

Nothing Can Stop Me

Career Pathways Participants' Motivations and Thoughts on Success

Kristin S. Seefeldt, University of Michigan | Whitney Engstrom and Karen Gardiner, Abt Associates
OPRE Report #2016-27 | March 2016

Overview

While the barriers economically disadvantaged adults face in completing post-secondary education and training have been well-documented, less is known about the internal motivations and strengths that these individuals bring to the education and training experience. In-depth interviews with participants in the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) evaluation find that:

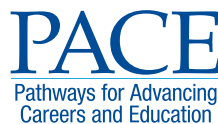
- Respondents presented themselves as highly motivated, success-oriented individuals who were very likely to achieve their goals.
- Wanting a career, wanting to provide financially for their children as well as serve as role models, and hoping to transform themselves (e.g., overcoming significant personal challenges) were motivations for enrolling in career pathways programs.
- Respondents defined success in various ways, including finishing the program, getting a good job, getting good grades, and understanding the material covered in training.
- Career pathways programs may want to build upon participants' initial motivation and confidence and to find ways to incorporate children, a significant motivator for participants, into their programs.

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 degree (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015). However, economically disadvantaged 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).

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 on 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 better 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.

While the barriers economically disadvantaged adults face in completing post-secondary education and training have been well-documented, less is known about the internal motivations and strengths that these individuals bring to the education and training experience. This brief describes study participants' motivations for enrolling in a career pathways program as articulated by 84 participants in the treatment group—that is, individuals who could access the career pathways programs evaluated in PACE. These interviews are part of a qualitative

sub-study designed to better understand participants' experiences. In these interviews, respondents discussed their motivations for enrolling in a career pathways program, how they define success in their selected program, and how they view their chances of experiencing success, whether that be completing the program or some other measure respondents deemed important. This brief is one in a series of three highlighting findings from the first round of PACE qualitative interviews. A second round of interviews will commence in fall 2016. PACE impact and implementation study results will be presented in forthcoming reports. Study enrollment concluded in December 2014.

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 one program 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 about 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 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). For this brief, the broad categories were further refined by exploring and identifying ideas and meanings embedded in discussions of various topics with the goal of uncovering their assessments of the challenges they faced in their current program and the types of issues that could pose challenges in moving forward with additional training or achieving their desired career.

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; African Americans and 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. The majority (60 percent) had a high school degree or its equivalent, about 20 percent had less than a year of college, and 11 percent had already completed an Associate's degree or more. Eight percent lacked a high school diploma at the time of study entry.

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.

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

Findings

The findings presented below are based upon interviews with 84 treatment group participants. The research team asked participants to describe why they decided to go through the lottery to enroll in their chosen program, although many respondents volunteered this information when talking about other issues, such as their goals for themselves and their hopes for the future. And although most respondents had not yet completed their training through the career pathways program (and some had not formally started training), the research team asked them to talk about how they defined the term “success” in their program and, given that definition, did they believe they would be successful.

Nearly all of the participants in the qualitative study had not been participating for very long. The team strove to interview people 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, how participants define success for themselves may change or evolve as they have more experience with the programs, and their assessments of their ability to achieve their goals also might change.

The following four pages will detail these findings on why participants wanted to enroll in the program to the meaning of their success.

Why Did Participants Want to Enroll in the Program?

As one might expect, since participants were enrolled in career pathways programs, a desire for a career, rather than (as some called it) a “dead-end” job, was the primary driver of enrollment for the majority of respondents. But, underlying this answer were a variety of situations. Some respondents had been or were currently in the labor force, but typically in low-paying jobs without benefits. Others characterized their jobs as having limited if any opportunities for upward mobility or learning new skills. They hoped that obtaining education and training through the career pathway program would be their way out of the low-wage labor market. One of the respondents from a community college-based program worked in a clerical position, and while she was salaried, her salary was low. She noted:

I'm trying to find a better, more productive way to get into a career versus just working these—I mean, I have a great job. By all means, I have a great job, but, ehh, it's a job.

More than one in five respondents who were parents specifically said that their children served as motivators for enrolling in the program. About half said that obtaining a better paying job also would mean more money for their children. A respondent contrasted her current situation with what she envisioned her finances would look like once she completed her training. She said:

[My kids] ask for things and I can't give 'em to them. Then they see these people, “Oh, we're going to go on vacation to Disneyland.” I'm never gonna be able to do that with this [job]. I never will. It's my kids, straight. I need to be better. I want to be able—my kid wants a car at 16. [If I get a better paying job] I'll be able to give him a car at 16, if he wants to. He deserves it though.

But it was not just material goods that parents desired for their children; they also hoped to demonstrate the importance of education and show that attending school was something their children could do as well. A vast majority of these parents said that being a role model to their children was very important. A young woman participating in a community college-based program had just recently completed her GED; she had dropped out of high school when she became pregnant. Her rationale for completing her GED and for obtaining more training through the program was to make sure her son did not follow her initial path:

I want to set a good example for my son. I don't want—like, when he grows up and he thinks it's okay for him to drop out of school or quit or whatever he wants to do, he's not going to have a dream. So I think it was a good example for me to go back to school and get my high school diploma. So when he gets older, and then when he's thinking of dropping out of school, I have something to show him, that mommy went to school and she graduated.

Another participant's discussion of the ways in which she viewed enrolling in the program as setting a good example for her daughter was particularly poignant. She had left an abusive relationship and had wanted to make sure her daughter would not experience the same treatment in the future. She saw her participation in a career pathways program as one way achieving this goal:

Since I've gone through all this domestic violence, as I was overcoming it, I've always been working very hard. I want a better life for my family and my daughter and I. I don't want my daughter—I want my daughter to look at me and be proud of me and say, “Nobody should be treated the way you were treated.” It's not acceptable. I don't want her to ever think it's acceptable. I want to set an example for her and for her to go to college, to become independent, and to be a strong, confident, independent woman. That's what I want her to be. That's what I want to portray.

A number of respondents, about 15 percent, talked about their participation in a program as part of a larger narrative about transforming themselves and overcoming significant obstacles. A participant described her previous life as “just chaos.” She became pregnant in her early teens, started using drugs, was in an abusive relationship, and spent some time in jail. After divorcing her husband, she decided she wanted a “peaceful life.” She had always wanted to be a nurse, and when she found out about the career pathways program while attending a GED preparation course, she decided that it was time for her to fulfill her goals. Similarly, a participant in a community college-based program sought the services as part of his plan to turn his life around after serving time in prison.

Several of the programs in PACE explicitly focus on preparing participants for careers in the health care industry, and in others, some chose to train for health-related professions. Eighteen of the participants who enrolled in a health-related program described how they had been informal caregivers for family members and that these experiences served as a motivation to find a way to enter the field. One participant said:

I've always been a nurse. As I had mentioned, my dad was a drug addict. A lot of the times, he was very ill. I had to feed him. I had to check his blood pressure from a young age. My mom was a depressed person because of what my father would do. I had to nurse her in bed all the time, feed her and just check on her. I'm natural at it. I've been doing it all my life—over 30 years now, so yeah, it's very natural to me. I love it.

A very specific incident, though, spurred her to look for opportunities to enroll in a training program. Her son was hospitalized, and she thought that some of the nurses were not treating him well. She said:

That's when I had an epiphany, and I realized you know what, I should be doing this because I will treat children—I will treat people like my own. I would never treat them this way. I know how it feels. This is my calling. This is what I need to do.

Other respondents also viewed themselves as caring and compassionate people who just needed to find an opportunity to use their skills. One participant who was an immigrant noted that until she was able to receive a Social Security Number through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, she had no way register for school and thus begin her desired career where she could help people. Another participant discussed her entry into the program² as being just the type of opportunity she needed because she lacked funding to pay for school. She said:

Like I say, it's in my heart to take care of people. I noticed just how everything set up. I had no idea—because I had no way to pay for school, absolutely none. The way it was all set up, I went, started doing One Stop [a job center]. They told me about [the career pathways program], and it all fell into place.

One program only serves youth ages 18-24 and provides a stipend, college credit, and an internship for participants while they are enrolled. Most of these respondents were not parents, so wanting to build a better life for their children was not a common motivation. Likewise, because of their age, most of these respondents had limited time in the formal labor market and so only a few articulated a desire to move out of low-paying jobs and into a career. For some, the stipend,

college credits, an internship while in the program, as well as networking opportunities were a significant motivation, and a few were interested in the focus of the program (computers and technology). Many of the young participants interviewed were figuring out what they wanted to do after graduating from high school and not necessarily seeking to enroll in a training program, but instead signed up based upon recommendations from friends, family members, and others in the community who knew about the program and thought it would be a good fit.

The Meaning of Success and the Ability to Achieve It

Even though most participants were in the early phases or had not yet started their programs, the research team asked participants to think about what “success” meant for them. Of the participants who were able to articulate a definition of “success” for themselves, most viewed it as completing the program (29 percent), either the first step along the career pathway or their longer-term career goal. Also important in being successful was being able to find a job in their chosen field (26 percent). Some participants (18 percent) noted that grades were part of their definition of success, although individuals varied in terms of how they thought about grades. For some, passing their coursework would be a marker of success, while several others set the bar higher, not wanting anything lower than a “B.” And a few participants said they were attempting to obtain straight “A’s” in their courses. In the opinion of one participant, getting good grades might have important implications for her future career. As she said:

I wouldn't want my nurse to only know 70 percent of what she's talking about. You could pass with Cs, but I think I would want to know a little bit more than 70 percent to get by.

Finally, 13 percent of participants noted that being able to understand and retain material learned in their courses, regardless of the grade they received, was the most important marker of being successful.

With just a few exceptions, participants believed they would be successful in the program. In explaining why, a number of common themes emerged from their narratives. The most common reason, cited by more than a quarter of participants, was that they characterized themselves as people who followed through with their goals. When they put their mind to a task, these respondents said, they would see it through to the end. For example, one participant said this about herself:

² The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) was issued by President Obama via Executive Order in June 2012. Among other provisions, DACA allows certain undocumented young adults who came to the U.S. as minors to obtain Social Security numbers and temporary work permits and provides temporary relief from deportation. DACA students can participate in programs for which they are eligible. Health Profession Opportunity Grant (HPOG) funds, for example, cannot be used to support DACA students. Three PACE programs are HPOG grantees.

Right now, if I—I've always been like this: if I set my mind to do something, I'm like, "Whoa! Even I can't believe that I'm doing it." I'm pretty confident.

Similarly, a participant in a different site said that she would complete the program because she didn't "like to leave things halfway. I like to finish them."

A few participants noted that there was a chance that other factors, such as the breakdown of a car or a family situation, might hamper their ability to finish the program, but overall they believed their personality and character traits were ones that would lead them to success. As one participant said when asked if there would be challenges to meeting his goals:

Just, I'm pretty relentless, so I think that it wouldn't be like something that's—it wouldn't be myself stopping me [from meeting my goals]. It would be probably like transportation kind of issues, maybe.

Participants who characterized themselves as having overcome significant barriers or a troubled past were more likely to say they would succeed because they had already gotten through very difficult situations. The participant who had cared for her drug addicted father and mentally ill mother said that:

I know a lot of people and they saw what I went through, and they'd say, "Wow, it's a surprise you're not dead or you're not depressed." They've seen me rise up, kind of like a phoenix rising from the ashes, and then doing very well for myself.

Given all she had gone through, which included physical abuse and leaving home as a teenager and living on the streets, this respondent believed that she had the perseverance to get through the program. When asked how confident she felt about achieving her goals she said, "One thousand percent."

About 16 percent of respondents, when discussing their goals and their confidence in achieving them, used phrases such as, "I want this so bad" or "I need to do this now." Some seemed to view their chosen program as their one opportunity to move forward in achieving their goals. One respondent said:

Well, the only thing I can say is that I'm going to do my best, and I'm not going to lose this—I don't want to lose this opportunity to enroll in the health career.

Others articulated a sense that they were running out of time. A respondent who was a single mother working a low-wage job started to feel like she needed to do something to turn her life around financially so that she could afford to send her children to college. She explained her situation like this:

Because the older I got, the more desperate I felt, like I'm getting older. What am I gonna do? I felt a sense of urgency where I gotta get—because I didn't do it early [go to school] like I should have done, I felt a sense of desperation, like I better do something now.

Some respondents, even if they had expressed strong motivation and confidence in their ability to achieve their goals admitted to being anxious about enrolling in their program, wondering if they would be able to handle the requirements. However, participants who had started the program reported that once they began taking classes and saw that they were able to handle the coursework and other elements of the program, it gave them confidence that they would achieve their goals.

Building on Participants' Motivations

Qualitative interview participants presented themselves as highly motivated, success-oriented individuals. Below are suggestions for ways that programs could build upon participants' initial motivation, acknowledging that some programs may already engage in these types of activities.

Understanding Participants' Motivations and Goals.

Programs could use this information to improve marketing and recruitment. For example, knowing that a group of potential participants view themselves as people who are natural caregivers could lead to recruitment materials that highlight this characteristic. Or, materials could appeal to people's desire to transform themselves and be good role models for their children.

Capitalizing on Participants' Initial Confidence.

Programs may also want to consider how they can capitalize on what appears to be the significant initial confidence exhibited by many participants, before difficult coursework could potentially derail confidence and possibly persistence in the program. For example, programs might have participants discuss and/or document their motivations and confidence in their ability to succeed when they first start and then periodically return to this exercise throughout the program, particularly when material becomes more difficult and participation is more challenging.

Incorporating Motivations and Experiences into Programming.

The motivations of participants could also be helpful to programs as they design or adapt services. Much as industry representatives are sometimes "at the table" with program administrators and designers to articulate their ideas for program content aligned with employer needs, participants can add a different and important perspective to the nature of training and supports.

Engaging Children in the Process. Many potential participants are parents, and at least for respondents in this study, children were a key reason they had enrolled in a program. Programs could consider ways of involving children in the experience, by having opportunities for parents to bring their children to visit the program and see firsthand what their parents' days are like and the effort their parents must put forward to succeed. Programs could also develop joint studying sessions for parents of older children or even "career days" where children can learn at an early age about careers and the skills needed to obtain good jobs.

Citations

Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2015. "Earnings and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment." Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor. http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm (accessed 7/15).

Fein, David. 2015. "A Statistical Portrait of Populations in Nine Career Pathways Programs." In process.

Fein, David. 2012. "Career Pathways as a Framework for Program Design and Evaluation." Bethesda, MD: Abt Associates.

Goldrick-Rab, Sara. 2010. "Challenges and Opportunities for Improving Community College Student Success." *Review of Educational Research*, 80:3, 437-469.

Tannock, Stuart and Sara Flocks. 2003. "I Know What It's Like to Struggle: The Working Lives of Young Students in an Urban Community College." *Labor Studies Journal* 28:1, 1-30.

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.

Submitted to:

**Erica Zielewski and Nicole Constance,
Project Officers**

Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Contract Number: HHSP23320072913YC

This brief and others sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation are available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/resource-library>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Project Director:

Karen Gardiner

Abt Associates, Inc.
4550 Montgomery Ave.
Bethesda, MD 20814

This brief is in the public domain. Permission to reproduce is not necessary. Suggested citation: Seefeldt, Kristin, Engstrom, Whitney and Karen Gardiner. (2016). Nothing Can Stop Me: Career Pathways Participants' Motivations and Thoughts on Success. OPRE Report #2016-27, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

