

INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING SELF-SUFFICIENCY STUDY

Millions of adults lack the post-secondary education and occupational training needed to obtain jobs that provide good wages, benefits and pathways to advancement. Over the past three decades, those with high school diplomas or less education saw their earnings fall compared to those who had more education.¹ At the same time, the share of jobs that require college credentials continues to grow. According to the Department of Labor, by 2018, 63 percent of job openings will require workers with at least some college education.²

There is longstanding interest among policy makers and program operators in finding ways to increase the skill levels of low-income individuals, improve their enrollment in and completion of post-secondary education, and improve their economic prospects. A number of factors, however, limited the success of efforts to date.³ Many low-income adults face challenges to post-secondary education enrollment and completion, including: limited basic academic skills; limited academic or training goals due to negative school experiences and lack of college role models; work and family demands on time; inability to afford school; and stress and other issues associated with poverty. At a broader level, many post-secondary education systems are not geared towards non-traditional students, including low-income adults. For example, they have weak basic skills programs; an emphasis on long-term programs and general education degrees; fragmented and, at times, deficient academic advising and student support services; complex financial aid rules; and limited financial assistance. Supports from social services and workforce systems, which might assist these students, can be limited and/or difficult to coordinate.

The career pathways approach is gaining steady acceptance as a promising strategy to address these challenges and improve post-secondary education and training for low-income and low-skilled adults. Career pathways programs intend to improve the education and earnings of low-skilled adults by providing well-articulated training steps tailored to jobs in local demand along with guidance and other supports.

Although there is some research evidence on selected components of career pathways programs, to date, there has been no rigorous research on the overall effectiveness of this approach.

A number of Federal departments are funding research in this area. This brief focuses on an evaluation supported by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF): the Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency (ISIS). ISIS is using an experimental (random assignment) design to assess the effectiveness of nine career pathways programs.⁴ It is conducted by a team led by Abt Associates.⁵

Programs in the ISIS Evaluation

ISIS aims to test innovative career pathways programs. The evaluation includes nine promising programs across the country (see Exhibit 1). The programs in the ISIS evaluation are:

- Bridge to Employment in the Health Care Industry at the San Diego Workforce Partnership (SDWP)
- Carreras en Salud at Instituto del Progreso Latino
- Health Careers for All at Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County (WDC)
- Pathways to Healthcare at Pima Community College (PCC)
- Patient Care Academies at Madison Area Technical College (MATC)
- Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA)
- Washington Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program at three sites (Bellingham Technical College, Whatcom Community College and Everett Community College)
- Workforce Training Academy (WTA) Connect at Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC)
- Year Up (eight sites)

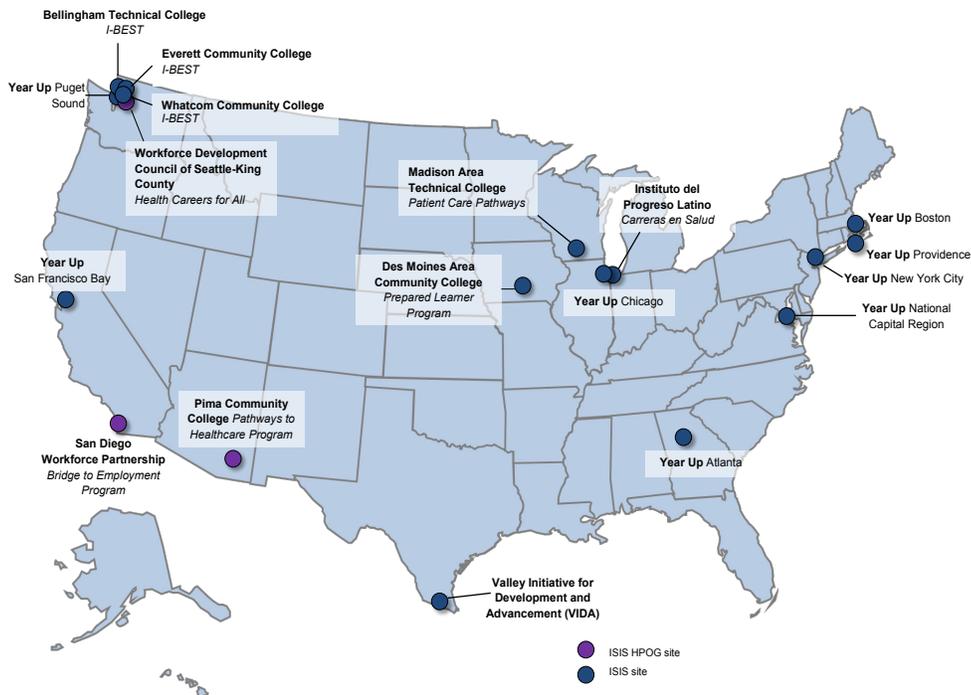
The programs operated by PCC, SDWP, WDC are funded by ACF Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG)⁶ and one (Instituto del Progreso Latino) is a sub-grantee to an HPOG-funded program.^{7,8}

The nine programs vary in design, and also combine and prioritize different program elements and career pathways steps.⁹ Areas of diversity include:

- **Lead organization.** Community or technical colleges (DMACC, MATC, PCC, and the three Washington colleges) operate four of the programs in the ISIS evaluation. Non-profit organizations (Instituto del Progreso Latino, VIDA, Year Up) operate three others, while Workforce Investment Boards (SDWP, WDC) lead the remaining two.
- **Target population.** By design, all of the programs in ISIS target a low-skilled, low-income population. Carreras en Salud (Instituto del Progreso Latino) focuses on low-skilled Latinos with reading levels as low as 6th grade. Students at DMACC’s WTA Connect have similar skill levels (7th to 8th grade). The other programs primarily target those whose assessment test scores are too low for college entry, but are above a certain threshold, such as a 10th grade reading level, including Washington I-BEST, VIDA and MATC’s Patient Care Academies. Finally, Year Up targets disadvantaged youth, ages 18-24.

- **Occupational focus.** Several programs in ISIS focus exclusively on health-related occupations. This includes the three HPOG-funded programs (at PCC, SDWP, WDC), as well as Carreras En Salud at Instituto del Progreso Latino (an HPOG sub-grantee) and MATC’s Patient Care Academies. The other programs focus on multi-occupational areas, including welding, electrical, health and administrative support (Washington I-BEST and DMACC’s WTA Connect); health, manufacturing, and technology (VIDA); and IT and financial services (Year Up).
- **Steps on a career pathway.** The programs vary in the number and level of steps within a career pathway they encompass. Instituto del Progreso Latino’s health care program captures the longest potential career path, with participants able to enter at the pre-certified nursing assistant level and advance to an Associate’s degree in nursing. VIDA, which offers longer-term programs, focuses largely on higher pathway steps with an Associates’ degree as the primary credential, although it also supports one-year and shorter certificates. In addition, VIDA operates a 16-week accelerated academic bridge program for individuals testing at 10th grade or higher, but not yet qualified for college credit courses.

Exhibit 1: ISIS Programs



In contrast, the Washington I-BEST program and the programs at DMACC, WDC and SDWP help low-skilled students attain short-term credentials, though participants can opt to continue to additional certifications and degrees.

- *Service Strategies.* All of the programs include some type of assessment, instructional accommodations, supports, and connections to employment. The programs combine these strategies in different ways depending on the goals of their program and target population. Some sites, notably I-BEST and MATC, emphasize a contextualized curriculum, while the connection to employment is a critical component in others (Instituto del Progreso Latino, VIDA, and Year Up).

The ISIS Evaluation

The ISIS evaluation includes program-specific impact, implementation, and cost-benefit studies.

- *Impact study.* The impact study will measure differences between the treatment and control group members on main educational (outcomes persistence in education, receipt of certificates and degrees) and employment and earnings-related outcomes. Analyses also will assess whether impacts vary by subgroup and estimate impacts for intermediate outcomes for each program. The ISIS team will analyze and report findings for each program separately.¹⁰ The first impact reports will cover 15 months of follow-up post random assignment.
- *Implementation study.* The implementation study will provide a detailed description of the programs, document the experiences of participants in the career pathways programs (the treatment group), and examine how their program experiences compare to individuals who did not receive the career pathways services (the control group). The evaluation team will produce reports that analyze program implementation based on each program's theory of change.
- *Cost-benefit study.* The cost-benefit study will describe the tangible benefits and costs from varying perspectives (i.e., social, participant, and taxpayer). It will address areas like the gross and net costs of each program and whether the benefits of providing services outweigh the costs.

More Information

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¹ Carnevale, A., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2010). *Help wanted: Projections of jobs and education requirements through 2018*. Washington: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce; Council of Economic Advisers. (2009). *Preparing the workers of today for the jobs of tomorrow*. Washington, DC: Council of Economic Advisers.

² Carnevale et al (2010).

³ For a summary of the evidence for the issues discussed here, see 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. The paper is available at www.projectisis.org.

⁴ DHHS's career pathways research portfolio includes impact and implementation studies of the Health Profession Opportunity Grant (HPOG) program. The Departments of Labor (DOL) and Education (Ed) also funded and evaluated career pathways initiatives. DOL and Ed launched a one-year Career Pathways Initiative in 2010, which provided funding to nine states and two tribal entities to develop sustainable career pathways to promote linkages among system partners. DOL produced a set of technical assistance tools for state, local, and tribal policymakers to use in development and implementation of career pathways approaches. The Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education funds the Designing Instruction for Career Pathways initiative.

⁵ The study team includes MEF Associates, American Public Human Services Association, National Conference of State Legislatures, and National Governors Association. An important partner in the study is the Open Society Foundations Special Fund for Poverty Alleviation, 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. The Joyce Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, the Meadows Foundation, and the Hearst Foundations have also provided generous support to some of the programs in the ISIS evaluation.

⁶ The HPOG program provides education and training to TANF recipients and other low-income individuals for occupations in the health care field that pay well and are expected to either experience labor shortages or be in high demand. The HPOG program is administered by the Office of Family Assistance within ACF. Grant funds may be used for training and education and supportive services. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/welfare_employ/evaluation_hpog/overview.html.

⁷ Instituto del Progreso Latino is a sub-grantee of the Will County Workforce Investment Board.

⁸ All four will be included in a related career pathways study, the ACF funded HPOG Impact Evaluation.

⁹ Additional information on each program, including program-specific profiles, is available on the ISIS website at (www.projectisis.org).

¹⁰ The rationale for separate studies is that, although all nine programs utilize basic building blocks in career pathways, they vary on a substantial number of fundamental design features, including eligibility criteria and target populations; services provided; goals for participants; and timeframes for expecting goals to be achieved.