

PROJECT MATCH

FEBRUARY 2007

Beyond Barriers to Work

**A Workforce Attachment Approach
That Addresses Unpredictability,
Halting Progress, and Human Nature**

**TOBY HERR
SUZANNE L. WAGNER**

About Project Match

Founded in 1985, Project Match engages in program development and research in a range of fields related to low-income populations, including welfare-to-work, workforce development, community development, and financial education and services. Project Match's employment model for community-based organizations and its case management system for state and local welfare agencies have both been replicated at sites around the country. Having provided employment services in Chicago for more than 20 years, Project Match recently expanded its own direct-service activities and is focused on the city's West Haven neighborhood, where a mixed-income community is being built to replace the Chicago Housing Authority's Henry Horner Homes. New Project Match initiatives to promote stabilization of this emergent community target families across socioeconomic strata and provide services to adults, youth, and children.

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The writing, production, and dissemination of this paper were made possible with funding from the Alphawood Foundation and Bowman C. Lingle Trust.

The opinions and recommendations in this paper do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

An adaptation of this paper appears as a chapter in *The Legacy of Discrimination and Segregation: Implications for Transforming Public Housing*, edited by Margery Turner, Susan Popkin, and Lynette Rawlings (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 2007).

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Introduction

Since 1985, Project Match has operated a community-based employment program, first in Chicago's Cabrini-Green neighborhood and now in West Haven, on the city's Near West Side. Over the course of more than 20 years of operation, Project Match has received national attention for its programmatic approach, which has differed from prevailing approaches for welfare recipients, public housing residents, and other low-income populations.

Most program developers currently look at the challenge of workforce attachment through the lens of “barriers to work”—that is, they focus on ameliorating a discrete set of problems ranging from lack of child care to depression that are presumed to be the main reasons people do not work. Barriers to work started out as a loose descriptive term for thinking about the issues faced by the long-term unemployed but has, over the years, crystallized into a categorical construct for explaining their unemployment and become the defining structure of virtually all program models for people who fail to get jobs through traditional job search efforts. The concept of barriers is now the basis for assessing and sorting people in employment programs, for determining what services will be provided and in what order, and for judging who is likely to be successful or not in the workforce.

At Project Match, we look at the challenge of workforce attachment through the lens of human development, a perspective focused on understanding the process of change and growth in individuals. Drawing on many different disciplines, particularly psychology and sociology, this perspective has led us to very different decisions about program structures and services for the long-term unemployed. In this paper, we describe the differences between a barriers approach and a human development approach to workforce attachment, in terms of both theory and practice. And because the barriers approach is so embedded in current systems—whether welfare-to-work, workforce development, or housing—we start the paper with some history, tracing how barriers to work evolved from a mere phrase into the prevailing institutional paradigm. The barriers

approach did not spring fully formed from the minds of program developers, but emerged gradually in tandem with—and sometimes in opposition to—a series of political and ideological shifts in the structure of cash assistance for poor families. Knowing this history undercuts the inevitability of the barriers approach, making room for consideration of other approaches around which to build employment programs.

To Work or Not to Work? The Changing Expectations of Welfare

In a nutshell, the barriers approach assumes (1) there are particular problems that usually prevent people from finding and keeping work; (2) these problems can be resolved in a fairly straightforward manner through program intervention; and (3) their resolution will be followed by success in the workforce. In barriers-focused employment programs, participants are assessed up front for a specified set of problems and then referred for services to address any of the problems they are identified as having, in order to become job-ready. An increasing focus on barriers to work has coincided with rising expectations that welfare recipients should work, or engage in work-related activities, in exchange for cash assistance—expectations that have changed dramatically over the decades since federal assistance began.

From AFC to WIN. Aid to Families with Children (AFC), enacted in 1935 as part of the Social Security Act, is generally regarded as the beginning of the U.S. welfare system for poor families, though there were various state pension programs for destitute mothers that preceded it. The stated intent of the federal legislation was to allow an adult relative—“father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, brother, sister, stepfather, stepmother, stepbrother, stepsister, uncle, or aunt”—to stay at home and raise the children upon the death, continued absence, or incapacity of one or both parents. The assumption was that this support would usually go to women whose husbands had died and that AFC would assume the traditional male role of breadwinner, thereby allowing the widow to continue in the traditional female child-rearing role, in keeping with social norms of the time.¹ Because there was no expectation that these women on welfare should work, the issue of *barriers* to work did not arise in response to the legislation: The only reason to start thinking about reasons why people cannot work is when they are expected to, but do not.

¹As scholars have pointed out (for example, Lynn, 1999), the social norms reflected in AFC and other New Deal programs were not universal, but representative particularly of the white middle and upper classes. Women in poor families, particularly among racial and ethnic minorities, often worked from necessity, even with children, and society saw nothing wrong with this. In fact, under AFC states had considerable discretion to determine eligibility and often used that discretion to exclude African American mothers and other “undesirable” families from the program (Blank & Blum, 1997).

AFC was never intended to be large, nor a major tool for fighting poverty, a goal addressed more aggressively by different provisions of the Social Security Act and other New Deal programs. In the decades following its passage, the program name changed—to AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children)—but more significant changes were at hand, particularly beginning in the 1960s. With President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty, the welfare rolls began to climb: 38% of single-parent families received AFDC in 1960, but by 1975 the proportion had risen to 74% (Lynn, 1999). More than the increase in the rolls, though, there were two other shifts that resulted in new expectations for welfare recipients (Blank & Blum, 1997; Ellwood, 1988). First, by the mid-1970s the proportion of never-married mothers on the rolls had increased dramatically, causing some to wonder whether AFDC itself was making out-of-wedlock motherhood an easy decision. Second, since World War II the number of women in the labor force, even mothers, had been increasing, so that staying at home to raise children now appeared to be a choice rather than a necessity that should be supported by the federal government.

Changes in expectations for welfare recipients began to be evident in 1971, when the federal Work Incentive (WIN) Program, established in 1967 and originally voluntary, started to require adults in AFDC households to register and participate in welfare-to-work programs. This requirement was not extended to adults with preschool-age children, however, or to those who were disabled, in school, or needed at home for special reasons (Blank & Blum, 1997; Burtless, 1989). In these exemptions, we can see the emergence of the concept of barriers to work—that is, circumstances or problems that make work or work preparation difficult or impossible for an individual—though welfare agencies at the time did not feel responsible for addressing those circumstances or problems. With exemption as an option, there was not yet a need to develop a programmatic approach to barriers.

Even for families not exempt from WIN’s welfare-to-work requirement, however, the new expectation had few teeth, since lack of financial and administrative resources meant

that most of those required to participate did nothing more than register (Gueron & Pauly, 1991). With the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA) of 1981, some states took advantage of new authority to experiment with their WIN programs, including California (the GAIN program) and Massachusetts (the ET program). Still, for most welfare recipients, work expectations remained minimal or nonexistent, though by 1988 it looked like that might change.

The Family Support Act. The 1988 Family Support Act (FSA) was considered the most significant reform of AFDC since the program's 1935 inception, and it was intended to rebalance the social contract. Cash welfare was still a federal entitlement, but there was a much stronger expectation that recipients should do something in exchange. This shift was signaled in several ways. For the first time, FSA established participation rates for state welfare-to-work programs, starting at 7% and rising to 20% over time. Further, recipients were expected to participate for 20 hours each week in approved activities. On top of that, exemption from participation was no longer possible for mothers with young children, unless a child was under three years of age (one year of age at state option).

Looking back, we know that FSA did not change the culture of welfare as intended, primarily because the majority of welfare recipients never participated in welfare-to-work programs (Bane & Ellwood, 1994). FSA did dramatically change the culture of welfare in unintended ways, however—by institutionalizing the concept of barriers to work and turning it into a programmatic construct.

Human capital development was at the heart of FSA, part of the reason the legislation had bipartisan support. Based on the assumption that a lack of knowledge and skills was keeping welfare recipients from employment, FSA required states to offer education to recipients who did not have a high school diploma or demonstrate basic literacy. This requirement was the most indelible statement possible about lack of education being a barrier to work. Related to this requirement, FSA mandated welfare agencies to conduct an initial assessment for each recipient and develop an employability plan. To program developers and administrators, this “assess and treat” model would come to seem

appropriate not only for identifying skill deficits, but other personal and family problems as well.

FSA institutionalized the barriers approach not just through its human capital development focus, but also by mandating certain supportive services. States were required to provide child care for recipients in welfare-to-work programs and to pay for transportation. The law also allowed for a year of transitional Medicaid and child care upon leaving welfare. These provisions clearly indicated that lack of child care, transportation, and medical insurance were also to be considered barriers to work.

FSA's exemption policy provided the third buttress for the barriers construct. As much as FSA widened the pool of nonexempt recipients by lowering the age of children that would prevent participation, states could still exempt recipients for a host of reasons, and they did. In 1992, for example, half of recipients were exempt from participation in welfare-to-work programs, for having a child under age three, being pregnant, having child care or transportation problems, being ill or disabled, caring for an ill or disabled household member, and other reasons; in some states, as much as 75% of the caseload was exempt (Bane & Ellwood, 1994). All these exemptions countered the expectation of reciprocal obligation embodied in FSA, by positing a variety of conditions and situations that stand in the way of participation in work or work preparation.²

The Waiver Era. While FSA established the foundation for the barriers approach, a fully built edifice did not appear until the waiver programs of the early and mid-1990s, when many states requested permission from the federal government to experiment with their AFDC programs. By 1996, 44 states had received waivers covering a broad range of program changes, from increasing earnings disregards and asset limits, to extending transitional Medicaid and child care, to requiring more recipients to participate in work or work preparation. The waivers that received the most attention were those related to

²At the time, Project Match argued that many of the exemptions would be unnecessary if the menu of countable activities were broadened to include ones suitable for the exempt recipients (Herr & Halpern, 1991). This would accomplish two things: First, it would uphold the spirit of the law and, second, it would engage less job-ready AFDC adults in activities that could serve as lower rungs on the ladder to economic and family stability.

participation. Some of these built on the FSA foundation by focusing more intently on barriers, and even expanding the definition of what constitutes a barrier. In Utah, a well-known but extreme example, the waiver called for universal participation in activities that would lead to self-sufficiency—no one would be exempt. In tandem with this requirement, the state broadened the range of acceptable welfare-to-work activities, in order to allow amelioration of barriers to count. FSA had pinpointed low skills and lack of child care, health insurance, and transportation as barriers; Utah began also to consider problems like domestic violence and substance abuse, as did many less ambitious states. Compared to the original FSA barriers, these new ones tended to be harder to identify through up-front assessment and also harder to address, embedded as they are in individual psychological processes.

The Wisconsin waiver program, while also requiring a much higher level of participation than FSA, contrasted with Utah's in that it was much more work focused. All welfare recipients were assessed for employability, but even those deemed to have significant barriers to employment were assigned to activities with a more overt work orientation, such as community-service jobs. Of all the state waiver programs, Wisconsin's was considered most to embody a work-first ethic, though it was not the only program in the country to raise anxiety in the advocacy community. Fearing that expectations for welfare recipients were becoming unreasonable, advocates for low-income families began lobbying against work-first policies. They relied heavily on a barriers argument and turned *barriers to work* into the commonly used phrase we recognize today, signifying not just a set of conditions and situations, but a rationale for providing particular services and reducing (or eliminating) work expectations.

Out of this milieu, research on barriers among welfare recipients sprang up in the 1990s, examining the prevalence of various problems, as well as their effect on employment. While the findings were actually mixed in many of these studies (see, for example, Lloyd, 1996, on domestic violence; Olson & Pavetti, 1996, on a range of variables), those that indicated a negative effect on employment received more attention, providing additional framing for the architecture of barriers.

TANF. Despite the efforts of advocates in the wake of the state waivers, the level of expectation for welfare recipients skyrocketed with passage in 1996 of the conservative—and controversial—Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Replacing AFDC with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the act ended the federal entitlement to cash welfare. If you did qualify for TANF in a state, you were limited to 60 months of it (less at state option) and were subject to stricter welfare-to-work requirements than under FSA. And states themselves were required to increase the proportion of welfare recipients participating in approved activities, starting at 25% of the caseload and eventually moving up to 50% by 2002.

So far under TANF, participation in welfare-to-work programs has remained lower than expected (Minoff, 2006). What *has* happened under TANF, however, is that lots of people have left welfare altogether. The caseload decline began a couple of years before TANF, but accelerated after the law passed, propelled in part by a strong economy in the 1990s: Between 1994 and 2004, the number of welfare cases decreased by about 60% (Haskins, 2006), a drop hardly affected by the 2001 recession.

While it might be expected that the welfare exodus would have undermined the barriers perspective, it actually had the opposite effect, because employment has been unsteady for so many leavers, and some have not worked at all (Acs & Loprest, 2001). In trying to understand these unemployment patterns, researchers have used the lens that has become most familiar—barriers to work. A summary of state studies was unable to find strong consistent findings on barriers among leavers, except for a “substantial minority” who had child care and health-related problems (Acs & Loprest, 2001). Nevertheless, as an increasing number of agencies outside the welfare system have taken up the challenge of providing employment services to these former welfare recipients, they have adopted the barriers approach established under FSA—that is, an assess-and-treat program model focused on a defined set of problems. In this way, the approach has begun to spread from

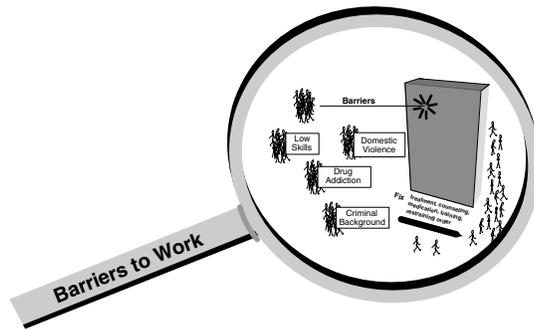
the welfare system to the broader workforce system that serves a range of un- and underemployed populations.

The barriers approach is being applied to welfare stayers under TANF as well, as exemplified by program models around the country (see, for example, the program descriptions in MDRC's guide *Beyond Work First: How to Help Hard-to-Employ Individuals Get Jobs and Succeed in the Workforce* [Brown, 2001]). As the rolls dropped precipitously, the field assumed that those left behind must have more barriers. Interestingly, research has not shown this to be the case. Urban Institute researchers, comparing the 1997 and 1999 caseloads, found that "contrary to conventional wisdom, the data do not suggest that adults on TANF in 1999 were significantly more disadvantaged than those on TANF in 1997" (Zedlewski and Alderson, 2001, p. 1).³ Later, they made the same comparison between the 1999 and 2002 caseloads and came to the same conclusion; even the incidence of multiple barriers was about the same in both years (Zedlewski, 2003). Also, in both 1999 and 2002, the researchers found a relatively high level of work or work-related activity among welfare recipients with barriers, compared to 1997.

The latest ratcheting up of work expectations occurred with the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, which called for increased participation of TANF recipients in state welfare-to-work programs. Beginning October 1, 2006, states have to meet a 50% participation rate for single-parent TANF families, and adjustments to the regulations mean there will be many fewer loopholes. If history is a guide to the future, this increased expectation of work will lead to an equally increased focus on barriers.

³The particular problems examined in the Urban Institute study were poor physical or mental health, lack of English proficiency, a child on SSI, a child under age one, education level less than high school, and no work experience within the past three years.

Workforce Attachment by Problems: The Barriers Lens



Experience and research so far under TANF beg the question of whether the field has gone down the wrong path, relying on barriers both as an explanation for unemployment and as the organizing principle for service delivery. At Project Match, case managers have always helped participants try to resolve different types of problems, ranging from lack of child care or transportation to domestic violence or substance abuse, but the program never subscribed to the barriers approach, mainly because we always found that problems in and of themselves are not good predictors of workforce success. Two participants who look the same demographically and also share the same personal and family problems—for example, depression and a sick child—can end up looking very different in the workplace over time.

An early but still-important study on employment barriers by the Urban Institute supports our hunch that something besides barriers is likely the differentiating variable between people who do and don't work (Olson & Pavetti, 1996). The study is still important because of all the barriers research that has now been done, this one looks not just at welfare recipients, but at welfare recipients in relation to the general population. First, the researchers found that a surprising number of welfare recipients worked even with certain problems.⁴ For example, 56% of welfare recipients with a medical problem worked in the current or previous year, just 5 percentage points below the 61% employment rate of welfare recipients who **didn't** have a medical problem. Similarly,

⁴The barriers considered in the Urban Institute study were poor physical health, poor mental health, a sick child, substance abuse, and low basic skills.

55% of welfare recipients whose child had a medical problem worked, compared to 61% of those whose child **didn't** have one. One of the study's conclusions was that "employment was common among welfare recipients with and without barriers" (p. 32).

The study also concluded, however, that **year-round** employment was **not** common among welfare recipients. Interestingly, though, year-round employment was uncommon not only among those **with** barriers, but among those **without** them as well. In other words, few welfare recipients of any sort worked month in and month out during the year. In contrast, the study showed, non-welfare recipients generally worked year-round, even if they had barriers: "While intermittent work is common among welfare recipients, it is not the norm for non-recipients, including those with serious barriers to employment" (p. 34).

The authors of the Urban Institute study did not postulate what psychological, social, or other factors account for the similar employment rates of welfare recipients with and without problems, or for the different employment rates of recipients and non-recipients with the same problems. But their findings clearly implied that there is some unidentified characteristic (or perhaps more than one) common to people who end up on welfare that leads to less work than among people not on welfare who have the same barrier profile.

Even if there were absolute correlations between barriers and employment outcomes, the practice of up-front assessment is problematic, as it relies on case managers quickly identifying problems or participants quickly revealing them. This may be relatively easy for structural problems like child care and transportation, but not so likely for personal problems like substance abuse and domestic violence. Not only do many personal problems require clinical expertise to assess properly, but people generally do not want to reveal their most guarded secrets to a total stranger. Moreover, problems may not exist at the beginning of program participation, but emerge only later.

If people were more willing to share such information at program entry, it still may not be the best way to establish a productive, positive rapport with a participant. Many

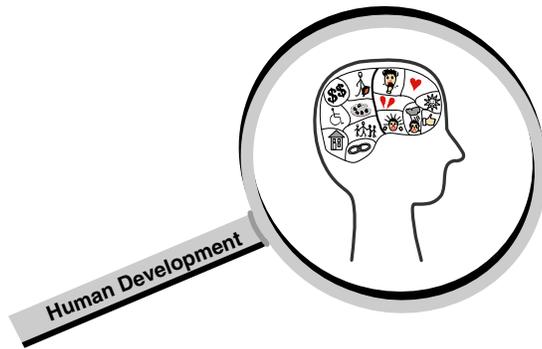
people who come to employment programs have a history of failure in a variety of settings, and up-front barrier assessments often just reinforce their sense of failure. Care may be taken to frame the assessment in neutral tones, but the participant is still likely to hear: “Are you stupid? Are you an addict? Do you get beat up? Are you crazy?” Traditional assessments are focused on uncovering deficiencies and difficulties, not strengths and successes, which may only heighten feelings of shame and distrust.

Finally, because it is easier from an operational standpoint, many programs sequence activities, with people participating in one at a time. So when assessment uncovers a problem, the next step is an activity to “treat” it; when that is completed, the person moves to the next activity—for example, job search. But unless a person is completely unable to function, addressing a problem should be combined with work or other activities. Many problems—particularly personal problems—cannot be resolved in a neat and speedy manner, but ebb and flow over time, making it impractical to put life on hold until everything is “okay.”

The attraction of the barriers approach to program developers may very well lie in the sense of order it imposes on the often chaotic and troubled lives of program participants. Unfortunately, real life usually cannot be corralled by a series of assessments and treatments. For better and worse, human beings—and the lives they lead—are more complex and unpredictable than the barriers approach acknowledges.⁵

⁵The same reductionism marks the labor economics approach to workforce development, which assumes that people will consistently act in ways that maximize their earnings potential. However, there is a large body of research showing that no matter what labor economists prove is best for people, individuals often do not act accordingly. For example, while education credentials do pay off in the labor market, many welfare recipients do not attend or complete education programs, even when mandated to participate in them. In our own experience at Project Match, we have never known a participant to make a decision about school or work simply by weighing economic costs and benefits. People of every socioeconomic class make these decisions based on many different factors, and the financial ones are not always paramount.

Workforce Attachment by Individual: The Human Development Lens



Project Match began in 1985, and we learned our first lesson very quickly: Based on observations and data from the first year, we discovered that it was much easier for participants to get a job than keep it. At the time, employment programs did not stick with participants beyond pre-employment services and the first job placement, so the field could not provide any guidance to us on how to address this rapid and frequent job loss.

With her master's degree in early child education and experience as a grade-school teacher, Project Match's founder and director, Toby Herr, was predisposed to consider the problem and its solution through a developmental lens. A developmental perspective means trying to understand how and why people change and grow. The field of human development draws on a range of disciplines to explore this process, including psychology, sociology, and even biology. While the field is not completely unified, there are several principles that are common to contemporary theories of human development (Lerner, 1998):

- Change results from the dynamic interaction of biological, psychological, physical, and sociocultural factors in an individual's life.
- Change occurs over time, and the timing of events can affect a person's developmental trajectory.
- While there may be general patterns of development, every individual has a unique trajectory.

With such principles in the background, Project Match ended up making a unique set of decisions about its employment model, in regard to program length, methods of assessment, choice and sequencing of activities, and tracking and measuring progress. These decisions—described in this section—show what we think it means operationally to view workforce attachment through a human development lens.

Think Multi-Year. Realizing that the first job is just the first step, Project Match became one of the earliest programs in the country to develop a comprehensive set of pre- and post-employment services, including job placement, retention, reemployment, and advancement assistance. To implement these services, it was necessary to make an open-ended, long-term commitment to participants, promising to help them find second, third, even tenth jobs if necessary and figure out when during this process they might be ready for more education or training.

Many Project Match participants stay in the program for three to five years, some even as long as eight, nine, or ten. This multi-year participation means that each year we have both new enrollees in the program and “carryovers”—that is, participants who enrolled in the program in a previous year. Also, because participants’ service needs rise and fall over the years, we needed to create different “statuses” among which they can move—such as active/inactive and regular/intermittent—in order to balance employment counselors’ caseloads and allow enrollment of new participants. Each of these caseload statuses is tied to a specific set of protocols for program-initiated contact and tracking-system updates. For example, when a participant is in a stable period, she can be moved to intermittent status, which means the employment counselor need check in only quarterly, not monthly. Similarly, if a participant does not respond to program-initiated contact for six consecutive months, she can be moved to inactive status, which means the employment counselor does not need to check in at all. However, if the participant decides at any point she’d like more services, she is simply switched back to active status without having to go through the enrollment process again.

Implementing a multi-year employment program not only requires different caseload statuses, it also requires a tracking system with mechanisms to differentiate among them and reflect a participant's movement from one to another and back again over time. Also, many of the outcomes in a long-term, open-ended program will differ from those in a short-term, closed-ended program, which has implications for accountability to both administrators and funders. For example, it is not particularly meaningful in a multi-year program to simply report job placements during a given year, which is commonly expected. Instead, we break down the annual number of placements by first job since entering the program, second job, third job, etc., which gives a clearer picture of the longitudinal process of workforce attachment and where in that process participants are. (See "Measure Progress by the Distance Traveled," below, for more on defining and tracking progress in a human development-based employment program.)

Let Behavior Guide Assessment. Instead of up-front assessment, we rely on informal, ongoing assessment based on a participant's actual behavior. There are no eligibility requirements for Project Match: Anyone in the community who attends a three-hour orientation can enroll, no matter their level of job-readiness; there is no screening-out process based on individual characteristics like education level or health status, which means that many of our participants fall into the category of "hard to serve." Yet once they have enrolled we do not immediately turn to the tools of up-front assessment—tests, inventories, questionnaires, and other instruments—since, as discussed above, we have found over the years that the presence or absence of specific problems is not a good predictor of eventual workforce success.

In our experience, behavior is the best guide to determining which services, supports, and activities will make the most difference for a person. For example, if a person says she wants first and foremost to find a job, but then does not show up for a scheduled interview with an employer, her employment counselor will follow up to discuss why she missed the interview. Often the participant will have a concrete reason for missing it—for example, no money for bus fare—which the counselor will help resolve. But if the participant misses the next interview as well, the counselor will use the repeated behavior

as an indicator that something else—perhaps lack of motivation, or fear of failure, or an unsupportive boyfriend—is the real problem and will begin to explore the possibilities with the participant: There may be an activity other than job search that is a better “starting point” for the participant (see “Start Where People Are and Build Gradually,” below). Staff reflect on actual behavior throughout a person’s participation, so that assessment is a continual process.

Just because assessment is informal and observational does not mean that it is unstructured and subjective, however. Many of the ways that Project Match staff gather information about participants are indirect but methodical. At group orientation before enrollment, for example, staff not only observe participants’ demeanor and social interactions, they also carefully review their completed program applications and individual goal worksheets to gauge writing and reading comprehension skills. Also, when we train other programs in informal assessment methods, we stress how important it is for staff not to allow their own preconceptions and biases to color their observations—one of the risks of this type of assessment.

The Urban Institute conducted a review of screening and assessment practices in welfare programs since the 1996 TANF legislation, under contract to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The study revealed that some agencies are moving a bit closer to a behavior-based approach: Instead of relying just on formal assessment tools at a single point in time—an approach proving to be of limited value—these agencies are beginning to incorporate informal methods based on observation of individuals over time as they interact with the welfare system (Thompson, Van Ness, & O’Brien, 2001).

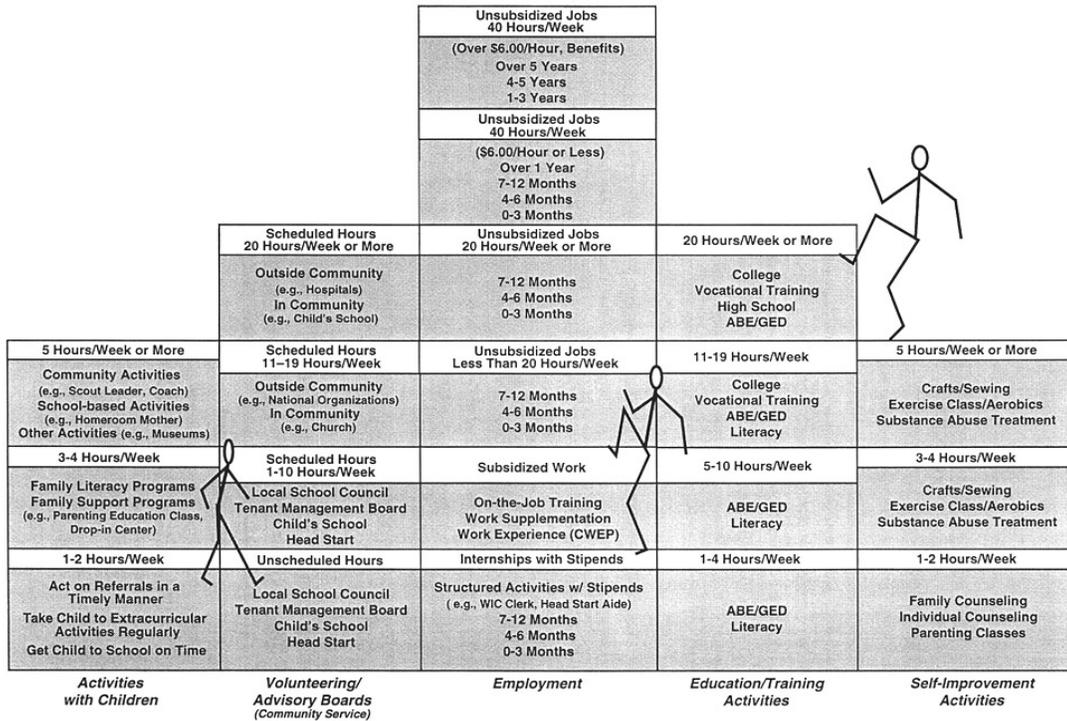
Interestingly, the federal government, in determining who is attached to the labor force and who is not, uses actual behavior to classify people. The Current Population Survey (CPS), conducted monthly by the U.S. Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics, is the primary source of information on the national labor force, including those familiar statistics on unemployment. For the CPS, people considered to be “in” the labor force are not just those who are employed, but also those who are unemployed but

have engaged in defined job search efforts during the previous four weeks. People who are not working **and** have not looked for a job during the previous four weeks are classified as “not in” the labor force (and therefore not included in the government’s official unemployment rate either). Those not in the labor force are further subdivided into categories based on other behavioral variables that reflect their degree of unattachment. While the behaviors considered by the Bureau of Labor Statistics are not exactly the same as (and certainly fewer than) the behaviors considered by Project Match, the point of similarity is that both consider actual behavior related to employment more revealing than what people say about their desire to work or what formal assessments surmise about their capacity.

Start Where People Are and Build Gradually. Developmental best practice recommends providing opportunities for growth that are challenging yet more likely to result in success than failure (Bandura, 1994). Failure—particularly repeated failure—tends to result in a diminution of effort; success—particularly if it is not too easy—tends to build a sense of self-efficacy. Because the job-readiness range of new enrollees at Project Match is wide—some people need nothing more than a job lead, others have not even mastered getting places on time—there must be a correspondingly broad range of activities to serve as starting points and stepping-stones toward economic stability. Recognizing that standard employment and education activities are not a good first step for some people, particularly if they have failed in those settings before, Project Match theorized that activities in which they are already involved as parents and community members could be structured to promote basic skills and competencies necessary for workforce success and to build a sense of mastery.

In 1991, we came up with a visual metaphor for this developmentally-based approach known as the Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence (Herr & Halpern, 1991):

The Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence



In addition to employment and education/training, the Ladder includes child-focused activities, volunteer/community-service activities, and self-improvement activities. Further, each category of activity is broken down into gradually increasing time commitments. Whereas traditional employment models offer only “upper rung” activities, the Ladder—with the addition of lower and middle rungs—ensures that there is a starting place for everyone that is not so high that they fall off, but high enough that they can master a new skill or competency and make incremental progress toward bigger goals. The Ladder also provides a way to conceptualize how individuals can create their own “pathways” to economic stability, by moving up, down, and diagonally on the rungs in a unique sequence of activities.⁶

One example of how lower-rung activities can serve as a starting point is the story of a Project Match participant who, though trained as a medical technician, was too afraid to

⁶The rationale for the Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence is more fully explained in Herr, Wagner, & Halpern, 1996.

work. Struck by the paralyzing nature of her anxiety, we decided not to continue to try to push her into a job. Instead, we encouraged her to have her daughter join a local scout troop and to attend the meetings regularly with her. Over time she rather naturally began to assist the scout leader in creating flyers, assisting with craft projects, and doing other things for the troop. Eventually her “position” in the troop was formalized and she was an assistant scout leader for a year. This experience helped her gain confidence and overcome many of her fears about working, and she ended up getting a steady job as a hospital phlebotomist.

The Ladder model is effective only if staff review participants’ progress on a regular and frequent basis, preferably every month. If a person is doing well in a volunteer activity, for example, the next month staff should urge her to increase her hours, take on more challenging tasks, or even transition to a higher rung on the Ladder. If the person is having trouble in the activity, staff should adjust the plan accordingly, perhaps by reducing the time commitment or changing the activity entirely. In Pathways to Rewards, a new Project Match initiative for public housing residents that includes a frequent flyer–like incentive program, we have institutionalized “upping the ante” by not allowing participants to earn reward points for achieving the same goal for more than two reward “cycles”: To keep earning points, which can be redeemed for gifts of choice such as a DVD player or assistance with utility bills, a participant must set a new, more challenging goal.

Strengthen the Work Identity. While we view lower-rung activities in terms of their work-prep potential, participants themselves do not always see them from that perspective when they engage in them. For example, a participant volunteering in a scout troop could be more likely to think of herself as performing in her role as parent rather than her role as potential worker, not just because of the setting for the activity, but because of how she views herself. While all people function simultaneously in multiple roles throughout their lives—possibilities for adults include worker, student, parent, and partner—there is often one role from which individuals most draw a sense of self and around which they construct a primary identity.

Among female Project Match participants, we have long noted that they tend to view themselves first as parents and last as workers; in between fall additional roles, particularly in relation to other family members such as siblings or parents and also to partners or husbands. Among low-income women of various races and ethnicities, the sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas have also noted “the primacy of the mothering role, how it can become virtually the only source of identity and meaning in a young woman’s life” (2005, p. 11). For us, the realization took shape when analyzing participants’ pattern of job loss: As soon as something went wrong at home, even things that might be considered relatively minor or normal problems, participants would often quit their job or get fired because of unauthorized tardiness or absenteeism to deal with the problem. In other words, the job was always the first thing to go. In light of this, we began to theorize that many of our participants have a weak work identity, at least in relation to other roles, and that if we wanted them to stop moving in and out of the workforce so casually, we would need to strengthen their work identity. While the parenting role is indeed important, so too is the worker role for women who are the primary or sole provider for their children.

In the context of an employment program, there are real limits as to how much staff can go about the task of identity development—a process so complicated that the field of human development has spent decades trying to understand it. At Project Match, what we have done is simply to try to make people conscious of their different roles and to help them learn to better balance them and understand how they can sometimes even reinforce one another. With the Pathways to Rewards initiative for public housing residents, for example, participants are asked to set incremental goals in relation to their different roles and—even more important—they are encouraged to pursue them simultaneously, not one at a time. This emphasis on simultaneity reinforces the importance of all the roles and communicates that one role need not be sacrificed at the expense of another.

Measure Progress by the Distance Traveled. The benchmarks that employment programs track usually reflect the data that funders want for accountability purposes, and as we know from our own experience with both foundation grants and government contracts, the data funders want tend to be limited to summary, point-in-time snapshots at the end of a 12-month period: number of job placements during the year; number of people who kept the job 30, 60, and 90 days; average starting wage during the year, etc. While we report this information, it does not reflect the goals of a multi-year workforce-attachment model, which assumes there will be numerous jobs along the way. With a multi-year model, a longitudinal perspective is needed to gauge both the progress of individual participants and the performance of the program overall.

For individuals, it is important to know more than whether they were employed during the year and how long they have been on the job. How many years has the person been in the program? Is he on his first job, fifth job, tenth job? Has the period of unemployment between jobs decreased over time? Has the length of employment increased with successive jobs? Has the hourly wage increased? Has the person moved from part-time to full-time work? Has there been a return to school (or more than one) and when did it occur? Did the person complete the education program or drop out? Such over-time data provide a picture of the person's progress from month to month and year to year, which is critical for making individual case management decisions about next steps and caseload status and for knowing how far a person has come relative to where he started.

While a human development-based employment program needs to know each participant's individual history since enrollment, aggregate longitudinal data for the program as a whole are also important. At the most basic level, aggregate longitudinal data can reveal how many years people typically stay in the program: In a voluntary, open-ended employment program, this is an important thing to know, and it may vary from program to program depending on the community served. From the aggregate data, a program can also learn whether there are general patterns for the process of workforce attachment for the community served. In our own research, for example, we have used

the data to determine the likelihood of a person being a steady worker—that is, someone who works month in and month out during the year—after five years of program participation: We found that we should expect about 50% of our participants to be steady by this time (Wagner, Herr, Chang, & Brooks, 1998). And more recent research showed that it takes our long-term participants an average of 9.3 years to raise their annual earnings by 75% (adjusted for inflation), though people appear to fall into two distinct groups: a high-advancement group whose annual earnings increased by 105% and a low-advancement group with a more modest 35% increase (Wagner, Chang, & Herr, 2006). Learning these sorts of things from aggregate longitudinal data provides solid information for assessing achievement of program goals, refining the model, and managing resources.

As mentioned in “Think Multi-Year” (above), it takes a sophisticated computerized tracking system for collecting and reporting data in a program like Project Match, and we ended up creating our own in the program’s early years. Our recent redesign of the system, known as Chang™, still captures monthly outcomes achieved by participants, as well as services rendered by staff. But now, protocols that support core elements of the program model—such as prompts about when to check in with participants and update their outcomes—are embedded in the tracking system as well, providing an automatic infrastructure for day-to-day operations. The tracking system has been adopted by a group of other community-based employment programs in Chicago that have also decided to offer multi-year services.

* * * *

Any agency that decides to operate an employment program has to choose a lens through which to view the process of workforce attachment. At Project Match, we advocate for the human development lens, for while the barriers lens gives us important information about poor families, it does not help us understand how and why people change. Without this understanding, program designers cannot build the necessary “scaffolding” to foster the process of change.

When it comes to workforce attachment, a human development lens shows us the importance of allowing participants to access services as needed over a period of many years; of offering both traditional and untraditional activity options to make sure there is an appropriate starting place for everyone; of breaking down big goals into manageable incremental goals; of basing decisions about sequencing of activities on the actual behavior of individuals from month to month; of differentiating the various roles a person plays and addressing each of them in relation to development of a stronger work identity; and of measuring progress based on where people start and how far they travel, not just where they end up.

This way of measuring progress is perhaps the most difficult aspect of a human development approach for people to accept, since it means redefining “good” outcomes and then resetting our expectations for policies and programs. In our recent advancement research at Project Match, for example, average annual earnings for even the “high advancement” group were still only \$18,962 after almost 10 years (Wagner, Chang, & Herr, 2006). From a purely economic perspective, this might look like failure, since these earnings alone would not pull families out of poverty. Yet we do not consider the outcome a failure, since we know that these annual earnings represent a 105% increase over where the participants started.

Similarly, but on a national scale, critics of the 1996 welfare reforms have called the legislation a failure, since 10 years out many of the families that left welfare for work are still poor. But what were these families’ earnings before welfare reform? For many, \$0. Considering where these families started and where they are now, their progress as workers is significant, and not just in terms of changes in earnings. As a human development perspective underscores, these changes in earnings have also required or resulted in significant changes in attitudes, behaviors, self-identity, relationships with friends and family, status in the community, and other psychosocial domains. No matter which lens you look through, this is a lot of change.

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