

TANF Education and Training

The Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative



APRIL 2010 | Josh Bone

The Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative (CPI) provides a comprehensive set of academic and support services designed to enable low-income, low-skill individuals to acquire the degrees and/or credentials required to obtain and hold jobs in selected high-demand, high-wage industries. CPI is funded with federal TANF dollars but is not limited to recipients of TANF cash assistance. Students are eligible if they are adult caretakers of children under 21 and have incomes below 250 percent of the federal poverty line. Parents who participate (or whose children participate) in certain other means-tested programs are automatically eligible.

When students sign up for CPI at one of the state's 22 two-year colleges or one of three technical centers associated with four-year universities located in Arkansas, they select a particular career goal from a list assembled by CPI officials. Each career is accompanied by a list of the courses and degrees and credentials a student needs to enter the particular field. These degrees and credentials range from GEDs and vocational credentials to Associate degrees. CPI participants must meet the same academic admissions standards applicable to other students. CPI pays up to \$1,500 a year per participant for tuition and support services and provides benefits for up to 18 months. At most sites, once students choose careers and accompanying pathways, they must obtain a Mandatory Employability Certificate, which can require some remedial coursework. The certificate confirms that students have acquired the basic skills needed to be immediately employable if they leave CPI before completing the credentials and/or degrees required for entry into their chosen fields. CPI uses the ACT WorkKeys Assessment System to evaluate whether students have the skills necessary to earn a Mandatory Employability Certificate and uses the KeyTrain system to provide remedial training to those students who need it.¹

Each incoming student is assigned a counselor and a tutor who remain available throughout the student's time in CPI. The counselor is trained to identify and appreciate the logistical problems faced by individuals living in poverty, including low access to reliable transportation and challenges to arranging and affording quality childcare. CPI directly contracts with private vendors to provide childcare and transportation services, and the counselors ensure that students receive these services. Counselors also work with local Department of Workforce Services (DWS) offices to ensure the smooth delivery of other available support services. The tutors provide academic support and track academic progress. Students who are struggling to pass tests are assigned to a lab that evaluates their knowledge and skills. If the lab identifies any gaps that might interfere with academic and career goals, students receive instruction designed to fill the gaps. After students leave CPI, they retain access to ongoing career support services, including classes in resume writing and interviewing and individual career counseling.

¹ For more information about the ACT WorkKeys Assessment System and KeyTrain, visit http://www.keytrain.com/wrk_over.asp.

By The Numbers

- **Year started:** 2004
- **Approximate number of active participants:** 7,000, many of whom are not TANF recipients.
- **Annual cost:** \$12 million (entirely TANF dollars).
- **Performance Measures:** According to the latest annual report conducted for CPI, 90 percent of CPI students either continued with the program into the next semester or completed the program.

CPI and TANF Work Requirements

Counselors are responsible for ensuring that students who receive TANF cash assistance meet work participation rate requirements to the extent possible. Most students are counted as participating in vocational education for the first 12 months of their CPI participation. Many students (especially those pursuing vocational credentials) complete their education within 12 months. Counselors are currently experimenting with other ways of counting students, including creating work-study internships. If students participate in work-study for at least 20 hours a week, work-study can count as subsidized employment, and hours of school attendance can then be counted as job skills training, which is not capped. Because so many CPI students count towards the state's work participation rate, however, CPI has faced little pressure to increase the number of students who count.

Documentation and Verification Requirements

Counselors work together with local DWS officials to document and verify hours. All hours spent in CPI programs are documented and verified. The DWS officials provide the counselors with necessary forms and explain the documentation and verification procedures that are required for different types of activities (class attendance, supervised

TANF Work Participation Rates

States face financial penalties unless they engage 50 percent of adults in families receiving TANF-funded assistance in a limited number of countable work activities for a specified number of hours per week. Education and training activities only count toward these hours to a certain extent. No more than 30 percent of individuals counting toward a state's work participation rate can be counted in vocational education or high school attendance (for minor parents), and no individual can be counted as participating in vocational education for more than 12 months. After those first 12 months, hours spent in education and training programs can count as job skills training or education related to employment, but only when combined with at least 20 hours of participation a week in employment or another core TANF work activity.

The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA) for the first time imposed the work requirements on recipients of assistance funded with state-only money that is claimed toward the TANF maintenance of effort requirement, and it made other changes that effectively increased the work participation rate targets that states must meet. Additionally, the regulations implementing the DRA require that all hours of participation be verified and documented, which poses significant challenges to institutions educating TANF participants. For more information on the TANF work participation requirements and the changes made by the DRA, please see *Implementing the TANF Changes in the Deficit Reduction Act: "Win-Win" Solutions for Families and States*, available at www.clasp.org/WinWin.

As a result of these restrictions, and a general "work-first" approach, many states allow only very limited access to education and training for TANF recipients. However, some states have found ways to work within the federal requirements and provide valuable educational opportunities to parents receiving TANF. This brief is one in a series that profiles promising approaches to supporting education and training programs under TANF in spite of the limits imposed by the federal rules.

study, etc). The counselors, in turn, inform the students of the requirements and ensure that the students get the necessary signatures from their instructors and study supervisors confirming participation.

Crucial Innovations

The pathways model allows for smooth transitions between different degrees and credentials. The comprehensive set of academic services provided by CPI allows students to enter the program at different points in a career pathway and achieve the same goal: the receipt of degrees and/or credentials necessary to obtain and hold a particular job, whether it is as a nurse or an automobile mechanic. One student might enter CPI without a GED and exit with an Associate degree. Another student might enter CPI with a high school education, but an inability to solve basic math problems, yet ultimately exit with a vocational certificate in computer operation and a thorough knowledge of basic math. Because students see from the outset that certain course progressions will lead them to their particular career goals, they are less likely to become discouraged and more likely to move through the educational system strategically. Furthermore, because CPI provides so many benefits along the way (remedial education, GED, credentials, etc.), students rarely feel as if the only benefits come after completion of the entire set of courses.

CPI has created an effective outcome measurement system. A main focus of CPI is outcome measurement, with an eye toward improving services. During CPI's second year, administrators focused on developing measurement systems that could identify best practices. The systems they implemented were designed to measure student achievement of employment goals and create a demographic profile of the CPI student population. After assembling this data, the administrators contracted an outside firm to evaluate whether CPI was effectively moving its students into high-demand, high-wage jobs, and whether two-year colleges could provide enough educational resources to help students into these types of jobs. The outside firm continues to conduct an annual survey, the results of which help CPI identify ways to better serve its target population, often by identifying the types of services that students need to receive.² Additionally, the results of the surveys, including the 90 percent success rate cited above, have convinced many in the state legislature and at state agencies that CPI is worth supporting and expanding.

A rewards system for community colleges has helped CPI incentivize community college cooperation. One million dollars of CPI's budget is reserved each year for incentive funding, which is awarded at the end of the year to the community colleges that have met their performance goals, as measured by the system described above. In addition, each year CPI publishes a list of the colleges that have met their goals and received additional funding. The governor has maintained a strong interest in this information. As a result, community colleges are generally very attentive to the needs of CPI students.

Challenges

CPI is facing increasing levels of interest that may require imposing new eligibility requirements. Because practically all parents in Arkansas community colleges meet the income requirements, and only 18 percent of Arkansas residents have a post-secondary credential, the potential pool of CPI students is quite large. As a result, CPI caps per-student investment at \$1,500 and closely monitors enrollment rates to ensure that it can provide sufficient services to each student. So far, due to increased investment in CPI, admissions

² The latest survey (Year 3) is available at: http://www.workforcestrategy.org/publications/AR_CPI_Report_YR3_Final_2009.pdf.

standards, and natural attrition, CPI administrators have not had to tighten eligibility requirements. As enrollment continues to increase as a result of high unemployment, however, CPI might have to tighten its eligibility standards unless funding levels increase.

Coordinating between government agencies is an ongoing struggle for CPI. The initial effort to secure a TANF grant for CPI was led by the state Department of Human Services, the Association of Two-Year Colleges, and the Southern Good Faith Fund. The Department of Higher Education ultimately became the lead agency for CPI. However, DWS receives all TANF funding and implements all other programs that serve TANF recipients. As a result, CPI administrators have had to form partnerships and build relationships with DWS to ensure the smooth delivery of services to students. CPI officials have undertaken two related approaches to building and sustaining productive relationships. First, they have focused on building trusting relationships not just with high-level state administrators but also with the officials at local DWS offices who actually write the checks and coordinate the delivery of services to students. According to CPI administrators, the fact that counselors and DWS officials have had to work together to figure out how to document and verify hours has had an unexpected benefit: counselors and DWS officials have gotten to know each other and this has caused lines of communication to open about other topics, including new services that DWS might be able to provide to CPI students. Second, CPI administrators have worked to find areas where various agencies can cooperate and link resources for a common goal. For instance, many programs that serve TANF recipients, not just CPI, want to decrease the cost of subsidizing participant transportation. CPI administrators have coordinated an effort to negotiate lower gas prices on behalf of all Department of Human Services and DWS initiatives. These efforts have helped build trust and deepen mutual respect within state agencies, facilitating ongoing success.

For More Information

Visit

Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative website:

<http://www.arpathways.com/>

Contact

Dr. Karon J. Rosa
Program Director
Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative
Arkansas Department of Higher Education
karonr@adhe.edu
501-371-2083