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Health Profession Opportunity Grants

OFFICE OF FAMILY ASSISTANCE



Research to Practice Partnerships:

Early Findings and Lessons
Learned from the HPOG University
Partnership 2.0 Research Grants

Research to Practice Partnerships

Early Findings and Lessons Learned from the HPOG University Partnership 2.0 Research Grants

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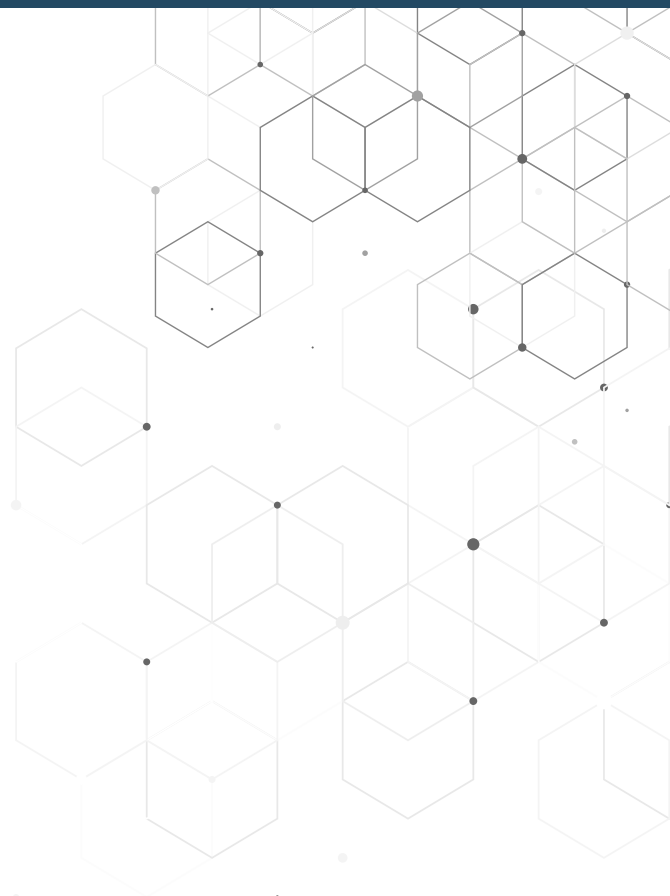
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Overview

Purpose

The Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) Program provides Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients and other low-income individuals with education and training for occupations in the healthcare field. This report summarizes lessons learned and early findings from the Health Profession Opportunity Grants University Partnerships (HPOG UP) 2.0 research grants, which supported research and evaluation studies focused on questions relevant to HPOG Program goals and objectives, operating from September 2016–September 2020. Following a brief introduction to the Office of Family Assistance’s (OFA’s) HPOG Program and the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation’s (OPRE’s) HPOG evaluation portfolio, this report introduces each of the HPOG UP 2.0 grantees, their HPOG program partners, and their research projects. It explores the research methodologies of each grantee and highlights takeaways from each research project over four years of project implementation. Authors examine the partnerships between each HPOG UP grantee and their program partner(s), providing examples of how the partnerships grew and evolved and how the research has informed practice within the partner organization and beyond. To conclude, the report highlights the process of translating research into practice, with a focus on strategies that are practitioner- and policymaker-specific and action-oriented.

Key Findings and Highlights

This report was informed by one-on-one calls with each of the three HPOG UP 2.0 grantee teams, as well as project reports, past grantee meetings and presentations, and grantee publications. These primary and secondary sources of data revealed common threads across all three projects that highlight:

- ▶ The value of tailoring education and training and individualizing career pathways,
- ▶ The importance of providing intentional and intensive supportive services to address participant barriers and challenges,
- ▶ The importance of bolstering the capacity of career pathways programs to identify and understand structural barriers and equip participants with the skills and knowledge to overcome them, and
- ▶ The power of active stakeholder engagement and regional partnerships (between researchers, education and training providers, and employers) in developing infrastructures that shape inclusive and equitable local labor markets.

Strategies for bridging research and practice can be summarized in several key takeaways:

- ▶ Successful partnerships between researchers and key stakeholders, including practitioners and employers, work well when they are organic, relational, and built on common understanding. This includes offering mutual benefit, speaking each other’s language, understanding the labor market, and knowing what policies affect key stakeholders and how.
- ▶ Career pathways research and program development should consider a long-term lens.
- ▶ Data collection and analysis methodologies must be adaptable to both program context and external factors.

The report concludes with lessons learned from across the three projects, as well as research-to-practice insights and broader applications beyond HPOG UP 2.0.

Executive Summary

In 2010, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) established the Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) Program to provide Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients and other low-income individuals with education and training for occupations in the healthcare field.¹ The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Human Services (HHS), awarded a first round of five-year HPOG grants (HPOG 1.0) in 2010. In 2015, OFA awarded a second round of HPOG grants (HPOG 2.0), which have continued into 2021. HPOG was authorized as a demonstration program with a mandated federal evaluation, and ACF's Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) supports complementary HPOG 1.0 and HPOG 2.0 evaluation portfolios that include the HPOG University Partnership Research (HPOG UP) grants. In 2011, OPRE awarded five HPOG UP grants to university-based researchers (HPOG UP 1.0). The grants supported research and evaluation studies focused on questions relevant to the HPOG Program goals and objectives; applicants were required to partner with one or more of the HPOG 1.0 program grantees in developing and executing their research plan. In 2016, OPRE awarded a second round of HPOG UP grants (HPOG UP 2.0) to three grantees partnering with HPOG 2.0 programs: **Brandeis University, Loyola University Chicago, and Northwestern University**. The goal of this report is to summarize lessons learned and early findings from the HPOG UP 2.0 research grants as of the end of the HPOG UP 2.0 grant cycle (i.e., September 30, 2020). Following a brief introduction to OFA's HPOG Program and OPRE's HPOG evaluation portfolio, this report:

- ▶ Introduces each of the HPOG UP 2.0 grantees, their program partners, and research projects.
- ▶ Discusses the process of translating research and evaluation findings into practice, with a focus on strategies that are audience-specific and action-oriented.
- ▶ Explains the partnerships between each HPOG UP grantee and their program partners and looks at examples of how they have grown and evolved.
- ▶ Highlights some of the preliminary implications of the HPOG UP grantees' research and summarizes key takeaways from the past four years of project implementation.
- ▶ Concludes with takeaways and broader applications of lessons learned beyond HPOG UP from across the three projects.

As the HPOG 2.0 Program concludes in 2021, findings from the HPOG evaluation portfolio, including the HPOG UP research grants, provide information for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners considering the future of workforce development programs for low-income individuals.

¹ HPOG was authorized by the Affordable Care Act (ACA), Public Law 111-148, 124 Stat. 119, March 23, 2010, sect. 5507(a), "Demonstration Projects to Provide Low-Income Individuals with Opportunities for Education, Training, and Career Advancement to Address Health Professions Workforce Needs," adding sect. 2008(a) to the Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. 1397g(a). The second round of grant awards has been extended until September 29, 2021.

Introduction

The Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) Program provides education and training to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients and other low-income individuals for occupations in the healthcare field that pay well and are expected to either experience labor shortages or be in high demand.² In 2010, the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) awarded the first round of HPOG grants to 32 organizations across 23 states to carry out five-year programs (HPOG 1.0). In 2015, ACF awarded a second round of HPOG grants to 32 organizations across 21 states, continuing through 2021 (HPOG 2.0).

HPOG 2.0 builds on the foundation laid by HPOG 1.0 by more strongly encouraging grantees to design and implement programs that follow a career pathways model through detailed guidance. Career pathways programs provide post-secondary education and training that is organized as a series of manageable steps. Successively, each step leads to higher credentials and employment opportunities in growing occupations and is designed to prepare individuals for the next level of employment and education and provide a credential with labor market value. To effectively engage and retain trainees and facilitate learning across diverse populations, career pathways programs integrate promising instructional strategies, participant supports, and employer connections.³

HPOG was authorized as a demonstration program with a mandated federal evaluation, and ACF's Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) evaluates the HPOG Program using a multipronged strategy to examine program implementation and systems change, as well as outcomes and impacts for participants. OPRE's robust HPOG evaluation portfolio is intended to inform researchers, practitioners, and policymakers about the impact of HPOG programs as they were implemented, as well as broader issues related to the design and operation of workforce development and career training programs. As part of this evaluation portfolio, OPRE funded the HPOG University Partnership Research (HPOG UP) grants, which aimed to augment the evaluation portfolio by supporting studies conducted by university researchers partnering with one or more HPOG programs to answer specific questions about how to improve HPOG services within local contexts. Since 2011, ICF has worked closely with OPRE and the HPOG UP grantees through the facilitation of grantee engagement and dissemination strategies.⁴

The first round of HPOG UP grants were awarded in 2011 to five grantees (HPOG UP 1.0). In 2016, OPRE awarded a second round of HPOG UP grants (HPOG UP 2.0) to three grantees:

- ▶ Brandeis University, Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Institute for Economic and Racial Equity (IERE) in partnership with The Workplace, Inc.;
- ▶ Loyola University Chicago, Center for Research on Self-Sufficiency (CROSS) in partnership with Chicago State University; and
- ▶ Northwestern University, Institute for Policy Research (IPR) in partnership with Community Action Project of Tulsa County.

The HPOG UP 2.0 grantees, which are the focus of this report, worked in partnership with their HPOG program partner(s) to contribute to the body of knowledge around workforce development and career pathways and inform relevant policy and practice decisions. Each HPOG UP grantee coordinated closely with their HPOG program partner to develop and implement research plans tailored to the program. Detailed profiles of each HPOG UP 2.0 grantee study are provided in the subsequent section.

² HPOG was authorized by the Affordable Care Act (ACA), Public Law 111-148, 124 Stat. 119, March 23, 2010, sect. 5507(a), "Demonstration Projects to Provide Low-Income Individuals with Opportunities for Education, Training, and Career Advancement to Address Health Professions Workforce Needs," adding sect. 2008(a) to the Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. 1397g(a). The second round of grant awards has been extended until September 29, 2021.

³ To learn more, visit: <https://career-pathways.org/about-career-pathways>.

⁴ ICF is the contractor for the HPOG UP Research Support project, Contract Number HHSP233201500071. ICF delivers evidence-based solutions, training, technical assistance, and tools for developing and implementing programs that strengthen families and communities. Learn more at www.icf.com.

Grantee Profiles



Grantee Profile:

Brandeis University, Institute for Economic and Racial Equity

HPOG Program Partner:

The WorkPlace, Inc.

Overview

The [Institute for Economic and Racial Equity](#) (IERE) at Brandeis University partnered with The WorkPlace in Bridgeport, CT, to design, implement, and assess a career advancement intervention that enhances existing supports, leverages innovative technology, and engages the regional healthcare community to guide participants along successful career paths following entry-level employment. The Brandeis team designed its career intervention to align with The WorkPlace's Health CareerRx Academy (HCA) curriculum. Through the study, the Brandeis team aims to develop new methods for better understanding and quantifying career pathways.

Specifically, this project seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- ▶ Understand the opportunities and barriers faced by entry-level healthcare employees trying to advance.
- ▶ Develop an evidence-based, technology-driven career advancement and engagement curriculum for employees.
- ▶ Create advancement tools for employers.
- ▶ Determine the effectiveness of the advancement education and engagement curriculum based on a quasi-experimental pilot study.
- ▶ Identify leverage points for employer engagement in policies and practices that foster career advancement.

The project also monitors the challenges that participants of color face in advancement and develops [tools that employers can use](#) to support equitable and culturally effective advancement for all employees.

Brandeis University: Quick Facts

- ▶ HPOG Program Partner: The WorkPlace, Inc.
- ▶ Principal Investigator/Key Staff: Janet Boguslaw, Ph.D.; Jessica Santos, Ph.D., Sylvia Stewart; Sara Chaganti, Ph.D.
- ▶ Primary Methods: Surveys and interviews with program participants, staff, and employer partners; administrative data; literature review; curriculum implementation

Methods

This study uses a mixed method design. Phase I includes participant surveys, HPOG employer partner interviews, and an analysis of existing HPOG 1.0 administrative data, labor market information, and related literature. Phase II includes the development and implementation of the pilot curriculum, and Phase III involves final data collection and analysis.

Research in Action

Through HPOG UP 2.0, the Brandeis team developed the Passport for Career Advancement curriculum to comprehensively shape the participant experience through the lens of retention and advancement (as opposed to traditional “job placement”), from first contact with the HPOG program, to the first coaching meeting, through the arc of the entire education, training, and first employment experience and beyond.

The curriculum is piloted through the Brandeis team’s program partner, The WorkPlace. The WorkPlace’s HCA is built on a partnership of healthcare providers, educators, trainers, and community-based organizations that provides occupational training, work readiness, and other supports in Fairfield County, CT. At the start of HPOG 2.0, the partnership was challenged with several staffing shifts at The WorkPlace, but strengthened over time through continuous, open dialogue and relationship building. Developing the curriculum in a collaborative way helped to cement and grow the partnership; it also enabled the Academy counselors and staff to more deeply embed career advancement in their work with participants and continue to be forward-thinking in their approaches to participant success. The Brandeis team’s goal going into the research was to have a strong working relationship with their program partner, but to also facilitate partnerships for The WorkPlace so the programming is even stronger when the research ends.

The WorkPlace plays an active role in the research process; a dedicated staff member conducts all outreach to participants for interviews with the Brandeis team. The research team states that their success completing virtual interviews during COVID-19 closures would not have been possible without the buy-in from The WorkPlace leadership and staff.

The Brandeis team found that face-to-face interaction with The WorkPlace was critical. Since the research team’s location is a two-hour drive from the program, they hired a local healthcare educator who was familiar with The WorkPlace to be a local researcher and serve as a bridge between the two for project implementation. “One thing that really cemented the partnership was when our team was able to go down and work directly with counselors, trainers, and staff so they could build relationships that were sustainable long distance,” states Principal Investigator Dr. Boguslaw.

The Brandeis team also collaborated with Jewish Vocational Service (JVS) Boston, a recognized leader in workforce development innovations and strategies. The team worked with JVS to co-develop the Passport for Career Advancement curriculum. The Brandeis team noted that JVS leadership integrated new career advancement and equity components into their own programming as a result of its involvement in developing the curriculum. “For JVS to validate the process of re-conceptualizing career advancement is exciting to see,” says Dr. Boguslaw.

Guiding Research Questions

1. What factors facilitate and impede career advancement for entry-level health professionals?
2. Does enhanced employee knowledge and regular communication about advancement opportunities and workplace environment, practices, and processes facilitate advancement for entry-level workers?
3. How can enhanced employer communications and practices generate increased employer commitment and action to promote employee advancement, and facilitate generation of workplace practices and culture that emphasize retention and advancement following initial employment?

The Brandeis team is focused on spreading the career advancement message to enhance traditional workforce development more broadly. Beyond the HPOG UP project, both The WorkPlace and JVS Boston have shared interest in modifying existing pieces of their programming to include more career advancement and equity components. In both cases, they have taken the broader conceptual issues and are translating and embedding them into their practices.

Early Findings and Key Takeaways

The Brandeis team's [early findings](#) challenge workforce systems, training providers, and employers to think beyond linear career pathways and consider other factors that constitute advancement, leading to better outcomes and higher quality jobs for entry-level healthcare workers. While the traditional model typically measures career advancement as a change in job title and/or increase in hourly wage, this study suggests that any improvement in job quality could be considered career advancement by employees if it improves their well-being in some way that is most important to them. For example, career advancement may mean shifting from a per diem position to a full-time position, with the same job title.

This research suggests taking a long-term approach to occupational training that goes beyond training and job placement with a focus on educating and supporting participants in pursuing shorter-term micro-advancements, career navigation, and long-term goal setting. The Brandeis team finds that advancement is not a linear process, and the Passport for Career Advancement curriculum aims to provide tailored, individualized guidance such as coaching to participants to help them map out their vision, goals, and associated next steps, as well as overcome hurdles along the way after initial employment. While the curriculum was developed with healthcare in mind, The WorkPlace is planning to adapt many parts of it for other populations and sectors they serve. The research also indicates that women of color continue to face challenges to securing career advancement, and these strategies may help improve their longer-term employment outcomes.

The Passport for Career Advancement curriculum comprises five workshops:

- ▶ Navigating the Road Through Your Career
- ▶ Starting a New Job
- ▶ Making Your Employer Work for You
- ▶ The Better Jobs Workshop
- ▶ Setting and Meeting Goals

Unlike a traditional curriculum, Passport for Career Advancement includes videos, interactive roadmaps with colorful illustrations and stickers, a board game, and even an online component with tools to help employees advance.

Micro-advancements are small changes in factors like workplace, schedule, and benefits that make a job better for an employee, but do not necessarily come with a change in wage or title.

Brandeis University: Lessons Learned for Researchers

- ▶ Strong partner relationships and buy-in can shift mindsets and practice models.
- ▶ Flexibility in the research approach is critical. The Brandeis team shifted their research design to accommodate lag times in post-intervention data. Shifts in data collection methods (from in-person interviews to virtual) due to the COVID-19 pandemic were also necessary.
- ▶ Approaches to the intervention must be tailored and targeted to specific participant needs.
- ▶ Healthcare career advancement with equity requires a specific focus and program strategies to address issues of disparities in access and outcomes.

The Brandeis team's next steps include developing a demonstration project to further validate their career advancement models and curricula and to establish new workforce relationships with healthcare employers. The team is also interested in creating or being part of a community of practice that includes other stakeholders with a common interest in growing the work around equitable career advancement.



Grantee Profile:

Loyola University Chicago, Center for Research on Self-Sufficiency (CROSS)

HPOG Program Partner:

Chicago State University

Overview

For its study of the Partnership to STEP UP in Health Careers HPOG program (STEP UP), [Loyola University Chicago](#) partners with lead HPOG program grantee Chicago State University (CSU) and two additional institutions: another academic institution and a social services provider. The two academic institutions (CSU and South Suburban College (SSC)), provide education and training to HPOG participants, while the social services provider, Metropolitan Family Services (MFS), ensures that participants have access to the supportive services they need to move successfully through their training program and obtain and retain employment. The program partners also collect participant data through surveys administered at five time points: baseline (program enrollment), midpoint of program engagement, program completion, three months post-employment, and six months post-employment.

The study is focused on the concept of psychological self-sufficiency (PSS) and how it translates to economic self-sufficiency (ESS) for HPOG participants. Specifically, this project seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- ▶ Address the challenge of achieving ESS among low-income job seekers in the health professions.
- ▶ Examine the extent to which PSS, a concept representing goal-directed psychological capital, affects one's employment placement and retention in the health professions.
- ▶ Determine whether engaging employers to provide coaching as an organizational practice makes a difference in maintaining PSS that may have been developed through the HPOG program, and whether this leads to employment and retention outcomes.

Methods

The team conducted surveys of program participants; focus groups with staff, employers, program alumni, and current students; and an analysis of administrative data to complete the project.

Loyola University Chicago: Quick Facts

- ▶ HPOG Program Partner: Chicago State University
- ▶ Principal Investigator/Key Staff: Philip Hong, Ph.D.; Timothy O'Brien, Ph.D.; Rana Hong, Ph.D.; Dara Lewis, Ph.D.
- ▶ Primary Methods: Surveys of program participants; focus groups with program staff and employer partners; analysis of administrative data

Psychological Self-Sufficiency is:

- ▶ An individual goal-directed process, when one's outlook shifts from **seeing barriers** to success to **building and sustaining hope** toward achieving goals.
- ▶ The force inside someone that **drives cognitive and non-cognitive change** by transforming barriers into hope actions.

Research in Action

The partnership between CSU and the Loyola research team is built on shared values and priorities. Both partners are dedicated to reaching the hardest to serve, supporting students as they confront their unique barriers, and engaging thoughtfully with the local business community. At the start of HPOG 2.0, the Loyola team sought out CSU as a partner since they were local to Chicago, believing that the partnership would be successful due to shared interest and commitment to the community. Through conversations between the Loyola team and CSU about the PSS concept, CSU became interested in integrating the Loyola team's model to further support career advancement for their students.

The Loyola team actively engages with the direct service provider, MFS, as well, which is important to ensure that data collection efforts remain strong. MFS is responsible for administering surveys at intake and during program participation, so they serve as Loyola's initial point of contact with participants. They also administer post-employment/follow-up surveys and input data into the HPOG 2.0 Participant Accomplishment and Grant Evaluation System (PAGES).⁵ The shared commitment to and understanding of the study and data collection process is crucial to the success of the Loyola team's research. Principal Investigator Dr. Philp Hong noted that, even as program staff transitioned, Loyola has seen continuity in data collection and management because the team has proactively stayed connected.

Throughout HPOG UP 2.0, the Loyola team has also placed an emphasis on engaging the business community, sharing with potential employers what they have learned from HPOG that will help employers improve their hiring and retention practices. CSU invites the Loyola team to their employer forums, which provide an opportunity for CSU and its stakeholders to engage with employers and seek their input and feedback on programming. Participating in the forums allowed the Loyola team to connect with organizations that hire HPOG graduates early in the study process. These connections have led to additional opportunities to further their research and translate their model into practice by piloting it within employer environments, including surveying new hires. Although the COVID-19 pandemic suspended engagement, the Loyola team was able to survey over 430 new and current employees (some of whom were HPOG participants) through recruitment events and in-service trainings. The team plans to continue the relationship once in-person gatherings resume.

The Loyola team has made it a priority to translate PSS as a theory of change into the TIP model®, described further below, which employers can use in their employee engagement models. Buy-in from an organization's upper-level leadership and human resources departments has been crucial to successfully implementing the model, and Loyola has shared information on return on investment to respond to potential concerns about cost and time commitments. Dr. Hong emphasizes that partnerships should be organic and relational. However, establishing them also requires persistence. It often takes multiple interactions to generate interest and commitment for a win-win solution for healthcare employers and employees.

Guiding Research Questions

1. To what extent does psychological self-sufficiency (PSS) contribute to economic self-sufficiency (ESS)?
2. How does HPOG program performance compare to traditional job training and placement models based on PSS as the theory of change?
3. How is individuals' short-term and long-term economic success determined by employer engagement?

The **TIP® curriculum** contains 15 transformative employment readiness modules designed to help jobseekers move from chronic unemployment—resulting from welfare receipt, homelessness, substance use, mental health issues, prison sentencing, or other experiences—into long-term, sustainable employment.

⁵ The Participant Accomplishment and Grant Evaluation System (PAGES) is a participant tracking and management system that includes data on participant characteristics, engagement in activities and services, and training and employment outcomes.

Early Findings and Key Takeaways

During the first round of HPOG UP, the Loyola team established PSS as a theory of change, synthesizing the connections between employment barriers, PSS, and ESS. Through HPOG UP 2.0, PSS has emerged as a practice theory that both employers and practitioners can apply. PSS can be used in a variety of social service settings, including fatherhood programs, workforce training, financial literacy programs, and reentry programs. The research illustrates how the variables interact, the processes by which one is translated into the other, and potential implications for wider application. The team plans to continue sharing their research to help employers and practitioners empower individuals to be strong agents of change in their own lives. The PSS lens shows how students navigate their barriers and even use them to propel themselves forward.

HPOG UP 2.0 has also helped the team understand how PSS can be applied across disciplines, including youth empowerment, educational success, violence prevention, and health promotion, in addition to the applications highlighted above. Employment outcomes are one key area of interest, but the team is also seeing broader implications for mental health and well-being, including greater levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Loyola University: Lessons Learned for Researchers

- ▶ Speak the language of business and frame the approach around return on investment when working with employers.
- ▶ Be persistent in engagement with partners (or potential partners) and maintain consistent communication.
- ▶ Support a growth mindset in participants. Tailored coaching can enable participants to translate their barriers to employment hope and, from there, to new opportunities for employment action.
- ▶ Be agile in the research approach. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Loyola team shifted data collection to remote platforms and continued communicating with employers and partners throughout times of uncertainty to keep partnerships strong.

Following HPOG UP 2.0, the Loyola team plans to continue expanding the application of PSS as a practice theory. They are considering new ways that organizations, and particularly employers, can integrate it into their business framework to foster a workplace culture of inclusion and diversity. This includes the development of Transforming Impossible into Possible (TIP)[®], a curriculum framework created by the Loyola team that they are working to implement in workplace and social services settings. Dr. Hong and his team believe if TIP[®] is implemented earlier on in the career pathway, when students are developing their vocational identities, it would strengthen them as future candidates in the job market.



Grantee Profile:

Northwestern University, Institute for Policy Research (IPR)

HPOG Program Partner:

Community Action Project of Tulsa County (CAP Tulsa)

Overview

[Northwestern University](#), along with local data collection partner Oklahoma State University, is conducting an evaluation of the scaled-up version of *CareerAdvance*[®], a career training program operated by the Community Action Project of Tulsa County (CAP Tulsa). *CareerAdvance*[®] is an antipoverty program that serves low-income parents and children together by offering education and training in the healthcare sector to parents while their children are enrolled in Head Start, other early childhood education or care, or early elementary school. The study takes a two-generation (two-gen) approach to examine program impacts on both parent and child human capital outcomes, including healthcare certification, healthcare employment, and household earnings for parents and school attendance and academic achievement for children. It also looks at how parents and children adapt to and cope with the stress associated with work and school.

The evaluation seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- ▶ Examine the effect of *CareerAdvance*[®] on parents' employment, earnings, and psychological well-being as well as children's school outcomes, such as attendance.
- ▶ Explore work-family-school adaptation for both generations, including stress and coping, language interactions in the home environment, and identity and self-efficacy.

Methods

To examine work-family-school adaptation across generations, the study relies on data collected from: (a) parent and child focus groups, (b) a web-based interactive assessment of children's perceptions of school and family life ("puppet interviews"), and (c) real-time measurement of language use in the home environment, using the Language Environment Analysis (LENA) device. The study also leverages survey data and school administrative data.

Northwestern University: Quick Facts

- ▶ HPOG Program Partner: CAP Tulsa
- ▶ Principal Investigator/Key Staff: Teresa Eckrich Sommer, Ph.D.; P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, Ph.D.; Terri Sabol, Ph.D.; Amanda Morris, Ph.D.; Lauren Tighe, Ph.D.; Kenn Dela Cruz, M.A.
- ▶ Primary Methods: Surveys of program parent participants; children's school administrative data; focus groups with parents and children; puppet interviews with children; digital data from recording devices of parents and children

Research in Action

The Northwestern team's partnership with CAP Tulsa has grown and developed since the start of HPOG 1.0 in 2010. Principal Investigator Dr. Teresa Sommer, described their relationship as “ideal”—open, comfortable, and trusting. The relationship is reciprocal and involves a process of shared learning, as workforce training was relatively new to both partners at the start of the project. CAP Tulsa has gained a greater understanding of how their work impacts the families they serve, as well how to apply a workforce development lens to programming. The Northwestern team has also gained a more nuanced understanding of two-gen impacts, how outcomes for parents affect their children, and the importance of including both generations in the measurement of self-sufficiency outcomes.

Prior to partnering with CAP Tulsa, the research team at Northwestern was interested in how to help parents of young children achieve economic self-sufficiency. They planned to partner with Head Start programs engaging in workforce training as a platform for this research. The Northwestern team then discovered that CAP Tulsa was already doing similar work as part of their first HPOG program grant, and the two organizations collaborated on the CAP Family Life Study under HPOG UP 1.0.

CAP Tulsa provided both adult and child education during the first round of HPOG. As the second round of HPOG started, CAP Tulsa felt their [learnings from HPOG 1.0](#) pointed to a need for a partner that could lead on the workforce side while CAP Tulsa focused on what they do best—early education. Therefore, for HPOG 2.0, CAP Tulsa partnered with Tulsa Community of Work, allowing them to scale up their program model in size and scope.

Northwestern holds monthly calls with CAP Tulsa to keep them updated on study progress and what they are learning from the data collected. CAP Tulsa staff can then translate the data to what they are seeing on the ground and provide the Northwestern team with unique insight into the research process. Dr. Sommer noted that the team loves learning about the program from CAP Tulsa's perspective because it enables them to understand how what is happening on the ground affects what they see in the data.

Early Findings and Key Takeaways⁶

In HPOG 1.0, the team saw [positive effects](#) of program participation on certification, employment, income, and psychological well-being, and parents have even reported improvements in physical health two years after program enrollment. Further, CareerAdvance® children showed higher average rates of attendance (by about six days) and nearly half the rate of chronic absence in Head Start than matched comparison children after one semester. Notably, all children in the HPOG 1.0 sample performed above the national averages of Head Start children on assessments of receptive language and math skills.⁷ Ongoing research efforts reveal the potential promise of two-gen programs for improving parent and child outcomes and have several implications for Head Start programs and policy.

⁶ HPOG UP 2.0 findings are expected from Northwestern in spring 2021.

⁷ Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. (2020). *Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES): 2009 Cohort*. Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2020-03-18. <https://www.childandfamilydataarchive.org/cfda/archives/cfda/studies/34558>

Guiding Research Questions

1. What is the impact of CareerAdvance® on: (a) parents' human capital (e.g., healthcare certification, employment in the healthcare field, household earnings, and psychological well-being); and (b) children's human capital (school outcomes)?
2. What are the possible explanatory mechanisms behind why the program is or is not effective, including coping and risk among parents, language interactions in the home environment, and identity and self-efficacy among parents and children?

Northwestern University: Lessons Learned for Researchers

- ▶ Reciprocal partnerships result in shared learning and more opportunities for research.
- ▶ Tailored and targeted research methods that mirror interventions can yield rich and comprehensive data.
- ▶ Early challenges caused by delays in program enrollment and data collection often lead to a need to adjust research plans and expectations of when it is feasible to release findings.
- ▶ Unexpected events can yield opportunities, such as learning about how participation in CareerAdvance® has equipped parents to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly since those with careers in healthcare are working on the front lines.

The Northwestern team will complete their second wave of data collection in fall 2020 and begin analyses and dissemination immediately. At the conclusion of HPOG UP 2.0, they will focus on the longitudinal follow-up study of HPOG 1.0. Having collected data pre-COVID-19, they are also interested in comparing outcomes before and after the pandemic in order to better understand the long-term effects of career training, and whether those effects are bolstered or diminished in the time of crisis.

HPOG UP and the Translation of Research to Practice

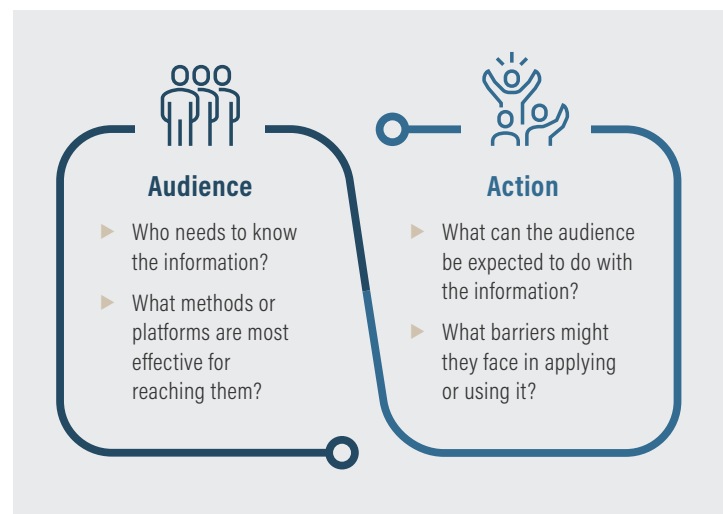
A central component of the HPOG UP 2.0 grants is the translation of research findings and lessons learned to inform human services or workforce development practitioners, policymakers, and the research field through effective dissemination strategies. OPRE's [Value-Added Research Dissemination Framework](#) defines dissemination as a "planned process that involves consideration of target audiences and the settings in which research findings are to be received, and where appropriate, communicating... in ways that will facilitate research uptake in decision-making processes and practice."⁸ As part of its role supporting the HPOG UP grantees, ICF helped the grantees target their resources to appropriate audiences including the general public, practitioners, researchers, program designers, and policymakers.

The HPOG UP dissemination approach is centered on the belief that the translation of research to practice goes beyond simply making research available through the traditional vehicles of journal publication and academic conference presentations. It involves a process of sharing and transferring information, growing the knowledge base across self-sufficiency disciplines, and informing research advances and programmatic development in ways that encourage targeted stakeholders to use research in their work. The goal of all HPOG UP 2.0 dissemination efforts is to inform the future design and operation of workforce development and career training programs.

Action-Oriented Engagement

Throughout HPOG UP 2.0, dissemination efforts have focused on answering four questions centered around ICF's "AA" framework, one that is audience-specific and action-oriented (see **Figure 1**). This framework allows researchers to think strategically about the end goal of their dissemination activities—focusing on the actions and corresponding outcomes that they hope come out of it versus sharing the more complex activities and methodologies that make up so much of the research experience. Translating research findings presents the challenge of distilling complex studies down into plain, concise, and easy-to-understand language that enables communication with non-research audiences. While research to practice is often conceptualized as a direct arrow, with practitioners benefiting from the findings of researchers, there has been less focus on how translation

Figure 1: Audience-Specific and Action-Oriented Dissemination



⁸ Macoubrie, J., & Harrison, C. (2013). *The value-added research dissemination framework*. Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Report #2013-10. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/value-added-dissemination-framework>

occurs, as well as the feedback loop that should inform the research in return, as shown in **Figure 2**. ICF's model is structured as a continuum, which includes a feedback loop to demonstrate that information flows both ways, for the benefit of both practitioner and researcher.

Dissemination represents the concept of action-oriented engagement; the goal is not to simply publish research and hope that stakeholders will find it, but rather to actively engage with various target audiences.⁹ For the HPOG UP grantees, these target audiences extend beyond their HPOG program partners to include other workforce development programs, employers who hire HPOG participants, and policymakers who design grant programs such as HPOG. The HPOG UP grantees tailor their engagement approaches based on these audiences.

Figure 2: The Research to Practice Continuum



Practitioner Partnerships

Strong research to practice partnerships are collaborative; they strive for mutual understanding and shared commitment to program improvement from both researchers and practitioners, rather than simply asking how researchers can better disseminate information to practitioners.¹⁰ With support from ICF, the HPOG UP grantees have leveraged their close working relationships with their program partners to inform their dissemination strategies. These relationships provided mutual benefit for both partners, enabling the HPOG UP grantees to define their research questions in collaboration with their partners. In essence, the partnerships were structured to allow learning to flow in both directions: from researcher to practitioner and vice versa. These types of partnerships enable researchers to better understand practitioner opportunities and challenges, ultimately leading to more actionable findings.

HPOG UP Dissemination Achievements

The HPOG UP grantees each approached the opportunities and challenges of translating their research to a practitioner audience in unique ways. From the start of HPOG UP 2.0, the grantees worked with OPRE and ICF to develop briefs and infographics and share messages via webinars, presentations, and blogs. Each dissemination activity was conceptualized with a specific goal and target audience in mind, and products highlighted lessons learned and project findings in engaging, visual ways to appeal to each audience, ensure understanding, and inspire action.

⁹ Tseng, V. (2012). *Partnerships: Shifting the dynamics between research and practice*. William T. Grant Foundation. <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2015/10/Partnerships-Shifting-the-Dynamics-of-Research-and-Practice1.pdf>

¹⁰ Ibid.

Table 1 showcases some of the products the grantees developed under the HPOG UP 2.0 grant in partnership with OPRE and ICF and provides insights into each grantee’s dissemination process.

Table 1: Grantee Dissemination Activities and Achievements

Brandeis University

HPOG UP Dissemination Products and Activities

- ▶ Rethinking Career Pathways and Advancement in Health Care brief
- ▶ Workforce Development-Mapping the Solution: Career Advancement for Entry-Level Healthcare Employees brief
- ▶ Employer Engagement—Mapping the Solution: Career Advancement for Entry-Level Healthcare Employees brief

Wider Dissemination Efforts

The Brandeis University team developed multiple infographic-style briefs to inform and engage workforce development stakeholders, including training providers, employers, and policymakers, about the key takeaways of their project related to career pathways and career advancement. In addition to living on the team’s website, the briefs are shared directly with workforce development stakeholders at meetings or events or electronically, and will complement the team’s presentations at future conferences.



Related publications and briefs by the Brandeis research team are listed [here](#).

Loyola University

HPOG UP Dissemination Products and Activities

- ▶ Psychological Self-Sufficiency (PSS) Research brief
- ▶ Transforming Impossible Into Possible (TIP ®) brief

Wider Dissemination Efforts

Along with written products such as the brief shown here, the Loyola University team has consistently sought opportunities to share their work with both program partners and local employers, hoping to engage employers who need to boost retention and/or improve their workplace culture. By answering the question of “what’s in it for them” if they hire HPOG participants or adopt a new model of career advancement, the Loyola team was able to further their conversations with local employers by attending partner meetings and employer forums to share progress and lessons learned. The team has learned that two-way communication that engages the partners and employers in the research process is key to securing buy-in.

Related research publications by the Loyola research team are found [here](#).

Northwestern University

HPOG UP Dissemination Products and Activities

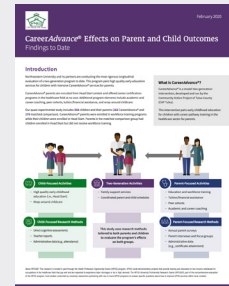
- ▶ Webinar hosted by the Self-Sufficiency Research Clearinghouse, Whole Family Approaches to Research and Practice: A look at CAP Tulsa's 2Gen CareerAdvance® program
- ▶ CareerAdvance® Effects on Parent and Child Outcomes: Findings to Date brief

Wider Dissemination Efforts

The Northwestern University team has shared their research progress and key takeaways with a specific stakeholder group—program participants and their families. To do so, they held targeted outreach events called Family Nights, along with their local data collection partner, Oklahoma State University (OSU), and CAP Tulsa, to provide participant families with the opportunity to hear how the study had progressed.

The team has found that engaging the families in the process has helped secure buy-in from participants and long-term commitment to the study.

Related publications, including policy briefs, by the Northwestern research team are found [here](#).



Project Synergies

Shared Learnings and Early Findings

HPOG UP grantees have identified shorter-term lessons learned from the HPOG UP 2.0 research studies, particularly when considered along with data collected during the HPOG UP 1.0 research studies. The long-term findings of HPOG 2.0 programming as examined by the HPOG UP 2.0 studies, particularly those related to economic self-sufficiency, will take more time to understand, as many participants are still completing their training or in the early stages of employment.¹¹ However, several key themes that have already emerged across projects are the importance of: (1) individualizing career pathways; (2) offering a variety of supportive services that address the needs of HPOG's target populations; (3) tackling structural barriers to promote equity; and (4) regional collaboration in workforce development.

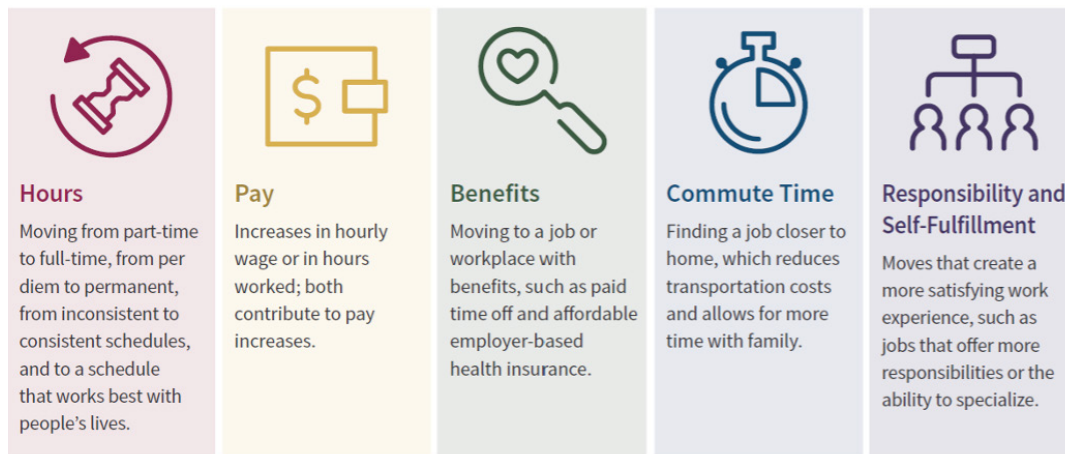


Tailored Training and Individualized Career Pathways

One of HPOG UP 2.0's early implications for programming centers on the importance of tailoring career pathways training to meet participants' specific needs. HPOG UP grantees have observed the importance of adapting career pathways to individual circumstances, whether that means supporting individuals through career advancement challenges, coaching to transform perceived barriers into hope, or tailoring children's programming to align with career training their parents receive.

The individualization of the career pathway could mean the reconceptualization of advancement, as the [Brandeis team has documented](#) and illustrated in **Figure 3**. The team's findings challenge systems and stakeholders to consider how advancement might look based on the specific needs or goals of an individual. For some, this may mean higher pay. For others, indicators such as less time commuting or better hours, which lead to more time with family, might improve overall work quality, job satisfaction, and long-term success. Recognizing these positive micro-advancements may help individuals stay on a path to multiple forms of advancement. Education and training can be tailored to emphasize this point by encouraging participants to identify what they prioritize in a job, why these things are important to them, and what workplaces will enable them to achieve a long-term vision that fits their priorities.

Figure 3: Redefining and expanding on the features of a career that could reflect advancement¹²



¹¹ OPRE's HPOG Evaluation Portfolio examines the longer-term impacts of both HPOG 1.0 and 2.0. More information is available here: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/evaluation-portfolio-for-the-health-profession-opportunity-grants-hpog>.

¹² For more information, see Brandeis University's Rethinking Career Pathways and Advancement in Health Care brief (2019). <https://heller.brandeis.edu/iere/pdfs/jobs/rethinking-career-pathways-and-advancement-in-health-care.pdf>

Individualization of the career pathway could also mean a process of coaching for individual growth, transforming employment barriers into hope actions toward success outcomes, as the Loyola team has studied and conceptualized as a theory of change. The TIP® model is designed to simultaneously address the needs of both participants and employers throughout one's career development process, coaching participants through 15 transformative employment readiness sessions that focus on personal growth and development topics including self-growth, motivation, and goal-oriented pathways. Northwestern's program partner, CAP Tulsa, uses a human-centered design approach to gather participant feedback and make changes to program design to accommodate working parents. The program encourages participants to pace learning based on what is reasonable given their own personal responsibilities and constraints, tailoring course loads to individual needs and goals.



Intentional and Intensive Supports to Address Barriers and Challenges

HPOG UP 2.0 grantee research has highlighted the importance of providing appropriate supportive services to participants to bolster retention in training and long-term career growth. The Northwestern team noted that many of those seeking workforce development opportunities in healthcare, particularly among the TANF population, are mothers with children. Without intentionally addressing their larger set of needs outside education and training, consistent participation can be difficult. The Northwestern team has seen CAP Tulsa address these unique needs by providing low or no cost education for parents and their children, coordinating parent-child schedules, offering childcare, and providing intensive coaching and opportunities for peer connection to navigate barriers. Northwestern has found that this helps parents persist in their job training programs; programming must acknowledge that family life and parenthood are critical elements of success.

The Loyola team also saw the significant barriers that students often face when participating in an HPOG program. Some students take years to complete their program, and, to do so, need support and coaching to navigate daily challenges. The team's recent analysis has focused on clusters of barriers and how different subsets of participants have seen their levels of employment hope fluctuate at various time points. Early findings indicate that recognizing and accepting certain barriers as they are (such as mental and physical health barriers) could be a strength rather than a risk factor; it can be empowering for those with barriers to recognize, perceive, and address them with support from program staff to move forward with persistence in their goal pursuit activities.

Brandeis's Passport for Career Advancement curriculum is designed to provide support to participants beyond education and training and throughout the early stages of their careers. This intervention includes advancement-focused programming with strategies for mapping out potential barriers and solutions; highlights informal networks participants can lean on for help navigating their career paths, including family, friends, and the broader community; and teaches participants about making human resources departments "work for you."



Opportunities for Identifying and Tackling Structural Barriers and Promoting Equity

The HPOG UP grantees found that program and policy flexibility are critical success factors in the participant experience. Systemic and structural barriers—such as stringent program requirements and workplace discrimination—often limit the potential for overall participant success. The Brandeis team has found that rather than limiting an individual's path within inflexible program rules, training structures should adapt to meet individuals where they are.

The grantees agree that while individuals' motivation and hope are key success factors, institutional dynamics also play an important role. Specifically, grantees found that employers often claim diversity and equity as key values in mission-based hiring practices aimed at enhancing patient-centered care, but do not prioritize these values in their organizational cultures. The Loyola team's TIP® model is designed to address institutional and opportunity structure, equipping participants to navigate these challenges rather than internalize them. The Northwestern team learned that in addressing these types of barriers, a light touch is not enough. Programs must use intentional, intensive, and tailored strategies to help participants recognize structural barriers and work through them. While equipping participants to achieve in the face of inequity is critical, the grantees agree that programs, institutions, and structures must do more to eliminate barriers and open the doors to opportunity for participants with diverse sets of skills and experiences.



Active Stakeholder Engagement and Regional Collaboration

A strong regional infrastructure can make a significant difference in the quality and outcomes associated with education and training as well as job placement, retention, and long-term advancement. Individual success is not the responsibility of the career pathways program alone, as other stakeholders (such as partners and employers) contribute to a participant's experience, opportunities, and growth overtime. The Brandeis team found that while the onus should not fall exclusively on education programs themselves, these programs can and should play a lead role in helping to engage infrastructure across all levels that touch participants.

Similarly, the Loyola team suggested that programs engage employers in ways that go beyond simply seeking out benevolent hiring partners, instead working with the business communities to drive and shape training and education. This deeper engagement could help to build an inclusive and diverse workforce that could yield measurable retention and advancement outcomes, as well as enhanced quality in patient services and healthcare.

Key Takeaways for Researchers

The HPOG UP 2.0 experience has highlighted several key takeaways for the workforce development and human services research fields as follows.

Partnerships work well when they are organic, relational, and built on common understanding.



Build mutually beneficial relationships.

Stakeholder engagement for the HPOG UP grantees hinges on relationship building, as well as the ability to answer the question, "What's in it for me?" Grantees have learned that one way to achieve this goal is to approach employers as customers and consider the interaction from their perspective. The HPOG UP grantees heavily invested in the process of building relationships with the goal of maintaining a consistent understanding of the healthcare industry, workplace culture, and how to link job seekers to appropriate opportunities.



Speak your partner's language.

The grantees learned the language of the local healthcare workforce and cultivated an understanding of the partners' internal processes related to hiring, human resource management, training, and advancement. There is a need to understand what makes these organizations grow, what policies affect them, what skills gaps they are facing in the region, and why. This more nuanced understanding is reflected in stronger rapport with both program and employer partnerships. For example, the Brandeis team worked in partnership with program partner staff to create a reciprocal learning environment where both parties had the opportunity to learn from and understand the other. This allowed the team to shape the curriculum materials in a way that aligned with the culture and business processes of The WorkPlace, making delivery possible.



Foster lasting relationships.

Creating consistent, long-lasting relationships with partners in the community is important for translating research findings into practice and ensuring their sustained impact. For example, the Loyola team invested significant time and energy into employer outreach, and more important, continued engagement. It can be difficult to keep employers engaged over many years while waiting for outcomes to manifest. Involving employers in the research experience can help mitigate this challenge by ensuring that their outcomes of interest are represented and examined. As a consistent voice at employer forums, the Loyola team clearly communicated expectations, sought employer feedback, offered opportunities for mutual benefit, and provided updates to employers to keep them engaged in the team's progress.

Research (and workforce programming) should consider a long-term lens.



Align program opportunities with career advancement realities.

The grantees learned that their program partners faced some difficult choices toward the end of the grant cycles—for example, whether to focus on enrolling more participants in short-term trainings or invest in longer-term training for fewer participants. The Brandeis team believes that a long-term view of programming would allow providers to set more participants up for success. A longer-term program enables participants to enter employment at a higher level, more effectively navigate their careers over time, and set long-term goals. This focus should carry over to career navigation and advancement assistance beyond the entry-level period. From a programmatic standpoint, this change might include shifting funding to encourage long-term career advancement vs. short-term outcomes, such as training completion and employment placement in jobs that are primarily per diem like home healthcare.



Manage expectations of a non-research audience.

Program partners want to see the effect of their programming early on, particularly because funding is often tied to demonstrating outcomes of interest to funders. However, since many of the outcomes tied to the grantees' studies are long term, the teams noted the importance of managing expectations for their partners. Competing priorities and demands on HPOG program partners' time and resources were also a challenge. Grantees suggest managing expectations by involving program partners in research and data collection processes early, so they have a more nuanced understanding of how long it takes desired outcomes to manifest.



Consider a long-term approach for the research.

Taking a long view of the research can be difficult, considering sustainability and funding challenges. However, it is valuable to consider impacts beyond a limited period. The Northwestern team has worked with CAP Tulsa through both HPOG 1.0 and HPOG 2.0 and credits the long-term partnership for allowing them to develop a foundation and build on it. Common understanding of the duration of the program and the length of time required to do the research and provide the strongest possible evidence base are crucial.

Data collection and analysis methodologies must be adaptable to both program context and external factors.



Tailor methodologies to align with program models.

Each of the HPOG UP grantees have data collection methodologies uniquely tailored to their partners and the programming they provide. One example is the Northwestern team, whose data collection methods are specific to the age groups with which they are working. For example, the team uses puppet interviews in lieu of focus groups for young children, and LENA devices to measure linguistic stimulation in the home environment for infants. This approach allows the team to take a robust, comprehensive approach to data collection that considers all stakeholders.



Be agile and responsive to external changes.

All three grantee teams had to be flexible as timelines shifted, programs were delayed, staffing changed, and other roadblocks came up along the way. The COVID-19 pandemic induced unprecedented challenges and stress for all program stakeholders, including participants, HPOG program partners, and the academic institutions at which the grantees are based. Research teams had to navigate data collection and analysis remotely, which meant the revision of Institutional Review Board approvals and additional unanticipated delays. The Northwestern team relied on school administrative data, but there have been delays in receiving that data as school districts shut down.

However, adaptability to extreme circumstances also created unique research opportunities for the grantees. For example, the Northwestern team plans to take a closer look at how participation in HPOG has equipped participants to work in the healthcare field during the pandemic. The team is particularly interested in the short- and long-term effects of career training and whether those effects are bolstered or diminished during the time of a pandemic.

Conclusion

The HPOG Program is a demonstration project intended to identify strategies for addressing a critical gap in the nation's economy: many Americans struggle to find jobs that pay enough to support a family and reach their goals, while at the same time, many healthcare employers struggle to find qualified staff to fill positions and care for patients in need.¹³ Since its inception, HPOG has sought to address these dual challenges by providing education and training to TANF recipients and other low-income individuals for healthcare occupations that pay well and are in high demand. The program simultaneously aims to be responsive to community workforce needs, matching careers in a growing field with people who are eager to fill them. HPOG programs seek to provide opportunities for participants to obtain higher education and secure positions that provide opportunities for advancement and personal growth, ultimately leading to economic stability.¹⁴

Through their partnerships with local HPOG programs, the HPOG UP 2.0 research grantees—Brandeis University, Loyola University Chicago, and Northwestern University—aimed to answer critical questions for communities about how healthcare career pathways programs can support low-income individuals and families while at the same time filling a need in the nation's economy. Together, the HPOG UP 2.0 grantees, along with OPRE and ICF, worked to marry career pathways research with adaptability to practice. Project synergies include findings around the importance of tailored career pathways, intensive and intentional services, strong regional collaboration across stakeholders, and supporting participants in breaking down barriers at both the individual and structural level.

An important component of OPRE's robust [HPOG evaluation portfolio](#), the HPOG UP grantees' findings may help strengthen future career pathways approaches that could lead to success for employers, career pathways programs, and low-income individuals alike. The grantees challenge designers of future efforts to emphasize holistic supportive approaches that equip individuals to tackle individual and structural barriers and empower them to self-advocate for long-term career growth and advancement in a variety of forms. As research on HPOG and similar programs continues, the HPOG UP grantees highlight the value of strong, mutually beneficial partnerships as well as long-term, adaptable, and flexible approaches.

Overall, the HPOG UP grantees created a research community that aims to influence next steps in the career pathways field. Taken together, the work of the HPOG UP grantees highlights key strategies and approaches that will advance the workforce development and human services fields.

¹³ Office of Family Assistance. (2019). *What is HPOG?* <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/hpog/about>

¹⁴ Ibid.

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