Overview of Career Pathways Research: Evidence & Gaps

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Abt Associates | May 1, 2019
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Career Pathways Strategies

- Evolved as response to labor market changes and evidence on limits of past employment and training strategies

- **Goal**: Help individuals advance over time to *higher skills, recognized credentials, and better jobs* with higher pay, while meeting employers’ workforce needs. Key elements—
  - Articulated education and training steps in industry sector
  - Support services, e.g. advising, child care, transportation, financial aid
  - Multiple places to enter and exit pathway depending on skills, credentials, work experience
  - Partnerships with employers and providers of services in community

- **Model vs. reality**: How career pathways implemented varies widely. Details matter—what works best for whom and when?
Wisconsin Career Pathways

- Adult Basic Ed
- English Lang. Learning
- Work Readiness
- Bridge Instruction
- Embedded Diplomas
- Applied Associate Degree
- Baccalaureate Degree

- Unskilled Job
- Semi-Skilled Job
- Entry-Level Skilled Job
- Entry-Level Technician
- Skilled Technician
- Managers & Technical Professionals

Apprenticeship
Targeted Jobs

Percent of Projects

- Healthcare: 60%
- Manufacturing: 50%
- IT: 30%
- Business: 20%
- Construction: 15%
- Hospitality: 10%
- Logis./Transp.: 7%
- Education: 5%
- Finance: 3%
- Energy: 2%
Populations Served

- Caveat: Very uneven information reported as to who was served; wide variation in demographics even within a project
- Typical participants were low-income high school graduates in their late 20s/30s, equally likely to be women or men
- Few research projects included programs serving substantial percentages of youth or Hispanics
- The most disadvantaged individuals not well represented in career pathways research to date
  - E.g., no high school diploma/equivalent, very low skills, limited English proficiency, criminal records, disabilities
Evidence to Date—Preliminary Takeaways

- Caveats: Career pathways model young, programs still learning and evolving while research being conducted.
  - Most impact findings released to date are short-term. Too early to tell about earnings or career progression, or whether short-term impacts will be sustained.

- Fairly consistent positive effects across sites on education outcomes such as training completion, credentials earned, etc.

- More mixed short-term impacts on employment and earnings, though majority of projects had positive effects.

- Wide variation in magnitude of impacts even within same research project. Implementation and local context important.
Impacts on Education, Employment, and Earnings Outcomes \( (N = \# \text{ of impact evaluations}) \)

- **Education Outcomes \( (N=76) \)**:
  - Positive: 83%
  - No Impact: 16%
  - Negative: 1%

- **Employment Outcomes \( (N=52) \)**:
  - Positive: 33%
  - No Impact: 6%
  - Negative: 62%

- **Earnings Outcomes \( (N=56) \)**:
  - Positive: 38%
  - No Impact: 63%
Career Pathways Research is Ongoing

- More impact research underway. Will add to evidence on—
  - Impacts of more fully developed career pathways programs (e.g. those offering multiple steps of training)
  - Intermediate (3-4 years) and long-term (5+ years) impacts of programs
Importance of Measuring Long-Term Impacts

**Figure 4** Average Annual Earnings during the Nine Years after Random Assignment among All Study Participants

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Note: Earnings are reported in current dollars. Statistical significance levels: **p<.05; * p<.10
Research Gaps—Programs & Systems

- To what extent do career pathways programs & systems help people advance over time to higher skills and better jobs?
  - To what extent do participants move beyond entry-level training and employment, even over a long period?
  - Who advances and who doesn’t? What are the key factors?
  - Which approaches to advancement are more effective?
    - Not enough evidence yet to know whether individuals will complete multiple, progressively higher steps of training over time
    - An alternative approach is to start with mid- or high-level training for higher paying jobs from the outset
    - What are tradeoffs (for access, completion, earnings, etc.) of different approaches? Implications for program design?
Research Gaps—Programs & Systems

- **Which components** of career pathways programs or systems are the **strongest drivers of impacts**?
  - Are certain components more effective when bundled together?

- **Which components** (or combinations of them) are **most effective for what groups**, and **under what circumstances**?
  - To what extent can career pathways strategies work for groups not commonly included in research to date?
  - How does local context affect what programs can accomplish? E.g. local labor market, TANF and SNAP policies, etc.

- Systematic **meta-analysis of impact studies** may help shed light on some of these questions
In the absence of career pathways programs, to what extent, and how, do workers advance on their own through progressively higher levels of education, training, and jobs?

- How does this vary by business/industry sector and by occupational cluster?
- To what extent is advancement more common for workers from specific settings or backgrounds?
- To what extent do wages increase for workers who progress through education and training in a pathway?

What are the implications for designing, implementing and evaluating career pathways programs and systems?
For Further Information

- Megan Lizik, Project Officer/COR, Chief Evaluation Office, DOL, lizik.megan@dol.gov
- Deena Schwartz, Project Director, deena_schwartz@abtassoc.com
- Julie Strawn, Co-Principal Investigator, julie_strawn@abtassoc.com

- Career Pathways Design Study (completed): summary brief

- Descriptive & Analytical Career Pathways Study (current):