A Qualitative Study of the Planning Processes Used to Build the Human Resources of Firms Through Career Pathways

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This study uses data from a qualitative study of career pathway programs to investigate the incidence and type of organizational partnerships between employers, education and other agencies in workforce development. Findings demonstrate that education providers lead the partnerships, but that organizations divide into either peer to peer or intermediary networks. Partnerships which focus on planning are increasingly important to human resource development.

Keywords: Human Resource Planning, Workforce Development, Partnerships

Connecting low income adults and youth to jobs that facilitate advancement is a critical issue for public policy. During the past two years federal policy makers have undertaken revision of a number of critical pieces of legislation to serve low income workers. Reauthorization of the Carl Perkins legislation, which is ongoing, raises the profile of educational interventions that structure "career pathways." These federal policies are mirrored in a series of state level experiments in places such as Ohio, Kentucky, or Washington where career pathways have become a critical tool in the education of adults. Career pathway programs offer adults with many barriers to long term labor market success a structured sequence of education programs connected to jobs within firms.

The programs, however, rely on strong linkages with employers as a key structural feature. Employer involvement in career pathways, just as employer involvement in apprenticeships or other forms of work-based learning, remains largely unexplored both in terms of its characteristics and the impact on individuals (Bailey *et al.*, 2004; Hawley & Marks, 2005). What kinds of planning processes are agencies using to implement career pathways evolve? What was the role of firms, and more specifically human resources departments, within these planning processes?

Theoretical Framework

In recent years the federal role in education at the state and local levels has expanded dramatically. Through government legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, the Perkins Act in 1998, the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, Washington has strengthened its role in key areas. While the specific provisions of each of the acts differ, they share commitments to an increased federal role in accountability and testing, often on a business model. Throughout this period of reform, business ideas and business principles have become increasingly critical parts of the education reform models. The overall critique, stated most forcefully in the 1990s, hinged on the superiority of market over bureaucratic organization of education (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Making business institutions contribute critically to educational quality – rather than simply disseminating market logic - is a much more ambitious goal, and potentially more important for educational practice and business performance. There are many ongoing experiments with business involvement in education and training in the U.S. These range from using vouchers for youth in cities like Cleveland and states such as Florida, to contracting out educational services to companies such as Edison Schools (Herrington, 1999; Rouse, 1998). These current efforts rest on a century of business involvement in career and technical education, which remains largely unexplored (Kincheloe, 1999). However, how these businesses improve the quality of education remains largely ignored in the heat of the arguments over vouchers.

Career Pathways, educational programs that direct youth and adults through organized educational programs, offer a promising policy activity to improve the quality of schooling and provide organizations access to human resources in technical fields. The recent Senate bill reauthorizing the Perkins legislation focuses on pathways that offer technical skills preparation at both the secondary and post secondary levels and provides for concurrent enrollment of youth (Senate Bill S-250). Career pathways for *low income adults* are the subject of considerable policy debate currently in the United States as they are a programmatic strategy for dealing simultaneously with the barriers that individuals face to labor market success as well as the need for technical skills in an educational context (Jenkins, 2003; Megson & Robins, 2004).

The research literature on employer involvement in education and training is relatively weak. Much of the literature is descriptive in nature, and does not help to develop our understanding of the impact of employers on career pathways or other related academic programs. Workforce development scholars hold that relationships with employers will improve the structure and services provided to participants. In recent reports, Osterman (2001) and Osterman and Lautsch (1996) describe the attitudes of employers towards disadvantaged workers on the whole, and document the involvement of workforce development organizations with employers(Osterman, 2001; Osterman & Lautsch, 1996). Melendez & Harrison (1997) describe a similar set of collaborative mechanisms between employers and job training organizations in California (Melendez & Harrison, 1997). This research stresses that organizations that collaborate with employers are able to achieve important outcomes for individual participants. This collaboration is frequently focused on ensuring job placements or training placements for trainees (Melendez & Harrison, 1997). Evidence shows that employer involvement has potential benefits for low wage workers. Bishop (1994) investigated the impact of job training on workers, but focused on whether or not job training took place with the employer or through a training program (Bishop, 1994). He found a positive benefit to participating in training through an employer. Bassi & Ludwig (2000) researched the impact of school-to-work programs in companies on participant's earnings. Ahlstrand et. al., (2001) reported on a study showing the characteristics of firms that provided more employer based training for lower-wage workers (Ahlstrand *et al.*, 2001). Firms that emphasized employer based training for lower-wage workers were larger than the average firm, were located in skill intensive industries, offered better benefits, and had low employee turnover.

The current research literature leaves major questions about the extent of employer (or other partnership) involvement in career pathways. While we are ultimately interested in asking questions about outcomes, and are concerned with the impact of these new models for training on individuals and organizational level outcomes, at this stage we are equally concerned with the process of program planning and development. Planning within adult education as within workforce development requires strong partnerships with community, business, or college providers (Caffarella, 2001). As Cordero-Guzmán (2004), Hawley, Sommers & Melendez (2005) describe, the types of partnerships that workforce programs engage in are substantively different than classic adult education programs (Cordero-Guzmán, 2004). Workforce development programs expand into employers in ways that requires new activities (such as supports for employee retention and advancement) more characteristic of human resources than adult education.

However, the quality of involvement centers on the relationship in the planning process to systems change or more narrowly to organizational improvement. Systems change, as used in the Human Resource Development field, helps us understand that the outcomes of workforce development are a function of both the actions in the private and the public sector (Jacobs, 1988).

Because the career pathway programs is a model that is currently being developed to substitute for more widely used interventions such as apprenticeships or vocational education, there has been little research into the types of partnerships that agencies are engaged within (Jenkins, 2003). Do agencies partner with community based agencies as well as employers? Do career pathways focus on post secondary education partners rather than secondary vocational education providers? Finally, we do not understand the relationship to systems change a part of this planning process. How do organizations fold planning for human resources into the larger issues of systems change?

Research Questions

The research questions we asked in this initial study included the following:
1. What agencies are typically involved in career pathway programs and what roles do employers take in these programs?
2. What kinds of partnership models are practiced in these planning programs?
3. How does pathway planning relate to the larger question of systems change in the community or region?

Methodology

Site Selection or Sample

The target population for this study was a sample of career pathway programs within a large Midwestern state. At the time of the site selection there were approximately 12 programs in operation within the state. From this set, a smaller group of six career pathway programs were identified based on two criteria. First and foremost, they were geographically dispersed around the state. There was an effort to ensure that the six were in different regional labor markets. Second, career pathways were selected for study that were both in urban and rural areas. As a result, half of the sites selected for study were in major metropolitan areas, the remainder were in rural counties or small towns.

The six sites selected for study, with some critical details about the local labor markets, are listed in Table 1. The rural sites ranged from a large multi county program (rural #1) with a moderate unemployment rate to small rural counties (rural #3) with very high unemployment and poverty rates. The urban sites ranged from metropolitan areas (Urban #1) to suburbs (Urban #2).

Table 1. *Labor force data and poverty information by research site.*

| Site name | 2003 labor force data | | | | Poverty rate, 1999* |
	Labor force	Employment	Unemployment	Unemployment rate	
Rural #1	331,600	310,600	21,300	6.4%	8.5%
Urban #1	437,900	415,500	22,400	5.1%	11.8%
Urban #2	127,000	118,900	8,000	6.3%	5.1%
Urban #3	279,500	261,800	17,600	6.3%	11.3%
Rural # 2	191,700	178,800	12,800	6.7%	9.2%
Rural # 3	37,700	35,000	2,700	7.2%	12.7%

*Poverty rate is for persons in families with income of less than 100% of the poverty income level.
Source: Labor force data from State Agencies.

Data Collection

Data were collected over the course of a year by making quarterly visits to the locations. A total of 54 interviews were made with the six programs. There were three types of respondents, 1) team leaders at educational institutions, 2) secondary educational leaders at other institutions; and 3) Human Resource Officers or Line Managers responsible for coordination with the educational programs. The education respondents interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes to an hour, while the HR leaders were interviewed for about 30 minutes each time. All interviews were taped and transcribed

Data were collected using two instruments. The first instrument was a structured protocol containing six sections used with the respondents from educational institutions. The instruments were developed for this study based on research literature review, initial interviews with the program officers funding the study, and modeled after similar studies that the authors completed with other state level programs promoting employer training through the education systems. The six sections included the following, 1) structure and definition of the career pathway; 2) partnerships; 3) organizational or social change; 4) evaluation; 5) low skill or low wage workers; and 6), technical assistance. Sample questions for the protocol include the following; "*For career pathway … would you please describe how employers are involved?   What is the role of employers in planning?   What employer role do you envisioned in implementing the career pathway?*" The second protocol was used with HR or employer representatives and included the following four sections; 1) structure and definition of the career pathway; 2) partnerships; 3) organizational or social change; and, 4) low skill or low wage workers. The employer protocol differed from the partnership instrument by focusing on broader questions, and inquiring about the fit with the employer.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed to help illustrate the planning process that career pathways were using to better train low wage workers for high demand occupations. After being taped and transcribed data were analyzed using qualitative data software. The software was used to enable the coding of transcribed data, codes that were based in many cases on the items in the instruments. To answer question 1, data were collected on the background and characteristics of each partnership. Questions 2 and 3 were answered using codes developed based on the instruments.

Results

Types of Partnerships

The planning projects involved a wide range of partners. The lead partners and fiscal agents were in all cases educational institutions, including community or technical colleges or adult workforce education programs. Over 200 individual partner organizations or businesses were listed, with two categories of partners - business and

education/ training providers - each accounting for about one-third of the total. About one-sixth of the partners were Workforce Investment Act partners, including one-stop centers, Workforce Investment Boards, and County Job and Family Services departments. The remaining partners were community-based organizations, local governments, state agencies, labor unions or labor/management councils, and other organizations.

An additional distinguishing feature of the six projects is their design regarding employer relationships. Three projects, all in health care, worked with one specific employer or a very small number of employers. The career pathways were designed to work within the context of the specific employer's hiring, training, and personnel policies, and usually were designed to work with individuals already employed by the business or those expected to be hired. Consequently, these projects have the potential to pinpoint systemic changes in business human resource practices needed to make the career pathways succeed. The other three sites setup career pathway programs with an intermediary organization, such as a chamber of commerce or a regional entity.

Partnership Models

The form of partnerships varies. Two types of partnership models were found: peer-to-peer networks and intermediary networks. The main difference between these models is the existence of a strong central leader/coordinator in the intermediary network.

Peer-to-peer networks. In the peer-to-peer model a small team of organizations worked together as equals. Two sites were characterized by this model. In general, a peer-to-peer network allows participating organizations to work together as equals. Even though one organization (in this case, the community college) is the administrative leader, each of the organizations is carrying out key aspects of the planning. This model does not describe the functions that organizations carry out, but is simply a stylized representation of their relationship.

The drawback to tight peer-to-peer networks is that they seem to shut out partners from other institutional settings. For instance, we interviewed staff from one Joint Vocational School who have very strong ties to peer institutions but almost non-existent connections to community or four-year colleges. In another case, we interviewed a community college that has excellent employer relations with a number of hospitals, but a continuing problem connecting to the Joint Vocational Schools. The following quote illustrates the impact of using tight peer to peer networks:

> *We co-existed, taking up the same time/space continuum, but they didn't do a lot of talking to each other. Even the social service agencies. Through the [network] and our other meetings, we have been talking about it. The [network] has been another really, really strong partner in that. So I think social service agencies have done a little more releasing of territory than the others. But for the most part, I think the others kind of co-exist and that is it. It is just a fact that they are in these communities ...and they know each other exists, but they never really worked together until this.*

Intermediary networks. The intermediary network type was critical to the success of one of the community college sites. An intermediary network has a strong leader, in this case the community college, and a relatively large number of subordinate agencies which serve to supply specific tools to the central agency. In one site, five agencies were the primary partners, including hospital, community action and social services, an area agency commission, and a local vocational school. As additional six partners were added over the first year of planning.

Virtually all of the primary partners have a history of partnerships with one or more of their participating members. These partnerships have evolved based on local demands as well as statewide initiatives. As one partner stated,

> *We have always ... felt strongly that we are the only hospital in X County, they are the community college in X County, and we want to work closely with them.*

In another site, the Joint Vocational Schools in the surrounding region have worked together over many years to support Career-Technical Education in this largely rural section of Ohio. The partners have a memorandum governing the territory and specify the financial costs to providing adult training in another institution's territory.

> *There has been a friendly working relationship before. But some of the partners have gotten to the point where they have signed an agreement with customized trainers who are out marketing and they are in each other's backyards. ... that has [caused] some tension among the career centers in the area. They have signed something on paper that means, "if you are marketing my backyard you will provide 2% of your contract, regardless of the services provided there." This is separate from the Higher Skills Partnership. Our biggest hurdle in this area is the fact that [local post secondary partners] will not speak to each other in a lot of areas, especially customized training.*

These institutional partnerships are cemented through personal ties. Examples of personal ties include an employer partner who is a retired employee of the Joint Vocational School, a connection that gave him substantial resources to draw upon, and a Joint Vocational School employee who had worked previously for a local Technical College.

These networks are more informal as well, resulting from serving on community boards, economic/workforce development boards, or other groups. An extended quote from one site serves to illustrate this depth of informal connections.

The best relationship is ours with X State, starting with the fact that the president then and now is on our board; he is chairman of our board. I came from a community where ... community colleges were our biggest system. I had them on my team ... so I have known probably realistically since the late 70's the value of connecting community colleges, particularly skills/technical training, into economic development. When I came here I understood the concept and I understood what the ...value of [the community college] was.

Relationship to systems change. In the definition of system changes adopted for this study, change focused on three particular issues, 1) feasibility, 2) change in the way business is conducted, and 3) resources. Systems change means changing the way individual partners conduct their business, and how the partners interact with one another to agree upon specific goals and work together toward those goals. It also means bringing the initiative to scale to achieve a measurable community impact.

Leadership is the key to building systems change through the planning process. Leadership is critical to keeping the process focused on agreed-to overall goals, bringing partners together, sustaining energy and commitment, winning the attention and support of local businesses and government agencies, and broadening and deepening the base of partnerships. Continuity of leadership is also important.

Key leaders include the decision-makers in the partner organizations – those with the authority to make change and make it stick.

I also think in particular [of] the leadership at [the JVS.] They just really have a strong philosophy, [and are] incredibly supportive of their staff.....To me it is the leadership, because people see everyone at the table collaborating and working together, and then the rest of it falls in line.

The project coordinator is also a key leader. The strongest projects had project coordinators and coordinators who were available from beginning to end of the planning process. One site attributed its ability to make rapid progress to hiring an effective project coordinator who is experienced and widely respected in the community and who made a full-time commitment to the project.

Maintaining a planning focus in the face of daily demands is difficult. As one interviewee stated:

Sustaining any project like this while still planning into the second year is so difficult. It is like you just run out of steam. ... you have all of these great ideas and plans for the first year. ....It is hard to sustain any planning part of it.

Questions about systems change focused on scale as some sites moved toward implementation: "how much change is needed, and how many people can we really work with?" As one interviewee reported about the difficulty of bringing the project to scale:

...[our coach]..used the Boston Model ... she had 20,000 people to work with. That translated to a couple hundred [here], so I wondered what would be a fair number. We thought about the whole 100 thing, but that is way bigger than here. If we got 100, that is beyond comparison. ...if we can get 10-25 a year, that would be a more manageable number.

Project scale also deals with the number of employers as well as the number of individuals. In one construction career pathway project, the diverse nature of the construction industry and the prevalence of small and medium sized companies providing most of the employment opportunities is a challenge. The project would have to work with a large number of employers in order to have the number and range of jobs needed for project impact.

The partners interviewed broadly agree that partnerships have been developed and are effectively working. Because successful career pathways for low-wage depend heavily on bringing to bear a range of activities and services, these strong partnerships bode well for pathways implementation. Most sites, including those sites that made comparatively less progress in their planning activities believed the project had helped them develop new partnerships or deepen existing key partner relationships. The strongest partnerships were those that had previous experience working together, with additional "glue" provided by personal and informal connections.

Conclusions

The analysis of this data on organizational planning within the context of workforce development provides some important details about the type of partnerships, the structure of these partnerships, and the relationship to systems change. The results of this study show that in all cases the organizations best positioned to coordinate joint work across the private and public sectors come from the education arena. While both community colleges and adult education institutions participated in these planning activities there were a wide range of organizations that also were involved, from employers, to chambers of commerce or other business associations and community based

agencies. Moreover, the structural form these partnerships took alternated from peer to peer networks to more expansive intermediary forms of involvement.

The relationship between organizational planning and systems change is in and of itself more complex, and the data collected illustrate the difficulty of drawing hard conclusions at this time. The clearest lesson to draw from the quotes is that maintaining a systems orientation to planning is difficult over a year or longer period of time. Organizations tend to focus on meeting internal demands rather than focusing on the community or societal objectives. Secondly, given that the career pathway planning meets different needs within the partnering organizations, the relationship to systems change depends upon the perspective of the agency. For example, community colleges and employers are credit oriented and have a more difficult time seeing systems change as a part of their goals for the planning process, vocational schools or chambers of commerce operate within the community perspective already and can articulate the community objectives of the planning process more clearly.

Contributions to HRD Knowledge

Until recently, research on partnerships might not have been considered within the boundaries of HRD research. However, recent societal trends make this topic increasingly pertinent for study. Indeed, partnerships between human resource programs and educational institutions are now at the center of public policy. The current Workforce Investment Act requires extensive business involvement, and the to be enacted 2005 Perkins legislation opens up the door to planning through career pathways. Moreover, scholars have turned increasingly to asking questions about the quality of these partnerships. The business management literature is increasingly focused on measuring the value interorganizational partnerships have for business outcomes. (Dryer & Singh, 1998; Subramani & Venkatraman, 2003). However, the larger HRD and labor economics literature emphases the important role that partnerships between employers and schools could have for improving the outcomes of education and access to labor for firms (Hawley *et al.*, 2005, Melendez & Harrison, 1997)

It is imperative that HRD scholars and practitioners understand the institutional changes that the labor market has undergone in recent years, and see that the increased need for planning with the educational sector (Osterman, 1999). Managers have many different options to recruit qualified workers, but the ideal has always been smoothly functioning apprenticeship or other systems that provide employers with the skilled labor (Culpepper, 2003).

The initial research on planning for career pathways has the following implications for HRD practice and research: greater understanding among practitioners of society-organization connections, and recognition among researchers of the need to expand research boundaries.

Society-Organization Connections

The definition of workforce development used at the beginning focuses on a workforce development system (Jacobs & Hawley, 2003). In this workforce development system, we are concerned with both the individual level outcomes of training and development (as any education program would be), but also in the firm level outcomes (as HRD researchers would be). In other words, taking workforce development as the focus for research forces one to investigate the outcomes of programs that are concentrating on both firms and individuals. These career pathway programs operate on the edge of these systems, creating business/education partnerships that strive for a mixture of outcomes, both organizational and individual in nature.

Expanding Research Boundaries

An expanded definition of workforce development and changes in the organizations providing training provide a basis for widening the research boundaries of HRD. For example, if firms are being forced because of changes in the labor market to recruit and train non-traditional workers, than the HRD field must understand the true costs and benefits of these activities. The return on investment for non-traditional workers may differ from calculations for management or entry-level employees. More broadly, while HRD typically measures the impact on firms of HRD practices, using workforce development as the focus would imply a need for evaluation of the impact of training on societal and individual level outcomes as well as firms.

As importance of partnerships increases in organizational outcomes, we must not loose sight of the need for critical research into partnerships. It is vitally important that we document the evolving roles that employers and education institutions are playing. That will only happen if we can develop research projects that are longitudinal such as this one and collect information on both organizations and individuals.

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