

CAREER PATHWAYS PROGRAMMING FOR LOWER-SKILLED ADULTS AND IMMIGRANTS: REPORT ON SURVEY FINDINGS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MAY 2017

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This project was funded in part by Institute of Education Sciences Grant No. R305H150047.

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Suggested Citation

Prins, E., Clymer, C., Toso, B. W., Elder, S. F., Loa, M., Needle, M. Raymond, B., & Ziskind, A. (2017, April). *Career pathways programming for lower-skilled adults and immigrants: Report on survey findings. Executive summary*. University Park, PA: Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank the adult education agency staff in Chicago, Houston, and Miami who responded to the survey, colleagues who piloted the survey, Kent Miller at the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center at Washington State University for his invaluable assistance with the survey analysis, Cathy Kassab for her help with statistical analyses, and graduate assistants Ruth Parrish Sauder and Tabitha Stickel for their help with the research project and report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This survey was part of a two-year Institute of Education Sciences (IES) project that examined how adult education providers in Chicago, Houston, and Miami are incorporating career pathways (CP) programming, especially for adults who are immigrants or have barriers to employment and education.

Our researcher-practitioner partnership included the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy at The Pennsylvania State University and three community partners serving as liaisons for each city: Chicago Citywide Literacy Coalition, Houston Center for Literacy, and Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

The IES project included three research phases: (1) a survey of adult education providers in the three cities; (2) focus groups with selected adult education providers; and (3) case studies of six programs (two per city). This report presents only the survey findings.

SURVEY PURPOSE AND METHODS

The purpose of the survey was to understand the landscape of adult education career pathways within and across Chicago, Houston, and Miami. Specifically, the survey was designed to help answer the following research questions:

1. What are the key features of adult education career pathways in each city, including student characteristics, program design and delivery, and data collection systems?
2. Which CP student outcome measures are most extensively used by adult education providers within and across cities?
3. Which measures (if any) are used by *all* adult education providers within and across cities?
4. What interim and long-term outcomes are adult education providers helping lower-skilled CP participants to achieve?

The survey covered the following topics: background information on the organization; student characteristics; program design and delivery; data collection systems and outcome measures; and aggregate student outcomes. All questions referred to the 2014-15 program year.

The sample included all adult basic education providers in the three cities (n=147). The confidential, web-based survey was administered by the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center at Washington State University. One hundred six agencies returned a complete (n=102) or partial (n=4) online survey, for a response rate of 72%.

For selected questions, we analyzed whether there were statistically significant differences (a) among cities and (b) between agencies that said they offered career pathways programming (CP), according to the CLASP definition (see below) versus those that said “no” or “in development.”¹

As the first survey to analyze how adult education programs are providing CP programming in three cities located in three of the nation’s large bellwether states, this report offers important insights that can help inform policy and practice both locally and nationally.

FINDINGS

OVERVIEW OF ADULT EDUCATION AND CAREER PATHWAYS IN THE THREE CITIES

Structure of Adult Education Provision: The structure of adult education provision differs markedly across the three cities. In Chicago and Houston, community-based organizations (CBOs) and community colleges are the primary adult education providers. In Miami, the main adult education providers are the public school district and a community college that also offers some four-year degrees. In Chicago and Miami there is a single multi-campus community college system, whereas in Houston there are six separate community colleges.

Organizational Type: The majority of survey respondents (58%) were CBOs, followed by school district adult education programs (22%), all of which were located in Miami. Nearly half (48%) of CBOs were located in Chicago.

Funding Sources: The most common funding sources were state government (57%), federal government (53%), and private foundations (51%). On average, agencies had 3.3 funding sources. Cities differed significantly in five types of funding; in each case Chicago agencies had the highest percentage of “yes” responses. Chicago agencies also had a higher average number of funders than respondents from the other cities. Agencies that said they offered CP reported significantly more funding sources, on average, than those that said “no” or “in development” (3.5 vs. 2.4).

Enrollment: In 2014-15, the agencies collectively served more than 282,000 students in adult basic education, GED, literacy, ESL, or other types of adult education. The average was 2,799 and the median was 403.

Approximately 51% of all the adult education students participated in the following “core” CP classes and services: classes to transition to postsecondary education, to obtain an industry-recognized credential, or to obtain a postsecondary or stackable credential; short-term certificate programs; internships; and apprenticeships. On average, programs served 1,445 CP students (median = 214).

Although CBOs comprised the majority of agencies, their median enrollment (all adult education students) was much lower than that of libraries, postsecondary institutions, and school district adult education programs. Collectively, CBOs served a much smaller percentage of the overall adult learner enrollment.

Provision of Career Pathways: According to the definition from CLASP (see p. 62), 83% of respondents said that they offer career pathways; another 11% are developing CP programming. There were no significant differences among cities.

The types of organizations that offer CP were similar to the overall survey sample (58% CBOs, 22% school district adult education programs).

Types of Classes and Services: The most common types of CP classes or services were ESL (84%), employability or work readiness (76%), and classes to transition to postsecondary education (75%). However, the other “core” CP services, such as classes combining basic skills and career/technical education (CTE) or short-term certificate programs were much less common. Cities differed significantly in the percentage of agencies that offered high school/GED diploma classes and classes leading to a postsecondary or stackable credential. Agencies that said they offer CP were significantly more likely to provide 12 out of the 15 classes or services, particularly career exploration or awareness, classes to transition to postsecondary education, and classes combining basic skills and CTE.

More than one-third (36%) of the 87 agencies that said they offer CP also reported zero students enrolled in the core CP services. This suggests that in these agencies CP may be less robust.

On average, agencies offered 7.5 adult education classes, services, or regular activities. Agencies that said they offer CP (per CLASP definition) provided significantly more classes and services, on average, than those that said “no” or “in development.” Agencies in Miami offered significantly more services, on average, than those in Chicago or Houston.

Individualized Career Pathways Plans: Among the agencies that say they provide CP (n=87), 61% formally assist students in developing their own, individualized career pathway plan.

Occupational Sectors: Education, child, and family services (44%) was the most common occupational sector, followed by health and medical technology (38%) and information technology (30%). Cities differed significantly in the percentage that focused on education, child, and family services; information technology; building trades and construction; hospitality, tourism, and recreation; arts, media, and entertainment; and manufacturing and product development. The latter was most common in Chicago; the other four sectors were more common in Miami.

COORDINATION AND PLANNING ACROSS CP PROVIDERS

Opportunities for CP Planning and Coordination: Only 36% of respondents said there were venues for CP coordination and planning *across organizations* in their city, and more than one-half were unsure. This suggests that there is limited awareness of CP coordination across different kinds of agencies at the macro (city) level. Of those who knew about mechanisms for CP planning and coordination across organizations, nearly 90% participated in these (Figure 18). These opportunities are described in further detail in the report.

Effectiveness of CP Planning and Coordination: One-fifth of respondents believed that organizations in their city are “very effective” in working together to avoid duplicating CP services (see Figure 19) and in determining and filling gaps in CP services. Sixty-three to 64% thought they were very or somewhat effective in both areas, compared to 35% to 36% who thought they were slightly or not at all effective. There were no significant differences by city.

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Types of Students Served: Agencies served a wide range of students, particularly unemployed or underemployed persons (90%), adults who struggle with basic skills (89%), immigrants or non-native English speakers (87%), and parents or caregivers (86%). There were statistically significant differences between cities for the following student groups: unemployed or underemployed persons, parents/caregivers, out-of-school young adults, veterans, and inmates. Agencies that said they offered CP were significantly more likely to serve immigrants or non-native English speakers, parents or caregivers, out-of-school young adults, dislocated workers, and unemployed or underemployed adults.

Demographic Characteristics of CP Students: Agencies reported demographic characteristics of CP students as a sub-set of all their adult learners. Due to missing data and inaccurate reporting of some data on demographic characteristics and NRS levels (below), these findings should be interpreted as rough estimates.

The survey findings indicate that CP students were disproportionately female, foreign-born adults who were economically vulnerable and had low levels of formal education. Salient characteristics were as follows:

- 59% women and 41% men
- 67% foreign-born
- Race/ethnicity of U.S.-born students: 57% Hispanic, 22% Black, 8% White, 7% Asian, 5% unknown, 1% other, <1% American Indian/Alaska Native or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- 44% received some kind of public assistance
- Employment status: 45% unemployed, 29% employed full-time, 19% employed full- or part-time (survey respondent did not specify), 7% employed part-time
- Educational attainment: 63% no high school/GED diploma, 21% high school/GED diploma, 6% some college, 10% postsecondary degree (primarily because of highly educated refugees, e.g., from Cuba), 1% post-graduate degree.

Student Testing, Classification, and Enrollment: Among the agencies that reported National Reporting System functional levels, about 63% of CP students tested at an ESL functional level and 37% tested at an Adult Basic Education functional level. About 69% of CP students placed at a beginning to low intermediate ABE or ESL level.

The majority (61%) of students were classified as enrolled in ESL classes, followed by ABE (22%), other (10%), and GED (7%).

CP students were enrolled for an average of 228 hours (median = 128) and 19 weeks (median = 14.6).

PROGRAM DESIGN AND DELIVERY

Partnerships: Respondents provided CP services jointly with many types of organizations, particularly CBOs (59%), social service agencies (44%), and workforce investment system organizations (40%). Cities differed significantly in the percentage that partnered with K-12 school districts, technical schools, and correctional institutions (all more common in Miami). Agencies had an average of 4.0 partners. Agencies that said they offered CP had significantly more partners, on average, than those that said “no” or “in development” (4.6 vs. 1.1). There were no significant differences by city in the average number of CP partners.

Entry Requirements: For each of the classes or services in the survey, more than 50% of agencies reported having grade level, test score, or language entry requirements. These requirements were most common for classes to obtain a postsecondary credential (86%), to access specific job opportunities (86%), and to obtain a

postsecondary or stackable credential (85%). Agencies that said they offered CP were significantly more likely to have threshold requirements for job development services.

Transitioning to the Next Step in the Pathway: Career counselors (54%) were the most common formal mechanism for transitioning adult education students to the next step of their career pathway, followed by written agreements or MOUs (49%) and formal referrals (45%). Cities differed significantly in the percentage that had career counselors; these were most common in Miami.

Instructional Approaches: Contextualized learning was by far the most common instructional approach (81%), followed by concurrent enrollment (50%). Transition/bridge programs were being developed by 13% of respondents. The percentage of agencies offering co-enrollment with a community college or postsecondary institution differed significantly by city; Miami had the highest incidence of co-enrollment. Agencies that said they offered CP were significantly more likely to use contextualized learning, concurrent enrollment, transition/bridge programs, work-based learning (i.e., using work-related problems and materials), and learning in the workplace.

Support Services: The most common support services and programmatic features to help adults access and complete classes were tutoring or other academic support (80%), alternatives class times and locations (72%), and job search assistance and placement activities (68%). Agencies that said they offered CP were significantly more likely to offer nine out of 16 support services. On average, agencies provided seven kinds of support services. Agencies that said they offered CP had significantly more support services, on average, than other agencies (7.8 versus 3.4).

STUDENT OUTCOMES

Type of Outcome Measure: Following CLASP's "Framework for Measuring Career Pathways Innovation," our list of 19 measures included interim and longer-term outcomes. Interim outcomes are crucial because they measure progress toward longer-term goals. They also help capture achievements of participants who have substantial barriers to education and employment such as lacking a high school/GED diploma or low reading, math, or language scores. On average, 32% of agencies measured the outcomes in the interim outcomes group, compared to 37% for the longer-term outcomes.

The most common measures were educational level gains on standardized tests (85%), attaining a high school or GED diploma (67%), and obtaining initial employment (55%). Agencies that said they offered CP were more significantly more likely to measure nine outcomes, mostly focused on employment, transitions, and CP credentials.

There were no common measures across all providers within or across the cities. Chicago agencies were more likely to measure educational level gains (all but one agency measured this outcome). Miami agencies were more likely to measure obtaining a high school or GED diploma. The diversity of funding sources (with only 53% receiving federal funding) may help explain the lack of common outcome measures.

Outcome Data Verification: The most common way to collect outcome data was self-report with verification, such as documentation from an employer (46%). Another 29% of the outcomes were self-report without verification, and 25% were reported by other institutions (e.g., Bureau of Labor Statistics wage records).

Reporting Data to Other Entities: Forty-percent of respondents said that the data they reported in the survey was also reported to another adult education program (e.g., local school district or community college).

Adequacy of Measures: Thirty-eight percent of respondents thought that their measures did “quite well” at capturing the gain and achievements of students with the weakest academic skills, compared to 34% for learners with the weakest English language skills and 24% for learners with the weakest employment skills. For each type of skill, 72% to 83% thought their measures did “somewhat” or “quite” well.

Aggregate Outcomes: The outcomes with the highest average outcomes were educational gains on teacher- or program-created assessments (60%), educational level gains (51%), and initial employment (43%). Due to respondent variation in calculating the percentages of students who achieved program outcomes, these figures should be interpreted as rough estimates.

CONCLUSION

The survey findings reveal that over 94% of the adult education agencies that responded to our survey currently offer or are developing CP programming, per the CLASP definition. However, there is wide variation in how CP services are configured, with most of the “core” CP services being less common (classes combining basic skills with CTE or classes, short-term certificate programs, classes to obtain industry-recognized, stackable, or postsecondary credentials, internships, and apprenticeships).

Programs are serving adult learners who experience various kinds of economic and educational vulnerability, particularly immigrants, refugees, and adults who are unemployed or underemployed and lack a high school degree. At the same time, at least 50% of programs also have threshold requirements for accessing the classes and services listed in our survey. This raises questions about how to ensure that adults with greatest barriers to education and employment can access CP programming.

Although there were no common outcome measures within or across cities, 85% of respondents measured educational level gains on standardized tests (an NRS requirement). Finding ways to measure interim training outcomes is crucial for capturing the achievements of learners who are a long way from reaching longer-term outcomes such as passing the GED Tests, attaining a postsecondary credential, or finding a job.

ENDNOTES

¹ We chose to use the CLASP definition for the survey because it was the best available at the time. It is also shorter and less restrictive than the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA) definition, which allowed us to capture a wide range of CP programming. (See the WIOA definition at <https://community.linccs.ed.gov/document/workforce-innovation-and-opportunity-act-career-pathways-definition>). In addition, the WIOA definition was very recent at that time and was not being widely used to guide programming.