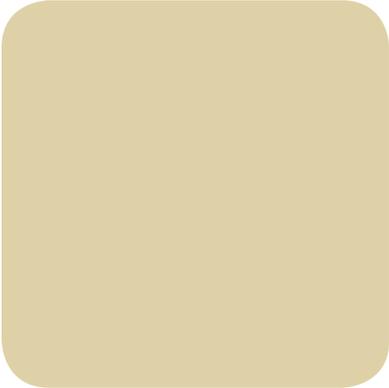
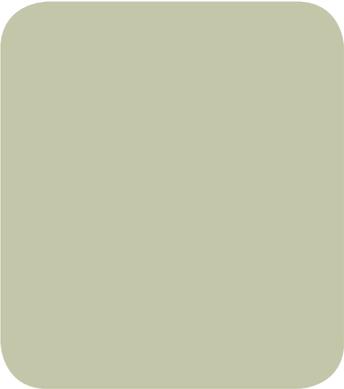


Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement: Implementation and Early Impact Report



Executive Summary

OPRE Report No. 2017-83



October 2017



PACE
Pathways for Advancing
Careers and Education

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Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE)

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Executive Summary

Low-income workers with only a high school education face poor and declining employment prospects (Pew Research Center 2014). Postsecondary training, often at community colleges, offers one strategy for improving this population's education and employment opportunities, especially if targeted to occupations where there is high and growing demand for skilled workers (Capelli 2014; Conway and Giloth 2014; Holzer 2015). How to facilitate a better match between the nation's need for a skilled workforce and the needs of low-income adults for employment is a topic of great interest to policymakers, workforce development organizations, educators, and other key stakeholders.

VIDA Program

This report provides evidence on the implementation and early impacts of one promising effort to meet the needs of low-income students and local employers for skilled workers, the **Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA)**. Founded in 1995, VIDA, a community-based organization created through a partnership of faith-based leaders and the business community in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas has a mission "to formulate new institutional relationships in the Rio Grande Valley that simultaneously address employers' needs for skilled workers and link the area's unemployed and underemployed with high skilled, high wage jobs identified in the region."¹ VIDA's primary goal is for participants to graduate with an associate's degree or industry-recognized certificate in a high demand occupation and achieve living-wage employment in their area of study.

The report includes findings from the implementation study and the impact study. The former showed that VIDA continued to implement its program as designed. Participants received assistance with tuition and school-related expenses as well as intensive counseling and personal guidance.

The impact study showed that over an initial 24-month follow-up period, compared to a randomly assigned control group that could not access the program, VIDA treatment group members:

- Earned more college credits,
- Enrolled in college full-time at a greater rate, and
- Earned more college credentials.

VIDA supports full-time enrollment of individuals in occupational training programs leading to certificates and degrees in occupations with high local employer demand. Participants must be

¹ See VIDA website at <http://www.vidacareers.org/whowe.htm>.

unemployed, underemployed, meet federal poverty income levels, or be on public assistance. Additionally, they must be residents of the Rio Grande Valley, 18 years or older, and eligible to work in the United States.

To support participants' successful completion of training, VIDA provides comprehensive and intensive counseling services and substantial financial assistance at a cost of approximately \$13,750 per participant over an average of two and a half years. VIDA's primary program features are:

- **Required full-time enrollment** in certificate programs, associate's degree programs, or the final two years of bachelor's degree programs. VIDA staff conduct an initial assessment of each applicant to determine his or her ability to commit to the program. The assessment accounts for finances, personal circumstances, and the need for VIDA services.
- **Weekly mandatory group or individual case management and counseling sessions** conducted at students' colleges by experienced VIDA Counselors with degrees in education, social services, psychology or a related field provide information on how to succeed in college and employment, identify problems early, and provide social support.
- **Wrap around support services** for tuition, books, and other needs, such as transportation assistance calculated on school attendance to reduce the cost of obtaining a certificate or degree.
- **The "College Prep Academy,"** a 16-week, accelerated, full-time basic skills ("bridge") program for those who are not college ready but who have tenth grade skill levels or better. The course meets daily to prepare individuals to pass college entrance exams.
- **Regular assessment of local labor markets** to identify occupations where support for training from VIDA is most likely to promote employment.

Together these features and other less central program components provide a substantial set of services for which a participant must meet a demanding set of requirements. Their aim is to move students quickly through standard college coursework in order to obtain a certificate or a degree and secure employment.

Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) Evaluation

Abt Associates and its partners are evaluating VIDA as part of the **Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) evaluation**. Funded by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the Department of Health and Human Services, PACE is an evaluation of nine programs that include key features of a "career pathways framework."

The **career pathways framework** guides the development and operation of programs aiming to improve the occupational skills of low-income adults, primarily older nontraditional students,

by increasing their entry into, persistence in, and completion of postsecondary training. Central to accomplishing these outcomes, the framework describes strategies for overcoming barriers to education and training that these students can face. Key features of programs within this framework include: a series of well-defined training steps, promising instructional approaches targeted to adult learners, services to address academic and non-academic barriers to program enrollment and completion, and connections to employment.

The VIDA evaluation includes an **implementation study** that examines the design and operation of the program as well as participation patterns of students enrolled, and an **impact study** that uses an experimental design to measure differences in educational and employment outcomes for a sample of 478 individuals randomly assigned to a treatment group that could participate in VIDA or a control group of 480 that could not.² Using data from baseline surveys, a follow-up survey, administrative records, in-depth participant interviews, and site visits, this report provides the results from the implementation study and describes the early impacts of the program (24 months after random assignment) on education, training and employment.³

Key Findings

This summary documents findings from the implementation study and early findings from the impact study at 24 months after randomization, including receipt of college credits received since random assignment, the primary outcome used to assess the early effects of VIDA.

Implementation Study

The implementation study examined how VIDA's counseling and financial support services were implemented, the degree to which treatment group members enrolled in and completed occupational training programs, and the receipt of counseling and other services by the treatment group relative to the control group.

- *Participants reported benefiting significantly from the counseling provided to them by VIDA, and qualitative data suggests that treatment group members received a substantial dose of these services.*

In interviews, participants discussed the importance of the VIDA Counselors to their experience in the program. Participants said that they believed the Counselors understood what they were going through, provided them with encouragement when school felt difficult or personal challenges arose, and offered strategies and guidance. Qualitative information from PACE team

² Random assignment ensures that the treatment and control groups will be equivalent in their observed and unobserved characteristics, and that any systematic differences in their subsequent outcomes can be attributed to the treatment group having access to program services.

³ The analysis plan was posted on the ACF website at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/pathways-for-advancing-careers-and-education-supplement-evaluation-design-impact-analysis-plan>. Outcomes were also registered on the Open Science Framework site. <https://osf.io/bpm8u/>.

program observations, interviews with staff, and interviews with participants, suggests the majority of treatment group members received a substantial dose of individual and group counseling.

- ***Almost all participants (99 percent) received VIDA’s assistance with tuition and expenses related to attending and completing school, and VIDA provided an average of almost \$7,000 in direct financial assistance per participant within 24 months of random assignment.***

VIDA carefully calculates the amount of financial support it will provide each participant, taking into consideration his/her household finances, the type of program into which the participant is enrolling, and the length of time it expects the student to participate in the program. In the 24 months after random assignment, VIDA spent funds on 98 percent of treatment group members.⁴ In the two years after random assignment, VIDA spent an average of \$6,808 per participant (for the 98 percent of treatment group members for whom they expended any financial resources). Of the participants who received financial assistance, almost all (99 percent) received assistance with tuition and related expenses of attending and completing training, which averaged \$4,861 per participant. Eighty-nine (89) percent of participants had assistance paying for books, at an average of \$910 per participant, and 88 percent received at an average of \$835 per participant for transportation assistance for going to and from school. Thirty (30) percent of participants had help paying for uniforms or interview clothing, because VIDA views these as necessary expenses for participation in training and attaining a job. Less common among the types of financial support related to training was assistance for tools (23 percent), school supplies (19 percent), and tutoring (3 percent).

- ***VIDA staff reported that the program was a set of obligations and incentives and not just a set of services; participant interviews reflected this perspective, too.***

VIDA commits to providing a high degree of financial and personal support, but the participant must agree to meet VIDA’s program requirements, including maintaining full-time enrollment in school, achieving passing grades, and participating in weekly counseling sessions. VIDA staff articulated the view that financial support was more than a service; it was a key incentive for both attracting applicants to the program and fostering retention in the program and in training. Meanwhile, VIDA Counselors provide participants with the tools to address academic and personal challenges that otherwise might derail their participation in training.

⁴ In this report, “participants” constitute the 98 percent of treatment group members for whom VIDA provided at least one direct financial assistance payment.

- ***Nearly all treatment group members (98 percent) participated in occupational training and the vast majority (91 percent) completed college credits. About two-thirds accumulated 30 or more credits within the follow-up period.***

Almost all treatment group members (98 percent) participated in any education or training activity, which includes both basic skills education in the College Prep Academy and occupational training. Ninety-seven percent of all treatment group members participated in occupational training, including those who advanced from the College Prep Academy into college-level programs of study. Ninety-one percent of treatment group members earned at least one college credit, and 66 percent completed 30 or more college credits (by some standards the equivalent of a year of full-time college).

- ***The College Prep Academy prepared participants for entry into college-level occupational training programs, although VIDA was not able to increase enrollment in the program or expand to additional colleges as intended.***

Upon entering the program, nine percent of treatment group members needed instruction in math, reading, and writing in order to pass the college entrance exam. These students generally had a high school diploma or GED as their highest level of education at baseline, and started in the College Prep Academy. The majority of participants (85 percent) enrolled in occupational training after completing the College Prep Academy. Though the College Prep Academy had historically enrolled a small proportion of participants, VIDA planned to increase enrollment in the Academy during PACE. Its analysis of educational attainment levels in the region, where approximately one-fifth to one-quarter of residents held a high school diploma or equivalent but had not attended college, suggested that there was a demand for accelerated remedial education. However, the program was unable to expand the College Prep Academy as planned. VIDA found it more difficult to recruit interested and eligible participants than expected, and they encountered challenges expanding the Academy to a second college and discontinued this new partnership.

- ***Persistence in occupational training programs was substantial, with slightly more than four in 10 treatment group members still attending training at the end of the 24-month follow-up period.***

Two years after random assignment and enrollment into VIDA's program, 42 percent of the treatment group was still attending training. Among those still attending, about half were still working towards a credential while the other half had obtained a credential, suggesting they continued in their educational pathway to attain further certificates or degrees.

- *Training in nursing and allied health professions were the programs most commonly attended by treatment group members, followed by programs in education, social services, and specialized trades.*

Of treatment group members who engaged in occupational training, three-quarters participated in nursing or allied health training,⁵ according to VIDA administrative records. Half of those enrolled in health training pursued nursing programs. One-quarter enrolled in Licensed Vocational Nurse (LVN) certificate programs, 19 percent enrolled in Associate's Degree in Nursing (ADN) programs, and eight percent in a pathway program that advanced participants from LVN to ADN. Other health programs of training, attended by one-quarter of treatment group members, included certificate and associate's degree programs for Radiology Technician, Patient Care Assistant, Respiratory Therapist, Surgical Technician, Health Information Technology, and a Bachelor's of Science in Nursing (BSN). After health training, VIDA participants most commonly enrolled in programs in education and social services (14 percent), including Social Worker, Criminal Justice Corrections Officer, Teacher, and Sign Language Interpreter. Eleven percent of treatment group members participated in specialized trades programs such as Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning, and Refrigeration Technician and Automotive Technician. Nine percent of participants pursued business-related programs including Business Management Technology, Office Management, and Accounting, and seven percent enrolled in technology programs such as Biomedical Equipment Technology, Computer and Telecommunications Technology, and Aviation Maintenance Technology.

Impact Study

The impact study reports estimates of VIDA's early impacts on educational attainment, career progress, and non-economic outcomes. The main estimates cover impacts over a 24-month period after random assignment for the full sample of 958 randomly assigned participants. The research team also explored impacts for a longer follow-up period—36 months—for the roughly three-quarters of the sample who enrolled through May 31, 2013 (who could be observed for a longer time).

Prior to conducting these analyses, the research team categorized hypotheses into three groups: confirmatory, secondary, and exploratory. The confirmatory hypothesis focuses on the outcome which best represents whether the program is on track to have positive effects on its main goals consistent with the expected direction of the effect given the timing of the follow up. Secondary hypotheses include a limited set of additional outcomes which, like the confirmatory outcome, are consistent with expected effects within the period covered by the study report. Exploratory hypotheses include additional outcomes whose direction and timing are less certain.

⁵ Allied health professions are those professions that are not medical, nursing or pharmacy. Examples include Emergency Medical Technician, surgical technician, and medical coding specialist.

- ***VIDA significantly increased the total number of college credits earned (the confirmatory outcome).***

As Exhibit ES-1 shows, over a 24-month period, treatment group members earned 33.1 credits compared with 27.5 credits for the control group, an increase of 5.6 credits, or roughly two typical courses completed successfully. The 27.5 credits for control group members reflects the fact that they had access to the same college courses as treatment group members and that applicants were often already enrolled when they applied for VIDA's services. These impacts are among the largest reported to date from random assignment tests of programs aiming to increase college success among low-income individuals.⁶ In addition, an analysis of the pattern of this effect over time showed growing impacts on credits earned over each six-month period after random assignment.

- ***The program increased rates of full-time college enrollment and enrollment more generally.***

VIDA increased full-time enrollment in college, an outcome that is central to its theory of change. As Exhibit ES-1 shows, VIDA increased full-time enrollment in each six-month increment during a 24-month period by between about five and 11 percentage points, and by 11 points over the full period.

⁶ The research team's review of the literature, as well as consulting with others, indicates that only the MDRC evaluation of the CUNY ASAP program has demonstrated (slightly) larger impacts on credits and credentials (Scrivener et al. 2015). See Section 6.1 of the full report for detail.

Exhibit ES-1. Early Impacts on Education Outcomes (Confirmatory and Secondary Hypotheses)

Outcome	Treatment Group	Control Group	Impact (Difference)	Standard Error	p-Value
Confirmatory Outcome					
Total college credits earned within 24 months of randomization (average)	33.1	27.5	+5.6***	1.1	<.001
Secondary Outcomes					
Total college credits earned by end of successive periods after randomization					
By month 6	11.2	9.6	+1.6***	0.5	<.001
By month 12	21.3	18.0	+3.3***	0.7	<.001
By month 18	28.2	23.4	+4.8***	1.0	<.001
By month 24	33.1	27.5	+5.6***	1.1	<.001
Enrolled full time in academic/technical college courses during months (%)					
Months 1-6	64.6	55.0	+9.6***	3.0	<.001
Months 7-12	51.9	40.8	+11.0***	3.1	<.001
Months 13-18	31.3	24.4	+6.9***	2.9	.008
Months 19-24	20.8	16.2	+4.6**	2.6	.036
In any month 1-24	75.7	64.8	+10.9***	2.8	<.001
Total months of college enrollment (average):					
Full time	6.89	5.61	+1.28***	0.36	<.001
Any	15.38	13.14	+2.24***	0.46	<.001
Receipt of a college credential (%):					
Level 1 certificate	12.1	10.6	+1.5	2.0	.226
Level 2 certificate	15.9	12.7	+3.2*	2.1	.067
Any certificate	28.0	23.1	4.9**	2.8	.040
Associate's degree	26.1	22.9	+3.2	2.7	.116
Bachelor's degree	2.7	2.1	+0.6	0.9	.267
Any degree	28.8	25.0	+3.8*	2.7	.080
Any credential	53.3	45.0	+8.3***	3.0	.003
Enrolled in any summer school within 24 months of random assignment (%)	73.2	56.5	+16.7***	2.9	<.001
Total hours of occupational training at a college that does not grant degrees	11.8	14.6	-2.8	8.1	.635
Received a credential from: (%)					
A college within 24 months	53.3	45.0	+8.3***	3.0	.003
Another education or training institution by time of survey	0.6	0.9	-0.2	0.6	.646
A licensing/certification body by time of survey	34.4	35.0	-0.6	3.4	.567
Any of the above	62.2	55.5	+6.7**	3.4	.024
Sample size ^a	478	480			

SOURCE: Abt Associates calculations based on data from VIDA partner college records and the PACE short-term follow-up survey.

NOTES: Statistical significance levels, based on one-tailed t-tests tests of differences between treatment and control groups, are summarized as follows: *** statistically significant at the one percent level; ** at the five percent level; * at the 10 percent level.

^a The numbers in this row are the sample sizes for estimates based on college records for the full sample. These are all estimates except for the last two panels. In the last two panels (total hours and credentials by place), estimates for activity at a college also reflect college records for the full sample, but all other estimates in these two panels (including those for activity at any source) reflect the subsample who responded to the PACE follow-up survey, 434 treatment and 373 control group members.

These effects were significant at the five percent level, with most at the one percent level or smaller. About three-quarters of treatment group members were enrolled full time at some point. Viewed in terms of months of enrollment, VIDA increased full-time enrollment by about 1.3 months and any enrollment by about 2.2 months (both significant at the one percent level) within the 24-month follow-up period.

- ***VIDA significantly increased college credentials earned.***

VIDA significantly increased the percentage of individuals who earned a college credential by eight percentage points: 53 percent of treatment group members earned a credential compared to 45 percent of control group members (significant at the one percent level). Effects were largest for those who received a certificate, about five percentage points, with about two-thirds of this effect due to a significant impact on certificates that require 43 to 59 credits (known as Level 2 certificates). There was also a significant, positive effect (significant at the ten percent level) on those receiving academic degrees, about four percentage points, and this effect was almost entirely due to receipt of associate's degrees. VIDA did not affect receipt of non-college degrees or non-academic licensing/certificates.

- ***Educational impacts seen for a subgroup of early enrollees (followed for 36 months) suggest that VIDA's full sample impacts will grow over the next year.***

Availability of an additional year of college data for sample members who had enrolled in VIDA by the end of May 2013—somewhat more than three-quarters of the full sample—enables analyses of a 36-month follow-up period. These analyses provide a suggestive look into potential future impacts. VIDA had positive effects on college credits earned, full-time enrollment in college (persistence), and receipt of a college credential (college success) at 36 months. Further, the increases all were larger in magnitude than those at 24 months. The increase in college credits earned was seven credits over 36 months for the early cohort (39.4 credits versus 32.5 credits). The research team anticipates that the 36-month effects are likely to hold for the full sample for two reasons. First, the early cohort represents over three-quarters of the full sample, and, thus, in the full sample analysis will carry over three times the weight of the remaining roughly one quarter of the treatment group. Second, the outcome levels and point estimates for the full sample and the early cohort are extremely close in magnitude over the first 24 months, a period over which both are observed.

Next Steps in the VIDA Evaluation

This report on VIDA focuses on the implementation of the program and its early effects on participants' education and training. The findings on VIDA's impacts on college outcomes over two years of follow-up represent some of the largest effects to be established in random assignment evaluations of promising postsecondary programs. The key program goal examined at 24 months after random assignment to the program or a control group was receipt of college credits received since study enrollment. This emphasis on education outcomes reflects VIDA's

theory of change and expectations that many participants in the program would still be engaged in training at the end of the 24 months.

The next VIDA report will cover a **36-month to 42-month follow-up period**. It will take a more systematic look at program effects on participants' economic outcomes for a period when these are expected to occur. The report 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 VIDA achieved after 24 months will translate into economic gains in the workplace in the longer term. An analysis at approximately 72 months after random assignment will estimate long-term effects of the program. Key research questions for these future analyses include:

- Will VIDA's educational effects remain stable, grow, or shrink?
- Will VIDA's positive educational effects translate into positive impacts on employment outcomes in the longer term, consistent with the program's theory of change?
- Does VIDA have other positive effects on treatment group members and their families?
- Is VIDA cost beneficial?

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