

MWCA Responses to Survey for the GWDC's 2013 WorkForce Center Report

November 13, 2012

1. What is the appropriate role for WorkForce Centers in expanding career pathways and increasing credential attainment?

The local Workforce Councils (referred to as Workforce Investment Boards in federal statutes) are comprised of no less than 50% private industry leaders (the chair of the board must be a representative of private industry) and also include representation from a variety of entities including organized labor, higher education, adult basic education, economic development and community based organizations; the WorkForce Center partners carry out the services to jobseekers and employers.

Due to their structure, Boards are uniquely situated to reconcile the skill needs of employers and the skill development needs of job seekers. Local boards have been regionally strategic, working across service areas when needed; and have provided leadership in designing career pathway solutions and in securing funding to support regional activities.

Under current career pathways models, the Boards convene local partners; review labor market information; provide information on demand occupations, skill gaps, employment trends; work with post-secondary providers to ensure training programs align with employer needs; help to identify those job seekers who can benefit from training; and determine methods to assess their skills. The Board has a role in growing the regional capacity to offer and coordinate exploration and training/credential options in career pathways, within regionally identified strategic industries. The Board also plays a vital role in supporting the WorkForce Center partners in their work.

WorkForce Centers, which are entities made up of a partnership of state and local programs, focus on addressing the expressed needs of businesses and the individuals being served by various programs within the Centers. Within a region or community, WorkForce Centers should be - and are - the crossroads of bringing together employers who articulate a need for skilled workers; the workers who are looking for employment that offers good wages and have skills to offer; and the education system that provides the additional skill building tools necessary to transform workers from where they are presently to where they need to be, given the identified needs of employers.

WorkForce Center staff engage in outreach and recruitment activities for both employers and job seekers. In regard to jobseekers on career pathways, staff acts as an honest broker in identifying training that is appropriate for the individual, provides career planning services to help ensure investments in training will result in a credential leading to employment, and provides tuition assistance and other necessary supports that allow learners to persevere until a credential is attained.

2. Given your response above, what corresponding types of services should be offered at WorkForce Centers?

WorkForce Centers have resources that can be readily deployed to assist individuals with career pathway decisions and credential attainment. Experienced and highly trained professionals are available to guide individuals toward in-demand and good paying occupational pathways. By design, WorkForce Centers are “one-stops”, positioned to leverage resources and staffing to assure that customers are linked to services and support which enable them to be successful in their steps toward reemployment.

Career pathway navigation requires an intentional emphasis on labor market analysis, career and skill identification, basic skill enhancement, development of a skill portfolio and comprehensive workforce preparation, post-secondary education preparation with a respect to aligning worker career interests with occupational skill training programs, and the financial aid to attend those programs.

The WorkForce Center staff are trained navigators and neutral brokers of information which allows customers to make informed choice with respect to career options. Staff researches career pathways and credentials based on local economic factors and needs, and are in turn a source of information to job seeker and employer customers about career pathways and credentials. Assessment, career counseling, case management, support services, tuition assistance and job search assistance is necessary. (It should be noted that tuition assistance is limited to only individuals meeting eligibility for special programs, and there are many customers receiving core services only, that simply cannot access training because they lack the resources.) Access to Adult Education services, more opportunities for youth career counseling, and career/skill assessment services could benefit many job seekers.

3. What should the role of each of the following partners be in expanding career pathways and increasing credential attainment?

There are roles for all of these players in a comprehensive workforce system and you will find that in some fashion they are connected through the Boards and WorkForce Centers. Most of the entities listed are actively engaged in local boards and in fact are currently contributing to the workforce development system. One strength of the current system is that the local boards are able to convene these stakeholders and provide opportunities for all to contribute to finding solutions for employers and jobseekers.

Employers: Employers can provide WFC staff with real time hiring trends and information. Individual employers or employer associations need to work with workforce development staff to better educate workforce professionals, job seekers and educators as to the immediate and longer term skills needed by industry.

Specifically in regard to career pathways, employers can lead in the development of pathways; provide input into the content and approval of credential criteria; provide work-based learning opportunities; and be active in vocational exploration activities. They can also consider how such activities fit into current structures or could benefit their incumbent worker populations. And ideally, they could provide resources to advance career pathway and training opportunities.

The system should be careful not to rely too heavily on the information from one employer or a small sampling of employers. The diversity of employers in Minnesota leads to a very complex hiring landscape.

Post-Secondary Institutions: Post-Secondary Institutions can take information provided by employers to inform class offerings and curriculum content. Credentials (certificates/degrees) should be structured to meet pathway requirements, and offerings for occupational training within sectors of demand should be prioritized. Flexibility to provide off-hours training and credentialed classes are particularly important for adult learners in accessing a career pathway strategy.

Post-Secondary Institutions should have staff available who can help align career goals of job seekers with education programs (criteria needed to enter programs) and financial aid (how to access resources). Staff should also reiterate how these pathways relate to classes, credentials, and employment.

Community-Based Organizations: Community based organizations can be a source of expanded opportunity for WFC clients. They can often offer deeper services than WFCs can, and can assist job seekers in finding available community resources needed for support.

Adult Basic Education: ABE plays a role in career pathway preparation by aligning with post-secondary offerings and demand jobs, assisting jobseekers in academic and computer skills (this is particularly effective when delivered in a contextualized environment). Preparing learners with GEDs and assessments, and enhancing basic skills required by employers, are key components to this work.

State Government (Including all WIA program, human services, corrections, etc.): WIA programs should have staff involved in: group orientation to workforce services; providing retail career counseling; advising individuals who have attended career identification, work readiness sessions and labor market sessions on how to align their interests with available programs; and helping individuals access appropriate training programs.

Staffs of all types need to have more exposure to employers to learn about the type of occupations and skills that are in current and near-term demand.

At the state level, administrative entities are positioned to ensure the alignment of resources, data systems and statewide marketing. They should also ensure adequate resources to meet the need; this includes recognition that WorkForce Centers require both staff and administrative resources to support clients. Resources should be driven to the local level (to Boards, Workforce Service Areas, and WorkForce Centers) so that the demands of employers and jobseekers, which differ across the state, can be met.

Other Training Entities: New training that can be developed quickly to fulfill employers' needs and result in stackable credentials for learners is encouraged. Digital learning should be a larger part of the workforce training agenda; whoever can provide this should be encouraged to participate. Other training entities could help WorkForce Centers expand online offerings as well.

4. To what extent does the WorkForce Center system prioritize credential attainment (and/or reaching the tipping point)? More specifically, for what proportion of WFC customers is credential attainment the preferred outcome, and why? What factors (e.g. customer needs, local labor market conditions, programmatic/policy barriers) influence system priorities with regards to credential attainment?

The workforce system currently prioritizes credential attainment for WIA, state dislocated worker, Minnesota Youth and other programs. Credential attainment is the preferred outcome for all eligible program participants (in addition to Entered Employment) as they need these skills to be successful in the labor market and to earn self-sustaining wages.

Simply described, not all customers coming into a WorkForce Center are able to access training or tuition supports. The demand for training support far exceeds capacity- there are thousands of customers across the system that would benefit from skill upgrading and resources. In some areas, the percentage of *overall* WorkForce Center customers *including those who are not program participants* who enter credential training is low, as many jobseekers have adequate skills to obtain employment and have neither the time nor desire for credential training, particularly if they are not eligible for assistance. The availability of resources is also a factor in credential attainment levels achieved.

Customer needs/interests and labor market conditions have the greatest influence on credential attainment. Research has shown that there are definite earnings advantages for workers with credentials and suggest that industry-recognized credentials can offer some insulation from future layoffs.

The first line of credential attainment should be ensuring that WFC customers all have the requisite basic skills- reading, math and problem solving. These skills need to be at a level that will allow job seekers to gain entry level employment to jobs and careers that best fit their personal needs and interests.

Of those individuals that are eligible for programs that offer tuition assistance, the counselor will assess the individual's prior work history, education, and financial needs and develop a training plan that will allow them to transition to employment. Aptitude for the career pathway, interest in the career pathway, commitment to completing training, available resources, and likelihood of gaining employment and whether the career pathway provides an adequate wage are considered. As importantly, career pathway training should be aligned with the needs expressed by employers with respect to skills knowledge and abilities, and be designed so that

advance credentials can be attained by an incumbent worker to ensure they can take advantage of advancement and increased earnings.

Some programmatic barriers to credential attainment exist. The Minnesota Family Investment Program as it is currently designed is not a workforce development program due to its work-first mandate. This is unfortunate, as training and credential attainment may be even more critical for these jobseekers than other populations. A potential barrier may reappear in the next year as the length of Unemployment benefits available to clients in training returns to the pre-recession level of 26 weeks. The number of credentials that learners will be able to attain within their benefit timeframe will become increasingly limited. Finally, WIA performance measures are taken into account when determining how to best allocate resources.

Because many job seekers can't afford to not be working while they go to training, work-based learning opportunities are becoming increasingly critical. There is also a need to be developed, across the entire system, a better way of staying ahead of the trends so as the marketplace changes, workers can be better prepared to transfer their skills to new occupations.

5. Hypothetical situation: If twenty percent of Minnesota Dislocated Worker funding was specifically allocated for credential attainment, how many additional credentials could the system help customers earn? In such a scenario, what is the most cost-effective way for the additional funding to be used?

Minnesota has retained the WIA employment and credential goal which results in a focus on training and credentials; and more than 20% of allocated funding is already dedicated to training which results in credentials.

Rather than setting another goal which would likely increase paperwork and administrative costs, increasing funding to Workforce Service Areas/Boards would achieve the desired outcome of increased credential attainment.

Allocating funds to a proven, credible system is more effective and efficient than a request for proposal process. Employers need to be more involved in driving the credentials and guaranteeing that those who attain the credential become employed; resources to further develop sector initiatives and/or additional funding for career pathway work would help local partnerships expand the number of pathways developed for industries in each region.

Providers would advocate for other changes that would go along with additional funding in order to increase credential attainment. For example, the ability to utilize funds for universal customers and incumbent workers; or to further enhance tuition, support and staffing (career counseling and case management are important components to the success of attaining a credential).

One cost effective way to direct additional funding, suggested by those in the metro, might be to support a regional approach allowing them to: a) work with regional employers to define their immediate and future needs; b) work with regional educational institutions to fulfill the

needs with regional training opportunities; and c) to offer these career tracks to local workforce system customers on a rolling admission basis.

- 6. Assuming no changes or increases in funding for the WFC system, to what extent could credential outcomes be increased if that was made a priority of workforce programming? How would you realign services to maximize credential attainment outcomes and cost-effectiveness? What other services or expenditures would be (or should be) reduced to allow for increased emphasis on credential attainment?**

Because credential based training is already a priority for those enrolled in programs, there is no way to substantially increase credential outcomes without affecting needed services to other customers and/or increasing cost per participant. If resources remain at current levels, core services would need to be changed dramatically to make room for costs associated with a demand for increased credentials.

Those most in need require one-on-one services. Results have shown that career counseling, support services and case management provided by WorkForce Centers are key components to individuals being successful. When comparing the credential rates of individuals enrolled in MnSCU to the credential rate of WIA programs, you will note that WIA credential rates are higher because those supports are in place.

That being said, alignment of resource room services to be more virtual for those who are self-sufficient could create some savings in resource room staffing and structure, which could allow some resources for additional for career pathways and increased credential attainment. Additionally, continued emphasis on Basic Skills Credentials such as the NCRC for all WFC job seekers would be beneficial.

- 7. How could WorkForce Centers prioritize or find the proper balance between training (1) people who have already completed some course work towards a credential and just need some help finishing; and (2) individuals with low basic skills and occupational skills, including readiness to enter postsecondary education?**

Certainly, there are thousands of people who are low-skilled and could benefit from public assistance to improve their level of skills in order to become employed and have the opportunity to move up. Because WorkForce Center services are overseen by the local Boards, it makes sense for boards to set priorities for their Service Area. Staff in the WFCs then triage prospective participants to determine balance and to ensure performance measures are met.

Success in entering a career pathway and achieving credentials should not be subject to an artificial goal of “so many participants who have some course work completed” and “so many with low skills”. Participants should be determined first on need for assistance, whether financial or staff support. Another key is to look at the desire and interests of the prospective participants. These are predictors of successful completion. Some customers have started

education plans, but lack resources to complete their plans; our partnership with them leads to successful outcomes. However, it does little good to start to work with someone who has completed some coursework, just because they fall in that category, if they have neither the interest in the career nor commitment to complete.

As part of the service design, a comprehensive assessment is completed with all enrolled customers. This allows the counselor and the customer to develop customer centered employment plans. This assures that the plan incorporates all completed course work and other credentials. It serves as the basis for future consideration of training and how to support completion if it in fact makes sense to the plan.

Connecting customers with low basic skills and occupational skills to ABE services and special programs targeted to this population is something that the WFC system does on a regular basis. It is vital that these relationships are forged and that there is a smooth transition. Currently, those lacking skills may be enrolled in a FastTRAC initiative or referred to ABE prior to entering post-secondary school, whereas others are able to enroll in post-secondary training directly.

In order to ensure success the proper strategy must be available to fit the individual and the stated hiring needs of the local employers. The current system allows those professionals closest to the work to match resources, need and strategies with customers.

8. What changes would you recommend be made to state discretionary spending (General and Workforce Development Fund) in order to expand career pathways and maximize credential attainment? Please include any recommended legislative, program, or data reporting changes. For the purposes of this exercise, assume stable state and federal funding levels.

First, stop using the Workforce Development Fund for other purposes, particularly to supplant General Fund spending. It is important to build a reserve so the system is able to access needed resources when there are big swings in the economy as we experienced during the last recession.

Second, available funding and discretionary resources should be allocated to Boards and Workforce Service Areas as quickly as possible rather than being held for months or released through a Request for Proposal process. As mentioned before, directing resources to an already proven system is an efficient way to ensure cost effectiveness and makes it more likely that the desired outcomes will be achieved.

Discretionary funding could supplement existing resources for career pathways and credential attainment. Employers and the workforce system partners could do more work together to bring jobseekers into a career and occupation that gives them living wages and a pathway to grow in the career, or to make lateral moves if and when the time comes to shift careers. Employer involvement assures that training programs are designed to meet the needs of local economies and to connect individuals to jobs that will offer good pay in a sustaining career.

In the career pathways that already exist, much of the work seems sustainable, with the exception of the critical piece provided by workforce partners- career counseling, case management, and support services. Funding could be made available that opens up eligibility and includes funding for tuition, support services and staff time for additional adult learners. There should be an emphasis on assisting individuals in determining a career pathway that fits their interests and financial goals, assistance with developing a plan to reach those goals, financial support for and during training, counseling during training and assistance finding employment once training is complete.

We could also focus more resources toward youth career services, more career exposure for youth and career coaching, catching job seekers when they are young and encouraging credential attainment in industries that have strong career pathways.

Finally, alignment of data systems between ABE, MnSCU and the WorkForce System would be beneficial in tracking and reporting outcomes.