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Career Pathways

PATHWAY EVALUATOR TOOLS TEST FITNESS OF PROGRAM NETWORKS

A step-by-step process used by Texas and Washington state is offered as a way to evaluate the effectiveness of roads to occupations by the National Skills Coalition.

“Pathway evaluator tools answer questions policymakers have about how their state’s array of skills programs help a diversity of students and workers earn credentials and get jobs,” explains a new NSC report. “These questions include: Do people with different needs have sufficient access to appropriate programs? What pathways achieve the best employment and earnings outcomes for which groups of people?”

The authors go on to state that although the term is “pathway evaluator,” the approach “informed” Evergreen State officials’ setup of the celebrated Integrated-Basic Education and Skills Training program and helped later develop a grant program. Similarly, the Texas Workforce Commission has been working with the University of Texas at Austin’s Ray Marshall Center to develop PEs to figure out the various education and training paths for high school students after graduation, as well as to assess their employment and earnings outcomes.

The authors, Christopher King and Heath Prince, respectively senior research scientist and lecturer and director and research scientist at the Marshall Center, and Bryan Wilson and Brooke DeRenzis, respectively state policy director and state policy analyst at NSC, offer the interested state policy planner a quick overview of how to roll your own PE, so to speak.

The authors emphasize that the complexity of doing this is related to the layers of information involved. The people served can be as varied as youths seeking a first rung on a career ladder, welfare clients trying out second chance opportunities and unemployed adults in various circumstances who need to start a new career to get reemployed. Then there’s the variety of programs and services involved — case management, counseling, job search assistance, support services and funding for training from workforce development, skills training from community and technical colleges, and basic skills from

other adult education venues. Third, there are the different nomenclature and forms of tallying what each system considers an optimal result for each particular individual.

This is why linking education, training, public benefit and labor market data is the first step when it comes to being able to assess the results of pathways. They describe two methods: batch (or a quick bundling of data at a specific time) and longitudinal (or streaming data that follow processes and participants over time).

“The batch mode is technically simpler to establish than a longitudinally-linked data system, but it is somewhat cumbersome since it requires inter-agency requests, manual steps, and perhaps new or modified data sharing agreements in order for new batches of records to be linked,” the authors state.

Alternatively, states can tap federal State Longitudinal Data System and Workforce Data Quality Initiative grants to run privacy-protected systems that can follow “individuals’ cross-program participation in education, training, and social service programs over several years.”

Washington’s I-BEST showed that adult education’s labor market outcomes were in need of improvement but that community colleges were doing quite well. So policymakers wondered, “Did a pathway that combined adult education with college-level training produce better labor market outcomes for adults with low literacy and numeracy skills than adult education alone?”

The state combined adult education data and information from the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges with employment services and unemployment insurance data.

“Leak” Spotted

“Researchers discovered that individuals who participated in the adult education/college-level training pathway had better employment and earnings net impacts, which were similar to training participants who had not been adult education students. However, the pathway evaluator also showed that only a small portion of the adult education population followed the adult education/college-level training pathway,” the authors recount. “In short, the pathway evaluator showed there was a pathway that could be successful for adults with low basic skills,

but most individuals ‘leaked out’ of the system instead of following that pathway.”

Texas followed a similar development focused on high school graduates, combining data — thanks to a WDQI grant, from TWC — the Lone Star State’s Education Research Centers and a research sampling of graduates undertaken by the Marshall Center.

“The researchers found that students who followed the traditional college pathway were overwhelmingly more likely to persist in postsecondary education than those who delayed college enrollment,” the report states. “Based on this finding, policymakers could explore ways to help more high school students enroll in postsecondary education immediately following graduation.”

The next step in PEs are interactive and Web based, allowing officials to make queries and obtain answers on a variety of issues that arise in the process of clearing and maintaining paths through edu-

cation to labor market success. The authors describe these as “state of the art” and “just coming online.” The report features screen snapshots of a Texas example.

For officials just getting started, the authors propose three steps:

- First, decide how you will use the tools.
- Second, pick the system and policies involved.
- Third, assess the state’s capacity to generate an interactive online system.

✓ *Who Is Being Served Well? Using Pathway Evaluators for State Workforce Planning* by Christopher King, Heath Prince, Bryan Wilson and Brooke DeRenzis is available from the National Skills Coalition, 1730 Rhode Island Avenue N.W., Suite 712, Washington, D.C. 20036; (202) 223-8991; www.nationalskillscoalition.org.

—Cecilio Morales

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