EMPLOYER POWER AND EMPLOYEE SKILLS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WORKFORCE TRAINING PRACTITIONERS AND FUNDERS

ISSUE BRIEF BY **SUZANNE KAHN** AND **AARON SOJOURNER** | DECEMBER 2021

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the Roosevelt Institute released *Employer Power and Employee Skills: Understanding Workforce Training Programs in the Context of Labor Market Power* by Suresh Naidu and Aaron Sojourner. The report called for workforce development practitioners to reconceptualize their work as playing an active role in shaping the balance of power between employers and workers.

Naidu and Sojourner argued that workforce training programs can most effectively narrow inequality by helping to institutionalize shifts in power toward workers. Yet funding strategies often lead these programs to place an organizational priority on serving employers, not trainees. This issue brief offers funders of workforce development programs and practitioners who oversee the day-to-day work of these programs strategies to prioritize worker empowerment as a programmatic goal.

Employer Power and Employee Skills argues that successful workforce training programs build worker power by both imparting new skills to participants and reducing labor market frictions—obstacles to finding new employment or maintaining existing employment—for job seekers. To that end, Naidu and Sojourner offer a number of broad-stroke recommendations for funders and practitioners to consider when investing in and building new workforce training programs. These recommendations include:

- Conditioning employer participation in training programs on commitments to certain wage scales and working conditions;
- Ensuring training programs have institutionalized and equitable governance representing workers (ideally these representatives hold power independent of the program that they can use to hold program administrators, employers, and other stakeholders accountable to commitments);
- Emphasizing training linked to opportunities at multiple employers, while accepting that this may reduce any particular employer's willingness to finance the training program; and

- Improving trainees' options by investing in wraparound services that reduce impediments to finding and maintaining employment while credit-constrained, including resources for transportation, childcare, criminal record expungement, health care, and food security, and in ongoing job-search assistance for trainees and graduates.

This issue brief begins with a description of the state-of-play for current investments in workforce development programs, highlighting programs that have been particularly successful at centering worker power in their design. It then turns to policy recommendations, first for workforce training programs, and second for funders of these programs. These recommendations point to a path, modeled on existing successful programs and practices, that practitioners and funders can use to move away from an employer-service model and toward one that actively seeks to rebalance power in the labor market.

THE STATE OF PLAY: NONPROFIT WORKFORCE TRAINING PROGRAMS TODAY

To support workforce development, a variety of philanthropies, including corporate, community, and independent foundations, invest in programs that vary tremendously in terms of focus and success. The Roosevelt Institute's recent work examined both sides of this equation, with Naidu and Sojourner's report surveying the successes and failures of different workforce training programs, and a 2021 investment scan by Suzanne Kahn and Anna N. Smith offering an accompanying landscape analysis of philanthropic investment.

In their landscape scan, Kahn and Smith used a data set collected from tax returns of the 1,000 largest philanthropies between 2007 and 2017 to consider who was investing in workforce development and how. Their analysis led to the following key conclusions:

- Workforce development grants vary considerably in size. In the 2017 data set, 25 percent of the grants were below $20,000 and 75 percent below $139,800. The median grant was $50,000; the largest was $34,383,971. Only 105 of the 4,134 individual workforce development grants were over $1 million.

- While the largest philanthropic investments in workforce development often went to programs with strong wraparound service components, the majority of grants were more narrowly focused on skills training.

- In 2017, workforce development grants did not demonstrate intentionality around addressing racial inequalities. In our data set, only 117 of the 1,881 grants with reported grant populations (or just over 6 percent of grants, and 10 percent of funds) targeted racial and ethnic minorities as a recipient group. Even more striking, of the 48 workforce development grants focused on research and evaluation, only one was specifically focused on ethnic and racial groups.

For their report, Naidu and Sojourner looked closely at randomized control trials of workforce investments and found a wide range of results, with the best results coming from the most resource intensive (and therefore necessarily often smallest) programs. For example, the results of the federal government's Job Corps program are largely disappointing. Job Corps trainees have higher earnings (12 percent higher) directly after completing training compared to a control group, but the effects are short-lived, with no detectable effects for the majority of trainees after four years (Schochet et al. 2008). One recent report using IRS administrative data found significant, long-term positive effects of Job Corps for the 20- to 24-year-old age group, but still concluded that the overall program effect was small and quickly faded for younger students (Schochet 2020). Similarly, experimental evaluations of training programs funded under the federal government's Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act and Adult Dislocated Worker Training Program concluded that they had little effect on earnings or employment 30 months later. In contrast, intensive job search assistance and case management funded through the program did increase earnings (Fortson et al. 2017).

In addition to offering intensive wraparound services, many training programs that reliably raise participant wages have an institutionalized focus on workers and include accountability to institutions beyond employers. Three examples of such programs are the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership, the California High Road Training Partnership, and Project QUEST. These programs exemplify different approaches to building powerful partnerships that can provide a counterweight to employer relationships and help move programs away from an employer-service model.

- **Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership:** The Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP) is a membership organization comprising businesses, organized labor, and workers in the manufacturing, construction, health, and commercial driving industries. Together, members identify industry needs and, based on those needs, WRTP offers pre-employment training, incumbent worker training, and technical assistance to businesses. WRTP also provides extensive wraparound services, including childcare, transportation, job placement, and post-employment retention coaching. Studies show WRTP participants experience an average earnings increase of $6,255 over the two years after program acceptance. The earnings increase is largest for Black and formerly incarcerated participants, driven by employment increases (Maguire et al. 2010). WRTP's industrial manufacturing technician apprenticeship program is being replicated in other states in partnership with the Working for America Institute.

- **California High Road Training Partnership:** The California High Road Training Partnership is similar to the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership, but it is a public-private partnership. Through this partnership, the California Workforce Development Board invested in sectoral training programs in eight industries in the public and private sectors, including health care, janitorial, and public transit. Each program coordinated closely with employers and worker organizations to build career ladders from training to job placement, including deep wraparound services. The program required each participating employer to not only meet high job quality standards, but also reduce their carbon footprint and prioritize racial equity. Trainees in the health care industry program saw a 36 percent average wage increase and 40 percent higher job mobility (UC Berkley Labor Center 2020)—that is, the rate of moving to new jobs—indicating that trainees have many employment options (González-Vásquez et al. 2021).

- **Project QUEST:** Project QUEST is a successful training program based in the San Antonio health care sector. It offers substantial wraparound services including financial aid, tutoring, weekly counseling, job placement assistance, and referrals to other safety net programs, as well as to employers. Unlike the California and Wisconsin programs, Project QUEST is not based in a heavily unionized area nor is it built around relationships with labor unions. The program was founded by the South West Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a community organization rooted in working-class faith communities and neighborhoods. The IAF continues to organize and engage politically around workforce issues in San Antonio, which helps provide Project QUEST access to resources so that the program has a broader base of support than only employers. A randomized control trial of Project QUEST showed large earnings effects up to nine years out, with an average increase of $9,000 (20 percent higher than the control group), and even larger effects for older workers (Roder and Elliott 2019).

These examples of successful training programs in Wisconsin, California, and Texas, and the common threads they share—primarily, wraparound services and organizational support from sources other than employers—help inform our policy recommendations in the following section.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As part of our research to translate the recommendations in Naidu and Sojourner's initial report into policy proposals, we held discussions with workforce training practitioners across the country. Again and again, the funders and program staff we spoke with pointed out how workforce training programs orient toward serving employers. We argue that two key factors inform this orientation. First, employers are a critical source of funding for programs. Second, funders and federal standards too often encourage programs to measure their success in terms of job placement at the end of the program, which requires significant employer buy-in. The recommendations that follow address these factors.

Programs primarily focused on serving employers are likely to strengthen employers' power in the labor market relative to that of job seekers and incumbent workers. As a result, even if individual trainees benefit from a program in the short-term, the program may not do much to narrow or reduce inequality over time. Indeed, the ways in which these programs help build employers' power in the labor market is likely part of their appeal for employers. This leaves training programs in a bind, reliant on actors whose interest often rests in undermining the long-term goal of narrowing inequality. The recommendations that follow are offered with this tension in mind, and they aim to bring more balance to how workforce training programs operate.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRAINING PROGRAMS

Training programs can move away from the employer-service model by building relationships with institutions that effectively counter employers' power as funders and as influencers of said programs' success.

Build partnerships with organizations beyond employers.

Many of the most successful training programs have been built in partnership with labor unions. Union apprenticeship programs are in many ways the original sectoral training programs, helping develop career pathways with high-road employers. As discussed in more detail below, multi-employer, joint labor-management training programs in construction, health care, manufacturing, and other industries merit greater study and support. Labor-management partnerships operate mature and successful programs at a large scale in many cities and states. These should be studied so they can be expanded and improved upon.

Nevertheless, with union membership nationwide hovering around 10 percent (6 percent in the private sector) and highly concentrated in a few geographic regions, workforce training programs need other options for partnerships that can counterbalance employer power. The first place training programs should look is worker centers—community-based, nonprofit organizations that support low-wage workers. In 2021, there were more than 250 worker centers nationwide (Staff Reports 2021).

Typically, worker centers are oriented around specific local communities or industries and act as advocates and service providers for everything from legal representation to education. Worker centers have emerged among workers and in communities that, for a variety of reasons, have been excluded from the labor movement (Fine et al. 2018). This has often meant that they emerge in communities with relatively little labor market power, leaving them with a steep path to climb to effect structural change. These challenges do not diminish the potential ability of a partnership between a training program and a center to infuse a worker service ethos into program operation. For example, the Restaurant Opportunities Center United (ROC), a network of restaurant worker centers located in Washington, DC, Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and elsewhere, developed the COLORS Hospitality Opportunity for Workers (CHOW) training program to help increase skills, improve careers, and advance racial equity.

Where formal worker centers do not exist, other community organizations can help play this role. One way for training programs to think about relationships with community organizations is as key sources of trainees. The most successful workforce training programs put significant emphasis on not only training and placement of participants, but also participant selection. Building relationships with organizations that can help in this selection should be beneficial to training programs, creating useful partnerships that support a more equitable selection process that is less likely to lead to creaming—the practice of training programs selecting individuals who are most likely to successfully find employment. Community- and worker-led organizations might be able to help develop selection processes that avoid some of the biases with which employers enter. Maintaining these relationships should help incentivize programs to prioritize the needs of the participants and workers over the long term.

Set up formal measures of accountability to non-employer constituencies.

Relationships with unions, worker centers, and other community organizations can help establish informal channels of accountability outside of employers, but workforce training programs can also approach this goal more formally. One simple way to establish streams of accountability outside partner employers is to create formal advisory boards as part of the organization or program's governance structure. These boards should include a mix of employers, community representatives, labor organization representatives (if available), and program alumni. Program alumni can provide important feedback based on their own experience during and after the program. To further build program alumni power, workforce training programs should consider hiring independent entities to survey past participants and publish the results. Committing to this level of reflection and transparency from the outset helps creates accountability throughout the process.

Some of employers' power within workforce training organizations comes from the funding they provide. Developing other streams of funding, especially those that are public, can help programs build accountability to actors other than employers. Public funding streams create more democratic accountability structures because the elected officials who approve them are ultimately accountable to the electorate.[1]

Build relationships with elected officials.

Expanding on our last proposal, we also encourage training programs and their constituencies to build relationships with elected officials beyond funding streams.[2] By virtue of their position, elected officials are accountable to a broad range of institutions and individuals. Building formal relationships with elected officials can help create alternative power bases for workforce training programs. While public funding streams are one way to build these relationships, there are other methods as well. For example, training programs should consider whether some of the training and potential job placement they offer can be focused on the public sector, which is disproportionately a source of middle-class jobs for Black workers (Madowitz, Price, and Weller 2020). A successful example comes from Jobs to Move America, an organization that works to empower communities to leverage public demand for goods, such as electric vehicles, to win Community Benefit Agreements that increase community members' access to training and high-quality careers.

Training programs should regularly look for opportunities to work with local officials to improve job quality in their communities. These opportunities can take the form of municipal wage and labor standards ordinances or project-based agreements with specific employers who seek benefits from local governments. Development approvals and licensing processes are also opportunities to negotiate or enforce local hire provisions, living wage standards, and other policies that improve working conditions

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1 The Roosevelt Institute has issued an accompanying issue brief about how to improve public funding streams so that they too are designed to encourage programs to empower workers. See "Empowering the Workforce: How Federal Workforce Programs Can Increase Prosperity" by Anna N. Smith and Suzanne Kahn.

2 Relationships between elected officials, training programs, and programs' constituencies (such as unions, workers, and employers) must be executed in ways consistent with their respective constraints on lobbying.

and protect communities. For example, the City of Somerville, Massachusetts started a Job Creation and Retention Trust to finance training and high-quality jobs funded through a tax on large commercial projects. In 2020, the city adopted a wage-theft ordinance that strengthened the definition of responsible contractors; created a wage-theft advisory board of public, business, worker, and community representatives; and barred irresponsible contractors from working on any large project in the city, any project with tax increment financing, or any municipal contracts. By combining a public financing stream for workforce development with enforcement of job quality standards, the city is striving to translate local development into equitable access to family-sustaining careers. A 2011 report by Cornell University researchers analyzed 185 community workforce agreements and project labor agreements that local coalitions of community, labor, employers, and elected officials developed to create career pathways, including terms relating to training investments, labor standards, local hiring, and promoting inclusive and equitable access to these opportunities. The researchers summarized typical terms and made the case for their economic benefits (Figueroa et al. 2011).

The Industrial Areas Foundation, Project QUEST's partner organization, has long practiced lobbying around development and licensing approvals, as have labor unions and worker centers. The combination of training workers for jobs and helping improve the quality of those jobs can be a powerful formula for narrowing inequality, especially if training programs build relationships that keep them broadly accountable to the public.

Finally, workforce training programs should consider actively including civic training to accompany the workforce skills with which they provide participants. Workplaces have long been a critical site of civic engagement, and, historically, labor unions have helped educate members to participate in civic life. Workforce training programs can and should take on some of this role, helping job seekers and workers build skills as leaders and advocates in the workplace and in the larger polity. Doing this in a conscious way would also allow workforce training programs to build relationships with civic and political leaders (Roosevelt Institute 2021).

UNIONS AND INCLUSION

While our recommendations are premised on the belief that labor unions are critical institutions for empowering workers in the labor market, it is important to recognize that, historically, many unions have not helped all workers. In particular, many of the skilled trade unions have long histories of using their training and apprenticeship programs to exclude workers based on race. Nevertheless, at their best, unions have the power to create true worker solidarity and collective power, which can help expand the power of Black and brown workers where non-unionized workplaces cannot.

During the industrial revolution in the late 18th century, the skilled trade unions were primarily made up of white workers. The rise of industrial unions in the second half of the 19th century saw the beginning of more integrated union membership. As unions grew and began to expand their reach into the South—where they were understood as a direct challenge to the Jim Crow system—an anti-union politics and rhetoric deeply tied to the preservation of systemic racism also gained strength (AFLCIO n.d.).

Many unions have done serious, successful work to make their institutions more inclusive and diverse. Some building trades unions, together with employers and community organizations, have institutionalized partnerships to recruit apprentices from historically excluded racial, ethnic, gender, and neighborhood communities—to invest in pre-apprenticeship programs that build skills, knowledge, and social networks that promote participants' later success in the apprenticeship programs and the profession. The BuildingWorks program in New York City served over 1,000 pre-apprentices in skilled trades. In 2018, the Policy Group on Tradeswomen's Issues published a summary of practical lessons and tools for coalitions of developers, contractors, community groups, and unions committed to increasing access for women and people of color (PGTI 2018). Beyond apprenticeship, many unions have supported internal affinity committees where members can come together and advocate for their interests within the union and the broader community, to help create inclusive occupations and institutions. The Seattle Electrical Workers Minority Caucus has worked for decades for economic justice and against racism and sexism in the union, the industry, and the community, and women across the building trades unions organize in Tradeswomen Build Nations to build community and power for women in the trades (Garcia 2002). The A. Philip Randolph Institute is a multi-union coalition devoted to advancing Black workers in the movement and the economy. Its Pittsburgh chapter, for example, has helped lead the Breaking the Chains of Poverty (BTCP) training program since 2009.

Today, the relative strength of public and service sector unions within the labor movement means Black workers are actually more likely to be union members than white, Latinx, and Asian workers (BLS 2021).

Nevertheless, unions'—and particularly union training programs'—history of racism cannot be ignored. Training programs and unions must work collaboratively to ensure that their work is not only preparing participants for good jobs but also helping dismantle racist labor market structures.[3]

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS

Funders play a critical role in determining whether or not workforce training programs successfully build partnerships with institutions beyond employers that help them move away from a pure employer-service model. Funders can encourage grantees to pursue the kinds of relationships and activities described above through their relationships with their grantees, the reporting requirements attached to their grants, and, of course, their initial funding decisions.

Nurture partnerships between workforce training programs and labor unions, worker centers, and other community groups.

Funders can play a critical role in helping workforce training programs prioritize and build relationships with organizations other than employers by directly funding these partnerships. Given the racially exclusionary history of labor unions (see above), it might be particularly fruitful for funders to foster relationships between workforce training programs focused on Black and brown workers and labor unions.

Identifying locations and industries where the infrastructure of worker-led organizations is strong enough to foster these relationships might take significant work on the part of funders, especially if they want to look beyond the geography and industries of traditional unions. But worker-led organizations, broadly defined, can be found throughout the country. Taking the time to identify these organizations is well worth the effort. Workforce training appears more effective at narrowing inequality when labor organizations ensure that the jobs workers enter are high-quality roles with clear career ladders.

[3] This section also appears in our accompanying issue brief, "Empowering the Workforce: How Federal Workforce Programs Can Increase Prosperity," by Suzanne Kahn and Anna N. Smith.

That said, it is certainly true that focusing on building these relationships might limit the geographic reach of philanthropic investment in workforce training, and possibly narrow the number of industries in which funders invest. Naidu and Sojourner (2020) suggest that funders whose aim is to narrow inequality should be comfortable with that outcome. This is not to say that philanthropists should ignore those sectors of the economy or regions that do not have a strong worker infrastructure, but that workforce training investments should generally follow or accompany investments in building that infrastructure, not precede them. Instead of jumping directly to funding workforce training programs before helping to strengthen this infrastructure of worker organizing, funders should help foster the growth of worker-led organizations and then support their participation alongside employers in defining and creating new, high-road employment opportunities. (In some cases, this might even include funding partnerships between employers and workforce training programs only if an employer signs a union neutrality agreement.)

Notably, this is the model the Ford Foundation has recently pursued. The Ford Foundation was an early leader in investment in sectoral training programs, but has recently pivoted away from those investments after realizing that "identifying where good jobs were and training people for them means that you are ignoring huge sectors of the population in industries like landscaping, restaurants, and homecare workers" (Kahn and Smith 2021). The Foundation decided to move over to investing in worker centers that were reaching these underserved workers through policy and power-building work.

Value and reward multiple streams of funding for workforce training organizations, but value certain streams of funding more than others.

Funders frequently want to ensure that their grantees have multiple funding streams and, in particular, encourage grantees to seek funding from the employers with which they work. These investments are, correctly, understood as signaling buy-in from employers. But not enough thought has been given to why employers might be buying into the programs.

While employers provide earning opportunities for training participants and valuable information for program operators about the nature of expected skills and capacities demanded on the job, they also have their own interests, which include relatively cheap labor. Funders should be skeptical of programs that receive funding only from employers, and especially skeptical of programs that receive funding from only one or two employers.

Multiple employers mean there is some competition for trained employees that gives job seekers power. A single-employer program gives that employer a tremendous amount of control over both the training and the job seekers.

Funders should look to invest in training programs that have funding streams that create diverse accountability structures for programs. Ideally this would include public funding streams, like those discussed above. It could also include streams of funding from educational institutions and, potentially, alumni of training programs attached to organizations that continue to support workers as they move through their careers.

Measure program success by participants' hourly compensation.

Training programs often measure their success by job placement rate and retention. This incentivizes building strong relationships with employers who use the program as their hiring pool. While retention with the same employer can capture a high-quality match, it can also reflect a worker whose training is so narrow that they gained no other employment options and little leverage in the labor market. A better metric is hourly earnings regardless of employer. A higher wage reflects a high-quality match, whether gained through productivity enhancement at the first post-training placement or bargaining based on broader employability.

Create funding streams specifically for data collection.

As we have spoken with program officers over the last year, we have consistently heard that they cannot provide enough support to their grantees to ask them to do extensive evaluations or report data they are not already collecting. As a result, most program officers described designing very individualized reporting metrics with each grantee.

When they did their initial research, Naidu and Sojourner (2020) were disappointed to find scant data on training programs' performance. In particular, there was little data that dug deeply into the demographics or differential effectiveness of training programs. Rigorous randomized control trials that examine whether programs are more effective for certain demographic groups than others barely exist.

At the same time, there are many promising labor-management programs that have gone unstudied. For instance, Carpenters Union members and employers invest over $250 million annually on joint labor-management apprenticeship and training programs. The 1.2 million square foot international training center in Las Vegas includes a hotel and serves thousands of trainees from all over the country each year. The joint funds operate hundreds of additional training centers throughout North America with another 5 million square feet of training space. Each has extensive capital equipment to simulate and practice job tasks. In the US each year, these programs serve more than 50,000 registered apprentices and tens of thousands more tradespeople throughout their careers.

Similarly, in Washington state, nine hospital groups and a 14,000-member health care workers union fund and govern the SEIU Healthcare 1199NW Multiemployer Training Fund. It offers a wide range of training services used by thousands of workers every year and has received some public and philanthropic funding. Likewise, the Chicagoland Manufacturing Renaissance Council brings together unions via the Chicago Federation of Labor; employers via the Illinois Manufacturers Association; and K-12 schools, community colleges, and other stakeholders to build a talent pipeline, careers, and company success and to promote manufacturing "as a tool for social inclusion and community development" (Chicagoland Manufacturing Renaissance Council 2021.) Other construction and health care unions and their employers have their own joint apprenticeship and training funds, as do many in other industries.

While there are anecdotal success stories—and the continued funding by employers and members proves value—there is no gold standard evidence about impacts of union training programs or pre-apprenticeship programs on careers (United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America n.d.). Funders should consider building out funding streams specifically to improve data collection and support more rigorous studies of what works in developing and expanding these promising, large-scale settings. Building a rigorous evidence base could help guide more effective future investments.

Funding more qualitative data collection can also be useful. As we suggested above, one way workforce training programs could create more accountability to their alumni is through upfront commitments to hire outside consultants to survey program alumni and publish results. Funders should consider helping support these efforts.

CONCLUSION

Philanthropic investment in workforce training programs has grown substantially in the last decade. In our earlier investment scan, we found that the total amount invested in workforce development grew by over 50 percent over 10 years. Given the interest and investment in the field, it's worth taking a step back and considering what can make these programs most effective.

Our research shows that if we want workforce training programs to raise individual wages and decrease inequality, we need to look closely at how programs affect employer and employee power. The suggestions above are intended to help program funders and operators shift power from employers to workers through workforce training programs and thus raise workers' wages alongside their productivity.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank Mark Erlich, Matthew Capece, Andrew Stettner, and Dan Swinney for their comments and insight, as well as Roosevelt staff Anna N. Smith, Alí Bustamante, Sonya Gurwitt, Tayra Lucero, and Beryl Frishtick for their contributions to this project.

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