PACE CAREER PATHWAYS PROGRAM PROFILE:

Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA)

March 2014

OPRE

PACE
Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education

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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 health care, 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 as education and training approaches for low-skilled individuals. Along these lines, the *Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE)* study is using an experimental design to assess the effectiveness of nine career pathway programs across the country (See **Box 1** at the conclusion of this profile).

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.

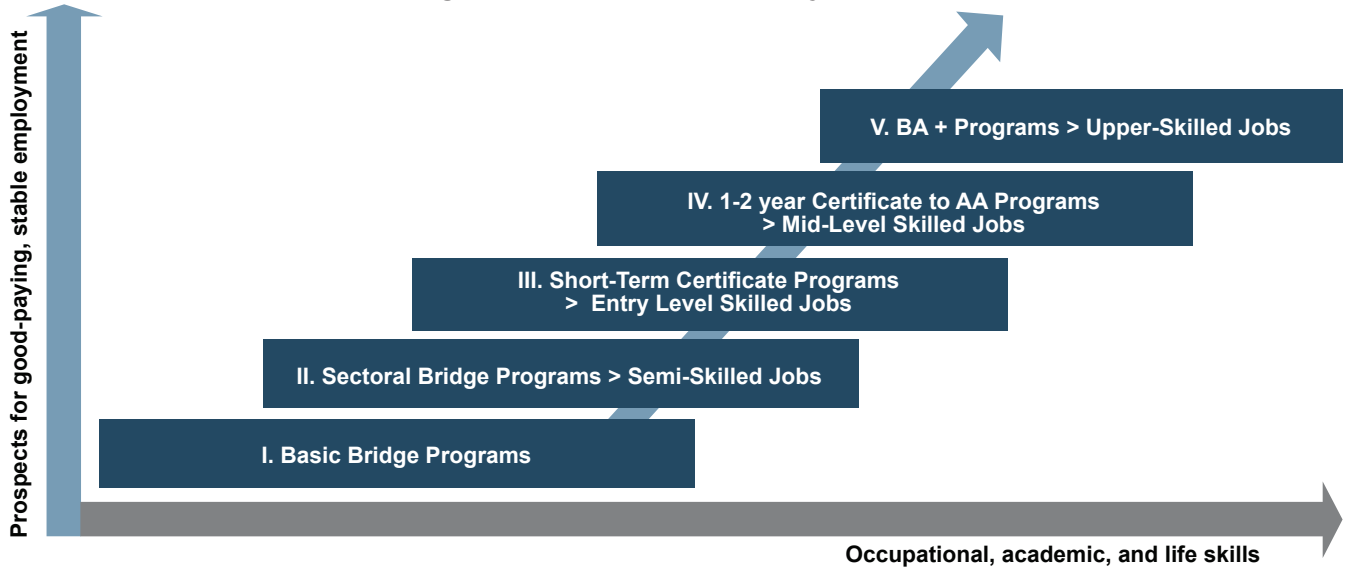
This profile is an overview of Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA), based in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas.[2] A nonprofit, community-based organization that serves a four-county region, VIDA supports unemployed, underemployed, and low-income individuals, including those on public assistance, in their pursuit of certificate and degree programs in high-demand occupations. VIDA provides extensive wraparound support services and financial assistance to all participants so that they can attend college full time. VIDA also operates an intensive 16-week College Preparatory Academy that offers math and literacy remediation for individuals at the tenth- to twelfth-grade levels so that they can pass the state college entrance exams and place directly into college credit courses.

This profile first explains discusses the career pathways framework used in the PACE evaluation, which provides a common approach for explaining and assessing career pathways programs. It then describes VIDA's model and how it fits within the career pathways framework.[3]

The PACE Career Pathway 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 support, 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 partnerships with multiple providers, including community-based

Figure 1: The Career Pathways Steps



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 program). 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.

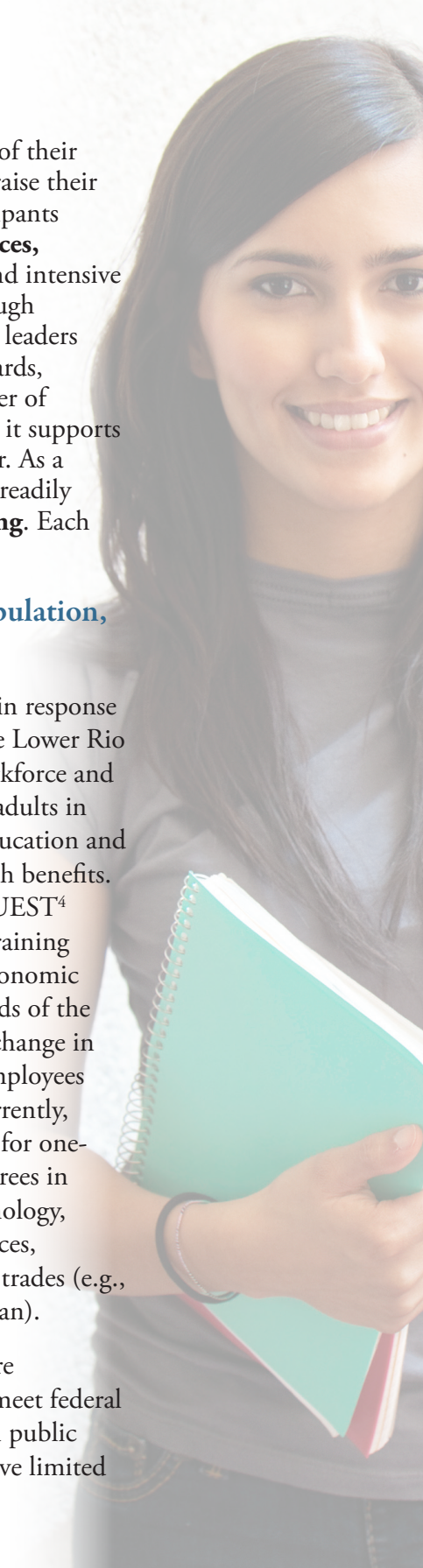
VIDA's Program

VIDA incorporates a number of career pathways components. All participants are **assessed for academic skills and nonacademic needs**. VIDA offers **accelerated remedial education** for individuals who do not test at the college level and might otherwise spend one or more years and a large share of their financial aid package trying to raise their skills to the college level. Participants receive **extensive support services,** including financial assistance and intensive case management. Finally, through ongoing dialogue with business leaders and economic development boards, VIDA regularly adjusts the roster of occupational training programs it supports based on local demand for labor. As a result, participants are likely to readily enter **employment after training**. Each component is described below.

Program Goals, Target Population, and Structure

VIDA was established in 1995 in response to the needs of employers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley for a trained workforce and of low-skilled and low-income adults in the region to achieve further education and training to secure good jobs with benefits. VIDA, based on the Project QUEST[4] model, funds participation in training programs that align with the economic development and employer needs of the region. The training programs change in accordance with demand for employees with specific qualifications. Currently, VIDA primarily funds training for one-year certificates or two-year degrees in allied health, information technology, business, education, social services, manufacturing, and specialized trades (e.g., automotive technician, electrician).

VIDA serves individuals who are unemployed, underemployed, meet federal poverty income levels, or are on public assistance. Most participants have limited



employment skills, and many are single parents. The program provides extensive financial assistance so that individuals can attend school full time, and intensive case management and counseling services to address academic and personal challenges. Some participants are new college students; others are currently enrolled in programs but are at risk of dropping out due to financial difficulties.

Other VIDA participants are not college-ready and need basic education remediation. For individuals testing at the tenth- to twelfth-grade levels, VIDA's 16-week College Preparatory (Prep) Academy provides math, reading, and writing remediation that aims to greatly reduce the time participants spend in basic education in order to preserve financial aid resources and accelerate entry into college certificate and degree programs.

VIDA addresses several steps in the career pathways model. The College Prep Academy is a basic bridge program that provides remediation (Step I in **Figure 1**) so that participants gain the skills needed to qualify for one- and two-year certificate and associate's degree programs (Step IV) offered at five local colleges and universities, and four-year bachelor's degree programs (Step V) offered at two area universities. VIDA also supports individuals in shorter-term programs (Step III) that have the potential to lead to jobs that offer living wages or to another certificate or degree program.[5]

Career Pathways Components

VIDA's program begins with **in-depth assessment** of applicants to determine their eligibility and "fit" with the program. It funds **occupational training** and provides **support services** to help participants persist and complete their certificates and degrees. Finally, the program provides **linkages to employment**.

Comprehensive Assessment

VIDA determines applicant eligibility based on three criteria: academic readiness, demonstrated interest in pursuing one of the certificates or degrees VIDA funds, and overall fit with the program.

To assess academic preparedness, staff review educational background information, such as high school diplomas or GED certificates and transcripts. Staff also use a number of different assessments that determine college-readiness, including TABE®, COMPASS®, ACCUPLACER, and the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA). Applicants who present passing scores are eligible to take college-level classes (some may already be enrolled). Applicants who do not have passing scores or have not taken one of these recognized assessments have the option of taking an abbreviated version of the TABE®, which is administered and scored during the intake process. Those testing at the college level are determined academically eligible, but still need to sit for a college entrance exam in order to apply for admission to the college program of choice. Individuals who score at the tenth- to twelfth-grade levels are eligible for VIDA's College Prep Academy; individuals testing below the tenth-grade levels are referred to other remedial education resources.

Staff use one-on-one interviews to determine applicants' interest and fit with the program. Staff explore the applicants' background, interests, and reasons for seeking VIDA services. They identify potential barriers to education (e.g., the need for child care, a disability, or unstable housing), some of which VIDA can assist with while others necessitate referrals. In particular, VIDA staff assess whether the individual is able and willing to commit to full time education, which is a requirement of program participation. Staff pay particular attention to assessing household income and other financial

considerations to ensure that VIDA serves only those individuals who otherwise would not be able to afford college. Later, staff use the financial information to determine the level of tuition assistance the program will provide to the college or university on behalf of the individual.

Applicants deemed eligible complete a Career Decision Maker assessment that prompts them to consider academic subjects of interest, prior job experiences, values, abilities, and future plans. Once admitted, participants meet individually with counselors, who use this form when discussing academic program choice, tuition and other financial assistance, support service needs, and ways to address certain barriers to education.

Basic and Occupational Skills Training

VIDA primarily provides comprehensive wraparound support services that enable participants to attend training and complete a certificate or associate's degree (see below). For the most part, VIDA is not involved in developing educational programming or designing curricula. The exception is the College Prep Academy for individuals testing at the tenth- to twelfth-grade level. For the Academy, VIDA works with two colleges that provide instructors who use content similar to what is used in the colleges' developmental education courses. The College Prep Academy, however, is accelerated and can be completed in 16 weeks, rather than multiple semesters as with traditional developmental education. This structure is intended to rapidly refresh participants' math, reading, and writing skills so that they pass college entrance exams when they complete the Academy program.[6] VIDA believes this short-term, intensive program helps participants maintain momentum in their education since they are able to arrive at vocation-specific, college-level training after four months. The College Prep Academy is only available to VIDA participants, and VIDA covers the full cost of tuition for participants so that they can reserve financial aid for college. Two of VIDA's higher education partners, South Texas College and Texas State Technical College, located on opposite ends of the Valley from one another, currently provide Academy instruction.

VIDA funds certificate and degree programs in the following areas, with courses offered through five colleges and universities in the region:

Allied health: *One-year certificate programs, two-year associate programs, and BSN programs (for which VIDA, under certain circumstances, funds the last two years)*

Information technology: *One-year certificate programs and two-year associate programs*

Business: *One-year certificate programs and two-year associate programs (e.g., accounting, paralegal)*

Education and social services: *Two-year associate programs (e.g., social work, teaching, criminal justice corrections officer, police officer, American Sign Language) and two years of a bachelor's program*

Manufacturing: *Two-year associate programs (e.g., precision manufacturing, machining technician)*

Specialized trades: *One-year certificate programs and two-year associate programs (e.g., HVAC, plumbing, electrician)*

Marketable skills *(e.g., commercial driver's license)*

The College Prep Academy requires daily attendance from 8:30 am to 3:00 pm. Each day is split evenly between reading and writing and math instruction. The typical class size is 15 students, and instructors report the small class size enables them to provide individualized attention and build camaraderie among participants. The colleges that run the College Prep Academy provide reading, writing, and math instructors who develop the curriculum. VIDA staff meet with instructors to discuss the vision for the College Prep Academy, as well as the program's expectations for the instructors. The classes are a combination of lecture, independent work, discussion, and group work. The reading and writing curriculum incorporates critical thinking skills, vocabulary, reading comprehension, debate and persuasive writing, and figurative language. The math curriculum is based on Introduction to Algebra and Intermediate Algebra courses taught in the colleges' developmental education departments. The math courses use Pearson Publishing's Course Compass program, which includes an electronic textbook, PowerPoint slides for classroom lessons, and a web-based portal through which participants complete homework assignments, take quizzes, and receive step-by-step assistance with problems they are having trouble solving.

VIDA reports that about 82 percent of College Prep Academy enrollees pass the ACCUPLACER or THEA exam by the conclusion of the 16-week program. Participants then enroll at one of the five colleges or universities in the region that offer college-level courses in the high-demand occupation selected in consultation with a VIDA counselor. The academy is timed such that it concludes immediately prior to the start of the next semester so that participants can proceed with their education immediately.

Academic and Nonacademic Supports

VIDA provides extensive wraparound support services in the form of counseling and case management, financial assistance, and social supports (described in more detail below).

Case management and counseling. Counseling and case management are central components of the program model and occur regularly throughout students' participation in VIDA. After being accepted into the program, individuals participate in a one-on-one VIDA Intake and Placement (VIP) meeting during which a counselor reviews the Career Decision Maker assessment completed at the conclusion of the intake session. This worksheet and the application serve as the basis for a discussion about academic interests, professional objectives, assets, and possible barriers to their education such as health issues, family circumstances, transportation, and housing. The counselor helps individuals identify a plan for addressing each barrier, and also prompts them to set short- and long-term academic, personal, and professional goals. Following the VIP, VIDA's Executive Director reviews the file and provides official approval before funds are allocated to the participants.

VIDA's six counselors hold mandatory weekly meetings with participants. Once a month, counselors meet one-on-one with participants to discuss academic progress and challenges, financial issues such as the ability to pay bills, and personal updates such as changes in living situations or health concerns. Counselors credit this activity with helping participants avoid crises that may cause them to drop out of school. Counselors often guide participants in developing a written schedule of key activities, including class, studying, work, family time, errands, and church. This not only helps participants organize and manage their time but also ensures that family

members know what time is blocked off for academic work. Outside of these sessions, counselors make themselves available any time participants encounter a challenge.

In addition to the one-on-one meetings, counselors also hold mandatory group sessions three times a month during which they cover topics like test-taking strategies, financial planning and budgeting, and time management to help participants balance school, work, and family life. The group sessions and often the individual meetings take place on the college campus to make it as easy as possible for participants to attend. Through these regular meetings, counselors monitor the academic progress of individuals, check for compliance with VIDA requirements, and ensure that their personal needs are supported. Midway through the semester, participants are required to ask their instructors to complete a progress report that requests feedback on the individual's attendance and punctuality, participation, and test performance. The counselor and individual review the progress report together to identify areas where the individual could improve and determine if any interventions, such as tutoring, are needed.

Financial assistance. VIDA provides financial support for all participants through the completion of the College Prep Academy (if applicable) and their certificate or degree.

- *Tuition assistance.* All participants receive some level of tuition assistance. The counselor conducts a thorough review of participants' household income and expenses and requires them to apply for financial aid (e.g., Federal Pell Grant, Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant, Texas Public Education Grant, scholarships). In consultation with the counselors, VIDA's compliance officer determines the amount of tuition assistance that VIDA will provide each term until credential completion.[7]
- *Books and course-related materials.* VIDA provides assistance for books, tools, uniforms, and other essential course materials. Participants present a quote from the school bookstore for the cost of books. VIDA typically pays for all required items as long as they were not previously purchased.
- *Transportation.* VIDA provides a gas allowance. The amount is determined at the end of each month and is based on the number of days participants attended class and the distance between home and school. To obtain this assistance, participants must be in compliance with VIDA's other requirements (e.g., grades and meetings with the counselor).
- *Child care.* Counselors help participants apply for Texas' Child Care Management Services (CCMS), and, if approved, VIDA will cover the copay for child care. If participants are not eligible for CCMS or are put on the waiting list, VIDA will contribute towards the cost of child care after receiving a signed contract from the provider indicating that the particular participants' child is under its care.

- *Licensing*. VIDA also provides financial assistance to help cover the costs of becoming licensed where participants' occupations require it. This can include coverage of fees, as well as transportation costs where travel is necessary to take a licensing examination.
- *Emergency assistance.* Limited assistance is available to help participants resolve issues that could lead to dropping out. This type of aid is granted only after the participant, counselor, and program directors have thoroughly investigated and pursued other potential options to address the particular emergency need. For instance, if a student with a hearing impairment were to lose a hearing aid, VIDA would first require the participant to work with her or his insurer to replace it. If that option failed, the participant would pursue assistance through the Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) or a similar agency, as well as through private grant sources. If none of those options proved fruitful, VIDA staff would identify a source from their own funds to cover the expense.

Social support. Peer support is another key program component. The College Prep Academies are organized into cohorts in which participants support each other both personally and through working together on educational material. All VIDA participants are required to attend group meetings three times per month. These create many opportunities for participants to help each other to persist in completing their educations. Additionally, all VIDA participants are required to take part in community service events up to three times per semester. Since their education is being funded by the local economic development councils, VIDA's Board and leaders believe it is important for participants to give back to the communities that are supporting them. By promoting civic engagement, the program hopes to encourage beneficiaries to continue being active members of their communities long after they attain their degree.

Connecting Participants to Employers

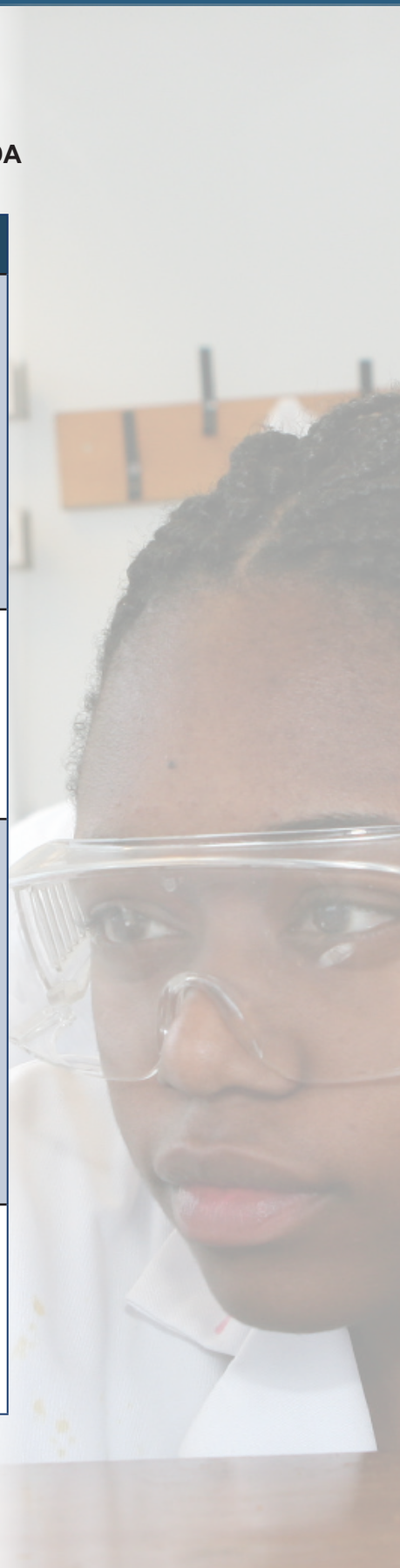
VIDA funds training for occupations in demand locally, as identified by the economic development councils and workforce investment boards that contribute funds to the program. These entities determine current needs for skilled labor and project future needs based on anticipated shifts in the sectors and industries in the region. VIDA counselors assist individuals in developing resumes and cover letters, and provide guidance on how to search for and apply to open positions. VIDA follows up with graduates for two years via telephone, email, social media, and regular mail to learn if they are working and inquire about their salary and benefits. If a call reveals that graduates are unemployed, VIDA staff offer to have a counselor meet with them to help with resume updating and to brainstorm job search strategies.

Comparisons to Other Offerings

In the absence of VIDA's program, individuals would likely take courses piecemeal over an extended period of time and would need to navigate financial aid on their own. Individuals who are not college-ready would take developmental education courses through the colleges, which could take several semesters to complete and could consume financial aid. **Figure 2** below illustrates the different career pathways services available to VIDA participants and to individuals enrolled in other programs through the local colleges and universities.

Figure 2: Comparison of Career Pathways Components Available to VIDA Participants and Others

Career Pathway Component	VIDA	Regional Colleges and Universities
Assessment	• Scores from an accepted college entrance exam such as TABE®, ACCUPLACER, THEA, or COMPASS. • Abbreviated version of the TABE® for applicants without college entrance exam scores. • In-depth one-on-one conversations between VIDA staff and each applicant during intake to determine eligibility and program fit. • Career Decision Maker tool.	• Scores from an accepted college entrance exam such as ACCUPLACER, THEA, or COMPASS
Curriculum	• College Prep Academy (remedial reading, writing, and math) accelerated over 16 weeks for those at the 10th to 12th grade levels. • College-level coursework within one of many high-demand occupational sectors.	• Developmental education prior to college-level course work • College-level course work
Supports	• Mandatory counseling and case management including weekly in-person contact. • Financial assistance, including tuition, books and course materials, transportation, child care, and emergency assistance. • Peer support developed through three group sessions per month facilitated by a VIDA counselor as well as in the College Prep Academy. • When necessary, assistance in receiving tutoring either through a college or with a VIDA alumnus. • Community service.	• College advisor, typically available to meet once or twice a semester • Financial aid • Tutoring
Employment Connections	• Funded courses of study are aligned with region's in-demand jobs. • Economic development councils and workforce investment boards support VIDA's program. • Resume, cover letter, and application assistance provided by counselors as needed.	• Some colleges have employment centers



Summary

VIDA is designed to help participants attain an associate's degree or certificate that trains them for in-demand occupations so that they can attain well-paid employment with benefits and opportunities for career advancement. In doing so, the program intends for individuals to become economically self-sufficient, which in turn contributes to the economic base in the region so that counties can provide greater services to their residents and attract further investment by employers. VIDA's career pathways components include:

- Close relationships with economic development councils and workforce investment boards are intended to ensure that VIDA participants pursue training that will qualify them for living-wage jobs in which employers seek skilled labor.
- The low-income unemployed and underemployed adults that VIDA serves receive extensive counseling services and significant financial assistance designed to help them persist in school full time, attain a certificate or degree, and re-enter the workforce in higher-paid positions.
- An accelerated 16-week College Prep Academy prepares individuals at the tenth- to twelfth-grade levels to pass college entrance exams so that they can begin college-level course work quickly and with their full financial aid package intact.

For more information about VIDA, go to http://www.vidacareers.org.

Notes

1. Carnevale, A., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2010). *Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018*. Georgetown Public Policy Institute, Retrieved from https://cew.georgetown.edu/report/help-wanted/.
2. To further its participation in PACE, VIDA receives support from the Open Society Foundations, The Kresge Foundation, the Meadows Foundation, and the Hearst Foundation. The evaluation of VIDA through PACE 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 PACE framework, see www.career-pathways.org: Fein, David J. (2012). *Career Pathways as a Framework for Program Design and Evaluation: A Working Paper From the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) 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. Project QUEST is located in San Antonio, Texas, with a second location in Dallas. In addition to VIDA's program in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, the model is also operated by Capital Idea in Austin and Houston;

   Project ARRIBA in El Paso; Job Path in Phoenix, Arizona; NOVA in Monroe, Louisiana; and Project Iowa in Des Moines.
5. Ordinarily, participants would take a shorter-term course if there were a reason that they could not immediately enroll in a more advanced program, for example if the particular course they needed to take were not offered in the semester when they started with VIDA.
6. At intervals throughout the College Prep Academy individuals may sit for the ACCUPLACER or THEA assessments. If they pass a section, such as math or reading, they may stop attending that portion of the Academy.
7. For individuals enrolled in four-year degree programs (Bachelors of Science in Nursing [BSN], Bachelors in Education, Bachelors in Social Service), VIDA pays for two years if they did not already help the individual with an associate's degree. Individuals seeking a BSN who have already earned an Associate's in Nursing, are not eligible for VIDA because they are likely earning $30 per hour and could either pay for the program on their own or seek assistance from an employer to pay for it.

Box 1: Overview of the PACE Evaluation

The Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) 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. PACE 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?

PACE 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 PACE 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 PACE 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 PACE 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 PACE 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

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/research/project/pathways-for-advancing-careers-and-education

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Foundations and federal agencies that have provided generous grants to support PACE programs include:

The Open Society Foundations' Special Fund for Poverty Alleviation www.soros.org

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Hearst Foundation www.hearstfdn.org

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

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