

Workforce Training Academy (WTA) Connect

Findings from the *Implementation and Early Impact Report* | May 2019 | OPRE Report #2019-23

WHAT ISSUES DID WTA CONNECT SEEK TO ADDRESS?



Low-income workers with only a high school education face poor and declining employment prospects.



There is high and growing local demand for skilled workers in targeted occupations.



Low-income individuals often face a range of resource- and skill-related barriers to obtaining postsecondary credentials.

WHAT WAS WTA CONNECT?



Launched in 2012.



Operated by Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) in Iowa.



Funded by Des Moines Area Community College with support from a grant by the Open Society Foundations (OSF).



Recruited low-income, low-skilled* adults with an interest in occupational training in specific areas (administrative support, medical office, certified nursing assistant, building maintenance, welding, advanced manufacturing).



Accelerated basic skills training prior to Workforce Training Academy occupational courses for applicants who did not score high enough on the admissions assessment.

* "Low-skilled" based on admissions test scores (CASAS or WorkKeys).

WHAT WAS WTA CONNECT'S APPROACH?



An on-ramp to the DMACC Workforce Training Academy, which provides occupational training in targeted high-demand, high-growth fields.



Basic skills remediation through a self-paced, internet-based curriculum and instructor-supervised labs. Participants who lacked a high school diploma or equivalent had access to GED/HiSET** instruction.



Advising from dedicated achievement coaches who helped participants enroll in and progress through WTA Connect courses, identified and addressed barriers to participation, and monitored academic progress.



Non-academic supports including free tuition, transportation supports (bus passes or gas cards), benefits screening (e.g., Medicaid, SNAP), and a workshop on goal-setting and self-efficacy skills.

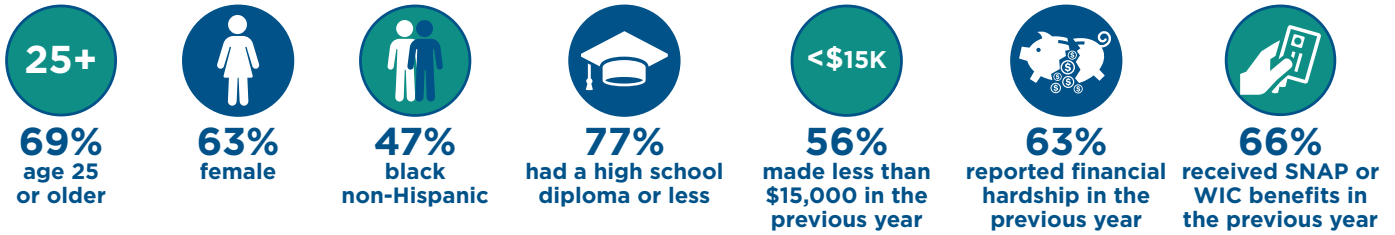


Employment assistance through a job readiness course and one-on-one sessions with an employment coach.

** High School Equivalency Test, a state-issued secondary credential comparable to the GED.

WHO ENROLLED IN THE WTA CONNECT STUDY?

For PACE, the program randomly assigned 943 study participants, 470 to the treatment group and 473 to the control group. Across treatment and control group members, the study participants were older than traditional college students, low income, from disadvantaged groups, and had limited education.



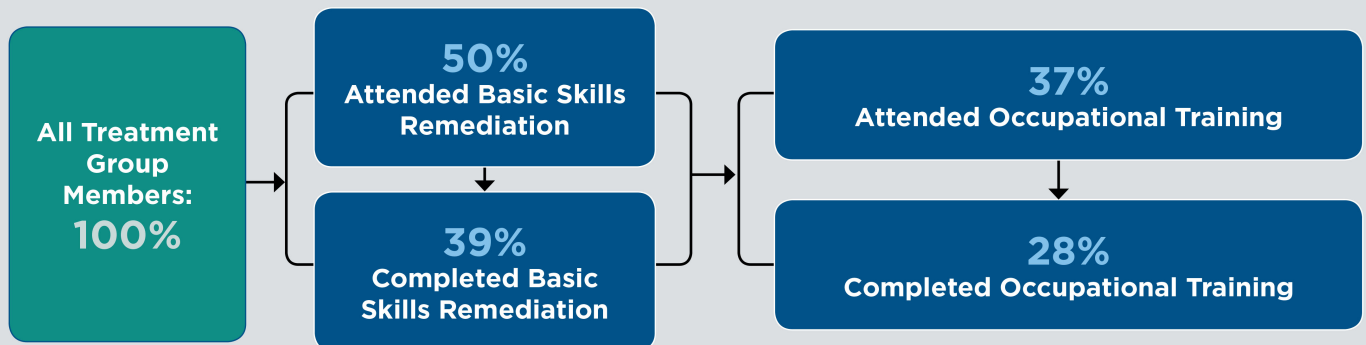
WHAT OCCUPATIONS DID WTA CONNECT TARGET?

WTA Connect offered short-term certificate programs lasting 2.5 to 16 weeks in the following occupational areas:

- **Administrative Support**
(e.g., *Administrative Support Basics*)
- **Medical Office**
(e.g., *Medical Unit Clerk; Patient Access Registration*)
- **Certified Nursing Assistant**
- **Building Maintenance**
(e.g., *Principles of Electricity; Principles of HVAC; Basic Plumbing*)
- **Welding**
- **Manufacturing Specialist**

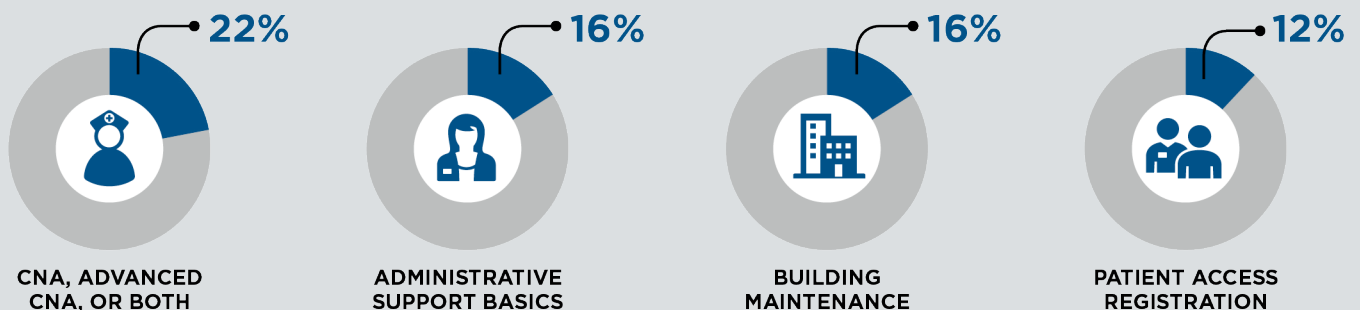
Each short-term certificate laddered into a one-year diploma or two-year degree program at DMACC.

WHAT TRAINING DID TREATMENT GROUP MEMBERS ENROLL IN AND COMPLETE?



The denominator for each calculation is all treatment group members.

Of those who participated in education and training...



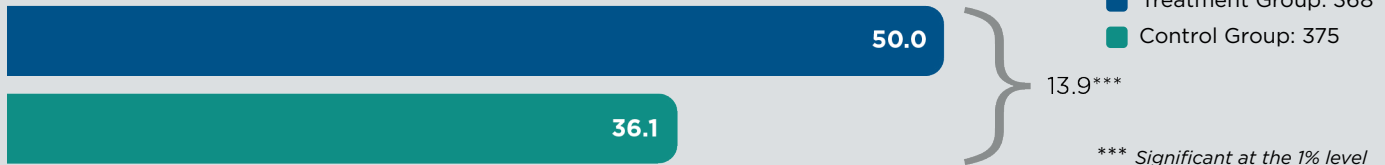
Most Common Training Programs

WHAT WERE THE IMPACTS OF WTA CONNECT ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING?

WTA Connect increased receipt of education and training.

The program increased enrollment in education and training within 18 months by about 14 percentage points.

ENROLLMENT IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING (%)

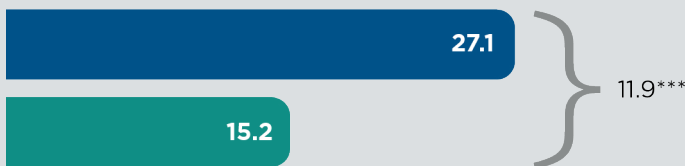


Source: PACE 18-month follow-up survey

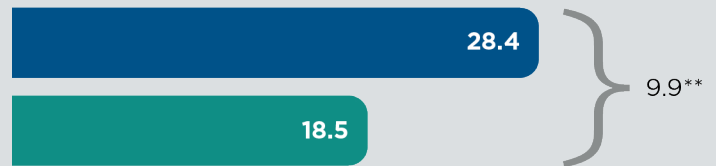
Among those who received education and training, WTA Connect increased receipt of various supports.

The program increased receipt of supports by about 10 to 12 percentage points among those who participated in education and training.

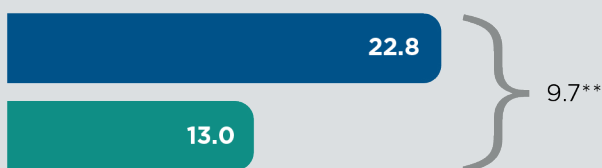
CAREER COUNSELING (%)



TUTORING (%)



JOB SEARCH/PLACEMENT ASSISTANCE (%)



Sample size

■ Treatment Group: 194

■ Control Group: 135

*** Significant at the 1% level

** Significant at the 5% level

Source: PACE 18-month follow-up survey

WTA Connect increased overall receipt of credentials.

RECEIPT OF CREDENTIALS (%)



Sample size

■ Treatment Group: 368

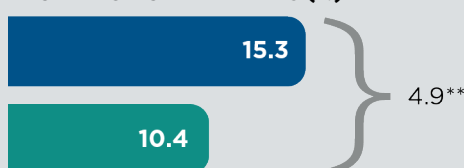
■ Control Group: 375

* Significant at the 10% level

Source: PACE 18-month follow-up survey

When credential attainment is disaggregated by source, WTA Connect only increased receipt of credentials from a licensing/certification body.

RECEIPT OF CREDENTIALS (%)



The program did not increase completion of college credentials or those from other types of education and training institutions.

Sample size

■ Treatment Group: 368

■ Control Group: 375

** Significant at the 5% level

Source: PACE 18-month follow-up survey

Impacts may not equal the difference between groups due to rounding

FACTORS THAT MAY HAVE INFLUENCED PROGRAM IMPACTS

WTA Connect increased participation in training, receipt of various supports, and credential attainment, but increases were not large. The program did not improve another key educational outcome—hours of occupational training completed. Several contextual and implementation factors may have influenced the modest program impacts.



The program experienced **challenges engaging treatment group members**. Only half of treatment group members attended any education or training. Treatment group members who did not enroll in any education or training offered a number of reasons for their decision not to enroll. The most common reasons selected as very or somewhat important were “didn’t have enough time due to work” (68%) and “didn’t have enough time due to family responsibilities” (62%).



WTA Connect was a new program implemented at the start of the PACE study. The **design of the new program components evolved** over the study period as staff and leadership decided adaptations were needed.



The program operated in the context of **broader organizational change** at the college and in the state of Iowa, which resulted in changes outside of WTA Connect’s control. For example, Iowa changed its test for earning a secondary (high school equivalency) credential. The state previously used the GED, but changed to another test, the HiSET, midway through the study period. This created a barrier for WTA Connect students seeking a secondary credential, some of whom lost the progress made on GED courses and subject tests.

HOW DID WTA CONNECT AFFECT EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES?



Early results show no impact on employment or perceived career progress.

WTA Connect did not have an impact on participants’ self-assessed measures of perceived career progress, confidence in career knowledge, or access to career supports. The treatment group was not more likely to be working in a job requiring mid-level skills or a job paying at least \$12 per hour. The next report will explore employment impacts further.

HOW DID LEADERSHIP LEARN FROM AND REFINE THE PROGRAM DURING THE EVALUATION?



Program leaders intentionally shifted toward flexible, self-paced program components with the goal of accommodating participants’ schedules and other life demands. For example, the program initially implemented an approach to basic skills remediation that included structured classroom instruction along with an online curriculum. During the first year of PACE, the program transitioned to providing all basic skills remediation in a self-paced, online format.



Early in the PACE study period, **program staff identified that a substantial proportion of treatment group members were disengaged or making slow progress**. Many faced barriers that made them unlikely to succeed, such as mandatory work requirements or substance abuse issues. In response, the program added a non-academic barriers assessment as part of determining eligibility for the program, intended to better identify and screen out applicants with clear barriers to engagement. Later, the program expanded the assessment to include a follow-up telephone screening.



Midway through the study period, **program leaders rebranded the program with a new name**. Leaders thought the original name, the Prepared Learner Program, may have deterred some applicants because the name suggested a “second choice” or less desirable program for those whose low assessment scores made them ineligible for occupational training at the Workforce Training Academy (WTA). The new name, WTA Connect, more clearly linked the program to WTA and the focus on occupational training.

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What is PACE?

The Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) evaluation uses a random assignment methodology to assess the effectiveness of nine career pathways programs targeting low-income, low-skilled individuals on credential attainment, employment, and earnings. Key features of career pathways programs include:

1. A series of well-defined training steps;
2. Promising instructional approaches targeted to adult learners;
3. Services to address academic and non-academic barriers to program enrollment and completion; and
4. Connections to employment.

This brief summarizes findings from the implementation study and impacts 18 months following study intake. The study is funded by the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Next steps in the PACE evaluation of Workforce Training Academy Connect

The next WTA Connect report will cover a 36-month follow-up period and will examine employment outcomes, such as average rate of employment and average earnings over successive follow-up quarters, and job characteristics, such as occupation, hourly wage, receipt of benefits, and career progress. Thus, it will begin to answer whether the occupational training gains that WTA Connect achieved after 18 months will translate into economic gains in the workplace in the longer term. Later, an analysis at 72 months after random assignment will estimate long-term effects of WTA Connect.

This brief summarizes findings from the following report: Hamadyk, J., and M. Zeidenberg (2018). *Des Moines Area Community College Workforce Training Academy Connect Program: Implementation and Early Impact Report*, OPRE Report #2018-82, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This brief, the full report, and other PACE publications are available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/pathways-for-advancing-careers-and-education> and www.career-pathways.org



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