

School, Work, and Waiting: The Activities of PACE Control Group Participants

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Overview

Evaluations of education and training programs often use an experimental design in which eligible program applicants are assigned at random to a treatment group that can access the program under study or a control group that cannot. In order to accurately interpret impact findings, it is important that evaluators capture the experiences of control group members. Of particular importance are learning whether control group members obtained training in absence of the program, whether they are working, and whether they experienced hardships. This brief describes the experiences of 39 members of the control group in the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) evaluation. PACE is an evaluation of nine career pathways programs. Although control group members could not enroll in the programs included in the study, they could access other education and training programs in their communities. This brief describes control group members' training and work experiences following enrollment in the PACE study. It does not make assumptions about what they would have done had they been assigned to the treatment group. In-depth interviews conducted six months after random assignment with these control group members indicate:

- Over 40 percent were enrolled in an education or training program, despite being unable to receive services through the program in PACE. Most reported that they were already enrolled in or were planning on enrolling in training prior to learning about the PACE program, and saw signing up for the PACE lottery as a low-risk activity.
- Although being assigned to the control group was disappointing, only a few reported they put their education plans on hold as a result.
- Many faced financial challenges, describing their finances as "tight" and reporting that they cut back on expenses while in school. However, none viewed their financial circumstances as a barrier to completing their education.

Introduction

Career pathways programs are a relatively new approach to providing education and training by designing a series of manageable steps leading to successively higher credentials and employment opportunities in growing occupations. Each step is intended to prepare participants for the next level of employment and education and also to provide a credential with labor market value. Programs also attempt to address the target population's barriers to training enrollment and completion; the programs generally target low-income, low-skilled adults. These components include financial support, including paying tuition and assistance in

applying for grants and financial aid to obtain and continue education; a contextualized curriculum that relates directly to the occupation or to real-life experiences; and an array of academic and non-academic support services to help promote success (Fein 2012). The Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) evaluation uses a random assignment methodology to assess the impact of nine career pathways programs targeting low-income, low-skilled individuals on short-term (18 months post random assignment) education and other outcomes.



Applicants to the nine programs in PACE first enrolled in the PACE study and agreed to be randomly assigned to one of two groups: a group that could access the career pathways program (the treatment group) or one that could not access the program (the control group). Importantly, control group members could enroll in other training programs or services available in the community for which they were eligible. The alternate services available varied by PACE site. With a random assignment design, differences between the treatment and control groups that emerge over time can be attributed to the program and not some other factor. However, if control group members receive similar services, or if treatment group members do not engage in services, the study will have difficulty detecting impacts (see, for example, Hamilton and Scrivner 2012).

This brief is based on the first of two rounds of interviews with a sub-sample of PACE control group members. It describes what they were doing approximately six months after enrolling in the PACE study, their motivations for trying to enroll in the career pathways program being evaluated, and the types of challenges they faced in obtaining training or other services (the box labeled “methodology” provides additional detail on the study components). It is not intended to estimate what they would have done had they been assigned to the treatment group. From the study perspective, it is important to document the experiences of the control group because it can help shed light on impact findings (or lack thereof).

Methodology

Nine career pathways programs in 18 locations are part of the PACE evaluation. The research team conducted qualitative interviews with a sample of treatment and control study participants in all nine programs, although not at all locations. All interviews were conducted between February and November 2014. This brief includes findings from interviews pooled across programs, rather than those specific to individual programs.

Sample: The research team contacted a random sample of individuals in each program who enrolled in the PACE study in the previous six months. The research team aimed to interview participants within six months of their random assignment date.

Participation in the interviews was voluntary, and each participant received a \$40 gift card as a token of appreciation. The team scheduled a total of 146 interviews and completed 123 interviews, for a response rate of 84 percent. The number of individuals interviewed at each program ranged from eight at one program to a high of 32 interviews at another with multiple locations. Response rates by program ranged from 75 percent to 100 percent. This brief uses data from interviews with 84 treatment group members.

Interview format: Interviews were done in-person, sometimes in public spaces such as libraries or coffee shops or at the program site, and less frequently in the respondent's home. Interviews were semi-structured in nature, allowing the interviewer the flexibility to follow up on and further probe respondents' answers, but all interviews covered the same set of topics: respondents' family, educational, and career backgrounds; educational and career goals; challenges they had faced or expected to face in achieving those goals; reasons for wanting to enroll in the career pathways program; and their program experiences to date. Interviews on average lasted 50 minutes.

Data analysis: All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed into word processing documents, and imported into NVivo, a qualitative analysis software package. The lead author initially coded the interview transcripts based upon the major topics covered in the interview guide (e.g., memories of secondary schooling; career goals; reasons for wanting more education and training) as well as themes that emerged over the course of interviewing, such as participants' assessments of their own goals and the types of person they envisioned themselves to be. Text segments associated with certain broad categories were then further coded and analyzed using an inductive thematic approach (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell 2013).

Characteristics of Participants Interviewed

The majority of qualitative interview participants from the control group were in their late twenties or early thirties; about 30 percent were 35 or older, and 13 percent were under 21. Individuals of Hispanic origin (41 percent) and non-Hispanic African Americans (41 percent) comprised of the vast majority of control group interviewees. Non-Hispanic Whites were 8 percent of the control participants, and the rest identified as being another race. Just over one third were foreign born. Women comprised nearly three quarters of the respondents, and about 60 percent of control group respondents had children. Five percent did not have a high school diploma at the time of random assignment, while 46 percent had only a high school diploma or its equivalent. About 40 percent had some college, and 8 percent had already completed an Associate's degree or more. The characteristics of the control group sample were similar to those of the full in-depth interview sample.

Due to the small numbers in each site, qualitative interview respondents, although initially randomly selected from among participants in their enrollment cohort, are not representative of all control group members, nor were they intended to be. However, the demographics of the qualitative sample match fairly well with the overall PACE control group sample with some exceptions. The control group qualitative sample has fewer respondents under age 21 than the overall sample (13 percent versus 21 percent). More qualitative sample members reported their race/ethnicity as Non-Hispanic Black (41 percent versus 26 percent). As well, fewer reported having less than a high school diploma when they entered the study (five percent versus 11 percent).¹

Findings

The interviews focused on respondents' current involvement in education and training programs, employment status, how control group members learned about the program being evaluated in PACE, and any challenges they faced in their personal lives (or they anticipated facing) that could affect their ability to meet their goals.

Motivations for Trying to Enroll in a Career Pathways Program

Understanding how potential participants learn about and decide to enroll in career pathways programs can help program staff develop recruitment strategies. Control group members learned about career pathways programs through a number of sources. Word of mouth and knowing friends and family members who had previously participated in the program

¹ Source: PACE Basic Information Form administered to all study participants at study intake.

were the most commonly cited sources of information. Six participants said that they learned about the program when they were in the process of signing up for classes (such as General Education Development (GED), ESL, and community college courses), reinforcing that, in some sites, programs recruited among students already inclined to enroll in education and training courses. For these control group members, signing up for the PACE lottery was a very low-risk activity; if they were assigned to the treatment group, they would get additional services, if not, they would still be able to attend classes. A few control group members reported that they had been referred to the program from a different service provider (e.g., a Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF] caseworker).

Eight participants described the career opportunities offered by the program as the motivation for entering the lottery. These participants wanted training in skills like computer programming or nursing, and saw the program as the way to achieve their goals. Other interviewees cited specific objectives as their motivation, such as finding a job, obtaining a GED or a CNA credential.

Participation in Education and Training Among Control Group Members

Over 40 percent of control group members (17 of 39) were enrolled in an education or training program at the time of the interview. Most were already attending school or were enrolling in school when they learned about the career pathways program and decided to enroll in the PACE study. In some instances, they were already enrolled in a similar training (or the same one) and entered the lottery for the chance to receive supportive services or other program elements that accompanied the training. A smaller number in this group found and enrolled in other programs in their area when they learned they were not eligible to receive services through the program being evaluated for PACE. Three control group members reported that they had registered for other programs in the community, but had not started classes, while another three were enrolled in programs to obtain their GED certificate so that they would be able to start a training program in the near future. In sum, 23 of the 39 control group members interviewed (59 percent) were actively engaged in an educational activity, or about to start one.

Some were already planning to enroll in a training program before they learned about the PACE study. Several programs in PACE recruited community college students, so control group members in these sites were likely to continue with their planned course of study, regardless of whether or not they would be a part of the program under study. As one control group member said, "If I did not get into [the career pathways program], I would pick out another [program]." Depending on the site and their course of study, control group members could end up in the same classes as PACE treatment group members.

The types of programs control group members participated in varied, although in terms of subject matter, many were in a similar occupational area as the programs in PACE. Fields of study included nursing, paramedicine, and information technology.

These control group members were generally using federal financial aid (grants and student loans) to pay tuition and other education-related expenses. They were not eligible to receive other types of services such as help with tuition and transportation, and case management provided through the career pathways program but could look for these services elsewhere in the community.

While some did identify alternate training to attend, being assigned to the control group was a disappointment for some who were attending school. One woman was nearing the end of her Bachelor's degree program when she learned about the program in PACE. She viewed the program as a way to help her finance the remainder of her degree. She had been attending school on and off and mostly part-time for about a decade and had recently exhausted her eligibility for Pell grants. When she was assigned to the control group, she took out a loan for \$10,000 to pay her last year's tuition and living expenses. She was weeks away from graduation when interviewed and did not yet have a job. She remained positive, though, believing that she had trained for a job in high demand and would soon be hired.

Work, Unemployment, but No Training

Of the 22 not attending school, nine were working and 13 were unemployed. Those in the latter group had a working partner (five), were receiving some form of public cash assistance (two), or were living with others or with their parents who paid the bills (six).

Five control group members described being assigned to the control group as discouraging them from enrolling in a training program. One reported that she already had debt from a loan for a previous certificate program and did not want to take on more debt. When she was randomly assigned to the control group, she decided to put her education on hold. Another participant had been admitted into a nursing program, but was also worried about the potential cost, noting,

"I don't know [if I'll attend]. I honestly don't know now. It's a lot of money to invest. Most of it would not be funded for me. I can get a little bit of grant money, but I would have to take a huge student loan."

A third, when she was assigned to the control group said, "...it broke my heart. It did. It really did. I wanted to go so bad to start and do what I want to do." This woman wanted to enroll in a healthcare training program but without assistance from the career pathways program could not figure out what steps she needed to take.

However, one control group participant found a good-paying job shortly after he enrolled in the study. At the time he was interviewed, he was imagining a career with this company. He viewed this job as a real turning point, saying:

"[This job] has just changed my life completely. Ever since I got that job, it's just like everything else has just been falling into place. Before that job, I was a lost person I'll be honest, but now that I have this job, it's changed my life to be honest."

He was hoping that eventually he could work his way up to a management position with the firm. Acquiring more education was in his future, he said, but he imagined himself getting a credential while still working for the same company and having the company pay for school. Because of this job, his aspirations for the type of career and education he wanted changed to a field that was different from the one he sought through the career pathways program.

Financial Challenges Facing Control Group Members

Programs in the PACE study generally targeted low-income, low-skilled adults for enrollment. Thus, many potential participants were likely to qualify for federal financial aid and other loans to help them afford and attend school. However, some programs in PACE provided financial support to treatment group members that was not available to the control group (e.g., tuition assistance or free tuition, assistance with training-related expenses, emergency assistance). Reflecting their similar background characteristics, control group members described very similar financial challenges as participants who were in the treatment group (see Seefeldt et al. 2016).

Control group members most commonly used the word "tight" to describe their overall financial well-being. Control group members said that they could afford to pay their bills, but did not have much left over. As one woman said, "[I'm] meeting the basics but not a whole lot [more]." A few said that as a result of attending school, they had to dramatically cut back on their expenses. One, when asked if her financial situation changed because she went back to school, replied:

“Okay, well, the cell phones, they had to be removed. No Internet at home. No cable at home. Sometimes we would not even get a chance to watch not even the news because we had no TV. I mean, we had television, but no channels. What else? Well, many things like for instance before it was—because we have an AC unit. Sometimes, at night it was like, “You know what, we just have to use the fan instead of using the AC unit.” No weekends go out and eat, watch movies with the kids, all that I was not able to do anymore, or shopping or anything like that.”

A couple of control group members viewed their financial situation as quite dire. One woman, her husband, and adult daughter were living with her mother-in-law, all of them trying to manage financially off of the mother-in-law’s Social Security check.

More than half (21) of control group members were living with family members, typically one or both parents and perhaps siblings. However, aside from a few instances, such as the woman described above, it is not clear whether this living arrangement was due to financial constraints, cultural norms, the life course stage of the respondent, or some combination of two or three of these factors. For example, shared housing could reflect practices of certain immigrant groups, but multi-generational housing could also be a result of living in cities with high rents, such as the San Francisco Bay area or Chicago or simply not having moved out of the family home after turning 18.

Despite having tight finances, none of the control group members enrolled in education and training programs viewed their financial situation as impeding their ability to complete programs and reach their career goals. Several noted that as long as they were able to receive financial aid, they did not anticipate facing any difficulties.

Conclusions

Even though control group participants were not able to receive training and other services provided by the program in the PACE study, many were able to enroll in other programs. Some control group members had been in the process of enrolling in programs when they learned about the PACE study and decided to enter the lottery. They reported that being assigned to the control group did not change their plans. Control group members also reported financial challenges. However, many control group members had access to federal financial aid and other resources. On the other hand, a few members of the control group reported that they were not able to pursue training without the support of the PACE program.

Citations

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About This Series

This is one of five briefs that describe findings from in-depth interviews with Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) study participants. The goal of the qualitative sub-study is to gain a more comprehensive understanding of participants' motivation for wanting to enroll in a career pathways program, their likelihood of success, their experiences with program services, challenges they experienced to completing programs and supports that helped them succeed. This brief focuses on the experiences of control group members,

that is, those who enrolled in the study but were not randomly selected to receive services through one of the PACE programs. The first three briefs can be found at www.career-pathways.org, and at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/pathways-for-advancing-careers-and-education>

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