

WorkAdvance

Executive Summary

Meeting the Needs of Workers and Employers

Implementation of a
Sector-Focused Career
Advancement Model
for Low-Skilled Adults

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Overview

The WorkAdvance program model integrates the most promising features of two especially important areas of workforce policy: “sectoral” strategies, which seek to meet the needs of both workers and employers by preparing individuals for quality jobs in specific high-demand industries or occupational clusters, and job retention and career advancement strategies, which seek to improve workers’ prospects for sustained employment and upward mobility. Specifically, the WorkAdvance model offers the following sequence of sector-focused program components to participants for up to two years after enrollment: preemployment and career readiness services, occupational skills training, job development and placement, and postemployment retention and advancement services. WorkAdvance programs are currently operated by four organizations (two in New York City, one in Tulsa, and one in Greater Cleveland) that focus on a variety of sectors and bring different types of experience and approaches to the implementation of WorkAdvance.

This first report presents early findings on how the four local program providers translated the WorkAdvance model into a workable program. It offers lessons that may be helpful to organizations seeking to implement a sector-focused career advancement program like WorkAdvance.

The WorkAdvance program operations and evaluation are funded through the federal Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a public-private partnership administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service. This SIF project is led by the Mayor’s Fund to Advance New York City and the NYC Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) in collaboration with MDRC.

Key Findings

- The WorkAdvance model is demanding, requiring providers to work effectively with both employers and program participants and to incorporate a postemployment advancement component that was new to all of the providers. Yet all four providers are now delivering each of the WorkAdvance components, with postemployment services being the least developed.
- Screening for program entry was driven by employer needs; as a result, on average, only one in five applicants were eligible and qualified for the program.
- The “soft skills” taught in career readiness classes appear to have been as important to participants and employers as the technical skills acquired from occupational skills training.
- Early indications are that completion rates for occupational skills training are high, although they vary somewhat across the providers. In most cases, completion of the training led to the earning of an industry-recognized credential, which is a critical first step toward getting a job in the sector.

Support from the Social Innovation Fund for WorkAdvance program operations will continue through June 2015. MDRC’s second report, in late 2015, will examine WorkAdvance implementation in more depth and will present findings on program costs as well as impacts on employment, earnings, and other outcomes of the program.

Preface

Even in good economic times, many low-skilled adults in the United States have difficulty obtaining jobs and advancing in careers that pay enough to support their families. At the same time, some employers report difficulty finding people with the right skills to meet their needs, even in periods of high unemployment. Addressing the needs of both workers and employers, in ways that will benefit both, has become a priority for public workforce systems and workforce development organizations. While these agencies, as well as policymakers, are increasingly looking to sectoral strategies to achieve this, few randomized controlled trials have been implemented at scale to test the effectiveness of these strategies; additionally, there has not been much focus on advancing workers to higher-paying jobs once they begin work in a given sector.

The WorkAdvance program and the related evaluation being conducted by MDRC were designed to test the effectiveness of a model that builds on lessons from previous research and practitioners' experience both in sectoral strategies, which prepare individuals for quality jobs that employers want to fill in specific high-demand industries or occupational clusters, and in job retention and career advancement strategies, which seek to improve workers' prospects for sustained employment and upward mobility. The program integrates the most promising features of sectoral and retention and advancement strategies in the hopes of producing larger and longer-lasting effects on employment, earnings, and career paths than either strategy might have on its own. Specifically, it offers preemployment and career readiness services, occupational skills training, job development and placement, and postemployment retention and advancement services. WorkAdvance programs are currently operated by four organizations (two in New York City, one in Tulsa, and one in Greater Cleveland) that focus on a variety of sectors and bring different experiences and approaches to implementing WorkAdvance.

Serving a dual customer — both workers and employers — can be challenging for many workforce development organizations. Likewise, focusing beyond initial job placement on the steps that workers need to take to advance in a career are new concepts for many workforce practitioners. What are ways in which career readiness training and occupational skills training can be informed by employers? What does it mean to coach someone toward advancement, and how do you actually do it? What kinds of marketing and screening are necessary to recruit and select participants who will be a good “fit” for a given sector? This report offers some lessons for practitioners about what it takes to launch and develop an advancement-focused, sector-based training and employment program.

In late 2015, MDRC will release a report describing the program's effects on employment and earnings, as well as its costs. In the meantime, this report offers workforce development professionals some insights into the challenges of, and best practices for, implementing a program like WorkAdvance.

Gordon L. Berlin
President

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We are especially grateful to our colleagues at the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO), who managed the entire New York City Social Innovation Fund (SIF) project, worked closely with the providers to raise the SIF match funds, brought providers together to share best practices and experiences through the SIF Learning Network, and monitored providers' performance. In particular, we thank David Berman, Patrick Hart, Sinead Keegan, and Kristin Morse for their commitment to WorkAdvance.

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and analysis, and Emma Saltzberg led the production of this report. Robert Weber edited the report, and Stephanie Cowell and Carolyn Thomas prepared it for publication.

Finally, our deepest gratitude goes to the individuals who contributed to the study by participating in the WorkAdvance program, who have allowed us to learn from their experiences.

The Authors

Executive Summary

Even in good economic times, many low-skilled adults in the United States have difficulty obtaining jobs and advancing in careers that pay enough to support their families. Individuals with no more than a high school education have seen their wages remain flat in real terms for decades, and their employment is often unsteady.¹ Training programs for low-skilled adults often fail to prepare participants for sustained employment and upward mobility, especially if the programs do not lead to a marketable credential² or do not focus on jobs in high-demand occupations with genuine advancement opportunities. At the same time, some employers report difficulty finding people with the right skills to meet their needs, even in periods of high unemployment.³

Amid much debate about how workforce policy should address these concerns, there is a continuing need for clearer evidence on the best ways to promote the upward mobility of low-skilled workers. The WorkAdvance program and the related evaluation were designed to help fill the gap in hard evidence by testing the effectiveness of a model that builds on lessons from previous research and practitioners' experience in two especially important areas of workforce policy: "sectoral" strategies, which entail preparing individuals for quality jobs that employers are seeking to fill in specific high-demand industries or occupational clusters, and job retention and career advancement strategies, which seek to improve workers' prospects for sustained employment and upward mobility. By integrating the most promising features of sectoral and retention and advancement strategies, the designers of WorkAdvance are hopeful that this combination of services will produce larger and longer-lasting effects on employment, earnings, and career paths than either strategy might have on its own; the WorkAdvance study will provide the first rigorous test of this combination of services.

The WorkAdvance program and evaluation are being conducted under the auspices of the Social Innovation Fund (SIF). Administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service, SIF is a public-private partnership designed to identify and expand effective solutions to critical social challenges. WorkAdvance is part of the New York City Center for

¹Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and Heidi Shierholz, *The State of Working America: 2008-2009* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

²Gayle Hamilton and Susan Scrivener, *Increasing Employment Stability and Earnings for Low-Wage Workers: Lessons from the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) Project* (New York: MDRC, 2012b).

³Harry J. Holzer, "Skill Mismatches in Contemporary Labor Markets: How Real? And What Remedies?" Conference Paper (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council and University of Maryland School of Public Policy, 2013).

Economic Opportunity (CEO) SIF project, which is led by CEO and the Mayor’s Fund to Advance New York City in collaboration with MDRC. MDRC is leading the WorkAdvance evaluation; has provided technical assistance to the local providers; and, jointly with CEO, has monitored providers’ operations. Funding for the program and the evaluation come from the SIF and a broad array of local funding partners that have matched the SIF funding.⁴

Overview of the WorkAdvance Model

The WorkAdvance model offers a sequence of sector-focused program components: preemployment and career readiness services, occupational skills training, job development and placement, and postemployment retention and advancement services. The dual goals of WorkAdvance are to meet employers’ needs for skilled labor while also helping low-income individuals obtain jobs in the targeted sectors, succeed in their jobs, and advance in their careers.

The WorkAdvance model requires local providers to:

- Recruit and select a sufficient number of appropriate participants to fill training classes, that is, low-income individuals who have the ability to complete the program services and be attractive to employers while not being so qualified that they have nothing to gain from the program.
- Develop a clear understanding of the structure, occupational opportunities, and skill requirements of the identified sector; establish and maintain strong relationships with employers; and be nimble in adjusting the program offerings to emerging labor market trends in the targeted sector.
- Engage participants in the full sequence of services needed to prepare them for initial placement and progress along career paths within the sector. Notably, many employment and training efforts have found it difficult to engage participants fully, particularly in multiple service components that extend for the duration that they do in WorkAdvance.
- Integrate postemployment services — especially support for advancement, not just retention — that have not typically been present in other sectoral programs.

⁴WorkAdvance providers worked closely with CEO to identify potential funding sources and raise the matching funds that were required by the SIF.

The WorkAdvance program is being delivered by four local providers that focused on a variety of sectors and brought different types of experience:

- Madison Strategies Group is a nonprofit spinoff of Grant Associates, a for-profit workforce development company that operates a variety of workforce programs in New York City, including sectoral strategies; one such program operated by Grant Associates influenced the design of WorkAdvance. Grant Associates' leaders used that experience to launch a new organization and program in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that focuses on the transportation and manufacturing sectors.⁵
- Per Scholas, in Bronx, New York, focuses on the information technology sector. Before WorkAdvance, Per Scholas had substantial experience with sectoral programs and with a random assignment research design of the type being used in this evaluation (discussed in the next section). It participated in the only rigorous study of sectoral strategies that had been conducted prior to WorkAdvance: Public/Private Ventures' (P/PV) Sectoral Employment Impact Study,⁶ which also had a large influence on the design of WorkAdvance.
- St. Nicks Alliance, in Brooklyn, New York, is primarily known as a large, well-established multiservice community-based organization offering affordable housing, health care, youth services, and other social programs. St. Nicks Alliance had operated smaller-scale occupational skills training programs, including environmental remediation training, for more than 10 years. Although the organization had offered occupational skills training on a small scale before, it did not have experience operating sectoral strategies. For WorkAdvance, St. Nicks Alliance focuses on environmental remediation and related occupations.
- Towards Employment is a community-based organization that provides a range of employment services for low-income populations in Greater Cleveland. As part of its employment programming, it offers financial literacy services and computer skills as well as on-site General Educational Develop-

⁵Madison Strategies Group initially offered services only in the transportation sector, including training for transportation-related manufacturing; however, the manufacturing focus gradually became more distinct from transportation as it became clear that someone who is trained to manufacture transportation-related parts can actually operate the machines necessary to make a wide variety of parts — even those unrelated to transportation. It is now more accurate to say that Madison Strategies Group focuses on both the transportation sector and the manufacturing sector.

⁶Maguire et al. (2010).

ment (GED) classes. Potential barriers to employment, job retention, and advancement are addressed by a range of supportive services, including transportation, legal services, and an extensive referral network for housing, mental health, and substance abuse assistance. While Towards Employment offered a range of employment programs and had done previous work in the health care sector, it did not have experience operating sectoral strategies per se. For WorkAdvance, Towards Employment is the only provider that launched services in two very distinct sectors — health care and manufacturing — and in two locations.⁷

Although all the WorkAdvance providers eventually emphasized training first before placement, Madison Strategies Group and Towards Employment initially implemented the program model, by design, with two separate tracks: One track emphasized up-front occupational skills training (similar to most other sector-based programs), and the other track sought to place people into jobs first. The “placement-first” track was intended to be a less expensive but still effective route to advancement by providing enrollees the opportunity to gain experience by working and learning sector-specific skills on the job, without participating in formal training first.

The local WorkAdvance programs enrolled participants from June 2011 to June 2013. For all participants, services continue for up to two years after enrollment.

The WorkAdvance Evaluation

The WorkAdvance evaluation examines how the program model was implemented in practice; its effects (or “impacts”) on the employment, earnings, and other outcomes for individuals who enrolled in WorkAdvance; and the cost of the program. The impact analysis uses a rigorous, random assignment research design⁸ to compare the outcomes for individuals who enrolled in WorkAdvance and the outcomes for individuals in a control group.

⁷Towards Employment subcontracts with Youngstown-based Compass Family and Community Services to deliver services in Youngstown, but research enrollment ceased there in January 2013. The partnership continues with a more targeted focus on manufacturing; however, individuals who had enrolled in WorkAdvance at Compass are not included in the study’s implementation or impact analysis for reasons discussed below in this report.

⁸In a random assignment evaluation, eligible individuals who apply for a program are assigned at random to either receive the program’s services or not. If the sample sizes are large enough, the difference between the two groups’ outcomes — referred to as “impacts” — can be attributed to the program, since the two groups were statistically alike at the time they entered the study and the only difference between them is that one group received program services and the other did not. A random assignment study (also known as a randomized controlled trial, or RCT) is widely held to be the most reliable way to study a program’s effectiveness.

This first report on WorkAdvance focuses on how the four local program providers translated the WorkAdvance model into a workable program. It offers lessons to consider when launching sectoral strategies that include advancement services, particularly postemployment. The report offers insights on the level of effort required to implement the program model; the level of technical assistance given to the providers to implement the model within the context of a randomized controlled trial; how program operations evolved over time; and how the four providers' decisions and experiences reflect their individual operating histories, strengths, and weaknesses. In particular, the report describes how the providers recruited and selected participants, as well as the extent to which the providers have so far been able to deliver services with a true sectoral focus while actively engaging workers and employers in the manner that the WorkAdvance model envisions.

This report covers activities through fall 2013: the first 24 to 28 months of WorkAdvance operations, depending on when each provider began enrolling participants. Most of the detailed data that are presented cover the first six months of participation in WorkAdvance services for all program group members randomly assigned through February 2013.⁹ The provider-reported job placement data, however, pertain to a smaller sample (enrolled through August 2012), which has 12 months of follow-up data, to allow more time to capture instances of program group members completing their WorkAdvance activities and finding employment.

A second report on WorkAdvance, in late 2015, will examine program implementation in more depth for the full sample, relying on both program and survey data and covering a longer operating period. It will also include findings on program costs and on employment, earnings, and other impacts for 18 to 24 months after random assignment. A total of five years of follow-up is planned for the impact analysis, if funding permits.

Early Implementation and Participation Findings

Translating the WorkAdvance model into a set of concrete services took time, and a substantial amount of technical assistance, for all four providers. The model is demanding, in that it requires providers to have a strong capacity to work with both employers and program participants and also to incorporate a postemployment advancement component that was new to all the providers.

- **Despite bringing varying amounts of experience with sectoral programs and varying operational strengths and challenges to the launch and development of WorkAdvance, all four providers are now delivering ser-**

⁹Program data for this report were collected through August 2013.

vices across all the WorkAdvance model components, with postemployment services being the least developed.

As noted above, Madison Strategies Group and Per Scholas both organizationally focus exclusively on sectoral programs, had already worked within their targeted sectors, had leadership with considerable sectoral programming experience, and ran programs that were predecessors of WorkAdvance; they were able to launch their WorkAdvance programs before the other two providers did. Having a singular focus on WorkAdvance and an operating culture that aligns closely with the model made it easier for Madison Strategies Group and Per Scholas to make the program a priority within their organizations, to serve a dual customer (participant and employer) in the way that the model envisions, and to adapt their staffs to the functional roles that the model requires. Meanwhile, St. Nicks Alliance had to develop a sectoral program in environmental remediation, for which it had already delivered training, within the context of operating a multifaceted organization, and Towards Employment had the extra challenges of gaining expertise in the manufacturing sector and of launching WorkAdvance in two locations and for two distinct sectors each. Additionally, both St. Nicks Alliance and Towards Employment managed other programs and brought to WorkAdvance an operating culture that was initially more focused on removing employment barriers than WorkAdvance calls for.

Yet all four providers are now far along in implementing the program components. By fall 2013, for example, the providers had all incorporated employer input and guidance into almost every part of the WorkAdvance program, including up-front screening, career readiness services, occupational skills training, and job development and placement — making WorkAdvance a truly employer-driven and demand-driven program. Additionally, the providers' employer partners were pleased, overall, with the services delivered by the providers and with the relationships established with them. However, postemployment advancement services are still being developed and rolled out. (For that reason, detailed discussion of this component is deferred until the next report, in late 2015.)

- **Marketing and outreach required a substantial investment of time and resources, especially because, on average, only one in five applicants were eligible and qualified for the program.**

The recruitment sources that generated the largest number of applicants for WorkAdvance did not necessarily yield the largest number who were eligible and suitable for WorkAdvance. However, careful analysis helped providers focus their outreach efforts more productively, so that a higher percentage of applicants could make it through the screening process and enroll. For example, while friends and family members were the largest recruitment source at St. Nicks Alliance, the Internet brought in the largest number of *eligible* applicants. After

learning that placing ads on the local Craigslist site could be effective, St. Nicks Alliance continued to use this source throughout the enrollment period.

As discussed above, a critical up-front WorkAdvance activity was the recruitment and screening of individuals who would be appropriate for the program. The WorkAdvance providers used both objective criteria (such as income guidelines¹⁰ and test scores) and subjective criteria (such as staff assessments of potential barriers to employment) to screen applicants. However, relatively few applicants were screened out as inappropriate by more subjective criteria at the discretion of the providers' staff; most of the individuals who did not eventually enroll in the program either withdrew on their own accord or failed to achieve the required score on assessments of their academic level. The screening for applicants' motivation may well have influenced the high participation rates in program activities discussed below.

- **Despite some advantageous characteristics, particularly with regard to educational attainment and employment history, the sample still faced substantial barriers to employment.**

At the time they entered the study, almost all sample members had at least a high school diploma or GED certificate, and over half the sample had at least some college education. Almost all sample members also had previous work experience, although only one in five were working. There is some variation in education levels across the industries, likely due in part to some providers using a minimum level of education as an eligibility criterion. For example, less than 1 percent of sample members training in the information technology industry lacked a high school diploma or GED certificate, since Per Scholas required this to help ensure that applicants would have the minimum academic skills necessary to succeed in the information technology sector. Other barriers to employment faced by the full sample are apparent, however: More than 36 percent of sample members had been unemployed for at least seven months prior to study entry. This group is of particular interest, as there is concern in the workforce policy community about the reduced labor market reentry rates for the longer-term unemployed. One-quarter of the overall sample had a previous criminal conviction, and even higher rates were seen within those enrollees targeted for the transportation and manufacturing industries (40 percent and 46 percent, respectively). Individuals who were targeted for the health care sector — over 90 percent of whom are female (in contrast to the other sectors, which are majority male) — had the highest percentage of single parents and the highest rates of food stamp usage.

¹⁰For WorkAdvance, applicants needed to be adults who had a monthly family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level and who earned less than \$15 per hour at the time they entered the study.

- **Even for a population that had substantial prior work experience, the “soft skills” taught in the career readiness classes were as important to participants and employers as the technical skills acquired from occupational skills training.**

The key features of the career readiness services were designed to provide (1) preemployment coaching to help participants set and follow through with career advancement goals and (2) career readiness classes to teach participants about the sector and help them acquire “soft skills” that are critical to success in their respective sectors. Although the structure and manner of delivering career readiness training varied across the providers, the basic content of career readiness training was similar: All the providers covered such topics as an introduction to the sector, résumés and cover letters, job search, interview preparation, appropriate behavior on the job (such as the importance of punctuality and reliability), and development of individualized career plans (ICPs), although some providers emphasized certain topics more than others. Employers who were interviewed for this report concurred that soft skills — or, as one employer called them, “essential skills” — are in many ways more important than technical skills. Rarely, they said, were individuals terminated from employment for technical mistakes; more often, terminations were the result of a lack of essential skills, such as showing up every day and being on time or because of sloppy behavior on the job.

- **Early indications are that training completion rates are high in Work-Advance: Very few program participants dropped out of occupational skills training within the first six months after random assignment.**

As shown in the top panel of Table ES.1, about 70 percent of participants across the providers participated in occupational skills training. As expected, rates of participation in occupational skills training are higher at Per Scholas and St. Nicks Alliance (the two providers that only offered training before job placement) than at Madison Strategies Group and Towards Employment (the two providers that were initially expected to place only about 50 percent of participants into training and the other 50 percent directly into jobs). The training participation rates averaged 89 percent for the training-first providers, compared with 52 percent for the dual-track providers.

Among those who started skills training, the average dropout rate across the providers within six months of random assignment is about 12 percent — a very low rate for a training or education program geared toward this population.¹¹ Although the bottom panel of Table ES.1

¹¹Gayle Hamilton and Susan Scrivener, “Facilitating Postsecondary Education and Training for TANF Recipients,” Brief No. 07 (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2012a).

The WorkAdvance Study

Table ES.1

Indicators of Participation in Program Group Activities at Six Months and Twelve Months After Random Assignment

Cross-Site

Participation in program activity since RA (%)	PS	SNA	MSG	TE	Overall
<u>Six-month indicators for participants randomly assigned through February 2013</u>					
Ever started skills training or obtained a provider-verified job ^a	93.1	85.2	77.0	69.9	81.4
Ever participated in any career readiness activity ^b	93.1	83.5	96.7	97.5	93.2
Ever started skills training	93.1	83.5	52.3	50.9	69.7
Ever completed skills training	76.9	76.4	25.1	33.1	52.0
Ever obtained a credential ^c in targeted sector (%)	70.0	69.2	25.1	15.7 ^d	44.2
Ever obtained a provider-verified job ^a	20.0	30.2	51.9	29.7	32.8
Sample size	260	182	239	236	917
<u>Twelve-month indicators for participants randomly assigned through August 2012</u>					
Ever started skills training or obtained a provider-verified job ^a	94.4	85.2	80.3	70.8	83.0
Ever participated in any career readiness activity ^b	94.4	83.5	99.4	96.6	94.2
Ever started skills training	94.4	83.5	49.4	41.5	67.2
Ever completed skills training	79.1	80.0	36.4	31.3	56.1
Ever obtained a credential ^c in targeted sector (%)	70.1	79.1	35.8	15.7 ^d	49.3
Ever obtained a provider-verified job ^a	49.2	48.7	67.9	49.0	54.1
Sample size	177	115	162	147	601

(continued)

Table ES.1 (continued)

SOURCES: Program tracking systems managed by Per Scholas (PS), St. Nicks Alliance (SNA), Madison Strategies Group (MSG), and Towards Employment (TE).

NOTES: RA = random assignment.

Refer to Appendix Table E.1 for site-specific details regarding how each metric is defined.

^aA job is considered verified if the WorkAdvance provider has obtained a pay stub or employment verification form or has made direct contact with the employer.

^bThe first program activity at PS and SNA is skills training, which is offered in combination with career readiness training and includes help with developing a career plan, résumés, and interview preparation. At MSG, the first program activity is career readiness training. At TE, the first program activity is an initial assessment whereby career goals and barriers to employment are discussed.

^cCredentials in the targeted sector are locally and/or nationally recognized. There is cross-site variation in reporting of locally recognized credentials obtained in the targeted sector.

^dTE's program tracking system captures only nationally recognized credentials. Therefore, participants who obtained the locally recognized computer numerical control machining credential are not counted as ever having obtained a credential.

shows that a higher percentage of participants who started skills training at Per Scholas and St. Nicks Alliance had completed the training within twelve months of enrollment than is the case at Madison Strategies Group and Towards Employment, further follow-up is needed to interpret these rates because of the number of participants who were still in training at the end of the twelve-month follow-up period.

- **In most cases, completion of occupational skills training led to the earning of either a nationally or locally recognized credential (or both)¹² — a critical first step toward getting a job in the sector.**

A credential indicates to potential employers that participants left training with a tangible skill, which was the expectation of WorkAdvance training. Most of the training programs were designed to lead to the earning of a credential; in some cases, such as at St. Nicks Alliance, trainings could lead to as many as five different credentials. As the top panel of Table ES.1 shows, at the two training-first providers, Per Scholas and St. Nicks Alliance, about 76 percent of participants completed training within six months of enrollment, and 70 percent earned a license or certificate. At Madison Strategies Group, all 25 percent of participants who completed training as of six months after random assignment also earned a license or certificate.

¹²Some of the WorkAdvance providers tracked and measured only nationally recognized credentials, obtained by passing an exam developed by a nationally recognized industry association, while others tracked and measured credentials that were not necessarily recognized nationally but that were recognized and valued by local sector employers. In most cases, completion of skills training led to the earning of at least one of these types of credentials.

Towards Employment only reported on nationally recognized credentials, though some of its participants could obtain locally recognized credentials. As a result, the roughly 16 percent reported to have obtained a credential in the health care or manufacturing sector at Towards Employment — which is about half of those who ever completed skills training within six months of enrollment — does not include those who obtained a locally recognized credential.

- **The placement-first strategy, while potentially worthwhile, did not deliver widely in this case on the goal of ensuring that individuals would have opportunities to gain new skills while employed. Whether or not these individuals are advancing, despite having fewer opportunities for skill acquisition than expected, remains to be seen.**

For the placement-first approach to be delivered as intended, it likely needs to be coupled with strong postemployment advancement services, but the eventual impact analysis may ultimately shed some light on this. Postemployment services — which might have helped the placement-first participants gain new skills and advance — were not developed in time to help ensure that these participants could move beyond entry-level positions. Without postemployment services squarely in place, the placement-first approach was not very different from a regular, nonsectoral placement program.

Next Steps

The WorkAdvance providers will continue to deliver services to participants with support from the Social Innovation Fund through June 2015. Researchers will continue to track the progress of program implementation, including the still-developing delivery of postemployment services. A survey of WorkAdvance enrollees and the control group is currently being fielded. The next report on WorkAdvance, in late 2015, will update the preliminary implementation findings in this first report, and it will also include findings from the impact and cost analyses.

Taken together, the WorkAdvance reports will provide policymakers, practitioners, and funders with especially useful information on the feasibility, impact, and cost of expanding and replicating a model of this type for low-income populations in various local contexts. Moreover, efforts are under way to secure additional funding to extend the follow-up of the program and control groups in order to document the longer-term impacts of the WorkAdvance model.

About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.