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Exploring Indiana's Workforce Ready Grants: How Do Short-Term Training Grants Impact Student Decision Making?

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Introduction

State investment in short term workforce credentialing is increasingly common across the country.ⁱ These short-term workforce programs are designed to expand the education-to-career pathway by providing a quicker alternative to more traditional degrees. Community colleges are key providers of these shorter-term, career pathway-linked training programs. By providing financial support for short-term programs, these state investments provide opportunities for community college students to enter these programs that may not have been previously available, particularly for students and programs that are not Pell-eligible. In this way, they may provide a potentially important resource for connecting individuals to short-term credential programs. Despite this potential, little is known about their impact on students.ⁱⁱ Given the interest and investment in these types of state programs, understanding how they influence individuals' pathways and outcomes is important to inform future policy efforts.

Indiana's Workforce Ready Grant (WRG) is one such state initiative, which, as part of the expansive Next Level Jobs program, is designed to "equip working-age Hoosiers and Indiana employers with the training and skills they need to succeed in the 21st Century economy" by providing Hoosiers with "no-cost training programs in any one of Indiana's five high-demand fields."ⁱⁱⁱ WRGs are part of this national trend of state funding investments in pragmatic, short-term training that seeks to meet the needs of local employers and includes similar programs in almost every state in the nation, such as Virginia's FastForward, New Jersey's Pay It Forward, and Louisiana's M.J. Foster Promise programs.^{iv} Connecting potential students to these short-term training programs is important to the state of Indiana considering the economic instability wrought by COVID-19, and the continued decline of industry sectors that once dominated the Rust Belt region. Long tenured worker displacement is high in the region, but so too is Indiana's number of job openings, the latter due in part to the fact that many residents lack the skills necessary to enter the workforce.¹ Further, as the

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics data on worker displacement from 2019-2021 indicates that the East North Central Division in which Indiana is located saw 554,000 long tenured workers displaced during that period, the third highest number in the country.

needs of the workforce change, and the state races to keep up, the WRG program aims to meet these significant needs.

The financial support of the WRG program that makes these programs accessible at no cost is potentially a strong influence on students' pathways. Community college students' decision-making process may be particularly sensitive to financial concerns in relation to their education and career choices. They are often from low-income backgrounds and can be strongly influenced by institutional grant aid, and financial considerations. State and federal financial aid are associated with retention and persistence in community college students (though modulated by the effects of ethnicity and income),^v and state and federal grant programs have been connected to higher enrollment rates.^{vi} Free community college policies and grant aid have been shown to have positive impacts on enrollment and completion rates, particularly for low-income students, although in practice, these policies tend to prioritize traditional age college students which can be detrimental to adult students.^{vii}

Despite the nationwide popularity of short term workforce credential programs, there is little information about program completion or post-WRG program student success measures such as what sort of jobs they get, what their salaries are, nor is there much of this information about other, similar programs.^{viii} One exception is an experimental study by the Federal Department Education that found that Pell funding for very short-term occupational training programs made students more likely to enroll in, and complete programs that were high-demand in their state.^{ix} This brief aims to add to this burgeoning body of literature. In the context of a broader research project focused on examining how community college students make decisions about IT programs and careers, this brief examines how the Next Level Jobs Workforce Ready Grant played a role in student decision-making among a sample of students engaged in Ivy Tech Community College's School of Information Technology (SoIT).² We provide a look into the ways this program impacts students and provide some key takeaways that can open the door for more research on this and similar short-term certificate funding initiatives.

Study Context

This brief is part of a larger study on student decision-making in Ivy Tech Community College's SoIT. This project focuses on student decision making in the Ivy Tech SoIT, using a variety of methods including student surveys and interviews. This issue brief will mainly draw from interviews of Ivy Tech SoIT students conducted from 2019-2021.^x There is also some additional contextual information gathered from interviews with Ivy Tech staff. This data has been analyzed to provide insight on how Workforce Ready Grants impact student decision-making relative to IT careers, with the hopes of sparking discussion on the ways that students in this and other state-funded workforce training programs make decisions.

What is the Next Level Jobs Workforce Ready Grant Program?

Indiana's WRG program is a last-dollar award, universal eligibility program, meaning that it can only be used after the student has used up other public funding sources for their education, and that it is not limited to students with financial

2 To see more of this work, Scovill, S., Peterson, E. K., Edwards, R., & Van Noy, M. (2023). Community, Computer and Campus; Edwards, R., Peterson, E.K., VanNoy, M., & Espino, M.L. (2023), Exploring Student Decision Making: A Longitudinal Study of Information Technology Community College Students; Peterson, E.K. (2023) Not "Just a Hobby": The Influence of Early Interest and Hobbies on Community College IT Student Decision-Making, Manuscript in preparation.

need or academic achievement requirements.^{xi} The program was started in 2017 as part of Governor Eric Holcomb’s goal of providing un(der)employed Hoosiers with the job training that is desired by local employers. The program is targeted in scope: only certain individuals are eligible for funding, and they can only choose from a limited range of certificate programs. The focus is on short-term credentials, “to allow participants to complete training quickly—assisting in securing gainful employment as soon as possible.”^{xii} Initially, only residents without college degrees were eligible, although the program was briefly expanded under CARES Act funding in 2020 to include more eligible certificate programs as well as participants who had already earned a degree, though this particular expansion ended in December of that year.^{xiii}

To be eligible for the program a participant needs to be an Indiana resident and a U.S. citizen/eligible non-citizen, have a high school diploma (but less than a college degree, with the exception of the temporary CARES Act expansion), enroll in a qualifying program, file the FAFSA, be enrolled either full-time (for dependent students) or half-time (for independent students), maintain satisfactory academic progress, and meet any other minimum criteria established by the Indiana Commission for Higher Education (CHE). Of note is the fact that the Workforce Ready Grant is, for the state’s educational programs, “a rare instance in which both Black students and males are overrepresented.”^{xiv} To illustrate, Black students made up 15% of the Workforce Ready Grant enrollments in the 2018-2019 school year,^{xv} compared to 10.2% of Indiana residents that are Black or African American.^{xvi}

The Next Level Jobs WRG covers the tuition and mandatory fees for eligible certificate programs at Ivy Tech Community College,³ far and away the most common institution choice for WRG beneficiaries.^{xvii} Other providers of WRG-eligible programs include schools like Vincennes University, and training schools/bootcamps like New Beginnings Computer Training.^{xviii} WRGs last for two years and cover only the credits for the qualifying program, non-program related credits are not covered.^{xix} Qualifying certificate programs must be associated with high-growth, high wage careers, which are determined by the state’s Department of Workforce Development (DWD)’s “Indiana Flame Ranking.” This ranking, of 1-5 flames increasing based on the “hotness” of the job, is calculated based on a balance of short- and long-term Job Projection Data, following rules established by the US Department of Labor’s Employment & Training Administration, and is recalculated quarterly.^{xx} The criteria for WRG programs has expanded: before, only programs associated with 5-flame careers were eligible but as of mid-2023, programs associated with 4-flame careers are also eligible. Programs that are covered at Ivy Tech include advanced manufacturing, building and construction, health sciences, information technology and business services, and transportation and logistics. Within each of these overarching program areas, there are several more specific programs and certificates that are covered. For example, a participant interested in IT could get a certificate in Data Analytics, Informatics, Website Design, and many more IT-related subjects.^{xxi} Across the state, Ivy Tech campuses collaborate with regional workforce boards to establish and build up WRG programming, to help ensure that program curriculum aligns with local workforce needs.

3 At Ivy Tech, “credential” is a catch-all term that is comprised of degrees, certificates, certifications, or teaching licenses. The Next Level Jobs WRG program only provides tuition and fee coverage for some credentials, namely short-term certificates (“certificates”), long term certificates (“technical certificates”), and noncredit certifications associated with certain job codes, as determined by the state Department of Labor/Department of Workforce Development.

How Does the Workforce Ready Grant Program Compare to Other Sources of Tuition Assistance?

In this sample, there were a few notable student funding sources other than Next Level Jobs: Pell grants, the GI Bill, and the Trade Adjustment Act (TAA). The WRG, unlike these other programs, is Indiana-specific, and has program limitations; namely, only funding certificate programs associated with high-demand, well-paid careers as determined by the Indiana DWD. It is important to note that WRGs can cover both credit and noncredit programs, unlike the Pell Grant which typically only funds the former, apart from some specific exceptions. The Pell Grant and GI Bill, on the other hand, provide funding for eligible individuals in almost any program at an approved institution or organization. The alignment between program choice and preexisting interests may be less of a concern for students funded by sources with less specific program guidelines. WRGs cover tuition and mandatory fees, with textbook cost being rolled into the price of tuition. These other funding sources generally cover some or all tuition, most of them cover fees, but they vary greatly in the additional forms of financial assistance provided.^{xiii} In these ways, the type of assistance provided by non-WRG programs may be slightly more comprehensive in scope. Programs also differ in the amount of effort required to benefit from funding opportunities. The Pell Grant, for example, is automatically distributed to all eligible individuals who fill out the FAFSA, and the Ivy Tech admissions process will alert all WRG eligible students, whereas the TAA required a bit more footwork on the part of potential beneficiaries.

How Do Workforce Ready Grants Influence Student Decision Making?

Workforce Ready Grants help students make decisions about education and career programs by targeting outreach to unemployed individuals, helping potential students overcome financial barriers, and parlaying potential students' interest in technology into completion of IT pathways.

Workforce Ready Grants may be particularly effective at recruiting un(der)employed individuals and helping them decide to enroll in schooling. Unemployed and underemployed individuals benefited from the funding provided by WRGs. The WRG program partners with WorkOne, the Indiana branch of the American Job Center initiative, to reach out to unemployed and WRG eligible Hoosiers via email. Students with a pre-existing interest in IT were able to take advantage of the WRG program and pursue a credential they had been considering for a long time. Due to this unique method of outreach, via the unemployment office, participants were connected to the funding resources provided by the WRG program. About this outreach-to-enrollment process, one participant said, “I had been a bartender for a long period of time. And during the pandemic, I was unemployed, like many people, and the state of Indiana reached out through the unemployment program...that’s how I found out about it.” He was finally able to enroll in an informatics program, an option he had been considering for years, due to the door that was opened by the WRG. Another subject described a similar experience:

At the time, because of COVID, my job was going through going furloughs...finally they just laid off everybody. Then I got an email from the unemployment office that said that you could go to school for you for free and get a certificate. And I'd been planning to go back to school anyway. So it just kind of worked out.

Having these emails find people at the right time – as one subject described it, “I didn’t have a job and I wasn’t going to have a job for a little while,” another said “if I didn’t do it now, then I probably never would have all this free time” – was

key to having them enroll in, and later complete, IT programs. Higher unemployment rates and economic downturns are connected to raises in enrollment numbers at community colleges.^{xxiii} Potential students often have more free time when unemployed, when they otherwise may have to balance full time work and school, so having extensive outreach to unemployed potential students for state-funded workforce programs like the Workforce Ready Grants initiative.

Workforce Ready Grants encourage individuals who were unsure about enrolling in school to take that step by providing them with funding. One roadblock between interest and enrollment is that many students struggle with affording tuition. For example, in a survey of the Ivy Tech students, almost half (48%) expressed that trouble paying for tuition was a challenge that they faced. Next Level Jobs was a way that some students were able to relieve the financial pressures of attending college. This need is even more apparent for students going through tough financial spots, such as one participant from our sample who was laid off due to the pandemic. She received an email from the unemployment office about Next Level Jobs described the program’s impact on her decision making:

I'd been planning to go back to school anyway. So, it just kind of worked out. So, I decided to take it up. And then I wanted to go for computer science, or a job where I can learn coding, and so it all just kind of lined up perfectly for me.

Though she had been planning to return to school regardless, a WRG gave her the financial support that she needed during her unemployment to pursue a certificate. This was the boost she needed to make the decision to attend Ivy Tech. In this case, her plans aligned well with the funding opportunity and motivated her to enroll. Another student echoed these sentiments, expressing that they didn’t realize that Ivy Tech even had an informatics program, “but when I found out about the Next Level Jobs program and saw that they had it, that influenced my decision.” What attracted this student to the WRG was the programming that was offered, and this outreach informed him of an option about which he was previously uninformed. This information, combined with the funding provided by the grant, led to his enrollment.

The WRG program can provide for tuition cost for students in need of financial aid, including those that do not qualify for Pell grants but still need financial assistance. Paying for tuition is a major barrier for many students/potential students, even at relatively affordable schools like Ivy Tech. State grant funding has been connected to higher enrollment rates.^{xxiv} The funding provided by the WRG program may be the final nudge that potential students need to enroll in their desired certificate program.

Workforce Ready Grants for Information Technology programming may be particularly beneficial for students with a pre-existing interest in technology.

A common thread among most of the sample was the idea that they had always been “into computers.” Many subjects shared this idea with the research team, making statements such as “a technology career is something that I’ve always thought about doing,” as one subject phrased it. Another subject expressed a similar sentiment:

So then, you know, they said [WRG] would pay for the tuition. So I was like, why not? And I have always been interested in computers and technology. So I thought informatics would probably be right up my alley, especially because it kind of incorporated a little bit of stuff I already had experience with.

At the time of his interview with our research team, he had just earned a certificate in Informatics. Another subject, who had also just earned a certificate in Informatics expressed a similar idea: “I’ve always just kind of [had] a techie kind of interest...I have an analytical way of thinking, so it just falls in line with my interest.” He said that this “techie interest,” combined with the funding opportunity posed by a WRG, led to his enrollment in Ivy Tech. At the time of his interview with our team, he was planning to enter a selective industry training program at the recommendation of an Ivy Tech professor before re-enrolling at Ivy Tech to finish his Associate’s in Informatics.

There was a clear trend in the sample: the Workforce Ready grants were not necessarily inspiring the tech-averse to suddenly enroll in an IT program, but they were giving people with pre-established interest the chance to pursue their IT-related educational goals. Other research from this project suggests that students with a preexisting interest may be more likely to pursue further education and/or enter an IT career than those without this preexisting interest.^{xxv}

Key Takeaways

While it is difficult to make any broad conclusions about the impacts of WRGs, and state-funded workforce credentials more generally, this paper provides some initial insights into how these grants influence student decision making. Here, we highlight three key takeaways that this work suggests, which can hopefully guide further discussion and exploration of these popular, but under-researched, workforce training initiatives.

- 1. Partnering with state unemployment offices may be an effective strategy to reach people who might be interested in workforce training programs but are unaware of the funding opportunities for which they are eligible.** Based on the sample of students from Ivy Tech’s IT program, WRGs may have a particularly effective outreach method of connecting with unemployed individuals or displaced workers via the unemployment office. This outreach allowed students to take advantage of an educational opportunity, while they had the time to do so, and some compelling motivation.
- 2. Grant funding of short-term credentials may open a door to education for prospective students that are unsure about enrolling due to financial concerns.** In this group, some participants had wanted to pursue an educational program but had not enrolled until they found out about Next Level Jobs. When they discovered that Ivy Tech not only offered the program that they were interested in, but also would pay for their tuition and fees, they decided to enroll in an education program. As we know, community college students are particularly sensitive to financial matters when it comes to enrollment and persistence, so WRG-style funding may be a promising initiative to promote student success.
- 3. Participants with a pre-existing interest in the target sectors for grant funded workforce programs benefit from these funds more than their counterparts that lack this interest.** In this small sample, the WRGs seemed to attract individuals that had already had an interest in IT, the grants did not seem to attract those without such an interest. Other work from this study suggests that students with a pre-existing interest in IT, and particularly those with an IT-related hobby, may have better outcomes than those pursuing an IT education program for more pragmatic reasons.^{xxvi} With all this in mind, it may be easier to recruit those students with a prior interest in IT, and they may be better able to take advantage of this funding.

Suggestions for Future Research

More research needs to be done to determine the impact of the Next Level Jobs Workforce Ready Grant program. It is important to note that our sample of students is small, and the subset that participated in the WRG program even smaller, so doing a targeted study focused solely on WRG beneficiaries would be a way to get a more comprehensive sample. Also, the WRG program is relatively new, which means that to determine its impact on student decision making and WRG students' ultimate employment outcomes, longer term study is necessary.

Student Decision Making. It is well established that community college students often can be strongly influenced by institutional grant aid and financial considerations. This influence can manifest in many ways, like why community college students decide to enroll in a 2-year public institution, or why they choose full or part-time status after they have enrolled. In this brief, we have developed some preliminary ideas about what type of students are attracted to short-term workforce credential programs and how grants impact student decisions to enroll, persist, and complete them.

Student Outcomes. The impact of the WRG program on job placement is understudied; there is very little information about how many students secure jobs after the program, the quality of these jobs, and their relevance to the certificates earned. Another area of research interest is comparing the outcomes of WRG students at public providers, like community colleges, to those affiliated with not-for-profit, private providers, a group of students that makes up about 20% of the WRG population.^{xxvii} Do students that complete these programs have better employment outcomes than those that stop out? What students are finding jobs after the program, and what kind of jobs are they? Are these employment outcomes equitable?

Future Directions. To determine the effectiveness of the Next Level Jobs WRG program at its goals of a) improving the skills of the workforce in Indiana and b) helping Indiana residents secure high quality jobs, more work is required. Given that WRGs are part of a much larger national trend of state workforce funding, it is especially important to understand how these grants influence student decision-making along their pathway to employment, as well as their impact on student employment outcomes. Workforce Ready Grants are on the forefront of state-funded workforce training programs, and learning more about how students make decisions in these programs as well as the educational and employment outcomes of these programs could have nationwide implications, especially as short-term Pell legislation continues to loom in Congress.^{xxviii}

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xxi. To see full list of programs, visit Ivy Tech's Next Level Jobs Workforce Ready Grant website: <https://www.ivytech.edu/programs/special-programs-for-students/next-level-jobs/>

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EERC Areas of Focus

Community College Innovation	Student Choices and Pathways	STEM and Technician Education	Noncredit Education and Non-Degree Credentials	Education and Labor Market Connections
				

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With a focus on two-year Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs), the Advanced Technological Education (ATE) program supports the education of technicians for the high-technology fields that drive our nation's economy. The program involves partnerships between academic institutions (grades 7-12, IHEs), industry, and economic development agencies to promote improvement in the education of science and engineering technicians at the undergraduate and secondary institution school levels. The ATE program supports curriculum development; professional development of college faculty and secondary school teachers; career pathways; and other activities.

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