Executive Summary

Title: Delivering Work-Based Learning for Rural, Low-Income
                 Adults: Promising Practices and Indicators of Success
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Research Question
What are the promising practices that effective work-based training programs use to support rural, adult learners from low-income backgrounds and how they are assessed?

Objectives
In answering the research question, this paper attempts to 1) provide funding organizations with an overview of WBL for low-income, rural learners, 2) identify promising practices in WBL programs serving rural, low-income adult learners, 3) identify indicators to assess WBL program effectiveness, and 4) explore additional areas for further research and evaluation.

Background
The signing of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) in 2014 and Strengthening Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins V) in 2018 signaled national recognition of the need to close skill and opportunity gaps to meet modern labor demands. One way Perkins V and the WIOA attempted to close these gaps was through providing funding, guidance, and design criteria for work-based learning (WBL) programs serving youth and adults, particularly for those from low-income, rural backgrounds. The Perkins Collaborative Resource Network defines WBL as "the alignment of classroom and workplace learning; application of academic, technical, and employability skills in a work setting; and support from classroom or workplace mentors" (2017).

Despite federal, state, local and private funding, and support of WBL programs, little research exists on WBL for low-income adult learners from rural backgrounds. Rural areas in America make up 97% of the country's land mass and contain 20% of the population (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). Rural communities suffer from outmigration of their working age adults. From 2000 to 2016, rural areas lost 11% of their prime-age (25-54 years old) working population, while suburban and urban prime-age working populations grew (Parker et al., 2018).

Outmigration of the working population can undermine tax and consumer bases, leading to fewer public services in rural communities, including quality primary and secondary education (Cromartie et al., 2015). Without public services and a skilled workforce, companies are even

further disincentivized to create jobs in rural areas (Koricich et al., 2018; Green, 2005). The absence of employers and intermediaries (unions, workforce development agencies, etc.) means rural youth are often forced to migrate to cities to enter the workforce or attend college (Petrin, et al., 2014; Woodrum, 2004; Cahill, 2016; Green, 2005). This can be especially prohibitive for low-income adults, who may not have the money, transportation, or support to relocate (Koricich et al., 2018). WBL, provided by community colleges, local businesses, and workforce development boards could help reduce outmigration through paid work experiences that lead to employment in the local community.

Key Findings

Where WBL happens
Traditionally, the work and classroom elements of WBL occurred in a physical space, such as a worksite or classroom. However, WBL classrooms and worksites are increasingly going remote. This is partly due to the nature of knowledge-based work, such as coding and consulting, that do not require a physical presence. Classrooms are also going online to accommodate adult schedules and rural realities (lack of transportation, child care needs etc.). The COVID-19 pandemic has further justified the need for remote work environments. As employers offer remote working options, there is a growing demand for employees with experience learning and working with virtual teams.

Barriers
There are many challenges to accessing WBL opportunities for rural, low-income adults. These challenges include:

- Transportation.
- Financing.
- Program not Designed for Local Needs.
- Limited Internet.
- Finding Child or Eldercare.
- Emergencies.

Promising Practices
This paper laid out promising practices organizations should heartily consider as part of their WBL programs. Funding organizations should also consider sponsoring organizations that possess these practices when making funding decisions. These considerations were broken down into three categories, *policy*, *design*, and *services*.

Policy

- Pay Learners.
- Recognize Credits from Other Programs.

Services

- Provide transportation and gas money.
- Provide Internet Access and Vouchers.
- Provide Emergency Aid and Services.

Design

- Design Programs to be Outcome-Driven.
- Schedule and design course delivery to be flexible.
- Provide Childcare and Accommodate Schedules.
- Provide coaching support.
- Partner with Local Businesses.

Measuring Program and Student-Level Outcomes

After program designers select their outcomes, they should select student-level indicators demonstrating that the desired outcome was achieved. In programs targeting adult participants, indicators should reflect adult measures of success. Typically, program indicators include persistence, retention, completion, and graduation rates etc. However, indicators should also include student-level outcomes such as higher salaries, promotions, and job placement.

Indicators to Assess Program Effectiveness

The WIOA Statewide Performance Reports require states to submit performance reports every year on their adult education and training programs. Data is collected on total participants served and exited, employment rates in the second and fourth quarter, median earnings, credential rate, and measurable skill gain (OCTAE, 2020). The literature further recommends programs use three indicators to assess program effectiveness:

- Credentials,
- Job placement, and
- Higher wages.

Further research

WBL is relatively new to the field of education and training. There are few studies evaluating program quality of WBL programs. Further research is also needed on adult drivers of entering and persisting through WBL programs. This literature review explored the challenges learners face (affordability, distance, match, etc.) when trying to attain education. However, more research is needed on the challenges providers encounter, such as funding, matching the needs of the labor market, and reporting to state or national entities.

This literature review did not rank the listed promising practices, although there may be some practices that are more promising than others. In addition, research is needed to determine if there is a combination of practices that lead to better outcomes.

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