Programmatic and Other Supports Accessed by Career Pathways Participants

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Overview

Disadvantaged adults are likely to face challenges in obtaining more education. Career pathway programs seek to overcome these challenges by offering a variety of supports. Participants may also have strong support networks that they can draw upon for assistance. While a large literature has documented the various barriers low-income adults face in advancing educationally, this brief considers the supports that participants in the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) evaluation receive and have available to them. Based on qualitative interviews with these participants we find that:

- Career pathways programs provide significant support to help cover program costs. This support ranged from covering the cost of programs through individual training accounts or other funding sources, helping participants apply for and obtain financial aid, to bridging the gap between financial aid provided and the cost of the program. Programs also often provide funds to purchase needed supplies for classes, such as books and other equipment. For many participants, this was an important financial relief.
- Interactions with career pathways staff generally focus on academic progress and completing paperwork, rather than advising.
- While some respondents formed study groups with fellow participants and met regularly, less structured connections with classmates were more common.
- Family members provide significant emotional support, as well as free housing and child care. However, living conditions might be crowded, and participants are embedded in networks where others are also economically disadvantaged.
- Programs may want to build upon case manager/participant relationships to inquire about participants' situations outside of the program and make referrals to other services. Helping participants build connections with each other may also strengthen participants' support networks.

Introduction

Obtaining education beyond high school is increasingly important in today's economy. Not only do post-secondary degree holders earn more, but they also have lower unemployment rates compared to those with a high school diploma (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015). However, low-income and low-skilled adults are likely to face obstacles to obtaining more education, including financial challenges, lack of academic preparation, and other demands on their time, such as parenting and working (Tannock and Flocks 2003; Goldrick-Rab 2010). Moreover, traditional, classroom-based instruction, like that of community colleges and universities, may not be well-suited to students who might have had difficult experiences in secondary school classrooms (Fein 2012). A combination of these and other factors have contributed to low persistence and graduation rates of economically disadvantaged students attending community colleges (Goldrick-Rab 2010).

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PACE
Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education

The Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) evaluation uses a random assignment research design to assess the effectiveness of nine career pathways programs (see sidebar) for low-income, low-skilled individuals in increasing participants' credential attainment, employment, and earnings. The career pathways approach aims to organize post-secondary education and training as a series of manageable steps leading to successively higher credentials and employment opportunities in growing occupations. Each step is designed to prepare participants for the next level of employment and education and also to provide a credential with labor market value. Students also receive assistance and support to help overcome academic, personal, and other challenges to completing their desired training and in finding employment.

The brief highlights the supports received by respondents in a qualitative study that is part of the PACE evaluation, focusing on responses from study participants in the treatment group—that is, individuals who could access the career pathways programs. Respondents discussed program-provided supports and assessed their usefulness. The research team also asked about any public assistance they received as well as the ways in which family and friends did (or did not) provide material and emotional help.

Methodology

Nine career pathways programs in 18 locations are part of the PACE evaluation. The research team conducted qualitative interviews with a sample of treatment and control study participants in all nine programs, although not at all locations. All interviews were conducted between February and November 2014. This brief includes findings from interviews pooled across programs, rather than those specific to individual programs.

Sample: The research team contacted a random sample of individuals in each program who enrolled in the PACE study in the previous six months. The research team aimed to interview participants within six months of their random assignment date, when treatment group members would still be receiving services, although there is variation across the sites (the time elapsed between random assignment date and the first interview ranged from one to nine months). When the team knew whether individuals were actively engaged in the program, they used a stratified random sampling frame in order to attempt to capture opinions and experiences of both those who remained in and those who had left the program.

Participation in the interviews was voluntary, and each participant received a $40 gift card as a token of appreciation. The team scheduled a total of 146 interviews and completed 123 interviews, for a response rate of 84 percent. The number of individuals interviewed at each program ranged from eight at one program to a high of 32 interviews at another with multiple locations. Response rates by program ranged from 75 percent to 100 percent. This brief uses data from interviews with 84 treatment group members.

Interview format: Interviews were done in-person, sometimes in public spaces such as libraries or coffee shops or at the program site, and less frequently in the respondent's home. Interviews were semi-structured in nature, allowing the interviewer the flexibility to follow up on and further probe respondents' answers, but all interviews covered the same set of topics: respondents' family, educational, and career backgrounds; educational and career goals; challenges they had faced or expected to face in achieving those goals; reasons for wanting to enroll in the career pathways program; and their program experiences to date. Interviews on average lasted 50 minutes.

Data analysis: All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed into word processing documents, and imported into NVivo, a qualitative analysis software package. The lead author initially coded the interview transcripts based upon the major topics covered in the interview guide (e.g., memories of secondary schooling; career goals; reasons for wanting more education and training) as well as themes that emerged over the course of interviewing, such as participants' assessments of their own goals and the types of person they envisioned themselves to be. Text segments associated with certain broad categories were then further coded and analyzed using an inductive thematic approach (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell 2013).

Programs in PACE

- *Bridge to Employment in the Health Care Industry* at the San Diego Workforce Partnership (CA)
- *Carreras en Salud* at Instituto del Progreso Latino (IL)
- *Health Careers for All* at Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County (WA)
- *Pathways to Healthcare* at Pima Community College (AZ)
- *Patient Care Academies* at Madison Area Technical College (WI)
- Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (TX)
- *Washington Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program* at Bellingham Technical College, Whatcom Community College and Everett Community College (WA)
- *Workforce Training Academy (WTA) Connect* at Des Moines Area Community College (IA)
- *Year Up* (eight sites across the U.S.)

Characteristics of Participants Interviewed

The majority of qualitative interview participants were in their late twenties or early thirties; about 30 percent were 35 or older, and 13 percent were under 21. Individuals of Hispanic origin comprised more than 40 percent of the interviewees; non-Hispanic African Americans and non-Hispanic Whites were 30 percent and 17 percent of the participants, respectively. Just over one third were foreign born. Women comprised nearly three quarters of the respondents, and 60 percent of all respondents had children. Only eight percent lacked a high school diploma at the time of random assignment. The majority (60 percent) had only a high school degree or its equivalent, about 20 percent had some but less than a year of college, and 11 percent had already completed an Associate's degree or more.

Due to the small numbers in each site, qualitative interview respondents, although initially randomly selected from among participants in their enrollment cohort, are not representative of all participants in the career pathways programs, nor were they intended to be. However, the demographics of the qualitative sample match fairly well with the overall PACE sample (see Fein 2015). The qualitative sample has fewer respondents under age 21 than the overall sample (13 percent versus 22 percent) and fewer respondents who are older than 35 (13 percent compared to 24 percent), but the racial and ethnic composition is very similar, as is educational attainment. The qualitative sample has more female respondents compared to the overall PACE sample (75 versus 67 percent).

1 Source: PACE Basic Information Form administered to all study participants at study intake.

Findings

The findings presented below come from interviews with 84 treatment group participants. The research team asked several questions directly about assistance participants received from program staff (and where applicable, staff at affiliated community colleges and other training institutions). The research team also asked, "Do you have any sources of support from family or friends?" and asked participants to elaborate upon the ways in which their networks provided assistance while they were enrolled in the program. Additionally, looking at other parts of the interview revealed additional types of help or people who were central to the participant's support system.

By design, nearly all of the participants in the qualitative study had not been participating in the program for very long. The team strove to interview individuals within six months of random assignment, but not everyone began a program immediately after they were selected for participation. Some participants had only just started their program, some were engaged in preparatory activities, and a few were waiting to begin. Thus, the reported supports they noted were based upon limited experience with the programs, including, perhaps, limited knowledge or use of the additional services available. Once participants are further along in their training, they may need and use other supports and services. The research team also asked respondents directly about other types of services or supports the programs could or should provide to help them meet their goals, and nearly all participants could not think of additional services, with most reporting high levels of satisfaction with the program thus far.

Assistance from the Program and Program Staff

One of the hallmarks of the career pathways programs in PACE is that they offer participants a wide variety of support services and other assistance to help overcome challenges to retention and completion. Some of this support included direct and indirect financial assistance and in-kind assistance to cover costs related to participants. Instructors provided some supports, while other program staff (e.g., case managers) provided supports at other times. Finally, some respondents noted that other program participants supported them.

Financial and Related Supports. All the programs in PACE helped participants cover the cost of attending the program, either through direct payments to programs (e.g., an Individual Training Account) or providing funds to bridge the gap between aid provided and the program cost. Some PACE programs included preparation courses for individuals who did not score high enough on an assessment to enter the selected course (e.g., classes to improve math and English skills). They provided these at no cost to participants. Programs also provided indirect financial assistance, namely helping participants fill out paperwork for Pell grants or other financial aid. Most respondents noted that tuition support and participation in no-cost programming was crucial. One participant, who was waiting to start the program, said of the tuition support, "It will help financially to get into a program that I might not be able to afford."

A number of respondents mentioned that when they first learned about the career pathway program, they thought it must be a "scam," because it seemed too good to be true. One participant said, "A friend told me [about the career pathway program]. I didn't believe it—that someone would pay for school. It sounded too good!" Similarly, another respondent said, "Like most people, I thought it was a little too good to be true, at the time. You're gonna pay me to earn college credits and get a certificate? What?"

Some participants, though, were already in the process of enrolling in education and training programs and securing financial aid when they became part of the career pathways program. However, these participants received other support, such as reimbursing participants for new tires for a car, providing vouchers to purchase needed work-related supplies such as watches (for taking pulses) and shoes, offering bus passes and gas vouchers to get to and from the program, and covering the cost of books.

Only a few participants reported that they had paid anything out of pocket for program-related supplies, and these costs were quite small. Four respondents took out student loans, but did so to pay for living costs, not tuition. However, as participants progress through the pathway and engage in additional training, they may need to find ways to finance their education on their own. Programs in PACE varied in terms of direct and indirect financial support available beyond the initial career pathway step. Some participants were concerned that the cost of more training might keep them from reaching their education and career goals.

Assistance from Staff. Sixteen respondents said that they were referred to tutoring services for extra assistance or were given additional help outside of class from the instructor of a particular course. They reported that this help was extremely useful. Participants in community college-based programs typically had access to campus tutoring services, which were staffed with instructors, students, or a mix of both. One program offered a class specific for PACE participants to provide extra assistance on assignments.

All of the career pathways programs in PACE offered case management (sometimes referred to as navigation services or advising). Of the 24 respondents who discussed their interactions with a case manager, most seemed to view these meetings as progress updates, rather than opportunities to discuss challenges they might be having within or outside of the program. The following participant's explanation of her meetings with a case manager is typical:

> *Well, I had to report with [the case manager] every single month, every month I update my information. I update everything, how I'm doing, and report cards, my grades, what I did with the voucher or whatever. I report it. I have copies of everything. Then I drop in her office the copies. Everything. Every single thing.*

Another respondent had weekly meetings with a case manager, but described his meetings as being fairly short:

> *They would usually see how we were doing in the week, throughout the week as we're getting our work done… That's pretty much it. The meetings were only for about 15, 20 minutes.*

However, participants in one site noted that their case managers also provided emotional support. One of these participants described sessions with her case manager:

> *The last week of the month is like an individual session. They'll ask you, "How are you feeling? Are you feeling pressure at work or school? How are you doing at school? Do you think you're gonna fail? How are you doing?" …They're really great counselors because they will help me. They help me with a lot of—they give us kind of [group] lectures of communication, of stress, how to handle stress, and work life, and family life. …Surviving and all that. Yeah. It's really entertaining and really helpful.*

Regardless of the structure of case management provided, nearly all participants reported that they believed that program and instructional staff wanted them to succeed and were committed to seeing them complete the program.

Assistance from Others in the Program. Nearly four in ten respondents reported that their fellow program participants were a source of support and assistance (a number that may increase as more respondents start or continue their programs). Nine respondents said they were part of organized study groups with other participants and worked together regularly on homework and prepared for tests together. Another five reported pairing up with a particular classmate, working together when possible, and generally providing emotional support to each other. More common, though, were less structured connections between participants. One participant, when asked if she studied with others, said, "I haven't studied with anyone outside of school," but then continued:

> *A couple of us always come like an hour earlier and we'll meet up and try to compare like, "Hey, did you get this? Did you get that? What answer did you get through? Well, I got this," and everybody's flippin' through books like, "Well, this is what I got out of it," so that helps. It's like three or four of us that kinda' meet up before class just to go over and kinda' double check things, so that's helpful.*

Other participants said that their classmates got to know each other and would help each other out if needed, but no formal groups were in place. These respondents believed that most of their fellow participants were approachable and willing to help. However, lack of time and other commitments such as family and work kept them from doing more with each other. As one participant said:

> *I don't study with anybody, but I talk to everyone. Everybody have kids so they're busy when they're working and working, and it's difficult with kids and with jobs. Everybody's in the same place, you know? Everybody works, everybody have kids, and it's hard.*

Supports Outside of the Program

Participants came to the programs with their own personal sources of support through family and friends, and some were receiving assistance from government programs. While one-third of participants described their financial circumstances as "very tight," some had access to help from family members that reduced the financial challenges of being in school. However, most participants' families were also economically disadvantaged. At a minimum, nearly all respondents reported having emotional support from their friends and family.

Help with Housing. Nearly four in ten respondents lived with their parents or other family members, and most were not paying rent or were paying a nominal amount. These respondents did not have to budget for what could have been a particularly large expense. Given that many respondents reported facing financial difficulties, having no- or low-cost housing was one personal strategy to minimize monthly bills. One respondent noted that he was able to save money because of his living situation:

> *I've had a good amount of money in a savings account, and my parents have been helping me out. I'm not paying rent at the moment, living at their place.*

Some of these respondents were younger participants who had not left home after finishing high school. Others had lived on their own, but returned home to live with family to save money, to escape bad relationships, or to provide care to a sick family member. For example, one participant moved with her children and boyfriend into her grandfather's house. In exchange for helping him with daily activities and cleaning the house, she was able to live there rent-free. Another left an abusive partner, returned home, and was trying to find housing of her own.

However, living with family could mean living in cramped quarters. One respondent lived with eight other family members. While she had her own room, she said it was difficult for her to study at home because "it's never quiet!" One of the interviews conducted in a respondent's house provided a direct observation of how shared housing could be challenging. This respondent, her boyfriend, and their young son lived with her boyfriend's parents in a small, two bedroom house in a neighborhood the respondent described as "violent" with "lots of gangs." Although no one besides his parents lived there on a permanent basis, other family members sometimes stayed there, and her boyfriend's nieces and nephews were often there while their parents worked. However, the couple only paid rent when they could afford it, and her boyfriend's father took the respondent to the program every day.

Help with Children. Respondents also noted that family members sometimes provided help with children, watching them while they were attending the program or studying, or taking them or picking them up from school. Among the 51 parents who were interviewed, nearly a third said that their family provided child care, transportation, and other help related to their children. Some family members provided regular child care while participants were in their programs. One respondent talked about how her mother volunteered to provide child care:

> *Pretty much, [my mother] said that to me, since she find out that I was going to start school. She's like, "I will take care of your daughter, because now I know it's for something good," you know? "Hopefully," she said, "you pass everything."*

Other respondents relied upon multiple network members to help with children. One respondent described her child care arrangement as such:

> *My mom does, and then my boyfriend one day a week and my mom, two days a week. It helps. I don't have to pay for day care. That's a big weight. That just means she really wants me to go back, so she's gonna do everything she can.*

While some respondents, like the one quoted above, did not have to pay relatives for care, others reported paying a small amount.

Emotional Support. Aside from providing help with housing and child care, the friends and family members of most respondents were not in the financial position to provide a great deal of material support. However, most respondents could rely upon friends and family for emotional support and encouragement. Only nine of the 84 respondents specifically said that their family was not supportive or did not pay much attention to their efforts to obtain more training. All the other participants responded affirmatively when asked if their friends and family supported them, and some discussed this emotional support in more detail. For example, one respondent said about her husband and children:

> *They're so proud of me. They're always like, "You can do this. Just focus on that. Don't worry about anything else. Just try to finish it. Go for it." Just being very supportive.*

This respondent's family was facing challenges paying bills, since she had quit her job to enter the program, cutting the family's income in half. However, both she and her husband believed that the opportunity to participate in the program was too good to pass up.

Other respondents talked about how their own parents had always wanted them to get more education, and now that the respondents were attending, their family was in their corner. One respondent said, "[My mother's] been wanting me to go back. She didn't go to college, so she wants me to...that helps me and encourages me."

As the previous quote also illustrates, knowing that emotional support is available also helped some respondents stay motivated. Another respondent talked about how important his family was both in terms of the support they offered, but also how their support spurred him on.

> *I wanted to make my parents proud. My mother, and my father, and my sister. My grandmother. They knew that I didn't really know what to do after high school. For me taking this step, they were behind me 100 percent. I knew I couldn't let them down. It was a priority.*

Public Assistance. Forty-five, or just over half of respondents reported receiving at least one form of government assistance and one was in the process of applying for benefits. Five students reported that they had been receiving a benefit but had recently lost it, in a few cases because of a change in income and in others because they had missed a benefit re-determination appointment. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP (formerly called Food Stamps) and Medicaid were the most commonly reported benefits, received by 18 respondents. The remaining respondents received various other benefits, alone or in combination, including assistance with housing, disability benefits, and cash assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Not all of the benefits reported were for the actual participant. For example, while some respondents did not meet citizenship or residency requirements for government assistance, their citizen children may have been receiving some benefits. Or, a participant had a child with a disability who was a beneficiary.

It is not clear from the interview data if those who were not receiving benefits might have been eligible or even knew assistance might be available. Income eligibility varies by program and by state for some programs, so a respondent who might have been eligible in one state would not have been in another. One respondent noted that prior to starting the program, her income was too high to qualify for SNAP. Once she started the program and cut back her work hours, she was eligible for the benefit. She said, "I had been applying and they kept on denying, because I was working. I think they said that I had to almost not work at all to qualify." Most respondents who were not receiving benefits, though, did not give a reason, but a few noted that because they were living with their parents and others, the household's income was used in calculating eligibility, and the combined income put them over the threshold for being eligible.

Maximizing Participants' Supports

The career pathways programs studied in PACE provide significant financial assistance through tuition payments, free preparatory training, and provision of other support services like gas vouchers. Case managers are available to participants, as well as tutoring assistance. Additionally, nearly all participants reported that their family and others in their personal networks were supportive and many provided needed help such as housing and child care. Programs may want to capitalize on these existing strengths. Below are some suggestions.

Build upon case manager/participant relationships. Respondents who had meetings with their case managers reported good relationships, but also seemed to view meetings as times to check in on their academic progress or discuss any problems they might be having in the classroom. Assuming trust can be developed, case managers could consider inquiring into participants' situations outside of the program. For example, asking about housing situations, where they study, how well they are doing balancing school with other responsibilities may help participants deal with any problematic areas. Case managers might also inquire about any types of public assistance participants are receiving to refer potentially eligible participants to these applicable programs or other supports in the community.

Help participants connect with classmates. Some programs in PACE organize participants into cohorts to help students feel as if they are moving through the program with a built-in support system. However, participants often juggle multiple responsibilities, such as parenting and working, making it difficult to find the time to study with fellow participants or provide emotional support to each other. Programs may need to be more proactive and provide specific opportunities within classrooms or other program activities to help participants feel more connected to each other and have another source of support.

Offer open houses for family and friends. Family and friends play a crucial role in providing material and emotional support. Such an opportunity could give participants' personal networks a better insight into the nature of the programs, the amount of work required, and the important role they can play in helping participants manage their responsibilities.

Citations

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About this Series

This is one of three briefs that describe early lessons from in-depth interviews with Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) study participants. The goal of this sub-study is to gain a more comprehensive understanding of study participants' motivation for wanting to enroll in a career pathways program, their likelihood of success, their experiences with program services, challenges they experienced to completing programs and supports that helped them succeed. These three briefs focus on participants' early experiences in the study, approximately six months after they were assigned to a group that could enroll in the career pathways programs. Future reports will incorporate findings from a second round of interviews that will occur approximately 18 months after study entry.

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