

CREDENTIAL ATTAINMENT BY OLDER WORKERS: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND THE DISLOCATED WORKER PROGRAM IN SUCCESSFUL EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

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Workers are remaining in the labor force at older ages and despite their desire to work, those without jobs face unprecedented durations of unemployment. Many of the unemployed lack current skills for jobs in demand and need to either upgrade their skills or be trained for a new occupation to become reemployed. An aging workforce combined with concerns about the long-term viability of social welfare programs has increased the importance of identifying strategies to encourage working at older ages. In recent years there has been increased focus on credential attainment through participation in publicly sponsored employment and training programs. While many older workers benefit from participation in publicly sponsored employment programs, they are less likely than their younger counterparts to receive training services.

The Workforce Investment Act's (WIA) Dislocated Worker Program plays an important role in providing employment and training services to displaced workers and the economically disadvantaged; these services are offered at American Job Centers. Community colleges and the American Job Center network have a shared goal of training workers for jobs in demand; they serve the needs of both employers and employees. This mixed methods research used a combination of multivariate regression, binary logistic regression, and key informant interviews to examine outcomes of older workers who participated in a training program through the WIA Dislocated Worker Program between April 1, 2008 and December 31, 2009 and/or enrolled in credential programs at community colleges. Unemployed workers aged 55 to 74 were the focus of the quantitative portion of this research.

Qualitative Research

The goal of the qualitative portion of this research was to identify strategies that allow workers to remain in the workforce at older ages in order to enhance their economic security and reduce their risk of poverty in retirement. This was accomplished through key informant interviews at 14 community colleges. Older adults face unique challenges in attending college; many never anticipated enrolling in college and lack an understanding of how to become a successful student and find new employment following completion of their educational program. The research question addressed was: *What are the characteristics of effective community college involvement in workforce training for older workers?*

Community colleges are essential for a competitive and well educated workforce. The Great Recession has resulted in extended unemployment for many older workers. Complicating their situation is the fact that many lack skills necessary for jobs in demand. In order to obtain new employment, these workers may require training in a new occupation and much of that training takes place at community colleges. Outreach programs for older students, providing advice for specific programs of study, support during the program to ensure completion, job placement services, and continuing education for skill upgrading are all keys to success for older students. Within each of these major categories (outreach programs, academic advising and counseling, persistence, job placement, and continuing education), specific challenges, services, and program components emerged from the interviews. Commitment by top community college administration (i.e., the president and board of trustees) to programs that support the success of older students is

important during each phase of the older student's college experience. Major findings from key informant interviews include:

- It is important for educators and career counselors to provide unemployed workers with a realistic view of their skills, the job market, and how their skills match those required for jobs in demand so they can make a timely decision about their future.
- Tools that assist unemployed workers in financial planning that will allow them to make an informed decision about their future are essential, including a method for determining whether or not they need to remain in the workforce and if so, a career pathway that will allow them to meet their financial requirements.
- In order to reach unemployed workers as soon as possible after displacement, strong relationships with American Job Centers, companies experiencing downsizing, and state and local governmental agencies are necessary.
- Because many older students are not interested in only short-term training programs, it is important for community colleges to consider pathways that will allow them to accumulate certificates that will lead to an associate's degree.
- "Students don't do optional" applies to both older and younger students. Older students may not understand how to navigate the system and may lack skills necessary to be successful in an academic setting; mandatory orientation and student success courses have improved student outcomes.
- Older students often lack self-confidence and if they experienced a difficult job loss may go through a grieving process. Relationships with organizations that provide mental health and other services are important so that referrals can be made.
- Grants are important in implementing innovative programs that lead to successful outcomes for students. This is often accomplished through partnerships with other organizations and these relationships may take substantial time and effort to cultivate.
- Outcomes can be improved for older workers if assistance in the job search process is provided. This includes guidance in resume preparation, improving interviewing skills, and navigating the on-line job search and application process. They may not understand the need to use specific "buzzwords" in their interviews and job applications and the need to create a resume for a specific job.
- Soft skills are important to employers; older workers need to understand employer expectations and be offered opportunities to improve these skills. This can be best accomplished through incorporating soft skill instruction and expectations into academic programs.
- Lifelong learning can be encouraged by providing educational pathways to attain additional credentials.

Quantitative Research

The quantitative portion of this research analyzed outcomes (employment and log wage changes) for workers aged 55 through 74 who attained a credential through participation in training in WIA's Dislocated Worker Program between April 1, 2008 and December 31, 2009. Credential categories include high school degree/GED, occupational license, and occupational certificate; these credentials are compared to those who did not attain a credential. Participants in the Dislocated Worker Program have either been laid off or received notification of layoff as a result of substantial staff reductions or plant closures. Research questions included: *1) What is the relationship between the type of credential attained and employment status four quarters after program exit? and 2)*

What is the relationship between the type of credential attained and changes in log wages four quarters following program exit compared to log wages three quarters before program participation?

Attaining any type of credential was significantly related to employment in the fourth quarter following program exit. The credential with the greatest benefit was an occupational license: controlling for other variables (e.g., age, sex, race/ethnicity, preprogram education, number of days in training, number of days between displacement and starting a training program) included in the model, the benchmark program participant (i.e., a white, 55 year old male with a high school diploma) who attained an occupational license had a 14.3% greater mean probability of employment compared to no credential. Those with no credential had an 11.2% lower mean probability of employment compared to a program participant who attained any type of credential. The likelihood of reemployment declines with increasing age; for example, as compared to a 55 year old with no credential, a program participant aged 59 to 61 who attained an occupational certificate was 15.2% less likely to be employed in the fourth quarter following program exit. This decline in likelihood of employment by age is observable within credential categories.

Changes in log wages are the difference in mean log wages four quarters following program exit and three quarters prior to program participation. On average, program participants in all credential categories experienced losses in log wages but wage losses were reduced for those who attained a credential when compared to those who did not attain a credential. Log wages changes (losses) were 14.3% greater (i.e., more negative) for 55 year old program participants who did not attain a credential as compared those of the same age who attained any type of credential. For example, 55 year old program participants who attained an occupational license experienced a mean log wage loss of 17.0% less than program participants of the same age who did not attain a credential. More specifically, a 55 year old who attained an occupational license experienced a 22.5% mean log wage reduction in reemployment compared to a 39.5% log wage reduction for those with no credential. Log wage changes were generally significantly and negatively related to increasing age. For example, mean log wage changes for a 58 year old who attained an occupational certificate were 22.1% greater (i.e., more negative) than for a 55 year old who attained the same credential.

Conclusion

This study analyzed outcomes for older workers who attained a credential through participation in WIAs Dislocated Worker Program and found that credential attainment by older workers results in positive outcomes both in terms of employment and wages. This research contributes to job training research by offering empirical support for the value of providing training services to those aged 55 to 74 who participate in WIA's Dislocated Worker training program. This research also contributes to existing job training research by identifying effective strategies in delivering education and training to older students. Outreach programs, career counseling, programs to improve retention rates, job placement, and continuing education opportunities are all important to older workers seeking training for new employment. Through their open-door policies, community colleges serve a disproportionate share of academically unprepared and low-income students. As a result of their unique role, community colleges are well positioned to meet the educational needs of older students. Community colleges, a major provider of worker training and education, already have in place many successful strategies to enhance the positive outcomes for older students. Taking these strategies to scale will further improve the circumstances of older workers.

Manuscripts resulting from this research have been accepted for publication in *Educational Gerontology* and the *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*. The full dissertation is available at:

<http://pqdtopen.proquest.com/#viewpdf?dispub=3570337>