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Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program—Research Synthesis Brief Series

Facilitating Postsecondary Education and Training for TANF Recipients

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- It is challenging to increase the proportion of low-income individuals who enroll in higher education, particularly among employed single parents.
- Some community-college-based programs have increased full-time enrollment and credits earned for students already enrolled in higher education—some of whom were TANF recipients—but only one program has been found to increase at least medium-term school persistence.

Increasing education among low-income parents is a vital component of policies to improve families' economic status. Educational attainment matters: between 1979 and 2005, wages for those with college and advanced degrees rose by 22 and 28 percent, respectively, while wages for high school graduates remained stagnant and wages for high school dropouts *fell* by 16 percent.¹ Overall, people who complete an associate's degree or certificate program earn more than those with just a high school diploma or general educational development (GED) certificate, and those who complete even one year of college earn more than those without the additional education.² But only a third of low-wage, low-income

workers with children have more than a high school diploma and another third are high school dropouts.³ Moreover, the strong association between postsecondary education and higher earnings does not necessarily mean that facilitating access to higher education among low-income adults will lead to earnings gains, particularly considering that many lack recent or successful school experiences.

This brief draws on rigorous studies to highlight what is known about efforts to encourage participation in and completion of postsecondary education among recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance and other low-income populations. In this brief,

The research... provides evidence that some strategies can increase TANF recipients' and other low-income adults' engagement and persistence in postsecondary education and training, and boost earnings.

postsecondary (or higher) education is defined as academic and vocational/occupational postsecondary programs but not basic education (such as GED preparation classes or high school diploma programs). The brief explores the programs that have been tried, their success in increasing engagement and completion, and the extent to which increases improved economic well-being.⁴ Emphasized studies are those that used random assignment (experimental) research designs, which allow the effects of the strategies to be disentangled from the effects of other factors, such as the economy. The random assignment process ensures that individuals assigned to different treatment groups have similar characteristics at the start of the study. Thus, any subsequent differences between the groups—for example, in enrollment or certificate completion—can be attributed to the initiatives being studied.

What Are the Barriers to Postsecondary Education for Low-Income Individuals?

Although access to and enrollment in higher education has expanded greatly in recent decades—total fall enrollment in two- and four-year institutions grew from about 5.9 million students in 1965 to about 17.5 million students in 2005⁵—low-income individuals remain less likely to attend college than other adults in the United States. For example, in 2008, 55 percent of high school graduates in the lowest family-income quintile enrolled in college within a year of graduation, compared with 80 percent of high school graduates in the highest quintile.⁶ Key barriers to postsecondary education for low-income individuals include affordability, inadequate financial aid, and inadequate preparation in the K–12 system.⁷

Community colleges are an important pathway into postsecondary education for millions of low-income adults. They have commonly sought to address some of the above barriers with open admissions policies, low tuition and fees, and flexible course schedules. These institutions serve a wide array of students and have long provided academic programs as well as employment and training programs, making them a key player in developing a more skilled workforce.⁸

Unfortunately, many students who enter community college never complete their studies. Recent data show that only about half of those who begin at a community college earn a degree or enroll elsewhere within six years.⁹ Not surprisingly, success rates vary greatly for different groups of students. So-called traditional students, who attend school full-time immediately after graduating from high school, rely on their parents for financial support, and work part-time or not at all during the school year, can typically devote most of their energy to their studies. On average, these students have more success than nontraditional students who may have children, work full-time, or have delayed enrollment.¹⁰ One study of employed adult undergraduates at community colleges, for example, found that 62 percent who considered themselves workers first (and students second) had not completed a certificate or degree after six years and were no longer enrolled, compared with 39 percent of such adults who described themselves as students first (and who were working only to cover minor expenses).¹¹ Barriers to success in college for low-income adults include a need for schooling or training to mesh with parenting responsibilities and with nonstandard, dynamic work schedules—without significantly reducing their work hours and thus their already low

income. Moreover, for many adults, their last experience with school may have been years in the past.¹² In general, college persistence is affected by the barriers to college access mentioned above, as well as by inadequate student support services and uncertainty about how to teach adults any needed basic skills.

TANF recipients face additional challenges to postsecondary education. Roughly half lack a high school diploma or GED. TANF agencies have sought to address this by referring TANF recipients to basic education courses, as well as to vocational training programs and postsecondary education. In addition, agencies have provided supports to those pursuing education and training: child care assistance, help with the costs of books and fees, occasional tuition assistance, career counseling in some cases, and work-study opportunities. Such actions, however, have been taken within the context of TANF agencies encouraging recipients to spend substantial time in “work” while pursuing education. Federal TANF law requires states to engage at least 50 percent of families in approved “work” activities—for at least 30 hours a week (or for 20 hours for single parents with children under age 6)—or risk penalty, and the law limits the degree to which education and training count toward the participation rate. Specifically, hours in vocational training can count toward the participation requirement, but can only count toward all hours of participation for 12 months for a given recipient. After 12 months, a state can only count the hours in which a family member is participating in higher education toward the participation rate (counted as job skills training) if he or she is also participating for at least 20 hours per week in a “core” work activity, such as subsidized or unsubsidized employment or work experience.¹³

Have Programs Encouraging Education and Training among Low-Income Individuals Increased Enrollment and Completion?

Programs promoting education and training for low-income individuals have operated both within and outside of the TANF program (and, formerly, the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program). Studies that have rigorously evaluated the effects of education and training initiatives for welfare recipients as well as those targeted to other low-income individuals are discussed below and are summarized in table 1.¹⁴

The National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies (NEWS), a large 1990s study, examined a number of programs with different emphases.¹⁵ In three cities, comparisons of education-and-training-first programs that *required* welfare participants to participate initially in education or training with a control group facing no participation mandate showed that, for sample members as a whole and over a five-year follow-up period, this strategy increased participation in basic education in all three sites and increased participation in vocational training in one of three sites, but did not increase postsecondary education participation in any of the three. NEWS also investigated a mixed strategy that, within the same program, urged some people to get a job quickly while requiring others to initially enroll in work-focused, short-term education or training. The welfare agency operating the program partnered with a local community college on the program design and operation, but assignments to academic college courses, as opposed to vocational training courses, were not permitted. While the program increased the proportion who took at least one college course for credit in the second half of the five-year follow-up period, data indicate that this increase was driven primarily by welfare

recipients' increased exposure to the community college system while they were participating in job search and other program activities rather than by specific actions taken by program staff.

Results from a program targeting TANF recipients who worked at least 20 hours a week and had a high school diploma or GED were less encouraging. New Visions, partially funded by TANF funds and run at a community college in Riverside, California, from 1998 to 2003, was voluntary and aimed at individuals not already enrolled at the community college. It provided a 24-week college bridge program to prepare people for occupational training programs, and offered a flexible schedule of classes, self-paced curricula, and short (six-week) class segments. Compared with a group of working welfare recipients eligible for Riverside's usual services, New Visions only barely increased the likelihood of enrolling in community college courses and produced no increase in the likelihood of accumulating regular college credits or attaining a certificate or degree over a three-year follow-up period.¹⁶

Similar results were found for two programs also operated in Riverside from 2000 to 2006 that were studied in the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) project. One program was operated by the welfare agency and the other by the workforce development agency. Both referred welfare recipients who were newly employed and working 20 or more hours per week to community education and training programs. Both programs used TANF funds for administration but other funding for education and training slots. One program, however, encouraged recipients to meet the state's 32-hour-per-week TANF participation requirement by adding another 12 hours of attendance in developmental (remedial) education (i.e., courses designed to bring students' basic

skills to college standards), vocational training, or postsecondary education. The other allowed recipients to substitute additional hours of the same type of schooling for hours on the job, or even to temporarily forgo employment and participate full-time in approved skill-building activities. Relative to a typical work-first program with a 32-hour-per-week work participation requirement and focusing only on individuals with a high school diploma or GED, the two education- and training-focused programs had little or no effect on participation in any type of education or training (while there were increases in adult basic education for those who lacked these credentials) and did not increase the receipt of certificates or diplomas. Notably, about one-third of recipients in the work-first program participated in an education or training activity, without any encouragement from a welfare program.¹⁷

The New Visions and ERA evaluations posited similar reasons for the limited effects of these voluntary programs on participation in education and training, based on field research. The chief difficulty appeared to be convincing many employed single parents—especially those working full-time—to cut back on their hours of work or on family time in order to attend school or training.

Another study examined three small-scale voluntary programs that were sector based, that is, they provided training related to specific industries. The programs targeted individuals with an interest in and aptitude for certain occupations and with requisite basic skills (almost all had a high school diploma or GED). Only about a third were employed part- or full-time when they enrolled, and about a quarter reported that they were receiving TANF at the time of enrollment (but none were mandated under TANF to attend the training). Program operators

included a community-based organization, a social venture, and an association of area employers and unions. Services included integrated skills training tied to specific sectors—for example, medical and basic office skills, information technology, health care, and manufacturing—and job-matching assistance to employers in those industries. Over a two-year follow-up period, the programs increased the percentage of individuals who began skills training (93 percent, compared with 32 percent for the control group), and 75 percent of those in the programs completed the training.¹⁸

What Is Known about the Earnings Effects of Programs That Have Increased Postsecondary Education and Training?

As discussed above, few rigorously evaluated programs that have sought to increase postsecondary education and training enrollment, particularly among employed single-parent TANF recipients, have, in fact, done so. However, *if* programs increase such enrollment, they *can* produce economic gains. The sector-based training programs provide an example: over the study's two-year follow-up period, average earnings for those who entered the program increased by about \$4,500, or 18 percent.¹⁹

In some of the programs, education and training did likely pay larger dividends to participants who received a high “dosage” of instruction, completed class sequences or programs, and received a degree or certificate or attained a skill level valued in the labor market. But only a minority of individuals—for example, in the NEWS programs²⁰—achieved these intermediate milestones.

Have Programs Designed to Help Low-Income Community College Students Stay in School Made a Difference?

In the past decade, several programs have aimed to help low-income and other disadvantaged community college students *already enrolled* to stay in school and succeed academically. The studies described here (and summarized in table 1) are of programs that focused predominantly on nontraditional college students—ones older than traditional students and more likely to have family and work responsibilities—and who are more similar to TANF recipients than are students in programs primarily serving young people just out of high school. Two of the programs were funded with states' surplus TANF funds and one had no explicit connection to TANF. None of these studies has examined effects on earnings.

Two colleges in New Orleans tested a program that offered a performance-based scholarship that granted students money only if they met certain academic benchmarks. This model attempted to address financial needs while providing an incentive to perform well. The program offered students up to \$1,000 for each of two semesters, for a total of \$2,000, if they enrolled at least half time and maintained a C (2.0) or better grade point average. Program counselors monitored academic performance and disbursed the scholarships directly to students. The scholarships were paid in addition to federal Pell grants and other financial aid, and students could choose to spend the funds on nontuition expenses. Because the program was funded with state TANF funds (exclusively), eligibility was limited to low-income parents. Participants, however, did not need to be on TANF—10 percent of the research sample reported that they were receiving cash assistance at the start of the

study. Most students in the study were single mothers and their average age was 25. Students in the control group did not receive the performance-based scholarship, but they had access to standard financial aid and the colleges' standard counseling. The evaluation found that students in the program group were more likely than those in the control group to attend college full-time, earn better grades, and earn more credits. Program-group students also registered for college at higher rates throughout the study—even in the third and fourth semesters, when most students were no longer eligible for the scholarship.²¹

A similar program was operated and studied at three community colleges in Ohio. Like the program in New Orleans, this program was funded with state TANF dollars and only low-income parents were eligible. As in Louisiana, participants did not need to be on TANF: 12 percent said they were receiving TANF when they entered the study. Most study participants were women, with an average age of 30. The program offered a scholarship of \$1,800 over an academic year if a student earned a C or better in 12 or more credits per semester. The program also offered a part-time scholarship of \$900 over the year for students who met the performance benchmark in 6 to 11 credits per semester. Early results suggested that the program increased full-time enrollment and credits earned. It did not, however, increase persistence in college, at least in the short term.²²

Another program, tested at two community colleges in Ohio, offered enhanced academic counseling to low-income students, many of whom were working and had children. The program had no explicit connection to the TANF system, although 14 percent of the participants reported that they were receiving cash assistance at the

start of the study. The students' average age was 24, with over a third 26 or older. Participating students were assigned to a team of counselors with whom they were expected to meet at least two times per semester for two semesters to discuss academic progress and resolve any issues that might affect their schooling. Each counselor worked with far fewer students than the regular college counselors, which facilitated more frequent, intensive, and personal contact. Students were also eligible for a \$150 incentive stipend for each of two semesters, paid after meetings with a counselor. Students in the control group received standard college services and no special stipend. This program increased the proportion of students who registered for college during the second and third semesters of the follow-up period, but the effect on retention subsequently dissipated.²³

In sum, the three programs discussed above improved some outcomes for students, but, so far, only the performance-based scholarship in New Orleans increased persistence over time.

What Are the Implications for State and Federal Policy and Practice?

Even without any special programs, many low-income people, including TANF recipients, enroll in school, training, or some other initiative to help them gain skills and find work. The challenge is to find programs and policies that *increase* the proportion who engage in such activities as well as *increase* the likelihood that they will persist in and complete such activities, and to do so in ways that maximize the eventual economic payoff.

To further these aims, the cited studies suggest several practices: financial incentives to encourage school attendance, academic progress, and the acquisition of marketable

licenses, certifications, and degrees, as well as to offset forgone hours (and wages) from work; exposure to the community college system for TANF recipients; help with finding jobs (and work/study positions) that might better mesh with school hours; the use of sector-specific training programs with close ties to employers for qualified individuals; and enhanced student support services.

The discussed research, however, does not provide specific guidance regarding how these practices can and should be implemented under TANF. Notably, states can allow participation in postsecondary education and training regardless of whether it is countable toward the TANF participation standard. Moreover, even under the TANF standard, postsecondary education can often be counted as vocational training for up to a year and, even after that year, it can be counted when combined with 20 hours of work or work experience. The practices of some programs currently encouraging postsecondary education and training under TANF may provide specific ideas for TANF administrators. The Kentucky Ready to Work program, for example, facilitates access to higher education by using TANF resources to fund counselors at community colleges who help TANF recipients negotiate school, family, TANF, and work obligations. A significant share of the program's resources also goes toward engaging program participants in paid work study jobs while they pursue their education. As another example, the Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative is using TANF resources to fund support services (including child care and transportation), tutoring, and counseling for individuals attending certain community college programs, including some TANF recipients.²⁴ In addition, TANF resources help offset tuition and fund work-study internships.

Areas for Future Research

The research discussed above shows that some strategies can increase TANF recipients' and other low-income adults' engagement and persistence in postsecondary education and training, and boost earnings. Moreover, it shows that various agencies and institutions can work together to promote higher education among low-income parents. But new, potentially more effective interventions are needed, and new interventions—along with promising current ones—must be rigorously tested and the successful ones brought to scale. Taking into account strategies found to be effective and hypotheses for why some tested programs were *not* effective, such initiatives could try the following approaches:

Adopt a career pathways framework. Career pathways can be defined as “a series of connected education and training programs and support services that enable individuals to secure employment within a specific industry or occupational sector, and to advance over time to successively higher levels of education and employment in that sector. Each step ... is designed explicitly to prepare for the next level of employment and education.”²⁵ Programs using a career pathways framework generally offer academic, occupational, and life skills training that employers value, financial and supportive services, and defined links to employment opportunities, with a goal of moving individuals up career pathways.²⁶ Some research initiatives examining this type of program are already underway. The Administration for Children and Families (ACF), for example, is funding the Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency (ISIS) project, which is testing nine career pathways approaches to increasing access to and success in postsecondary education. Another ACF-funded effort is evaluating health-

care-related education and training programs operated using Health Profession Opportunity Grants, targeted to TANF recipients and others.

Use a sector approach. While this approach has shown promise on a small scale, it would be useful to examine whether sector-based training programs can be implemented on a larger scale than previously, as well as in different settings and focusing on different sectors. Such an effort, accompanied by a rigorous evaluation, is underway as part of a Social Innovation Fund grant.

Incorporate more reforms within community college settings. Given community colleges' extensive role in educating and training low-income adults, improving their programs is key. Tests that are being considered or planned or are underway include ones focusing on new reforms in financial aid, such as delivering aid like a paycheck to help students manage their expenses, providing better information about financial aid, and simplifying the application process. Other studies are examining multifaceted, comprehensive reforms that provide a wide range of services and incentives to help students stay in school and eventually graduate, or reforms that aim to build new pathways from college entry to graduation. Finally, work is being done to innovate developmental education (the instruction of basic skills in college) to help students learn material and progress more quickly through college. Few planned

or existing studies, however, appear to focus on programs specifically targeted to TANF recipients or older, low-income, nontraditional students balancing work, school, and family, suggesting areas in which more research may be desirable.

Explore ways for more low-income adults to receive a high school diploma or GED in concert with, or before quickly transitioning to, vocational training and postsecondary education. Many low-income adults have not completed high school or a GED credential and do not qualify for postsecondary programs. If a goal is to enable these individuals to engage in postsecondary education or vocational training, other types of interventions are needed. These could experiment with ways to encourage individuals to enroll in adult basic education and GED preparation courses; structure and staff such courses to increase persistence in and successful completion of the courses (resulting in the GED credential), for example, by combining basic skills instruction with credential-producing vocation training instruction or work/study positions; ensure that GED completers have obtained the academic skills that will qualify them for postsecondary education and training without their first taking extensive basic skills “brush-up” courses; and promote frequent, quick, and attractive transitions to postsecondary education and training programs. Washington State's I-BEST is an example of

such an initiative. It involves team-taught basic skills and occupational instruction, and is being studied under the ISIS project.²⁷ The new multistate Accelerating Opportunity initiative is another example. It seeks to change how adult basic education is structured and delivered so more students can complete GEDs and be ready to succeed in college.²⁸

In conclusion, while there is evidence that some strategies can increase TANF recipients' and other low-income adults' engagement and persistence in postsecondary education and training, much remains to be learned about how best to do so, at scale, and in ways that significantly improve earnings for low-income families. ■

Table 1. Summary of Programs and Their Effects

| Program | Operating organization | Target group | Key effects on education and training engagement | Key effects on earnings |
|--|-------------------------------|---|---|--|
| NEWS education and training first: required participants to initially attend education or training (Hamilton 2002) | Welfare agencies | TANF recipients | Modestly increased participation in basic education in all three cities and in training in one city | Modest increase |
| NEWS mixed strategy: required some participants to initially attend short-term education or training and others to initially search for a job (Hamilton 2002) | Welfare agency | TANF recipients | Modestly increased participation in basic education and, late in the follow-up period, substantially increased participation in postsecondary education | Substantial increase, particularly early in the follow-up period |
| New Visions: prepared participants for occupational training programs; voluntary (Fein and Beecroft 2006) | Community college | TANF recipients who worked 20+ hours/week and had a high school diploma/GED | Small increase in college course enrollment; did not increase credits earned or degree/certificate receipt | No increase |
| ERA Work Plus: provided education and training referrals to help meet TANF participation requirement (Hendra et al. 2010) | Welfare agency | TANF recipients who worked 20+ hours/week and were newly employed | Increase in basic education participation but not in postsecondary education or training | No increase |
| ERA Training Focused: provided education and training referrals to help meet TANF participation requirement (Hendra et al. 2010) | Workforce development agency | TANF recipients who worked 20+ hours/week and were newly employed | Increase in basic education participation but not in postsecondary education or training | No increase |
| Sector-based training: provided integrated skills training tied to specific industries; voluntary (Maguire et al. 2010) | Community-based organizations | Low-income individuals interested in and qualified for certain occupations, almost all with a high school diploma/GED | Substantially increased participation in and completion of training | Substantial increase |
| Performance-based scholarship in New Orleans: paid scholarships if students met certain academic benchmarks (Richburg-Hayes et al. 2009) | Community colleges | Low-income community college students with children | Substantially increased full-time college attendance, credits earned, and persistence | Not examined |
| Performance-based scholarship in Ohio: paid scholarship if students met certain academic benchmarks (Cha and Patel 2010) | Community colleges | Low-income community college students with children | Substantially increased full-time college attendance and credits earned, but did not affect persistence in the short term | Not examined |
| Enhanced academic counseling: Provided intensive advising and a small stipend (Scrivener and Weiss 2009) | Community colleges | Low-income community college students | Temporarily increased credits earned and persistence, but no meaningful longer-term effects | Not examined |

Note: Throughout the table, *effects* refers to effects for all of those subject to or enrolled in the programs, not just for those who actually engaged in education or training.

Notes

1. Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto (2007).
2. Grubb and Associates (1999); Kane and Rouse (1995). More recent analysis suggests that this pattern holds among TANF recipients as well. Among individuals in Colorado who began receiving TANF between 2004 and 2007, earnings increases over the subsequent three to six years, compared with individuals' pre-TANF earnings, were greatest for those who received community college certificates or degrees (with the exception of an academic associate's degree), but those who accumulated a significant number of credits with no certificate or degree also experienced some earnings increase (Turner 2011).
3. Acs and Nichols (2007). Education levels are even lower among adult TANF recipients: In 2009, about 5 percent had more than 12 years of schooling (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2011, Table 25).
4. Some aspects of this brief draw from an MDRC working paper on helping low-wage workers persist in education programs (Richburg-Hayes 2008).
5. Brock (2010).
6. College Board (2010).
7. See, for example, Brock and LeBlanc (2005).
8. Meléndez et al. (2004).
9. Walton Radford et al. (2010).
10. Choy (2002).
11. Berker, Horn, and Carroll (2003).
12. Golonka and Matus-Grossman (2001), Levin-Epstein (2007), Matus-Grossman and Gooden (2001).
13. Lower-Basch (2008).
14. The "effects" discussed in this brief represent the degree to which strategies changed individuals' usual patterns of participation in higher education (or earnings) relative to what was "normal" at the time, rather than increases in outcomes per se.
15. Hamilton (2002); for detail, Hamilton et al. (2001).

16. Fein and Beecroft (2006).
17. Hendra et al. (2010).
18. Maguire et al. (2010).
19. Ibid.
20. See Bos et al. (2001).
21. Richburg-Hayes et al. (2009).
22. Cha and Patel (2010). A similar performance-based scholarship program was tested at two community colleges in New York City, targeting low-income adults age 22 to 35. It had no explicit connection to TANF, but 8 percent of the participants were receiving cash assistance when they entered the study. Early results show that the program increased full-time enrollment, and scholarship dollars offered during the summer substantially increased enrollment in college that semester (Richburg-Hayes, Sommo, and Welbeck 2011).
23. Scrivener and Weiss (2009).
24. For a summary of the implementation practices of these two programs as well as other strategies, see <http://www.clasp.org/postsecondary/pages?id=0007>.
25. Jenkins and Spence (2006, 2).
26. See <http://www.projectisis.org/project.html> for a depiction of this framework.
27. See Zeidenberg, Cho, and Jenkins (2010).
28. Jobs for the Future press release, August 2011.

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Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program

This brief was funded through U.S. HHS Contract ACF-10654 (OPRE Report #2012-17) under project officer Emily Schmitt. It is one of a series of briefs summarizing research on topics related to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. The author thanks Administration for Children and Families staff for comments on earlier drafts.

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