ISIS CAREER PATHWAYS PROGRAM PROFILE:

Des Moines Area Community College Workforce Training Academy Connect Program

April 2014

OPRE

ISIS
INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING SELF-SUFFICIENCY

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Introduction

A substantial gap exists between the skills of the labor force and the needs of employers in many high-growth industries, including healthcare, technology and manufacturing. This gap results in unemployment while well-paying jobs go unfilled. At the same time, many low-skilled adults persist in low-wage work with little opportunity for advancement.[1] Career pathways programs aim to address the economy's vital need for skilled workers while offering low-wage workers the opportunity to obtain education and training and advance into the middle class.

To achieve their goals, career pathways programs offer low-skilled adults well-articulated training and employment steps targeted to locally in-demand jobs combined with promising instructional approaches and supportive services. Policy makers and practitioners show great interest in career pathways programs, in part because such programs provide guidance for developing improved education and training approaches for low-skilled individuals. Along these lines, the *Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency (ISIS)* study is using an experimental design to assess the effectiveness of nine career pathways programs across the country (See Box).

An experimental evaluation design assigns individuals eligible for a program via lottery to a treatment group that can participate in the program or a control group that cannot participate but can access other services in the community. Because the assignment process is random, there are no systematic differences between the treatment and control groups at the time they enter the study. Thus, any differences detected during the follow-up period can be attributed to the program. Random assignment is considered the gold standard of program evaluation.

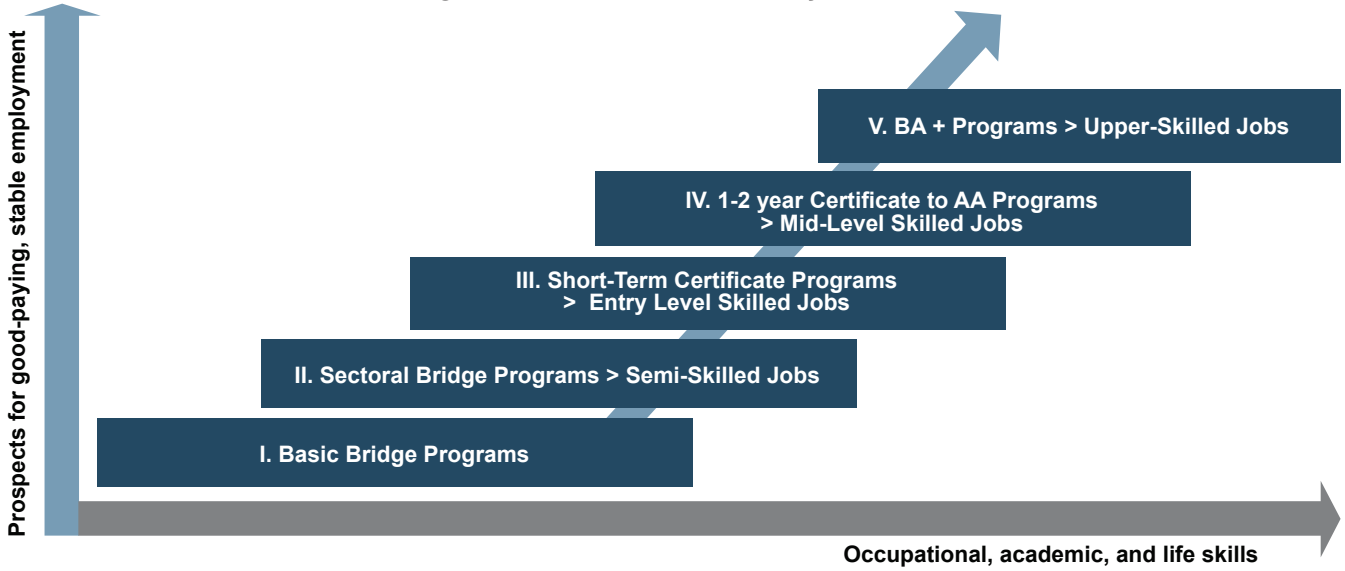
This profile is an overview of the Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) *Workforce Training Academy Connect (WTA Connect)* program.[2] Designed and operated by DMACC in Des Moines, Iowa, WTA Connect targets students who otherwise would not be eligible to enroll in vocational training certificate courses because of their low skill levels. The program intends to accelerate entry into vocational training by enabling students to pursue basic skills and occupational training simultaneously. Through support services and advising, WTA Connect aims to equip participants for success in their chosen course of study.

This profile first describes the career pathways framework used in the ISIS evaluation, which provides a common approach for describing and assessing career pathways programs, and then discusses DMACC's WTA Connect model and how it fits within this framework.[3]

The Career Pathways Framework

The career pathways approach presupposes that postsecondary education and training should be organized as a series of manageable steps leading to successively better credentials and employment opportunities in growing occupations. Each step is designed to prepare participants for the next level of employment and education and also provide a credential with labor market value. To effectively engage, retain, and facilitate learning, programs integrate four core elements: (1) comprehensive assessment, (2) promising approaches to basic and occupational skills, (3) academic and nonacademic supports, and (4) strategies for connecting participants to employers. Individual programs vary in terms of emphasis placed on each core component, although all are comprehensive in nature in order to address the learning and life challenges facing adult participants. Career pathways programs typically include

Figure 1: The Career Pathways Steps



partnership between multiple providers, including community-based organizations, community and technical colleges, human services and workforce agencies, and employers and their representatives.

Although steps in career pathways programs vary with their target populations, focal occupations, and service strategies, the broad training and employment levels shown in **Figure 1** provide a basis for classifying programs.

The first two steps (I and II) represent "on ramp" programs designed to prepare low-skilled participants for college-level training and lower-skilled jobs with a career focus. The next two steps (III and IV) provide college-level training for "middle skills" employment—jobs requiring some college but less than a bachelor's degree (e.g., an associate's degree or shorter certificate). The final step (V) includes interventions to promote completion of a bachelor's degree and more advanced credentials. Career pathways are designed to allow entries, exits, and re-entries at each stage—depending on skill levels and prior training, employment prospects, and changing personal situations. Programs vary in terms of entry and exit points as well as steps incorporated.

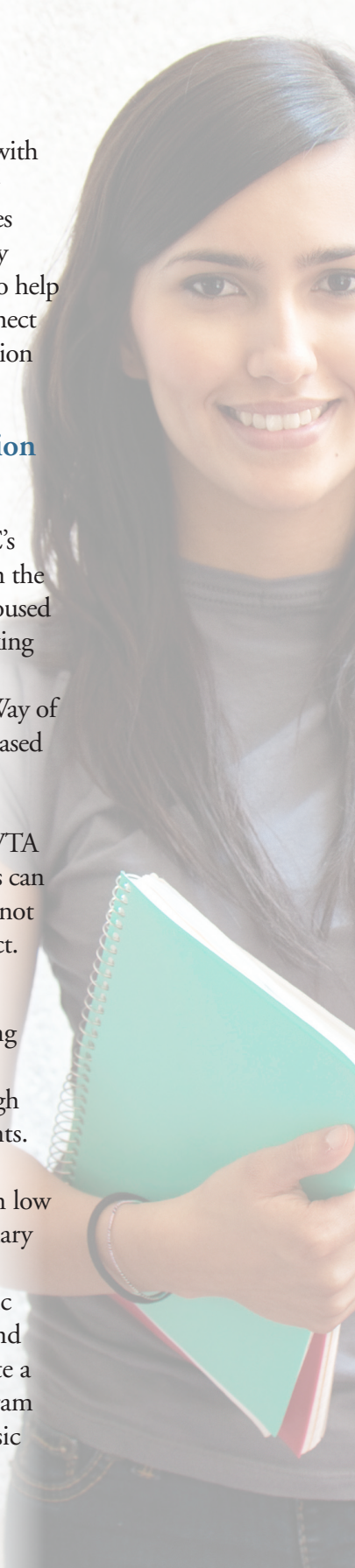
DMACC's WTA Connect Program

WTA Connect targets low-skilled adult learners and includes key components of the career pathways model. The program features accelerated entry into vocational training certificate courses for students with a low level of basic skills in math and/or reading. Advising and supportive services are designed to help participants identify barriers, set goals, and access resources to help them succeed. Additionally, WTA Connect provides financial assistance, paying tuition for all participants.

Program Goals, Target Population and Structure

WTA Connect is operated by DMACC's Workforce Training Academy (WTA) in the Continuing Education Division. It is housed in the Evelyn K. Davis Center for Working Families (the Center), an initiative that brings together DMACC, the United Way of Central Iowa, and several community-based organizations under one roof to provide education, employment, and financial services to local residents. By locating WTA Connect within the Center, participants can access supportive services and resources not available directly through WTA Connect.

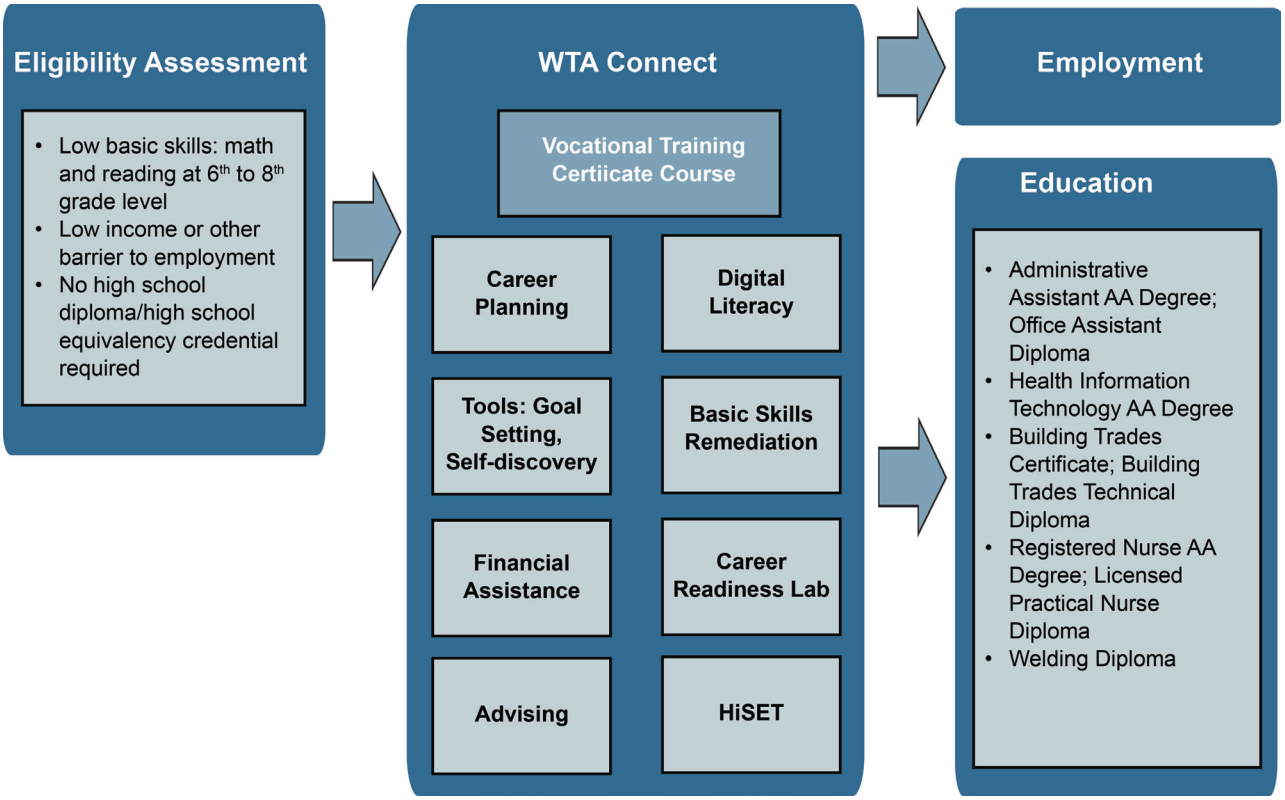
DMACC developed WTA Connect to expand access to the Workforce Training Academy, which provides vocational certificates in targeted high-growth, high demand sectors at no cost to participants. DMACC found that WTA's eligibility requirements prevented applicants with low basic skills and/or who lacked a secondary credential from being admitted. WTA Connect admits students with low basic skills and/or no secondary credential and prepares them to enroll in and complete a vocational certificate course. The program packages vocational education with basic skills remediation, psychosocial skills



development, and advising. After completing the preparatory components of the program, WTA Connect participants enroll in certificate courses alongside traditional WTA students. WTA Connect completers can either continue their education at DMACC or enter employment.

Candidates for WTA Connect are identified by their score on the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS), COMPASS, or WorkKeys assessment. WTA Connect targets individuals who do not test at the requisite math and reading grade level to enter WTA directly (9th grade or higher). A high school diploma or high school equivalency credential (HiSET, the High School Equivalency Test) is not required for program entry, but participants are strongly encouraged to earn one while enrolled because it is required for further training at the college and by employers.[4] In addition to being low-skilled, the majority of WTA Connect participants are low-income, and those who are not generally have other barriers to employment, such as skills deficiencies or inconsistent work histories. Once they complete the necessary components of WTA Connect, participants enroll in the WTA vocational training courses that provide certificates in Certified Nurse Assistant (CNA), Medical Unit Clerk, Patient Access Registration, Administrative Support Basics, MIG Production Welding, and a suite of building maintenance trainings, such as Principles of Electricity and Basics of Plumbing. All WTA Connect program components, with the exception of vocational education courses, are provided at the Center.

Figure 2. WTA Connect Program Components and Career Pathway



Vocational education courses are offered at the DMACC Urban Campus (adjacent to the Center), the Southridge Career Center, and the Ankeny Campus. In the absence of WTA Connect, students with low assessment scores would have to complete internet-based, remedial coursework and earn qualifying assessment scores to enroll in WTA certificate courses. Students with no high school diploma or high school equivalency credential would have to earn one to meet the WTA eligibility criteria.

Within the ISIS career pathways model, WTA Connect is designed to move participants through a bridge program (Steps I & II in **Figure 1**) and then earn a short-term certificate (Step III). Each certificate course in WTA Connect prepares students for a one-year diploma or two-year associate's degree program at DMACC, so students who choose to continue on an educational pathway can do so (Step IV). WTA advisors assist participants with the transition to employment or further education. **Figure 2** depicts the WTA Connect components and the pathways to employment or further education after program completion.

Career Pathway Components

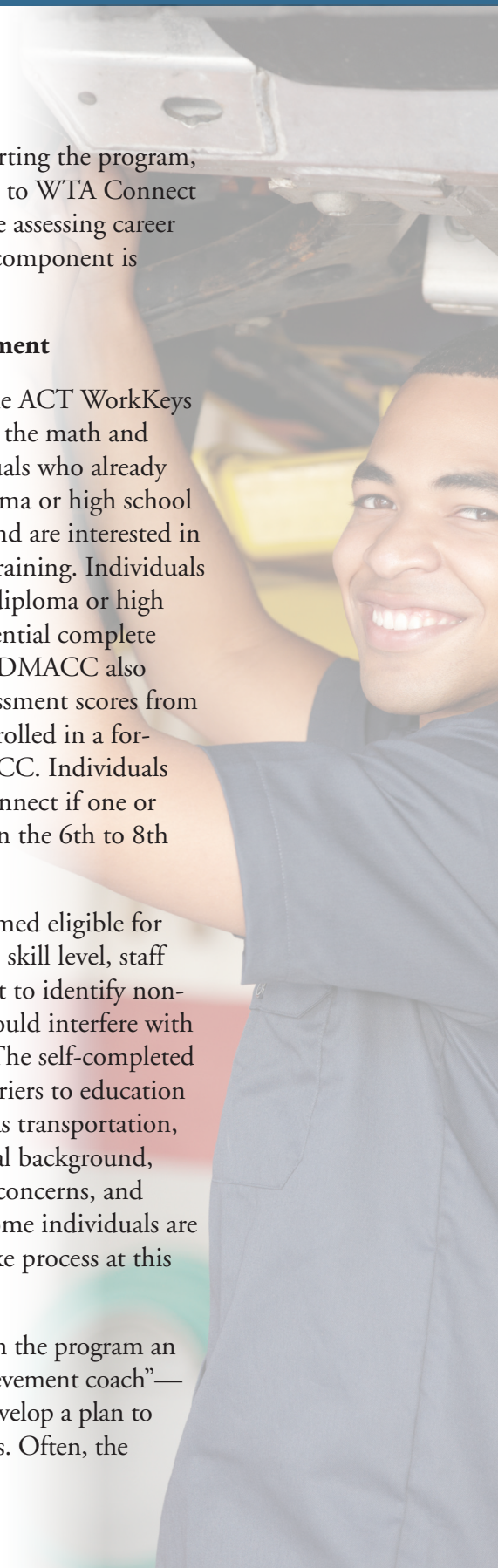
WTA Connect incorporates an array of academic and non-academic services including academic and non-academic assessment, basic skills remediation, psychosocial skills development, and student supports. WTA Connect also helps participants prepare for employment. A unique feature of the program is that participants do not need to pre-select a training area prior to starting the program, but instead are admitted to WTA Connect generally and spend time assessing career options. Each program component is described below.

Comprehensive Assessment

DMACC administers the ACT WorkKeys assessment to determine the math and reading skills of individuals who already have a high school diploma or high school equivalency credential and are interested in enrolling in vocational training. Individuals who lack a high school diploma or high school equivalency credential complete the CASAS assessment. DMACC also accepts COMPASS assessment scores from applicants previously enrolled in a for-credit program at DMACC. Individuals are eligible for WTA Connect if one or both of their scores are in the 6th to 8th grade skill level range.[5]

Once applicants are deemed eligible for WTA Connect based on skill level, staff administer an assessment to identify non-academic barriers that could interfere with program participation. The self-completed assessment identifies barriers to education and employment, such as transportation, child care needs, criminal background, substance abuse, health concerns, and current job demands. Some individuals are screened out of the intake process at this point.

After individuals enroll in the program an advisor—called an "achievement coach"—uses the assessment to develop a plan to address identified barriers. Often, the



Center's other partnerships arrange the supportive services, such as child care, applications for public benefits, and basic needs assistance, and to help individuals access affordable health care and housing.

Basic and Occupational Skills Training

The WTA Connect curriculum includes a career planning and digital literacy session, a sequence of psychosocial skills development sessions called *Tools*, basic skills remediation to improve math and reading skills, vocational training, and (as needed) HiSET completion.

Career Planning and Digital Literacy Labs. WTA Connect participants have flexibility to select their vocational course based on skills and interests. Individuals first hear about vocational offerings during the mandatory pre-application information session, but they do not need to formally select a training area prior to WTA Connect entry. The theory is that program participants might have an idea of what they want to study, but after exposure to other options may change their minds. An initial program activity is career planning. After enrollment, participants attend a career planning session that focuses on assessing career interests, understanding job responsibilities and associated salaries, and advancement opportunities. Participants use a web-based tool, *I Have a Plan Iowa*™, to conduct a short interest assessment.[6] The tool generates a list of careers that match the participant's interests and personality. The participant then uses the web-based tool, O*NET, to complete a "Career Research Assignment." The purpose of the activity is to explore careers more in-depth to further assess whether the occupation is a good fit. Lastly, participants conduct an informational interview with a practitioner in their vocational area of choice.

In addition to helping participants explore occupations, *I Have a Plan Iowa*™ provides participants with a brief financial self-assessment. This component introduces budgeting tools and tips for financing education, and allows individuals to select additional financial topics of interest.

The digital literacy lab prepares participants for the digital elements of their vocational programs. The web-based instruction includes a two-hour assessment of computer literacy and a lesson on keyboarding, basic computer use, the internet, and setting up an email account. Specific digital literacy proficiency is required for certain vocational training courses, such as Administrative Support Basics, Patient Access Registration and Medical Unit Clerk. Individuals who fall below the proficiency standard must improve their digital literacy skills in order to enroll in the vocational course. Digital literacy skills training is provided free of charge to the WTA Connect participants.

Tools. The two-session *Tools* course aims to help participants better understand the challenges they may face in their training programs and how to overcome them. Tools sessions are three hours each and are generally completed prior to the start of vocational training.

- The first session leads participants through a process of "self-discovery" to identify their strengths as well as barriers to success (e.g., low self-esteem, personal or family issues, and financial obstacles). The instructor lectures, engages participants in discussion, and uses group activities and worksheets to facilitate self-reflection and assessment of professional goals. Participants complete an assessment of obstacles and barriers that they might encounter during the program.
- The second session aims to prepare participants for success in vocational training and beyond. Instructor-facilitated activities include detailed discussion on the specific vocational training classes, performance standards for both the classroom and

workplace, and supportive services available through WTA Connect.

WTA Connect staff view the process of self-discovery, identification of obstacles, and goal-setting as a critical element of the program. Many participants enter the program with diminished confidence either because they were unemployed or underemployed for long periods of time and/or had negative prior school or work experiences. The goal is for participants to acknowledge where they are starting from (including cumulative bad experiences) and remember their strengths and transferrable skills so that they can draw on them during the program and beyond.

Basic Skills Remediation. WTA Connect participants start with low (6th to 8th grade) basic math and/or reading skills. For participants who already have a high school equivalency credential or high school diploma, all basic skills instruction is delivered through e2020, an internet-based curriculum that uses video lessons followed by practice and short quizzes. WTA Connect is designed to allow students to remediate only in the areas where their skills are low on a flexible schedule. Based on their assessment scores, participants may need to remediate in math, reading, or both. They attend a two-hour introductory class to sign up for e2020 and take an e2020 skills assessment, which identifies participant-specific remediation needs and sets the participant's e2020 training curriculum. Participants then complete the required lessons either in an instructor-staffed computer lab or from any location that has internet access. The instructor and the achievement coach monitor participants' progress in e2020 to determine if there are particular places where they struggle and might need extra help. If participants need additional help, WTA Connect provides a tutor to work one-on-one with them or with a small group.

WTA Connect contextualizes the math component of the skills instruction. Participants attend an industry-specific session in which employers/practitioners discuss how math is used in their profession.

Participants who come into the program without a high school equivalency credential or high school diploma are required to attend a managed enrollment HiSET testing class instead of the basic skills remediation.[7] The HiSET class is a seven week, in-person, instructor-led program. Participants attend at least two three-hour sessions per week. The HiSET test measures knowledge in five core areas: reading, writing, mathematics, science and social studies. The sessions are offered at various times during the week from Monday through Saturday to accommodate participants' schedules. Participants enrolled in the HiSET class also attend the contextualized math component described above.

Vocational Training. Participants select their vocational training course at the outset of the program, in consultation with their achievement coach (see **Figure 3** for a full list of certificate courses). The vocational training courses last between 2.5 and 16 weeks, and WTA Connect students are enrolled in the same classes as WTA students.

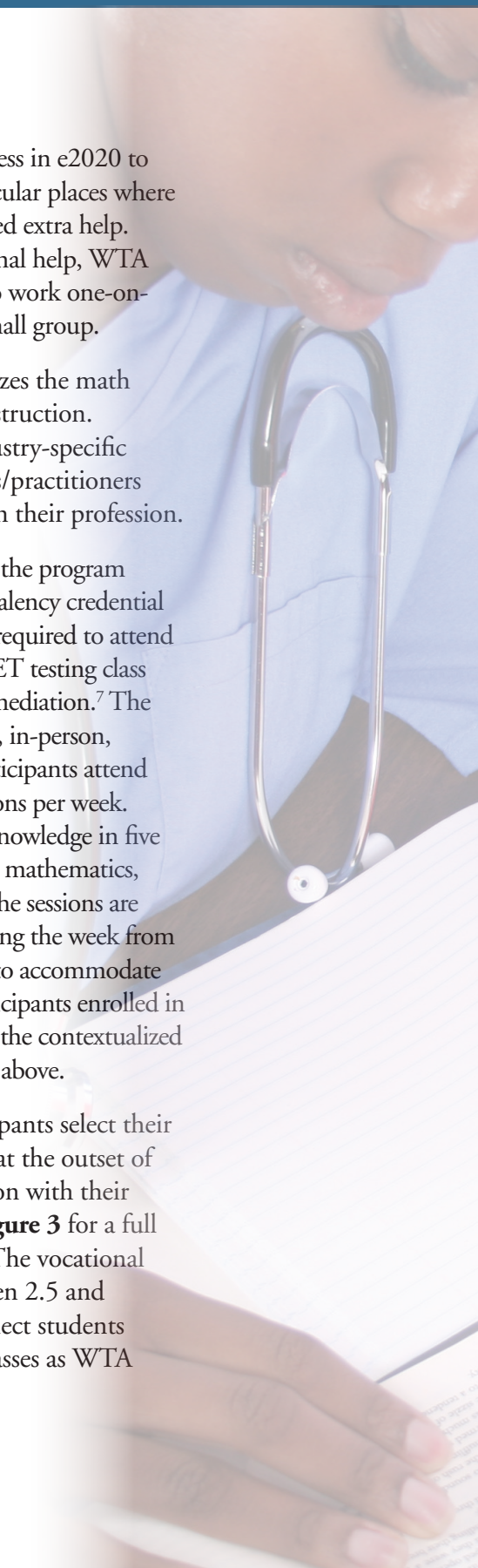


Figure 3: WTA Connect Certificate Courses

Short-term WTA Connect Certificate	Length of the Course	Hours Spent in Course	Career Pathway Ladder
Administrative Support Basics	10 weeks	60 hours	• Administrative Assistant 2-year AAS Degree • Office Assistant 1-year Diploma
Medical Unit Clerk	14 weeks	76 hours	• Health Information Technology 2-year AAS Degree
Patient Access Registration	10 weeks	60 hours	• Health Information Technology 2-year AAS Degree
Certified Nursing Assistant	2.5 weeks - 6 weeks	75 hours (basic) 150 hours (advanced)	• Registered Nurse 2-year AAS Degree • Licensed Practical Nurse 1-year Diploma
Principles of Electricity	16 weeks	64 hours	• Building Maintenance Certificate • Building Trades Technical Diploma
Principles of HVAC	10 weeks	60 hours	
Basic Plumbing	10 weeks	30 hours	
Welding	16 weeks	235 hours	

Each certificate course leads directly into one or more one-year diplomas or two-year associate's degree programs. Upon completion of a certificate, WTA Connect participants have the option to enroll in further education at DMACC.[8]

Academic and Nonacademic Supports

WTA Connect provides a range of supportive services, including advising, financial assistance, and benefits screening.

Advising. WTA Connect achievement coaches guide participants through enrollment, identify barriers, arrange supportive services, and monitor their academic progress over the course of the program. Participants attend four mandatory advising sessions with an achievement coach, and can receive more frequent support as needed. (Advising sessions occur either one-on-one or small groups.)

During the first advising session, the achievement coach meets with a small group of students to discuss program enrollment. The achievement coach discusses any risk factors identified during Tools Session 1, and participants leave with a support plan and schedule for completing the WTA Connect program components. The second and third advising sessions focus on monitoring progression through the program components and working toward enrollment in vocational training. The third session is designed as a vocational training-specific group meeting during which the achievement coach reviews the status and readiness of participants immediately prior to the start of training, discusses the details of the vocational training, and discusses available support services. Once vocational training starts, instructors contact the achievement coach when they identify issues with participants' attendance, behavior, or study skills. The final advising session occurs once vocational training concludes and focuses on participants' transitions to further education or employment.

Participants that begin to slow down and stop progressing in the program are required to attend a "Tools intervention" session with the achievement coach, which uses self-discovery and goal setting documentation from Tools Sessions 1 and 2 to help them recommit to completing the program.

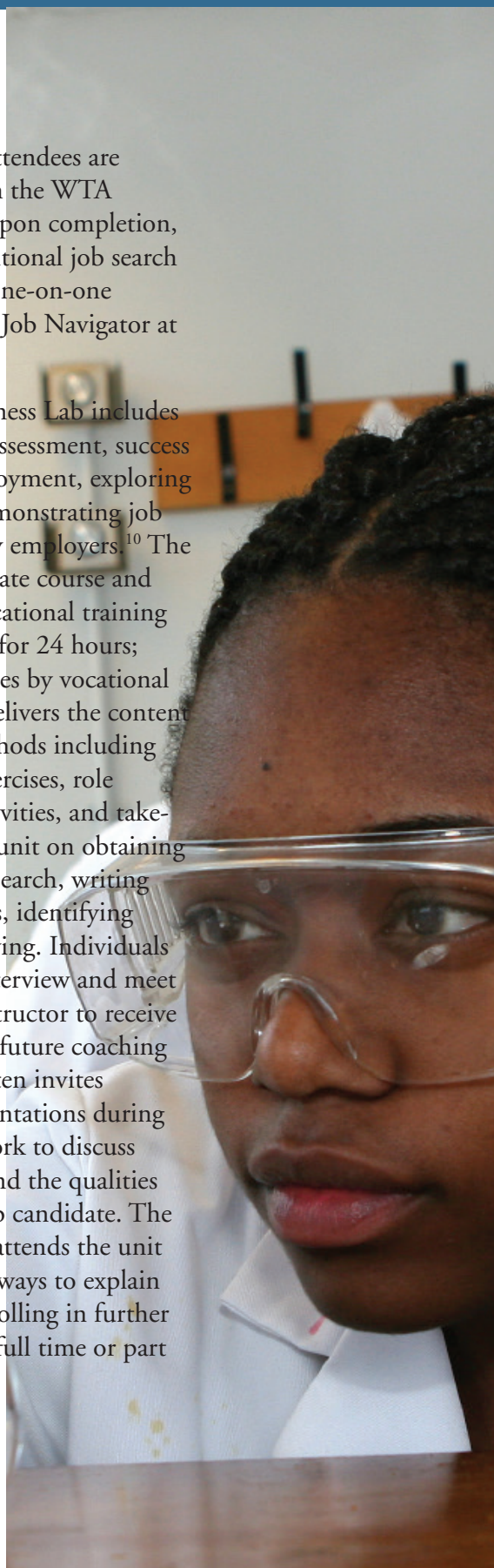
Financial Assistance. All components of WTA Connect, including vocational training, are provided free of charge to participants. DMACC fully funds WTA Connect through a variety of sources including private grants and state and federal funds. The majority of WTA Connect participants are funded through Iowa's GAP tuition assistance fund and the Pathways for Academic Career and Employment (PACE) fund.[9] The achievement coaches work with students to apply for and secure these funds. Other funding sources used for WTA Connect participants include Workforce Investment Act and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) employment and training program.

Benefits Screening and Other Supports. WTA Connect offers benefits screenings to assess participants' eligibility for public benefits and to help connect participants to resources outside the college for other services such as child care and health care. Participants apply online for benefits such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and health care. WTA Connect staff ensures that those who are eligible successfully complete and submit the required paperwork and documentation to secure the benefits. Additionally, WTA Connect provides transportation support in the form of bus passes or gas cards, and makes referrals for resources not available through WTA Connect.

Connecting Participants to Employers

WTA Connect uses a range of strategies to prepare participants for employment. All vocational training attendees are required to participate in the WTA Career Readiness Lab. Upon completion, participants seeking additional job search assistance can schedule one-on-one coaching sessions with a Job Navigator at the Center.

The WTA Career Readiness Lab includes units on personal skills assessment, success at work, obtaining employment, exploring career pathways, and demonstrating job readiness skills sought by employers.[10] The Lab is part of the certificate course and is integrated into the vocational training schedule. The lab meets for 24 hours; the specific schedule varies by vocational course. The instructor delivers the content through a variety of methods including individual and group exercises, role playing and scenario activities, and take-home assignments. The unit on obtaining employment covers job search, writing resumes and cover letters, identifying references, and interviewing. Individuals participate in a mock interview and meet one-on-one with the instructor to receive feedback and determine future coaching needs. The instructor often invites employers to make presentations during the unit on success at work to discuss employer expectations and the qualities that are desirable in a job candidate. The WTA academic advisor attends the unit on exploring career pathways to explain students' options for enrolling in further education, whether it is full time or part time while also working.



Students who need further coaching continue to meet with the instructor or are referred to Job Navigators at the Center. The instructor follows up regularly with all participants who conclude training move on to the job search process. The WTA academic advisor meets one-on-one with students interested in further education to provide hands-on assistance with the transition to the college.

Comparison to Other Offerings

DMACC's WTA Connect incorporates self-discovery and goal setting, basic and vocational skills training, mandatory advising sessions, access to supports, and a career readiness lab. **Figure 4** below illustrates the different career pathway services available to WTA Connect students and to similarly skilled students who are not enrolled in the program.

Summary

DMACC developed WTA Connect to increase access to vocational training certificate courses for students with a low basic skills levels (6th to 8th grade). To support low-skilled students, WTA Connect packages the vocational training with additional supports and instruction including a career planning session, a self-discovery and goal setting course, basic skills remediation in math and reading, and advising services from achievement coaches. The program is designed to improve students' academic skills and psychosocial skills so that they are prepared to succeed in vocational training courses typically offered only to students at a 9th grade skill level or above.

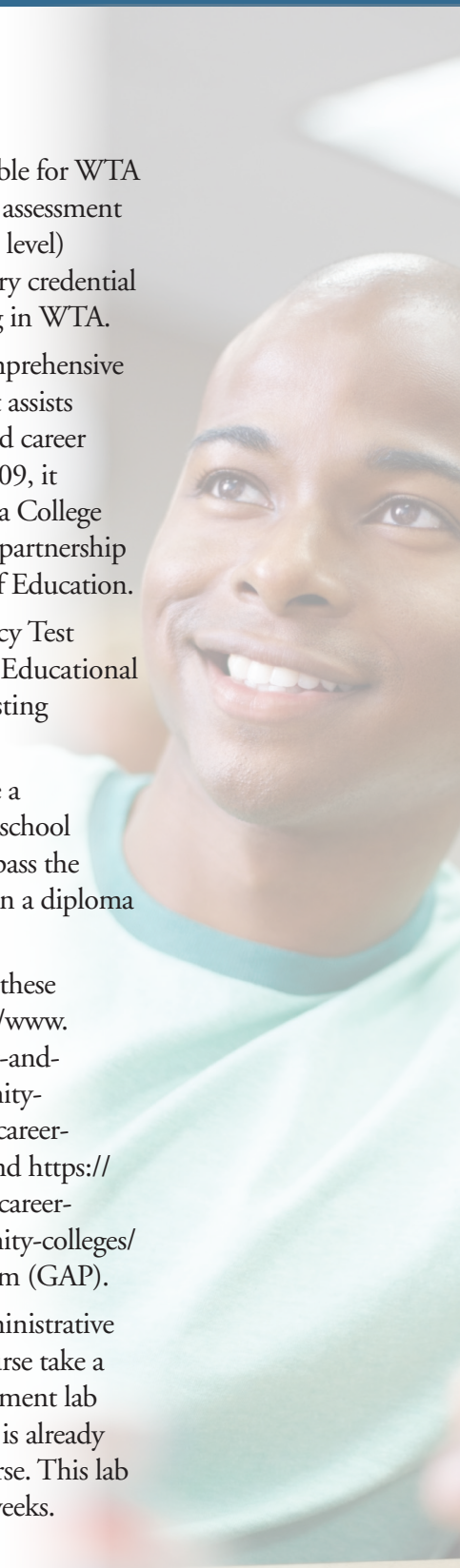
For more information about the Workforce Training Academy, visit https://go.dmacc.edu/outreach/wta/Pages/welcome.aspx.

Figure 4: Comparison of Career Pathway Components Available through WTA Connect and Other DMACC Offerings

Career Pathway Component	WTA Connect	Other DMACC Offerings
Assessment	• WorkKeys • Barriers Assessment	• Various
Curriculum	• Career planning • Digital literacy • Tools: self-discovery, barriers assessment, goal setting • Basic skills remediation • Vocational training certificate course • HiSET preparation (if needed)	• Self-directed remediation • HiSET preparation (if needed) • WTA for those who raise the skill levels
Supports	• Mandatory advising sessions with achievement coach • Financial assistance • Public benefits screening • Income supports	• General college advising not related to vocational training • General direction on services offered through the Center
Employment Connections	• Employment lab • One-on-one assistance from employment specialist or academic advisor	• Pre WTA: none • If increase WorkKeys scores to enroll in WTA: Employment lab, one-on-one assistance from employment specialist or academic advisor

Endnotes

1. Carnevale, A., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2010). Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018. Georgetown Public Policy Institute, Retrieved from http://cew.georgetown.edu/jobs2018/.
2. WTA Connect receives support from the Open Society Foundations. The evaluation of WTA Connect through ISIS is funded by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF).
3. For more information on the ISIS framework, see www.projectisis.org/isis-documents: Fein, David J. (2012). Career Pathways as a Framework for Program Design and Evaluation: A Working Paper from the Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency (ISIS) Project. OPRE Report # 2012-30, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
4. Starting in January 2014, DMACC began using HiSET as its high school equivalency credential as the result of a statewide change in Iowa. Previously the GED was used.
5. An individual is eligible for WTA Connect if one assessment score is in the range and one score is above the range. If either score falls below the range, he/she is not eligible. Students who do not have a high school equivalency credential or high school diploma are eligible for WTA Connect with slightly higher assessment scores (at a 9th or 10th grade level) because the lack of a secondary credential prevents them from enrolling in WTA.
6. I Have a Plan Iowa™ is a comprehensive web-based planning tool that assists users to explore education and career options. First launched in 2009, it was implemented by the Iowa College Student Aid Commission in partnership with the Iowa Department of Education.
7. The High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) is a product of the Educational Testing Service and Iowa Testing Program.
8. Participants who do not have a high school diploma or high school equivalency credential must pass the HiSET test before enrolling in a diploma or degree program.
9. For more information about these funding sources go to https://www.educateiowa.gov/adult-career-and-community-college/community-colleges/pathways-academic-career-employment-pace (PACE) and https://www.educateiowa.gov/adult-career-community-college/community-colleges/gap-tuition-assistance-program (GAP).
10. Students enrolled in the Administrative Support Basics certificate course take a shorter, less intensive employment lab because some of the material is already covered in the certificate course. This lab meets twice a week for two weeks.



Box 1: Overview of the ISIS Evaluation

The Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency (ISIS) evaluation, a 10-year effort funded by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and led by Abt Associates Inc., is a random assignment evaluation of nine promising career pathways programs that aim to improve employment and self-sufficiency outcomes for low-income, low-skilled individuals. The goal is to produce methodologically rigorous evidence of the effectiveness of career pathways approaches that will address issues of interest to federal, state, and local policy makers and practitioners and have significant influence on policy and practice. ISIS will include implementation, impact, and cost-benefit studies. Key study questions include

- What is the impact of each program on higher levels and quicker achievement of certificates and degrees? On earnings?
- What are the impacts of each program on individual and family well-being?
- Do impacts vary by subgroups, and, if so, which characteristics are associated with larger or smaller effects?

ISIS was launched in late 2007 and began with intensive outreach to solicit the views of policymakers, program operators, researchers and advocates on promising program areas to test, resulting in a focus on the career pathways approach. The evaluation team then recruited strong career pathways programs into the study. Random assignment began in November 2011 and will conclude in September 2014.

The nine ISIS Partner Sites are: Instituto del Progreso Latino, Des Moines Area Community College, Madison Area Technical College, Pima Community College, San Diego Workforce Partnership, Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement, the Washington I-BEST program in Bellingham Technical College, Everett Community College and Whatcom Community College, Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County, and Year Up. An important partner in the study is the Open Society Foundations (OSF), which provided resources for many of the programs in the ISIS evaluation to expand their scale to meet the requirements of the evaluation, to enhance services in specific areas, or both. Support was also provided to specific sites by The Joyce Foundation and Kresge Foundation.

Data collection activities include two rounds of implementation research visits, two follow-up surveys with individuals in the study, and acquisition of site-specific and national administrative records on education and employment-related outcomes. The evaluation team will produce a series of reports including: program profiles for each of the ISIS partner sites, site-specific implementation reports documenting the operation of the program, and site-specific impact reports examining the effect of the program on education, employment, and other related outcomes, including a cost-benefit analysis.

The ISIS team includes:

Primary Evaluation Sponsor

The Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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Other Project Sponsors

Foundations and federal agencies have provided generous grants to support programs in ISIS including:

The Open Society Foundation's Special Fund for Poverty Alleviation : www.soros.org

The Joyce Foundation www.joycefdn.org

The Kresge Foundation www.kresge.org/

Health Professions Opportunity Grants, Administration for Children and Families http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/programs/hpog

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