

Issue Brief

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Great Jobs KC Has the Potential to Increase Earnings Dramatically

Access to a secure, high-quality job is the most powerful pathway to economic security and upward mobility, but promising career opportunities are largely reserved for workers with specialized qualifications or a college degree. In Kansas City (KC), more than two-thirds of working-age adults do not hold a bachelor's degree, and those with sub-baccalaureate credentials often find their preparation does not give them the skills demanded for available jobs ([Strohl et al. 2024](#)).

Great Jobs KC, with incredible support from philanthropic partners, is tackling this problem with an ambitious new program to support adults ages 17 and older in completing short, tuition-free, and specialized training programs that equip them for specific, well-paying job opportunities in the region. This issue brief summarizes findings from an evaluation of the first two years of the Great Jobs KC job training program, conducted in partnership with Mathematica.

The Great Jobs KC job training program

Great Jobs KC is a nonprofit organization that seeks to secure household-sustaining jobs for people in the Kansas City region with low to moderate incomes. Its job training program, launched in 2022, provides adults ages 17 and older with access to tuition-free programs that grant industry recognized credentials in high-paying and high-demand sectors. Great Jobs KC's job training program is designed to be short-term, flexible, and skills based. It consists of five phases of support (Exhibit 1). Training programs span multiple industries, including construction, health care, information technology, logistics and warehousing, service careers, and manufacturing. In addition to training, Great Jobs KC also provides its participants, who are known as Scholars, with personal supports during participation, including guidance by a Scholar Advocate, mentorship and coaching, and access to an alumni networks.

Learning goals of this study



Understand the model. How does the approach of Great Jobs KC compare with the approaches used by other training programs?



Describe the Scholars. Who participates in Great Jobs KC?

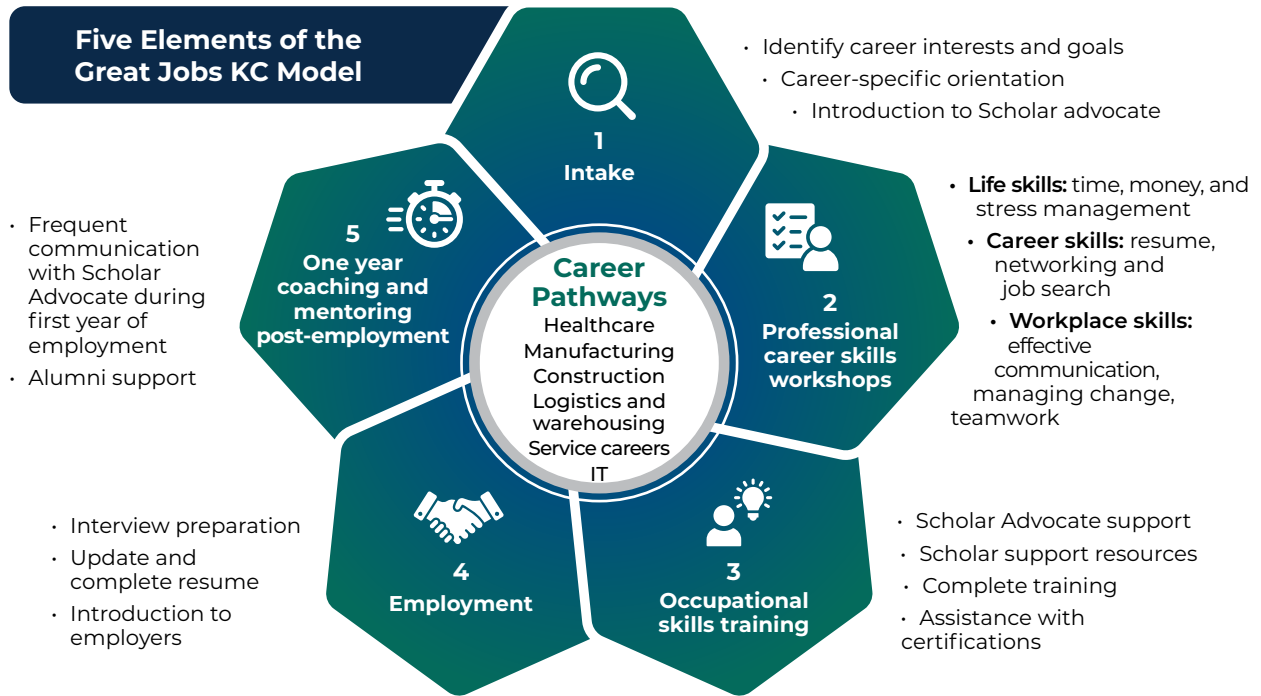


Track growth. How much did Great Jobs KC grow in its first two years?



Assess early outcomes. During the first two years of the program, how many Scholars completed the program? How many of them found employment and achieved higher incomes after training?

Exhibit 1: Program Model



Study approach and sample

The evaluation of Great Jobs KC had three components:

1. A high-level landscape scan to examine how the program model differs from models used by other programs in Kansas City and similar cities
2. A quantitative outcomes analysis measuring the progress of about 7,000 trainees (known as "Scholars") during the program's first two years, including the post-training employment outcomes of the first 700 Scholars with at least six months on the job market
3. In-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups with Great Jobs KC staff, employer partners, a community partner, Scholars who completed the program, and Scholars who did not complete the program

How does the Great Jobs KC approach compare with the approach of other training programs?

Our landscape scan of 32 workforce programs across Kansas City and peer cities revealed that the Great Jobs KC model is different in scale and approach.

- / **Scale.** Great Jobs KC has more programs in total (~140) for Scholars to choose from.
- / **Intensive supports.** None of the other scanned programs in the region combined free employer-linked training with intensive wraparound services such as transportation, technology, clothing, or housing.
- / **Clear salary goal.** Great Jobs is unique in articulating an aspirational salary target for Scholars of \$45,000 per year.
- / **Size.** Great Jobs KC enrolled more than 5,000 Scholars in the past 12 months, a much greater number than other programs (which typically enroll 500 or fewer students per year).

Who participates in Great Jobs KC?

Most Scholars participating in the program are adults with low incomes, and Great Jobs KC helps them select from a wide range of training programs across multiple industries (Exhibits 2 and 3).

The program includes 140 different training programs in total—for example, Scholars can choose from 48 programs in health care and 56 programs related to information technology.

Exhibit 2. Scholar demographics*

Characteristic	Average/percentage/dollars
Average age (N = 7229)	32
Female (N = 7398)	61%
Race or ethnicity (N = 6333)	
Black	70%
White	18%
Latino, Hispanic, or multiracial	9%
Previous employment and income (N = 6571)	
Employed when entering program	53%
Yearly income for all Scholars (average) (N=3506)	\$13,687

*Demographics are self-reported

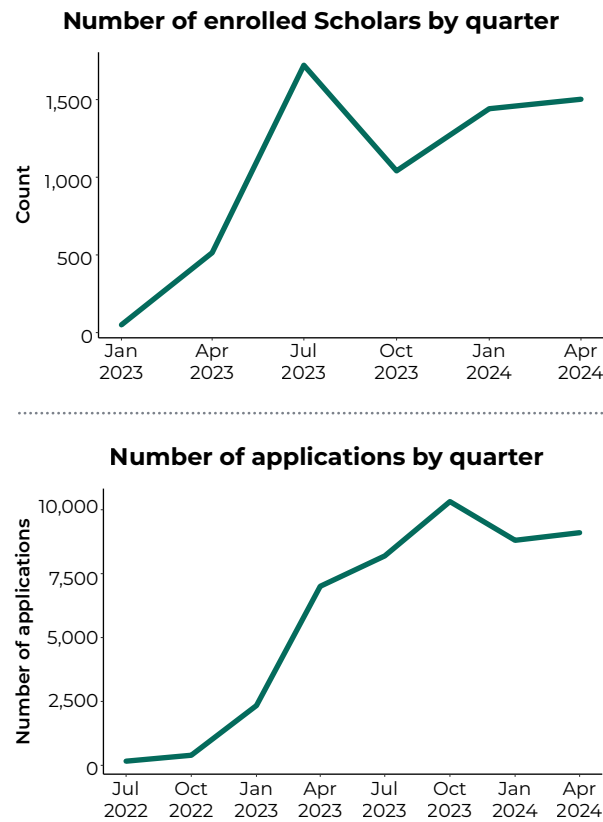
Exhibit 3. Distribution of sectors and programs

Training program industry	Number of enrolled Scholars	Percentage	Certificate programs
Health care	2201	42%	48
Logistics and warehousing	1345	26%	9
Information technology	1172	22%	56
Other Industries	520	11%	27

How much did Great Jobs KC grow in its first two years?

Great Jobs KC program grew rapidly in its first two years, reaching enrollment levels of nearly 1,500 Scholars each quarter (with more than 7,000 Scholars enrolled in total).

Exhibit 4. Two-year growth of Great Jobs KC



In interviews, staff and employers celebrated this growth, which was partly due to dedicated full-time staff focusing on marketing, recruitment, and community outreach. However, they also named challenges associated with scaling the program so quickly. To manage larger caseloads, program staff wanted more time and resources to hire additional staff. To address the growing numbers of Scholars with varied needs, staff and employers also said they needed more translation support for English language learners and that pre-training workshops should be tailored to address other gaps in foundational skills (such as literacy and computer use).

The program currently refers Scholars to area GED or English language learner programs if needed, but enhancing the program’s in-house capacity in these areas could equip Scholars to access and complete job training faster.

How many Scholars completed the training program and achieved higher incomes after training?

Using data collected by the Great Jobs KC program, we measured how many Scholars successfully progressed through the training process, found employment, and achieved higher salaries.

In Scholars’ own words

The study team interviewed Scholars who graduated and found employment. Here are some things they said about how the program affected their lives:

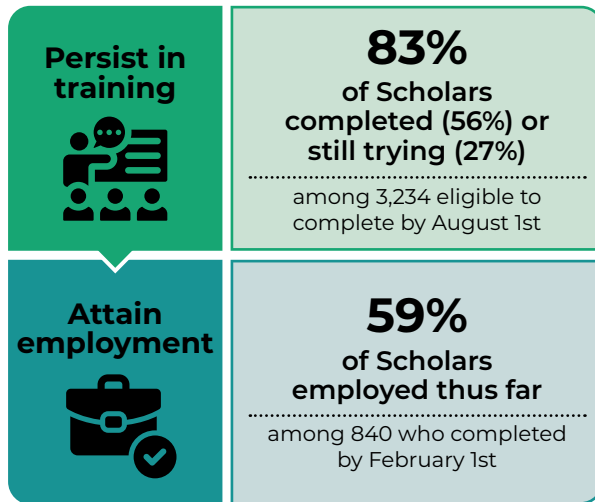
“This program has help me to double my income. Now I have a career rather than job. I care about my appearance going to work now and I am excited to go to work. I feel like I am doing good in the world.”

“Being a mother at home was very isolating. Now I have employment and leave the home with a purpose. I tell everyone in my family about [the] Great Jobs KC program and its connections.”

“If I didn’t participate in Great Jobs KC ever, I would be struggling with finances. I’d be more “on edge” on a mental health level. My previous job was uncomfortable to be in. This is [the] least stressed I’ve been since I graduated high school.”

Persistence rates are strong, with about eight in 10 Scholars staying with the program long enough to complete training. More than half (56 percent) of Scholars who enrolled between summer 2022 and early 2024 completed their training “on time.” We define on-time as when you would expect scholars to complete their training program based on their enrollment date and the duration of their training, assuming they pursued training full-time.

Just over one-quarter (27 percent) are still working toward completion with help from Great Jobs KC (for example, pursuing part-time training), and 17 percent withdrew from the program without finishing. These training programs require six months or less to complete, and Scholars' persistence rates compare favorably with the 34 percent completion rate in public community colleges that largely offer two-year associate degrees (NCES 2023).



Note: U.S. community colleges have a 3-year graduation rate of 34% (NCES 2023).

A majority of graduating Scholars find a job within six months. Almost three in five Scholars (59 percent) who completed training and spent at least six months on the job market found employment, and 41 percent have not found a job yet. Although Great Jobs KC continues to work closely with many of these job seekers, it remains to be seen how many will succeed with additional time and support.

On average, Scholars who complete the program nearly double their incomes. Among all Scholars who completed the program and had at least six months to look for a job, average earnings increased from \$14,634 before the program to \$26,037 after the program. This was a 78 percent increase in earnings on average (a rise of \$11,403). These changes are substantial—an impact of this size would be as large or larger than the impacts of any other adult education program that has been rigorously evaluated in the United States (NCEE 2021). That said, the present study does not provide a causal impact estimate for Great Jobs KC: some of the Scholars' changes in earnings may have occurred even if they had not participated in the program. It is also important to consider that the average increase in earnings could go up over time if Great Jobs KC is successful at placing the remaining 40 percent of Scholars in jobs.



Note: Among 770 Scholars who graduated before February 2024, and had pre-program income data.

Employed Scholars earn about \$47,000 per year on average, with some industries paying substantially higher wages than others. Among Scholars who found a job after completing the program, the average annual salary was \$47,465; a majority (51 percent) of Scholars were earning more than the


program’s income goal of \$45,000 per year. Incomes varied by industry (Exhibit 5). Importantly, this study did not measure the value of benefits or other aspects of job quality (such as work hours, stability of shifts, or opportunities for advancement) that may also help offset these initial earnings differences over time.

Exhibit 5: Incomes by Industry

Sector	Average income	Median income	Percentage > \$45,000
Logistics and warehousing	\$58,596	\$53,232	95%
Information technology	\$49,597	\$47,000	60%
Manufacturing	\$43,951	\$40,000	46%
Health care	\$38,920	\$37,440	15%

In summary, Great Jobs KC is a unique program that has scaled up quickly to serve a large number of adults across many industries and credentialing programs. The early outcomes of Great Jobs KC Scholars are promising, with strong rates of training persistence, dramatic increases in earnings among graduates finding employment, and opportunities to strengthen these outcomes in the future by helping more Scholars to finish training and then find a job. It remains to be seen whether Great Jobs KC can sustain these strong early outcomes as the program continues to scale up over time. However, if the program continues to deliver results for Scholars, Great Jobs KC has the potential to show impacts that are as large or larger than any other job training program for adults in

the United States that has been rigorously evaluated with a high-quality impact study. Understanding these impacts represents an important and exciting opportunity to demonstrate that this program should be a model for other cities in the future.



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