
Career Start:
Process Evaluation

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Executive Summary

This report presents the results of a process evaluation of the Career Start initiative in North Carolina's food stamp employment and training program. The purpose of this evaluation is to analyze and describe the process followed in the first wave of Career Start counties. As part of this evaluation, a sample of five of the fifteen original counties involved in the initiative was chosen. In each county, staff from the local department of social services, the community college, and the local office of the Employment Security Commission (ESC) were interviewed. In addition, a group of Career Start participants were invited to a focus group to discuss their experiences in the program.

The key findings are:

- Career Start appears to have had only a limited impact on the work load of food stamp eligibility workers.
- A large number of Career Start participants do not comply with requirements to report to orientation sessions at the local community college. As a result, their households are sent a notice of adverse action and, if the individual does not comply with program requirements, the household's food stamp allotment is reduced. The amount of this reduction is approximately \$100.
- A smaller number of individuals are referred to the local ESC office in Career Start counties than before the initiative was implemented. This is likely due to the large number of individuals who are sanctioned for not complying with program requirements to participate in Career Start orientation.
- ESC workers report that they are placing about the same number of individuals in employment now as they were prior to the implementation of Career Start.
- There is wide variation across community colleges in the operation of the Career Start program. For example, orientation sessions range from a one-day, four hour session to a three-day, twelve hour session. There are differences across the

colleges in the tools used to screen participants as well as in the types of classes offered. This variation appears to be due to staff expertise in each college as well as local needs and resources.

- Career Start is a paper based system. The transmission of information between agencies and with clients is bogged down by the flow of paper.
- There is not a centralized database tracking who participates in Career Start and what training and services each individual receives. Without this type of system, it will not be possible to explore the impact of Career Start on employment.
- Career Start participants generally support the program. Most provided anecdotes of their experiences. All indicated that the program had value and should be continued. Career Start workers from all agencies for the most part support the program too. They like the opportunities it presents for their clients to better themselves through education.
- Career Start participants reported in the focus groups difficulty in finding jobs after completing the program. It is not clear whether this is true of all Career Start participants or just those who were able to participate in the sessions. It may be that many Career Start participants who were invited to the focus group sessions were unable to attend because they were employed.

Introduction

Federal regulations require that able-bodied adults that are not otherwise exempt register for employment. *Career Start* is a demonstration project in North Carolina targeting food stamp recipients who are required to register for work. The goal of *Career Start* is to better prepare individuals for the workforce by providing pre-employment skills through the human resources development programs in local community colleges.

Career Start was implemented in March 2004 in 15 North Carolina counties designated as Labor Surplus Areas (LSA) based on Department of Labor (DOL) standards. According to DOL, a jurisdiction is classified as labor surplus when its average unemployment rate is 20% or higher than the average unemployment rate for all states during the previous two calendar years. The counties involved with *Career Start* included Ashe, Catawba, Cleveland, Columbus, Edgecombe, Hertford, Hoke, Lenoir, Person, Robeson, Rockingham, Rutherford, Scotland, Stanly, and Vance.

In the first phase of the *Career Start* program, work registrants in the 15 LSA counties were referred to a local community college for assessment. After the initial assessment, some individuals were routed to the local office of the Employment Security Commission (ESC) to participate in an independent job search for eight weeks. Other individuals were referred to the community colleges for up to four weeks of enrollment in a human resources development program designed to help food stamp work registrants acquire skills and find jobs with sustainable wages. These individuals were subsequently referred to the ESC for four additional weeks of independent job search.

The primary target populations for *Career Start* are Employment and Training (E&T) individuals. The E&T population is comprised of (a) food stamp recipients with dependents who are mandated to register for work as well as (b) able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) in these 15 counties since March 2004. A process evaluation was performed as part of the evaluation of *Career Start*, by the Jordan Institute for Families at the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Food Stamp Caseload – Definitions of Participants

Work Registrants (WRs)

Work registrants (WRs) are food stamp participants between the ages of 16 and 59 years who are required to register for work unless exempt or deferred. These individuals can be identified by their work registration code of R or T in the Food Stamp Information System (FSIS)¹.

Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs)

ABAWDs included in this analysis are food stamp recipients between the ages of 18 to 49 years who are not responsible for a dependent child or incapacitated adult and who are not pregnant. All ABAWDs are required to register for work. ABAWDs are identified by the work registration codes of 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, or 15 in FSIS.

Process Evaluation Approach

The process evaluation began with the selection and approval by the DSS, ESC, and community college partners of five of the original 15 Career Start counties. Counties from the first group were selected because of the length of time they had been in the program. The criteria used to select these counties included size, rural versus urban, and location. All the counties were struggling economically, so a diverse group was chosen based on those criteria.²

Introductory letters were sent to the directors in each of the counties by the State. Each agency was invited to participate in the process evaluation. Once contacts were established in each group – DSS, ESC, and community college, in each of the five counties, Jordan Institute staff sent out letters by mail or email, explaining the process evaluation and asking for contact persons. Meetings were scheduled through the contacts with staff from each agency involved in Career Start. In each county, meetings were held with DSS food stamp staff, food stamp supervisors, ESC staff, and community college staff. A focus group of Career Start recipients was held in each county as well.

¹ Work registration code of R in FSIS designates mandatory work registration. Individuals who may be exempt from work registration can volunteer. These individuals have a work registration code of T in FSIS. There are very few individuals with code T in FSIS. Hence for simplicity, we do not differentiate between voluntary work registrants and mandatory work registrants.

² In order to maintain the confidentiality of the respondents, those five counties are not identified.

Prior to each meeting, letters were sent to the participants to explain the evaluation and advise them of their participation rights either by mail or email. Focus group participants were invited to participate by letters sent through the mail explaining the reason for the focus group and offering an incentive for attending. A toll-free number was set up for them to respond and ask questions about participating in the focus groups.

At least two Jordan Institute staff members participated in each group interview – one to run the interview or focus group, and one or two to take notes and assist in the interview process. Jordan Institute staff spent about three days in each county conducting the interviews. Typically, six interviews were conducted in each county – two with DSS food stamp staff, one with the DSS food stamp supervisors, one with ESC Career Start staff, one with community college Career Start staff, and a focus group of Career Start participants. All the interviews were scheduled and conducted between January and March 2005. In general, the interviews lasted between one to two hours.

The Career Start Process From the DSS Perspective

Almost every eligibility worker interviewed said that their jobs are the same now as they were before Career Start was implemented. The program brought about no substantial increase or decrease in their workload. Several workers said there was a slight increase in paperwork, due primarily to individuals who do not comply with Career Start requirements, such as attending orientation session or classes. These workers who reported an increase in paperwork were generally not able to quantify the size of the increase either in terms of the percentage of their time spent or the number of additional forms completed. Other workers said the amount of paperwork was about the same.

The Department of Social Services (DSS) is the first step in the Career Start process. DSS workers begin the process by working with potential Career Start participants to determine their eligibility in the program. For the five counties where interviews were completed with DSS workers and supervisors, the process appeared remarkably similar. When an individual applies for food stamps on behalf of a household, the eligibility worker assesses the eligibility of each household member for Career Start program. If the individual is required to register for work, the worker

completes form NCSES-2624 and sends it to the community college.³ This form includes contact and demographic information on the individual, their registration status (new registrant, re-registrant, etc.), exemptions from participation, deferments for non-ABAWDS, and a statement of expectations that the individual must sign. During this same meeting, the DSS worker gives the head of the food stamp household who is making the application information on the Career Start program and reviews what is expected. The DSS worker also informs the individual of the consequences for non-compliance with the program.

In many instances, the individual who is required to register for work is only a member of the food stamp household and not the person completing the application for food stamps. Frequently, the eligibility worker processing the case does not have face-to-face contact with the work registrant. Communications between the DSS eligibility worker and the work registrant who is referred to Career Start are routed through the head of household, or through the mail.

Career Start participants are generally sent letters from the community college informing them to report for an orientation session. In one county involved in this study, DSS schedules orientations and sends letters to Career Start participants. In this county, the letters are usually sent the day the food stamp application is approved. The DSS lets the community college know who is scheduled for orientation.

If the individual does not comply with the Career Start program, a NCSES-2625 form is sent to the DSS worker from the community college. The DSS worker sends the household a notification of adverse action, letting the head of household know that the food stamp allotment will be reduced because the Career Start participant is being disqualified. This non-compliance costs the household about \$100 per month in reduced food stamp benefits. If the Career Start participant decides to comply with program requirements, he or she must contact the eligibility worker and, usually, the community college, within 10 days to arrange to meet program requirements. If this occurs, another NCSES-2625 form is completed and the individual is again sent to the community

³ There was some variation across the counties in how the form was transmitted to the community college. In some instances, a DSS staff member had delivered them. In other instances, the forms were picked up by a community college staff member. In still other instances, the forms were mailed.

college for the Career Start orientation or training. If the individual does not respond to the notice of adverse action, the household's food stamp allotment is reduced.

Once the Career Start participant is referred to the community college, the majority of the DSS workers interviewed stated that they do not know exactly what happens to the participants. One worker stated that as long as they do not receive another NCSES-2625 form from the community college they just assume everything is going along as it should. Eligibility workers in several counties said they felt they could do a better job of informing the participants about Career Start if they themselves had training on what the program is supposed to do. In several counties, workers expressed frustration at not getting responses to their questions raised during statewide training sessions.

Career Start is a paper intensive process. There is no automation. There is always a time delay associated with the floating of information between agencies. Communication plays a large role in the perception of success from the point of view of the DSS worker. Only one county reported that communication between the three partner agencies could be improved upon. The remaining four counties remarked that the open communication between the agencies is one of the main reasons they are encouraged by the program. One county has representatives from both the community college and ESC within five minutes of their office. They continued on to state that "...our flow of information is better, and it may be just that our communication is better... our relationships are better than other counties". A staff member in one county said "Any county going into this needs to develop a really good working relationship with their partners. The communication we have certainly helps us. We could not ask for better partners."

There does appear to be a change in worker's perceptions of the success rate of the participants since Career Start began. An eligibility worker in a different county reported that "when they had it here (ESC trainings), a lot of the grumbling that I heard was the fact that they (the participants) went in there and were talked at for 30 minutes and then they left and they just didn't want to do it. And now they actually say that they feel like they are accomplishing something."

A DSS worker from a different county expressed similar sentiments "I don't think participation is extremely higher than it was before, but the process itself seems much

better to both us and our clients because it does seem they are given or explained in detail about their options and they feel better about that.” She added that “it is faster for us to get somebody a cure when they are disqualified. And our ESC person may not be quite as overworked as before. Not that she is not still overworked, but the process is much smoother for her now.”

In addition, the worker noted that “we’re seeing more people taking advantage of getting their GED or taking a HRD class where they learn how to interview, or fill out an application and make use of the JobLink Center. I feel that participation has increased over time.”

While most of the eligibility staff interviewed did comment on increased participation post-Career Start, some counties reported high rates of disqualification. However, they continue on to say that a larger number of individuals want to cure this disqualification rather than take the loss of their food stamps as compared to before.

Most of the DSS workers interviewed stated that they believed Career Start is a worthwhile program and should be continued. There are some areas where many saw room for improvement. Increasing communication between partner agencies and helping the DSS workers to gain a better understanding of the program once the participant leaves their office was mentioned by one county. Transportation and child care for participants was another mentioned by almost all of the counties. Many of the participants live in rural areas and do not have access to private cars or public transportation making it difficult for them to participate in the program as they should. Automation of the forms and record keeping were also mentioned as a way to improve the program from the perspective of the Career Start staff. An automated system with the participants’ file and additional forms to be shared among the partner agencies was one suggested solution to streamline information sharing. Clarification of shared terms was another method suggested to ease information sharing. The DSS workers from one county commented that terms they use are defined differently by other agencies leading to confusion and time wasted clearing up miscommunications.

Overall the DSS workers interviewed from the five counties all believe that Career Start is a step in the right direction and a positive pathway for those who are motivated to achieve.

Career Start from the ESC Perspective

The process Employment Securities Commission (ESC) staff members employ in helping Career Start participants find work is similar in each of the five counties where interviews occurred. By and large, it is the same procedure used before Career Start. In the first step, ESC staff attend at least a part of the initial orientation all Career Start participants attend at the community college. At this initial session they introduce themselves and review what services ESC can offer the participants. In some instances, an ESC worker meets with those participants who are directly entering job search in a group session. Some have the meeting directly following the initial orientation. In other instances, meetings are scheduled at the ESC offices within the next week. In this group session each participant completes another assessment in which they give further information on their work history, including where they worked last, how long they worked there, and what their salary was. They also provide information on what type of job they would like to find. After this initial group meeting, the ESC worker generally meets with each participant on an individual basis to go through job listings and provide job referrals. Each participant is given a work search card on which they record their job search activities over a four week period. Depending on the county, each participant is expected to go search for work at two to four places per week.

At the end of the first four week session, the participant meets again with the ESC worker to review their efforts, get more referrals for jobs, and search for other openings. The participants are given another work search card and sent out to find employment for another four weeks. The ESC workers from all five counties report that they do not follow-up closely on what is written on the work search card, unless something seems suspicious. At that time they may call the potential employer to see if the participant did approach them for work and what the result was. After the second four week period ends, and no employment has been secured, the participants are encouraged to either return to the community college for more training (mostly encouraged to take GED or HRD courses) or to stay with ESC and continue their job search. As an additional incentive, at the end of each four week block the ESC worker authorizes a voucher for \$25 to cover travel expenses while the participant is out searching for a job. The funds come from the food stamp program.

The process of looking for a job for those who initially complete four weeks of HRD training at the community college is the same as for those who come straight to ESC from the initial orientation, except it is a four instead of eight week process. If a participant is non-compliant at any time through the four or eight week period, they are reported to the DSS for disqualification through the form NCSES-2625. Follow-up once an individual has left the program varies by county. One worker reported that she does random audits of her files, while another reports she follows-up with each participant every thirty days for one year.

Transportation appears to be the major hurdle facing participants. Programmatically, miscommunication and misdirected paperwork along the continuum of the three agencies is an issue facing ESC workers. Paperwork and participants are at times being sent to the wrong place, or the agency is not kept abreast of a participant's status and therefore provides services they are not slated to receive. For example, an individual may have been disqualified while at the community college, but still sent to ESC for services without the ESC worker knowing they had been disqualified until they receive a phone call from DSS asking why a disqualified individual is receiving services. Another concern is the lack of clarity on policies and procedures. One ESC worker reported that repeated requests for clarity and more information have been ignored by those at the state level. As a result this worker stated "A lot feels like trial and error".

While most of the ESC workers expressed frustration that they are not seeing as high a number of people come in the door as they were before Career Start began, they have noted that their placement rates have not dropped off significantly. This suggests that the attrition for non-compliance occurs at the community college first. Some counties feel that participants who come through the HRD programs are better prepared for employment than those who do not; others see no change at all. Many feel that there is not enough time spent at the community college to really make a difference in an individual's skills. Suggestions of longer stays at the college along with a greater emphasis on obtaining a GED were voiced. Even though significant changes have not been seen by any of the ESC workers interviewed, all but one saw Career Start as a worthwhile program that should be continued.

Career Start from the Community College Perspective

The first two steps in the process for the community colleges are the same across all five counties. The college receives a form NCSES-2624 from DSS and then schedules the participant for an orientation. The time between when the college receives the form NCSES-2624 and when the orientation is scheduled ranges from five days to one month. The longer wait periods tend to stem from the college not being able to schedule enough participants for the orientation. The colleges prefer to offer the orientation to several students at one time as opposed to only one or two students. Four of the counties have one four-hour orientation; the other has a twelve-hour class broken into three four hour sessions. During the four hour orientation session representatives from the college and the ESC speak about their various roles in the program and their expectations of the participants. Depending on the county, DSS may or may not attend the meetings. The participants also complete a self-assessment form in which they judge their strengths, list their work history, education, contact information, types of jobs they are interested in, whether or not they are interested in furthering their education, and other personal information. The session also provides an overview of the type of information participants receive in the Human Resources Development (HRD) classes; including resume writing, application completion, interview techniques, presenting yourself to potential employers, motivation, and job skills.

For the remaining county, the initial orientation is in the form of three four hour sessions scheduled one to two times per month depending on projected enrollment. In the beginning of the Career Start program this county did offer one four hour orientation, but found that they have a higher attendance rate with the current arrangement. This class is a more in depth “mini HRD” class. The first day is a “getting to know you” day. The instructor reviews any exemptions the participants may qualify for, does a career assessment and planning exercise, and tries to motivate the participants to continue in the program. The second day involves instruction on how to complete an application and conversation about what kind of job the participants would like to find. The last day focuses on interview skills, approaching employers, how to dress for an interview, the basics of a resume, and other essential work search skills. If applicable, during this time

the instructor also strongly encourages the participants to pursue a GED regardless of whether they stay at the college or go to ESC after the initial class ends.

Again, the counties diverge on how participants are divided into those going directly to ESC for job search and those who are to continue their education either through GED or HRD courses. Some counties allow the participants to decide on their own which course of action to take, while others decide for them. A one on one conversation is held with each participant to further evaluate their abilities and discuss next steps regardless of whether the college or the individual makes the decision. The participant does however have the right to overrule whatever decision the college staff makes. If the participant remains at the college, they have four weeks of HRD classes and then go to ESC for the remaining four weeks of job search. If they immediately go to ESC they are there for eight weeks of job search. One college staff member described the decision making process as varying based on where the individual is at the current point in time.

“There are some people that just feel desperate they have to go look for work no matter what they just have to go look for work,” the staff member said. “And to those folks we try to make sure that they know they can go look for work and at the same time work on that GED or whatever training is necessary and not be held accountable for those hours or for that activity. Then there are some others that feel like this is the opportunity that I have ever had to go back to school and I’m going to take advantage of that. And...there is a group that will do anything to put off the work search.”

If the participant remains at the college they go into HRD classes. At some of the colleges the participant chooses their course of study, in others the program staff does. Ideally this is tailored to the skills the participant needs to enhance in order to become more employable. Among the content included in the classes are computer literacy, application completion, interviewing and resume writing, presentation, networking, and using online resources for job searching. Assessments are completed in the classes so that the participant is able to see where their strengths and weaknesses lie. Additionally, participants do have access to classes in money management along with other classes regularly offered at the college. The HRD classes varied among counties in the class days and times, but for the most part, were scheduled for about 12-20 hours per week on

three to five days per week. Participants were given a voucher for transportation for \$25 at the end of their four weeks of classes at the community college.

If the participant does not show for the initial orientation/class or fails to attend regular classes a form NCSES-2625 is sent back to DSS. All of the colleges state that they do offer at least one rescheduling opportunity for the initial orientation/class. However, if repeated requests for rescheduling are made the participant is considered non-compliant and the form NCSES-2625 is sent to DSS. Transportation, child care, or communication glitches account for the majority of the reasons people do not comply.

The staff members interviewed listed transportation, child care, lack of computer skills, low literacy, and poor vision/lack of health benefits that provide eye exams or glasses among the greatest barriers facing participants. As for barriers for the program, one county remarked that while they enjoy having autonomy within the county on running its program, they would like to see more direction from the state level. An example of how this would ideally occur is to have new information, training, and program/policy updates come from the three agencies at the state level, not just from the one applicable to them. This combined effort is seen as something that would benefit the program as a whole and get all agencies involved on the same page. One other concern voiced by two counties was the lack of information on what happens to the participants once they leave the college. This was also heard in interviews with DSS workers.

As one staff member said “It’s just worked out well and I think the most important thing has been the benefit for the clients because they do seem to have a little more sense of choice and it’s not just ‘Do this so you can get your food stamps’. It’s here’s a way that maybe I can better myself.”

Career Start Participants

The Career Start participants who were involved in the focus groups generally were very supportive of the program. Almost all reported that Career Start had value to them. The focus group participants had attended an orientation session at the community college. Many continued to take additional classes at the college before being referred to the ESC office for an independent job search. The courses included such topics as human resource development (HRD), an introduction to the use of computers, and money management. A few of the focus group participants were also pursuing a GED.

Most reported difficulty in finding a new job. Several were grieving over the loss of their last job and were hoping to find a similar position in the same industry. The focus groups revealed several perceived barriers to employment. One perceived barrier was the participant's age. Several said they believed employers favored younger workers. Two participants said they were unable to find a job because they had a criminal record. While several said that their lack of high school credentials was a barrier, they had learned during the Career Start classes how to address that issue.

The focus group participants reported several difficulties in attending Career Start training. Almost all participants volunteered that transportation was a problem. Many did not have working automobiles. In most locations, public transportation is not existent. Some resorted to walking or riding bicycles. At least one hitched rides with strangers.

Their views of Career Start are presented below.

Community College Training

Almost all focus group participants had positive things to say about the orientation session. One participant said his orientation began with a three-day training session. Following the orientation, "you could make a choice of what you wanted to start in. They gave you a choice of HRD, Money Smart, the career start, and the finish up would be job search at the unemployment office."

In the orientation, "they do a little evaluation to see where your strengths are," he said. "Some people have mechanical skills. Some people might have different other skills like outdoors. Some people might want to want to be in the medical field. They really tried to get a feel for the person. Everybody is different but we are there for the same reason."

Another county's Career Start orientation provided training on how to apply for a job. "They said don't be afraid to shake their hand and to let them know you are interested," said one participant. "They wanted to make sure you were able to fill out an application, a valid application," said another. "They wanted you to present yourself so you could fill out an application proper," said a third.

"It renews your memory," added one of the participants. "I had been out of work for more than a year. I signed up for unemployment for 26 weeks. The training tells you what to look for and how to apply for a job."

One female Career Start participant said she had second thoughts at the beginning. Within a few days, those initial misgivings were dispelled. “I went to a class that lasted a month. I was going from 9 in the morning to 2:30 in the afternoon, Monday through Friday.”

“When I went in, I was wondering why I was there in that class,” she said. “I thought at the beginning it was a waste of time. We just filled out papers and papers and papers, but like after three or four days, I started getting trained to find a job, to fill out applications. They also talked about how to start a career.”

Not every Career Start participant takes courses after being referred to the community college. “They sent me something that said I needed to go to the community college,” said one participant. “At the community college, the teacher, we talked a while. She told me what was what. The other guy came in. That’s when we started. As far as I’m concerned, it was worth me going there.”

“She explained things thoroughly,” he said. “She’s very good. She said it was an option on my part. I could have still taken classes if I wanted. After I took the test, the lady told me I didn’t need to take any classes. ‘You need to go down to the unemployment office.’ So I called a lady down there and she told me when to come in.”

GED Training

Another Career Start participant said the program motivated her to get her GED. “I went on to get my GED,” she said. “I’m working on it, if I can keep going. It requires three days a week. That’s three days I could be looking for work. It’s not paying the bills. It’s great I’m getting my education and it’s not costing me. With education I know I can get a better job than what I had.”

In terms of working on his GED, a different participant said “I completed the 9th grade, but I dropped out in the 10th. I never took algebra. I’m on social studies now. It’s a lot of dates and stuff. Some of you remember and some you don’t. It’s more interesting now. I’m also studying language now. I find myself going to the dictionary to find the meaning of a word. I get frustrated but I won’t quit. The problem is still going to be there. I find a way to deal with it now. I might need to have to ask for a teacher to help me.”

“I have experience on a lot of stuff,” the participant said. “But as far as book knowledge, I have a lack of knowledge with words and stuff.”

His GED class is conducted “in a big room. There are twenty students in it. They have only one teacher. She’s real nice,” he said. “She doesn’t care if you ask her something 20 times. She doesn’t mind. She’s real nice as far as helping you. She doesn’t want you to feel anything is not important. “

The students in the class are studying different topics. “You got some in social studies. We got one guy who came in a month or two ago. He’s already finished almost. He’s just got to do his math. He’s in his 20’s—23 or 24—and it’s still fresh in his mind (from school). I’ve been working on my GED for nine months.”

HRD Classes

In the HRD class “there were a lot of good things I learned, like how to deal with people, get along with people, and how to use a computer. I had never used it (a computer) before,” said one woman who participated. The class covered things such as “your attitude and your looks. The teacher showed me how to dress to look professional and how to act professional.”⁴

“Before that class, I was going to interviews dressed in blue jeans. I would wear sneakers. I would go there in sneakers and blue jeans and not be professional,” she said. “The teacher showed me how to dress professional, how to do my resume, how to talk to a manager and how to explain to them that I needed a job and what were my qualifications.”

“The HRD class gets you prepared for getting a job, getting a better job, or getting a job of your choice,” the participant said. “It all depends on where you are in your life.”

“For me, my GED will be my first step. Most places want you to have a high school (diploma) or a GED before they will even hire you. For me right now, my GED is the first thing I need to get as far as getting the career job or the job I would want to have.”

Interviewing Skills

Another topic covered in HRD is interviewing skills. “What they prepare you for (in HRD) is how to present yourself when you go to the employer,” said one man. “They teach you to be knowledgeable of the company, to know something about the company

⁴ At another community college, Career Start participants were provided a voucher for a set of clothes at a local thrift store, upon completion of their HRD class.

and do some research. They teach you to ask questions. They also teach you how to talk. They have a sheet of 32 basic questions that employers might ask you. They train you. They even video tape you and take you through an interview. They let you see how it actually is when you go for an interview.”

“We viewed the tapes of everybody’s interviews,” he added. “We made comments to each other about the things they could improve on. It gives you a good look on things. It gives you ideas on how you could change, how you can do better before you go for a real interview.”

“They prepare you for questions you don’t feel easy talking about,” he continued. “Like some things that may have happened on the job or some personal issues. You never know what they are going to ask you in an interview. You’ve got to be comfortable and confident enough to talk about it. You can’t stutter or beat around the bush. Sometimes you can say something without really having to go into detail like somebody who didn’t complete high school could say ‘One of my weaknesses is I dropped out of school but I am working on my GED class.’ It lets them know that you see your problem, your weakness, and you are trying to make good on that.”

“Before Career Start, every time I would go to an employer, they would ask if I had a GED or a high school diploma,” said a woman who dropped out of middle school at age fifteen. “I would put down that I was a graduate. Sometimes they would catch me on it (because I did not graduate).”

“The teacher showed me how to say the truth about it and not to be embarrassed that I did not finish school,” she added. “Now I always tell the truth when I talk to employers. I ask them for a chance. I tell them that I will take classes for a GED if I get the job I am applying for.”

“When I went there, the teacher later told me, they thought I was going to quit the class because I always go with an attitude,” she added. “I started learning a lot. They said I had changed from one day to another. I started learning a lot of things I didn’t know. It (the class) helped me a lot. Thanks to Career Start, I got me a good paying job.”

Resumes and Cover Letters

In addition to how to be interviewed, the HRD class provides training on “how to do resumes and cover letters,” one participant said. “I never even heard of cover letters

before that class. You can send it for jobs they are not currently hiring for, for jobs they are not taking applications for. You can send them a resume and let the company know you are interested in a job and how they can reach you. They can get in touch with you when an opening comes up.”

“Career Start also showed me how to write,” one participant said. “Back then I didn’t know how to write that well. I would just start and keep on with no punctuation, no nothing. In addition to classes on writing, the participant said she received training on computers and software. “We used to go to the library at the college to get the newspaper. The teacher would help us look for jobs. She would make us do letters, like we were writing letters to the person asking for a chance, for them to give us an opportunity, to learn and to qualify for the job we were asking for.”

“We would send the letters to the person we were interested in working for,” she added. “They would write back. The first thing they would tell me was to get into the GED program and they would be glad to give an opportunity.”

Money Management Classes

Many of the community colleges offer training on money management. Sometimes this training is offered as part of a class, while in other instances it may be a separate class. Most of the Career Start participants found that training useful.

Following orientation, “I started Money Smart first, then I went to a computer class—Introduction to Microsoft—then I went to a two-day segment connected to the computer class. HRD was a three-week course. I just finished that,” he said. “Tomorrow I start my job search.”

The participant said he chose Money Smart because he “didn’t know anything about it.” One of the instructors at orientation told him “the guy that taught the class was not only was good at what he was doing, he’d been through it. It was more a personal thing. This guy, he really had been down. He was able to relate to us as far as what he was going through, how we could better ourselves if we do get a job.”

“He said to be accountable for the money you spend, just don’t waste it,” the participant recalled. “He talked about how to get out of debt and stay out of debt. Mostly he wanted you to pay cash for everything other than a house. As far as buying cars, he requested you go to auctions.”

“He gives you a different outlook on different stuff,” he added. “All of our own habits are surrounded and connected to things that we do in our life that hinder us from prospering. He even broke it down to people who smoke cigarettes. If you spend \$5 per day on cigarettes at the end of the year you can see how much money you spent on cigarettes. When you look at it on a piece of paper, you actually see it up front. It helps you look at things a whole lot better.”

“I’d like to go back and do it again,” he said. “I really want to go back and pick up some more stuff. It’s a good class. I just wish it would have been a little bit more lengthier. He’s patient. He answers any questions. He even had his wife come in. We got to hear from both sides; how she felt. She really didn’t like the changes. She said they were so used to spending money, going out and eating expensive lunches and doing things that people do. She didn’t like the system she was going to have to do. She understood he had her best interest at heart.”

“They had to talk to each other,” he added. “They learned to work together. It was a hard step for both of them. They had a plan and they knew what they wanted. They put down their goals and what they wanted to do. They picked their bills and they got out of debt. They are living proof it can be done. It just takes a lot of sacrifice. A lot of things don’t come easy. You just have to work at it.”

“I liked them because they were down to earth,” he said. “They showed how they did it. They had a big jar with just credit cards they cut up. It was full. They were like \$50,000 in debt and they got out in three years. They did little things like packing their lunch. They used the money to work for them. They took their tax refunds and applied them to a certain bill they wanted to knock out. They target one particular bill they wanted to get rid of and they worked on that, then they started knocking on the next bill. They laugh about it now but it wasn’t all cookies and cream when they started out.”

A participant who received money management as part of an exiting class also found it meaningful. “The first part of the class was on money management. I took the class. I knew about banking and saving money but in order to start saving you’ve got to start making some money,” he said. “The second week they talked about computers. I gave it my best. After four weeks, they sent me to the unemployment office for work search. All I’m getting is the address of places that are hiring but no job yet.”

Computer Classes

The participants also found the computer class worthwhile. “For me, the computer class was more personal because for today’s economy, everything is going to computers. The work force is being connected to computers in some way. Even as simple as filling out applications at a lot of places, you have to go online and fill them out. They don’t have the standard paper ones.”

“For me, it (the computer class) was like a break point,” he added. “I didn’t have computer skills. When you are like me—44, almost 45—I really never had too much experience with computers. It was frightening or scary at first. Being the way things are now, to get a job you are going to have to have some computer skills. But you have to get in too deep, to the heavy stuff. It gave me some experience in typing. I never typed a day in my life. I went through the Mavis Beacon (software package for typing). When we finished, I was typing seven words per minute. That was good to me because I was a one-finger person. That’s a class I’d like to go further in. I think it’s a good thing to have.”

“I didn’t finish high school,” he said. “A lot of stuff is new to me. I never got a chance to experience the computer. I was afraid of it. I’d guess you’d say you wouldn’t be smart enough. You have the assumption that people who work with computers are high IQ and little stuff like that will keep you from using it (computers). You have to take a chance.”

“Now Career Start is a nice program,” he added. “It shows you a lot of things. It introduces you to a lot of stuff that you never thought about having to use like computers and doing resumes. I never had the need for a resume.”

“I knew how to go into a computer,” he said. “It’s basically fun. The teacher that we had, she’s pretty broad minded. She cares about students. She keeps stating you never know when you might need this.”

Bonding with other Participants

There was a good deal of bonding among Career Start participants at the community college. “I had some pretty nice people in my class,” one participant recalled. “There were two girls and their husbands. One of the girls got a job. She worked with cable television. We used to tease her about climbing poles. She didn’t look like the kind of person who would climb poles. The class was almost like family. We had a good time

from the first day. At the end it was kind of sad. Everybody cooked and brought different stuff at the end. We exchanged email addresses so we could keep in contact. They were more personal because people talked about things people don't usually talk about. They were open."

"It really made the group closer," he added. "Everybody was helping each other."

"I made friends at the same time I was learning. The teacher that thought I was going to quit, now I like her," said a participant in a different county. "She has shown me so much. Now she and I are good friends. She still teaches me stuff that I will need for a career."

"Sometimes I will get into a class and I will see people like I was when I started," she said. "They do not want to be there. They do not know why they are there. I started telling these students not to be afraid and not to be frustrated."

Barriers to Employment

Some Career Start participants have a number of barriers that makes it difficult for them to find jobs. One 46-year-old participant said he was "a new reader. As a new reader, it's difficult for me to deal with computers." He also is a recovering substance abuser with a criminal record who dropped out of school in the 10th grade. He said he started reading as a byproduct of his treatment for substance abuse. "I don't want to break my anonymity, but I was doing a twelve step, attending a twelve-step program. I noticed there were quite a few guys in there that wouldn't read or couldn't read."

"When someone else was reading a certain thing, I'd read along with them," he said. "I got used to the words. I knew I had a reading problem. I was reaching out, trying to do better."

"Career Start told me about a church down the street from me," he added. "They had an adult reading program. I've been trying to attend that. It is seven miles from my house, but it's easier than coming into town to attend a class. I live out in the country. It's easier for me to go two nights a week out in the county. I've got a class tonight."

"I've been looking for work before I got into this program," he said. "I'm a new diabetic and I'm trying to get a handle on it. Changing, going through this transition, it's hard on me. I can't fault anyone for my shortcomings."

“They told me I could be exempt but I didn’t want to be exempt,” he said. “They told me I would need to spend four weeks at the community college.”

Transportation

Transportation, especially in rural areas, is a major barrier to complying with program requirements, looking for work, or getting a job. According to one Career Start participant who moved back to North Carolina about a year and a half earlier to help his mother who had been in an accident, hitching a ride is his primary mode of transportation. (He had hitched a ride to attend the focus group at the local department of social services.) “Transportation is my biggest problem. These folks don’t realize it’s really difficult to get around when you want to get somewhere.”

A second Career Start participant in the same county echoed his comments. “I didn’t have a problem taking the class,” she said. “It’s just the transportation. It’s hard getting a ride. They don’t have city buses. If you go to Virginia, there are city buses everywhere.”

Transportation to class was a major issue for many students, the woman said. “I have my own transportation but there was a lot of people in my class that paid \$2.25 to ride the bus. Sometime students would miss a day or two out of the class because they did not have a way to get to the classes.”

“We would always see that. In the Career Start program there was a lot of people who wanted to come and learn what Career Start offers but there is just no way to get there.”

Lack of transportation is a big problem. “There are no city buses,” said one participant. “Taxis cost three times as much as having a car. I’ve seriously thought about getting a horse.”

“It’s \$5 to jump in the car and go up the road and back,” said another participant.

“I was riding my bike,” another participant said. “I have a car but it was broke down. I called the Council on Aging (which operates a limited bus service). She said it would be \$4 to ride the bus. I told her I wasn’t working and didn’t have the money. She gave me the name of a lady to call at the college. I was in class and they called me in class and told me I could start riding the bus. That helped me a lot.”

“I was trying to do my best,” he added. “It was 8:30 in the morning and it was cold. It’s kind of cold to be walking. I was lucky I didn’t have to go when it was raining. (The Council on Aging bus) brought me and took me home. They carried me two weeks. I rode my bike the first week. I rode it half-way and I walked the other half.”

“People that you know say they’ll take you,” he said. “But when it gets down to it, they’ll get all upset. I hate to depend on somebody to get me somewhere. You can see the attitude that they really don’t want to help you.”

Child Care

Child care was another problem. The woman, a single mother, had to be home when her son came home from kindergarten. “I was working on a GED but when you have kids, you don’t really have the time when you live alone. I couldn’t go to class in the afternoon because I didn’t have anyone to watch my son.”

Job Search

“If Career Start could provide some jobs here, that would help us all,” said one participant. “You can look, but if it’s not there, you are not going to find anything.”

“I’ve been looking for another four weeks, three places a week” said the woman who had received unemployment for 26 weeks. “There’s just nothing, in furniture especially. I’ve even went to foam rubber since furniture is so low right now. And even socks. I did socks for a couple of weeks as a temporary. And temporary can’t help you. There is just nothing out there. It’s discouraging. It’s another day wasted when you could be out there working. Everybody wants experience, but how are you going to get experience if you can’t get in the door? Furniture. That’s all I’ve ever done. That’s all I know. They told us in that class work was supposed to pick up this year. It ain’t picked up yet. What gets me is they got this board of what they are hiring for. Otherwise they won’t talk to you. If you can’t upholster, or you can’t trim, or you aren’t a sewer, they won’t let you in the door. I’ve been in furniture all my life. I’m 45. That’s all I’ve ever done, but that don’t matter.”

“I did foam rubber when I was 18,” she added. “I thought I could go back to it if I had to. Or I could be a sander. They need sanders at the furniture places. I’m willing to learn. I’ll tell them I hadn’t ever done it, but if you’ll show me I can do it. Even spraying furniture.”

The participant said foam rubber was “where they cut cushions. We just cut them out with saws, then piece them together. They have gluers that glue the pieces. I’ve done all that. I’ve been down to one employer that does foam rubber five times. I’ve probably pestered them to death.”

One Career Start participant who had done electrical work for close to twenty years said he received a job referral. “I did get a call from the unemployment office about a job. They had a job in the electrical field. They didn’t hire me because they wanted a licensed electrician.”

“From their point of view, if they want to train somebody, they want to train somebody young,” he added.

“My daughter, she’s 20, she’s got a chance,” echoed another participant. “She’s young. You get older, like us, they want you to be what you used to be. You can’t and I can’t be 20 again. You want my opinion? All the business have gone here. It’s just going down hill.”

“I started out trying to do culinary, you know, kitchen work,” he said. “But I haven’t even been able to get in being a dish washer. All I wanted is a job. They kind of pump you up then let you down. I’ve been looking for work; I need work. I’ve got plenty of dreams. Without a job—any job—I can’t fulfill any of them.”

The difficulty of being an older worker plus having a criminal record and getting a job was echoed by another focus group participant. “I’m fifty-five. I’m not going to be able to do most of these jobs out here. How’s a 55-year-old going to get a job, get a career? When you are 18 and on up, you can do anything. Any man with a record, 55-years-old isn’t going to get a job.”

“I’m between a rock and a hard place,” he added. “I’ve got priors (a criminal record). People with priors, they need work too. They talk about giving a man another chance, what chance do I have when they ask if you’ve ever been convicted of a felony and you say ‘yes.’ They say ‘I’m sorry, we can’t use you.’”

Lack of Jobs

“This is the first town I’ve been in at Taco Bell or Burger King or McDonalds and they tell you ‘No, we are not hiring,’” said one participant. “They don’t need anybody. They *always* take applications in every city around the United States. Except here.”

“My health is starting to creep up on me,” said one participant. “I have no way of seeing a doctor or a dentist. You are not qualified for Medicaid unless there is someone young living with you.”

“Even if you’ve been in a job for six years, a lot of things have changed. Most places want a GED or a high school diploma,” said one participant. “I knew I had to look for work,” said a participant. “So I get out here and ride. It takes a lot of gas. You have to go in person. Most of the time you can’t get past the office. I can’t get in to talk to the supervisors. Most say they won’t take an application.”

“I’ve been looking myself,” said another. “I bet you I’ve turned in thousands of applications. When you keep getting told no, how can that build up your spirit?”

“They tell you that they’ll keep it on file for a year,” chimed in another. “I bet they throw it out when I walk out the door.”

Career Start

“I basically think Career Start should have an age limit to it,” he said. “There might be somebody in the program older than me. What kind of career or future are we looking at. Nobody wants to hire somebody in their 50’s. And as for a career, a man close to 60, he’s not going to have a career.”

Summary

The Career Start program attempts to improve the employability of food stamp participants who are required to register for work. This is done by providing these individuals access to training and services at community colleges. These food stamp employment and training participants are required to attend an orientation session at the local college where the Career Start program is described. In most instances, each participant is screened to identify barriers to employment and to determine if he or she is job ready.

A number of the individuals participating in Career Start do not have high school credentials. The exact number is not available. Information on education attainment is not collected and reported. These individuals are encouraged to enroll in a GED program during the orientation session. The GED program is available at no costs and is generally offered in a self-paced, classroom setting. Each GED class may contain a set of individuals with a range of educational needs. Since the GED program is self paced and depends on where the student begins as well as his or her abilities, the amount of time required to complete the program varies widely. Several community college staff estimated that it would likely take 18 months for an individual to complete the program. Individuals are required to participate in the community college segment of Career Start for only four weeks before being referred to the local ESC office for four weeks of independent job search.

There is nothing to prevent an individual engaged in an independent job search from pursuing a GED.⁵ Most counties appear to offer a flexible schedule for the courses. There are certain costs for participating in the program, such as transportation. Also, as several Career Start participants pointed out, each hour spent in the classroom working on a GED is an hour that could have been spent looking for work.

Career Start participants in a number of counties had substantial experience in manufacturing industries affected by the economic downtown of the last few years, such as textiles and furniture manufacturing. It is not clear whether those industries will rebound. Many of those individuals dropped out of high school before graduating in order

⁵ An individual would have to accept a job if offered one, even though the work schedule might conflict with GED classes.

to accept the manufacturing jobs. While they may have solid employment histories in these industries, it is not clear whether there will be jobs for them.

Several community college and ESC staff said that new employers moving into the Career Start counties involved in this study will likely require a more educated work force. While it is not clear where the information on new employers is drawn from, the assumption that they will require educated workers seems reasonable. Even though Career Start offers an opportunity for the individual who did not graduate to get a GED, it does not appear that a large number are motivated to enroll in the program.⁶

In addition to the GED, Career Start offers a set of classes on human resource development (HRD). This includes how to complete an application, how to dress for an interview, how to answer an employer's questions, and how to get a job. Most Career Start participants said they felt that this training was worthwhile and would help them find employment.

Training on basic computer skills is also offered. This training allows Career Start participants to learn such things as how to turn a computer on and off, how to launch an application, how to find things on the internet, how to save a file, and how to print it. These sessions also provide the participant with an introduction to typing skills. These skills will assist participants in completing online applications as well as in developing resumes and crafting letters to prospective employers. All of the participants who had received computer training said they thought the classes were worthwhile.

Many community colleges also offer money management training as part of Career Start. This training may be included as part of HRD or as a separate class. The participants who took these classes said they learned a lot. They said they also wished they had jobs—and were earning money—so they could put the training to use.

All the staff interviewed expressed strong support for the Career Start program. Community college and ESC workers both indicated a willingness to do whatever they could to move Career Start participants into employment. Many community college staff provided anecdotes that illustrated going the extra distance to serve individuals. This was evidenced by such things as making arrangements for transportation, scheduling a

⁶ Any resident of North Carolina—not just Career Start participants—can enroll in a GED program at their community college at no cost.

separate orientation session for one Career Start participant who was responsible for the care of a disabled household member, as well as efforts in job development.

What is not clear for the process evaluation is whether the Career Start program translates into improved employment and earnings for participants. The program was launched in 15 counties with high unemployment. Since it was implemented, food stamp participation has increased. This increase is an indication of poor economic conditions. As a result, it is difficult for individuals with barriers to employment to find jobs.

There may also be difficulty in tracking the impact of a program that has only four weeks to address problems. The short duration makes it difficult to observe an individual and evaluate his or her strengths. Training is provided in group sessions using a teaching approach that works well with adult learners. The participants in these classes may have wide variation in learning abilities and styles. There may not be sufficient time or resources to provide individualized instruction. Few things can be taught and mastered in one month. Given that classes are not scheduled every day for every student, Career Start participants have less than a month to master the material.

In order to assess the connection between Career Start and employment, a separate outcome evaluation needs to be conducted. This outcome evaluation would track who is referred to Career start, the individual's prior education and employment, the type and amount of services and training provided, and the experiences the individual has after completing the program. Data are not currently available on who attends what Career Start segments and the amount of assistance he or she receives.⁷ This outcome evaluation would examine the cost-effectiveness of the Career Start program. It would explore the cost of providing the services by community colleges and compare those costs—along with the observed outcome of employment and earnings—with the costs of a tradition food stamp employment and training program operated by the state employment service. This outcome evaluation could be used to quantify the benefits of Career Start and identify what components work and why.

Additional research also may be needed to determine the best ways to motivate Career Start participants who dropped out of high school to attend GED programs. The

⁷ Community colleges do track the number of individuals referred for Career Start, the number of individuals that do not comply, and the number of students attending various classes each month. This information on instruction is reported at the class, and not individual, level.

findings from this could be used to encourage employment and training participants to pursue educational opportunities on a part-time basis while they are receiving food stamps and to continue those efforts if they find a job.