CSW
CORPORATION FOR A
SKILLED WORKFORCE

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Make Decisions With Us, Not About Us

Findings and Recommendations from the Worker-Centered Benchmarking Project

About Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW)

CSW is a national workforce policy and systems change nonprofit that partners with government, business, and community leaders to develop good jobs and the skilled workers to fill them. Since 1991, CSW has provided high impact strategic planning, program development, and evaluation assistance to state, regional, and local partners. We catalyze change in educational and labor market systems, policies, and practices to increase economic mobility, particularly for people of color and others historically excluded from success.

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Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Introduction

Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW) is the operator of the Workforce Benchmarking Network (WBN) National Survey, which houses the largest national dataset of aggregate information on program participants, services, and results. The WBN National Survey enables organizations to benchmark their own program outcomes against similar organizations, for learning and program improvement. It was built gathering input from hundreds of workforce development practitioners and funders from across the country on the data measures and outcomes these organizations both tracked and felt were important for measuring impact. Examples of metrics contained in the WBN National Survey include program completion, credential attainment rates, job placement, wage, and health benefit data, alongside financial security outcomes like net income and credit score increases. All data points are disaggregated by race, ethnicity and gender, allowing WBN National Survey users to identify and compare how different populations are accessing and experiencing program services.

The WBN National Survey is a powerful tool that helps organizations understand the progress participants make towards economic mobility by measuring program outcomes largely in the context of employment, wages, and certificate attainment. We recognize, however, that an important perspective and voice was missing at the table when determining what measures to include in the WBN National Survey: job seekers and workforce program participants. Do job seekers and participants view program success in the same way as workforce organizations and funders?

To that end, CSW conceptualized the Worker-Centered Benchmarking Project (WCBP) using a participatory action research approach[1] to answer three primary research questions:

1	**How do we know if programs are achieving their intended impact within the communities where they operate?**
2	**How do we know what communities want from workforce programs?**
3	**How would participants of workforce programs define success?**

To answer these questions, CSW recruited eight workforce development participants from across the country to form an advisory council. The council was provided with the training and resources necessary to lead nine months of participatory research and disseminate the findings from this work. This report details the process and methodology CSW used to design the project, followed by the advisory council's key findings, participant-centered success metrics, and overarching recommendations.

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1   A research approach grounded in the philosophy that program participants are experts in their abilities, their assets, and their goals and should be included when developing and implementing program evaluations.

Advisory Council Recruitment

The advisory council was advertised as an opportunity for workforce program participants to rethink how program success is defined, develop new metrics reflective of this definition, and issue recommendations to providers and funders for incorporating key findings into everyday practice.

With input from frontline staff at direct service providers, CSW crafted draft language, an FAQ, and a short, user-friendly online application that could be shared. All communications emphasized the importance of an advisory council that reflects the diverse representation of workforce program participants and geographies. Furthermore, CSW communications highlighted a desire for advisory council membership with a diverse range of workforce program experiences.

In total, CSW received more than 100 requests for additional information and 49 applications for the advisory council. Between March and May of 2023, CSW conducted phone or video interviews with all eligible applicants. Interviews were designed to detail the advisory council project scope—including anticipated time commitments, associated activities, and a commitment to provide a $25.00 per hour stipend to advisory council members for all project activities.

CSW invited eight individuals to join the advisory council for its opening retreat.[2] Those selected to participate had mixed experiences in workforce development programs, with some completing programs and achieving their desired outcomes. Collectively, the advisory council represented programs ranging from six weeks to a year in length, and training that spanned culinary/hospitality, urban forestry, medical billing, and IT help desk work. None of the selected participants had ever conducted research or served in any formal leadership capacity.

Advisory Council Activation

The advisory council was launched through a three-day virtual retreat. The purpose of the opening retreat was to build relationships and foster community, while developing a foundational understanding of workforce development evaluation. The advisory council interviewed staff from foundations, community colleges, and community-based and national workforce non-profits, which provided them with insights into existing and potential workforce program metrics while affording them the opportunity to practice effective listening and questioning skills.

During the retreat's final day, the advisory council discussed qualitative workforce metrics with Yon Jimenez-Macuso and Galiana Fajardo, the team behind REDF's perceptual feedback research. The advisory council was inspired to discover that perceptual coupled with behavioral feedback is a powerful way to assess program outcomes in a way that centers participant experience and expertise. In the case of REDF's research, perceptual feedback and participant voice in an advisory council capacity aided the creation of better data collection tools, sharper data collection processes, and unique insights in the interpretation of results.

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2   Work-life challenges caused two advisory council members to drop from the project during or directly following the opening retreat.

Advisory Council Members

Marwa Berro ———————————————————
Location: Dearborn Heights, Michigan
Workforce Program: Culinary Arts

Samantha Francis
Location: Brooklyn, New York
Workforce Program: Medical Billing

Terrell Hemphill ———————————————
Location: Detroit, Michigan
Workforce Program: IT Support

Alijandrina Martinez
Location: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Workforce Program: Multiple workforce programs

Asher Robinson ——————————————————
Location: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Workforce Program: Urban Forestry

Diandra Sital
Location: Bronx, New York
Workforce Program: Multiple workforce programs

Focus Groups

The advisory council spent the remainder of June and July of 2023 working closely with CSW's research and evaluation team to develop interview and focus group protocols and workshop the 58 themes and interview questions identified by the members. Through planning sessions and mock focus groups, the advisory council narrowed the list of focus group questions to twelve.

The advisory council conducted fifteen focus groups with 52 workforce development participants and alumni between August and October of 2023. Focus groups were facilitated in English and Arabic; conducted both in-person at partner sites (to accommodate participants and alumni with technological limitations) and virtually. Focus groups were facilitated by two advisory council members; one who directed questions and a second who provided technical support and transcribed notes. When scheduling conflicts prevented two advisory council members from participating, CSW staff members provided technical support. All focus groups used the same advisory council-developed protocols, eight common questions.

The eight common questions developed by the advisory council were:

1. Why did you join a workforce program?

2. What are/were you looking for in a workforce program?

3. Did you enjoy your workforce program?

4. What best motivated (encouraged) you in the program?

5. Were you supported emotionally during the workforce program?

   a. If so, from whom? What supports were the most effective?

   b. If not, what support would you have liked to receive?

6. What obstacles did you face during the workforce program?

7. What does successful completion of a workforce program look like for you?

8. Please provide specific markers or achievements that you believe should be considered when assessing the success of a workforce program.

Once focus groups were conducted, advisory council members were given a three-week window to watch focus group recordings and transcribe themes; this ensured their familiarity with all focus group responses, and not just those they facilitated or supported themselves. Bi-weekly discussions throughout this process provided advisory council members with valuable qualitative data analysis experience and led to the development of an online survey, to test and validate the group's assumptions.

Online Survey

December 2023 through February 2024 was a period of great activity for the advisory council. They met weekly to convert the focus group themes into a digital survey for workforce program participants and alumni. This survey was distributed nationwide to CSW partners (including WBN member organizations), through social media, workforce funders, and intermediaries. The survey received 129 unique responses and 95 unique completions. Survey responses were concentrated in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and New York, and included individuals who had participated in programs in urban, suburban and rural settings.

Metric Formation

Across six meetings in January and February, the advisory council drew upon data collected through focus groups and the online survey to develop six new workforce development program metrics. To ensure an equitable process for new metric creation, each advisory council member developed six new metrics asynchronously over the course of seven days, identifying methods to measure each metric and questions to ask of workforce program participants. The council then met to iterate on the metrics and questions developed. The following metrics and recommendations were written entirely by the advisory council. Metrics and recommendations were developed based upon the advisory council's focus group and survey data.

RECOMMENDED METRIC #1

Participant's sense of safety and belonging in a workforce development program

WHY THIS METRIC SHOULD BE ADOPTED

Participant sense of safety and belonging is positively linked to outcomes of increased learning, better decision-making, and job retention.

- A feeling of safety and belonging fosters trust, engagement, and motivation.

- Participant sense of safety and belonging is a key motivating factor for participants to overcome barriers that might prevent workforce program completion.

- Focus group participants report being more likely to recommend a workforce program to their networks and to participate in alumni, mentorship, and community engagement activities if they felt a sense of safety and belonging.

METHODS TO COLLECT METRIC DATA

- Collect disaggregated participant survey data before, during, and after workforce program participation.

- Conduct focus groups facilitated by workforce program alumni.

- Conduct pulse surveys assessing safety, belonging, and inclusivity.

QUESTIONS TO ASK PARTICIPANTS

- To what degree do you feel seen and understood in your workforce program?

- To what extent do you feel welcomed at your workforce program after you graduate?

- Do you trust the staff in your workforce program?

- Do you feel supported by the staff at your workforce program?

RECOMMENDED METRIC #2

Participant's sense of safety and belonging in a job

WHY THIS METRIC SHOULD BE ADOPTED

- Focus group participants, particularly women and persons of color, expressed significant concerns entering industries that are white, male dominant, or where these participants have been historically plagued by harassment.

- Focus group participants who felt safe at work reported being more likely to retain employment, maintain a mindset of advancement, and progress along a career pathway.

Understanding participant sense of safety and belonging at work provides valuable information about the quality of work-based learning opportunities. This is especially important because safety at work is heavily linked with burnout, negative employee performance, and turnover.

METHODS TO COLLECT METRIC DATA

- Gather program alumni feedback through multiple mediums to increase participant comfort to provide candid responses.

- Conduct on-site visits to employer partners.

- Conduct focus groups with program alumni, particularly those participating in work-based learning opportunities.

QUESTIONS TO ASK PARTICIPANTS

- Do you feel respected at your job or work-based learning opportunity?

- To what extent do you feel physically and emotionally safe at work?

- Do you feel safe raising a workplace concern to your supervisor?

- Do you feel informed of your rights and protections at work?

RECOMMENDED METRIC #3

Change in participant self-confidence or self-esteem

WHY THIS METRIC SHOULD BE ADOPTED

- Building self-confidence and self-esteem are fundamental for personal and professional growth. They empower individuals to take on challenges, pursue opportunities, and succeed in their careers.

- By creating more confident participants you create more confident and effective ambassadors for your program.

Negative self-perception has been been shown to limit long-term social mobility. Participants in focus groups report being more likely to complete programs, gain and retain employment, and advocate for themselves with a positive shift in self-confidence.

METHODS TO COLLECT METRIC DATA

- Administer surveys before, during, and following program completion.

- Administer evidence-based perceptual feedback surveys such as the Employment Hope Scale or those developed by REDF.

- Conduct participant interviews with trained program peers rather than program staff. This removes a potential power dynamic, fosters a greater sense of trust with the facilitator, and allows

QUESTIONS TO ASK PARTICIPANTS

- Do you feel confident and prepared to participate in a professional interview?

- How confident do you feel in your abilities to perform the tasks required for your desired job?

- To what extent do you feel able and confident to be the authentic version of yourself in a professional setting?

RECOMMENDED METRIC #4

Growth in emotional intelligence and regulation or shift in mindset

WHY THIS METRIC SHOULD BE ADOPTED

- Positive shifts in emotional regulation allow participants to look beyond the now and toward long-term success.

- In focus groups, we heard extensively from participants who felt particularly triggered in the classroom and at work because of prior educational and labor market trauma. It was repeatedly recommended that programs measure changes in emotional intelligence and regulation or shift in mindset as a key predictor of long-term success.

METHODS TO COLLECT METRIC DATA

- Conduct qualitative interviews facilitated by peers or workforce program staff.

- Administer assessments of perceived employment barriers or "the shift from not possible to work to very possible to work."

- Conduct pre-program, mid-program, and post-program focus groups

QUESTIONS TO ASK PARTICIPANTS

- Have you noticed that you have a more positive mindset? If so, how does this affect your ability to learn or your reaction to performance feedback?

- Are you able to see things from someone else's perspective?

- How comfortable do you feel looking beyond the now toward future success?

- How confident do you feel in navigating workplace challenges and using them as opportunities to learn, grow, and improve?

RECOMMENDED METRIC #5

Career preparedness

WHY THIS METRIC SHOULD BE ADOPTED

- Our survey confirmed that most of the participants we spoke to prioritize skill training over job placement, while ranking credential attainment as the most important workforce program metric.

- A "clear career pathway/plan" was the second greatest determining factor for program completion based upon survey results. It trailed "work life balance."

- Preparedness directly reflects a program's ability to train and empower participants for employment.

- In focus groups, participants expressed a need to be informed and trained in a way that is relevant to the jobs they were going into, beyond the surface-level idea of being "job-ready."

METHODS TO COLLECT METRIC DATA

- Evaluate participants on their performance in simulated work environments.
- Collect employer-provided feedback on participant job preparedness.
- Assess in-program participant performance based on industry job expectations.

QUESTIONS TO ASK PARTICIPANTS

- How comfortable are you explaining your training to someone outside of your workforce program?
- How prepared do you feel for professional interviews after your workforce program?
- What percentage of what you learned in your workforce program training do you use in your job?

RECOMMENDED METRIC #6

Change in participant social capital

WHY THIS METRIC SHOULD BE ADOPTED

- In our survey of workforce participants and alumni, professional networks and relationships were prioritized over placement into a job.

- In focus groups, participants expressed the importance of networking. Often, networking transcends things that may have hindered participants such as lack of experience or a criminal record.

METHODS TO COLLECT METRIC DATA

- Administer pre-program and post-program surveys to participants and alumni to compare their relationships and networks.

- Conduct peer-led one-on-one interviews and focus groups.

QUESTIONS TO ASK PARTICIPANTS

- Has participation in your workforce program opened additional opportunities for you, either personally or professionally?

- Do you notice a change in the way that you communicate now versus before the program?

- How comfortable do you feel communicating your goals and interests to friends and family after the program, versus before and during?

Key Advisory Council Recommendations

| 1 | **Recommendation #1**
Treat workforce development participants as humans first, and learners second. |

One statement that stood out from the advisory council's fifteen focus groups was "we're all humans outside of work." Past educational and labor market traumas were discussed extensively during focus groups, regardless of the training type or location. "The participants we spoke to are accustomed to being treated poorly as they navigate underfunded public systems and in low-quality jobs that only care about production and profits," the advisory council writes.

Rather than viewing workforce programs solely as a benefit for participants, it is critical that workforce practitioners also recognize the sacrifices participants make to attend programs. As survey results revealed, "flexibility of programs/instructors" and "staff at the program that supported, understood me, and saw my potential" were the third and fourth most important drivers for program completion. The council advocates treating participants with grace, dignity, and respect, particularly when unanticipated obstacles and challenges arise which may be retraumatizing.

| 2 | **Recommendation #2**
Utilize individuals with shared experience to collect feedback. |

Repeatedly, focus group participants praised the focus group process for enlisting individuals who had experienced workforce programs firsthand as the focus group facilitators. Focus group participants noted that they felt more comfortable speaking with individuals who had recently been in similar situations. They also expressed a greater willingness to provide honest and authentic feedback about their program experiences. The advisory council writes, "There's an assumption that workforce development participants won't be professional enough to lead a productive focus group session. We on the advisory council believe it to be the other way around. If programs don't enlist individuals who have experienced programs, they will struggle to collect the kind of candid feedback that can be used to inform program improvements." The advisory council continues, "Training participants [to lead focus groups] is a quick and easy process and will buy workforce organizations instant credibility with the participants they serve and honest feedback that wouldn't be gleaned otherwise."

| 3 | **Recommendation #3**
Invest in trauma-informed and resiliency-building strategies |

Based upon findings from the survey and focus groups, the advisory council concluded that most participants who access workforce development programs have experienced past trauma. Frequently, these traumas are closely related to previous experiences in educational and work settings, making the risk of triggering trauma during a workforce program or work-based learning experience high.

This was particularly true of focus group participants who reported having a learning disability. The advisory council believes it invaluable for workforce development program staff to receive training to understand the brain science behind trauma and develop strategies to identify and support participants who have experienced trauma. Furthermore, workforce service providers should help participants better understand trauma as a key component of job readiness training and develop strategies to navigate future traumas, particularly those that may be triggered in a work setting.

4   **Recommendation #4**
Incorporate worker and learner voice in strategic decision making

As evidenced by the title of this report, *Making Decisions with Us, Not About Us*, there is significant interest amongst workforce development participants in accessing leadership opportunities, giving back, and actively helping to shape the workforce development system. The advisory council believes that workforce development participants are the most overlooked asset that the workforce system possesses and are often invited only to participate in the occasional survey or focus group, or are hired, when convenient, because it is cost-effective. The advisory council can think of no better designer, implementer, or evaluator of programs designed to increase economic opportunity than individuals who have experienced barriers to opportunity firsthand and are able to identify supports that will prove most impactful.

Next Steps

CSW is eager to provide opportunities for the advisory council to continue present their research, with speaking arrangements scheduled for the University of Michigan's Employment Equity Learning and Collaboration Collaborative (EELAC), the National Fund for Workforce Solutions' SHIFT conference, and the annual convening for the New York City Employment and Training Coalition in December 2024. Furthermore, CSW is committed to providing opportunities to leverage the advisory council's experience and expertise, where applicable, in regional or population-specific cohorts that employ the WCBP's participatory action research process.

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