POLICY BRIEF

LONGITUDINAL DATA COLLECTION
IN CAREER PATHWAY PROGRAMS
Core Indicators and Elements

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A. DISCUSSION

The goal of any career pathway program is to provide low-skilled individuals with the education and training they need to move from their present level(s) of skills and abilities to the level(s) required to hold family-supporting jobs.

The particular type of education and training individuals need depends on (a) their present level of skills/abilities, and (b) their specific target occupation. For most disadvantaged individuals with low basic skills, career pathways require a succession of different types of education and training presently provided by a variety of institutions. That could take several years, perhaps with intermissions between enrollment in different educational components.[1] For these and other participants in career pathway programs, the program's success can only be determined by tracking the progress of individuals through the instructional services they need until they reach the end of the program or terminate their participation in it. That is, success consists of making continual progress toward the goals of family-supporting employment *measured over multiple years*. And to measure success, multi-year (longitudinal) data on progress must be gathered over as many years as necessary and across as many types of instructional programs as the individual undertakes.

Data of this kind is essential for establishing public accountability for career pathway programs and their components. But it is also necessary for determining how to improve programs through better alignment of their components and by upgrading and assuring the effectiveness of each component. Finally, such data needs to be documented to help individuals navigate career pathway systems and motivate them to persist.

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[1] A few innovative career pathway and "bridge" programs have begun to accelerate the time to a credential even for adults at low skill levels.

At present, most states do not link their data or collect it on a longitudinal basis. [2] This is partly because the components of career pathway systems (e.g., adult education, vocational training, community colleges) gather information only on the progress of students through their *own* systems, and <u>this information is not linked in any database</u>. We do not know, for example, how many adult education students make transitions to postsecondary programs and how well they fare in those programs if they do, because adult education programs gather data only on progression through generic basic skills levels, and community colleges rarely gather data on whether their students have a prior background in adult education, or what it is. Moreover, most data on student progress in any of these systems is gathered only on a short-term basis. In adult education, for example, the National Reporting System (NRS) mandated by the U.S. Department of Education, as well as the record systems of individual programs, measure only how much progress an individual makes in a single year, rather than how much they make over the multiple years they may be enrolled in basic skills courses.

In principle, it should be possible to construct longitudinal data systems for career pathway programs by requiring all components of those programs to report the annual progress of individual students – according to certain core indicators – to a central database and then summarizing these annual reports to create a record of each individual's gains over successive years. A major barrier to this is lack of standard student identifier numbers across all pathway components, which could be mandated by federal or state law.

Further, it should not be difficult to identify the core indicators of progress on which programs should submit data – at least toward the upper levels of career pathway systems. This is because <u>the upper levels are usually standard vocational/occupational and postsecondary education programs</u> – although they are sometimes combined with remedial education of various kinds. <u>In these programs, the standard indicators for progress can be used</u>. These include entry into the program, number of courses passed, [3] persistence in the program, completion of degrees or certificates, and placement and retention in family-supporting jobs. To these should be added prior educational background, as a way of capturing which students were previously enrolled in adult education and/or obtained a GED – thereby establishing completion of (or at least exit from) adult education and the GED as core indicators.

<u>The problem with defining and reporting core indicators of progress occurs primarily at the lower levels of career pathway systems</u> – when students would normally be enrolled in adult education. The primary measures used by the NRS and most programs are progress on

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[2] Exceptions are Washington and Wisconsin, and Illinois and Minnesota are moving in that direction.

[3] The idea of "momentum points" is gaining in use and interest (see CAAL's March 2010 publication titled "Local Perspectives on WIA Reauthorization," www.caalusa.org/publications.html (NC-CAAL 12). Some states are examining what courses really predict success (e.g., WA and OH) and looking at types of courses, including remedial classes, not just the number.

standardized tests of generic basic skills and GED completion. <u>These standardized tests do not capture whether individuals are making progress in essential workforce skills or even whether the type and level of basic skills instruction they are receiving is suited for the next step in career pathways</u>. A prime example of this misalignment are the tests that measure progress for the roughly 50% of adult education students enrolled in ESL programs. These <u>tests of English language ability give no strong indication of whether individuals have the math or even many of the writing skills required for next steps in career pathways</u>. Likewise, although the GED is a useful core indicator for some purposes, <u>the level of skills the GED reflects is higher than that required to enter some integrated job/occupational training programs and lower than that required to enter most community college programs without need for remediation</u>. In short, the <u>core indicators used by the NRS are not as revealing about achievement along career pathways as they should be</u>.

Without a better system of core indicators for adult education, progress on the NRS indicators should probably be used on an interim basis. Thus, at present, the core indicators for adult education students in career pathway programs should probably be individuals' gains according to NRS measures over multiple years. This data would then be linked to data on upper level career pathways to allow tracking students' progress from the lowest levels of basic skills through vocational/postsecondary education.

The Secretary of Education should be mandated to propose a more suitable set of core indicators for adult education students within a few years. The experience of outstanding adult education/workforce development programs indicates numerous possibilities about how these might be constructed.

B. AN ILLUSTRATIVE LIST OF SOME KEY CORE INDICATORS AND ELEMENTS

[__Notes__: (1) Not everything in this list necessarily rises to the level of a core "indicator," although all items have a place in a cross-agency, cross-title, data system. (2) Some people think that Title I core indicators should relate to employment only. (3) Each year, states negotiate target levels for program indicators with the Departments of Labor and Education.]

- Acquiring the GED or an equivalency high school diploma.

- Passing a test or receiving certification that validates readiness for college and/or for a job or job training.

- Gaining actual admission to a college and/or job training program.

- Progress after enrolling in college or employment and training (E&T) programs – in terms of courses or modules leading to degrees and certifications, or how well students do in remedial courses including math and English.

- Progress relative to individual employability plans that would specify the basic and workforce skills required for particular forms of further E&T.

- Evidence of job acquisition and of remaining/advancing in employment. (Some examples of incumbent worker "measures of progress" are: eligibility for advanced training, eligibility for career ladder opportunities, enhanced employee retention, promotability, increased ability to implement new technologies, job upgrades, and increased wages.)

- Evidence of learning progress in ABE/ASE and ESL at certain identified points along career pathways from very low skills to readiness, as determined by states and local programs – e.g., attainment of intermediate level of proficiency, or progress related to specific benchmarks of skill attainment specified in individual learning plans. This includes gains that may be unique to specific population groups in terms of their outcome goals (e.g., parents in family literacy programs, correctional populations, GED acquisition, incumbent workers).

- The nature and extent of support and counseling services provided, in relation to individual learning goals.

- The period of time it takes to move students certain "distances" along learning pathways to specified outcomes.

- The age and educational background of students and whether they are working part-time or full-time or not at all.

Note: The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) published a policy brief on March 22, 2010 containing *Recommendations for Incorporating Postsecondary and Workforce Data into Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems.* It is consistent with CAAL's information and analysis as presented above. It says: Statewide data systems should have the capacity to: (1) Follow the educational progress and labor market outcomes of all students and workers; (2) Track and measure the educational and skills development progress, completions, and outcomes of all participants, (3) Track and measure the labor market outcomes of all participants; and (4) Respond to certain additional challenges. The paper presents a few specific measures for each of these four recommendations; it is available at http://www.clasp.org/resources_and_publications/publication?id=0734&list=publications.