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The New Visions Evaluation

College as a Job Advancement Strategy: An Early Report on the New Visions Self- Sufficiency and Lifelong Learning Project

May 2000

Prepared for
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In August 1999, Riverside Community College (RCC), in Riverside County, California, launched an innovative program designed to prepare welfare recipients for college and help them move to better jobs. Set on a community college campus, New Visions provides a 24-week program of academic instruction and support services, followed by up to five months of credit-bearing course work in an occupational mini-program. In order to be eligible, clients must have a high school diploma or GED and be working at least 20 hours a week. The program is a partnership between RCC and the Riverside County Department of Public Social Services (RCDPSS).

Abt Associates Inc.'s five-year evaluation of New Visions is the first random assignment study of the effectiveness of a special college program for welfare recipients. The evaluation, which also includes a study of program implementation, will answer several important questions. The first is whether offering intensive supports encourages single parents on Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) to return to school after they have gone to work.¹ The second is whether making work a condition of education and training increases motivation to learn and enhances short-run job retention and advancement opportunities. The third is whether providing remedial education and support services helps participants to succeed in regular college programs, thereby increasing their access to higher-paying jobs over the long run.

Answers to these questions will be of interest nationwide, as well as within Riverside County. The New Visions demonstration comes at a time when, having created a strong imperative for welfare recipients to work, many states and localities are seeking ways to create pathways from entry-level employment to jobs that make families economically self-sufficient. Although there is little question that advanced job skills are critical to such transitions, not much is known about strategies seeking to expand access to higher education. Of particular interest is whether it is feasible to boost welfare recipients' college participation while enforcing the time limits and work requirements that nearly all states have adopted since the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA).

¹ Although New Visions is not limited to single parents, very few adults from two-parent families have volunteered for the program. Accordingly, the substance of the demonstration essentially concerns the needs and responses of single parents.

This report reviews the literature on special programs for welfare recipients at two- and four-year colleges, describes the New Visions demonstration, and provides initial findings on program implementation and client experiences. The findings come at a very early juncture in the demonstration and are offered as an introduction to New Visions rather than as a preview of its likely outcomes.

New Visions Is the First Special College Program for Welfare Recipients To Be Rigorously Evaluated

Special college programs for welfare recipients received a substantial boost when the 1988 Family Support Act's Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) program made education and training (E&T) the cornerstone of the nation's welfare policies. Many states allowed welfare recipients to go to college under JOBS, and schools—particularly community colleges—developed a variety of innovative program designs. A small evaluation literature suggests students' experiences in these programs generally were positive, but there have been no rigorous studies of program effectiveness.

JOBS-era welfare-to-work experiments have generated useful findings on programs providing adult basic education, vocational training, employment services, and a mix of education and employment services. There is some evidence that mixed approaches have been more effective than single strategy models. However, college preparation and attendance have been at most a tiny sliver of the services in the programs studied to date. Therefore, the effects of policies and services promoting college for welfare recipients on economic and educational outcomes are unknown.

Under PRWORA, the shift to quick-employment welfare-to-work strategies initially led most states to severely restrict welfare recipients' access to higher education. More recently, states have been reconsidering how they might utilize the formidable resources of colleges and universities to promote job advancement for the many recipients who remain poor after they go to work. Several excellent reviews of the policy options within PRWORA are available to inform such efforts. However, little hard evidence on proven strategies is available to guide the design and implementation of actual programs.

The New Visions demonstration will help to fill this information void. The evaluation's process study is documenting the issues arising during implementation, assessing how RCC and RCDPSS respond to these issues, and examining how the services received by New Visions participants differ from those otherwise available. The impact study is using an experimental design to measure New Visions' effects on employment, education, and welfare outcomes for welfare recipients who volunteer for the program. As this design ensures that New Visions

exposure is the only systematic difference between randomly assigned treatment and control groups, measured differences in average outcomes between the two groups can be assumed to provide unbiased estimates of the program's true effects.

The New Visions Demonstration Is Testing a Mixed-Strategy Program

The goals of New Visions are to build educational competencies needed for longer-term academic success, while imparting skills useful at work in the short-term. By requiring students to maintain jobs for at least 20 hours a week, the county hopes to heighten students' appreciation of the practical value of classroom instruction, foster improved translation of new knowledge into earnings gains, and sustain participants' connections to the labor force.

The New Visions demonstration is only one part of a broader effort by Riverside County to provide E&T to welfare recipients who go to work. The county recently initiated a significant reformulation of its welfare-to-work approach. As in the past, all clients initially concentrate on finding jobs, with help from RCDPSS's widely-acclaimed employment service counselors. Clients who find jobs for at least 20 hours a week advance from Phase I to Phase II, where the emphasis shifts to promoting job retention and job advancement through education and training. In Phase II, special case managers link clients to a variety of E&T programs in the community.²

Phase II clients are allowed to volunteer for New Visions if they are interested in continuing their college educations and already have a high school diploma or GED. Following a one-week orientation, New Visions participants enter a **24-week core program** of academic instruction and career guidance. This program offers classes in remedial math, English, and reading; basic computer skills; and career-life guidance. Academic instruction relies heavily on applied learning and hands-on assignments drawn from work situations (e.g., math problems arising in varying occupations, resume and cover letter preparation) and other areas of daily living (e.g., interest on loans, income taxes). The guidance class concentrates on critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as study and communication skills needed for success at college, work, and home.

The core program offers a flexible schedule and individualized instruction delivered in a group setting. Classes are taught in three-hour time blocks each day, four days a week, with each block repeated three times daily to suit varying work, child care, and transportation needs.

² Clients advancing to jobs that allow them to leave welfare enter a third phase of the county's revised program. In Phase III, they receive mentoring and other services to strengthen job retention and advancement on a voluntary basis.

Small class sizes allow instructors to work with students on an individual basis. Lessons and assignments are structured so that students can move through the curriculum at their own pace.

After students graduate from the core program, New Visions staff help them choose an ***occupational mini-program*** at RCC. These programs last from one to five months and are available in occupations such as nursing, medical technician, early childhood education, corrections, police dispatching, human services, office administration, and manufacturing and construction. The programs certify students for entry-level jobs in a chosen occupation and provide academic credits that students can apply towards further certification or an associate degree.

During the Pilot Year, the New Visions Partners Successfully Implemented Several Key Components of the Program

RCC and RCDPSS made significant strides in implementing this innovative program over the first 18 months. Perhaps the most important accomplishment was bringing two very different institutions together in a working partnership—a key requirement for successful welfare-education initiatives. RCC and RCDPSS have demonstrated a strong mutual commitment to the program. Sustaining a disciplined team approach at all levels remains challenging, most notably in working on recruitment issues.

A second important achievement has been RCC's success in developing a strong core instructional program that blends academic remediation and real-world skills. The basic New Visions program successfully integrates academic instruction with workplace and other life skills training, provides highly-individualized instruction, moves students along through a manageable series of steps, and is delivered by an accommodating and dedicated staff.

A third accomplishment has been that RCC has created a highly-supportive social environment for New Visions students. Although less tangible than some other outcomes, a cohesive and motivating environment is an important attribute of successful social programs. New Visions' comfortable, on-campus location and encouraging staff provide a supportive buffer zone between challenging home and work situations and the additional demands of the regular college environment. The program's well-crafted guidance program creates strong bonds among students that strengthen their commitment to the program.

New Visions Still Faces Several Significant Challenges

Ambitious new programs usually take several years to develop fully, and New Visions has been no exception. After a year and a half, the program still faced three significant challenges: 1) meeting the program's recruitment goals, 2) bolstering supports to help participants balance work, home, and school responsibilities, and 3) strengthening connections between the core program and occupational mini-programs at RCC.

Recruitment has proven to be a far more difficult task than RCC and RCDPSS originally envisioned. It also is one of the most important challenges, since New Visions will be judged not only for its impacts on participants but also for its ability to engage a significant number of single parents in school while they are working at least part-time. Despite improved teamwork and several additional recruitment activities, the inflow of volunteers (about 40 clients every six weeks) remains substantially below the level expected (110 clients). On a positive note, there are many ways current efforts might be expanded, and RCC and RCDPSS are actively engaged in developing additional strategies.

One set of responses includes measures to increase program take-up by increasing the frequency and variety of communications about the program, bringing additional resources into play (e.g., expanding contributions by RCC and RCDPSS line staff, involving program participants and celebrities, and engaging an experienced marketing firm), and strengthening program supports that will help convince welfare recipients that they can handle school on top of already significant work and family responsibilities.

Although RCDPSS policy precludes direct referrals to specific E&T providers, Phase II case managers can make a substantial contribution to New Visions recruitment efforts.³ In order to succeed in their efforts to engage clients in E&T generally, case managers will be assessing clients' interests and educational backgrounds and providing information on the benefits of E&T and the range of opportunities available in the community. Case managers are in a strong position to support RCC's recruitment efforts by identifying clients likely to succeed in college with extra help, presenting the case for college, and introducing clients to available resources for easing transitions to college. In the process, case managers could provide a substantial amount of information on New Visions and put interested clients in touch with RCC staff.

³ The agency describes its philosophy as a "push-pull" approach, in which case managers encourage clients to choose some E&T activity and providers are responsible for recruiting clients into specific programs. This strategy is essentially a market-based approach, with government performing two important functions. First, RCDPSS is committed to increasing clients' demand for E&T, which the agency believes to be vital to long-term job retention and advancement. Second, the county recognizes that in order for the market to operate efficiently, it must ensure that clients receive good information about alternative E&T opportunities and that providers have good access to their potential customers.

A second kind of response includes changes that would broaden program eligibility, which currently is limited to a small fraction (15 percent) of the overall caseload. Eligibility could be broadened by revising work requirements (e.g., allowing work study or reducing hours outright) or accepting clients without a high school diploma who test close to being GED-ready (and adding a GED component to the program).

In addition to strengthening the program's initial appeal, increasing supports to help New Visions participants manage their school, work, and parenting responsibilities could make a substantial difference in program retention. The current model provides mainly case management, with New Visions staff helping participants to coordinate school with their existing work, child care, and transportation options. Our early fieldwork suggests that this assistance, while helpful, may not be sufficient to overcome some of the most critical barriers, such as transportation and participants' concerns about child care availability and quality. In response, RCC and RCDPSS are seriously considering several services that could be very helpful, such as providing a van shuttle service to help participants attend New Visions, establishing on-campus work study and child care opportunities, and offering financial incentives for school that will allow participants to work less if they choose to do so.

Linkages between New Visions' core program and subsequent college course work also need to be strengthened. Over the past year, New Visions staff have begun to refer more students to RCC occupational mini-programs. Our impression is that participants need more concerted guidance and support throughout the 24-week program to enable them to continue in school while also handling the demands of improved job opportunities. RCC and RCDPSS staff must make college continuation a top priority and work especially closely with clients and each other in the weeks before—and after—graduation from the core instructional program.

Impressionistic Evidence Suggests that the Experiences of New Visions Participants Have Been Positive

Some early hints about participants' reasons for volunteering and their experiences in New Visions may be gleaned from observations of 143 clients who enrolled on a pilot basis in 1998-1999, before the official start of the demonstration. An intake survey found that these clients signed up for New Visions primarily to get help in obtaining a college degree or certificate (41 percent) or finding a better paying job (37 percent). When asked about their future plans, the vast majority (79 percent) expected to be both in college and working a year later (after the program would have ended). Such expectations coincide closely with New Visions' goal of promoting continuing college education for working single parents.

In a small group discussion, treatment group members said that the program's guidance classes had helped to create a supportive environment. One positive feature of this environment is its strong culture of peer support, which participants credit with providing valuable emotional and practical (e.g., transportation, child care) assistance. Students also had very positive reactions to New Visions' academic instruction, citing the program's faculty as the best teachers they had ever had. Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) scores show a substantial improvement in math skills, and a smaller improvement in language skills, for clients completing the core program.

For those participants who did not complete the core program, stronger program supports are needed to improve retention. One-third of volunteers attending orientation in the pilot group did not finish the program. Also, as mentioned above, linkages to occupational mini-programs were not fully implemented during the first year. Only two-in-ten program graduates entered such programs.

As a result of New Visions, clients were much more likely to participate in E&T. All treatment group members, but only a quarter of control group members, received an education or training assignment after volunteering for New Visions. In the last quarter of 1999, after most of the pilot group had finished New Visions, the percent receiving TANF was significantly higher among treatment (85 percent) than among control (72 percent) group members. Participation in New Visions may have led some New Visions students to forego full-time job opportunities and to remain on welfare longer than they would have had they not participated in the program.

Although interesting, the initial experiences of a small sample of participants during the pilot phase do not provide a very reliable indication of how New Visions impacts may unfold over time. Much will rest on the outcome of RCC's and RCDPSS's efforts to meet the recruitment challenge and on the degree to which RCC succeeds in strengthening the program's supports and its linkages to occupational mini-programs. Future reports will provide a fuller assessment of emerging New Visions strategies and more substantial analyses of clients' experiences.