



Bring Them Back, Move Them Forward
Case Studies of Programs Preparing
Out-of-School Youths for Further
Education and Careers

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By:
Rob Buschmann
Joshua Haimson
Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.
Princeton, N.J.

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Margaret Spellings

Secretary

Office of Vocational and Adult Education

Troy Justesen

Assistant Secretary

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Executive Summary

Some school districts and community-based organizations are seeking to enhance dropout recovery programs so that they not only help participants secure a high school credential but also prepare them for postsecondary education or employment. These efforts are prompted, in part, by research suggesting that programs designed to prepare dropouts only for a high school credential have had limited success. While some programs have succeeded in helping participants secure a General Educational Development (GED) credential, those participants' average earnings outcomes are often no better than those of a control group who did not participate. One nonexperimental study suggests that GED recipients can benefit substantially if they secure some postsecondary education. Together these findings raise the question whether dropout recovery programs could be enhanced to help more participants prepare for postsecondary education, training, or employment.

To inform policy and practice, the Office of Vocational and Adult Education of the U.S. Department of Education sponsored a study that examined six purposively selected dropout recovery programs. The purpose of the study was to explore how programs seek to engage and teach participants, to identify implementation challenges programs face, to understand how they seek to overcome these challenges, and to explore implications for policymakers, program practitioners, and researchers.

The six programs selected for the study include three that prepare participants for a GED, two that prepare them for a high school diploma, and one that provides both GED and high school diploma options. All of these programs also offer participants some preparation for postsecondary education, training, or assistance finding jobs. Drawing on site visit interviews as well as outcome data, this report presents findings on five topics: (1) program goals and partners, (2) admissions and attendance policies, (3) instructional approaches and academic outcomes, (4) methods used to address participants' personal issues, and (5) strategies to prepare participants for postsecondary education and jobs. The report concludes with some observations about issues facing policymakers and practitioners, and with questions for future studies.

Program Goals and Partners

The case study programs fell into two categories, defined by the outcomes they sought to help participants achieve. Two of the programs were "college-focused," seeking primarily to prepare participants for college degree programs. The remaining four were "broad-goal" programs, which help participants select from and prepare for a broader array of postsecondary options, including not only college but also other types of postsecondary education or preparation for jobs.

Five of the six programs had a "lead partner" that shaped the program's governance structure, target population, and outcome objectives. For the two college-focused programs, the lead partner was a college; for three of the four broad-goal programs, the lead partner was a community-based organization. The four broad-goal programs had a variety of "secondary" partners that included postsecondary institutions and employers.

Partners were important, but maintaining partnerships required substantial effort.

Some programs sought out participants capable of achieving program goals, then sought to ensure their commitment to the goals.

Staff tried to address participants' diverse learning needs, but limited resources sometimes constrained these efforts.

Staff helped participants with personal issues but had difficulty addressing the most serious problems.

Cultivating and maintaining partnerships was a challenge for the programs. In most programs, staff invested a great deal of time developing and maintaining partnerships. For example, program staff needed to work closely with employer partners to make sure internships were appropriate given students' skills and to confirm that student interns performed adequately. One program limited the number of employer partners providing subsidized internships because of the substantial effort required to work with an employer to develop good internships and monitor interns' performance.

Admissions and Attendance Policies

The emphasis that programs placed on preparing participants for college shaped their applicant screening process. The two college-focused programs screened applicants for a minimum level of academic proficiency. The admissions policies of the four broad-goal programs, by contrast, were designed to welcome a more diverse population, including some applicants with lower academic achievement levels.

Three programs had orientation procedures and minimum attendance rules designed to induce participants to attend regularly, allow teachers to make progress through the curriculum, and focus resources on participants who were sufficiently committed to the program. However, in implementing the attendance rules, programs had to deal with the reality that many participants had personal issues that could disrupt their lives and affect attendance.

Instructional Approach and Academic Outcomes

Teachers had to figure out how to deliver instruction effectively in classrooms containing participants with diverse academic skills and program entry dates. Even in the program with the most stringent academic entry requirements, participants' achievement levels in reading and math ranged between 8th and 12th grade. Classrooms in the other programs included participants with even more diverse academic skills.

To address participants' academic needs, teachers often worked closely with individuals or small groups. To engage participants who were experiential learners, program staff sometimes developed project-based activities. However, large class sizes sometimes constrained teachers' ability to accommodate participants' individual needs and interests.

Addressing Participants' Personal Issues

According to staff, many participants in the programs contended with difficult personal issues, including unstable living situations, abusive parents, emotional problems, and substance abuse. All of the programs sought to learn about participants' backgrounds and personal issues during the application process. Staff said that it was difficult to uncover personal problems in these

Some participants enrolled in postsecondary programs and found jobs, but program impacts and participants' long-term prospects remain uncertain.

How can programs serve the most disadvantaged dropouts while offering appropriate opportunities to those with more skills?

early assessments, because many participants were reticent to discuss them. After participants enrolled, program staff sought to monitor their behavior and tried to reassess their problems and service needs.

Both teachers and counselors discussed participants' personal problems with them, tried to help them resolve these problems, and provided moral support. Most participants in our focus groups, though they were not necessarily representative of all program participants, said that they had developed a positive relationship with one or more staff members.

Even though programs may have provided participants with valuable emotional support, they did not have the resources and expertise to provide therapy to those with serious problems. Program staff attempted to refer participants with these problems to local service providers. However, getting participants to make use of such services was challenging.

Preparing Participants for Postsecondary Education and Jobs

Each of the case study programs sought to help participants not only secure a high school credential but also define and pursue a career goal. To do so, programs helped participants define educational and career goals; prepare for what they want to do after leaving the program; and make the transition from school to a postsecondary program, a job, or both.

Two of the high school programs had the highest percentage of participants earning a high school credential and entering college (see Table 1). Although it is not possible to discern whether these two programs actually had positive impacts on participants' college enrollment, it is worth noting that they shared a number of key features: each provided extensive career and educational exploration opportunities, dual-enrollment in college classes, and assistance applying to colleges. A key question is whether these program features increased participants' college enrollment rates. Alternatively, it is possible that these programs' impressive student outcomes were due to their careful screening of applicants.

It is even harder to judge whether or by how much the programs positively affected participants' employment rates. Post-program employment appears to be more prevalent in some programs than in others, but these differences may reflect the extent to which staff documented the employment of participants who left the program. Even in programs that referred participants to specific jobs, staff reported that most participants found their own positions.

Issues for Policymakers and Practitioners

Although individual programs may need to have selective admission standards in order to achieve their specific objectives, policymakers and funders may want to find ways to provide relevant opportunities for nearly all dropouts. One option is to try to create a "portfolio" of programs with varying goals and admissions standards so that most disadvantaged youths, regardless of their skill level in any given area, can be served. Another option is to create programs

with tiers, similar to two of the case study programs. In such programs, participants with the lowest skills are admitted to the lower tiers and can progress to higher tiers if and when their skills and performance surpass critical thresholds.

Table 1
Program Outcomes by Site

Program	Percentage of Participants Achieving Outcome			Sample Size
	Earned GED or High School Diploma	Postsecondary Enrollment (College or Training)	Employed When Left Program	
Olive Harvey High School	42	29	n.a.	100
CUNY Prep GED Program	34	14	n.a.	295
Open Meadow CRUE High School	52	26	58	65
Open Meadow High School	50	15	87	70
Cypress Hills GED Program	20	15	25	178
Next Step GED Program	28	9	46	43
ACYR Center for Excellence GED Program	25	5	22	168
ACYR Center for Excellence High School	6	1	n.a.	144

Data is for program year 2005–06, except for the Next Step GED Program (2004–05) and Cypress Hills GED Program (2006–07).

n.a. = not available.

Even programs that carefully screen applicants serve participants with diverse academic and personal needs. Addressing these needs effectively may require an individualized approach and relatively small class sizes. Staff require time to address each participant's academic needs and learning style, monitor their behavior, and discuss their personal problems. Postsecondary and employer partners can enhance dropout recovery programs, but program staff must commit time to cultivating and maintaining those partnerships. Both funders and program managers need to consider the costs of these activities.

Questions That Can Be Addressed in Future Research

***H**ow much does it cost to implement programs?*

More detailed information about the factors driving program costs would be helpful. The case studies suggest that some programs incur substantial costs to achieve various operational objectives such as maintaining effective partnerships, individualizing instruction, and providing counseling and emotional support. More specific information on program costs for each of these activities could help programs plan and enable funders to evaluate funding requests.

***W**hat do graduates accomplish and what issues do they face?*

It would be useful to track how participants fare in postsecondary education and the labor market and which groups of participants fare better. Longitudinal surveys could identify factors that predict whether participants will encounter certain obstacles. This may help programs anticipate and address participants' needs.

What are the impacts of programs and which program features improve participant outcomes?

The most important policy questions concern whether and how programs improve participant outcomes. Rigorous impact studies are needed to address these questions. The most useful studies would isolate the extent to which a single program feature or strategy contributes to the differences in average outcomes. For example, participants could be randomly assigned to either a program that offers counseling and social services or a program that does not. Alternatively, the key differences among the interventions could be: whether program staff provide individualized instruction, dual-enrollment classes in a college, or occupational training and high-quality internships. Testing the value of specific program features could enable policy-makers to enhance dropout recovery programs and help disadvantaged youths succeed.

I. Introduction

Policymakers and educators are seeking new ways to address the educational needs of out-of-school youths. High school graduation rates in the United States did not improve appreciably over the last two decades of the twentieth century, prompting concerns about the skill deficiencies of and limited opportunities available to those who do not complete high school. Although graduation rates appear to have improved slightly between 2001 and 2004 (from about 71 percent to about 74 percent), dropout rates remain substantial.¹ Consequently, policymakers are continuing to try to enhance dropout prevention services and strengthen dropout recovery programs that help students who have left high school either pass the General Educational Development (GED) test or receive a regular high school diploma.

Many researchers and practitioners have concluded that dropout recovery programs should seek to do more than prepare participants for a GED (Aron 2006; Kerka 2004; Martin and Halperin 2006; Steinberg and Almeida 2004). While some programs have succeeded in helping participants secure GEDs, participants' earnings outcomes are sometimes no better than a control group who did not participate (Long 1996; Cave 1993). These findings suggest that a GED by itself may not appreciably improve participants' outcomes. One nonexperimental study suggests that GED recipients can benefit substantially if they secure some postsecondary education (Murnane, Willet, and Boudett 1999). Together these findings raise the question whether dropout recovery programs could be enhanced to help more participants prepare for postsecondary education, training, or employment.

To inform policy and practice, the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) of the U.S. Department of Education (ED) sponsored a set of case studies of dropout recovery programs that offer some preparation for postsecondary education or training. The purpose of the study is to explore how programs seek to engage and teach participants, identify implementation challenges programs face and how they seek to overcome these challenges, and explore implications for policymakers, program practitioners, and researchers.

The case studies focused on five main questions: (1) Who participates in these programs? (2) How do programs seek to engage and teach participants? (3) Which implementation challenges do programs face, and how do they seek to overcome these challenges? (4) What are participants' outcomes, and how can outcome data support program improvement? (5) What are the implications of the findings for policymakers, program practitioners, and researchers?

Below we describe the study's conceptual framework, research questions, site selection criteria and the six case study sites, data collection methods, and the organization of the rest of this report.

¹See high school graduation rates by year in Digest of Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education 2006, which can be accessed at: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d06/tables/dt06_101.asp?referrer=list.

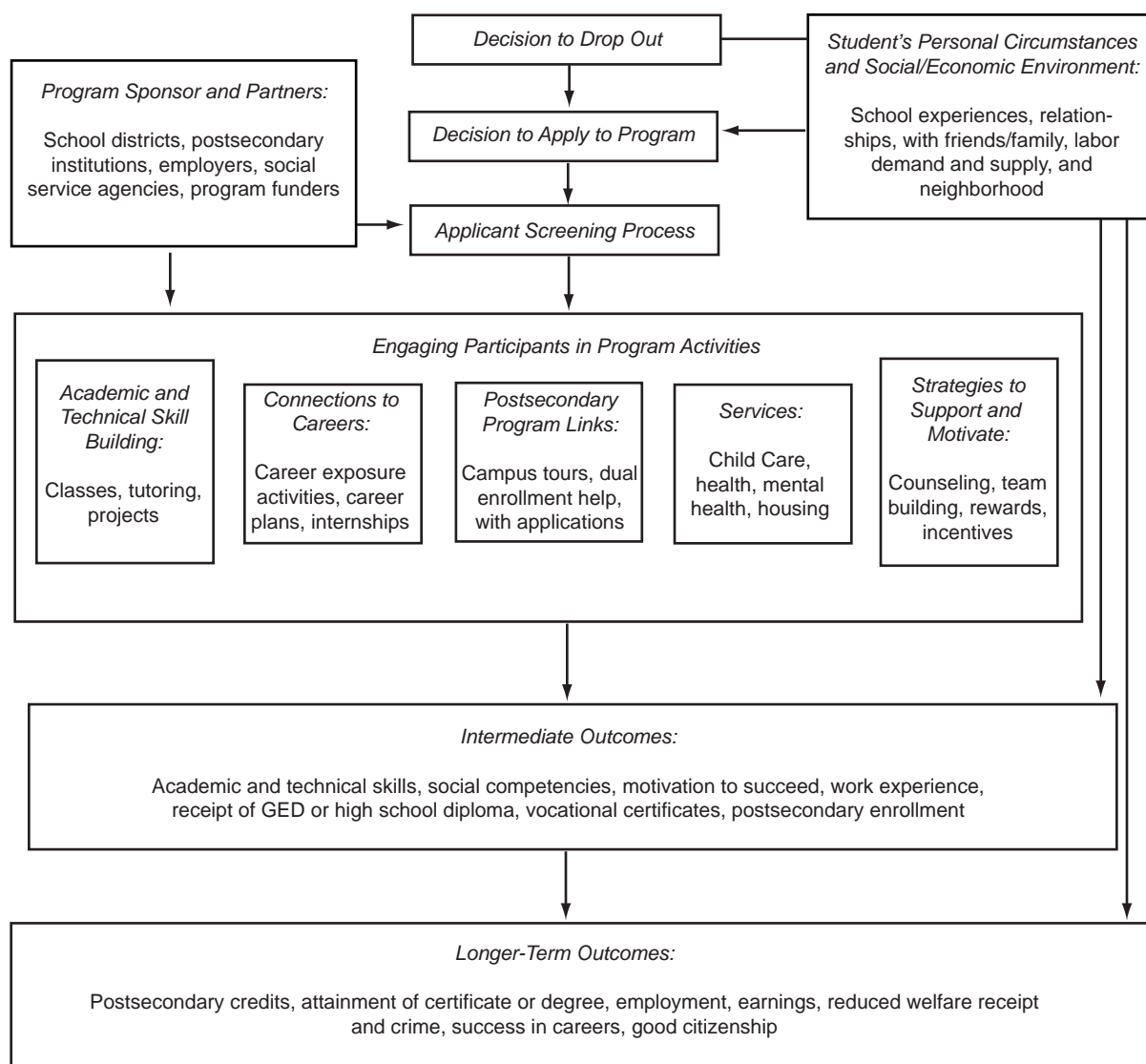
Framework Shapes Study Questions

Conceptual Framework

The design and objectives of dropout recovery programs indicate how they seek to benefit participants. The literature on these programs points to various factors that can influence their effectiveness. Drawing on a literature review and a preliminary review of the design of the dropout recovery programs considered for the case studies, the research team developed a conceptual framework describing factors that lead youths to disengage from school, how recovery programs seek to reengage these youths, and other factors that can influence participant outcomes (Figure I.1). This framework encompasses the following processes experienced by program applicants and participants:

- ***The Decision to Drop Out of School.*** A number of personal issues and problems can contribute to a student's initial decision to drop out, some of which persist and give rise to needs that dropout recovery programs must address. A decision to drop out sometimes comes after several years of academic failure (Allensworth and Easton 2005; Gleason and Dynarski 2002; Rumberger 2004). Students who have had conflicts with other students or teachers sometimes have social problems that need to be addressed. Other personal problems that sometimes persist include health and mental health issues, substance abuse, pregnancy and parenthood, homelessness or unstable housing arrangements, family conflicts, or involvement in gangs or criminal behavior. In addition, dropouts participating in focus groups often suggest that they have found high school boring, do not see the value of the high school curriculum, or need to secure a job to support themselves (Bridgeland et al. 2006).
- ***The Decision to Apply to a Program.*** To attract dropouts, programs can specify how they will benefit participants and address their learning needs. Dropout recovery programs can influence the mix of participants they serve by adopting specific outreach and recruitment strategies.
- ***The Applicant Screening Process.*** Programs often screen applicants to identify those who are likely to benefit most from program services or those who are likely to be successful. Application and screening procedures can be shaped by sponsoring agencies' missions, key partners' interests, or the outcomes that funders expect programs to achieve. For example, programs may screen out students with extremely low levels of educational achievement if governing boards or funders expect a substantial proportion of participants to achieve impressive outcomes or if postsecondary partners seek referrals of program graduates with higher-level skills. Similarly, some employment-focused programs may screen out students with substance abuse problems or criminal histories if employer partners encourage them to do so.
- ***Engagement in Program Activities.*** Programs' learning activities, social supports, services, and incentives are designed to engage participants, address their educational and personal needs, and help them prepare for employment or postsecondary education. For participants who dropped out because they found high school boring or frustrating, programs need to develop learning activities that engage students, addressing their interests and learning needs. Work-based activities may provide both useful learning opportunities and highlight the value of academic skills. Group projects develop teamwork and social skills and strengthen attachment to the program.

Figure I.1
Conceptual Framework for How Dropout Recovery Programs
Can Affect Participants



- **Intermediate and Longer-Term Outcomes.** Success in developing new competencies and securing credentials and work experience can expand participants' postsecondary education and employment opportunities, their well-being, and their contributions to society. By helping participants develop skills and addressing their personal issues, programs can also help participants develop more rewarding personal relationships and become better citizens.

Study focuses on five main questions

Research Questions

Few dropout recovery programs have been documented to have long-term positive effects, and there are many open questions about how best to help dropouts succeed in education and careers. Perhaps the most important questions concern the effects of enhanced dropout recovery programs on the outcomes of specific groups of dropouts. These types of questions are best addressed through an impact study. Before policymakers and researchers can select interventions for larger-scale demonstrations or experiments, however, it is useful to identify potentially promising interventions, describe their distinctive features, document the outcomes some participants achieve, and refine research questions and hypotheses about how programs may be affecting participants.

This study examined five sets of research questions:

1. ***Who participates in these programs?*** Which admission procedures do programs use, and how do they influence the mix of youths who participate? What are participants' educational and social service needs when they enter the program?
2. ***How do programs seek to engage and teach participants? What instructional methods do programs use?*** To what extent and in what way do programs individualize instruction and services? How do programs address participants' personal issues and social service needs? How do programs make use of institutional partnerships to help prepare participants for postsecondary education or careers?
3. ***Which implementation challenges do programs face and how do they seek to overcome these challenges?*** Which factors appear to affect the way programs implement specific screening methods, curricula and instructional approaches, case management and support services, and transitional activities?
4. ***What are participants' outcomes and how do programs use outcome data to support program improvement?*** Which kinds of outcome measures do programs collect, how reliable are those measures, and which measures can be used for program improvement? How successful are programs in placing participants in internships, jobs, dual-enrollment courses, and postsecondary programs? To what extent do participants enter jobs and postsecondary programs that make use of the technical instruction they received?
5. ***What are the potential implications of the findings for policymakers, program practitioners, and researchers?*** Which program components appear to address students' needs? Which programs have promising outcomes? How might policymakers and practitioners strengthen programs? Which questions could be addressed in future research?

Sites prepare dropouts for high school credential and postsecondary education or training

Site Selection Criteria and the Six Case Study Sites

The team selected six programs to study based on the following four criteria:

1. **Dropouts Served.** We identified programs in which dropouts represented at least a quarter of all the participants. (We considered some high school programs that include both dropouts and students transferring from another high school.)
2. **High School Credential.** The programs had to offer participants an opportunity to earn a high school diploma, a GED, or both. This ruled out programs focused solely on job training or similar services.
3. **Preparation for Postsecondary Education and Training Programs.** The programs all provide some preparation for postsecondary education or training that goes beyond general guidance about available postsecondary programs. This preparation could include dual enrollment in college classes, direct exposure to specific postsecondary programs, or help in securing an industry-recognized certificate.
4. **Outcome Data.** The programs had to be able to provide some outcome data for participants—at a minimum, aggregate measures of the percentage of participants earning a GED or high school diploma and enrolling in postsecondary education.

The six case study programs were selected from a pool of 23 candidates. Most of the 23 sites were identified by various experts and advocacy organizations; others were suggested by ED staff. We asked these individuals and experts to suggest dropout recovery programs that helped participants prepare for postsecondary education or training, as well as programs that they believed were promising in various respects, including in the way they engaged students, addressed their personal problems, and helped them prepare for productive careers. We completed screening calls with 21 of the 23 candidates to gather information relating to the four selection criteria. Based on this information, and after consulting with OVAE, we selected six sites for the study. Table I.1 summarizes information on each site's target population, the length of time students typically spend in the program, the high school credential for which students are instructed, and the ways students are prepared for postsecondary education and careers. More information on each site is provided in Appendix A.

Data Collection Methods

Study draws on qualitative information from visits and outcome reports

During spring and summer 2007, we conducted a one- or two-day visit to each of the six sites. At each program, we interviewed five groups of respondents: (1) principals or program managers, (2) teachers (both academic and vocational), (3) counselors, (4) school or administrative records coordinators, and (5) program participants. We also requested aggregate outcome reports and records for each of the students enrolled in the program during school year 2005–06. Some programs were unable to provide data for that school year and instead provided data for the preceding or subsequent year. We requested individual records containing data on attendance, math and reading pretest and posttest scores, attainment of high school diploma or GED, postsecondary applications or enrollment at the time of graduation, and job placement or employment status at the time of graduation. Although all sites were able to provide aggregate reports or

Table I.1
Sites Selected For Case Studies

Program	Number of Students	Location	Groups Served	Length	High School Credential	Preparation for Post-Secondary Education	Preparation for Jobs
Olive Harvey Middle College High School	200	Chicago, Ill.	Dropouts and non-dropouts	2–3 Years	Diploma	The school has a dual enrollment program with Olive Harvey College, and uses Olive Harvey College facilities and professors. The school also conducts field trips to local and out-of-state colleges.	The program provides some instruction in general employability skills.
City University of New York (CUNY) Prep GED Program	300	New York (Bronx), N.Y.	Dropouts	1–2 years	GED	The program helps students prepare for college through dual enrollment classes at CUNY, assistance with the college application process, and college survival tips.	None.
City University of New York (CUNY) Prep GED Program	200	Portland, Ore.	Primarily dropouts	2–3 years	Diploma	The school prepares students for college through a dual enrollment option with Portland Community College, field trips, and assistance applying to college.	The program provides instruction in general employability skills and offers internships and assistance finding jobs.
Cypress Hills GED Program	150	New York, N.Y.	Dropouts	1–2 years	GED	The program helps students apply to college and provides some counseling for those enrolled in New York City (NYC) College of Technology.	The program provides subsidized internships to some students and refers students to vocational training implemented by partners.
Next Step Charter School GED Program	85	Washington, D.C.	Dropouts	1–2 years	GED	Counselors help students apply to college and take interested students on field trips to colleges.	Staff members help students obtain internships, job skills training, and jobs.
Arizona Call—A Teen Youth Resources (ACYR) Programs	200	Phoenix, Ariz.	Dropouts and non-dropouts	1–2 years	Diploma or GED	Staff members help students apply to college and offer field trips to local colleges.	Students can obtain training and jobs through an associated <i>Workforce Investment Act</i> program.

student records indicating the extent to which students completed a diploma or GED as well as some information on post-program postsecondary enrollment, various sites were unable to provide data on one or more of the other key variables. Three programs were unable to provide data on participants' employment status at the time of graduation. The individual school records were often incomplete. For example, posttests were missing for most participants, so we were unable to use this variable.

In addition to asking for individual student records, we also requested aggregate outcome measures indicating the percentages of students who had achieved specific outcomes. When these aggregate measures were inconsistent with the student records, we sought to reconcile the

differences. In Chapters V and VI of this report, we discuss outcomes that combine the student records with aggregate outcomes when the student records were either unavailable or the program indicated that they were not reliable. The discrepancies between the student records and aggregate reports generally were always smaller than 10 percentage points.

Organization of this Report

The rest of this report is organized into the following six sections:

1. **Chapter II, Program Goals and Partners** addresses program outcome objectives and target population, and how these are shaped by program partners.
2. **Chapter III, Admissions, Orientation, and Attendance Policies** addresses how programs screen applicants, orient new participants, and establish minimum attendance rules. It also discusses how these procedures confirm that participants are a good match for the program and reinforce their commitment to program goals.
3. **Chapter IV, Instructional Approach and Academic Outcomes** includes the programs' learning activities and instructional approaches and how programs sought to address each student's learning needs.
4. **Chapter V, Addressing Students' Personal Issues** describes how programs sought to assess students' issues, provide moral support and counseling, and refer students to social services.
5. **Chapter VI, Helping Students Get Into Postsecondary Education and Jobs** addresses the ways programs helped students prepare for postsecondary programs and careers and the extent to which programs achieved specific post-program outcome objectives.
6. **Chapter VII, Issues and Questions** discusses some lessons for policymakers and practitioners and questions that could be addressed in future studies.

II. Program Goals and Partners

Programs cultivated partners to help students achieve program outcome objectives but maintaining partnerships required substantial effort.

Each of the six programs had a set of specific goals for its participants. In most cases, those goals resulted from the history and development of the program. A program's goals also were influenced to varying degrees by the priorities of its partner institutions and organizations. In turn, those institutions and organizations brought specific assets to the table, allowing program staff to enhance the opportunities available to participants.

This chapter describes the goals of the case study programs, examines how the mission of the organizations that sponsored or supported the program influenced those goals, and reviews the assets that different types of partners brought to programs.

Program Goals

Programs focused either on preparing participants for college or on a broader set of options.

The case study programs generally fell into one of two categories, defined by the outcome they sought to help participants achieve. The first type—"college-focused" programs—sought primarily to prepare participants for college and placed much less importance on alternative goals, such as helping participants gain admission to technical schools or find jobs right after graduation. The two college-focused programs were City University of New York (CUNY) Prep, a General Educational Development (GED) program, and Olive Harvey, a high school diploma program. Staff for both of these programs viewed the high school credential as a gateway to college.

The second type—"broad-goal" programs—sought to help participants select from, and prepare for, a broad array of post-graduation options. Staff at these four programs generally believed that it was not reasonable to expect all participants to prepare for college. One program director summarized this view by noting, "We wish every [participant] would go to college. Is that realistic? No, absolutely not."

The distinction between these two types of programs also affected each program's target population. The college-focused programs generally thought they needed to screen out applicants with extremely low academic ability in order to ensure that participants had the capacity to prepare for college and a chance to get in. By contrast, the broad-goal programs tended to serve somewhat more academically diverse populations (see Chapter III for more information on how programs screened applicants).

However, all the programs shared some objectives. They all sought to prepare students for a high school credential, either a GED or high school diploma (this was one of the site selection criteria). All the programs, to some extent, sought to help participants develop academic skills, stronger self-esteem, teamwork skills, and good work habits. Programs also sought to assist participants with some personal challenges, including problematic relationships with family members.

The “lead partner” shaped the program’s goals and designs.

Secondary partners helped broad-goal programs expand participants’ postsecondary options.

Program Partners

Five of the six programs had a “lead partner” that shaped the program’s governance structure, target population, and outcome objectives. For the two college-focused programs, the lead partner was a college; for three other programs, the lead partner was a community-based organization.² The one program without a lead partner, Open Meadow, had a range of “secondary” partners and funders to support its two high school programs. The lead and secondary partners for each program are shown in Table II.1.

Lead partners offered distinct capabilities relevant to a program’s goals. Colleges brought dual-enrollment opportunities and expertise about the skills and initiative required to succeed in their programs. These institutions simplified the process of developing and implementing a dual-enrollment program and made it easier to expose participants to a college environment.

Lead partners that were community-based organizations brought other kinds of advantages. These organizations were familiar with the needs of disadvantaged youths and had other programs or services that could be used for outreach and to recruit dropouts. One of the GED programs, Cypress Hills, was created by a large community development organization that was able to mount local outreach efforts through its various educational and recreational programs. It also had some staff members who appeared to be familiar with the culture and problems of local disadvantaged youths. Some staff members had backgrounds similar to those of many participants, having grown up in the same neighborhoods, and were only a few years older than the participants.

Most of the programs had some secondary partners that provided some learning opportunities or services for participants. Although these partners were generally less influential in designing the program and shaping its goals, they often played important roles. These partners included colleges, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and local governments. The broad-goal programs tended to have more secondary partners, in part because they sought to provide participants with access to both local postsecondary programs and jobs.

Programs faced challenges cultivating and maintaining partnerships. Open Meadow’s partners included Portland Community College (PCC), which provided dual-enrollment opportunities to participants, as well as several local employers offering internships and on-the-job training. Open Meadow staff invested substantial time developing the dual-enrollment program with PCC, including discussing the type of preparation students needed before they could take classes. Open Meadow sought to minimize the burden on employers by suggesting how internships could be structured and monitored. Staff had to check in frequently with these employers to make sure students were performing adequately. Staff members at another broad-goal program, Next Step GED program, noted that they chose to limit the number of employer partners providing internships because of the substantial effort required to maintain these relationships. As a result, the program decided not to try to develop internships in some of the areas of interest to participants.

²A community-based organization here is an organization, generally a nonprofit, with the basic mission of serving the community in which it is located. In this study, the community-based organizations were limited to the immediate geographic area of the program itself (none were regional or national organizations).

Table II.1
Lead and Secondary Partners

Program	Lead Partner	Secondary Partner
College-focused Programs		
Olive Harvey (High School)	Olive Harvey College	None
CUNY Prep (GED)	CUNY	None
Broad-goal Programs		
Open Meadow Programs (HS)	None	Portland Community College Several employers, including Washington Mutual and Standard Insurance, and other businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies
Cypress Hills (GED)	Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation	NYC Technical College “Hard-skills” training programs
Next Step (GED)	Latin American Youth Center	Howard and Montgomery Colleges Multiple local businesses and non profit agencies
ACYR Programs (HS and GED)	Arizona Call-A-Teen Youth Resources	Gateway and Rio Solado Colleges City of Phoenix/Maricopa County, YouthBuild Phoenix, Goodwill Industries, Maricopa Skills Center

Implications and Questions

Programs need to balance the costs and benefits of forging partnerships.

Several types of institutions possess assets that have the potential to enhance programs seeking to assist disconnected youths. Colleges can help create dual-enrollment programs and provide advice on how to prepare students for college. Community-based organizations can help programs with outreach and referrals. Employers can offer internships and entry-level training.

Because creating and maintaining these partnerships require effort, program staff must consider the extent to which a partner is likely to help achieve the program’s objectives. Maintaining a partnership requires substantial staff commitment. For example, staff need to help employers create appropriate internships and monitor the workplace performance of student interns. Similarly, if students are referred to dual-enrollment classes in a college, some system must be established to monitor their classroom attendance and performance. Given that many programs are small operations with few teachers and administrative staff, they need to weigh the potential benefits of each partnership against other uses of these staff resources.

III. Admissions, Orientation, and Attendance Policies

Programs sought to select participants capable of achieving program goals and secure their commitment to pursue those goals.

All of the programs had to determine how they would ensure new participants had sufficient skills and motivation to complete the program. Specifically, staff had to resolve three questions:

- Who should we admit to our program, and how should we balance serving those with the greatest need against ensuring that all participants have a good chance of succeeding
- How should we focus participants on the goals of the program and increase their commitment?
- When should we stop trying to help participants who do not appear committed and remove them from the program?

This chapter discusses how programs dealt with these questions in formulating their applicant screening process, initial orientation process, and minimum acceptable attendance.

Applicant Screening Process

College-focused programs screened out applicants with weak academic skills.

The emphasis programs placed on preparing students for college shaped their applicant screening process. The two college-focused programs, CUNY Prep and Olive Harvey, first screened applicants for a minimum level of academic proficiency: both required at least eighth-grade proficiency in reading and Olive Harvey also required eighth-grade proficiency in math. Olive Harvey staff noted that other programs in the region could serve youths who could not score at that academic level and frequently referred such applicants to those programs. Staff reported that nearly 90 percent of the applicants to Olive Harvey failed to score high enough on the reading and math tests to qualify for admission. Staff at CUNY Prep sometimes made exceptions to the eighth-grade reading requirement if applicants appeared knowledgeable and motivated during an interview.

Broad-goal programs generally accepted applicants with lower academic scores and a wide range of goals.

The admissions policies of the four programs with broader goals, by contrast, were designed to welcome a somewhat more diverse population, including applicants with lower academic achievement levels and varied educational and employment goals. Table III.1 shows that the broad-goal programs all had participant populations that scored at lower levels than did those in the two college-focused programs. All four of these programs could serve participants entering at almost any academic level, either through basic adult education courses or remedial high school and middle school courses. Although these programs did not screen based on students' academic levels, they sometimes did screen out students for other reasons.

Table III.1
Skill Levels of Entering Participants

Program	Percentage of Participants with Reading Skills Below Eighth Grade	Percentage of Participants with Math Skills Below Eighth Grade	Percentage of Participants for Whom Data are Available
Olive Harvey	33	n.a.	100
CUNY Prep	31	60	70
Open Meadow ^a	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Cypress Hills	60	86	65 ^b
Next Step ^c	100	100	100 ^c
ACYR GED Program	46	68	98
ACYR Center for Excellence (High School)	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

Source: Data provided by programs.

^a In the Open Meadow program, data were available for less than 44 percent of enrollees.

^b In the Cypress Hills program, data were available on reading tests for 65 percent of participants and on math tests for 46 percent of participants.

^c In the Next Step program, these estimates are based on staff reports.

n.a. = not available.

One of the broad-goal programs, Open Meadow, made a concerted attempt to screen out applicants who were not motivated to secure at least a high school diploma. Staff asked applicants why they were interested in the school and screened out many students whose answers suggested they would not be serious students (including those who said they applied because their parent wanted them to go back to school or they were bored). Staff also discouraged students with disabilities or serious learning problems, because the school could not accommodate them. Staff reported that nearly two out of three applicants were screened out based on these interviews.

The other three broad-goal programs were much less selective. Although Cypress Hills sometimes discouraged applicants who said they were interested only in securing a GED and did not want to prepare for postsecondary education or training, most applicants were admitted. The other two programs, Next Step and ACYR, used interviews mostly as an information-gathering tool, attempting to understand the participants' social service and educational needs. The only applicants screened out were youths with serious disabilities, substance abuse problems, or severe mental health issues.

Both Cypress Hills and Next Step had tiered programs, in which those with the lowest test scores entered the lowest tier and could advance to a higher level once their academic performance improved. Cypress Hills had a pre-GED program for those with math and reading scores below the ninth-grade level, as well as a GED program for those with higher skill levels. Similarly, Next Step had several tiers with students advancing to the next level when their test scores and homework demonstrated that they had progressed sufficiently.

Orientations sought to engage students and prepare them for the program.

The ratio of applicants to the number of slots available in each program constrained the extent to which programs could be selective in admitting applicants. The most selective programs, Olive Harvey and Open Meadow, had a large flow of applicants relative to the slots available. Although these programs screened applicants in different ways—Olive Harvey using test scores and Open Meadow using interviews—both were able to select the students they believed could benefit from and succeed in their programs.

The least selective programs reported higher attrition rates, which may reflect the fact that they did not screen out students with low motivation, weak skills, or serious personal issues. For example, about a quarter of all students enrolling in ACYR left the program within the first month. ACYR staff noted that there were many reasons students left quickly, including lack of interest in securing a high school credential, difficulty with the curriculum, personal crises, and a decision to return to their previous school. Attrition was somewhat lower at CUNY Prep (about 15 percent within the first month), which screened based on tests but made exceptions. The two most selective programs had the lowest attrition within the first month—Olive Harvey (about 3 percent), and Open Meadow (about 6 percent).³

Programs with higher attrition rates generally had to admit new students frequently to keep classrooms full. Most programs admitted students several times a year, but those with the highest attrition tended to admit substantial numbers throughout the year. The high attrition and constant inflow of new students posed a challenge for teachers, because they had to continually assess the needs of new students and had more difficulty making progress through the curriculum (see Chapter IV).

Orientation for New Enrollees

All six of the programs had an orientation process during which staff shared information about the structure and rules of the programs with new participants. In most programs, the initial orientation was designed to send a signal to new enrollees about the skills the program expected them to acquire, as well as its behavioral rules. In addition, orientations provided students with opportunities to (1) define educational and career goals, (2) get a sense of the challenges ahead, (3) get to know one another, and (4) secure support from parents.

Most of the programs' orientations encouraged participants to express a commitment to a postsecondary education or training goal. Olive Harvey took a week to introduce participants to the program's emphasis on entering college and asked participants to either confirm that they were interested in preparing for college or withdraw from the program. The orientation at Cypress Hills, by contrast, consisted of a daylong presentation describing a variety of postsecondary options including college and vocational training offered by the program's partners. All students were expected to select one of these options.

Two programs sought to challenge participants and demonstrate that they would need to work hard. For example, CUNY Prep required participants to complete a five-page personal essay

³Staff at Next Step and Cypress Hills suggested that their programs experienced substantial turnover, but they could not provide specific estimates or school records with exit and entry dates from which these measures could be calculated.

during an initial weeklong orientation. Because many participants were unaccustomed to this type of writing, this assignment served to highlight the program's academic demands and to test participants' motivation. Open Meadow had no structured orientation session for participants, but it put all new enrollees on a six-week "probationary period" during which they were watched closely by staff for signs of faltering motivation (e.g., poor attendance or tardiness) or dedication to class work. At the end of the probationary period, participants had to have demonstrated to staff that they deserved to stay in the program.

In two sites, participants were asked to confide in staff or peers and establish some personal connection. Open Meadow's Corps for Restoring the Urban Environment (CRUE) participants began each trimester with a two- to three-day wilderness trip for both new and returning participants. The intent of these short orientations was for participants to bond with one another and their instructors, which would be important in their subsequent school activities, particularly ones requiring them to work as a cohesive group. Next Step asked participants to write a letter to the person of their choice as part of their orientation process; the purpose of this letter was to get an idea of the participants' background, personal issues, and writing ability.

Finally, two programs sought to help participants secure support for their educational goals from family members. Olive Harvey asked new participants, as part of their initial written academic plan, to address how their own families would help them. This strategy also served to broaden the scope of the participants' commitment: with parents or other family members present, participants were making a more public and meaningful commitment to finishing the program.

Attendance Rules

During the orientation process, staff discussed its expectations about student attendance. Some programs conveyed well-defined minimum acceptable attendance rules in order to set clear expectations. These rules were designed to induce students to attend regularly, allow teachers to make progress through the curriculum, and focus program resources only on participants who were sufficiently committed to attend consistently. However, in defining these rules and implementing them, programs had to deal with the reality that many participants had personal issues that often disrupted their lives, making it difficult for them to have perfect attendance.

Three programs defined minimum attendance rules, but these rules were specified in different ways. The rules in two programs were designed to catch and address attendance problems quickly. At CUNY Prep, for example, participants who did not show up 90 percent of the time in a 12-week period were required to leave the program for at least a quarter. Open Meadow placed participants with more than four absences in a six-week period on attendance-focused probation; then they had to attend the program 85 percent of the time for six weeks or they were asked to leave.

Another program defined minimum acceptable attendance rules for a longer period. Next Step allowed participants a relatively large number of absences over the course of a semester before the participant was dismissed from the program. However, Next Step kept close track of participants' absences and organized formal meetings with program staff, parents, and the participants when students approached their limit.

Attendance policies tested participants' commitment and sought to maintain a productive classroom environment.

Staff suggested that strict attendance policies seemed to reduce the extent to which unprepared participants migrated in and out of the classroom. Teachers at the programs with relatively strict attendance policies reported that the policies helped their classes maintain an adequate pace through the curriculum by removing students who could slow the class's progress. However, it is unclear whether the attendance policies motivated many participants to improve their attendance or whether the rules simply allowed programs to weed out students with low motivation.⁴

Implications and Questions

Programs sought to identify and admit participants who have the potential to succeed and keep out those who might threaten their success. Distinguishing these two groups is challenging and requires some judgment on the part of program staff. Any single decision rule carries some risks.

If the program is too selective with its application process or too strict with its orientation and attendance policies, the program might find itself screening out, or removing, a large proportion of the dropout population. In geographic areas with multiple programs for disadvantaged youths, those who are screened out can enroll in a less restrictive program. However, if the program is the sole provider or if most programs are selective, then many dropouts may find themselves with few viable educational options. On the other hand, if the program is not selective and strict enough, the risk is that many participants will fail to achieve the outcome objectives. This may discourage staff, funders, or youths who are considering applying to the program.

Policymakers can explore several strategies for ensuring that most dropouts can enroll in some educational program. One option is to try to ensure that most areas have a "portfolio" consisting of programs that collectively serve most dropouts. Each of the programs in the portfolio would admit a different mix of participants, depending on the program's goals. Another option is to create tiers within a single program, similar to Next Step or Cypress Hills. Those participants with the lowest skills can be admitted to the lower tiers and can progress to higher tiers if their skills and performance surpass a critical threshold. This option carries the potential advantage of allowing participants to switch easily between parts of a program, providing them with ready access to additional options and more continuity of services.

Multiple pathways are needed to serve a diverse dropout population.

⁴CUNY Prep, one of the few programs that tracked reasons students left the program, reported that about a third of applicants left within their first school year without securing a GED during the 2005–06 academic year, and of these students, 90 percent failed to meet the attendance requirements.

IV. Instructional Approach and Academic Outcomes

Programs sought to address students' diverse learning needs, but resources constrained the extent of individualized instruction.

Teachers sought to individualize instruction to address diverse academic skills and high student turnover.

Although some programs screened students more strictly than others, all had to accommodate students with varying skill levels. To engage students, teachers sought to clarify the connection between the curriculum and the skills needed to succeed. The skills of new enrollees and their attachment to the program appeared to influence their academic outcomes. This chapter examines each of these issues.

Academic Instruction

Staff at all six programs noted that students in the same classroom often had diverse academic skills. As noted in the previous chapter, some programs did not screen applicants at all. Other programs, such as CUNY Prep, had a stated policy of screening students, but in practice they sometimes enrolled students with lower skill levels than those required for admission. Even at Olive Harvey, the program with the most stringent academic entry requirements, participants' reading and math achievement levels ranged between 8th and 12th grade. As discussed in Chapter III, four of the programs reported a substantial student turnover rate, which meant that new students continually joined the classes of students who had been in the program for some time. Limited staff in all but one program meant that students could not be sorted into more than two groups based on their skill levels.⁵ Hence, teachers had to devise a way to teach classrooms containing students with diverse academic needs.

One of the most common ways teachers tried to accommodate the differences in students' academic preparation was to devote some class time to teaching individuals or small groups of students. Many teachers spent a small amount of time lecturing the entire class and then worked with individual students or groups on customized assignments appropriate for their skill levels. In language arts classes, some teachers assigned different books to individual students based on their reading levels. In math classes, some teachers adjusted the difficulty of problems for each student. Some teachers frequently administered various assessments to students to gauge their skill level and progress.

Teachers used at least two strategies for assigning students to small groups. Some teachers included in each group students with varying skill levels and encouraged those with greater academic skills to assist their less-skilled classmates. Others created groups with fairly homogeneous skill levels and calibrated the group assignment based on students' skills. Either strategy required careful monitoring of the groups to ensure that students worked well together and were making progress.

⁵The exception was Next Step in which those speaking English were broken into three groups based on their achievement level and those speaking only Spanish were also divided into three groups.

Large class sizes and other constraints sometimes made individualized instruction difficult.

Projects and trips were designed to engage students and reinforce the classroom curriculum.

Some programs also selected or developed curricula that would accommodate students with diverse academic needs and address substantial turnover. One program's teachers configured some lesson plans so that individual lessons did not rely on material introduced previously in order to help new students understand what was being taught. Two programs integrated the curriculum across different subjects, seeking to provide multiple opportunities for students (especially those with lower achievement levels) to acquire the key skills and knowledge needed to graduate.

Regardless of their approaches, teachers often were constrained in their ability to accommodate students' diverse academic needs. Class size had a large effect on how much time teachers could spend with individual students or small groups. Class sizes varied from less than 10, in which teachers found it relatively easy to individualize instruction, to classes of 25 or more, in which it was more difficult to do much individual instruction. Careful assessment of each student's progress and tailoring assignments to students' learning styles were also more difficult in larger classes.

Engaging Students and Ensuring Relevance

Programs found that many students had short attention spans and were often bored by classroom activities that had no clear connection to their life experiences or career goals. Programs employed two strategies to engage students: project-based activities and trips that complemented the curriculum.

Some programs worked with local partners to develop projects. The CRUE high school program within Open Meadow shaped much of its curriculum around community-oriented, project-based learning. Students worked on projects for various public and nonprofit agencies involved in environmental protection and social services. These projects sought to demonstrate the connection between students' schoolwork and life beyond their classes. Similarly, CUNY Prep asked students to conduct community health surveys in which students could apply a variety of academic skills.

Some programs also organized trips designed to engage students and reinforce parts of the academic curriculum. Olive Harvey teachers regularly took students to see performances of plays that they were reading in class. Olive Harvey teachers also tried to give students a more concrete sense of history by visiting important historical sites.

Staff noted that creating interesting projects and trips was time-consuming. In most cases, teachers had to coordinate with employer staff or some other organization to develop a good project. Ensuring that a project or trip was directly relevant to the curriculum required a fair amount of advance planning. Moreover, teachers struggled to develop a variety of projects and trips, attempting to address students' diverse career interests. Although time-consuming, most teachers reported that these efforts were useful and heightened the interest of many students who tended to be bored by more traditional classroom instruction.

Students in programs that screened applicants more carefully had higher graduation rates.

Helping students with diverse skills and learning needs may require investments in small class sizes and flexible curricula

Student Academic Success

All programs sought to help students make academic progress. Students' progress can be gauged in at least two ways: the extent to which their math and reading skills improved and the percentage of participants securing a high school credential. Although almost all programs administered some kind of pretest and posttest, post-test data were missing for a majority of students in all but one of the programs. The one exception was Olive Harvey, whose relatively complete data suggest that the median student gained about one grade level over two years.

The programs were able to provide more complete data on the extent to which students secured a high school credential by the time they left the program (Table IV.1). Overall, the fraction of students earning a high school diploma or GED varied a great deal across the programs. In Open Meadow, 50 percent of those in the regular high school and 52 percent of those in the CRUE program earned diplomas. By contrast, in ACYR's high school program, only 6 percent earned a diploma.

The mix of students admitted to programs appears to have influenced the extent to which participants secured high school credentials. The two programs that screened applicants most carefully—Olive Harvey and Open Meadow—had the highest percentages of students who secured a high school credential. In contrast, the two programs with the lowest high school credential rates admitted many students with low reading and math levels. The low graduation rate in these programs may also be partly due to high student turnover. Staff at one of these programs suggested that the high turnover not only affected those who left the program but may have discouraged some of the students who remained behind, perhaps leading them to devalue the program or wonder whether they could satisfy its academic demands.

CUNY Prep, a college-focused GED program, did not spend much time on preparing students for the GED test; instead, it sought to help students develop the higher-level skills needed to succeed in college. This program had a fairly traditional high school curriculum, which covered all the major academic subjects and also sought to help students develop the research and study skills needed in college. The program provided a fairly brief (three-week) class designed to help students pass the GED. The lack of emphasis on preparing for the GED test combined with the decision to admit students with fairly weak basic skills may have contributed to the modest fraction of students passing the GED (34 percent). The broad curriculum, however, may have helped some students enroll in college (see Chapter VI).

Implications and Questions

Dropouts have diverse academic needs. Although most have some academic deficiencies, the extent and nature of these deficiencies vary a great deal. Some students drop out because they see little connection between the curriculum and the skills they need to succeed. Hence, programs that reengage students not only seek to address students' individual learning problems but also try to make a connection between the curriculum and their diverse career interests.

Individualizing instruction is potentially valuable, but it is often costly. Successful efforts to address students' learning problems and career interests require smaller class sizes, more intensive student assessments, and a flexible curriculum. Moreover, accommodating diverse

Table IV.1
Students' Success Earning High School Credentials

Program	Percentage of Participants Earning GED or High School Diploma
Olive Harvey High School	42
CUNY Prep GED Program	34
Open Meadow CRUE High School	52
Open Meadow High School	50
Cypress Hills GED Program	20
Next Step GED Program	28
ACYR GED Program	25
ACYR Center for Excellence High School	6
Note: All percentages are for school year 2005–06 except for Cypress Hills (for which GED rate is for 2006–07) and Next Step (for which GED rate is for 2004–05).	

learning styles is time-consuming. Good projects and trips require planning and the cultivation of partners who can host visits or work-based activities. All these objectives have cost implications. Policymakers and program staff need to be aware of these higher costs when they gauge the funding needed to support dropout recovery programs.

***P**olicymakers need to decide which academic outcomes programs should report.*

Programs for disadvantaged youths are likely to continue to struggle to document their academic outcomes. Even in case study programs with relatively high graduation rates and low turnover, the test data were sometimes incomplete. Policymakers and funders should consider which types of academic outcomes programs should report. Although it may be reasonable to expect consistent measures of students' math and reading skills when they enter and leave a program, funders should recognize that many students leave unexpectedly and hence will not complete a posttest. Funders should also realize that programs seek to develop other skills—such as research and critical thinking skills—that are more difficult to document. Aside from success earning a high school credential, students' progress in postsecondary programs and the labor market may be the best indicators of students' acquisition of valuable skills.

V. Addressing Students' Personal Issues

Programs sought to help students with a variety of personal issues but had difficulty addressing the most serious problems.

Despite their young age, many students had experienced difficult problems in their personal lives. Staff reported that some students were single parents or needed to support their families financially. Some had unstable living situations, moving frequently from one family member or friend to another. Many, if not most, had troubled relationships with the adult figures in their lives. Those living with parents often received inconsistent support and some were emotionally or physically abused. Some programs served foster children as well as those who had been in the juvenile justice system. Participants' difficult histories often contributed to emotional or substance abuse problems.

These personal problems had the potential to undermine students' participation, posing a key challenge for the programs. Staff noted that students' personal problems sometimes interfered with their academic progress by making it harder for them to concentrate or to attend the program consistently. Personal crises led some students to leave the program before acquiring many skills or earning a high school credential. To deal with these challenges, programs sought to perform three functions:

- Identify students' personal issues
- Provide students with moral support and personal advice
- Refer students to other service providers to address their more serious problems

Identifying Personal Issues

In order to address students' personal challenges, staff first had to identify them. Ideally, staff members would identify these issues as soon as possible, so that they could begin to address them before they negatively affected students' progress. This was difficult to accomplish, however, because staff had to cultivate students' trust before they could secure much personal information. For students who had problematic relationships in the past with school staff and other adults, trust did not come easy. Hence, program staff had to be patient as they tried to get students to confide some of this personal information.

All programs conducted an initial assessment, and some continued to closely monitor and assess students' needs.

All of the programs sought to learn about students' backgrounds and personal issues when they applied and during the initial orientation process. Some programs sought to obtain more detailed information about new participants' personal problems than did others. For example, three programs conducted fairly detailed initial assessments that covered students' backgrounds, interests, living situations, relationships with their parents, mental health and substance abuse issues, contacts with the juvenile justice system, and employment and economic needs. In contrast, the other programs' initial assessments focused on a narrower set of issues, particularly students' skills, goals, and any serious learning problems.

Regardless of the range of issues discussed in these initial assessments, most programs found that it was difficult to uncover personal problems in these early assessments. Students rarely confided serious problems to staff this early in the process. Moreover, when they did mention a problem, it was difficult for staff to gauge how serious it was.

Because of these difficulties, all of the programs monitored students' behavior and continued to try to identify personal problems throughout the time students were in the program. Some programs conducted formal reassessments, but the frequency and form of these reassessments varied. Open Meadow's high school programs and CUNY Prep's GED program sought to monitor students closely by requiring them to meet regularly with counselors either individually or in a group. Open Meadow required students to meet at least twice a week with their assigned counselor in a group setting and at least three times a year individually, allowing the counselor to keep tabs on each student's problems and issues as they developed. Cypress Hills GED program required each student to meet one-on-one with a counselor every two weeks.

The other three programs did not require meetings with counselors but sought instead to monitor students by tracking attendance and asking teachers to report behavior problems or other issues. When problems emerged in class, teachers referred students to counselors. Students also could voluntarily approach counselors for help. Although we were unable to discern whether these less formal monitoring systems were effective in identifying students' problems, they clearly relied heavily on informal communications among staff and students rather than any formal reassessment procedures.

Regardless of whether students were required to meet regularly with counselors, most programs relied on teachers to some extent to share information about students' behavior problems and attendance with counselors. Even programs that required students to meet periodically with counselors often identified some serious personal problems only when teachers mentioned that a particular student's attendance or performance in class had declined or the student's behavior suggested a serious problem. A key challenge was making sure that information about students' attendance and performance was conveyed quickly to counselors or other staff. Because teachers were busy and had no regular meetings with counselors, they had to take the time to mention emerging problems in order to address them in a timely way.

Although all of the programs reported that some students left prematurely because of personal problems, they had difficulty documenting the extent to which specific problems contributed to student attrition. Next Step GED program, a program with substantial turnover, reported that more than a third of those leaving the program in 2004–05 did so because of a serious personal problem (such as having a child, developing a serious mental health or substance abuse problem, or becoming incarcerated).⁶ However, the program did not have detailed data on the specific problems experienced by each student who left. Moreover, Next Step stopped collecting any information on the reasons students left the program in the subsequent school year because it was costly and difficult to do so.⁷ Although individual staff members in various

⁶Most of the rest changed schools or moved.

⁷Similarly, CUNY Prep, which also experienced substantial student turnover, classified the reasons for most exits, but these data suggest that about 90 percent of those leaving did so because of poor attendance and the school's records do not provide information on the reasons for the poor attendance.

Most programs provided moral support and advice, which students appeared to appreciate.

Students often forged close relationships with at least one adult, though not always counselors.

Programs tried with mixed success to refer students to other services when appropriate.

programs had a sense of why particular students left, the lack of more systematic information made it harder for programs to refine their strategies for identifying and addressing participants' personal issues.

Providing Moral Support and Advice

One of the main ways that program staff attempted to address personal issues was to discuss these issues with individual students and provide some emotional support or advice. In addition to trying to resolve some personal problems, staff sought to make students feel better about themselves. This counseling also was designed to reinforce the personal ties between participants and staff as well as participants' overall attachment to the program.

Both counselors and teachers provided moral support and advice to students. In theory, the primary responsibility for discussing personal problems lay with counselors. Counselors reported discussing a variety of issues with students, including both practical issues such as how to resolve needs for child care or short-term employment, as well as more difficult issues, such as how to deal with conflicts with parents and friends, pregnancy, or substance abuse. However, students who participated in our focus groups reported that they often discussed personal issues with not only counselors but also their teachers. Teachers were well positioned to provide informal counseling, because they saw students more often than other staff and many had a substantial amount of experience working with disadvantaged youths.

The site visit interviews suggested that many students trusted some staff members and valued the emotional support they provided. Most students participating in focus groups said they had developed a positive relationship with one or more staff members. They said that they viewed the staff as much more sympathetic than the teachers and staff in their previous schools and that this was one of the main reasons they found the program attractive. Because the focus group participants were not a random sample of all participants, it is impossible to discern whether these positive views were representative. Nonetheless, these reports suggest that some students felt positively about program staff and that these relationships did reinforce their overall attachment to the program.

Referring Students with Serious Problems to Service Providers

Program staff provided emotional support and a stable adult relationship for students, but they could not provide "therapy." Only one program had social workers available to students through a partner organization, and counselors at that program suggested that they did not have time to address serious psychological problems. Another program had two social workers for a brief time, but funding cuts forced the program to eliminate the positions. The programs did not have the resources to provide intensive psychotherapy to students with serious emotional problems or substance abuse issues. Hence, program staff referred students with these problems to local service providers, though those referrals were not always successful.

Referring students to other service providers and getting them to make use of these services was challenging. Students with serious substance abuse or mental health issues often refused to go to any service provider. Sometimes students reported that they had difficulty accessing services, but it was hard for program staff to discern the nature of the problem. Confidentiality issues

To address student personal issues, programs need sufficient staff and solid relationships with service providers.

may have limited the amount of information service providers could give to program staff. Whatever the reason, communications between the program and local social service providers appeared to be fairly limited.

Implications and Questions

Past studies suggest that programs serving disadvantaged youths may need to monitor their behavior closely and address personal issues in a timely fashion (Larson and Rumberger 1995; Sinclair et al. 2003).⁸ Close monitoring of at-risk students has been shown to be important in reducing the likelihood that high school students will drop out. Most rigorous research on this issue has focused on programs serving students before they drop out, so no definitive evidence exists relating to whether and how programs serving dropouts should address participants' personal issues. Nonetheless, students who have dropped out probably have problems that are at least as serious as those of at-risk students who have not yet dropped out. Hence, it makes sense for dropout recovery programs to try to identify and address their students' personal problems.

Although identifying and addressing personal issues may be important, they require staff with adequate time and relevant skills. Staff members need to meet regularly with individual students to discuss how they are faring; when problems are identified, staff will need to take the time to deal with them and follow up if necessary. Monitoring attendance and problem behaviors in class requires good record keeping and some coordination among staff. Some specialized skills are needed to establish trust with youths who have had problematic relationships with parents and teachers. Most teachers would need additional training in how to counsel youths and refer those with serious problems to service providers. Ideally, most program staff, including both teachers and counselors, would possess these skills, expanding students' opportunities to discuss difficult problems.

Even in programs that monitor students closely and provide useful personal advice, addressing the needs of students with serious problems is challenging and requires effective partnerships with service providers. The case study programs could not afford to retain the specialized professionals needed to address serious emotional problems or substance abuse issues directly. In addition, staff members noted they had difficulty referring students to other service providers, partly because students were reluctant to make use of these providers but also because they had difficulty communicating with these providers. One option may be to house programs in multiservice agencies to facilitate the referral process and make follow-up easier. Alternatively, programs may need to forge closer relationships with local service providers to facilitate referrals and follow-up.

⁸ For a review of this literature see the What Works Clearinghouse report summarizing evaluations of dropout prevention interventions at: http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/do_tr_09_23_08.pdf.

VI. Helping Students Get Into Postsecondary Education and Jobs

Programs helped participants enroll in postsecondary programs and secure jobs, but program impacts and participants' long-term prospects remain uncertain.

Each of the case study programs sought to help students not only secure a high school credential but also define and pursue a career goal. To do so, programs sought to help students

- Define educational and career goals
- Prepare for what they want to do after leaving the program
- Make the transition from school to a postsecondary program, a job, or both

In this chapter, we review how programs performed each of these functions and discuss some of the issues students and staff faced. We also examine the extent to which programs were able to document participant outcomes, the mix of outcomes documented, and some implications for practitioners and policymakers.

Helping Students Define Educational and Career Goals

Defining a goal can both motivate and provide direction. Staff members at all of the programs noted that most students entered their programs with few specific goals and relatively little confidence that they could pursue a meaningful career. This negative attitude was sometimes reinforced by their past difficulties in school and by the critical views of family and friends. Staff suggested that students had few positive role models. A student at one program summed it up succinctly: “People like me don’t go to college.” Staff members at another program noted that students frequently came to them with a certain aimlessness and only a vague feeling that obtaining a GED might help them get a better job—or any job, for that matter.

In response, most of the programs tried to help students develop more positive self-images and more specific and ambitious goals. Program staff sought to help students identify their own strengths and interests, define specific career and educational objectives, and explore various postsecondary and employment options. The programs we visited took a variety of approaches to doing this. Two high school programs—Olive Harvey and Open Meadow—provided fairly intensive exploration activities as part of a required transition class. Although the activities were different in the two programs, both helped students explore career options and define goals. The other four programs provided less intensive initial exploration activities.

Two programs provided intensive exploration activities but emphasized somewhat different transition options.

At Olive Harvey, students explored careers, although mostly in the context of learning about the college education needed to pursue attractive jobs. Staff emphasized that a college education could expand students’ career options and help them earn higher salaries. Staff shared information on the array of college options, including two-year and four-year programs. The program organized tours of many college campuses, both in and out of state. Some students spent a week touring historically black colleges, and staff made sure students learned about many elements

of student life by including tours of dormitories, student centers, and the school cafeteria and by attending talent shows. These activities were designed to reinforce the idea that African-American youths (the largest percentage of that program's population) can go to college and thrive.

Open Meadow, in contrast, sought to help students explore college as well as other postsecondary education and training programs and near-term employment options. Initial exploration techniques in the first trimester of Open Meadow's two-trimester course included writing an autobiography (which served the dual purposes of helping students understand themselves and of providing early drafts of college application essays), researching three possible careers in-depth, taking students to college fairs and career fairs, and defining tentative career goals and educational plans. During the second trimester, students began to pursue more actively a specific postsecondary option by either taking a college course or securing an internship or paid job that provided some relevant work experience and could inform students' career goals. The course instructor pointed out to students the benefits of a college education and also supported their decisions to enter the workforce after graduation if they clearly were not ready for college. The instructor encouraged those students who did take a job to continue to consider college and other postsecondary educational and training options as they clarified their goals.

The other four programs invested somewhat less time and effort in helping students explore options and define goals. Some programs required students to discuss career goals with counselors periodically. Others offered optional consultations with program staff and tours of some local postsecondary education and training programs.

Preparing for Postsecondary Education and Careers

Regardless of their goals, students had to develop the skills, knowledge, and other competencies needed to achieve those goals. All programs sought to prepare students for postsecondary education or training by providing appropriate academic instruction. Most programs developed core academic classes that emphasized skills needed for college, including reading, writing, math, research methods, and critical thinking. Generally, the college-focused programs spent somewhat more time on research methods and writing skills than did the other programs. In addition, three programs used dual-enrollment as a strategy for preparing students for postsecondary education and careers.

Programs offered two types of dual-enrollment college classes. Each type provided a somewhat different form of preparation for college. Two of the high school programs, Open Meadow and Olive Harvey, allowed students to select from a broad menu of regular college courses in a local community college. Students were placed in those classes alongside regular community college students, and program staff regularly monitored their progress. This method was intended to give students a sense of the expectations and type of work involved in college classes and to acclimate them to the college environment. This experience may have helped prepare students both intellectually and psychologically to pursue a college degree.

In contrast, CUNY Prep—a GED program—developed special college-level courses just for the students enrolled in the GED program. The university chose to create separate college classes in part because participants had not yet passed the remedial tests required to take regular CUNY courses. In addition, the program was able to get course instructors to focus on the specific

To prepare students for college, three programs had dual-enrollment options.

Most programs prepared students for general employment rather than for specific occupations.

academic, study, and research skills that many of the participants lacked. A potential downside of this approach was that it may not have given students an “authentic” college experience, perhaps making it harder for some to get a sense of, and acclimate to, the college environment. However, staff was able to monitor students closely and ensure that the curriculum addressed their academic needs.

In addition to helping some or all of their students prepare for college, programs also sought to help students develop some skills valued in the labor market. To do this, most programs focused on developing general employment skills rather than skills needed in specific occupations. Two programs required students to take a class in which they learned about employers’ expectations, proper workplace etiquette and dress, resume writing, and job interview techniques. In addition, all programs rewarded students who were punctual and displayed good work habits.

The decision to focus on general employability skills appears to reflect two considerations. First, these skills were valuable regardless of students’ chosen career or educational path. For example, even though most of Olive Harvey’s program focused on preparing students for college, it also required students to take a job readiness class. Staff discouraged students from working while they were in the program but recognized that all students needed to prepare for the labor market and most students would need to support themselves while they attended college. Second, because of their modest sizes, programs had difficulty offering students many occupationally focused training options.

One program did offer some occupationally focused training through other training providers, although this posed some coordination challenges. Cypress Hills GED program referred students interested in preparing for specific occupations—including carpentry, nursing, and security—to various training programs offered by partner organizations. In these cases students had to either complete their GED or move to the GED class offered by the training provider. Cypress Hills’ counselors attempted to continue to meet with students to provide some personal support while they were in training. However, this required coordination with both the student and the training provider and was not always feasible.

Making the Transition to Postsecondary Programs and Jobs

The first time a young person applies to a postsecondary program or for a full-time job, it can be daunting. The challenge is even greater for those without a support system. Applying to college can be particularly difficult unless one has help from family or friends who are familiar with the process and can provide some guidance.

Three programs offered a great deal of help walking students through the college application process. As part of its transition course, Olive Harvey high school required students to sign up for college admissions tests, complete at least one college application, and fill out financial aid forms. The program also provided ACT tutoring for students interested in applying to four-year college programs. CUNY Prep GED program and Open Meadow’s high school programs provided similar assistance. CUNY Prep required students to take a course that included completing college applications. For Open Meadow’s required transition course, students were expected to either apply to college or secure an internship or job.

Staff walked student through the college application process.

Programs provided job search tips, placed students in internships, and referred some to specific positions.

The other three programs offered students similar assistance through counselors, but it was voluntary; in practice, few students seem to have taken advantage of it. Counselors helped some students with college applications and financial aid forms and sometimes took students for informational interviews. However, students had to articulate some interest in applying to college to obtain this assistance.

The broad-goal programs helped students find jobs generally by providing tips on job search techniques and referrals to some specific jobs or internships. By contrast, the two college-focused programs—Olive Harvey high school and CUNY Prep GED program—did not provide any job search assistance, in part because they viewed jobs as a distraction from academics. Staff in the broad-goal programs helped students complete job applications, write resumes, conduct mock interviews, and identify job openings. Open Meadow provided the most job search assistance, referring many students to internships and some to full-time jobs. However, Open Meadow staff reported that internships rarely led directly to full-time jobs with the same employer.

Students' Post-Program Outcomes

The extent to which students achieve specific outcomes may influence the way programs are perceived by partners and other key stakeholders, including postsecondary education officials, employers, funders, and the students themselves. Given the growing emphasis funders place on outcome-based performance measurement, programs achieving impressive average outcomes are likely to find it easier to mobilize financial support. Programs will also likely have more success with informal word-of-mouth outreach efforts if students know graduates with positive outcomes.

Even though outcomes are not the same as program impacts, they can shed some light on whether programs are helping students enroll in college and obtain a job. By “impacts,” we mean the difference between students’ average outcomes and what they would have achieved in the absence of the program. The extent to which students achieve positive outcomes places an upper bound on the size of program impacts. For example, if few students achieve a specific outcome, then the program cannot have had a substantial positive impact on that outcome.

One must be cautious in comparing the outcomes of the case study programs for at least two reasons. First, the programs served different populations of students. Hence, the programs with the most impressive outcomes may not be the most effective. Programs’ applicant selection processes no doubt had some influence on participants’ interim and post-program outcomes, including how long they remained in the program and the extent to which they earned a high school credential. Second, the near-term outcomes are not necessarily indicative of students’ longer-term outcomes. Students who left a program without enrolling in college may have enrolled at a later time. None of the programs were able to track students’ long-term outcomes in a comprehensive way.

Two of the high school programs—one college-focused and one with broader goals—had the highest percentages of graduates going on to college.

While those leaving some programs appear to have higher employment rates, this may be due to better tracking.

The two high school programs that screened applicants carefully appear also to have the largest percentage of graduates entering college (Table VI.1). Olive Harvey, the only college-focused high school program, had the largest percentage of participants who enrolled in college after leaving the program (approximately 29 percent). Open Meadow, a broad-goal high school program, also had a relatively high percentage of students enrolling in college; among those exiting the project-based CRUE part of Open Meadow, about 26 percent enrolled in college, as did about 15 percent of those exiting Open Meadow high school. Although it is not possible to discern whether these two programs actually had positive impacts on students' college enrollment, it is worth noting that Olive Harvey and Open Meadow shared a number of key features that may have helped students prepare for and enroll in college. Specifically, each provided relatively intensive career and educational exploration opportunities, dual enrollment in regular college classes in which students had an “authentic” college experience, and considerable assistance in applying to colleges.

Regardless of whether these programs had a positive impact on the extent to which students enrolled in college, there is still the question of what effect—if any—they had on the number of students who persisted in college programs beyond any required remedial courses and who used skills learned in college classes and any certificates or degrees in the labor market. CUNY Prep was the only program that collected data on graduates' persistence in college. This program discovered that among those graduates enrolling in college, about one-quarter remained enrolled about 18 months later. Although the program did not collect systematic information on the obstacles students confront, university staff suggested that some graduates (as well as some similar students from disadvantaged backgrounds) reported a variety of hurdles, including difficulty juggling jobs and college courses and finding remedial courses difficult or boring. The university is now exploring ways to help students reschedule classes so they are compatible with their jobs and redesign remedial courses to make them more engaging and relevant to the college courses students are taking.

It is even harder to interpret the programs' data on employment outcomes because of the varying amount of effort program staff devoted to identifying and documenting students' employment status. The percentage of students who appeared to have secured jobs was much higher for some programs than for others, but these differences may reflect the extent to which staff closely monitored and documented students' employment after they left the program. Open Meadow, the program with the largest percentage of students reportedly securing jobs, was able to secure detailed information on most students' employment status. Other programs were less successful in obtaining this information, so those programs' employment outcomes may be artificially depressed.

In all of the programs, even those that provide job search assistance, staff reported that most students found their own positions rather than relying on the program for a job referral. The three programs that tracked students' occupations found that most of the jobs appear to be typical of positions obtained by teenagers—for example, in retail establishments or restaurants. This suggests that the programs may not have a large effect on the types of jobs students obtain in the short term.

Table VI.1
Program Outcomes by Site

Program	Percentage of Students Achieving Outcome				Sample Size	Program Year
	Earned GED or High School Diploma	Postprogram Enrollment		Employed When Left Program		
		College	Training			
Olive Harvey High School	42	29	n.a.	n.a.	100	2005–06
CUNY Prep GED Program ^a	34	14	n.a.	n.a.	295	2005–06
Open Meadow CRUE High School	52	26	n.a.	58	65	2005–06
Open Meadow High School	50	15	n.a.	87	70	2005–06
Cypress Hills GED Program	20	2	13	25	178	2006–07
Next Step GED Program	28	9	n.a.	46	43	2004–05
ACYR Center for Excellence GED Program	25	5 ^b	n.a.	22 ^c	168	2005–06
ACYR Center for Excellence High School	6	1	n.a.	n.a.	144	2005–06

Note: With the exception of sites indicated, percentages represent students who achieved these outcomes out of all students who *left the program* in a program year.

^aInstead of focusing on the sample of students who left the program, CUNY Prep percentages represent students who achieved these outcomes out of all students who *entered the program* between fall 2005 and spring 2006. However, the measures above are based on follow-up conducted after all of these students left the program.

^bACYR's GED program did not distinguish between college and other training enrollment.

^cACYR's GED program provided the percentage of participants employed at some point during the program, rather than the percentage employed when they left the program.

n.a. = not available.

At Cypress Hills, however, some of the students enrolling in the construction-training program that was managed by a partner organization did secure higher-paying construction jobs with help from the training program staff. These jobs typically paid at least \$10 an hour and were apprenticeships that could lead to even higher-paying jobs. These positive employment outcomes highlight the potential benefit of some occupationally focused training programs for youths who do not enroll in any other postsecondary education.

Implications and Questions

Although this study was not designed to measure the impacts of the case study programs, the outcomes of some of the sites suggest that it may be feasible to help some dropouts enroll in college, highlighting the potential value of a more systematic evaluation of these program models. The college-enrollment rates were highest in two of the high school programs that shared some key features. They both offered students fairly intensive career and educational exploration, dual-enrollment opportunities, and considerable assistance in applying to college. A key question is whether those program components actually increased students' college enrollment

Student outcomes suggest a multipronged college preparation strategy may be promising.

College-focused programs may need to consider whether and how they are benefiting students who do not enroll or succeed in college.

Better follow-up data are needed for both evaluations and program improvement efforts.

beyond what it would have been in the absence of these programs. It is possible that because of the way these programs screened applicants, most students would have achieved these outcomes even if they had attended a GED or high school program that did not offer any of those program components. Assuming these programs did have a positive impact on college enrollment, it remains unclear which aspects of the intervention were most important.

Another question that emerges from this study is whether it is really useful for some programs to focus exclusively on college, as opposed to providing students with a broader array of options. None of the programs succeeded in placing a majority of entering students in college. Thus, managers of college-focused programs should consider how they are helping students who fail to enroll in college, as well as those who enroll but do not get past required remedial classes.

It is possible that focusing exclusively on college may benefit students who enroll in college but may have some negative consequences for those who do not. Staff at several programs noted that students come into their programs with an acute sense of having failed before. Failing one more time, even when pursuing an ambitious goal, might threaten their self-image and sense of confidence and discourage them from pursuing other ambitious goals. Alternatively, it is possible that encouraging students to pursue ambitious academic goals might have lasting benefits for nearly all students, even those who do not enroll or succeed in college. They may gain academic skills, develop a respect for learning, and decide to pursue other education and training or challenging jobs.

Better follow-up information on postsecondary and employment outcomes is needed to begin to gauge how graduates may be benefiting from programs and the types of obstacles they face. To assess whether programs are achieving their stated objectives of helping students enroll and succeed in postsecondary programs and attain jobs, data are needed on credits, certificates or degrees, and earnings. Just as valuable would be information on the reasons some students do not succeed in postsecondary programs or jobs. Getting this information, however, will not be easy. Students move, lose interest in their former schools, and are understandably reluctant to complete questionnaires or detailed telephone surveys. Programs or program evaluations will need sufficient resources to obtain high-quality outcome data.

VII. Issues and Questions

The case study findings point to a number of issues for policymakers and practitioners to consider as well as some questions that could be explored in future studies.

Issues for Policymakers and Practitioners

As policymakers, foundations, and program managers seek to enhance dropout recovery programs, they should consider ways to address three key challenges: (1) providing most dropouts with access to some dropout recovery program; (2) addressing participants' diverse academic needs, personal issues, and goals; and (3) determining how program graduates are faring in postsecondary programs and jobs.

Providing Access to Dropout Recovery Programs. Programs need to strike a balance between being sufficiently selective so that they maintain their integrity while also being sufficiently open to adequately serve as many disadvantaged youths as possible. One option is to try to create a “portfolio” of programs with varying goals and admissions standards so that most disadvantaged youths, regardless of their skill levels in any given area, can be served. Each of these programs would admit and retain a different mix of students depending on its goals.

Another option is to create programs with tiers, similar to those in the Next Step and Cypress Hills programs. Those participants with the lowest skill levels can be admitted to the lower tiers and can progress to higher tiers if their skills and performance surpass a critical threshold. This option carries the potential advantage of allowing participants to switch easily among the parts of a program, so that they may advance without the interruption of switching to a different program.

Addressing Participants' Diverse Needs. Even the case study programs that had academic admissions requirements ended up serving students with diverse academic and personal needs, necessitating an individualized approach that seemed to work best when class sizes were small. Teachers needed time to address each student's academic needs and learning style. Addressing students' personal issues also required staff who could closely monitor students' behavior, discuss their problems, and form a personal connection.

Various partners have the potential to enhance dropout recovery programs, but program staff must commit time to cultivating and maintaining partnerships. Colleges can help programs create dual-enrollment programs and provide advice on the skills students need to succeed in college. Community-based organizations can help programs with outreach and service referrals. Employers can offer internships and entry-level training. Forging and maintaining relationships with partner organizations requires staff who are skilled in negotiating and providing careful followup. Staff also needs to ensure that students referred to the partner are well behaved and perform adequately.

Can programs serve the most disadvantaged dropouts while offering appropriate opportunities to those with more skills?

Providing appropriate instruction, services, and meaningful postsecondary opportunities may be costly.

The prospects of program graduates remain uncertain.

Both funders and program managers need to consider the costs of these activities. Staff-student ratios are likely to determine the extent to which staff can perform these functions effectively. If resources are severely constrained, then programs need to modify their target population, their objectives, or both.

Documenting Post-Program Outcomes. Data from two of the case study programs suggest that it may be feasible to help some dropouts enroll in college. The college enrollment rates were highest at Olive Harvey and Open Meadow, high school programs that provided fairly intensive career and educational exploration, dual-enrollment opportunities, and considerable assistance in applying to colleges. It remains unclear whether these program features are responsible for participants' relatively high college enrollment rates or whether these outcomes simply reflect the way the program screened applicants. It is also unclear how many of the students who enrolled in college succeeded in accumulating college credits and secured some certificate or degree valued in the labor market.

Both programs and funders need better information on students' post-program experiences to support program improvement. Programs could benefit from detailed information on the types of obstacles students confront in the labor market and in their postsecondary programs. It may be helpful to gauge the extent to which participants are making use of the skills they acquired in the programs. Both kinds of information could help staff modify the curricula, career guidance, and the forms of personal support offered to students.

Questions that Can Be Addressed in Future Research

This study shed light on some of the issues program staff and students face in selected dropout recovery programs. Some of these issues point to questions that could be addressed in future studies. Here, we identify three questions pertaining to (1) the costs of program implementation, (2) participants' long-term outcomes, and (3) program impacts.

How much do dropout recovery programs cost?

More detailed information about the factors driving costs could be helpful to both program staff and funders. The case studies suggested that some programs incur substantial costs to achieve various operational objectives, such as individualizing instruction, monitoring students closely, providing support, and offering meaningful internships. More specific information on program costs for each of these activities could help programs plan and allow funders to gauge whether funding requests are reasonable.

What are the accomplishments and issues faced by the graduates of dropout recovery programs?

Even if program staff try to obtain better post-program outcome data, it is unlikely that most programs will be able to follow participants for more than a few months after they leave. As noted earlier, programs and funders would benefit from more detailed information on how participants fare in postsecondary programs and jobs. Moreover, it would be useful to gauge which groups of students fare better. Longitudinal surveys could help identify the factors that predict whether participants will encounter various obstacles and allow programs to refine the way they target specific types of instruction and services.

What are the impacts of dropout recovery programs on participants, and which program features improve participant outcomes?

The most important policy questions are whether and how programs can improve student outcomes. Rigorous impact studies are needed to address this question. Experimental or good quasi-experimental studies can determine how dropout recovery programs affect students' post-secondary education and employment outcomes. Ideally, these studies would also be designed to discern which specific program features are effective.

One key issue is which types of interventions should be tested and compared. Contrasting outcomes of two programs that differ on multiple dimensions may not be helpful, because this may not permit researchers to isolate the extent to which a single program feature contributes to the differences in average outcomes. Similarly, it is best to compare programs serving the same population to ensure that the differences in average outcomes are attributable to the differences in the program interventions rather than to differences in the backgrounds of the participants.

Experiments could randomly assign students to two dropout recovery interventions that differ on only one key dimension. For example, participants could be randomly assigned to either a program that offers counseling and social services or a program that does not. Alternatively, the key differences among the interventions could be: whether program staff provide individualized instruction, dual-enrollment classes in a college, or occupational training and high-quality internships. Testing the value of specific program features could enable policymakers to enhance dropout recovery programs and help disadvantaged youths succeed. Ideally, it would be useful if the study examined not only the incremental benefits of a specific program feature but also its incremental costs. Rigorous study designs such as these could help policymakers enhance dropout recovery programs and help disadvantaged youths succeed.

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