

WORKER AND LEARNER PERSPECTIVES

INSIGHTS FROM PARTICIPANTS IN OUTCOMES-BASED TRAINING PROGRAMS

/ **TIFFANI M. HORTON AND SARAH MILLER**
FEDERAL RESERVE BANK OF ATLANTA

OUTCOMES-BASED TRAINING PROGRAMS: AN INTRODUCTION

Traditional postsecondary degrees provide the most promising path to not only employment³⁰⁶ but also upward economic mobility.³⁰⁷ Graduates with a college degree often earn more than those without one,³⁰⁸ and while these outcomes vary by demographics such as race, ethnicity, and gender, college can be an important key to unlocking individual economic potential.³⁰⁹ The cost of college, however, has ballooned in recent years, making it hard for many to afford enrollment

306 Dataset for 2005-2025, “Unemployment Rates for Persons 25 Years and Older by Educational Attainment,” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed April 30, 2025, <https://www.bls.gov/charts/employment-situation/unemployment-rates-for-persons-25-years-and-older-by-educational-attainment.htm>.

307 Anthony P. Carnevale, Zachary Mabel, Kathryn Peltier Campbell, and Heidi Booth, “What Works: Ten Education, Training, and Work-Based Pathway Changes That Lead to Good Jobs,” Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, May 1, 2023, cew.georgetown.edu/pathway-changes.

308 Leila Bengali, Marcus Sander, Robert Valletta, and Cindy Zhao, “Falling College Wage Premiums by Race and Ethnicity,” Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, August 28, 2023, <https://www.frbsf.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/el2023-22.pdf>.

309 Anthony P. Carnevale, Ban Cheah, and Emma Wenzinger, “The College Payoff: More Education Doesn’t Always Mean More Earnings,” Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2021, https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/cew-college_payoff_2021-fr.pdf.

and complete a degree.³¹⁰ Decreasing federal financial aid also means students and their families are left to find alternative resources, which might include leveraging savings, taking out loans, or working to pay for education.³¹¹ This financial burden can be especially heavy if a student drops out before they obtain the degree and, therefore, without the employment or higher earnings potential of the degree to put toward any debt accrued.

▶ The multitude of complex credential systems that exist (such as certification, licensure, or other award) makes it difficult for students to determine what might yield the best outcomes, especially when these pathways are forged in academic spaces without thoughtful consideration of industry demand and coordination with employers that can inform curriculum.

Short-term credentialing programs can be more affordable and flexible alternatives to traditional postsecondary degrees. Though employer demand for these credentials has grown, they may not provide the same kind of economic benefits as postsecondary degrees.³¹² The multitude of complex credential systems that exist (such as certification, licensure, or other award) makes it difficult for students to determine what might yield the best outcomes, especially when these pathways are forged in academic spaces without thoughtful consideration of industry demand and coordination with employers that can inform curriculum.³¹³ Complicating matters further, learners are not always offered the guidance needed to effectively navigate the job market.

A degree or credential does not guarantee a job or higher income. Although unemployment is lower for those with a bachelor's degree, securing a job can still be difficult. As of late 2024, job openings were fewer and unemployment was higher than one year prior.³¹⁴ In a shifting labor market, knowing which credentials, degrees, or skills have value

310 Nyerere Hodge, Stuart Andreason, and Carl Van Horn, "Then and Now: The Changing Landscape of Education Outcomes and Funding in the 21st Century," Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, October 15, 2024, <https://www.atlantafed.org/cweo/workforce-currents/2024/10/15/then-and-now-the-changing-landscape-of-education-outcomes-and-funding-in-the-21st-century>.

311 Phillip Levine, "Covering the Tuition Bill: How Do Families Pay the Rising Price of College?" Brookings Institute, October 15, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/covering-the-tuition-bill-how-do-families-pay-the-rising-price-of-college/>.

312 Anna Crockett, Emily Ryder Perlmeter, and Xiaohan Zhang, "Short-Term Credentials Meet Growing Interest among Students, Employers," Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, March 6, 2024, <https://www.dallasfed.org/cd/communities/2024/2402>.

313 Tiffani M. Horton and Sergio Galeano, "Reconceptualizing Workers as Lifelong Learners," Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, August 6, 2024, <https://www.atlantafed.org/cweo/workforce-currents/2024/08/06/reconceptualizing-workers-as-lifelong-learners>.

314 Simon Mongey and Jeff Horwich, "Fewer Openings, Harder to Get Hired: U.S. Labor Market Likely Softer than It Appears," Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, September 5, 2024, <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/article/2024/fewer-openings-harder-to-get-hired-us-labor-market-likely-softer-than-it-appears>.

in the job market can inform educational decisions toward a higher probability of greater economic security.

The complex credential marketplace leaves many students in less-than-ideal circumstances, where they may have spent too much or are in debt for a credential that they may not have finished. Investments and funding models such as traditional financial aid (for example, Pell grants) support student access to and enrollment in educational programs and focus less on successful completion and transition into the workforce.³¹⁵ Emerging innovations like outcomes-based funding agreements can mitigate some challenges for learners by supporting programs focused on employment and income-increasing outcomes.³¹⁶ Ongoing standard evaluations of such programs using administrative data on program completion, sustained employment, and wage gains are illustrative. However, optimizing outcomes for enrolled individuals could benefit from incorporating learners' experiences to provide a fuller picture of impact and potential improvement.

Qualitative inquiry into the learner's experience, such as intentional interviews, focus groups, or open-ended survey questions, can provide necessary context and nuance for evaluation and program improvement. Engaging with learners to understand which programs, funding, and repayment models work best to benefit their employment outcomes, these approaches can better evolve to ensure success for a greater number of participants.

Lessons from the Federal Reserve's Worker Voices research can guide new outcomes-based funding training programs to close the information gap on program design and effectiveness by integrating qualitative research elements with traditional program evaluation approaches.³¹⁷

LESSONS FROM THE WORKER VOICES PROJECT

During 2021 and 2022, now seen as the near-term window of economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on labor force participation, the job market saw marked strength. Unemployment was at historical lows,³¹⁸ wages were rising,³¹⁹ and employers

315 Annie Bowers, "Aligning State Higher Education Funding with Student Outcomes," FREOPP, December 30, 2024, <https://freopp.org/whitepapers/aligning-state-higher-education-funding-with-student-outcomes/>.

316 See Chapters 5, 8, 9, and 19 of this volume.

317 Sarah Miller and Ashley Putnam, "Using Qualitative Research to Understand the Economy: A Toolkit," Fed Communities, October 16, 2024, <https://fedcommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/worker-voices-using-qualitative-research-understand-economy-toolkit.pdf>.

318 Neil Mehrotra, "Measuring the Strength of the Recovery," U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 26, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/featured-stories/measuring-the-strength-of-the-recovery>.

319 John Robertson, "Real Wage Growth: A View from the Wage Growth Tracker," *Policy Hub: Macroblog*, Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, February 14, 2023, <https://www.atlantafed.org/blogs/macroblog/2023/02/14/real-wage-growth--view-from-wage-growth-tracker>.

were expanding hiring practices to incentivize greater labor force participation for a wider range of workers and job seekers.³²⁰ By March of 2022, there were two job openings for every one job seeker.³²¹ These conditions gave rise to a national conversation that asked several questions: Where are the workers? Why are they not coming back into the labor force en masse? Are they looking for different work? If so, does that mean they are making investments in their own skills to increase their competitiveness in the job market?³²²

Administrative and economic data alone could not answer these questions because they are lagging indicators of what's happening in the moment and lack the lived experience of people making choices about work — whether that was choosing not to work or finding new work. To better understand labor market experiences, the Federal Reserve embarked on large-scale qualitative research, launching the Worker Voices Project to bring lived experiences and worker perspectives to the conversation.³²³

Economic data are essential, to be sure. Digging beneath those data and going directly to those workers and job seekers navigating shifting labor market conditions gives greater insight into their experiences and how those experiences influence their behavior.³²⁴ The goal of the Worker Voices Project was to understand workers' experiences with employment at the onset of the pandemic and into economic recovery, specifically workers who did not hold a bachelor's degree. This research sought to identify the barriers workers and job seekers navigated in seeking or retaining employment, understand if and how they benefited from demand-driven responses to labor market tightness, and how their experiences affected decision making around employment. The objective of this qualitative research was to inform workforce development and employer policies and practices by highlighting worker perspectives from their lived experiences.

▶ Administrative and economic data alone could not answer these questions because they are lagging indicators of what's happening in the moment and lack the lived experience of people making choices about work — whether that was choosing not to work or finding new work.

Photo: Getty Images/Chris Wedel. Illustration: iStockphoto.com/Robert Kozma. © 2024 March 21, 2024. https://www.federalreserve.gov/news/all-things-work/skills-based-hiring-new-workplace-trend.

321 Charles Gascon and Joseph Martorana, "The Job Openings-to-Unemployment Ratio: Labor Markets Are in Better Balance," *FRED Blog*, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, July 18, 2024, <https://fredblog.stlouisfed.org/2024/07/the-job-openings-to-unemployment-ratio-labor-markets-are-in-better-balance/>.

322 Ranjay Gulati, "The Great Resignation or the Great Rethink?" *Harvard Business Review*, March 22, 2022, <https://hbr.org/2022/03/the-great-resignation-or-the-great-rethink>.

323 Fed Communities, "Worker Voices," <https://fedcommunities.org/research/worker-voices/>.

324 Raphael W. Bostic, "How the Fed Goes beyond the Data to Try to Make the Economy Work for Everyone," Fed Communities, May 6, 2024, <https://fedcommunities.org/how-fed-goes-beyond-data-try-make-economy-work-everyone/>.

WORKER VOICES FINDINGS IN CONTEXT

Worker Voices research showed that the employment experiences and daily risk calculations workers made around health, finances, and family demands at the onset of the pandemic were, in participants' own words, "traumatic" and "scary" realities that affected their return to the labor market and their approach to future employment opportunities.³²⁵

Despite evidence of demand-side efforts to widen on-ramps to work with skills-based rather than degree-based hiring,³²⁶ these efforts did not benefit workers and job seekers equally. Many participants noted sending out numerous applications, in some cases hundreds, yet not matching with jobs. Those who remained working spoke of burnout due to labor shortages, took on more job tasks, worked longer hours, faced what they viewed as unrealistic job expectations, and received wages they considered disproportionately low for their job responsibilities. Given these employment experiences, many participants noted they began to have greater expectations of job quality, including better treatment on the job, greater job security, and increased flexibility in their work schedules and environments. They needed jobs with compensation reflective of their worth and level of responsibility and adequate to support them and their families. They wanted predictable and stable jobs and jobs that include benefits.³²⁷ They noted having left jobs lacking these characteristics or did not apply for jobs that did not meet their expectations of "quality employment" based on their needs, family situation, and career stage.

To better position themselves for better, different, or new employment opportunities, the participants noted two key strategies: (1) exercising job autonomy (leaving or changing jobs, and in some cases choosing self-employment and entrepreneurship) and (2) pursuing credentials and skill-building opportunities.³²⁸ For skill building, some participants invested in formal education at a technical or community college or sought a four-year bachelor's degree. Others opted for shorter-term credential or certificate training programs offered through local and publicly funded workforce systems, community-based providers, or online programs. Many also took advantage of self-directed and informal learning, leveraging their personal or professional network,

325 Sarah Miller, Merissa Piazza, Ashley Putnam, and Kristen Broady, "Worker Voices: Shifting Perspectives and Expectations on Employment," Fed Communities, May 24, 2023, <https://fedcommunities.org/research/worker-voices/2023-shifting-perspectives-expectations-employment/>.

326 Joseph Fuller, Christina Langer, and Matt Sigelman, "Skills-Based Hiring Is on the Rise," *Harvard Business Review*, February 11, 2022, <https://hbr.org/2022/02/skills-based-hiring-is-on-the-rise>.

327 Theresa Dunne and Keith Wardrip, "Worker Voices Special Brief: Perspectives on Job Quality," Fed Communities, September 25, 2023, <https://fedcommunities.org/research/worker-voices/2023-job-quality-perspectives-special-brief/>.

328 Tiffani M. Horton and Elizabeth Bogue Simpson, "Worker Voices Special Brief: Pursuing Advancement through Personal Investment," Fed Communities, January 10, 2024, <https://fedcommunities.org/research/worker-voices/2023-pursuing-advancement-through-personal-investment-special-brief/>.

using platforms such as YouTube, or reading technical or professional books to improve their skills.

The research revealed many issues that added context to hard economic data. Engaging directly with people living through current economic circumstances was valuable for understanding the motivations and experiences influencing the data trends. For example, workers noted their personal journeys were not reflected in economic data, employer sentiment, or national narratives around the worker shortage during 2022. Conversations about workers' experiences offered a broader understanding of how workers define quality characteristics of a job. This understanding helped employers better appreciate the perspectives of their incumbent or future workforce when adopting certain practices or developing policies.

▶ Engaging directly with people living through current economic circumstances was valuable for understanding the motivations and experiences influencing the data trends. For example, workers noted their personal journeys were not reflected in economic data, employer sentiment, or national narratives around the worker shortage during 2022.

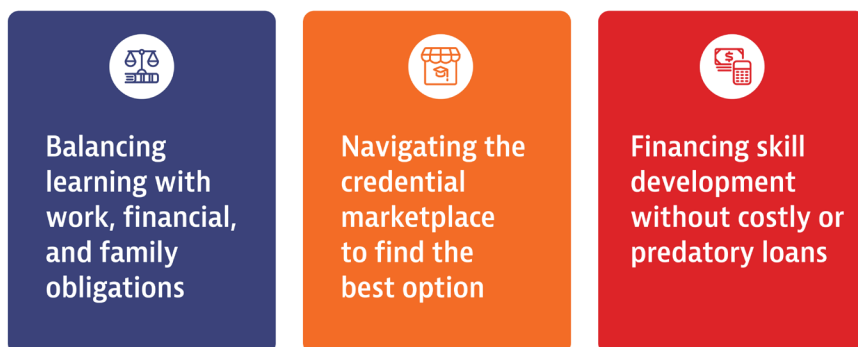
Worker Voices' qualitative input added context to better understand macro trends in the labor market and inform employer practice. Similar qualitative information gathering for training programs like outcomes-based funding innovations would allow for context on learner experiences that may be unclear or absent in longer-arc administrative data. A mixed approach using both quantitative and qualitative data to monitor program outcomes and experiences, particularly when these models are novel and in pilot stages, could create more opportunities for program administrators to make timely design changes to improve outcomes for learners.

THE CHALLENGES OF PURSUING EDUCATION AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

As more outcomes-based training programs and pay-it-forward funding models become available that shift financial burden and risk away from the working learner and create better employment outcomes, understanding the barriers learners face when considering skill development or other educational options is crucial.

/ **FIGURE 1** /

BARRIERS TO EDUCATION AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT FOR LEARNERS



BALANCING ACT OF THE WORKING LEARNER

Pursuing education and skill development can be difficult, particularly for nontraditional students and working adults balancing family caregiving responsibilities, financial needs, and working full- or part-time. The challenge is exacerbated by the financial and economic realities for workers in lower-wage roles without bachelor's degrees.³²⁹ The promise of employment advancement through skill development and education is often unrealized for several reasons: misalignment of training competencies to industry demands causing lower utility in the job market;³³⁰ high costs coupled with increased financial risk and potential long-term debt;³³¹ and market undervaluation of credentials or degrees. The design of these programs may also present challenges for some learners such as hybrid or virtual learning modalities or courses offered during business hours that can be inaccessible for working learners.³³²

NAVIGATING THE CREDENTIAL MARKETPLACE

Navigating the credential marketplace — knowing what programs are available, where and how the learning takes place, the costs of the programs, and the value they have in the job market — is

329 E. Kobena Osam, Matt Bergman, and Denise M. Cumberland, "An Integrative Literature Review on the Barriers Impacting Adult Learners' Return to College," *Adult Learning* 28, no. 2 (May 2017): 54-60.

330 Annelies Goger, Katherine Caves, and Hollis Salway, "How U.S. Employers and Educators Can Build a More Nimble Education System with Multiple Paths to Success," Brookings Institution, May 16, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-us-employers-and-educators-can-build-a-more-nimble-education-system-with-multiple-paths-to-success/>.

331 Sarah Wood "How Much Student Loan Debt Does the Average College Graduate Have?" *U.S. News & World Report*, October 21, 2024, <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/paying-for-college/articles/see-how-student-loan-borrowing-has-changed>.

332 Laura Perna and Taylor Odle, "Recognizing the Reality of Working College Students," AAUP, Winter 2020, <https://www.aaup.org/article/recognizing-reality-working-college-students>.

challenging for learners, especially nontraditional learners who may be disconnected or far removed from the K-20 education system. The responsibility for navigating a complex system falls on workers and learners, many of whom may lack family or social connections that could inform educational selection and attainment.³³³

▶ A mixed approach using both quantitative and qualitative data to monitor program outcomes and experiences, particularly when these models are novel and in pilot stages, could create more opportunities for program administrators to make timely design changes to improve outcomes for learners.

/ FIGURE 2 /

LISTENING TO LEARNERS: INPUT FROM PARTICIPANTS CAN IMPROVE WORKFORCE PROGRAMS

Qualitative interviews, surveys, and focus groups give **researchers** valuable insights from learners.

By engaging **learners**, researchers better understand which programs, funding models, and supports work best, helping ensure greater success for more participants.



They often face basic questions such as “What do I want to do?” and “What education or training program will prepare me to be competitive in these jobs?” Even workforce and career adviser professionals find it difficult to navigate the more than 1 million short-term and lower-cost credential or certificate programs available in the skill development marketplace,³³⁴ let alone workers and learners who lack substantive career awareness. Over the past several years, a number of organizations have made efforts to provide data on credential program value or employment outcomes;³³⁵ however, these clearinghouses are not necessarily targeted or marketed to the learner as their main user.

333 Raj Chetty, Matthew Jackson, Theresa Kuchler, Johannes Stroebe, Abigail Hiller, and Sarah Oppenheimer, “Social Capital and Economic Mobility,” Opportunity Insights, August 2022, https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/socialcapital_nontech.pdf.

334 Credential Engine, <https://credentialengine.org/>.

335 For more information on these efforts, please visit workforcerealigned.org/appendix.

Consequently, earners typically choose skill development pathways through online searches, encouragement from their networks, or recommendations by their employer or prospective employer.

FINANCING SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Once a learner chooses a skill development pathway, the next step is financing. They confront the question of how they will pay for the training, especially as rising tuition and learning costs outpace wage growth.³³⁶ Some workers have support from their employers through tuition-assistance or tuition-reimbursement benefits. But these educational assistance programs, provided under the Internal Revenue Code, 26 U.S.C., Section 127 (1954) and allowing tax-free benefits up to \$5,250 per employee, often fall short of covering the price tag of the degree or credential.³³⁷ This is just one of several reasons for the low participation rates of tuition-based programs.³³⁸ Workers whose employers do not offer tuition-based employee benefits are typically responsible for the full financial cost of pursuing training, with no guarantee that the financial risk will bring greater economic mobility and wage gains.

▶ **Workers whose employers do not offer tuition-based employee benefits are typically responsible for the full financial cost of pursuing training, with no guarantee that the financial risk will bring greater economic mobility and wage gains.**

THE GOALS OF OUTCOMES-BASED TRAINING

Many innovative programs have emerged in recent years in response to these challenges. The programs aim to balance investments and spread risk across a greater number of stakeholders, reducing burdens on learners while aligning public and private investments around outcomes. Programs like Pay-It-Forward Funds,³³⁹ Income Share Agreements,³⁴⁰ and outcomes-based workforce loans help working learners and employers finance training that leads to improved employment results.

These innovative programs explore new ways to pay for education and skills training that is more affordable, results in less debt for the

336 “Digest of Education Statistics,” National Center for Education Statistics, Table 330.10. 2023, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_330.10.asp.

337 “Frequently Asked Questions about Educational Assistance Programs,” Internal Revenue Service, June 2024, <https://www.irs.gov/newsroom/frequently-asked-questions-about-educational-assistance-programs>.

338 Jillian Berman, “Companies Help Employees Pay Tuition — but Few Accept the Offer,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 10, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/companies-help-employees-pay-tuition-but-few-accept-the-offer-1528682580>.

339 Social Finance, “Pay It Forward Funds,” <https://socialfinance.org/product/pay-it-forward-funds/>.

340 Emma Kerr, “Income Share Agreements: What to Know,” *U.S. News & World Report*, April 13, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/paying-for-college/articles/income-share-agreements-what-students-should-know>.

learner, and improves education and employment outcomes. They can mitigate the financial risk of the learner and incentivize greater collaboration between public funding streams and business and industry objectives to build a skilled workforce. Many offer low or no-cost access to training, and supportive services through zero-interest or low-cost loans with contingent repayment obligations based on the learner's employment outcomes. In such programs, learners only repay funds if they are employed with earnings above a certain income threshold, and payments are often capped in duration and do not exceed the original principal amount of the loan. Some programs also include stipends during training as well as other wraparound support services, such as targeted career counseling, to connect learners with employers, provide resume advice, and interview coaching. In theory, these innovations create better employment outcomes for learners, use funds more efficiently, and provide a highly skilled pool of talent for employers while limiting debt carried by learners.

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS ON OUTCOMES-BASED TRAINING: OUTCOMES FROM LEARNERS IN PILOT EFFORTS

To explore the theory that outcomes-based training provides improved employment outcomes for learners and to apply lessons learned from the Worker Voices Project, we conducted one-on-one interviews with three former students of an outcomes-based program. For privacy purposes and to acknowledge the pilot stages of the innovation, the program is referred to as the pilot program. However, the details of the program are outlined to show its relevance to other similar outcomes-based programs. These interviewees were identified by program administrators and invited to speak with Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta researchers to share their insights. While the sample size is small, these anecdotal insights illustrate experiences and suggestions for the program, as well as reinforce the value of qualitative inquiry.

▶ The three students noted that without this opportunity and the way the program was structured in terms of borrowing, nonrepayable grants, and repayment guidelines, they would not have otherwise been able to enroll in an academic program.

The pilot program offers a zero-interest loan to cover the costs of tuition charged by the educational institution. Program participants receive a stipend (nonrepayable) while they are enrolled; access to emergency aid for unexpected, one-time expenses; access to mental health counseling; and assurance they will be employed within their area of study. Loan repayment is contingent upon obtaining and maintaining an income above a threshold higher than the federal

poverty level for their household, and repayment will never exceed the original loan amount. The three students noted that without this opportunity and the way the program was structured in terms of borrowing, nonrepayable grants, and repayment guidelines, they would not have otherwise been able to enroll in an academic program. The reasons included high tuition costs, high interest rates on private loans, or the inability to stop working to take the courses.

The three students reported that initial communication about the program during enrollment was strong, but ongoing communication and support throughout their studies were lacking. One participant observed, "In the first couple of months, they would call and make sure they got you on the phone to ask how it's going, if you had concerns. Then sporadic texts every few months after that. It was mass texts." Their comments reflected dissatisfaction when the initial levels of case management tapered once they were entrenched in the program. The students felt they needed more frequent communication from administrators throughout the course of the program to receive adequate support and be successful.

The structure of the training and educational programs was also a critical point, with all three interviewees noting that they would have preferred an academic design better calibrated to the needs of the students. They mentioned the importance of understanding the scaffolding of the program to address learning differences, adjusting the pace, providing various instructional models and modes, and meeting the needs of employers. One student said that they needed more training to be competitive for the jobs promised at the start of the program. They noted the training they received from the institution partnered with the pilot program insufficiently prepared them for the job market. As a result, they had to take additional certification courses at their own expense to improve their employment prospects.

As for the students' experiences with program repayment, all three noted a need for improved communication through the loan servicer and a desire for consistent monthly payments once income was stable. At the time of the interviews, two students were in active repayment on their loans, and both said their payment amounts fluctuated and did not stay at a rate consistent with their income. One stated, "[Payment] per month will change pretty frequently ... like what I need to pay back. I'm never really sure what the amount is." Another interviewee noted that their payment amount had changed three times after the 90-day nonpayment grace period, indicating that they had received a payment increase despite a lack of documentation to warrant a change in the monthly payment amount.

The value of career development opportunities, including coaching, can be a positive addition to outcomes-based funding programs,³⁴¹ and the three students appreciated the career counseling offered by the pilot program. Nevertheless, they were unsure the counseling made a positive difference in their job search upon exiting the program.

Overall, the interviewees saw value in outcomes-based training. One noted, “As far as the fund goes, I think it’s a great idea. I don’t understand why you have to pay an arm and a leg for any decent education.” Another interviewee noted: “In general, I’m happy with the program — stipend, emergency fund, mental health counseling — it’s beneficial to us students,” but continued, “maybe because it’s new, they just need to refine it.” So while they valued the training, they felt that aspects of the implementation fell short. One student sagely reflected, “[It was exciting] to hear the initial vision of the program, but execution is where it mattered.”

▶ Overall, the interviewees saw value in outcomes-based training. One noted, “As far as the fund goes, I think it’s a great idea. I don’t understand why you have to pay an arm and a leg for any decent education.”

LEARNER VOICES: USING QUALITATIVE METHODS TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR LEARNERS

As these interviews attest, the pilot program’s concepts and design are promising, but the administration of the program shows room for improvement. Outcomes-based training models often have ambitious plans to get individuals to and through credentialing programs quickly, efficiently, and with the greatest impact. In the literature on this subject, preliminary evaluation efforts reinforce the valuable opportunity these models provide, but the results on implementation and outcomes are mixed, similar to our findings, and researchers note that more data are required to truly assess impact.³⁴²

While the research for this chapter relied on individual interviews for substantive insights, assessment tools such as focus groups or open-ended survey questions can similarly elicit substantive feedback on program implementation, including enrollment, learning modalities, career support, case management, repayment structure, and overall communication. Program administrators can adopt the qualitative

341 Shawn VanDerziel, “The Value of Career Services,” National Association of Colleges and Employers, November 28, 2022, <https://www.nacweb.org/career-development/organizational-structure/the-value-of-career-services/>.

342 Gilda Azurdia, Richard Kazis, Caroline Schultz, and Katerina Galkin, “Income Share Agreements to Finance Short-Term Career Training: Preliminary Findings from the Career Impact Bond Study,” MDRC, February 2024, https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/CIB_Brief_2.3.pdf.

methods that quickly and efficiently capture learner insights, positioning their program to make timely changes that ultimately improve the learner experience. This approach can be vital in an evaluation environment where learnings are sometimes not gleaned until several years of cohorts have completed the program.

▶ Program administrators can adopt the qualitative methods that quickly and efficiently capture learner insights, positioning their program to make timely changes that ultimately improve the learner experience. This approach can be vital in an evaluation environment where learnings are sometimes not gleaned until several years of cohorts have completed the program.

Adequately capturing the experiences of learners can be labor-intensive; it requires sensitivity and nuance. This can be difficult to accomplish when building and evaluating solutions like outcomes-based funding models at scale. However, as with the Worker Voices research, qualitative inquiry is a valuable channel to make quick programmatic adjustments that better serve students in real time. This approach could be particularly useful during nascent or pilot stages. A qualitative approach should be coupled with standard evaluation methods that often include descriptive and administrative data collection, as well as correlation and causal analyses. An evaluation model for emerging innovative training programs that prioritizes learner voices for immediate feedback, while leveraging the rigor of longer-term standard evaluations, could be considered a best practice.

Beyond evaluation, considering the experiences of learners within these programs can be beneficial in understanding individual decision making and likelihood of success. Being intentional with solicitation of learner perspectives, program feedback, and honest reflection of their experiences can add unique value, allowing for real-time evolution of program offerings, student counseling or coaching, and improvements to increase learner outcomes for the better.

▶ An evaluation model for emerging innovative training programs that prioritizes learner voices for immediate feedback, while leveraging the rigor of longer-term standard evaluations, could be considered a best practice.

Blending real-time insight from learners with longer-term insights on program value allows for a multipronged approach to improving program offerings and streamlining communication. Ultimately, better learner feedback may be able to support greater future enrollment,

completion, and employment success, which in turn can create sustainability for outcomes-based training programs. These new programs have turned the partnerships, financing, and employment outcomes of traditional education models on their heads. Adding another layer to program design and evaluation, where learner voices are leveraged, offers greater opportunities to refine these programs, particularly in a pilot phase.

Tiffani M. Horton is a Senior Adviser for Community and Economic Development at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta.

Sarah Miller is a Director and Principal Adviser for Community and Economic Development at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta.