. And, there's no help out there. Once you pass a certain income, there is nobody out there who's going to help to pay for your child care. And, that really jeopardized my job. I worked it out. But, the financial struggle and strain during that time was hard. So, I would say that [paying for child care] is a huge obstacle.

– PAULA

In terms of day care, for nursing, the reality is that the hours don't click. For most nurses it's 12-hour shifts. I have my son at La Petite Academy where I have to pick him up at 6:30 p.m. So, I also have to pay for gas money for a baby-sitter to pick him up and stay with him for an hour or two hours after that. I pay about \$600-700 per month for child care. That's \$300 for the center plus about \$400 for the other person.

– DANI

When I started working ... it was like I got every crazy shift ... It was at the point where my husband and I were leaving the house at the same time going to work. So, one night my daughter said, 'Look, I need to talk to y'all. You're gone. Daddy's gone at the same time. Nobody's here with us any more.'

– THELMA

Problems and worries about child-care arrangements were among the most commonly cited difficulties mentioned by respondents. All of the single mothers discussed this issue, and it was also a concern for couples in which both parents had to work in order to earn enough income to support the family. Child-care arrangements were especially difficult for individuals who worked non-standard hours. In a number of cases, respondents had to carefully evaluate opportunities to pursue promotions or job advancement because these opportunities required shift work, and finding reliable child care at

odd hours was a significant problem. For example, moving from a position as a home health aide, which is often daytime work, to a higher paying position in a hospital, which can require working at any hour of the day or night, seriously complicates the balance of working and caring for young children. Similarly, some respondents in manufacturing environments stated that they might earn more in another job, but that the shift work required would make obtaining child care impossible. Just as importantly, many noted that working odd hours would pose too great a sacrifice in terms of further limiting the time they had available to be with their children and to fulfill their responsibilities as parents.

Many parents juggled work and child care by using patchworks of provider arrangements that included care by relatives, licensed child-care centers, and both licensed and unlicensed home-based care. For those who did not have relatives and friends to care for their children, covering the cost of paid child-care arrangements was often a serious concern. Paula, who described the dilemma of paying for summer care for four children, noted that the monthly cost was \$1,600. Thus, despite dramatic increases in earnings that she realized after graduating from Project QUEST, Paula found that the cost of child care took too large a bite out of her paycheck, and she continues to struggle with this expense. For families trying to balance shift work with other family members, so that one is always home with the children, changing schedules can often throw such arrangements out of balance.

Health Insurance

The dialysis job, I keep that because I get full health benefits not only for me, but also for my children. The transit job doesn't offer health insurance for my children.

– B R E N D A

I have health insurance for my children through the state. They started a new insurance program for kids and for low-income families. So, I have them covered that way. But, for me, I don't. If I ever get sick in the middle of the night, I have to go to the public emergency room and stay there all night.

– T Y R A

[My son] was already 18 but he was still in high school. He needed a break from school due to being overtired [due to chronic asthma]. They [her employer's health insurer] said that they couldn't cover him. I took him to a minor emergency room ... and it was over \$1,200. I pay them \$100 every pay period.

– V A N E S S A

While the majority of graduates of the three sector programs obtained jobs providing some type of access to a group health insurance plan, through more in-depth conversations with participants, we learned that obtaining it – both for themselves and other family members – still presents a range of complications due to costs of both premiums and co-pays, and various eligibility-related restrictions. For example, Brenda, who trained with CHCA and obtained a position performing dialysis, had actually found better-paying work with the public transit system. But, this job did not provide health insurance coverage for her children, so she continued to maintain the dialysis job in order to purchase their coverage at group rates. Tyra described how she could probably find a better job with health benefits, but changing jobs would require sacrificing the flexibility that her current job affords, and that allows her to care for her children and support her mother after the death of her father. Vanessa experienced a financial crisis when she discovered that her son’s coverage had been cancelled. A number of other respondents, like Brenda, cited accessing or maintaining health insurance coverage as a primary influence in respondents’ decisions about keeping or leaving a job. In general, respondents reported health insurance as an important aspect of a job, and clearly paid attention to the costs associated with this benefit, noting differences in co-payments or monthly premium contributions among plans with which they had been affiliated.

Caring for Family Members

It wasn't so easy for me ... I have a son who has attention deficit so he's very hyper. So, I can't just leave him with anyone. ... My son's babysitter moved to the Poconos [from the Bronx]. She offered to take him there with her every Sunday and bring him back on the weekends. So, that worked for him ... but the strain and the stress of me worrying because my son is all the way in Pennsylvania ... that was very difficult for me.

– M A R I A

[My son] has seizures, ADHD, bipolar and a whole bunch of other things. He has to be in a special day care where they have one-on-one with a special person.

– S Y L V I A

Parents of children who have special care needs reported having great difficulty finding and paying for appropriate care. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, approximately 6 percent of children have a disability, defined as a long-lasting physical, mental or emotional condition.⁸ Some researchers find that the incidence of disability may be higher (and increasing) among children living in poverty-level or near poverty-level households.⁹ Balancing work and caring for a child with special needs creates enormous challenges for families with limited resources.

⁸This data is reported on the Annie E. Casey Web site as part of its Kids Count project. Available at: <http://www.aecf.org/cgi-bin/aecensus.cgi?action=profileresults&area=1&printerfriendly=0§ion=9>; Internet.

⁹G.T. Fujiura and K. Yamaki, "Trends in childhood disability prevalence: Poverty and family structure," Trends in Demography of Childhood Poverty and Disability (2000). Exceptional Children, 66, 187-199. Abstract available from: http://www.ahs.uic.edu/ahs/files/dhd/downloads/Emerging_Disabilities/Trends%20in%20childhood%20disability%20prevalence.htm; Internet.

Health issues also influenced participants' job paths when they had to become the caregiver for a sick family member. In some cases, mothers looked for jobs with extraordinary flexibility, so that they could care for chronically sick children. In other cases, an ill or dying parent was the reason for leaving a job. Participants brought up a number of issues with respect to caring for sick family members. For children with behavioral problems or chronic conditions, the availability of appropriate care is limited and expensive. For sick family members, respondents described dissatisfaction with the service that they received from outsiders or difficulty in paying for care. For respondents who felt they had an important care-giving role to play within their families, this role was more important than a job or income.

My son's seizures have started back up. ... There's not really a way that I can go back to work right now, because I've got to get his medications back on track. And, that usually takes six months to a year. He's been on the same meds for over four years now. They aren't working. So, they have to try new stuff on him.

– G L O R I A

... My mom was sick at home, and I was putting in a lot of overtime working for a nursing home. They never could get nurses to work the 3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. shift. And, I was working from 7:00 in the morning until after 11:00 o'clock at night. And, I couldn't do it anymore. I told them my mom had been real sick. She had called me at work a few times. And, I couldn't leave. But, they weren't really very understanding. I had called in, I think, two days in a row that I could not leave her at home alone. And, they told me I needed to do something – that I was smart enough. I should either get her a home nurse or put her in a nursing home is what I was told. And, I went into more detail as to what was wrong with her. And, they just were, well, we need you here. And, I thought, hmm.

– V A N E S S A

Throughout our focus groups and interviews, parents and individuals with other family care-giving responsibilities described the difficult choices they must make each day to keep their family and income-generating responsibilities in balance. They must find and pay for or provide themselves the care that others who depend on them require. The responsibility of caring for dependents is arguably one of the most difficult barriers to overcome in retaining employment and affects in very real ways the opportunities for advancement that are open to individuals in such circumstances. In Vanessa's case the irony of her situation – working long hours in a nursing home while also caring for her home-bound elderly mother – is particularly poignant.

Beyond trying to help with referrals to community-based or public resources that may assist with identifying or paying for appropriate care, there may be little that an employment program can do to influence participants' job options or support them at work in cases that are especially problematic. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that these issues are prevalent among all individuals, are

disproportionately difficult to manage for low-income individuals, and should be highlighted and figure more prominently in our assessment and understanding of the potential for positive long-term employment outcomes.

Housing and Transportation

I have a two-family flat. Actually my wife's mother owns it; she lives right across the street. We take care of the property and it's a two-home family flat. Her sister lives downstairs and we live upstairs. ... We hardly pay rent. We just help Mom out with every job or building the garage or enhancing it or whatever. ... Savings is a struggle ... [A goal for the next five years is] getting a decent house.

– ROGER

I had to go back to my mother's house, apply for all these different apartments until one of them finally accepted me. If you are on public assistance and make a low income, they'll give you a Section 8 apartment.

– GABRIELLA

As far as transportation, I always stick to the same area. I try not to find a job too far out, because if my car breaks down, I won't be able to get there. I did that before when I moved too far away from a job instead of staying in my own little area and my car was stolen and I had no way to get to work. And, they weren't understanding at all. ... But, those good jobs are always really far out. A good job, if it's really far away, I will take it. But, in the back of my mind, I'm thinking – the wear and tear on my car, the gas. The more I make, the more it goes in the car.

– MONIQUE

I used to work at a place where no buses went. I would have to walk almost two miles. So, you know that didn't last long.

– TAMARA

Even though it's a 48-mile commute each way ... for \$15,000 annually ... it was worth the drive.

– SYLVIA

While individuals with whom we spoke discussed a number of difficulties with obtaining affordable housing and reliable transportation, our main focus on these issues was in understanding how they influenced their job and career options and choices. Among our research participants, some could afford to pay their housing costs on their own or supplemented by a

spouse's income. Others reported having to live with their parents as a cost-saving or child-care strategy, and a few were living in publicly subsidized housing.

The significant issue for almost all participants is that they are not free to move. Being unable to afford to move out of a parent's home or from a lower- to a higher-cost area closer to better employment opportunities, or being tied to a Section 8 subsidy meant that they could not move to improve their commutes. Participants definitely felt that where they lived limited their employment options. Long commutes were cited as expensive and detrimental to their ability to arrive at work on time, as well as taking important time away from their families and increasing child-care costs.

Combined with a difficult housing situation, like Roger and Gabriella, many participants reported problems with transportation. This issue was most notable in Detroit, where Tamara described the best manufacturing jobs as being located outside of the city, and San Antonio, where, as Sylvia's situation illustrates, suburban nursing homes pay higher wages and benefits than do those downtown. In both of these cities, which lack good public transportation systems, workers generally need reliable personal vehicles to maintain employment and advance. Yet, even for workers with reliable vehicles, as Monique noted, higher wages paid in the suburbs were often still not enough to justify the long commutes with their extra fuel expense and wear-and-tear on cars.

The Way Forward: Advancement and Further Education

Cooperative helped me because I've always wanted to work in the health field. I wanted to be a nutritionist. By working with Cooperative I have changed my mind; I would love to be a nurse. Working at Cooperative has given me more encouragement, more motivation. I've become more motivated to go and do it. I've gotten a lot of experience, so it's good. Working with them has given me the opportunity to want to go further. I'm actually going to go to college. I just got accepted by the Bronx Community College.

– CARLA

Sometimes it was very hard [getting through school], because I'd be catching six to eight buses a day and then the kids had the chicken pox, and I was getting home in the dark and it would be cold or raining ... and then the homework. ...

– PAULA

Almost without exception, every person interviewed stressed that their experiences in sectoral training and in the labor market have convinced them that education is imperative for success. Some commented on the need for credentials, others on the need for particular skills. Almost all participants had plans to pursue further education. It seemed clear from our discussions that the training programs had laid significant groundwork in terms of helping trainees see for themselves that they could make progress toward larger educational goals. Participants pointed to their own successes in completing training and were generally very articulate about the specific steps they needed to take to address their individual

barriers to continuing with coursework. They noted that the training programs encouraged them to continue their education, and a few of the research participants had already taken additional steps.

Working with these engineers, [I see that] there are a lot of things I don't know. In the next three years, I want a chance to go back to school and get my mechanical engineering degree. Our company does offer college reimbursement, so it is an opportunity for me to go to school. But, you also have to work full time. I just purchased a home in October, so I still have to maintain that. And, I have two children. I don't want to come home in the evening and just say to them, 'Mommy has to go.' My kids are in school, in day care, and I'm at work. When my daughter is a little bigger, more independent, can do more things on her own, then I'll feel much better.

– A M B E R

I work from 6:30 to 3:00. If I were to go to school, I'd rather go in the day where you have an hour-and-a-half-long class or an hour-long class. Because the few classes I've taken have been three, four hours in a classroom. And, that's hard for me. You're disinterested after a couple of hours. You just want to go.

– T A M A R A

[My new job] offered to help me with school ... but, I have to work full time ... I cannot be a student and a full-time worker.

– S A N D Y

The reality for most program participants is that completing the initial training program while also caring for children and working to earn income represented a heroic effort at a level that proves difficult to sustain over a longer period of time. While it is clear that graduates continue to be enthusiastic about returning to school, they are also very pragmatic about the amount of effort that will be required, as well as the cost. Participants who were delaying their return to school, nevertheless, had some very detailed plans about the conditions under which they would return.

Individuals expressed regret that in the past they did not understand what a lack of further education really meant in terms of their ability to have employment options and a satisfying career. A notable number commented that they had liked and done well in school when they were younger – but that they lacked guidance or help with planning from adults and didn't continue after high school. They expressed determination that their own children will succeed in school and attend college.

I liked school when I was younger. Most definitely. Honor student. I took college prep classes during high school but never actually went to college. I don't know; I guess my mom never enforced college on us, so for my kids it's a must. I tell my son, 'I don't care if I have to take out a second mortgage, you're going to college. Whatever it takes, you're going.'

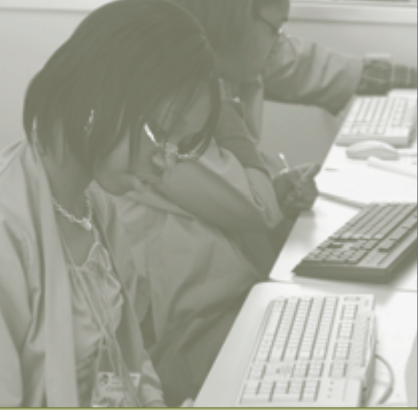
– A M B E R

Since I've pursued my associate's degree, it's now set in stone how important an education is. I [always] knew I wanted to do something and be successful, but I just didn't know about planning. I didn't have a true understanding of how important it [college] was until after I had my children. I didn't have anybody guiding my path saying, 'Okay, this is how you build a successful career.' I didn't have any goals. I mean, I knew I wanted to go to college and I kept trying to go to college over and over again; but, I didn't really have an idea about a career.

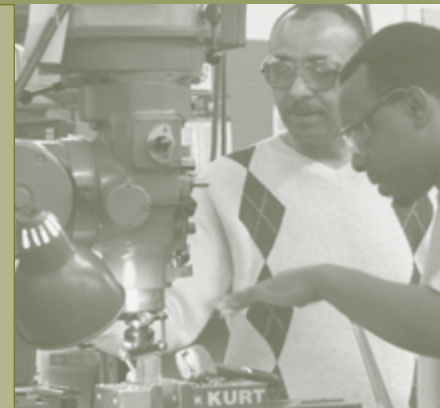
– P A U L A

I looked at my daughter. I just looked at her and told her, 'Please, just go on to school.' I keep telling them [my kids] don't be like their mother and wait until they're 30 to discover that they can do this.

– V A N E S S A



We took a vacation last year, me and my kids and my mom, to Colorado – the first one [vacation] that we’ve had as a family. I have been able to do a lot more things since then, now with having a job. I think I just expect more from everybody now, even from myself. — T Y R A



I want to tell young girls that this is a job that they can have, because when I grew up, I didn’t know. No one could tell me five years ago that this is the job that I would have. — D A N I



C O N C L U S I O N

The life changes that respondents attribute to their participation in Project QUEST, Cooperative Home Care Associates and Focus:HOPE are both inspirational and educational. Respondents were articulate about the value of new skills (technical, communications, planning and initiative-taking were among those frequently highlighted) and relationships they developed through the sector training program. They clearly articulated their growing recognition of the need to continue developing their skills in order to continue gaining financial self-sufficiency.

Throughout our discussions, respondents were forthright about the barriers they have faced since completing training and entering or re-entering the workforce. They have helped us to understand, in very practical terms, how they believe their program experiences influenced their employment trajectory and what other life circumstances have played a role. Several themes with respect to the design and delivery of training services stand out:

- **Soft Skills.** The degree to which participants noted the programs' role in teaching and modeling effective communication styles, study and work habits, and other non-technical and non-academic skills was striking. Respondents noted that these skills were important to both obtaining and maintaining employment. Integrating "soft skills" lessons into a specific work-focused curriculum was accomplished in a variety of ways across the three programs, but respondents were clear that this integration made those lessons real and lasting.
- **Support Systems.** Encouraging peer networks, providing counseling services, linking clients with specific social services and providing emergency financial support were all cited by respondents as crucial to their ability to succeed in the training program. Participants noted not only the practical value of services, such as child-care assistance, that made it possible for them to attend classes, but also the psychological boost of participating in a program in which staff understood them and worked to identify and address personal barriers to success as a matter of course.
- **Specific Job Goals.** Participants had specific goals with respect to work and employment, and it was clear to them how the program would help them to meet those goals. Program staff members were credible to participants, because they outlined a vision for and the concrete steps necessary to achieve a specific goal. The occupation-specific learning environment was described again and again as providing: the context for practical application of new soft skills and technical skills; the motivation to succeed; and the "real-life" experience needed to build confidence, as well as to identify and compete successfully for jobs.

Participants also spoke of continuing challenges, plans for the future, and the influence of the training experience on both life and work situations. As is often noted, success breeds success. Respondents indicated how their success in the training program gave them greater confidence in their ability to learn and encouraged them to plan for further education. Many described how the experience opened their eyes to the importance of education generally and inspired them to encourage other family members, particularly children, to focus on educational goals.

Nevertheless, key challenges remained for a number of participants:

- **Becoming Self-Sufficient.** Despite making substantial gains in terms of employment and wages, a number of participants continue to rely on informal supports from family, particularly in the provision of housing and child care, or on public benefits, such as Section 8 vouchers, child-care subsidies and other supports. Only about half of the respondents reported that, four years after their training experience, they were earning income sufficient to pay market price for housing and all family expenses, and that they and their dependents had health care coverage. The responsibility for providing care to ill or disabled family members drove some graduates to choose lower-paying, but more flexible jobs, and forced others to leave the workforce altogether.
- **Balancing Earning and Learning.** Most respondents expressed the desire to further their education and many were able to describe specifically how that would enhance their earning power. Several laid out clear plans and timelines for pursuing degrees, and a few had even embarked upon or completed additional degrees and certificates. More common, however, were those who could not provide for their families and also pursue further education or training. They were discouraged about this inability to continue to advance. Those who had made additional educational progress generally had important supports, such as a working spouse, or were able to extend public benefits for a short period of time while the additional credential was earned.

Workforce development programs' ability to respond to these longer term and not specifically work-related concerns is limited. In some cases, participants returned to the program for assistance finding a better job or navigating an issue with the social service system. Many, however, were unaware that programs would continue to help them after graduation. And indeed, programs may not be in a financial position to offer substantial services beyond the period immediately subsequent to graduation and job placement. Expanding this post-placement role might be a first step to addressing some of these concerns, but we recognize that programs already struggle to fund pre-employment services for as many individuals as possible.

Our hope in conducting this series of discussions and interviews with sector training graduates was to learn more about the program elements they feel positively affect longer-term labor market outcomes. It is clear that while there are common practices that are important to providing the context for success, it is just as important to have a realistic understanding of the real-life circumstances of individuals and their families.

In recent years the public workforce development system has placed increasing emphasis on better understanding the specific labor market needs of businesses in specific industries and for specific occupations. This emphasis is appropriate. As was articulated by our respondents, credibility and knowledge of industry practices and employment demand were aspects of their experience that they believe were fundamental building blocks of both their training experience and the programs' ability to help them get and keep good jobs. Knowledge about specific business needs is a cornerstone of effective workforce development practice.

Nevertheless, the most effective workforce development programs also recognize that another fundamental cornerstone is the workers. And, just as critical as understanding the specific needs of businesses is understanding the specific needs of job-seekers and workers. Clearly one-size-fits-all does not serve business needs. Nor does it serve the needs of individuals. The original SEDLP study showcased results of hundreds of individuals who had achieved great gains following participation in a well-established sectoral employment development programs. Our much more nuanced follow-up discussions with a subset of the original study population has highlighted a number of important issues that must be addressed, some by program design and others by more realistic public infrastructure to support workers, if even relatively successful participants like these are to achieve real and continuing labor market progress.

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To learn more about WSI's workforce development research and the Sectoral Employment Development Learning Project (SEDLP) that was the impetus for this report, visit our Web site: www.aspenwsi.org

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Workforce Strategies Initiative
The Aspen Institute
e-mail: aspenwsi@aspeninstitute.org



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

One Dupont Circle, NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20036