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Innovations in Publicly Funded Workforce Training Programs

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By Christopher Ackley

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Thank you to Mary Piecewicz for her guidance and consistent encouragement throughout this project as well as the SLP faculty and my fellow students. This paper is dedicated to the hardworking adult learners of Genesis Center who inspired me to continue my formal education

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Chapter 1:

Abstract--Good Jobs for a Better Life:

According to the Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner (2024), by the year 2030, 67% of jobs in Rhode Island would require education beyond a high school credential. Currently, only 54% of Rhode Island's working age population (age 25-64) have either a college degree or a vocational certification. With this disparity in mind, state leaders want to ensure that all residents have the necessary educational attainment to obtain employment in a well-paid job in an in-demand industry. Related to the continued education necessary for better jobs is digital skills. A 2023 report by the National Skills Coalition found that 92% of jobs across all industries required digital skills and 40% of jobs requiring more than a high school equivalency required both foundational digital skills and digital skills specific to the industry (Bergson-Shilcock 2023).

Service sector jobs in low-end retail and hospitality pay low wages that require many employed in these positions to enroll in entitlement programs to subsidize the cost of housing, food, healthcare, and childcare. The already high cost of living in Rhode Island has been exacerbated by record inflation (disproportionately affecting low-income individuals and families) making it very difficult to save any significant amount of money to invest in continued education or even create emergency savings. The RI Life Index, a statewide study undertaken by Blue Cross Blue Shield and Brown University found that 68% of respondents found their housing unaffordable in 2023—increasing from 56% in 2020—and 77% of respondents found their overall cost of living to be unaffordable—increasing from 69% in 2020 (https://rilifeindex.org/#). Even more recently, it was reported that home prices had become unaffordable in every city and town in Rhode Island for a household making the median annual income of $81,380 (Guernelli 2024).

Concurrent with these challenging economic circumstances, job training programs that serve as a bridge from lower wage service jobs to better paying professional positions predominantly operate during traditional work hours and run anywhere from several weeks to six months in length. This makes it very difficult for people, especially those who are caregivers, to access and succeed at these programs while maintaining financial stability. A recent study by GO Banking Rates found that 50% of American households were living paycheck to paycheck for nearly the entire year and 70% of households were living paycheck to paycheck for some of the year (Olya 2024). This means that a large portion of the population struggle to save money to protect them against unforeseen emergencies or to proactively invest for their future. Without programmatic intervention, many, lower income residents of Rhode Island will not be able to invest in their futures by committing to and successfully completing a job training program while continuing to support themselves and their families. This will strand individuals in low-wage jobs and continue a cycle of poverty.

In addition, many unemployed or underemployed individuals lack the critical digital skills necessary to enter the workforce and advance within a field due to either a lack of exposure to 21st century technology or an inability to demonstrate the *professional* digital literacy needed to secure employment at a "good" job, paying more than $18/hr. Before an individual's digital skill gap prevents them from obtaining employment, it may also prevent them from enrolling in and excelling in a job training program if their needs are not understood and addressed.

This paper will explore aspects of the current public workforce system and detail persistent challenges as well as promising practices in the field from both Rhode Island and other locations. The author will present a series of recommendations for state and local leaders in the field as well as affiliated training providers and nonprofit practitioners. These proposals are designed to strengthen the overall system and create more opportunity for upward mobility, especially among individuals who have historically not had

equitable access to postsecondary educational attainment which provides access to economic advancement.

Chapter 2:
Methodology

This topic was of specific interest to me because jobs and careers are at the center of both personal finance and the broader regional and national economies. Helping connect individuals to good jobs can have profound consequences that change the fortunes of generations. At the same time, the worlds of work and higher education are both undergoing significant changes and innovations. A confluence of forces have brough about the conditions for change, such as backlashes against systemic racism and oppression and increased income inequality, and the pandemic and its disruption to traditional systems and service delivery has only expedited the process. While the nation and the world face great uncertainty, there is also the possibility of meaningful improvements.

Traditional higher education is still the most direct path to economic stability. However, it has proved more challenging for low-moderate income students to persist and obtain a college degree that produces a favorable return on investment. Many individuals do not complete degrees but exit school with student debt that negatively affects their economic mobility and prospects for educational attainment. Even some who do graduate question the value of a diploma that does not necessarily lead to a job and can leave the graduate in significant student debt. A recent report by National Student Clearinghouse found that college enrollments dropped in 2023 by 3.6% and 1.4 million individuals left school without earning a degree—community colleges serving low-moderate income students are the most common school of last enrollment among these individuals (Withnall 2024).

An alternative path is emerging, where individuals enter short-term training programs and gain essential skills to perform middle-skill jobs with upward career trajectories. Once started on a career path, there are subsequent opportunities for career advancement, often involving professional development opportunities paid for by the employer (such as a CNA enrolling in training to become an LPN or an RN that is paid for by their employer).

This paper will use both qualitative and quantitative data to analyze the current effectiveness of publicly funded workforce programming. While research will incorporate best practices from around the country and even abroad, special attention will be paid to publicly funded programs in Rhode Island. Final recommendations will be made with Rhode Island's programming in mind, but most likely could be applied to any public workforce system. Recommendations will aim to make programming more accessible to populations most in need, increase persistence across programs and eventual placement at jobs, and strengthen programs to better position participants for success in a 21st Century workforce.

Chapter 3:
Literature Review

There are many ways that individuals make their way into the workforce. Some find work directly out of high school, though often in lower-wage service sector jobs. Others will pursue higher education with the hopes of embarking on a higher paying career path. An alternative and less understood pathway involves the network of adult education training programs that prepare job seekers with the necessary technical skills to enter a specific field, and often a certain occupation. High functioning programs align with in-demand industries and are designed in concert with employer partners to meet their staffing needs. These programs can be an effective way for a job seeker to either transition from a low-wage job to a middle-skill position with opportunity for advancement or to enter a career pathway without potentially taking on significant debt from higher education. However, the network of non-profit, for-profit, and government-run programming can be difficult to navigate as programs have varying structures and attributes.

This paper explores existing literature on job training programs and specifically examines the experiences of low-moderate income individuals using these programs. After broadly defining the current network of workforce training programs, the paper will then detail the logistical and financial challenges faced by participants navigating these programs as well as current innovations making programs more accessible and success more attainable as individuals work towards economic independence.

Background

Employment and Training programs in the United States date back to the Great Depression, when a large-scale government response was necessary to rebuild and stabilize the

country's economy. Since that time, government investment in such programs has fluctuated, largely in response to broader economic trends. In their working paper "Employment and Training Programs" Burt S. Barnow and Jeffrey Smith comprehensively explain the different types of government employment training programs for adults, specifically focusing on means-tested programs such as Jobs Training Partnership Act (JTPA) and the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA). The paper explains the questionable rationale for government operation of workforce development programs, as they "do not meet the usual definition of public goods as they are both excludable and rivalrous" (Barnow 2015, p.5). However, both education and the vitality of the economy are socially valued to the extent that there is a strong justification for providing job training opportunities.

The paper directly addresses the specific impacts of such programs on the lower class and corrective actions on labor markets and wage distributions. It is not uncommon for job training programs to emerge when a specific group is affected by dramatic changes in the labor market. A pertinent example would be the efforts to retrain coal workers from mines facing closure for 21st Century jobs in technology or clean energy. Using this same logic, investing in low-to-moderate income adults to assume good well-paid jobs also makes good use of human capital and strengthens the workforce. The extent to which interventions are necessary in training programs will be explored later.

Continuing to look at the current job training landscape, Paul Osterman writes in a 2019 report for Brookings Institute that there are training needs from both the supply side and the demand side of the labor market. 44% of adult workers earn low hourly wages (Osterman, 2019). For some, these are temporary transitional jobs that afford them extra expendable income. However, for others, these wages are depended on to meet basic (and rising) costs of

living. Training or "upskilling" is necessary for moving from poverty wage jobs to family sustaining jobs. On the demand side, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that by 2026 just under 25% of the workforce will be 55 or older (Osterman, 7). The country is set to experience a massive wave of retirements and those positions need to be filled by competent employees. Osterman, in his conclusion, points out that high-functioning programs make substantial investments in their students through support services, employer connections, and integrated remedial education.

It is mentioned that due to an inability to access child care and transportation, programs are not universally accessible to those who need further education. Similarly, in Harry Holzer's 2008 study "Workforce Training: What Works? Who Benefits" the author states that more promising new job training approaches include stackable post-secondary credentials, direct ties to industries, and a range of support services (including financial assistance) both during the training and beyond (Holzer 13). These financial supports and program stipends have been particularly impactful for low-income parents, and especially single parents. For this population, enrolling in and successfully completing training may not be possible without financial supports.

Challenges

To illustrate this last point, this paper examines the 2015 study of participants in a Personal Care Aide training in Michigan. The study looked at 109 program participants who had not completed their program and asked them to choose the best option regarding why they did not finish their program. Respondents reported scheduling conflicts with work, transportation issues, and caring for sick family members as the most common reasons for program attrition. Scheduling conflicts with work can also be read as a participant not having the

requisite funding to dedicate themselves more fully to the training, and instead needing to juggle work and school in order to make ends meet. One respondent elaborated, "I don't take a lot of courses because I can't afford to pay for the classes." Another stated, "We really need to be qualified for more things…we are willing, but we can't afford to pay for it" (Luz, p. 152). It can be assumed that individuals who are working and also training to become PCAs are currently employed in lower-wage jobs that would make it hard for many individuals to save significant funds to sustain themselves during an involved training program. It should also be noted that these socio-economic challenges were brought up repeatedly, both by program graduates as well as those who dropped out. The study's authors suggest flexible attendance and makeup policies for classes in addition to comprehensive financial supports for transportation, food, and child care.

To further advance this point, Gina Adams and Caroline Heller, in a paper published by Urban Institute, study the lack of child care for parents, and especially single parents, engaged in training. This relates to the lack of availability and affordability in the child care system at large. Because that system is severely overburdened, states must prioritize what low-income families receive child care assistance. The data suggests that parents seeking education and training are less likely to receive care than those who need to care to support employment (Adams, 2015). On one level, this makes sense; keeping people gainfully employed is important for the individual and the overall economy. Furthermore, the existing job is a sure bet, whereas an individual starting a training program will hopefully obtain a better job, albeit sometime in the future. However, the lack of child care for low-income parents seeking training creates a serious challenge for many people, both financially and logistically, to access and complete training. In a country where 58% of the 21 million low-income parents have education levels at-or-below a

high school diploma (Goger, 2020), there are many people in need of upskilling to earn higher wages and improve their financial capability. The national organization Kids Count releases and annual Fact Book on child wellbeing issues and found in 2023 that while childcare for a toddler cost the average Rhode Island family 12% of their income, still 10% of households had to leave or turn down a job because it would not work with their childcare schedule. The Annie E. Casey's 2023 Kids Count study estimates that the lack of adequate childcare costs American workers $122 billion annually and accompanying tax revenue (Annie E Casey, 2023).

Solutions

Despite the challenges facing an underfunded and decentralized workforce development landscape, there are still many people working to innovate in this field and promising practices addressing the needs of individuals and families across the country.

Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) has pioneered a model across the country that it calls Bridges to Career Success. In Bridges programs, individuals are enrolled in job training programs, poised to enter in-demand industries with local employer partners. While engaged in training, participants receive comprehensive support services including access to public benefits, financial coaching and education, and digital literacy—all integrated into their training program. Students are supported throughout the program and services continue as participants transition into employment and navigate new challenges that arise in the world of work. The particular emphasis on financial education, financial goal attainment, and digital skills makes this model very attractive for supporting high-need adult learners.

Pell Grants are the foundation of higher-education financial aid for low-income students in America. They have traditionally been awarded to students from households earning less than

$50,000/year pursuing first time undergraduate degrees or credentials lasting at least a typical semester (Thomas, 2020). Pell Grants have not been available for individuals looking to enter short-term training programs in order to improve their prospects on the labor market. In 2011, with the country still in the wake of the 2009 recession, the Department of Education experimented with expanding access to Pell Grants for short-term occupational training programs and examined the impacts of the grants on enrollment and completion. The experiment demonstrated that offering experimental Pell Grants increased the likelihood that an individual would enroll in a training program as well as increasing the chance that they completed that program. These effects were more pronounced for individuals with bachelor degrees returning for further education, but also positively impacted all students enrolling in short term training programs. For short term training programs specifically, similar to the programs previously referenced in other sources, individuals were 16% more likely to enroll in training and 10% more likely to complete training programs (Thomas, 6). While employment and wage data were collected as part of this experiment, they were not assessed for the report. It would be useful to determine the impact of expanded Pell Grant investments on participants when looking at the possibility of providing additional support to future students.

One way to address the challenge of economic supports for low-income individuals in workforce training programs is to better integrate training and work in a way that combines hands-on experience with academic learning all while providing income. These "Earn and Learn" models often take the form of registered apprenticeships (Goger). Apprenticeships are more well known, and often held up as an ideal model for paid training in a wide variety of fields. European countries such as Germany, The United Kingdom, and Switzerland are recognized for leveraging apprenticeship programs to a far greater extent than the U.S. and doing

so in a way that is economically viable (Goger). So, why don't we see more "Earn and Learn" strategies in the U.S.?

In her policy paper for Brookings, Annelies Goger argues that newer programs in this country are serving on average, much older clients and the lack of state-level policy and infrastructure around apprenticeships has created significant bureaucracy and expense for individual organizations looking to create apprenticeship programs. Goger advocates for many specific changes to the current "Earn and Learn" landscape; however, her suggestions focus on increasing and stabilizing federal funding while modernizing and simplifying the policy framework surrounding apprenticeships at both the federal and state level. Finally, she believes that all parties (government, education, philanthropy) must come to the table and help facilitate this culture shift and make sure it is available to and embraced by a diverse group of Americans, especially those who have been intentionally or unintentionally excluded from education and training opportunities in the past.

Conclusion/Summary

In previous eras of American history, with employment came the promise of opportunity. However, tens of thousands of Americans work full time and still qualify for government entitlement programs—and need them to make ends meet. Now, the goal is a "good" job in the form of the elusive family-sustaining-wage. However, for many this will require a significant investment of time and potentially prolonged forfeiture of income. The literature shows the challenges faced by many who pursue training programs, including a lack of foundational education and digital skills and especially in negotiating the cost of child care, transportation, and housing throughout programs that are largely unpaid. One population not explored in this body of literature is individuals who choose not to pursue training opportunities due to these

foreseen hardships and stay at low-wage jobs or remain unemployed. This is a topic for further exploration. Additionally, one development that bears further examination is the expansion of remote and hybrid learning opportunities. In the wake of the pandemic there are now numerous models for online learning, both synchronous and asynchronous. While the importance of digital skills is undeniable in terms of employability, it remains to be seen which models (remote, hybrid, hi-flex, etc.) are successful in adult occupational training. However, there is clearly an opportunity to increase access while decreasing logistical complexity and cost for many potential students. The larger question is are students prepared for these technology dependent classes, and if they are not, what supports are necessary to make them successful?

While these questions, among others, require further research, an emerging trend in the literature shows that effective workforce training programs are acknowledging the multifaceted needs of participants and addressing them to the extent possible. Detractors will specifically see substantial economic supports as unnecessary but viewing them as investments in a skilled labor force rather than an extended entitlement program can reframe the issue. In one of the few dissenting opinions found on the importance of workforce development, Chris Edwards and Daniel Murphy argue that the network of Federally funded training programs is ineffective and wasteful, noting that in 2011 the network of government agencies supporting workforce development programs spent $18B on training activities. Putting aside the effectiveness of current programming, a counterpoint to Edwards and Murphy's argument comes from Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce as they reported in 2013, while Federal spending on training activities stayed level at $18B, employer training activities totaled $590B. These funds were predominantly invested in college-educated professionals, while Federal training dollars are used by less educated individuals typically of lower social classes

(Nunez 2015). If it is understood that training opportunities are important to both the supply side and demand side of the labor equation, the next step is honing the accessibility and effectiveness of programmatic offerings. Ideally, incorporating some combination of income supports, supportive services, and digital skills into training will become normalized, prove effective in democratizing and strengthening the job training landscape in a way that creates economic opportunity for individuals, meets the needs of the business community, and proves that this level of support is a good investment creating more pathways to the middle class for working people.

Chapter 4:
Background context

This paper is meant to provide insights and recommendations for a variety of stakeholders that interact with the public workforce system. This includes State and local legislatures, decision makers at government departments such as the department of labor and training or workforce boards, and training providers and nonprofit practitioners that interact with training participants or potential training participants. One challenge is that all of these entities collectively comprise the public workforce system. Decision making is often siloed, and systems do not adequately communicate with one another. In a 2023 report from the Harvard Project on Workforce on Navigating Public Job Training, David Deming emphasized that the current system is vast with over 75,000 providers across 7000 occupations, with limited ability to gage program performance. This is due in part to the underfunding of the public workforce development system—less than $500MM in 2021 compared to $25B in Pell Grants for higher education (Deming 2023). Lacking a streamlined system, programs must engage additional funders, which complicates processes for both people working to administer programs as well as individuals

seeking training. This paper is not intended to make recommendations on the larger mechanics of the public workforce system in Rhode Island, but rather to focus on training program design and effectiveness.

While all manners of education, including early childhood, K-12, and higher education all collectively contribute to a strong labor force and economy, this paper will focus on non-credit bearing workforce training programs designed to quickly train individuals for employment in a specific in-demand role. The focus will be on how target populations engage with these programs, the difficulties they face in both access and persistence, and the existing gaps in support preventing many people from excelling in programs and furthering their professional lives.

Suggestions made in this paper can be applied to workforce development systems more broadly, but it is more specifically focused on the public workforce system in Rhode Island and will make some specific references to programs and entities unique to Rhode Island. With regards to the Rhode Island landscape, due to the involvement of a variety of government offices with unique operating procedures, as well as private-nonprofit partners, the resulting system can be disjointed and difficult to navigate. Improving communication among all entities involved is an overarching recommendation that will not be given full attention in this paper, but the topic will be mentioned and requires additional study.

Rhode Island continues to grapple with a problem that has existed ever since the textile industry, jewelry making, and other broad segments of manufacturing left Rhode Island several

generations ago. Prior to these largescale shifts in the employment landscape, lower-skilled workers were able to access family sustaining jobs. In today's economy, individuals are relegated to minimum wage service sector jobs that do not allow them to support a family without the help of government benefits or to save money to invest in educational attainment.

This issue has been exacerbated in recent years. Inflation has made it exceedingly difficult to support a family on a minimum wage job. Individuals in this situation are often in danger of housing instability and food insecurity, further straining state and community resources. At the same time, a Digital Skills gap exists where according to a 2018 report by the U.S. Department of Education 17% of adults aged 16-65 were functionally computer illiterate, but 41% of adults without a high school diploma were computer illiterate (Mamedova 2018). This divide has only become more pronounced as systems key to navigating both employment and broader cultural participation have moved predominantly if not exclusively online. Not only is Digital Access (having the ability to use devices and access the internet) now an important issue, but also Digital Skills—or the lack of them—which people needed to perform key functions of almost any job. Digital skills now must be considered as a prerequisite for almost any program, similar to literacy and math skills, as an individual's ability to navigate technology is directly related to their ability to perform core functions of the job.

In order for Rhode Island's economy to be strong, the state needs an educated and trained workforce. This is essential for four main reasons:

1. We need to fill already existing jobs with qualified individuals.

2. There is a generation of "Baby Boomers" advancing toward retirement and those positions must also be filled.
3. For companies to bring jobs to this state, especially higher paying family-wage jobs, they must be confident that the labor force can meet their needs.

4. A state near full-employment with well-educated and trained employees will create a broad and strong tax-base

Making sure that all individuals have access to vocational training programs in order to improve their skills and attain better job opportunities is essential for their individual success as well as the state's overall economic progress. The New England Board of Higher Education reported in their 2021 Fact Sheet that in Rhode Island 34% of individuals 25 and older held a bachelor degree or higher. This number in Connecticut was 5% higher and nearly 10% higher in Massachusetts. This puts Rhode Island in a position where a larger percentage of its adult population is less competitive on the job market and likely in need of upskilling to obtain higher quality employment.

Currently, there is a fundamental disconnect between the goals of the state to upskill the population and improve the economy and the level of investment in adult education state-wide. This is specifically evident in workforce training programs designed to move unemployed and underemployed individuals into good jobs in in-demand industries, through specialized training programs designed to meet the needs of employers. Current occupational training programs are largely run during daytime hours, are unpaid, and provide limited wraparound support to assist students in completing programs and navigating potentially challenging situations during their training.

System level change requires a significant investment in training participants in the form of direct financial assistance as well as a more holistic approach to training programs that considers digital skills and additional supportive services. While this may seem like an excessive investment based on historical precedent, over time it will generate a significant return on investment through job creation, a broadening of the tax base, and moving more working age individuals off of government entitlement programs.

Challenges:

The most overwhelming challenge facing a variety of critical sectors including education, environmental protection, social justice, and many others is limited financial resources. Rhode Island is a small state located in close proximity to two wealthier ones (Massachusetts and Connecticut). The Bureau of Economic Analysis Q3 data from 2023 shows the median income in Rhode Island was $22,000 less than in Massachusetts and ranked second lowest in New England ahead of only Maine. This income disparity generates significantly less tax revenue to support public goods and invest in citizens. At the same time, a relatively diminutive budget prioritizes shorter term spending rather than longer term investment and will shy away from newer and less tested models in favor of programs that are generally favorable to the public or have proven track records of success.

It must be noted that the past several years have seen uncharacteristic investment in promising practices and pilot programs due to large infusions of federal dollars into state budgets through American Rescue Plan (ARPA) funding. The last waves of this funding are currently padding state budgets (including in Rhode Island) but these funds must be obligated no later than the end of 2024 and must be spent by the end of 2026. This creates a challenge where any programs or

positions created with and funded by APRA dollars may not necessarily continue beyond the 2026 deadline. State governments and service providers are unsure of how to proceed with this fiscal cliff looming.

Adult education will always be viewed differently from K-12 education. As a sector, it will serve fewer people and command less resources, but it should be understood as an essential part of the economy as it gives people the skills they need to work and contribute to society, simultaneously strengthening households and strengthening local businesses.

Chapter 5:
Recommendations

The following set of recommendations take a holistic view of state funded workforce training programs, who they are designed to serve, and who ultimately access programs. Beyond accessing programs, there are a significant percentage of students that enroll in programming, but do not persist for a variety of reasons. The focus of these recommendations will be on program design and program delivery, with the ultimate goal of making programs easier for low-moderate income individuals to access and to make them more successful in preparing people for jobs and securing jobs for those same people.

Basic implementation strategies are outlined for each recommendation in a way that is both realistic and financially attainable, although many recommendations will require increased investment from current funding levels.

1.Enhanced Financial Support for Workforce Training Participants

In most cases, training programs included no financial support for participants. Some programs have managed to institute modest completion stipends, which encourage persistence, but provide no financial support as students' progress through their program. More recently, training participants enrolled in state funded programs have been eligible for income support for items such as utility bills, car insurance, and additional groceries. This program is a step in the right direction, but there are still significant challenges with the model which the following changes could improve:

- Funds cannot currently be used for housing support due to expense and tax implications for supporting landlords. For many students, housing is their largest and most important need.
- Transportation is supported, but only bus passes and car payments or car insurance payments. Individuals can not receive support for ride share services such as Uber and Lyft, another important need.
- Funds are allotted per students and the duration of the program is not considered. Some programs are 10 weeks in duration while others are 22. Funding should be distributed equitably using a formula based on both need and length of training.
- Students access funds through part-time state employees, they are often difficult to reach and state offices are inaccessible to many students lacking adequate transportation. Access to support should be located where they attend classes.

2. Wrap-Around Supportive Services

Many low-moderate income adults enter training programs with a number of barriers to program success and employment. Having wrap-around supportive services—meaning program staff to assist them with personal or financial issues not directly related to their program, but helpful in ensuring that individuals persist through the program. Involving these supportive staff positions

at the beginning of and throughout training programs helps to stabilize situations when necessary and also deal with challenges that emerge during their program. The ability to work with a variety of supportive mentors increases the chances that individuals will successfully complete programs, obtain employment, and maximize the economic and social value of public workforce system investments.

Beginning in 2004, Local Initiatives Support Corporation championed an integrated service model it calls Financial Opportunity Centers (FOC). FOCs are comprehensive support programs including Case Management, Financial Coaching, Career Coaching, and Digital Navigation. A 2020 White Paper released by LISC found that participants in training programs including an FOC were 15% more likely to gain employment than those without FOC services (Winston 2020).

While the full implementation of a Financial Opportunity Center may be cost prohibitive for certain programs, ideally there would be at least two key support positions at every site: (1) A case manager to assist with public benefit access and (2) digital literacy navigator to provide digital education and support. A case manager can often double as a financial coach and if programs are well designed, many job placements will occur through the internship process.

3.Inclusion of Digital Literacy and Digital Skills

Our world of work and our society in general has reached a point where digital skills touches every aspect of our lives. Training people for good jobs and careers now means giving them digital skills. This is not just for jobs in the tech industry, but for jobs in construction, healthcare, and manufacturing. In fact, a 2023 report by the National Skills Coalition stated that

92% of jobs required some digital skills, and this number is only growing (Bergson-Schillcock 2023). For training programs to be successful, and adequately prepare participants, they must focus on two levels of digital education—Foundational Digital Skills and Industry-Specific Digital Skills.

Foundational skills encompass the basic skills necessary to operate in American business culture. This includes basic computer skills, sending and receiving email, organizing and attaching files, and performing basic online searches. Part of foundational skills and full participation is access to internet access and a device for attending class, such as a laptop or tablet

Industry-Specific skills prepare participants for the actual demands of their workplace and differentiate them from other job candidates throughout a search process. This could be accomplished by using iPads to transmit patient vital signs, the use of patient scheduling software, or a digital point-of-sale system in a hospitality or retail setting.

In order to address the needs of individual students, a digital skills assessment would be administered at program orientation. Based on the results and the baseline digital literacy of the participants, both the Digital Literacy Navigator and the Program Instructor would focus on any missing foundational skills while the Program Instructor would work on industry specific skills.

One aspect of Digital Skill integration is the need for professional development among staff members to adequately teach students necessary digital skills. Technology skills of many adult

education professionals are lacking and as a sector, there would need to be a concerted effort to up-skill existing staff to the point that they were able to positively impact students in this area.

4.Varied Program Design

As previously mentioned, workforce training programs have traditionally occurred during traditional working hours (Monday-Friday 9-5). While this may be an ideal schedule for unemployed individuals, it is difficult for individuals to forego gainful employment and attend programs as their financial stability would be in jeopardy.

Ensuring that a variety of training models exist, most notably evening classes for working people and people with small children who cannot access childcare. The pandemic thrust youth and adults alike into online learning. While this is clearly a field that will continue to grow and become more mainstream, it should be approached cautiously in the adult education field.

The digital skill level of the target population should be seriously considered when conducting classes in a fully remote or hybrid setting. While convenience and accessibility are important factors for program design, the ability of participants to fully engage and retain key information is the primary concern. As previously outlaid components of digital education and digital navigation services improve, it will be possible to expand online opportunities, which will only reinforce digital capabilities of students.

5. Child Care infrastructure

An overarching challenge to designing effective job training programs is the dire lack of childcare. This is a topic that needs significant attention beyond the scope of this paper;

however, it should be noted that the challenge extends beyond training programs and consequently impacts people's abilities to accept jobs or maintain jobs because they either cannot obtain child care or because their child care situation is so inadequate that their work becomes untenable.

Addressing childcare as a necessary piece of workforce development rather than an afterthought strengthens the entire system for employees and employers alike. Due to the recognized broken childcare system—there is not enough of it, it is unaffordable to the consumer, and at the same time childcare workers are grossly underpaid—this is a daunting task, but there may be opportunities to address the problem

Former Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo, who is now Commerce Secretary was one of the chief architects of the monumental CHIPS Act in 2022. While the Act is a generational investment in American advanced manufacturing, there is a provision stating that any company receiving investment beyond a certain threshold must plan for child care for their employees that is affordable, accessible, reliable, and high quality (Kashen 2023).

Creative ways to increase access to childcare, especially in proximity to employment and training hubs, and on site whenever possible, makes training and employment possible for one family member while ensuring a safe and enriching environment for another at the start of their lives.

6.Leverage public-private partnerships

Billion-dollar companies like General Dynamics Electric Boat, Lifespan hospital group, and CVS Health all benefit from the public investments in workforce training programs. Through

the Real Jobs RI program and the Department of Labor and Training, industry partnerships and often individual employers have direct input to how training programs are designed and what positions key roles participants should be trained to perform.

This benefits job seekers because there are established outlets for employment post-training and training programs often commence with an internship at one of these employer partners. However, this model also greatly benefits employers as their training and recruitment efforts are directly subsidized by state funds. During a 5-year period beginning in 2015, 3,974 unemployed Rhode Islanders entered training programs through Real Jobs and 2,939 were hired--1,348 employees were hired by Electric Boat alone (Anderson 2020). While big companies have considerable input for these training programs, they must also come to the table and contribute to training efforts.

As American Rescue Plan dollars sunset and Rhode Island's population rapidly ages, it is imperative that we have a strong workforce development strategy that moves as many eligible workers as possible off the sidelines and into the labor market. This means investing in new strategies and bringing private investment to the table. Necessary program supports like direct financial assistance for participants, enhanced digital upskilling, and expanded childcare infrastructure that would make more Rhode Islanders competitive employees may not be possible without private industry providing support.

Chapter 7:
Conclusion

Hopefully this paper has detailed the importance of good jobs for people to gain financial stability and position themselves for economic advancement. Because of the barriers faced by many people to access these existing good jobs, it is important to design clear and accessible pathways that catalyze the success of participants.

Many people never enter workforce training programs because they are unable to leave their job or reduce hours in order to pursue education, others (as mentioned in the Michigan Personal Care Aide study) deal with consistent economic challenges due to enrollment—and some are not able to persist. Creating programs that are accessible and provide holistic support, including financial assistance, is essential for broad student success.

Acknowledging the inexorable assimilation of technology into all facets of modern life, including employment, it is essential that digital education take a central role in workforce training programs so that people are prepared for in-demand jobs and are also poised for growth and advancement in their careers. One aspect of this topic that needs further study is the need for digitally up-skilling the adult education workforce so that they have adequate skills to facilitate technology learning in their classes. To what extent do we need to train the trainer to achieve desired skill gains?

As the funding landscape becomes more challenging, especially with the end of COVID spending from the federal government, state's must be more creative in how they not only maintain current levels of programming, but also increase investments in public workforce systems. When we think about who is benefitting from existing programs, it is mainly large corporate entities such as hospital groups, defense contractors, and larger corporate retailers who are happy to let the state carry out training activities that benefit their business at no additional cost to them. There must be a contribution from the private sector commensurate with the benefits they receive in order to sustain these programs and make future investments. This should be a creative arrangement between the state government, private employers, and training entities to maximize investment and strengthen program design—such as the use of private dollars as matching funds to leverage grant funds.

The state of Rhode Island has ambitious goals for educating its working age population and raising the median income to compete with neighboring states. This won't happen without ambitions planning and investment in a variety of initiatives. The public workforce system is just one of these areas; however, it is critically important in achieving these broader goals while focusing on segments of the population that have been traditionally underserved.

Project Charter

1 Project Overview

1.1 Introduction

A well-trained workforce is essential to the overall economic health of a given city, state, or region. At the same time, good jobs are the cornerstone of financial health for an individual or a household. Ensuring that systems are correctly designed to serve the needs of in-demand industries and individual job seekers is important for economic growth.

This project is specifically interested in the publicly funded workforce training programs in Rhode Island targeting low-to-moderate income individuals. This population commonly faces barriers to access and barriers to successful completion of programs, while also significantly in-need of upskilling in order to achieve economic independence and move off of the public benefits system.

Rhode Island has often had a vulnerable labor market in comparison to its more prosperous neighboring states of Massachusetts and Connecticut. During times of economic recession, it is often "first in last out" and generally lags other southern New England states on household economic figures.

In many sectors of the economy and across many regions skills gap already hampers economic growth. The Rhode Island Economic Progress Institute predicts that by 2030 70% of jobs in Rhode Island will require some post secondary education beyond a high school credential. In order to make sure as many people as possible have access to these career track jobs, we must design programs that support a variety of populations and take into account significant challenges to continuing education.

1.2 Major Stakeholders

Project Manager: As the chief researcher and author on this project, I will be responsible for collection of all relevant information, analysis and synthesis of findings, and organizations and presentation of results. I will also control communication with and between any external partners while working on the project.

Government Agencies: Agencies such as the Department of Labor and Training and Offices of the Post Secondary Commissioner provide funding for public workforce training programs. They conduct extensive research and have deep relationships with in-demand industries as well as community-based organizations carrying out a variety of programs to train individuals for employment. They also collect data on program outcomes and trends in the broader economy.

Private Philanthropies: These organizations--including the private sector, public foundations, or individuals have access to unrestricted funding often targeted to improve workforce systems and economic security of vulnerable populations. These entities can often fund experimental programs more easily than larger government funding sources. If programs are successful, they can be replicated in other areas or scaled to meet larger demand.

Community Based Organizations: This collection of largely nonprofit organizations receives funding from government agencies and private philanthropies to carry out workforce training programs and accompanying supportive services. These organizations are responsible for interfacing with the low-to-moderate income individuals either looking to enroll or enrolled in programming. They also serve as direct connections to hiring managers at employer partners.

Low-To-Moderate Income Adults: This segment of the population is most in need of upskilling in order to obtain family sustaining employment. They also traditionally face barriers to employment such as access to reliable transportation and childcare, lack of flexible work schedules, and insufficient savings to invest in unpaid training programs for a significant period of time. For these reasons, many individuals fail to enter training programs and remain in low-wage jobs or fail to complete training programs.

2 Project Goal and Scope

2.1 Project Goal

This project looks to better understand the challenges facing all parties involved in the publicly funded workforce training system—including government, employers, training partners, and individual job seekers. After better understanding these challenges, the project will identify best practices achieving positive outcomes and make recommendations for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the public workforce system. The goals would be making public workforce trainings more accessible to low-moderate income individuals in a way that considers convenience and financial feasibility in order to increase enrollment, completion rates, and subsequent job placement rates post training.

2.2 Project Scope

As previously stated, the project will explore the effectiveness of current workforce training programs in the state of Rhode Island. While the focus will be on the current program dynamics in the Rhode Island system, exploration for best practices and successful program models will extend to other states, regions, and even other countries.

In addition to subsidizing the cost of training for individuals through public funding, in the wake of the pandemic there has been additional funding in the state of Rhode Island for income supports and wrap-around services for individuals enrolled in state-funded job training programs through a program called Rhode Island Reconnect. This includes funding to assist

with food, utilities, childcare, and transportation during an individual's training program and subsequent job search period. In addition, individuals can access various forms of counseling during this time to help them stabilize their situation, complete training, and enter the workforce.

While funding is limited, RI Reconnect is more robust than any program in recent memory for supporting trainees. As part of the project, the results of these pilot programs will be analyzed to the extent possible, and conclusions will be drawn related to the effectiveness, sustainability, and projected long-term impacts of these levels of investments in trainees.

Work Area	In Scope	Out of Scope
Workforce Development Sector	Public Funded Programming	Private programming run by employers
Outcomes	Program Completion, Job Placement, Starting Wage	Employee Retention and Advancement, Individual Economic Outcomes
Training Provider	Sector-Based Occupational Training Programs	Credit Bearing college programs, general work readiness programs
Supports Provided	Financial, Emotional (mental health, addiction, intimate partner abuse)	Supplemental Academic Support

3 Assumptions

- The researcher/project lead approaches this project with the intention to learn about and contribute to the specific field of study.
- There is a consistent need for adequately trained workers to fill open job positions in order to keep Rhode Island's economy healthy.
- Employment at a family sustaining job (not minimum wage) is the most common way that individuals and families achieve economic independence and stability.
- Educational attainment correlates to higher levels of earnings in both the short and the long term.
- Low-to-moderate income households struggle to save money, especially in the recent inflationary environment.
- The majority of publicly funded workforce training programs are several months long, take place during traditional working hours, and are unpaid.
- Publicly funded workforce programs are a partnership between government agencies, training partners, employer partners, and individuals.
- Many individuals would need economic assistance to enter and complete a workforce training program.

- Providing additional financial supports and supportive services to participants in job training programs increases the cost of delivering training programs.
- Government resources and private resources are limited.
- Training Provider resources are limited.

4. Constraints

The most significant restraint in this project is the limited time restraints of the project lead. Without a project team of researchers and collaborators or any true survey/study component to this project, there are limitations on what information can be contributed outside of compiling secondary research.

In addition to limited time and resources, some key partners showed limited cooperation, such as members of State agencies or partner non-profit agencies. This can be attributed to requests for data or perspective falling low on their list of priorities or potentially even an unwillingness to participate due to fear of exposure or competition.

In addition to these two large constraints, the following more specific constraints exist:

Limited Sample Size—This project is looking at a small set of individuals to make assumptions about the larger workforce training landscape.

Incomplete Outcomes—Job placement outcomes must be self-reported by program participants. This introduces the possibility that outcomes will not be recorded or will be otherwise distorted.

Counter Factual—There is no control group to position against individuals receiving the intervention.

Program Not Means Tested—There is not adequate information about the household configuration and baseline financials for individuals researched in the study to determine the relative impact of support on different segments of the population.

Changing Conditions—Outcomes reported in the project cannot account for larger economic trends that would otherwise affect outcomes outside of the intervention, such as larger economic trends that would impact employment or even a larger global event such as COVID-19.

5 Risks

This project largely reflects past research and projects. It therefore does not pose real risks to subjects. It also does not use resources outside of the time and effort of the author and any participating organizations contributing research or expertise to the project.

The result of this Capstone project will be recommendations to key decision makers and policy makers for funding levels and design elements of the public workforce system. In compiling research and formulating a set of recommendations, there is a risk that the approach is not thorough enough, lacks clarity, or is irrelevant to the point that it is ignored by key stakeholders.

Another related risk is that recommendations are accepted, but in implementation the research undertaken proves to have overlooked key variables or failed to take into account site-specific characteristics. Therefore, all reasonable efforts will be made to ensure recommendations are realistic and relevant.

6 Communication Plan

(For capstone thesis/case study students this section is not required)

7 Project Team

Chris Ackley—Project Lead
Mary Piecewicz—Capstone Advisor

8 High Level Roles & Responsibilities of Project Team

(For capstone thesis/case study students this section is not required)

	Team Members				
Tasks					
Project Lead	CA				
Responsible for the project charter	CA				
Responsible for the ensuring effective communication	CA				
Responsible for the quality of the final paper	CA	MP			
Responsible for the quality of the final presentation	CA	MP			
Responsible for submitting peer reviews	N/A				
Problem identification and analysis	CA				
Problem resolution	CA				

9 Measures of Success (*Detailed measurements that will indicate that the project is a success)*

Project Outcomes	Measure of Success
Define The Problem	Clearly articulated problem statement creates a workplan for project research
Research The Problem	Collection of a variety of materials detailing current challenges and efforts around workforce training reform and enhancement
Collect Data on The Problem	Obtain key data from national studies as well as information specific to Rhode Island in order to comprehensively understand the issue
Determine effectiveness of current efforts, assess replicability and scalability of interventions	While the project learns from a diverse network of efforts, the project keeps a focus on relevance of efforts to current Rhode Island conditions
Make recommendations for the future design of publicly funded training programs	Clear and actionable steps to improve accessibility and effectiveness of the public workforce system in Rhode Island

Stakeholder Sign-off

This project charter has been signed off by the client, capstone advisor and project team members.

Christopher Ackley_____Project Lead_____12/7/2023_____

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Name Title Date

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Name Title Date

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