

# *Adult College Completion through the Workforce System*

*A Research Report on Lessons Learned  
From a Multistate Intervention Initiative*

**Education and Employment Research Center**

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Sara B. Haviland  
Renée D. Edwards  
Heather McKay  
Eric Kushins

Education and Employment Research Center  
School of Management and Labor Relations  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey  
Janice H. Levin Building  
94 Rockefeller Road  
Piscataway, NJ 08854

[smlr.rutgers.edu/eerc](http://smlr.rutgers.edu/eerc)

**RUTGERS**  
School of Management  
and Labor Relations

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## **ABOUT THE ADULT COLLEGE COMPLETION INITIATIVE**

The Adult College Completion Initiative was implemented with funding from the Lumina Foundation for Education. The Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation committed to increasing the proportion of Americans who have received a high-quality, college-level education. The foundation's goal is to increase the proportion of Americans with college degrees, certificates and credentials significantly by 2025.

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# **College Completion through the Workforce Development System: A Research Report on Lessons Learned from a Multistate Intervention Initiative**

## **Summary of Findings**

The following report highlights key research findings from a process evaluation of the Adult College Completion (ACC) Initiative, a four-year joint Rutgers University/National Association of Workforce Boards project, funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education. Working to institutionalize college completion as a routine training option for clients who held some prior college credit, the ACC Initiative was a demonstration program carried out in the workforce development systems of Indiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania. In the implementation of the project, the implementation team, staff in the states, and the evaluation team identified a number of important pre-existing challenges to ACC in the workforce development system. Understanding these challenges and finding ways to solve them was an essential component of the project. These challenges are also the focus of much of the research conducted on the project by Rutgers.

Taken as a whole, the Rutgers/NAWB ACC Initiative facilitated the return to college of 750 unique workforce system clients across the four partner states. The effort was largely successful due to a focus on changing the culture of workforce development in these areas, as well as the implementation of lessons learned in the initial states (MS and PA) to a second wave of states (IN and OK).

This report examines these culture changes and challenges and outlines some potential solutions and responses from the ACC implementation team. These lessons serve as a starting point for potential research questions and can inform future efforts to incorporate college as a training option in the workforce development system. Some of the most important challenges that emerged and are discussed in the report are listed below.

### *Attitudes toward ACC in the Workforce Development System*

- At the beginning of the ACC Initiative, perceptions of college varied among workforce professionals, with some workforce staff valuing college completion, others completely skeptical of it, and the majority falling somewhere in the middle. Local area variations in population and industry can affect how college is valued.

- Those who value ACC see it as beneficial for the client and as a logical use of WIA funds.
- Many value a two-year degree but were more skeptical of bachelor's degrees and beyond.
- Complete skeptics did not see the value of a degree over a certificate or short-term program and did not believe that college could be directly linked to job listings.
- Workforce centers often focus on investing in short-term skills-based credentials to get clients back to work quickly. While this can be a good strategy in some industries and for company openings, it does not always result in employment.

Promising practices to address these issues include trainings and information sessions to convey to workforce center staff and stakeholders the value of a college degree for both clients and the region as a whole. Additionally, it is helpful to convey that ACC is a new way of doing business, not just a short-term program.

#### *The Role of Intake and Case Management in ACC*

- Intake and case management processes are not uniform, and this can create challenges for one-size-fits-all approaches to implementing ACC.
- Frontline staff are required to let clients lead the conversation about training options and training choices—thus, client suggestions at times lead the conversation rather than strong career counseling and intrusive career advising.
- Clients may not be informed about their choices and may not volunteer information about prior college experiences because of shame or embarrassment for not completing, time out of college, or other reasons.
- Workforce center staff are not always well informed about higher education and may need further training to provide appropriate guidance to ACC-eligible clients.
- Clients under financial duress who may be qualified applicants for ACC often choose certificate programs instead of degree programs so that they can get back to work quickly.

Promising practices to address these issues include standardizing intake procedures and creating better strategies for frontline workers to convey the long-term importance of a degree, as well as training frontline workers in how to offer stronger educational guidance to allow clients to make an *informed choice*. Additionally, training frontline

staff in alternate sources of funding that can supplement or replace WIA training monies could help put ACC within reach for clients.

### *The Role of Institutions of Higher Education*

- Proximity to colleges can be a challenge in some local areas.
- Relationships between workforce development and higher education are often non-existent or limited to the financial aid and admissions offices.
- When relationships are built, they can be mutually beneficial, with the workforce center helping schools to improve retention and bring near-completers back into the fold, and workforce centers can help create a curriculum to make the connection between college degrees and jobs.

Promising practices to address these issues include creating shared physical spaces (e.g., workforce center office on or adjacent to community colleges), sharing staff, and working to maintain connections across multiple divisions within the college systems.

### *Policy and Funding Issues*

- The stability of funding for government-based programs was a challenge during the grant period that undermined some workforce center staff's confidence in the ability to make long-term commitments to training.
- ITA allocation is inconsistent; in some areas, it is sufficient to facilitate ACC, but in others, it is quite restricted, or funding caps are too low to cover tuition.
- In some areas, local policies about ITA spending can be a challenge, such as required completion of the first semester of schooling and demonstration of the ability to finish their degree before funding is dispersed to clients.
- Funding conditions may deter some potential completers (e.g., returning tuition payments if a class is failed).
- Training options are set by the Eligible Training Provider Lists (ETPLs), which are set by local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBS) and may favor short-term programs offering job-specific, low skill credentials.
- Training must lead to a job on a High Demand Occupation (HDO) list, which are typically set by states and can limit creativity among frontline staff at workforce centers.

Potential solutions include an examination of policies at the state and local level to identify items that can hinder college completion and working to adapt these policies. Common policies of concern include ITA caps, the ETPL and HDO lists, not only in

their formal structure but also in how they are understood and operationalized in the workforce centers.

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## INTRODUCTION

Efforts to improve access to college have the potential to produce a myriad of benefits for individuals, the regions they live in, and the employers they ultimately work for. This report examines one such effort: the Adult College Completion (ACC) Initiative, a joint Rutgers University/National Association of Workforce Boards (NAWB) project, funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education. Working to institutionalize college completion as a routine training option for clients who held some prior college credit, the ACC Initiative was a demonstration program carried out in the workforce development systems of Indiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania. The implementation team worked with members of state and local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) and the personnel at workforce centers to increase awareness of college completion as an option for training and to identify policies and practices that needed adjustment to facilitate ACC for eligible clients.

This report presents the research findings of the program evaluation team. Though the ACC Initiative encountered many hurdles with regard to funding stability and policy barriers within the LWIAs, the Initiative facilitated the connection of 750 unique workforce center clients to college programs, in part due to implementation adjustments as lessons were learned and applied between states. In particular, the program was able to apply lessons learned in two legacy states (Mississippi and Pennsylvania) to implementation in Indiana and Oklahoma, and this yielded stronger outcomes in those states.

We will discuss those challenges and adjustments, presenting data on program outcomes as well as key facilitators and barriers for program success; we will also outline next steps for future research. Issues that the implementation team encountered are organized into four main areas: attitudes toward ACC in the workforce development system, the role of intake and case management in ACC, the role of institutions of higher education, and policy and funding issues. We note potential solutions and best practices where appropriate, including expanded training for workforce development staff and close examination of local WIA policies to find common hindrances to ACC. Our key finding is that cultural shifts in the institution of workforce development, coupled with minor changes in processes and policies allow the workforce development system to offer greater support for eligible clients to complete a college degree. These findings have implications for others interested in facilitating college completion through the workforce development system; we

conclude with a discussion of these implications and present questions for future research.

## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

The nation's One-Stop workforce centers or American Job Centers are designed as centralized locations where job seekers can access a variety of government employment services. They were first introduced to consolidate services in the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 and have recently been reauthorized as part of the newly signed Workforce Opportunities and Innovation Act (WIOA) of 2014. Given their emphasis on skills training for job seekers who qualify for Individual Training Accounts (ITAs) under WIA, workforce centers also factor into many sector strategy plans designed to make a region more attractive to certain high-growth industries by offering coordinated efforts to appeal to these industries.

In these strategies, workforce centers can help to develop the workforce in an area to meet the needs of an industrial sector that the region is trying to attract or keep, and in fact, many of the guiding policies for workforce centers are set by local workforce investment boards (WIBs), whose membership is comprised of local business, education, and community leaders. Policies set by WIBs dictate which training paths are eligible to clients (through the Eligible Training Provider List) and identify which occupations these paths must target (through High Demand Occupation lists). In this function, workforce centers are important players in the movement to upskill the workforce to meet employer demands; they are a tool in the arsenal of the local area that helps to ensure that the local labor market can offer a sufficient supply of workers to meet employer needs.

The influence of business is constructive in this process: when training paths are aligned with specific current or near-term job opportunities, it ensures that trainee time and resources will ultimately pay off with a good job that offers sustainable pay. However, the involvement of business also means that the training paths offered sometimes favor short-term training options specifically geared toward a narrow margin of job descriptions, creating skill sets that are employer-dependent. This is good for businesses and ensures that the workforce center will meet its mandate to locate clients in jobs that pay a certain rate within a certain timeframe upon training completion. In the short term, it is often good for clients as well, as they receive adequate assistance to land a paycheck again quickly. However, for some clients, with some minor

adjustments to these paths, an even better outcome is possible, one that is also useful to a broader set of employers.

### **Training Paths, Skill Shortages, and the College Alternative**

Training options are part of an ongoing dialog about skills in the U.S. and the ability of the U.S. workforce to meet employers' needs. Yet there is a growing pushback against the notion that a skills gap crisis is upon us. In short, the market is not performing in a way that would confirm a skills mismatch: with increasing hours and/or wages for jobs dependent upon skills that are in demand by employers but a short supply of workers who meet the necessary requirements to perform these jobs (Krugman 2014, Mishel and Rothstein 2014, Salzman 2013, Shierholz 2014). The reports of skills shortages tend to be based on employer surveys, with little external evidence to support this claim (Cappelli 2014). In part, this is due to a shifting notion of how involved employers should be in employee training and career development. Historically, employers selected employees with general skills and aptitudes and developed in these employees the specific skills needed for jobs in the company over the course of the employees' careers. Another traditional model involved employers searching the job market for employees with particular skills and raising or lowering salaries to attract the right kind of applicants. However, employers are shifting away from these more traditional models to one rooted in the concept of immediacy. Cappelli notes that arguments that there is a skills shortage are rooted in the idea of a market where applicants either possess the skills they need to do a job upon hire or "cannot do the job," and the role of public education "is seen as providing graduates that employers would like to hire" (Cappelli 2014: 5-6). When skills training is so tightly aligned to specific employers, it can also leave individuals at risk for spatial mismatch (Kalleberg 2007), with skills that are less broadly applicable to other work should specific companies fold or choose to relocate these jobs.

Rather than responding to very specific needs from one employer or another, college education has the potential to realize employers' needs for upskilling while also giving workforce center clients a credential that is more broadly useful, beneficial, and more easily stackable than the short-term training options that workforce centers typically favor. It is a powerful alternative to short-term programs and provides a powerful benefit for those who complete it. Compared to the average high school graduate, the average college graduate earns more money, is less vulnerable to job loss during recession, and even enjoys better health (Buckles et al. 2013; Hout 2012; Oreopoulos and Petronijevic 2013; Porter 2014). Discussing recent studies on the return on a college

degree, *New York Times* economic columnist David Leonhardt put it succinctly: “[From] almost any individual’s perspective, college is a no-brainer. It’s the most reliable ticket to the middle class and beyond.”

Individuals with college degrees, on average, experience greater earnings and economic security. Though specific projections vary, researchers agree that the difference in benefits from those holding degrees and those who do not is stark. Using data from the Census Bureau, Carnevale et al. (2011) demonstrates a lifetime earnings gap between education levels that is quite striking. Those who held high school diplomas could expect to earn, on average, \$1.304 million, while their counterparts with some college earned \$1.547 million, associate’s degree holders earned \$1.727 million, and bachelor’s degree holders earned \$2.268 million. Each step along the continuum of degrees represents a clear advantage for individuals’ economic prospects.

This effect is increasingly felt by younger generations. According to a recent report by the Pew Research Center (2014), median earnings for full-time workers age 25-32 with high school diplomas were \$2,000 dollars lower than those of individuals with some college credit or a two-year degree and \$17,500 less than those of individuals who had a bachelor’s degree or more. This gap is larger than it has been for previous generations at the same age and demonstrates the increasing importance of higher education for individual livelihoods. The Pew report also demonstrates the protective effect of higher education, as the unemployment rate for the same age group is currently 12.2 percent for high school graduates, 8.1 percent for individuals with two-year degrees or some college, and only 3.8 percent for those holding bachelor’s degrees or more (the poverty rate for the groups is 21.8 percent, 14.7 percent, and 5.8 percent, respectively). Simply put, college degrees increase earnings and mitigate economic risk for the individuals who hold them.

Demand drives this protective effect, and the increasing importance of higher education for workers is linked to its increasing importance for employers. During the Great Recession of 2007-2010, the U.S. economy lost 5.6 million jobs requiring high school degrees or less, while adding 187,000 jobs requiring a bachelor’s degree or higher (Matthews 2013). Currently, 59 percent of jobs require postsecondary education or training, a number that will exceed 65 percent by 2020 (Carnevale and Smith 2012). The National Governors Association (NGA) predicts that employer demand for postsecondary-educated workers between 2013 and 2030 could top 24 million; based on current educational trends, there would be a shortfall of roughly three million workers to fill these jobs. If educational attainment were adjusted to meet projected demand, however, the NGA asserts that this could lead to an increase in incomes by \$540 billion over the next 17 years (NGA 2014: 4). Increasing the supply of college-educated workers

is not only good for the workers themselves; it is good for business and the overall economy as well.

## **Potential Completers**

The population of adults that have completed “some college” without a degree is broadly varied in terms of distance to degree, with many having one semester of college (Shapiro et al., 2014). From a workforce development perspective, students who, Shapiro et al. (2014) terms “potential completers” —those with at least two full academic years’ worth of college instruction—represent a population that could quite efficiently be converted into degree holders (a college student is considered full time for student aid purposes if s/he is enrolled in at least 12 credit hours per semester, and a typical pace for a traditional four-year BA program is 15+ credits per semester). Though there is variation in how many credits programs require for completion, associate’s degrees are typically 60 or more credits, and bachelor’s degrees are typically 120 or more (Johnson, Reidy, Droll, and LeMon, 2012). The ACC Initiative specifically focused on individuals who passed through the workforce development system and were within close range—less than 30 credits—of completing a college degree due to earlier efforts that may have been abandoned or made difficult by life circumstances. In essence, the program was aimed at students who could, with full-time study, complete a degree in a year or less.

## **The ACC Initiative**

New tactics in training and education, such as adult college completion, i.e., the completion of an associate- or bachelor-level degree, are required to position workers not only to survive but to thrive in the modern economy. The ACC Initiative was funded by The Lumina Foundation, a leader in expanding access to post-secondary education. Lumina has created the ambitious Goal 2025 program, which aims to increase the population of Americans with high-quality post-secondary degrees or credentials to 60 percent by the year 2025. Clearly, a major component of reaching this goal is making improvements to the pathways for traditional students moving into college upon graduation from K-12 education. However, this is not enough; to reach 60 percent, we must engage the nearly half of adults aged 25-64 who have high school diplomas but not college degrees—one in five of whom have actually completed some college but not a degree (Matthews 2013).

To that end, the ACC Initiative focused on helping adult clients of workforce centers who had previously disengaged from college education but were potential completers (defined for these purposes as individuals within 30 credit hours or fewer of degree completion). The Initiative emphasizes the benefit of acquiring a portable, stackable degree—a degree that allows adult learners to re-enter the job market quickly and which, if effectively managed, can create pathways for future education and credentialing (Austin et al. 2012).

The ACC Initiative was rolled out in four total states, which occurred in two waves: first in Pennsylvania and Mississippi (the legacy states) and then in Indiana and Oklahoma. Intervention began in Mississippi and Pennsylvania in 2010. Oklahoma’s first intervention occurred in 2011. Indiana’s intervention was the last to occur (2013). The lessons learned in Pennsylvania and Mississippi informed the design of the ACC Initiative in Indiana and Oklahoma, increasing the implementation team’s focus on common specific policy challenges regarding WIA Individual Training Accounts (ITAs), High Demand Occupation (HDO) and Eligible Training Provider (ETPL) lists, issues with client intake and flow at the workforce centers, and training for workforce center staff to raise awareness and knowledge of ACC options. Five workforce areas in Pennsylvania, three in Mississippi, eleven in Indiana, and two in Oklahoma participated in the ACC Initiative, for a total of 21 participating workforce areas.

## **METHODS**

The evaluation of the ACC Initiative was conducted by the Education and Employment Research Center (EERC) team at Rutgers University<sup>1</sup> throughout the program grant period (2010-2014). The ACC Initiative was a multifaceted effort to introduce ambitious change to a complex system with stakeholders at multiple levels of government, institutions of post-secondary education, and employers within the community. To capture the complexity of this task, the team followed a process evaluation approach. This method differs from more outcomes-oriented evaluation approaches in that it primarily seeks to understand how the various procedures and practices of implementation and the context of the program affect outcomes. The process was participatory, with the evaluation team joining regular meetings with implementation staff to both observe program operation and offer feedback to implementers when

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<sup>1</sup> The EERC group was previously located in the Center for Women and Work at the Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations (SMLR) and spun out into an independent research center still housed within SMLR in 2013.

appropriate. This report first offers an overview of the program outcomes and then presents findings from the process evaluation to identify facilitators and barriers to college completion through the workforce development system. We discuss the methods for each in turn.

## **Assessing Program Outcomes**

To assess ACC Initiative outcomes, the team worked with participating state data tracking systems. Data entry and tracking is an important element of the ACC Initiative and has proven to be one of the most challenging. Many workforce data systems do not separate past technical/vocational education from past college education. The research teams provided consultation and assistance to states as they worked to adapt their tracking systems to provide more timely and useful information about college education and wage data. Changes to workforce area data systems were made on a state-by-state basis due to the variance in state systems.<sup>2</sup> For further information about changes made as part of the ACC Initiative, please see the *Adult College Completion Through the Workforce System: Final Outcomes and Data Report*.<sup>3</sup>

Outcome data were collected for the period between fall 2011 and summer 2014. Each area self-reported data at various times during this period. Mississippi and Pennsylvania both reported data multiple times, allowing for updates, since they were the first states to implement the Initiative. Because Indiana went through the implementation process later than the other three states, data collection for the state occurred between August 2013 and August 2014—the shortest period of time reported for any of the four states.

Data were categorized into two broad categories: associate’s degrees and bachelor’s degrees. Clients enrolled in an associate of science, associate of applied science, or associate of arts degree program were counted as “associate’s degree” enrollees, and clients enrolled in a bachelor of science or Bachelor of Arts degree program were counted as “bachelor’s degree” enrollees. There was one client enrolled in a master’s or

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<sup>2</sup> Having more than one tracking system is not unusual among workforce centers nationally. For each workforce center, the state data systems are the first reporting systems to the USDOL, and any other information collected is at the discretion of the workforce center. Some modify the state system to include additional fields or use the “notes” section, while others choose to add a second system for case management.

<sup>3</sup> Edwards, Renée, and Heather McKay, *Adult College Completion Through the Workforce System: Final Outcomes and Data Report*, New Brunswick: Rutgers Education and Employment Research Center, September 2014.

higher degree program in the reported data (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma reported one enrollee pursuing a master's degree in education).

### **Assessing the ACC Process**

The ACC Initiative's implementation methods evolved over the four years of the project; in that time, opportunities for data collection evolved as well. The result is a convergence of many sources of data, both qualitative and quantitative, to provide a full picture of the process of ACC implementation.

From the outset of the Initiative, the evaluation team observed weekly implementation team meetings; meetings and interviews between implementers and stakeholders; and training sessions, webinars, and conference sessions hosted by members of the implementation team. In addition to regular observation of the implementation team, the team performed materials review of policy documents, publications, and materials provided in the workforce centers. Key informant interviews were carried out with individual clients in the workforce system, which guided later data collection.

To further understand the workforce center context and daily operations that might affect ACC, the team conducted 45 in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with frontline staff, case managers, and leadership in the four program states at the beginning of their intervention processes (N=9 in Indiana, 8 in Mississippi, 11 in Oklahoma, and 17 in Pennsylvania). These interviews, lasting approximately one hour each, covered a range of topics, including the intake process at their workforce centers, experiences with clients, their opinions on college and knowledge of the education system, and the local markets and nature of employer demand in their local areas. Interview transcripts and notes were coded for major project themes using the qualitative data software NVIVO 10.

Training sessions for workforce center staff became more uniform and universally deployed as the Initiative developed between the legacy states and the second round, and they were a major component of the implementation process in Oklahoma and Indiana. This presented an opportunity for further data collection to assess ACC-related knowledge and experience among workforce professionals early in their ACC Initiative process. The evaluation team observed these training sessions and conducted surveys with frontline staff in attendance. The Oklahoma (N=24) and Indiana (N=44) frontline staff trainee survey was intended to provide a brief analysis of three areas from the perspective of workforce development staff: 1) staff feeling regarding client choice, 2) staff knowledge of college education, and 3) staff opinion regarding the strength of their

center in assessing clients' past education. Though these results are descriptive, taken together with the interview data, they offer a snapshot of the attitudes, experiences, and knowledge of workforce center staff before they have more extensive exposure to the ACC Initiative. These data can be instructive to others seeking to accomplish ACC in the workforce development system; when working to get ACC to take root, these are the conditions that must be responded to and adjusted for.

The first series of survey questions targeted staff feelings regarding the federal mandate to promote client choice throughout the workforce development process. Specifically, do staff feel that clients arrive at the workforce center with strong ideas about what they want from their case management appointments and strong ideas about their potential training path(s)? Additionally, do these preferences actually take priority in the daily workings of the workforce center?

The second focus of the survey was intended to inquire about staff knowledge regarding college education and how education fits with career ladders. Primarily, staff were asked to explain the difference between a degree, a credential, and a diploma, as well as the difference between stackable and terminal credits. Through interviews, it had become clear that, in many cases, frontline staff and case managers seemed to be unaware of the difference between education/training that could be applied to future education and career paths (stackable) and other types of training with limited future flexibility (terminal). This line of questioning through the survey was intended to address inferences previously expressed in interviews.

The third focus of the survey was to ask workforce staff how strong they felt that their workforce center process is for addressing whether or not a client has had some college education in the past, as well as to give any suggestions or ideas of how this process could be improved.

## **RESULTS**

We begin with an overall assessment of program outcomes, using the state quantitative tracking data to describe how many clients in participating areas enrolled in or completed college degrees during the Initiative. To put these results in context, we next assess the ACC process using interview and observational data to identify challenges relating to ACC buy-in and values in the workforce system and its surrounding organizations (the organizational field), the role of intake and case management in ACC, and policy and funding issues related to ACC. In response to each of these categories of challenges, we include "Promising Practices and Potential Solutions"

sections, identifying ways in which the ACC implementation team addressed these issues and other promising practices we noted in the field.

### **Program Outcomes<sup>4</sup>**

A total of 750 clients had enrolled in or completed their degree programs in the participating Oklahoma, Indiana, Mississippi, and Pennsylvania workforce areas at the time the data were reported in summer 2014. This includes clients who had completed their degree programs and those who were enrolled at the time the data were collected, including those who withdrew prior to graduation. Data were reported for Indiana in summer 2014, for Oklahoma in spring 2014, for Pennsylvania in spring 2014, and for Mississippi in summer 2014, with the exception of one reporting area in Mississippi, which reported in spring 2013 and did not provide an update. Data outcomes and updates for all four states were analyzed in summer 2014.

Data were collected for the period between fall 2011 and summer 2014. Each area self-reported data at various times during this period. Mississippi and Pennsylvania both reported data multiple times, allowing for updates, since they were the first states to implement the initiative. Because Indiana went through the implementation process later than the other three states, data collection for the state occurred between August 2013 and August 2014—the shortest period of time reported for any of the four states.

Indiana's eleven reporting areas had 294 clients (39 percent of the total enrollees reported) enrolled in or finished with their degree programs at the time the data were reported (summer 2014); 257 of these were associate's degrees and 37 were bachelor's degrees. Sixteen degrees (14 associate's and 2 Bachelor's) were reported in Indiana with no regional information attached to them. Without the regional information, it is impossible to ascertain whether these enrollees are from one of the ACC Initiative areas; however, given that 11 out of the 12 areas in Indiana are represented in the ACC Initiative, it is highly likely. These 16 enrollees were not counted as part of the Initiative tallies.

Oklahoma's two reporting areas had 224 clients (30 percent of the total enrollees reported) enrolled in or finished with their degree programs at the time the data were

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<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of the quantitative outcomes of the program, please see Edwards, Renée, and Heather McKay, *Adult College Completion Through the Workforce System: Final Outcomes and Data Report*, New Brunswick: Rutgers Education and Employment Research Center, September 2014.

reported (spring 2014); 118 of these were associate’s degrees and 106 were bachelor’s degrees.

Pennsylvania’s six reporting areas had 134 clients (18 percent of the total enrollees reported) enrolled in or finished with their degree programs at the time the data were reported (data were updated for all areas summer 2014 with the exception of H-1B participants, last updated spring 2014]; 55 of these were associate’s degrees and 2 were bachelor’s degree. The remaining 77 enrollees were not reported with degree type.

Mississippi’s three reporting workforce areas had 98 clients (13 percent of the total enrollees reported) either currently enrolled in or finished with their degree programs at the time the data were reported (data were updated for Mississippi Delta and Mississippi Partnership for summer 2014, Mississippi Twin Districts did not report data after the summer of 2013); 68 of these were associate’s degrees and 10 were bachelor’s degrees. Twenty enrollees were reported without degree type.

Table 1. Enrollees by Local Workforce Investment Area and Degree Type

State	Area <sup>5</sup>	Associate Degrees	Bachelor’s Degrees	Not Indicated	Total
MS	Twin Districts	38	0	0	38
MS	Delta	10	9	18	37
MS	Partnership	20	1	2	23
PA	Central – H-1B <sup>6</sup>	6	0	0	6
PA	North Central	0	0	34	34
PA	Southern Alleghenies	0	0	43	43
PA	Westmoreland	21	1	0	22
PA	Mercer	20	0	0	20
PA	Southwest Corner	8	1	0	9
OK	Tulsa	45	27	0	72
OK	Oklahoma City	73	79	0	152

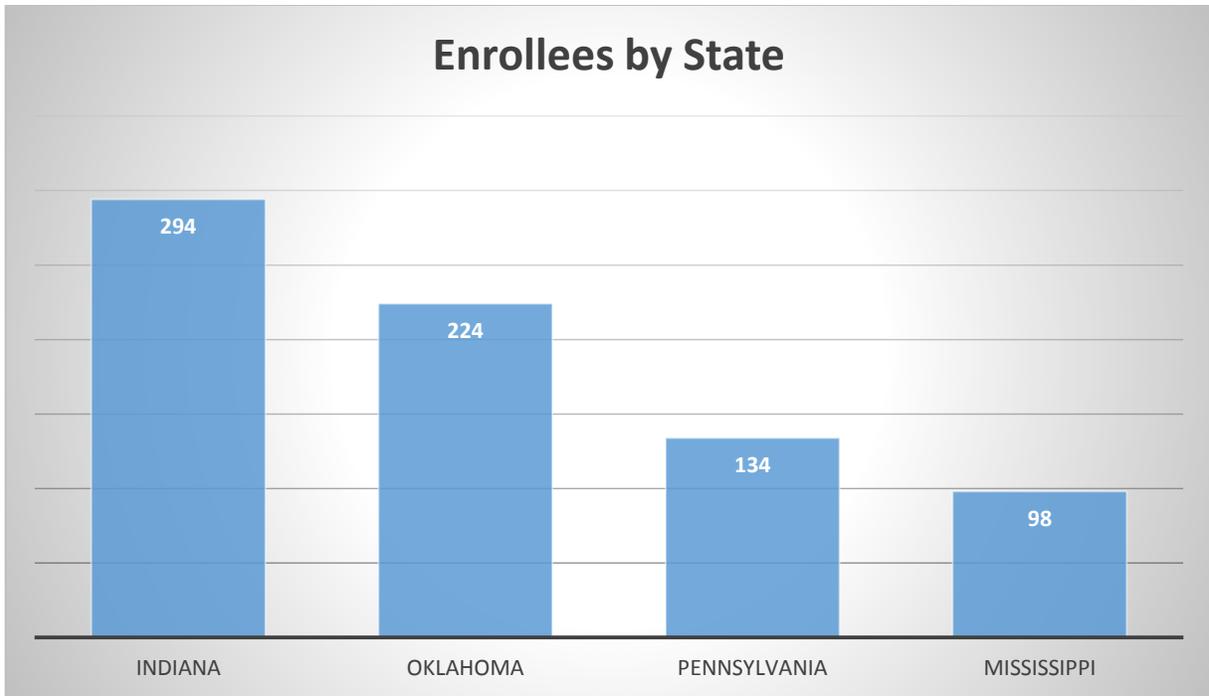
<sup>5</sup> Some data were reported by LWIA, and some were reported by county. Given the numerous counties included in this analysis and the lack of consistency across offices, data are reported here by the “area” in which the local offices self-reported. For Pennsylvania, reporting was done by Workforce Investment Board (WIB), for a total of five WIBs plus the H-1B data.

<sup>6</sup> For federal H-1B programs, USDOL has a relatively rudimentary Management Information System (MIS) collection process. Each agency (most of the H1B grantees are not LWIBs) has an Excel spreadsheet in which they manually input data and forward the file 45 days after each quarter to the USDOL in Washington. In this case, each local area having a H1-B program will develop its own sub-MIS program; usually, they track manual reports, and then, on the 44<sup>th</sup> day after the quarter, they scramble to get the data in.

IN	Region 1	6	1	0	7
IN	Region 2	19	1	0	20
IN	Region 3	28	1	0	29
IN	Region 4	9	1	0	10
IN	Region 5	24	8	0	32
IN	Region 6	64	6	0	70
IN	Region 7	10	1	0	11
IN	Region 8	22	10	0	32
IN	Region 10	7	0	0	7
IN	Region 11	16	2	0	18
IN	Region 12	52	6	0	58
TOTALS		498	155	97	750

Of the individual reporting areas, the Oklahoma City (OK) area had the highest number of enrollees (N=152), followed by Tulsa (OK, N=72). Region 6 in Indiana came in a close third (N=70). Oklahoma City (OK) had the highest number of bachelor’s degree enrollees at 79, followed by Tulsa (OK) at 27 and Region 8 (IN) with 10. Considered in aggregate by state, Oklahoma reported 106 bachelor’s degree enrollees, Indiana reported 37, Mississippi 10, and Pennsylvania 2. Across the workforce centers, 24 percent [N=155 of the total enrollees with reported degree type (N=653) pursued bachelor’s degrees compared to the 76 percent (N=498) that pursued associate’s degrees]. This is likely an indication of the workforce system’s tendency to encourage (and fund) clients pursuing “short-term training” options rather than longer-term training such as bachelor’s degrees, which can take years to finish, even for clients with some prior education.

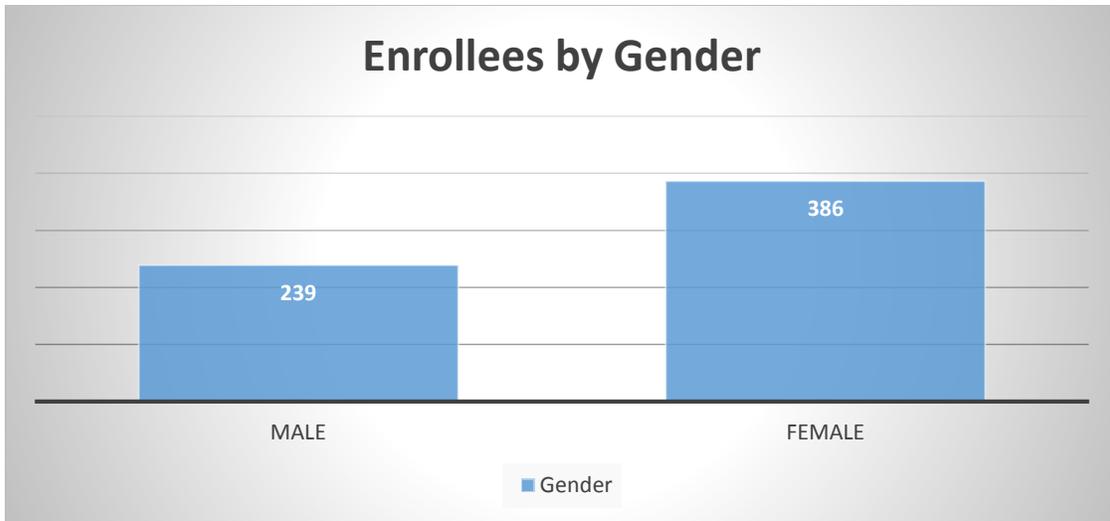
It is likely that Indiana’s and Oklahoma’s higher numbers of bachelor’s degrees have been influenced by the states’ respective efforts to combine their two systems of workforce development and higher education; it also reflects their efforts to encourage clients to receive four-year degrees. Oklahoma’s Reach Higher education initiative and Oklahoma City’s Project Finish Line program encourage clients to finish their education and encourage bachelor’s degrees more than other workforce centers historically have.



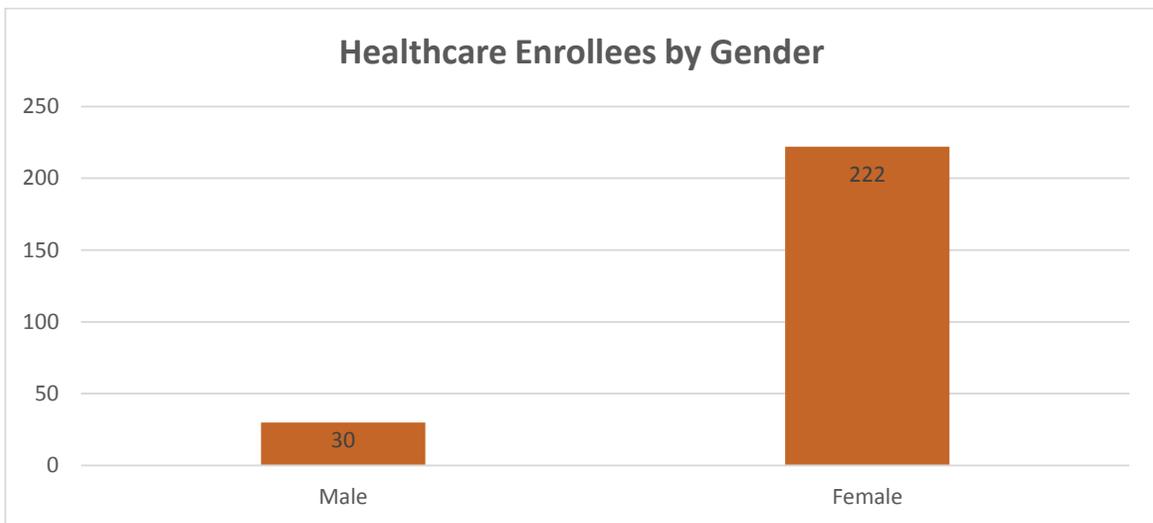
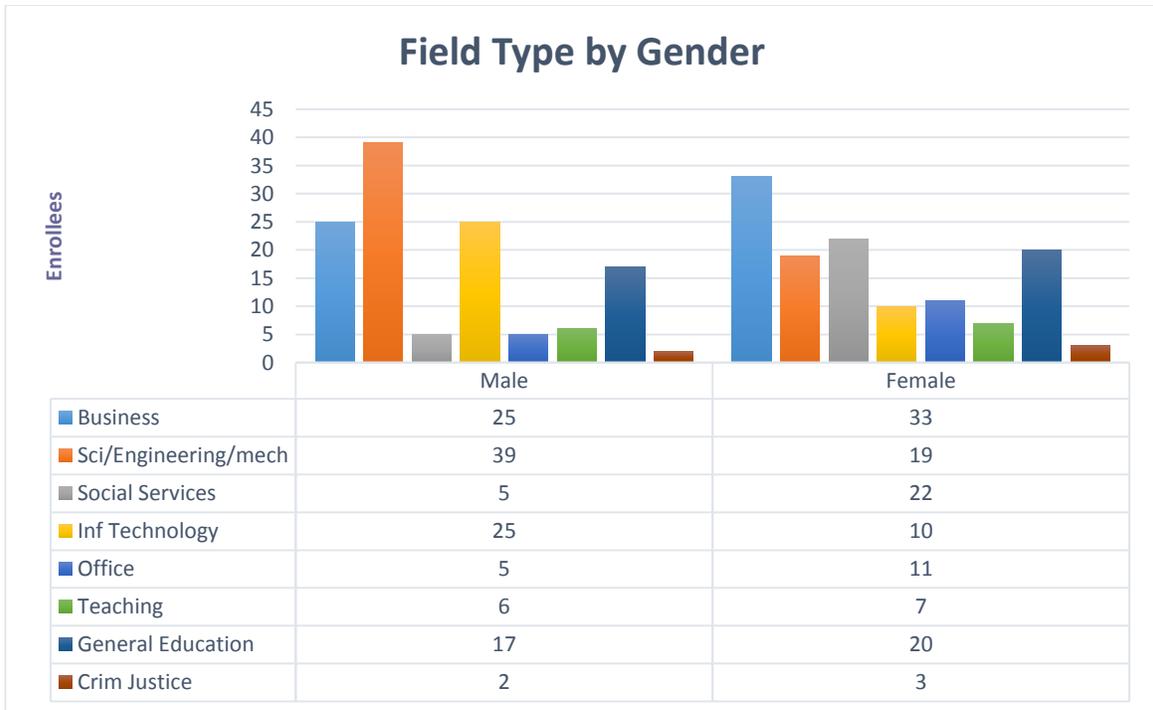
When looking at the gender dynamics of the reported enrollees (N=625),<sup>7</sup> it is evident that more women (62 percent, N=386) were enrolled under the Initiative than men (38 percent, N=239). A closer look at the type of major by gender suggests that this may be due in part to the number of clients who entered certain degree fields and the subsequent gender dynamics of those fields. Gender dynamics are probably at work in the fields of healthcare, social services, and office administration, commonly referred to as “traditional” jobs for female workers. In addition, nationally, female students outnumber male students in most colleges and universities; this may well play a role in the gender dynamics of workforce clients re-entering degree programs as well.

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<sup>7</sup> Mississippi Partnership and Oklahoma Tulsa did not report gender information, and across all other workforce centers, some case managers did not report their clients’ gender. 625 of the 750 reported clients had gender information included.



Gender dynamics are also evident in the degree types of enrollees. Of the enrollees with reported degree type and gender (N=501 with both fields complete), 50 percent (N=252) of clients were reported having gone into healthcare fields, and 88 percent (N=222) of these were women. Of the clients (7 percent, N=35) who went into computer technology fields, the majority were men (71 percent, N=25). Somewhat surprisingly, this gender dynamic did not hold for enrollees in business-related fields; of the 58 enrollees in these fields (12 percent of the total enrollees), 25 (43 percent) were men and 33 (57 percent) were women.



Workforce offices utilizing WIA funds must match degree types with their area’s Demand Occupation list.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, case managers tend to either funnel clients into degree programs that will match their areas’ demand list or choose clients as

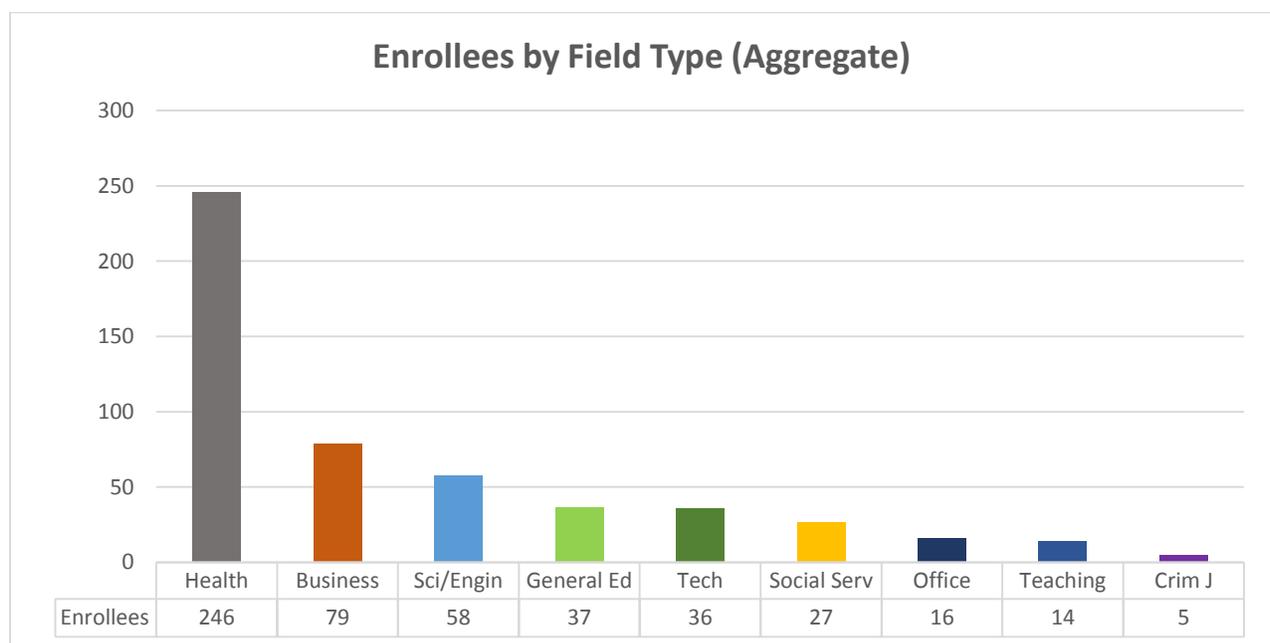
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<sup>8</sup> This is a requirement of WIA; local interpretation varies with each labor market, the growth potential of each labor market, and the discretion of the LWIB; all are accountable to the same standards of placement, entered employment, retention, and follow-up. For more information on how the Demand Occupation List works and how it affects training opportunities, see <http://smlr.rutgers.edu/eerc/adult-college-completion>.

candidates for the Initiative if their prior degree type or current degree interest matches the area’s demand list.

Sixteen of the 21 areas reported degree majors/job field types for their clients. This allows for field type analysis of a total of 518 clients across all four states. Field types were grouped into nine categories: business, science/engineering, or mechanical type-degrees (this category also included those listed simply as “associate of science degree” or “bachelor of science degree”), social services, information technology or computer-type degrees, office administration degrees (including paralegal), teaching and education degrees, general education/liberal arts degrees (this category also included any degree with no detail field, such as those listed simply as “associate of arts degree” or “bachelor of arts degree”), criminal justice degrees, and healthcare degrees.

Concerning field type, the highest number of enrollees are in healthcare (N=246), business (N=79), and science/engineering and mechanical skills (N=58) degree fields. This ranking is not surprising since these employment opportunities are prevalent in nearly all participating workforce areas. It should also be noted that, in many cases, fields were not detailed enough to distinguish between them; for example, a B.S. in biology (clearly a science degree) or an A.A.S. degree that very may well be an associate of applied science in accounting degree (and therefore actually a business field degree) are really quite different field types, but because of the way they were reported, they are indistinguishable in the data. Therefore, the science/engineering and mechanical skills degree field may be over-reported in the data.



Employment and wage data were not available from the majority of workforce areas at this time; not enough information was reported across workforce centers for analysis. The lack of wage data resulted in part from political changes in our partner states. In the newer ACC partner states, the delays in wage data meant that analysis would not be worthwhile at this stage.

## **Process Findings**

The following results are drawn from interviews with frontline staff and leadership at workforce centers, surveys of workforce center staff trainees from Oklahoma and Indiana, interviews and meeting notes with stakeholders and program implementation staff, and reviews of materials related to policy and process in the workforce system at the local, state, and federal levels.

It is important to emphasize that the frontline interviews described below occurred, for the most part, at the very beginning of the ACC Initiative intervention in any given area. These frontline interviews offer a snapshot of the workforce development system that the implementation team first encountered. What follows is an outline of issues that the implementation team found when they took the ACC Initiative into the field. When it comes to replication and efforts to bring this to scale, these are the issues that future implementers will likely face. Each section ends with a section titled “Promising Practices and Potential Solutions,” which includes a discussion of how the implementation team handled these challenges and some positive practices that surfaced during implementation. We also discuss some items that would require adjustments beyond the scale of the ACC Initiative.

We begin with a discussion of attitudes toward ACC throughout the workforce development system and then describe key issues that the implementation team encountered regarding client counseling, the role of higher education, and policy and funding issues.

### Attitudes toward ACC in the Workforce Development System

Though many frontline staff, directors, and board members within the workforce system described ACC as beneficial and appropriate to the mission of workforce development, there were also ACC skeptics; some fully bought in to the importance of higher education, others could see the value of a two-year degree but not necessarily much more, and some were skeptical of the whole enterprise. When skeptical or uninterested, the workforce center staff can be a major hurdle for efforts to increase

college education through the workforce system, in part because they are often unfamiliar with the higher education system and do not have useful contacts within it, or they are skeptical of the value of college degrees. As the gatekeepers who perform intake procedures and guide clients toward one path or another, they have great influence over the clients; their opinions of ACC matter. Also importantly, workforce center directors and LWIBs influence the approaches to training through their policies and guidance on procedures; their opinions of ACC are also quite influential.

Many of the interview participants throughout all four states noted the importance of encouraging clients to complete college training. However, their true sentiments were often equivocal. The most positive respondents generally said that a degree (rather than a certificate program) was a valuable credential for well-paid employment. For example, one Mississippi staff worker noted that getting a credential is great, but a degree is needed if a client wants to move up in a profession. Respondents with the most favorable views believed that higher education of any sort could help dislocated workers, and they were clear that higher levels of education lead to greater client marketability.

Though many viewed degrees and college education positively as a general concept, the details of what that entailed varied, as interviewees had different opinions regarding the level of degree that was necessary to improve one's prospects. This can reflect regional prospects for college education. Frontline workers from all four states, as well as many key stakeholders, believed that there were few potential completers entering the workforce centers to begin with. There is great regional variation here, as demonstrated by differences in ACC Initiative outcomes (discussed above in the Program Outcomes section) in more urban versus rural areas. In some areas with low average education levels among the population, adults with "some college" experience may be rare, and efforts to achieve increases in the population of college degree holders may have to expand to help more than the population of adults within 30 credits of completion. Additionally, the limited number of individuals with some college experience in some areas makes the initial task of identifying potential college completers a time-consuming endeavor that case managers may skip.

A frontline staff worker in Indiana suggested that perhaps the goal of graduating more individuals with bachelor's degrees was not necessary given the job prospects available. "... [T]here are some areas where there are too many bachelor's degrees, and they really need more associate's degrees; that's really going to come from the bottom up—what you need for your local areas... And I think it's a good goal, but it really requires that

integration to really know what your local area needs.” Another frontline staff worker noted that, in her area, a two-year technical degree is more valuable than a certificate. Another worker emphasized that there’s “a myth” that, if someone is a tech student, it is because he or she does not have the intelligence to go to “a real college.” In the area where her workforce center is located, an associate of applied sciences degree (AAS—a technical-skills associate’s degree) “will get you a good job.” Furthermore, this staff worker believed that technical students require just as much problem-solving skill as someone who is completing a four-year college degree.

A frontline worker from Mississippi suggested that an associate of arts degree (AA) “is a good general education degree” that demonstrates that the person is a “completer” (the suggestion being that this is someone who will complete job tasks and responsibilities). It also demonstrates that the individual has basic education and is able to locate information and remember it (multiple respondents cited the demonstration of capacity and willingness to learn as a key benefit of college degrees). Such an individual is probably trainable and demonstrates someone who is disciplined and focused, can set goals, and has the basic cognitive skills to learn.

Other frontline staff, however, suggested that any degree in and of itself may not be as effective for job placement as specialized training or did not add any value beyond what a certificate or training program might. Some said that simply having *any degree or certification* is helpful because it shows potential applicants that they have training in a field that an employer really needs and that they are trainable and can complete a difficult task. In this view, there was nothing special about college per se; even if they accepted it as an item on a menu of training options, they did not see a reason to emphasize it over others.

The alignment with jobs was another source of concern. While short-term training is often aligned directly with specific positions, college degrees can seem more risky. For example, in Oklahoma, one workforce director said that, although he knows that studies show that degrees mean more income, “we can’t justify spending funds on that because it has no direct linkage [to a job]... I understand it’s people close to having a degree... [b]ut if I were a business and looking for someone with a skill set, I couldn’t use this [general degree] because it doesn’t specify.” Some worried about over-qualification and a lack of matching jobs for college credentials in their regions. One frontline worker in Indiana felt that many people were going to be holding bachelor’s degrees at jobs that require associate’s degrees. Another noted that nearly half of the people assembling cars at one place of employment in their region have a bachelor’s

degree but felt that what they really needed was a demonstration that they had the proper skills for that job.

Overall, early in the implementation process, there was some support for the idea of college completion through the workforce system, but there seemed to be little belief that a four-year degree had significant value, whether in the short term or long term, over a two-year degree. There was resistance among respondents who did not see the value of a degree over a certificate or other short-term training or who were not sure that college degrees would lead directly to jobs.

#### *Promising Practices and Possible Solutions*

The first order of business for any program attempting to transform practices within an organization is getting buy-in from within the organization and from key stakeholders. As described by a director in Indiana, it is important to start at the bottom and focus on work culture, “to have a positive focus on staff.” Once the staff buys into this culture, workforce centers can increasingly create a positive focus on customers and customer needs. To accomplish this, the implementation team worked with the frontline staff, as well as leadership throughout the workforce system of the states, emphasizing the importance of an educated workforce for the benefit of clients and as a strategic way to attract higher-quality jobs into an area (sector strategies were often a part of this discussion). This message was conveyed in interactions with workforce centers in the legacy states, and to disseminate this information more broadly throughout the system, this message became part of a larger, more formal training program for workforce staff that was a part of the Indiana and Oklahoma implementations.

In our discussions with stakeholders and frontline workers later in the process, it appeared that this message had gained traction, as several emphasized the business case for ACC in the workforce system. In short, when asked “Why ACC?” stakeholders often emphasized it as an opportunity to use training funds in a highly efficient manner: the same ITA funds could deliver even better incomes for workforce center clients, which reflects positively on the workforce center itself. Indeed, ACC was not even seen as a change from their usual operations for many of the workforce center staff we interviewed, in part because many believed that they had been doing ACC work all along (though we will describe some issues with its prior deployment and workforce center staff knowledge of ACC concepts in the next section).

To address the challenge of varying ACC buy-in in the workforce development system, the implementation team also emphasized the importance of delivering ACC to these systems as a permanent “initiative” rather than a temporary “program.” The distinction

drawn by members of the implementation team was that programs end; they are pots of money that are used and then moved past. By contrast, initiatives were seen as a new way of doing business. The ACC Initiative was meant to inspire a culture change and to help personnel and stakeholders at every level of the workforce development system to understand why ACC was important and continually seek opportunities to expand it within the state or region in which they operated. This was in part also accomplished through training sessions with state workforce development systems, which were developed throughout the project and culminated in a one-day, consistently deployed training package. As part of this training, implementers found it helpful to provide information for trainees to take back to the office to help build momentum for ACC. By training workforce staff and implementing ACC as an initiative and not just a program, buy-in increased, and it became easier for staff to see the benefits that college education can offer some clients.

### The Role of Intake and Case Management in ACC

Once buy-in is achieved, the daily task of achieving ACC takes place at the workforce centers. At the client level, the decision to pursue college completion through the workforce development system is highly influenced by frontline staff and case managers at workforce centers. We begin with a discussion of this experience, focusing on the role of intake and early case management, the limited role that frontline staff workers and case managers are comfortable taking in client counseling, the limited base of ACC clients coming through workforce centers, and how clients can affect this process as well.

#### *Client Intake and Early Case Management: A Process with High Levels of Variability*

When a client first walks through the door of any workforce center to seek assistance, the next few steps can be critical in ensuring that the client will receive the maximum benefit of the workforce center services. To make the workforce system friendly to ACC, the process of client intake and early case management must be addressed. These processes can vary from location to location and even sometimes within the same location; some clients experience very formal and scripted processes, while other processes depend on the experience and intuition of the workforce staff performing the intake and case management. The variation in these processes create challenges for “one-size” approaches to injecting ACC into the daily operations of workforce centers. Moving these centers toward more standardized procedures holds great promise and

can help alleviate some issues surrounding assumptions about clients and who may be eligible for ACC.

The challenge is clearest in the two legacy states, Pennsylvania and Mississippi, which have a great deal of local-level autonomy in the daily operations and procedures of the workforce centers. For example, in Pennsylvania, the assessment of workforce center clients is a multistep, path-dependent process involving both informal and formal evaluations, which can vary between local areas. Clients are typically first evaluated informally during the initial intake via a conversation with a frontline staff worker. Some staff workers mentioned that they follow a list of questions to ask clients, while others said that they did not. Case notes are written down—some staff only input client information into their computer system when they are sure that the client will continue working with the center, while others immediately register the client in the Center for Workforce Development System (CWDS, a job gateway website where registrants can be viewed by both workforce staff members as well as potential employers). Some workforce centers also have clients complete surveys, providing background information about the clients' education and work histories. This initial assessment upon intake helps determine whether the individual should be referred to a particular staff specialist (e.g., youth services, or veteran services) and whether the individual is eligible for an ITA account and training services. More formal assessments take place after the informal intake for those who are interested in pursuing training, certification, or a degree,<sup>9</sup> but with variation in the informal process, it is hard to guarantee that every ACC-eligible trainee is informed of ACC possibilities and placed on this path, if desired.

Those who do identify as having a “partial degree” upon intake are recommended to speak with a counselor to discuss college completion, even though few clients who enter workforce centers explicitly express interest in degree completion. Respondents

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<sup>9</sup> For those who are interested in pursuing training, certification, or a degree, the next part of their evaluation focuses on a variety of computer-based assessments, including the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE,, for which clients must demonstrate a ninth-grade reading and math comprehension to be eligible for WIA) and the System for Assessment and Group Evaluation skills assessment (SAGE, which evaluates aptitude, learning styles, and temperament). These cognitive and career assessment tests help staff specialists evaluate clients' preparedness for schooling and the particular career paths they are interested in pursuing (especially since many have been out of school for decades). Depending on the outcomes of these formal tests, clients may be required to complete career transition classes that help them prepare for school—including brushing up on reading and math abilities, as well as time management and note-taking skills, among other essential school-related skills. Once workforce staff determines that a client has completed the necessary training, staff members work with clients to determine certificate or degree placement.

said that they are interested in getting information about college completion to all clients, and at least one center requires recently dislocated workers to attend workshops that discuss college completion. Several workers emphasized the importance of speaking to and assisting anyone with some college because, even if that individual does not choose the college completion route or ends up not being eligible, “you never know who they may talk to and spread the word.” Still, respondents in our early interviews in Pennsylvania recognized that they could do a better job at assessing clients, especially asking them more direct questions about past college and pushing clients to reveal information up front. Informal and unstructured interviews contribute to lapses in understanding clients’ positions and backgrounds. Computer-based assessments are costly, and staff members wonder whether there are better ways to assess client capabilities.

In Mississippi, the process is similarly varied; no workforce staff members interviewed noted any specific written procedures on intake. Some workforce staff said that there are certain questions that they ask clients upon arrival, while others do not. As one frontline worker described it, she had “general questions that I’ve become accustomed to asking because I’ve been working in the program. But there’s no guidelines or set of questions for me to ask.” Individual clients who come into the center and ask about WIA funding are told that they must meet certain criteria. This information is provided to them in paper, with a sheet listing what they will need to get approval, through their provider or schools. However, once clients are pursuing WIA funding, some frontline workers and case managers suggest that they are sure to ask a variety of questions that are not on the WIA form to be sure that the clients know what they are getting into and to assure the workforce staff that the clients are capable of completing the training they’re seeking. If a client is interested in being a truck driver, for example, they ask whether the client likes being alone, not showering every day, and whether he feels comfortable being away from home for days or weeks at a time. For those interested in being an RN, one staff member will ask clients, “Can you commit to the training needed? Are you okay with blood? Etcetera.” This sort of information is critical to helping the case management know whether they should approve the client for WIA funding and indicates a willingness to offer some unscripted counseling to ensure a better outcome for clients, which could prove beneficial if harnessed to support ACC (for further discussion of the role of active counseling in ACC, see the next section)

Some suggested that staff workers could “maybe do a better job at [workforce] centers” by asking specific questions about job completion—“take an extra five to 10 minutes” to see whether clients have any college hours. Usually, during the second visit to the

workforce center, clients complete the Workforce Investment Network Global Services (WINGS) system, an online resource where clients input information about their education and skills that is made available to employers for job posting and recruitment. In Indiana, a frontline worker described the process as experience-based:

“It’s all based on motivation for the customer to engage in the process and improve their chances of employment. And that’s where the professional judgment of the staff is incredibly important. To be able to decipher, say, ‘Do you have a high school diploma?’ and if so, say, ‘Can you get a job on that or do you need to go back to college or get a short-term certificate or degree?’ To be able to assess and react to the person whose responses helps them center whether or not that customer is motivated to begin the process.”

In contrast to the more informal Pennsylvania and Mississippi intake and case management processes, Oklahoma and Indiana had more standardized practices that relied less on the judgment of the workforce center staff and more on large information sessions and scripted intake. For example, in Oklahoma, one frontline worker spoke about informational sessions that they hold every Friday between 10 and noon, where “we get anyone who has expressed interest in training to attend... [C]areer coaches will talk about in-demand occupations based on market research that our board has conducted.” These coaches will give clients information about the WIA funding process, walk clients through the eligible training provider list, and assist them with some tools to do some career and training research on their own. “[A]fter the session is over, anyone who is still interested is welcome to speak one on one with our career coaches” for an initial discussion. Then they can plan a meeting with the intake specialist, who will provide them with research help and initial assessments. If the client is still interested, he or she will then be assigned a career coach who will work with the client at that point. Efforts to increase ACC can then be targeted to this formal process, where all clients are receiving a great deal of information about the opportunities and services provided by the workforce center in a very homogenous process.

Consistency in intake and standardized procedures can also help alleviate issues created by assumptions about who is (and who is not) a potential college completer. Although clients seemed to be treated equally, at least in the way that frontline workers spoke about the way they assisted clients, there were a few groups of people that some interview respondents developed specific opinions about and generalized about their interests in training and college completion; these assumptions may decrease the

likelihood that every potential completer is receiving the appropriate direction and services. For example, in our early interviews, some respondents felt that older dislocated workers were not interested in a new career and thus would not inquire about college completion. Instead, they simply wanted to get a new job that they could stay at until they were ready to retire. Older workers were also perceived to be lacking in many skills that the staff believed were required for successful reemployment (e.g., tech-oriented, computer skills) or to have skills that were outdated or no longer in demand. Other clients mentioned in interviews as less ACC eligible included seasonal workers (presumed to be only looking for temporary work in the off-season) and factory or blue-collar workers (presumed to have little college in their backgrounds). According to the frontline staff and key informants we spoke with, many seasonal workers or factory workers do not need a college degree and instead are only interested in pursuing short-term training. One frontline staff member from Pennsylvania said that, if the client is looking for a job, the staff member doesn't "really push that avenue" of further training or schooling. Only if someone indicates on the initial intake forms that he or she is thinking about additional training or schooling does she "then ... go that route." For those who come into the center with résumés and are not sure what their next steps should be, one Pennsylvania frontline employee said that she reviews clients' résumés, and if it looks like they have marketable skills, she leads the client toward job searching; however, this may overlook potential ACC opportunities. If there were a standardized intake procedure attuned to ACC, these workers would all receive the same information as others and, it is hoped, the same opportunities.

Despite some generalizations, it was clear that there was no uniform picture of a standard client. When asked to describe a typical client, examples ranged from dislocated workers who had worked the same job for more than thirty years and were looking for a new job that would bridge the gap to retirement to a 20-something who had to quit school because he ran out of money and his job was not able to pay the bills to a single mom who went through a divorce and needed to find work to support her children. Realizing that any of these individuals could be potential completers would help frontline staff support ACC and give each client the most appropriate training experience possible.

#### *Promising Practices and Possible Solutions*

To address issues with variability in the intake process, ACC implementation staff worked with local workforce development systems to study their processes specifically with an eye toward common pitfalls in receiving accurate information regarding past education. Intake assessments and the initial case management of clients were a major

focus of these efforts. Additionally, training sessions help frontline staff learn to identify potential completers and expand their conception of who these clients may be. These sessions teach frontline staff and case managers how to ask clients various questions during intake to learn more specific information about their prior college experiences and degree completion.

This model was not one-size-fits-all but, rather, had to be customized to each state. This process was much simpler in states with more standardized approaches (Oklahoma and Indiana), where changes made had implications for practice throughout the state; creating more statewide standardized procedures for intake in other states could go a long way toward improving ACC-supportive practices (as well as any other efforts related to workforce development).

#### *(Not) Counseling and the Supply of ACC-Eligible Clients*

One particular concern about workforce center counseling is that workforce center staff is not permitted to provide much direction beyond assistance locating information and funding so that sessions meet WIA's mandate for client-driven counseling and so that there is no favoritism toward one training provider or path. This is due to the laudable goal that the process should reflect the client's interests, with case managers facilitating but not pushing the selection of a training path. However, there are some issues with how that mandate is interpreted and put into practice that can create issues for ACC. Generally, clients are often not prepared to make an informed choice regarding ACC without some direction from the workforce center staff.

In many of our early interviews, respondents discussed limits to the assistance that they were able to offer clients; most believed that, under WIA, frontline staff and case management can do very little to steer anyone who enters a workforce center in any particular direction. The workers' "proper" role is only to assist individuals in finding information, programs, and funding for the things that they request. This meant that, even if someone was close to completing his or her degree, if the client did not demonstrate interest in degree completion, the counselor was not allowed to guide a client toward college completion or continue the conversation in any way.

This is quite problematic for ACC, as few clients come into the workforce centers interested in college completion. In fact, one major issue encountered by frontline staff is that many clients who enter the workforce centers are *not even really sure what the offices can do for them at all*. One workforce employee in Oklahoma said that "it almost seems ... like about 90 percent of the people who walk through the door don't have a

clue why they're walking in; [they] don't comprehend or have the information right." This is in part due to the nature of workforce centers' role in unemployment; citizens are funneled through the centers to receive benefits, and the system can be overwhelming. The frontline worker trainee surveys offer a snapshot of how workers perceive trainees and their preparedness upon entering the workforce center. Of the respondents, 53 percent (N=36) disagreed or strongly disagreed that clients arriving at the Workforce office arrive with strong ideas about what they want from their counseling appointment, and 69 percent (N=47) felt that clients are not well informed about their options for training and education. This indicates the respondents' general feeling that clients are unsure of what they want from their visit to the workforce center and are not well informed about their options before arriving, a challenge that would be addressed if the client were given more information and direction upon intake.

These perceptions of clients as misinformed were also evident in interviews with workforce center staff. Some staff workers noted that some clients who may be eligible for college completion often choose certificate programs instead of degree programs because clients can simply get back to work more quickly, regardless of the long-term benefits of degrees. Some withhold information about past college experiences for a variety of reasons unless they are very directly asked. Withholding of information on prior education obviously makes frontline staff members' job in determining ACC availability difficult. Clients who left college previously may have done so because they did not have the necessary information, experience, or support to continue, and they may not understand that workforce centers can offer the information and support that they need to complete their degrees. Some clients discount prior completed college courses and fail to mention any secondary coursework during intake at WIA centers. Several frontline staff members noted that many potential students do not realize that they lack just a few classes to complete their degrees and fail to see how courses taken years earlier could lead them to degree completion today. One Mississippi workforce employee noted that these individuals may not have found a program that was the right fit for them in the past, but they have some accumulated credits already that may be available to work toward a different degree.

Among clients who do inquire about particular certificates or degrees, very few receive alternate direction from the staff. Again, the frontline worker trainee surveys are instructive in this discussion. Seventy-four percent (N=50) of respondents agreed that client preference takes priority when the client has a certain preference regarding his or her goals or desired training type, while 25 percent (N=17) disagreed or strongly disagreed. This indicates that the majority of respondents are not exploring options

outside their clients' initial preference and indicates that the respondents strongly align training opportunities with clients' original preferences. Interview respondents noted that the most popular programs investigated tend to include lower-level nursing (nursing assistant or licensed practical nursing) or medical worker certificates and degrees or commercial driver's license (CDL) programs. These are staples in many workforce centers, as trainings are fairly quick and employment opportunities are relatively dependable. In Pennsylvania, frontline workers reported that it was quite easy and relatively quick to place CNAs and LPNs; this meant that workforce centers were even less likely to steer interested clients away from these paths. There are also degree-granting programs that some clients inquire about in Pennsylvania, and the most popular ones include administrative medical assistant (which usually requires an associate's degree) and accounting or business administration (requiring an associate's degree, and placement for the position is usually in a medical facility). These degree paths are very good for trainees with a specific interest in these areas. However, these paths are not always friendly to ACC; they are quite specific in their credit requirements, which can render previously acquired credits moot and turn "near-completers" into starting-all-over-again students.

Counseling that demonstrates for clients what jobs they can do with a degree they are nearer to completing is rare but could be helpful in this regard.

#### *Promising Practices and Possible Solutions*

Generally, at the beginning of the ACC Initiative, case managers were often uncomfortable with taking a more active role due to concerns over removing the client from the driver's seat. This lack of information and ambiguity on the part of the clients, paired with a hands-off approach to counseling that some workforce centers take to comply with their understanding of WIA, can challenge the workforce staff efforts to assist the unemployed effectively. Clarification from workforce centers' leadership may be needed to help them understand where the boundaries are in WIA-compliant advising and to help them create a situation where clients can make an *informed choice*. One tactic introduced by the ACC Initiative to improve the balance between counseling and allowing the client to drive the session was more direct questioning by the frontline workers and case managers regarding prior college experiences and future college interests. This helped staff to ascertain when someone had some college and might be eligible to continue (e.g., asking whether they ever took a college course instead of asking if they went to college). This does not remove the client from the decision-making position but, rather, gives the counselor a more complete understanding of the client and enables the counselor to offer a more accurate menu of options and better

assistance to clients. Offering low-income clients simple information about resources for college along with assistance in acquiring those resources has proven to be a more promising combination than simply presenting the information (Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, and Sanbonmatsu 2009). Bringing this practice into the workforce development system can improve the quality of case management and therefore improve the outcomes for individual clients.

Another tactic recommended to partner workforce development systems by the ACC Initiative was case management with a long-term view. Workforce staff can encourage clients to pursue stackable training to maximize the benefit of their ITA-funded training, i.e., choose certificates that can lead to degree programs or degree programs that can lead to further degree programs (the ladders for these programs are better established in healthcare fields but exist in other areas as well). In this scenario, staff workers can suggest that clients explore schools that offer transfer opportunities for prior certificate coursework, putting them closer to the finish line if they eventually choose to pursue a degree-granting program. This was a new term for many frontline workers; stackable credentials were discussed only by a limited number in our early interviews. Those who were aware of it seemed to think that it provided a critical long-term plan for clients who needed to get back to work quickly but who also had the capacity to pursue a degree in the future.

For ACC to flourish in the workforce development system, it is also helpful to bring more ACC-qualified and aware individuals through the doors. One method to do this is old-fashioned public outreach. The implementation team introduced posters in the workforce centers (where permitted) that said, “Ask me about college completion” in an effort to increase client awareness and discussions about higher education within the workforce center. In Mississippi, there was a concerted effort to publicize and bring people into the workforce centers for assessments. This included efforts to advertise at grocery stores, at churches, and even at local colleges (to capture individuals who are already enrolled but at risk for dropping out, as we discuss further in the next section, *The Role of Institutions of Higher Education*).

A regional manager in Indiana noted that frontline workers should do more than provide clients with the data on employment rates and long-term income opportunities for those with and without degrees. Instead, said he suggested that “the delivery of that conversation must be strategic. He calls this type of strategic counseling “‘intrusive advising,’ where the stark reality of the economy is presented to them in a way that allows them to see that without getting a degree, ‘I’m really kind of hopeless in the job

search.” This type of “intrusive advising” is something that requires additional training of frontline staff workers and trial and error on implementation to identify what strategies work best for different client populations.

#### *Frontline Workers’ Understanding of Higher Education*

For workforce center staff to take a more active role in counseling, it is important that the staff has a clear understanding of the college system, how it functions, and what options exist within it to help adult learners. In our early frontline worker trainee surveys and evaluation interviews, we found that there was a great deal of confusion within the workforce development system regarding higher education and that information was not always conveyed in an ideal manner.

The vast majority of respondents in the frontline worker survey (94%, N=64) reported that they find that clients do not always understand the difference between various training options available to them. Yet, while 65 percent (N=44) of respondents indicated that they explained the various types of education (degree, credential, and diploma) to a client in many or most cases, 36 percent (N=25) never or rarely explain it to their clients. This indicates that, although respondents feel clients do not generally understand the difference between various training options available to them, they are not always explaining the difference to them. In addition, further results indicated that case managers who do explain the differences to clients are most likely omitting or not accurately describing information.

Respondents were asked to describe how they would explain the difference between a degree, a credential, and a diploma to a client. A degree is a combination of technical skills with general education and usually includes an additional element of social sciences education (associate’s, bachelor’s, master’s, and Ph.D.). A credential can be given for the completion of one class or a set of classes streamlined to enhance job skills quickly. A diploma is generally an acknowledgement of the completion of a series (less than one year, one year, or two years) of classes or hands-on learning of occupational skills, usually technical in nature.

When prompted to explain the difference between a degree, credential, and diploma, respondents indicated fairly uniform examples of a degree, most acknowledging that a degree is an associate’s or bachelor’s degree. None of the respondents indicated that a degree is a combination of technical skills and general education, however. Descriptions of credentials were fairly accurate, with most respondents describing them as enhancements to specific skills or occupational training. Descriptions of a diploma, however, were far less accurate. Almost all the respondents referred to a diploma as

completion of high school or a GED or receiving an actual written decree of completion of high school or post-secondary education.

Respondents were asked to describe the difference between types of education, specifically the difference between stackable and terminal credits, and how often they discuss these types with their clients. Fifty-eight percent (N=22) of respondents indicated that they discuss the difference between stackable and terminal programs of study with their clients, while 66 percent (n=45) indicated that they do not.<sup>10</sup> When asked to describe these two types of education, respondents did not seem wholly to understand the difference. Stackable credits allow a person to earn short-term certificates or college credit and in the future apply them to further occupation-specific training or college education (respectively), thus allowing for ascent of a career ladder. Additionally, credits can generally be applied to other degree types, so if a person changes his or her career trajectory, they may still apply the previously acquired credits to a future career type. Terminal credits cannot be applied to or combined with future training/education.

Forty-four percent of respondents (N=30) either stated that they did not know the difference or chose not to answer the question. Of the remaining respondents (N=38), most demonstrated that they knew that stackable credits were credits that could be combined with others or built upon in the future, but few respondents accurately described what terminal credits are. This may be an indication of why most respondents never discuss these types of education with their clients; they do not know the difference or do not know how to articulate it to their clients.

#### *Promising Practices and Potential Solutions*

These early data, collected at the beginning of the ACC implementations in Oklahoma and Indiana, speak to the importance of ACC-related training for frontline workers in the workforce development systems. This is not an area that is familiar to many, and they are not prepared to guide clients through this system without additional information and training

#### *Training Selection: Employer-Based Pressures*

Case managers helping clients navigate their training path selection face pressures from both the clients themselves and area employers that can affect the advice that they provide. On the business side, these challenges are rooted in business needs and can steer clients away from ACC.

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<sup>10</sup> One respondent indicated "N/A."

Employers often demand specific skills that require short-term training rather than long-term degree completion. As a result, workforce centers with limited budgets look to fund opportunities that will most successfully help clients land jobs quickly. Center staff employees noted that they often focus on training related to popular local industries. For example, the move of a major engineering company can result in an emphasis in certification programs related to potential openings at the plant.

A frontline worker at a Pennsylvania center felt that workforce trainers and providers were “bombarding them” with offers to provide workshops to clients on training for specialty skilled credentials. These trainings can be a boon for workforce centers and clients who need to return to a paycheck quickly; they are directly aligned to specific jobs, ensuring that investments of time and resources will result in a paycheck for workforce center clients. The jobs mentioned by staff workers that were typically funded included welding, natural gas, and CDL training, not ACC education. Finally, a frontline workforce employee in Oklahoma said that, in the Tulsa area, employers have been asking “actually less about people who hold degrees and more about specific skills.” As a result, workforce staff is looking more into certain customized training.

#### *Promising Practices and Potential Solutions*

Regarding employer pressures, this is an area where sector strategies can be beneficial so that one employer voice is not outweighing the needs of the local area. When multiple stakeholders are brought to the table, as is typical in sector strategy planning, it is possible to steer an area toward supporting industries with higher-skill, higher-quality jobs. This should not necessarily replace jobs with lower barriers to entry but provide local workers with a range of options to facilitate better working lives.

This is also an area where employer outreach on the part of the local WIBs can be beneficial. If WIBs work more closely with employers offering higher-level jobs, they can offer a greater menu of training options that are aligned to specific jobs and employers.

#### *Financial Limitations of Clients*

Once clients begin to understand the realities of the job market and their long-term earnings potential, they can realize the importance of additional training, certification, or even obtaining a degree. However, many clients have complex financial, social, and educational issues that create further barriers to college completion. Interview respondents reported that the length of training is critical to the training pathways that individuals choose when they face more dire financial scenarios, such as dwindling remaining time on unemployment benefits. Few clients can afford to forego income and

pursue schooling full time, especially those who have children. Among those who want to pursue college completion, many are already stuck with debt (including student loan debt from prior college enrollment, which can leave clients understandably hesitant to return to that particular well).

The desperation of some situations is so immediate that the long-term benefits of higher education cannot be realized against the urgent needs of the present. One interview respondent noted that “a lot of the folks that we’re dealing with are hand-to-mouth, for lack of a better term.... [returning to school would be] a big change, which is also going to change their life in the short run.” This frontline worker went on to say that, even though someone with an associate’s degree will have greater lifetime earnings than someone without a degree, she’s not sure whether “these folks ... are able to look at that future projection kind of thing because they’re so worried about their current situations.” Remedying this situation may be beyond the scope of the workforce development system; however, there are some steps that can help alleviate these pressures and help clients to reach for their college degree.

#### *Promising Practices and Potential Solutions*

One solution, as mentioned above, is helping clients land in stackable programs that will get them degrees in the near term, such as associate’s programs, while setting them up for future education and enabling clients to get back to work sooner. Several frontline workers in Mississippi go as far as to recommend that individuals complete a two-year degree and perhaps couple that with specialized training through the workforce division to help make the connection to paid employment sooner.

Some clients may also be eligible for a process referred to as “reverse transfer,” where individuals near BA completion are converted to an AA, which has the benefit of providing the client with a marketable credential very quickly. This process typically costs money and depends upon the institution where credits were obtained and the institution that is granting the degree. Thus, while there is support for degree completion, workforce staff is still focused on ensuring that clients complete training that provides direct relevance to employer hiring. A frontline worker in Indiana believed that clients should pursue the most accessible degree to them because they have already started it (even if it is an associate’s degree in general studies).

Finally, alternate funding sources can help clients to stay afloat financially as they pursue degrees, and increasing workforce center case managers’ awareness of these programs could help them better guide clients regarding the possibilities. In our interviews, alternate sources mentioned included Pell Grants, occasional national

emergency grant funds (e.g., Katrina NEG, oil spill monies, American Recovery and Reinvestment Act), Discretionary Governor's Dollars, Rapid Response, STEPS funds for summer youth, JobTrakPA, TAA, private scholarships, and finally, personal student loans. Increasing staff awareness of alternate funding would require training but could prove quite fruitful as they work to triangulate resources to support clients in difficult circumstances.

### *The Role of Institutions of Higher Education*

To accomplish ACC, the workforce development system depends upon institutions of higher education to enroll and educate ACC-eligible clients. Yet the quality of relationships and the collaborations between workforce centers and higher education vary significantly from area to area. Two major factors contributing to these different relationships include the proximity of workforce centers to institutes of higher education and efforts on the part of the two institutions to engage with each other regularly.

Physical proximity to a quality higher education institution that is willing to work with the workforce system is critical to ACC efforts. Without nearby universities willing to apply for and maintain their status on the Eligible Training Provider Lists (discussed below), it is nearly impossible to get ACC efforts off the ground. This is an area of particular concern for some rural and remote areas, where a lack of college partners in the area can prove a major barrier for clients seeking college education, as they have to travel greater distances. It can also create challenges for communications between workforce centers and the institutions of higher education that would serve their client base, as there are fewer natural opportunities to communicate. In these instances, the workforce centers may need to seek opportunities for distance learning and add those programs to their ETPL lists (discussed below in the Policy section).

For those who do have colleges and universities nearby, building a strong relationship can facilitate ACC. This close connection between workforce centers and community colleges often involves connections to both the admissions and the financial aid offices at those colleges. Several workforce centers have reached out to local schools, establishing strong connections to college admission gatekeepers to facilitate clients' admission to universities. In some local areas, workforce centers can even be physically located at community colleges. This was found in several locations and most extensively demonstrated by Indiana's statewide community college system, Ivy Tech, which is often housed in the same complex as workforce centers and is known for its strong ties with the workforce system.

Shared staff is another way to bridge the gap between schools and the workforce system. These sorts of positions can be minor; for example, one workforce center hired an instructor from a local community college to teach computer skills to clients. They can also be more explicitly directed toward bridging school services and the workforce centers. For example, in one LWIA in Mississippi, the WIB funded a position at the community college that fostered the relationship between the college and the workforce development system. This individual watched for opportunities to improve retention or reincorporate individuals who had dropped out due to a lack of resources. Students who had run out of other sources of funding were referred to those workforce centers, which were easily accessible to students and can help students access different funding sources such as the ITA. Caseworkers sometimes work closely with financial aid offices at local colleges. If the financial aid representative knows that a student has exhausted all his or her financial aid, that individual is referred to the workforce center to see what sort of financial support the workforce center can provide. A Pennsylvania interviewee also described acquiring lists of dropouts from the community colleges and crosschecking it against the registries of the workforce center in an effort to find more ACC-eligible clients. Clearly, the close relationship with higher education can be a win-win scenario, where colleges are able to improve their retention, the workforce development system is able to improve its performance outcomes, and students who need it are able to receive an extra financial boost to help them achieve their college degrees.

However, one weakness that was present in many collaborative relationships across the states was that the workforce centers did not build relationships with the academic side of the schools. This is a lost opportunity to ensure that workforce center staff are knowledgeable about the college process and able to prepare their clients for the realities of college. It is also a lost opportunity for workforce centers to influence course offerings. As workforce center staff often have very strong relationships with the local industry, they can recommend courses for the community colleges to offer students for in-demand work. For example, one interview respondent described a relationship between a workforce center and a local company that needed pipe welders, so the workforce center was able to help create a metalworking class at the community college with input from the companies that wanted to hire trained workers. In this way, the workforce system can also be beneficial to the institutions of higher education, helping the schools to connect with employers and create stronger pathways between college degrees and jobs. In Indiana, a workforce director explicitly spoke about the importance of initiatives with both higher education and employer partners to help develop paid

internship agreements with emerging workers. He said that he works with employers and partnering schools to identify students early to connect them with employers in the city. As an operations manager in Indiana noted, “It becomes a great collaboration between workforce development and economic development because the employers are saying, ‘We need this kind of training.’ And those participants come to us and they’ve decided they’re going back to school, and we talk about things called marketable skills...” based on information that workforce centers receive from local employers.

Unfortunately, all relationships between the workforce development system and higher education are not positive. Some frontline workers reported that some of the community colleges seem to be apprehensive about welcoming adult college completers who want to “pick up extra credits.” They said that there are large variations in how “friendly” community colleges are to adult completers. Additionally, many workforce center staff had little to no contact at all with institutions of higher education, a missed opportunity to facilitate relationships between the institutions.

#### *Promising Practices and Possible Solutions*

Coordination between workforce centers and institutes of higher education can build relationships that are mutually beneficial and help the clients/students that both serve.

As it pertains to fostering greater communication and more effective “hand-offs” between the workforce centers to institutes of higher education, frontline staff workers are very positive about having workforce centers located on community college campuses. Frontline workers at these workforce offices suggest that they have strong relationships with administrators at schools with on-campus workforce centers. However, shared space is not necessary; other ways that workforce centers have built these relationships with higher education included shared staff and close contact with individuals in financial aid and admissions at the universities. However, the best relationships also included connections to the academic side of higher education, allowing workforce centers to leverage these relationships and their relationships with employers to create more tailored coursework to meet employers’ needs.

#### Policy and Funding Issues

Finally, we turn to the policies and logistical issues surrounding workforce development systems and ACC. In terms of state and policy-level issues, three major themes emerged: stability of funding, policies regarding the logistics of ITA funding, and the ETPL and HDO lists. We discuss each in turn.

### *Stability of Federal Funding*

Far and away, the biggest hurdle that the ACC Initiative itself faced at its start was one that is quite common in the current political and economic environment: funding stability. As the overall federal budget became tighter and a greater source of political tension, the budgets available to government programs at all levels were in peril throughout the grant period. The effect of this was felt almost immediately after the Initiative began when Congress slashed the Governor's Discretionary Funding from 15 percent to five percent; these funds had been earmarked to support the rollout of the ACC Initiative in the first two program states (MS and PA). The states worked to find funding in their budgets to make it work, but it was a very large hurdle; the net result was a cut to the ACC Initiative of \$600,000 in Pennsylvania and \$450,000 in MS.

Additional instability was introduced during the grant period with the two-week government shutdown of 2013, which disrupted payments and services throughout the federal system and left workforce center staffs understandably nervous about the stability of their funding.

Workforce directors, managers, and frontline staff do not always feel comfortable promising clients that they can provide funding for college degrees because they do not know when the amount of funding they can offer will change or when funding might no longer be available. Thus, according to one operations manager, "Because funding has become a little more uncertain, we don't want to put our performance [too] far out" and promise individuals funding in the future that may not materialize. This is a particularly difficult issue in funding higher education, whose calendars do not neatly align with clients' entries into the workforce development system. While shorter-term training sessions may be offered every two or three weeks, waiting until September or January to start a college course can feel like a gamble for centers unsure of the stability of their funds.

### *Promising Practices and Potential Solutions*

This is an issue that is bigger than the ACC Initiative and is attributable to the state of the economy and our moment in history. Remedying this would require a societal-level commitment to workforce development, which does not feature prominently in discussions on budgetary goals. The currently improving economy and the publicity surrounding the WIOA rollout could give the system momentum; however, as with all federally funded programs, the ITAs that fund ACC exist at the whims of politicians. Small pots of money were identified in MS and PA that provided a little assistance.

### *ITA Funding Logistics and ACC*

Policies regarding ITA use can create barriers to ACC, often unintentionally. Common challenges include stipulations about full-time status, qualifications for ITA-funded training, and funding caps.

One common local policy regarding ITAs that the ACC implementation team found was the requirement that schooling be full time. This meant that, if, for example, a workforce center client was within six credits of a college degree, the ITA could not pay for the student to go to school for six credits; the student would have to go for 12 to have status as a full-time student. This is a waste of training time and resources, and it is unnecessary. As a result of the ACC Initiative, this policy was changed in one Mississippi local area, and funding is now available for those attending school part time. Nonetheless, this practice is not widespread, and there are obstacles to funding (extra paperwork and permissions) for those interested in taking courses part time. To qualify, the individual must get approval from the customer operations supervisor at the Mississippi Department of Employment Security (MDES) at the workforce center. When enacted, these sorts of accommodations can help enable clients to balance their personal lives with schooling. However, workforce staff said that they made it clear to part-time schooling clients that support could not be guaranteed beyond the current semester for which they were getting assistance (because part-time students require special permission to receive funding, and that permission was not guaranteed).

One challenge in prescribing full-time enrollment is the need to balance efforts to secure a paycheck or to maintain unemployment insurance payments if said paycheck cannot be acquired. Some workforce center staff members described how trying to provide clients funding for school while clients are trying to maintain their unemployment status and collect federal support for their family's sustenance poses additional burdens to ACC. Many clients fall under unemployment laws, which requires that their clients demonstrate job-seeking tasks to obtain unemployment benefits—even if they are attending school. Some staff said that they recommend that their clients do job searches in case they are audited. Staff members said that this is frustrating because they have clients that are going to school but must apply for jobs anyway for appearance's sake. One counselor encourages them to apply for off-hour jobs or weekend work so that they are still able and available to work while attending school. They also noted that the federal WIA guidelines that determine which workers are eligible for assistance—specifically what constitutes a dislocated worker and the income level for a sustainable wage—were also quite limiting. One workforce employee in Mississippi described getting a call from someone who is an LPN and wants to complete a degree to become

an RN. This individual had already exhausted her Pell Grant and was seeking WIA assistance. This employee said that whether or not she gets money depends on how much she is currently making. If she is currently reaching the self-sufficiency level, which is currently \$20.60 per hour, then she would not be eligible for WIA assistance.

For those who successfully obtain funding, there can be local policies that place difficult conditions on continued support. In one local area, if a client failed a core course (such as biology) for his or her degree (such as nursing), the center will not fund that individual again. For example, several workforce centers in Mississippi used to pay for the first semester of schooling when people got into nursing school. However, this policy was recently revised to say that, for college programs, ITAs will pick up schooling costs after the first semester so the workforce centers can ensure that they are sending people who have more investment in the program. One reason given for this change is that some people pursuing associate's degrees in nursing sometimes have left after seeing how hard the program is—and if payments were made for a single semester and the individual discontinued the program, it would look bad for the workforce centers (in terms of the effective use of money) and deplete the financial resources available to the center and to other clients. This is an effective innovation for the workforce development system's performance outcomes and distribution of funds but could prove a major barrier for unemployed clients or others who are financially strapped.

Finally, funding caps are another policy that can often be a barrier to ACC. Local areas set ITA caps on funding per trainee; in some, the caps were set so low that it would be difficult to complete anything other than short-term programs. In terms of the amount of funding available for any individual client, Pennsylvania workforce staff described the WIB decision to cap ITAs (Individual Training Accounts) at \$8,000. This cap was determined to be the average needed for training costs. Although there has been talk of lowering this per-person amount (because it is higher than in some other counties), the WIB has decided to let it stand for now. In Mississippi, most of the programs funded are considered vocational or quick-to-work programs. For new students, funding of up to \$6,000 is available. For most clients, it is split over the entire program—typically, they pay \$2,000/semester for the last three semesters of their program, as specified in the ITA policy. In Oklahoma, a frontline worker noted that their ITA policy only allows for two years of support for clients, so “we don't typically step in to help anyone until the final two years. If they're pursuing just an associate's degree and can finish in 24 months, yes, we'll do that as well.”

### *Promising Practices and Potential Solutions*

As with other issues surrounding ACC, the solution is often simply to examine the policies with an ACC lens. Implementation staff helped workforce systems examine their specific ITA-related policies and caps to find points that might create friction for ACC efforts and remedy them when possible (e.g., raising ITA caps or removing full-time requirements). Additionally, staff training in alternate sources of funding, as mentioned earlier, could go a long way to help case managers bring multiple resources to clients and help work around funding shortages or logistical challenges to ITA use.

Despite ITA caps, some workforce centers have been successful in finding non-WIA funding for education and training, including a limited number of programs at the state level and great variety of opportunities at the federal level. For example, in Pennsylvania, one respondent described using alternate sources of funding to work around an ITA cap, such as JobTrakPA, a statewide initiative by Pennsylvania's 14 community colleges that may provide up to a semester of funding, national emergency grant funds (most recently, one grant was given for an oil spill), from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), Rapid Response, and the Discretionary Governor's Dollars. While some additional assistance could be provided by TAA (Trade Adjustment Assistance) and occasionally from TANF, these support programs were only referenced in passing. In addition, clients can apply to the PHEAA (Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency) and complete a FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) to supplement education costs. Workforce staff noted that many clients are taking out student loans to pay their tuition costs. Some clients have access to veteran-exclusive funding opportunities through the GI Bill. One workforce center mentioned the use of formula-funded grants (part of the WIA youth program serving eligible low-income 14- to 21-year-olds). Other individuals who qualify for special funding include those with disabilities—these clients meet with an OVR (Office of Vocational Rehabilitation) counselor to assess their needs and opportunities for funding.

### *ETPL: Developing an Appropriate Process for Maintaining Status<sup>11</sup>*

Any program or school seeking to accept training clients with ITAs must be certified and added to the Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL) and lead to an occupation on

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<sup>11</sup> For further discussion of the ETPL and HDO, please see our briefs on the subject: 1) Haviland, Sara B., et al., *Adult College Completion through the Workforce System: The Role of the Eligible Training Provider List in Training Choices*, New Brunswick: Rutgers Education and Employment Research Center, March 2014. 2)

the High Demand Occupation (HDO) list. This involves an application process with regular renewals, during which programs must demonstrate the success of their programs and applicability to high-demand occupations. Workforce development staff members suggested that getting on an ETPL often requires high levels of communication between WIBs and universities. One staff worker suggested that some schools that should be on the list are not because they have so many students already and they do not want to be bothered with paperwork. More simply, they do not have enough incentive to be concerned with the hassle of being on the ETPL.

In MS, there used to be two periods of the year to submit applications for the ETPL, but this has been changed to one. One frontline employee said that training providers “love the process” that is in place for ETPL. Once providers are approved, they can go online to update their applications concerning performance or cost. In addition, that worker said that, if there is demand for certain courses or training, schools can contact the workforce and ask for an exception to the ETPL enrollment period, and this exception can often be accommodated. Schools often do not submit programs for approval unless there is a specific interest in that program—this suggests that there is at times something of a lag time between interest in a program and its availability. However, the workforce centers sometimes do make recommendations to program directors, and several staff members suggested that they had open communication with college administrators responsible for submitting programs to the ETPL.

In addition, the degrees that are offered on the ETPL must align with jobs on the High Demand Occupation (HDO) list, or workforce centers will not be able to fund the degrees. This can create challenges for schools and workforce centers seeking to add general degrees, as narrow interpretations of the HDO list can dissuade the addition of degrees that are not occupation-specific (e.g., nursing or accounting). According to one workforce director, even if college completion numbers are “important to the governor... important to the Lumina Foundation and the Commission on Higher Education... [if] it’s not important to the work region system” that sets the HDO, it’s non-fundable.

#### Promising Practices and Potential Solutions

The ETPL list is a gateway to ITA funding; without a proper listing, schools cannot receive tuition monies under WIA. However, if the process of being added to the list is

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Haviland, Sara B., et al, *Adult College Completion through the Workforce System: The Role of High Demand Occupations in Training Choices*, New Brunswick: Rutgers Education and Employment Research Center, September 2014.

more complicated or more expensive than the tuition monies it will generate, this can serve as a deterrent to schools. States can examine their processes for schools and programs to be listed and maintain their listings on the ETPL with an eye toward efficiency. Staff members also suggested that getting on an ETPL often requires high levels of communication between WIBs and universities to help schools determine which programs and courses to add to the lists and to navigate the process. Again, building these relationships can go a long way toward adjusting the ETPL lists to facilitate ACC.

Additionally, states can examine their HDO lists with an eye toward ACC; within each high-growth industry, there are likely jobs that require higher education (e.g., the healthcare industry may have a use for general education majors in its non-health administrative jobs).

## **DISCUSSION**

Critically, though it is important to involve employers and educators, efforts to improve student outcomes must serve the clients first. WIA training is not perfect, and indeed, much improvement can be made. A recent piece by Timothy Williams (2014) in the *New York Times* described some of the hardships associated with WIA funding, detailing the stories of students who had gone through the workforce development system and completed training and degrees, only to find themselves in further debt and still unable to find a job. This story illuminated the need for greater accountability for programs participating in the WIA process; some of the problems highlighted were related to for-profit schools or schools whose tuition far exceeded that of state schools and even schools that were fraudulent in reporting their job placement statistics. One challenge that this highlights is the need for greater data reporting, as we have discussed. Data collection for WIA-funded higher education is imperfect; the federal reporting system does not distinguish education from other types of training, and while states develop their own systems for case management, in many cases, these systems rely on the schools themselves to provide information on outcomes rather than collecting that data in a more universal and standardized way. Given the large investment that WIA represents, it is remarkable that it is quite difficult (if not impossible) to obtain reliable data to assess efficacy for WIA-funded college completion.

This is not simply a matter of holding programs accountable to the government but can also be used to help schools assess and improve their own programs. In fact, the American Association of Community College Commissions and Board of Directors highlighted the need for more data in the summary report of their 2010 meetings,

describing the need for federal grants and data warehousing that ties education to workforce outcomes and efforts to improve the availability of data, noting that this was needed to “get a handle on workforce and economic outcomes” (McPhail 2011: 5).

Helping these programs and prioritizing programs that engage in continuous quality improvement on the ETPL list is a win-win scenario. ACC (in accredited, not-for-profit schools) is a high-quality credential that, when used carefully with good HDO lists, can provide a transferable, more broadly applicable credential to workforce center clients. The ACC Initiative as implemented also poses a low risk for introducing extraordinary debt to its participants, as it focuses on students who are within 30 hours of graduation, increasing the likelihood that ITA funds can cover the entirety of these individuals’ degree completion.

However, it is important to acknowledge a greater philosophical question that ACC raises regarding the preferred role of the workforce development system. One of our stakeholders, a leader in a state workforce development system, did note that workforce centers do not necessarily have a large population of ACC-eligible clients because they were known for helping the most desperate—clients with very low education, few marketable skills, and little in the way of resources. The workforce development system is indeed at an historical turning point. Building on earlier federal workforce systems, the 1998 Workforce Investment Act originally sought to incorporate multiple services for job seekers and the underemployed under one roof with the goal of getting people on the path to paid employment quickly and efficiently. Success in workforce centers is measured by job placements, increased incomes, and job retention. This has led to an emphasis on short-term trainings that require very little in the way of prerequisites or barriers to entry. To support the entry of higher-quality jobs into an area, it makes sense to shift the emphasis to college credentialing. Yet there remain individuals who may not qualify for college education or jobs for which college credentials are unnecessary; if workforce centers shift their limited resources to college, who will help these individuals?

Finally, the discussion regarding education, credentialing, and worker training is often geared toward the needs of local area employers and often emphasizes these interests. Yet skills mismatch is only one way in which workers can be mismatched with jobs, as noted by Kalleberg (2007). From a labor perspective, employers are often concerned about under-qualification or qualification in the wrong skill set. Yet skills mismatch can include both under- and over-qualification. Other factors can also make jobs a poor fit: geographic mismatch (living in the wrong place), temporal mismatches (jobs require

more or fewer hours than the worker prefers/is able to work), earnings mismatches, and work-family mismatches (jobs incompatible with family life).

Of particular concern, when a local area emphasizes training that is too strongly geared toward a specific job with a specific employer, the risk of spatial mismatch is quite high should that employer relocate later. More general, stackable credentials give workers flexibility that can help alleviate this risk. Yet this is not the only strategy to reduce the risk of mismatch. Employers have the power to alleviate other forms of mismatch through HR practices (e.g., increasing on-the-job training, converting part-time jobs to full-time, offering flexible scheduling, or increasing pay and benefits). In short, the role of employer practices is an important component of mismatch and the “shortage” of “qualified” workers, and it cannot be ignored in efforts to improve job matching. Improved credentialing is but one piece of the puzzle—employers can also play a role beyond requesting state-funded training that is a perfect fit for their jobs.

In the discussion of skills development and education, it is important to discuss larger societal and governmental objectives. What is (and what should be) the role of the individual, educators, the state, and the employer in skill development? This is a shifting conversation, as described by Cappelli (2014):

An important question raised by [reports on skill shortages] is who is responsible for the skill level of job candidates and, ultimately, of employees. Traditional employer human resource practices, such as assessing the abilities of job applicants, training employees for current jobs, and developing them internally for future roles saw employers as responsible for securing the skills they need. The thrust of these reports suggests that the education sector—especially public-funded education—and job candidates themselves should be responsible for producing the skills that employers want. Such a change would have profound implications for society and is worth considering seriously. (Cappelli 2014: 2-3)

The movement to upskill workers is, at its heart, a movement to make public one of the functions that were previously internal to employers: skill development, which begins with job training and continues throughout a lengthy career with the same employer. As career-length employment with a single employer is a rarity today rather than the norm, it makes sense to revisit the burdens placed on employers to increase the skill base of the job market. But what is the public’s role? Should government agencies be delivering job seekers to employers who are ready to work in a specific job function from day one of their employment? How specialized should training be? If training is too specific, how do employees adjust if the employer severs ties and they find

themselves back on the job market? These are larger discussions that are not often discussed but have profound implications for how the employment relationship, workforce development, and other societal institutions are structured.

Finally, though beyond the parameters of the ACC Initiative, to reach the goal of increased college completion among the adult population, it could be helpful to reconsider and perhaps broaden the definition of “near completion” beyond the ACC Initiative definition of “within 30 credit hours of a degree.” However, it should be noted that facilitating college completion for clients further from a degree may require changes in the workforce development system, given the constraints on ITA funding, as well as case managers’ preparedness to counsel individuals through a longer education process. It also requires a consideration of timeliness and the reward structure for workforce centers, whose performance measures favor quicker training solutions. Shifting these factors to favor ACC would require a larger, institutional shift in the way that we define what is important and valued in the workforce development system.

### **Questions for Future Research**

While we were able to ascertain many things about the process and outcomes of the ACC Initiative, new questions arose that we believe merit further inquiry in the future:

*Is ACC a more permanent solution than short-term training?*

Though we were able to assess enrollment statistics using state data, given the timeframe of the ACC Initiative, it is not possible at this time to offer final statistics on degree completion given the lags in data tracking and the timeframe that it takes participants to complete semester work. The initial results showed some promise. However, in the future, we recommend an investigation that revisits ACC enrollees to determine 1) whether they do indeed complete the degrees they began under WIA, 2) whether they then see an increase in wages in both the short and long term, 3) whether they suffer subsequent unemployment and for what duration, 4) whether they re-enter the workforce development system for new training, and 5) whether they continue on to further education after completing their WIA-sponsored degrees. Ideally, these outcomes would be compared to clients who receive short-term training, thus enabling an answer to the overall question: does ACC change the client’s educational and career path?

*Does ACC offer more egalitarian outcomes for workforce center clients than certificate programs?*

Short-term training solutions that appear on the menu of workforce center client options often include career paths in sex-segregated industries (e.g., commercial driver's licenses for men or nursing assistant certificates for women). The industries that skew toward men tend to pay more than those that skew toward women (England et al. 1988, Hegewisch et al. 2010, Baron and Cobb-Clark 2010). As college courses may lead to more integrated industries, it is possible that this path will lead to more egalitarian wage outcomes for workforce center clients. However, this effect may depend on the majors that clients choose and whether those majors lead toward jobs in sex-segregated fields. The gender dynamics in the case management process also merit further focused examination.

*Would the proactive/intrusive advising model be a better tool for workforce center case management?*

A major source of concern is the ability of case managers to provide meaningful guidance to clients entering the WIA system while complying with the WIA mandate that case management be client-driven; case managers can provide a menu of options, but they are forbidden from recommending one path over others, as this could potentially lead to favoritism toward one provider over others and hinder client choice. However, clients arriving at the workforce center are seeking guidance and can become overwhelmed by the influx of information. Would more direct professional advice from the case managers, with much more regular follow-ups, help? Intensive coaching and proactive or intrusive advising is a process that has shown great promise in helping remedial college students navigate their educational pathways (Abelman and Molina 2001, Bettinger and Baker 2011, Earl 1988). Given that many ACC-eligible students are returning after a break from school, advising geared toward remedial students may have a beneficial outcome for this population as well. Would extra training on both the college system and client case management enable the workforce center case managers to take a more proactive role in helping their ACC clients navigate the system as well?

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The ACC Initiative enjoyed success by applying lessons learned throughout the process, in particular between the legacy states and those states joining later in the project. In particular, the ACC Implementation team worked to understand the local context and customize the program as needed. Learning to recognize common pitfalls and friction

points helped the team to build an initiative that was complex but nimble, applying a concierge model to the process that became more sophisticated with each new contact.

Early in the intervention, it was not uncommon to hear from the case managers and stakeholders that ACC was not necessarily anything new, though one noted that “having a name for something we already did was helpful.” However, in early interviews with frontline staff, we found that these efforts were not necessarily the most aggressive or most informed regarding college options prior to the ACC Initiative intervention. The implementation team was able to change the path dependency in these centers, decreasing inertia toward short-term credentials and helping the frontline staff and workforce center leadership to move toward including a serious discussion about college history and possibilities as a routinized element of the client intake process.

Some things will always be outside of the control of those who operate within this system. The quest for money, politics, and job churn for key decision-makers and supporters can prove to be quite a challenge. However, worker training, policy adjustments, and shifting the culture of workforce development systems are all goals that were demonstrated to be achievable in the ACC Initiative.

The 750 students in participating areas who entered higher education programs will have greater future prospects simply by having achieved some college. If they are successful in their programs and acquire their degrees, their futures should be brighter: they join the ranks of college degree holders whose current trajectory involves better lifetime incomes, greater resiliency in downturns, and even better health than their counterparts with less education. In short, increasing ACC through the workforce development system is not easy, and many adjustments must be considered, but the potential payoff makes it a worthwhile pursuit.

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