

Don't Forget the Ones Left Behind.

How Career Centers Can Better Serve Job-Seekers Lacking in Basic Skills and High School Credentials

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the 1990s, researchers and public policy makers called for an overhaul of the nation's workforce development efforts. These efforts were to take a more "business-like" approach, become more "customer-oriented" (focused on understanding and responding to the needs of job-seekers and employers), and streamline services to eliminate redundant and inefficient services. The result was to be a move away from disjointed collections of "programs" and toward a better-integrated system responsive to each community's employment and economic development needs.

As states have begun implementing "One Stop" workforce development systems, a key component has been the local "career center." (For the purposes of this paper, "career centers" include agencies officially designated as "One Stop Career Centers" and other agencies which provide similar employment services.) These employment agencies -- on their own or in collaboration with other agencies -- typically serve as home base for a number of services for job-seekers. Staff help their unemployed or underemployed clients identify appropriate career and educational goals and deal with health, transportation, childcare, housing, or skill needs that block their ability to get and succeed in a meaningful job.

For many of the people served in career centers, a lack of "basic skills" and/or a lack of a high school credential have limited their career choices and ability to get a job. This paper discusses how career centers have until now dealt with clients who lack essential literacy and language skills or secondary school credentials and what might be done to better serve this important -- and growing -- segment of our workforce.¹

HOW A LACK OF BASIC SKILLS AND/OR A HIGH SCHOOL CREDENTIAL IMPACTS JOB-SEEKERS

Basic skills as one of many determinants of employability

While there is widespread recognition that basic skills impacts worker employability, too often statements from public policy makers, business leaders, the news media, and the adult training and education fields have over-simplified this relationship. These statements have overlooked the full range of factors that stand between job-seekers and a rewarding job. For workers to get jobs, the following conditions must be in place:

- Jobs need to be available. Local employers need to be open to hiring workers and those workplaces need to be accessible in terms of time and location. The jobs must also provide an appropriate wage and working conditions to attract workers.
- Workers need to be able to navigate the local “employment system.”

They need to:

- know what jobs are available;
 - know how to judge which of those jobs are suitable matches to their own abilities, interests, schedules, and transportation resources;
 - understand what steps to take to pursue and secure appropriate jobs, both for the short term and longer term;
 - have “connections” who can inform them about available jobs and introduce them to employers;
 - know how to present themselves to prospective employers, to demonstrate to employers what they have to offer, to learn more about the job, and to agree upon roles and salary and benefits;
 - Understand their rights and responsibilities as workers and know how to ensure that their rights are respected.
- Workers need to have particular skills and knowledge required by available jobs. These skills include:
 - “basic” skills (e.g., communication, social, and problem-solving skills needed in particular work environments: reading and writing of job documents; oral communications; mathematics; ability to identify,

analyze, and act on problems; ability to work with others; basic computer skills);

- “technical” knowledge (e.g., how to serve food, how to use office equipment, how to lay bricks, how to care for a patient); and
- “cultural” knowledge (of the social dynamics and mores of various kinds of workplaces).
- Workers need “credentials”. Home health aides, truck drivers, dietary workers – these are just a few examples of jobs that typically require some kind of “credential.” These documents include high school diplomas or General Education Development diplomas, a diploma from a technical training course, or a health certificate. In some cases, workers need to pass qualifying tests (e.g., for civil service positions) in order to be considered for a job. Lack of a “legal” status also blocks many immigrants from employment.
- Workers need to be able to pass checks for criminal background and substance abuse. The growing population of ex-offenders often has trouble getting jobs because of their criminal history. Similarly, many job-seekers are prevented from getting jobs because they cannot pass drug tests.
- Workers need the physical health, dexterity, and endurance to perform job tasks. These basic job requirements exclude the many workers who have physical disabilities or are simply not in adequate physical condition.
- Workers need to be able to manage transportation and family responsibilities (e.g., caring for a child or older home-bound family member, owning and maintaining a car, etc.) so they can get to the job and stay focused on it.
- Workers need to have the self-confidence and desire required to move into a new work environment. Some workers, both chronically unemployed and those traumatized by a recent lay-off, can be disoriented and otherwise not have the self-confidence, image of themselves as a capable worker, and trust required to take on the challenges of a new job. Fear of meeting new people, not being able to fit in, being rejected, having to take on unfamiliar job tasks, failure – these fears are very real obstacles which inhibit otherwise-qualified people from moving into rewarding jobs.

In sum, the above list acknowledges that having a solid grasp on reading, writing, math, oral English and other basic skills is important for U.S. workers. This is especially true if workers are to qualify for jobs characterized by new technologies, new work processes, and other requirements. But other factors also impact workers’ ability to get and succeed in a job.

Basic skills as a factor in clients' ability to use career center services

Career centers were established with the purpose of helping job-seekers to develop a career plan and then take needed steps to secure a desirable job. As such, most career centers have put in place services which deal with at least some of the above factors that impact job-seekers' employability. These services include:

- Labor market research (to clarify what jobs are in demand in the local labor market);
- Connections to employers and labor unions (through referrals, job fairs, Internet linkages);
- Career counseling;
- Connections to education and training services;
- Connections to other services related to health, housing, transportation, childcare, etc.

Job-seekers not only need particular skills to qualify for jobs, they need basic skills to make good use of career center services. These centers typically ask clients to participate in interviews, fill out forms, take tests, provide documents and other information, make decisions, use the telephone, meet employers, review job listings, and look up information using computers. These tasks require certain kinds of background knowledge as well as listening, speaking, writing, reading, and computer skills.

Similar skills are then required for clients to follow through on the information and contacts acquired in the career center. Presenting oneself to employers via a well-written resume and an effective job interview requires writing, reading, oral communications skills, and an understanding of workplace cultures. Job-seekers also need basic skills (and/or a high school credential) to participate in job-training programs and pass certifying exams.

The populations served in career centers who might lack basic skills and/or a high school credential

Many U.S. job-seekers lack the above-described basic skills and/or a high school credential. These include:

- The growing population of immigrants who lack English skills, a solid basic education in their own country, an understanding of the U.S. job market, and/or the connections and self-confidence required to move into a good job.
- The large population of high school dropouts who are leaving school without the skills, knowledge, and credentials needed to hold living-wage jobs. Many employers require job applicants to have a high school credential (i.e., a standard high school diploma or a General Education Development diploma). This

credential is also necessary for admission to post-secondary education, which is necessary for jobs that pay a living wage with benefits.

- People with disabilities (including learning disabilities) which made it difficult for them to develop basic and technical skills as children and which now continue to make it difficult for them as adults to get access to jobs or job training.
- People who, for other reasons, did not learn to read, write, or compute well in school, who have a high school diploma and successful work history, but who because of their lack of basic skills are stuck in undesirable jobs or in jobs which are at risk of being phased out and cannot participate in re-training.

HOW CAREER CENTERS HAVE RESPONDED TO CLIENT BASIC SKILLS NEEDS UNTIL NOW

Career centers have responded to the basic skills needs of clients in various ways.

These include:

Carefully-planned, well-supported, integrated services which:

- are based on a solid understanding that a lack of basic skills and/or a high school credential can be major obstacles for job-seekers;
- use effective practices from the fields of adult basic education and workforce development.

Well-intended but not-very-effective responses in which career centers:

- refer clients to over-burdened adult education programs;
- set up in-house “literacy programs” which use inappropriate curricula and are staffed by people with limited expertise in basic skills education;
- use assessment tools which are either inappropriate for the particular learners or are not used properly by staff; and/or
- set up basic education activities as stand-alone activities not tied in with available job opportunities or other job-related services at the center.

Components of a carefully planned, well-supported, integrated approach

A career center using the more-ideal, “carefully-planned, well-supported, integrated” model would put the following processes in place to serve clients who have basic skills-related needs:

- Take an integrated case management approach to serving clients and involve all service providers in assessing learner needs, planning and carrying out strategies for responding to those needs, and ongoing service delivery and continuous improvement of services.

- Work with clients to do careful, comprehensive assessment of their employment goals and the factors that contribute to or hinder progress toward those goals. (These factors are essentially those listed above under “For workers to get jobs, the following conditions must be in place.”)
- If the strengthening of literacy or language skills and/or the acquisition of a high school credential are found to be priorities for a learner, develop individualized career development plans which include shorter- and longer-term educational activities.
- Provide high-quality, customized educational services which:
 - *use effective adult education practices* which focus on learners’ actual interests and needs, build on their prior knowledge, emphasize learning through contextualized applications, and use relevant assessment tools that help learners and education staff monitor learner progress toward their goals and decide how to keep the learner moving toward success;
 - *go beyond traditional classroom-based learning models* and include self-study (learning at home or other locations) using computers and engaging reading and writing activities;
 - *broaden the definition of “basic skills”* to include a wider range of skills than in the past; and
 - *acknowledge that career center clients might need help to deal with identity-change* (i.e., changing one’s career, changing from being unemployed to employed) *and self-confidence issues* and that this might be facilitated as part of the education program.
- Hire, train, and support professional staff who are qualified to provide these services.
- Integrate basic education services with other career center services (including career counseling, childcare and transportation assistance, job development, and job placement). Integration can be achieved through:
 - *integrating of those issues into the basic education program* through, for example, discussion and writing in the basic skills classes about career goals or how to deal with transportation and childcare needs;

- *cross-training* counselors, job developers, and other non-education staff to understand how to better serve clients with limited literacy or English language skills;
 - *refining assessment procedures* used by various service providers, to avoid unnecessary redundancy and make it clear to all parties what information has already been collected and acted on;
 - *creating “career ladders”* which as clearly as possible map out the skills required for various types of jobs and the educational and other services available to help people move vertically up the ladder and horizontally across rungs to new types of jobs.
- Continuously monitor and improve services. This can be done through regular staff meetings done in-person and/or via e-mail or telephone conference calls (in which teachers and other staff discuss effective practices and problem-solve around challenges they are facing in their work); observations by supervisors or peers; interviews and focus groups with learners; periodic questionnaires for staff and learners; appropriate tests; and portfolios of student work.
 - Involve learners. Student advisory groups can be an effective way to get learner buy-in and input, to ensure that services stay on track. Students can also be effective recruiters and spokespersons for adult education programs. More-advanced students can also be of great help in the classroom as teacher aides.
 - Make it easy for clients to participate in educational services by providing well-equipped, comfortable learning facilities; convenient schedules; and accessible locations. This might include helping learners to get access to computers in their homes, extra tutoring help provided in sites (e.g., libraries) close to learners’ homes, and provision of reading materials for use outside class.

HOW CAREER CENTERS CAN WORK WITH ADULT EDUCATORS TO BUILD A “BASIC SKILLS SYSTEM”

If we agree that the above-described more-ideal model of carefully planned, well-supported, integrated services is the one career centers should be aiming for, we need to ask why this hasn’t become the norm for career centers. Experience suggests that, too often, policy and research have told career centers to move to this kind of model but have not acknowledged that doing so takes time, careful planning, staff training, commitment, new rewards systems, and collaboration across categories of service providers who historically might not have been inclined to collaborate or rewarded for doing so.

Described below is a step-by-step process that career centers and adult education providers can take to create a well-planned “system” for responding to the basic skills-related needs of career center clients. This is an alternative to too-familiar scenarios in which career centers look for the single test or pre-packaged “curriculum” which under-equipped and under-supported staff are then supposed to use to “teach” basic skills to often-complex populations in short periods of time.

The alternative, systematic approach described below is based on reviews of reports from the workforce development and adult basic education fields; interviews with staff of career centers and adult education programs; interviews with career center clients;² and field experience in several job-related basic skills programs. It also draws directly from collaborative planning models developed for workplace basic skills programs.³

Step 1: Build the basic skills team at the career center.

Historically, some career centers have had the in-house capacity (e.g., staff with expertise in adult education, learning facilities, etc.) to respond to the basic skills needs of clients. Other career centers have recognized that they lack those in-house capabilities for any of the following reasons:

- Many career center staff are, by profession, focused on job placement and are not necessarily trained or paid to attend to “adult basic skills.”
- Many career centers lack the budgets or facilities to provide some or any of the special adult basic skills services clients might need and therefore need to rely on local adult education providers.
- Career centers have historically been paid to place people in jobs, not to educate them in classrooms.

Some of those career centers which lack the in-house capacity to respond to clients’ basic skills needs have chosen to develop working relationships with local adult education providers. Career center staff have worked with adult educators to:

- set up referral mechanisms (to send clients back and forth between the two types of service providers);
- bring adult educators into the career center facility to provide instructional services;
- send job counselors out to local adult education programs to run workshops and recruit potential clients for the career center; and

- generally help the career center develop informed basic skills-related strategies appropriate for the career center and its clients.

Too often, however, these relationships have not been well-developed. This is often due to the “silo effect” of separate agencies focusing on different needs of similar populations, getting rewarded by distinct funders for producing different outcomes (e.g., job placement vs. “education”), and therefore operating in isolation from each other. Though “One Stop systems” are supposed to take a more integrated approach to planning and service delivery to aid the “whole” job seeker, it is not always easy to overcome historical differences between institutions.

That said, those career centers which want to build more-effective systems for addressing clients’ basic skills needs should recognize that they will likely have to work with local adult education providers. A well-organized, well-supported collaborative relationship can benefit career centers, adult educators, and their clients.

To create such a collaborative relationship, career center staff (or their boards) can form a “basic skills committee” composed of career center staff, representatives of other local adult education institutions who want to work with the career center, and perhaps other employment service providers who want to build relationships with the career center and adult educators.

Too often these kinds of groups remain at the “token” level and never create effective plans or working relationships. It is important for members to understand that they will need to devote time to making this planning group work and that they must be willing to try on new roles for themselves and for their agencies.

This committee should also recognize that it will likely need the services of one or more professionals who are good at facilitating organizational planning. This will require someone who can fulfill this role on at least a part-time (and possibly full-time) paid basis. This person(s) can be in charge of facilitating the planning process and carrying out the day-to-day work of organizing meetings, collecting and disseminating information, and seeing that plans are carried out.

As the team is assembled and expectations and roles clarified, team members might as a group, in smaller groups, or as individuals participate in training to help them develop expertise that will help them work on the team. This could include cross-training across traditional disciplines. For example, career advisors might get some training in how to, first, recognize clients whose employability is blocked by limited literacy or language skills or a lack of a high school credential and, then, respond in appropriate ways (through use of interpreters, clearly-written materials, or well-supported referrals to appropriate adult education programs). Adult educators might learn how employment services operate and

basic information about the local job market and, most importantly, how to develop curricula which effectively help learners develop relevant job-related basic skills.

Step 2: Assess the basic skills needs of career center clients and the employment needs of adult education program participants.

Members of this committee should focus first on the question of “whom do we serve in our respective agencies and what are their basic skills- and employment-related interests and needs?”

This might be done in two separate groups: career center staff and adult education providers. The career service providers can answer the part of the question relevant to them: “Who are our clients and in what ways does a lack of basic skills or a lack of a high school credential block their ability to get a job and to use our career services?”

Similarly, the adult educators can develop a statement in response to this question: “Who are our basic skills clients and what are their employment-related needs?”

In both cases, the respective groups -- career service providers and adult educators -- might need to do some additional research. This can be done by reviewing records or getting input from their clients via appropriate tests, interviews, focus groups, and/or questionnaires.

This process should (a) make the staff of the two types of agencies more aware of their own clients’ needs, so appropriate services can be planned; (b) help the two types of agencies better understand how the respective populations they serve overlap each other.

Step 3: Review possible strategies that career centers and adult education agencies can use to respond to the basic skills needs of career center clients.

Committee members should at this point do some homework to review various ways that career centers have responded to client basic skills needs. Options include:

- Career centers integrate basic skills assessment into the needs assessments they do with clients;
- Career centers refer clients out to adult education agencies;
- Career centers set up well-equipped “on-site” adult education services using (a) properly-trained career center staff and/or (b) local adult education providers.

In addition to reviewing reports from other programs, committee members should discuss (a) how the career center has historically responded to adults with basic skills needs and (b) what practices local basic skills programs have used to respond to their participants' employment-related needs.

Step 4: Create and implement the pilot project.

Now the committee can decide whether it wants to try out any or some combination of the above options on a pilot basis for, say, one year. Setting this joint venture up as a pilot project can have the benefit of focusing the effort on clear objectives, innovative procedures, and a “project-based learning” ethic.

To create the pilot project, the committee should develop a plan with:

- clear objectives focusing on field-testing certain procedures to help particular clients deal with their respective basic skills needs;
- a timeline of activities;
- mechanisms for hiring, training, and supporting the staff to carry out the various roles required to run the project;
- a strategy for ensuring that the learning facilities are adequately equipped;
- appropriate ways to manage data from the project and pay for costs;
- a strategy for monitoring the progress of the project, to allow staff and the committee to continually improve operations and prepare an end-of-project summary of achievements and lessons learned.

Once the plan is in place, the agreed-upon staff can implement the pilot project, continually improving activities as they go along, with support from the joint career-center/adult educator committee.

Step 7: Conduct an end-of-project evaluation and decide next steps.

As the initial pilot project draws to an end, the joint career-center/adult educator committee can use information generated through the year-long evaluation to analyze what was accomplished and whether and how to build on the lessons learned in the project to continue this kind of work.

HOW POLICY MAKERS MIGHT SUPPORT EFFECTIVE BASIC SKILLS SYSTEMS AT CAREER CENTERS

For career centers to create new ways of serving clients who lack adequate literacy and language skills and/or a high school credential, they will need support from their public (and, in some cases, private-sector) funders and policy makers (i.e., those who set guidelines for what career centers can do with their resources). These supports include:

- **More-appropriate goals and standards for adult basic education**

Adult education programs often feel forced to gear their services to meet unrealistic, irrelevant, outmoded, uninformed, or otherwise inappropriate expectations imposed by funders rather than focus on the contextualized uses of basic skills relevant to learners. If helping unemployed or underemployed adults to improve job-related basic skills is to be a primary goal for career centers and adult education programs, those skills should be more clearly defined and become the focus of learning activities. (“Raising scores on a standardized test” is not an appropriate goal for a job-related basic skills program; helping learners understand and develop the skills and knowledge they need for a good job IS an appropriate goal.)

Policy makers should use the research already done to define more relevant goals and standards for work-related basic education. New standards should present a broadened definition of the basic skills which adults need to participate effectively as workers, and as family members and community members, as well. Standards should also provide guidelines for instructional and assessment practices and clarify the supports (outlined below) programs need to help adult learners develop the broader range of transferable skills they need for work and other life roles.

- **Professional development opportunities**

To build and sustain high-quality adult basic skills programs, career center staff and their adult basic education partners need to be treated as professionals. This includes career opportunities with professional-level salaries and benefits, as well as opportunities to upgrade their skills through training (both short-term and more-in-depth institutes and college degree programs), mentoring relationships, practitioner research projects, internships in partner agencies, and work experience.

These professionals need to understand sound adult education principles and practices and how to apply them to helping adults prepare for worker roles. This is currently generally not the case, as career center staff often lack background in adult basic skills and opportunities to develop that expertise. Program quality ends up suffering when decisions are made based on limited understanding of good practice. And, even when teachers and administrators do have the necessary expertise, they are

often hamstrung by small budgets, meager facilities, an emphasis on quantity over quality, and a lack of career incentives to encourage them to stay with the work long enough to see it as a career.

Policy makers need to provide funding to allow career centers and their adult education partners to build the professional expertise required for high-quality work-related basic education.

- **An improved knowledge base through research**

To better understand the particular skill requirements of industries, or the best ways to teach particular populations, requires more research. Funders need to support research – including research carried out by practitioners in the field as part of their professional development -- to generate this knowledge and then get findings into the hands of decision-makers at all levels, so that policy and programs are based on informed decision-making.

This might be done through statewide workforce education initiatives (drawing on the experience of the National Workplace Literacy Program and statewide workforce education initiatives in states like Massachusetts and Virginia). A state could sponsor pilot projects geared to, say, developing integrated work-related basic skills programs (i.e., those which integrate basic education with computer and job skills) which prepare people to move into jobs in particular industries. Mechanisms also need to be in place (e.g., handbooks, Web sites, and the professional development opportunities described above) to get that research out to the field, so people can apply it and learn from it.

- **Well-equipped learning facilities**

Not only should learning facilities be large enough, properly furnished, and otherwise conducive to adult learning, they should be equipped with appropriate instructional technologies. When used by a well-trained instructor as components of a well-planned adult basic skills curriculum, computers, video, and other technologies can help learners develop both basic skills and technology skills while opening them to new sources of learning on the Internet. These technologies must be carefully selected and used, however, to ensure that they do not serve merely as “electronic workbooks.”

While the adult learning center (including those located in career centers) must remain a key component of a community’s adult learning system, major emphasis should now be placed on helping learners get access to learning opportunities at home, in their workplaces, or in other convenient, supportive community locations. This can include helping learners get access to computers at home. Learners need to be encouraged to move away from following the traditional “school” model in which learning is done only in a school building. For them to really make

progress in their learning, they need to see learning as an everyday thing and find multiple ways to put in more “time on task” on the development of the skills and knowledge they need.

- **Better collaboration between career centers, adult education programs, and others with a stake in a better-educated workforce and citizenry.**

Funders must recognize that career centers and adult education programs have until now been rewarded for very different outcomes (i.e., “job placement” vs. “education”). If career centers are to now shift toward providing basic education to clients and adult education programs are to really help clients progress toward career goals, new funding mechanisms and guidelines must be established to reward these two types of agencies for taking on these new roles, separately or jointly.

Adult educators should also be willing to see the involvement of career centers in adult education as a potentially positive development. For many years, adult educators have understandably been concerned that not enough resources were devoted to basic skills education. Now new funding might be coming from sources which historically were more concerned about job placement than education. Adult educators should see this as an opportunity to step up and help career centers use this money properly.

At the same time, career centers need to realize that helping adults strengthen their basic skills requires patience and careful customizing of educational services. Quick, “one-size-fits-all” workbook or computer-assisted curricula cannot possibly serve all the distinct populations that come into career centers needing to develop basic literacy and English language skills and/or earn a high school credential. Career centers need to tap into the expertise of adult educators to create basic skills strategies that will really help their clients.

Policy makers and the other stakeholder groups (employers, unions, community organizations) that should be supporting sound workforce development services need to recognize that a significant portion of the job-seeking population is blocked from rewarding and productive participation in the workforce by limited basic skills or a lack of a high school credential. Career centers and adult education programs can provide valuable services to this population, but will need financial support and encouragement to do so.

Career center professionals, adult educators, and policy makers now are faced with the difficult work of creating new education systems to enable the “undereducated” segment of the job-seeking population move into good jobs. It will be tempting to avoid the effort, risk, and investment that this creative work will require and cite budget limitations or bureaucratic stagnation as excuses.

But we can't tolerate these excuses nor allow this lack of action to continue, because the status quo is leaving many potentially productive workers by the wayside. This is clearly not good for our economy or society. With leadership, a new vision of adult education's role in workforce development, a willingness to change, and hard work, we can build better workforce development and adult education systems. In this way, we can give a chance to those job-seekers who are now being left behind.

Paul Jurmo currently teaches courses on adult literacy education at New York University and City University of New York. He is conducting research at Rutgers University on how career centers can better respond to job-seekers' basic skills needs. He is also helping the Transport Workers Union and New York City Transit Authority run education programs for subway and bus workers.

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² See research projects cited in 1, above.

³ For guidelines for and examples of collaborative workplace basic skills programs, see Folinsbee and Jurmo (1994) and Jurmo (1998 Collaborative)

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