

Progress on Pathways: Findings from Qualitative Interviews with PACE Participants

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Overview

Many adults lack the education and training needed for jobs that provide good wages, benefits, and pathways to advancement. These adults may also face challenges to enrolling in and completing post-secondary education, including limited academic skills, work and family demands on time, and the inability to afford school. Career pathway programs seek to overcome these challenges by offering a variety of supports and a defined progression from training for entry-level jobs through higher levels of credentialing. This brief summarizes interviews conducted with participants in the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) study. PACE is a rigorous evaluation of nine career pathways programs in which program applicants were assigned at random to a treatment group that could access the career pathways program or a control group that could not. The interviews with treatment group members explored progress in education, training and employment two years after enrolling in the study. This brief does not make assumptions about what they would have done in the absence of the programs. More than three-quarters of interviewed treatment group members were making progress along their chosen pathway. Specifically:

- Most participants still in school had moved on to a second training step in the career pathways program, such as a Licensed Vocational Nurse or an Associates degree in Nursing. These participants cited the importance of their initial training in getting them started in the career area. Participants generally referred to the program in the past tense and indicated their relationship with the program was over.
- Those still in school also reported high levels of motivation to succeed, and some were contemplating obtaining additional education, such as a graduate degree. Yet they also discussed ongoing financial strain and challenges balancing increasingly difficult course work with family responsibilities.
- Many participants who had finished training and were working in the field were in low-paying jobs. This reflects their completion of the initial step on the pathway, generally for an entry-level job. Many of these participants had also cycled through a number of jobs since finishing their training. Most believed they would return to school in the near future, but cited a need to work in order to save money for classes or a desire to learn more skills by working.
- A smaller number of participants discussed challenges in progressing along their career pathway. These included difficulties finding a job in the field in which they trained (or any job at all), being on a waiting list to start the next step of their training, or being unable to complete the first training in the career pathway.

Introduction

Low-income, low-skilled adults are likely to face challenges in obtaining more education. These include financial challenges, lack of academic preparation, and other demands on their time, such as parenting and working (Tannock and Flocks 2003; Goldrick-Rab 2010). Career pathways programs are a relatively new approach to providing education and training by organizing a series of manageable

steps leading to successively higher credentials and employment opportunities in growing occupations. Each step is designed to prepare participants for the next level of employment and education and also to provide a credential with labor market value. Students also receive assistance and support to help overcome academic, personal, and other challenges to completing their desired training (Fein 2012).



The PACE study uses a random assignment evaluation design to assess the effectiveness of nine career pathways programs targeting low-income, low-skilled adults on credential attainment, employment and earnings. Applicants to the nine programs were assigned to a treatment group that could access the career pathways program or a control group that could not.

A previous set of briefs examined treatment group members' motivations and supports at the time they enrolled in the program. These briefs found high levels of motivation for participating in the career pathway programs, in part driven by desires to move out of the low-wage labor market, to provide better futures for their children and serve as role models to them, and to overcome personal challenges they faced in the past. In addition to the supports provided by the programs, such as paying tuition and other program costs, participants cited fellow program participants and family members as important sources of encouragement, and in the case of family, instrumental support through the provision of housing and child care.¹

1 See Seefeldt, Engstrom, and Gardiner, 2016, "Nothing Can Stop Me: Career Pathways Participants' Motivations and Thoughts on Success" and Seefeldt, Engstrom, and Gardiner, 2016, "Programmatic and Other Supports Accessed by Career Pathways Participants."

Participants also cited worries about their ability to pay for everyday expenses, finance future education and training, and manage student loans from previous education and training. Some were dealing with very difficult family issues, such as divorce and domestic violence. And, as a commonly cited challenge, some participants found certain course material to be difficult, while trying to fit training and studying into schedules that often included jobs and family responsibilities.²

This brief examines how these treatment group members were faring two years after enrolling in their initial career pathways program. Had their motivation and support systems helped sustain them through training and into jobs and/or additional schooling? Did financial or other challenges impede their progress? How do participants assess their progress along their chosen career pathway? This brief draws on a second round of qualitative interviews with a small number of treatment group members approximately 18 to 24 months after enrollment. It does not make assumptions about what they would have done in the absence of the program.

2 See Seefeldt, Engstrom, and Gardiner, 2016, "Finances, Family, Materials, and Time: Career Pathways Participants' Perceived Challenges."

Methodology

The PACE evaluation includes nine career pathways programs in 18 locations, operating across several industries including health and IT. The research team conducted qualitative interviews with a sample of treatment and control study participants in all nine programs, although not at all locations. This brief includes findings from interviews pooled across programs, rather than findings specific to individual programs.

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

The team scheduled a total of 146 interviews for the first round and completed 123 interviews, which were conducted between March and November 2014, for a response rate of 84 percent. The number of individuals interviewed at each program in 2014 ranged from eight at one program to a high of 32 interviews at one program with multiple locations. Response rates by program ranged from 75 percent to 100 percent. The same set of individuals was contacted for a second interview approximately 18 to 24 months after study enrollment. Response rates were much lower. Researchers conducted 34 interviews (22 with treatment group members and 12 with controls), for a response rate of 28 percent. Of those that did not

participate, 19 lacked current contact information, but the majority of those not interviewed (57 total) never responded to repeated calls, letters, emails, and/or texts from the researchers. Interviews were scheduled but not completed with another 11 first round respondents due to "no shows." Two respondents declined to participate. Interviews were conducted between October 2015 and August 2016.

Participation in the interviews was voluntary, and each participant received a token of appreciation in the form of a \$40 gift card (at the first interview) and a check for the same amount (at the second interview).

Interview format: Interviews were done in-person for the first round, while the second round was conducted over the telephone. Both sets of interviews were semi-structured in nature, allowing the interviewer the flexibility to follow up on and further probe about respondents answers, but all interviews covered the same set of topics. Interviews on average lasted 50 minutes for the first round and 40 minutes for the second.

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

Characteristics of Participants Interviewed

Due to the small numbers in each site, qualitative interview respondents, although initially randomly selected from among participants in their enrollment cohort, are not representative of all participants in the career pathways programs, nor were they intended to be. The demographics of the qualitative sample are somewhat different from the overall PACE treatment group sample.

A larger share of the 22 respondents who completed second round interviews (41 percent) than all treatment group members (23 percent) were in their late twenties to early thirties at baseline. Eighty-two percent of respondents were female, compared to 65 percent of all PACE treatment group members. Individuals of Hispanic origin were over-represented in the second round of qualitative interviews (59 percent versus 44 percent), while similar proportions of both samples reported being non-Hispanic Black (29 percent versus 30 percent). A smaller share of the second round sample reported being non-Hispanic White (six percent) than did all treatment group members (19 percent).

Findings: Progress on the Pathways is Varied but Generally Positive

The findings presented below are based upon interviews with 22 treatment group members. Ten of these respondents (46 percent) were moving forward with their schooling, either having completed entry-level training and moving onto the next step or were still enrolled in their original training program. Seven (32 percent) had obtained a job in their field of study. Five, though, reported facing some obstacles to achieving their goals.

Continued Schooling

Ten participants were enrolled in a training program when interviewed for the second time. Of these, two were working toward completing their initial training in which they had been enrolled, while one other had switched into a different entry-level program.

The other seven had moved onto the next step in their academic pathway for their chosen profession. For example, four participants had finished course work designed to help prepare them to enter programs to become a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) or Registered Nurse (RN) and were now working toward that degree.

Most participants who were continuing their education described the important role that first step of the “PACE program”—that is, the career pathways program included in the study—had played in helping them move forward. One participant explained:

I feel getting into the [PACE program], that was my first exposure back to actual structured school since I was in high school. That was really—it was really nice, because it was—it was more structured, and not just—yeah, it was—it was nice. I was nervous to go back to school, and that helped me—eased me into it, and I did really well, so it was nice.

Another participant reported that she had planned on enrolling in a nursing program regardless of her status after random assignment, but being in the PACE program “made it so much easier and less stressful.” She cited the financial assistance and help paying for books and supplies as easing a burden.

While nearly all participants had received financial assistance for their initial training, this support was not necessarily ongoing for those who were completing additional training beyond the first step in the pathway. Even those participants who did receive financial assistance reported that they had to pay some expenses out of pocket. One participant recounted the expenses associated with the nursing program in which she was enrolled:

Financial aid covered my tuition, but not books and tools and uniforms, and we have a kit of supplies to practice with in the lab each quarter. Getting started was really expensive, thinking that you had to buy all the software and the books for the entire program at once, plus uniforms and shoes and stethoscope.

Participants who had moved into the next step in their training tended to describe their time in the PACE program as being completed (although they knew that they continued to be part of the random assignment evaluation). They spoke of the PACE programs in the past tense instead of as part of a pathway and indicated that their relationship with the program ended after they completed the first training program. Several participants, when asked if they had thought of contacting the program when a need arose, such as transportation or financial assistance, said that they had not. Several others indicated that they had requested assistance from the program after completing their initial training, but that assistance was not provided due to lack of funds or program rules.

As was the case when they started the program, participants who were in school remained highly motivated, and some talked about going even further with their education, potentially to complete a Bachelor's degree or attend graduate school.

Yet, going to school remained challenging at times, in large part because it required balancing difficult course work with other demands on their time, including employment and family. One participant recalled how stressful the previous semester had been for her:

I wasn't really seeing my kids. I wasn't seeing anyone. My children weren't calling me mother anymore. They didn't even know who I was. It became really hard for me. My family just seemed to start crumbling down.

Cutting back on the number of hours she worked (she was also employed while attending school) helped this participant feel more connected to her children, but it also resulted in tighter financial circumstances. As she noted, "It's tight at the end of the week or at the end of the month; we have \$40.00 or \$50.00 in the bank once all the payments go through and everything."

Concerns about balancing school, work, and family as well as worries about finances were frequently mentioned by participants during their first round interviews, and these issues remained challenges as they continued with their education. Some parents with older children reported that they tried to study at the same time that their children did homework as a way to combine family and school responsibilities.

All but one of the participants who were enrolled in school noted that they had strong support systems in place when they began their initial training programs, and any reported changes in these support systems were in a positive direction. Two of these participants married during the time in between interviews. Both noted that their spouses were employed, bringing more financial resources to the household, and were committed to their partner's success. As one said, "I have more support. I'm not alone." Another participant began receiving financial support from her parents after she enrolled in the training for the next step on the pathway. Her parents paid the tuition, allowing her to quit her job and focus on school.

The rest of this group of nine participants paid close attention to their financial situation, putting themselves on budgets (if they weren't already engaged in that practice) and cutting back on anything considered "extra." While "living thin," as one participant put it, was not necessarily fun, only one participant reported being unable to afford all her expenses; her car had been re-possessed, and she was behind on paying her utility bills.

Support was not just financial. Some of these participants reported during their first interview that they studied with classmates. For two participants, both single mothers with no other family nearby, these relationships strengthened and became very important sources of support. One, who described

herself as "not the group type" said of her set of friends, "My family are these students in school." The other woman was so grateful for the assistance provided by a friend who was a year ahead of her in their training program that she decided to develop a mentoring program for new students. The school agreed to support the program, and the participant was delighted, noting:

I've had so many people come up to me and say it was a major lifesaver, that their mentor helped them a lot. Strengthening each other, or using support that's already [there], using each other to support each other I think is a very valuable thing.

Completed Program and Working in their Field of Study

Seven participants had completed their initial training and were working in the field for which they had trained. Four of them finished a program that trained them for jobs in the information technology (IT) sector, and all had been able to obtain relevant positions. One participant remained employed with her long-time employer after obtaining a business degree, but she received a promotion, though was not currently working due to illness. Two had been trained as Certified Nurses' Assistants (CNAs) and worked as CNAs. Another had been trained as a heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) technician, and while he worked repairing appliances, he said he was using skills learned from his training and believed the fields to be related.

These were the jobs in which this group of participants was working in at the time of the second interview. However, many of them had cycled through several jobs before landing their current position. One of the CNAs quit the first job she held after finishing her initial training because she believed her employer was violating regulations designed to protect patients. Those working in the IT field often held contract positions, some of which did not last for long periods of time, before transitioning into regular employment, although some were still working as contract or temporary employees.

Pay for these positions was varied, ranging from a low of around \$7.50 per hour for one of the CNAs to \$24.00 per hour for an IT position. Some jobs did not offer benefits because they were contract positions, while in other cases, low-paid employees did not earn enough to be able to afford benefits like health insurance offered by their employer.

Most of these participants believed that they would return to school in the near future, but cited a need to work in order to save money for classes or a desire to learn more skills by working. One participant noted that additional training would cost anywhere from \$20,000 to \$80,000, depending on whether she enrolled in a community college or a private institution. Another participant, who had previously attended a

university, said of his current situation, “I feel like I learn more on the job than I ever did in school.” Still another participant was on a waiting list to start a LPN program.

This set of participants had positive recollections of their time enrolled in programs in the PACE study. This was particularly true of the participants who were in a program focused on IT training, who noted that the program not only provided instruction about computer hardware and software, but also provided training in interviewing techniques and other soft skills and secured an internship for participants. A participant who completed a CNA course said that her program provided her with supports so that she did not have to worry about meeting her basic needs:

They provide me food. They provide me gas. They help me a lot. When I finish my school, I will never forget that they give me the opportunity to have a new outfit to go for my interview...when I went to my interview I used the same outfit that they give me...I'm thankful. They help me a lot.

Another participant said his program helped him concretely reach goals he had long held. This respondent knew he wanted to work in a particular field, but, as he said, “I mean, I had a general idea [about the field], but I didn't really know specific job titles or paths that I could go into. [The PACE program] did help me in some sorts with that.” Finally, one other participant viewed his participation as being particularly transformative, helping him see that he could one day own his own business. He said:

Education was a big, big, big change in my life. My goals, instead of being an employee of [a repair shop], I don't want to be just the “go-to” guy that goes and puts everything on their back and just gets the job done. I want to be the guy choosing the person that will do that for me.

Challenges Remain for Some

Finally, five participants reported facing challenges to meeting their training and employment goals or had embarked on a different path. One participant had taken all of the pre-requisite classes needed for the LPN program in her area, but she was on a waiting list to start. She believed she would be able to enroll the following academic year, but at the time of the interview was working in a low-paying, service sector job.

One participant had completed her training program and was employed, but not in the field for which she trained (medical billing and coding). She decided that ultimately, she lacked interest in the field, noting:

When I was finishing up my last semester, I could not find myself—I was starting to struggle more as far as my grades. My grades had been good the first two semesters, three semesters, and so third semester, I just—I don't know if it was because I was starting to lose interest or I was just starting to struggle, and I just felt it wasn't for me.

She was able to find a job in the sector in which she was previously employed, although a higher paying one. She did not believe that her training was a waste of time, though, and thought it was beneficial to have training for a different type of job, should she ever want to switch paths. That said, this participant had never voiced a strong desire to work in the field for which she trained. During her first interview she said, “I just want to be able to work. Like I said, my goals are to travel. It's not career-wise. It's family-wise. I just need to make an income.”

Three participants were unemployed at the time of the interview, although one had been offered a job. She had also had a child since completing her training and had taken time off from working, and she had held several temporary positions in her field. The other unemployed participant had not worked except for odd jobs doing home repair. He said of his financial situation, “It's scary sometimes, because sometimes I don't make any money. I went a whole month with no money. Only because of the food stamps I was able to eat.” He had applied for numerous jobs and was quite discouraged about his prospects given his history. Despite his difficulties, he said of his experience in the PACE program:

They inspired me to get back on the right track and to get back into the medical field because I seen the need for it. Just being in a school setting inspired me...it just inspired me to become a better person because of the setting and being affiliated with some of the instructors when I was there, even though I don't keep in contact with them now. A lot of the instructors were very inspirational.

When he was first interviewed, this participant articulated a number of challenges he faced—his older age, his past experiences getting into trouble, and his struggles with substance abuse. When he started the program, he recognized that he might have difficulty finding a job but hoped that the credential he would receive would help him overcome those potential barriers. However, he had not re-connected with the program since finishing, and he lacked any real family or other support system to help him.

The third unemployed participant dropped out of her training program before finishing. This participant was attempting to complete her General Education Development (GED) certificate so that she could enter training for a healthcare profession. After taking a preparation class for a second time and again not passing the test, she stopped. Part of her difficulty, she explained was that she had been working, making it difficult for her to find time to study. However, she also noted that she found the material challenging and hard to understand. She subsequently lost that job, and when interviewed the second time, was looking for work. She had not decided whether she would re-enroll in the GED program, despite her continued hope to have a career in healthcare. She also had not been in contact with the career pathway program since leaving her GED class.

- **Job turnover was common for those who completed a training and found jobs.** Participants cycled through two or more jobs during a short period of time. In some cases, this outcome might be expected, since turnover in entry level jobs is high. However, some of these participants had held numerous jobs and did not seem close to finding permanent positions.
- **Despite stated challenges, most participants who had completed their initial training spoke very positively of the program.** Participants noted that the program provided them with both financial and motivational support.

Summary

Interviews with a small number of treatment group members 18 to 24 months following enrollment in the PACE study found that many were making some progress in their chosen career pathway. Progress, though, was uneven and a subset of participants continued to struggle with employment and education.

- **A majority of participants are on a pathway.** They continue with training and/or work in the field of their initial training. However challenges remain. These include tight finances, low-paying jobs, and difficulties balancing training and family responsibilities.
- **Some participants are facing difficulties on their pathways.** In some instances, participants opted to change fields after completing or dropping out of training. In others, jobs for which participants trained were not available locally or significant personal barriers interfered with obtaining a job. Some participants could not complete the first step on the pathway, whether because of lack of time, difficulty with the material, or some combination of the two.
- **Most participants report they are no longer connected to the program.** Career pathways programs intend to improve the education and earnings of low-skilled adults by providing well-articulated training steps, each associated with a credential and a job requiring higher skills. In practice, participants who enrolled in training beyond the initial training step did not refer to this subsequent training as a step in their program. Instead, they described the initial step as a self-contained program that was completed.

Citations

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About This Series

This is one of a series of briefs that describe findings from in-depth interviews with Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) study participants. The goal of this sub-study is to gain a more comprehensive understanding of study participants' motivation for wanting to enroll in a career pathways program, their likelihood of success, their experiences with program services, challenges they experienced to completing programs and supports that helped them succeed. The first three briefs in this series focused on participants

early experiences in the study, approximately six months after they were assigned to a group that could enroll in the career pathways programs. This brief reports on findings from a second round of interviews that were conducted 18 to 24 months after study entry. The first three briefs can be found at www.career-pathways.org, and at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/pathways-for-advancing-careers-and-education>

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