

San Antonio Program Moves Low-Skilled Workers into Middle Class

By Chris Tomlinson

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Programs to train low-skilled, underemployed adults to move up the economic ladder are notoriously ineffective, but Project Quest in San Antonio has hit on a formula with a now-proven track record.

Helping people move from poverty to the middle class is not easy, nor is it quick. But a sustained effort can take a

30-something single mom with a high school education from \$10,721 a year in wages to \$27,187 in just five years after graduation. After four more years, she can make \$33,644.



*License Vocational Nurse students Norman Ryan-Waldo, left, and Ruby Cigarroa practice carrying newborns during a lab at St. Philip's College do lab work, Wednesday, May 31, 2017.
Photo: JERRY LARA, Staff/ SAEN*

In a nine-year longitudinal study, Project Quest participants made more money, obtained more skills and worked more hours than a demographically-identical control group.

“To see earning differences this large and for this long is unprecedented in the workforce development field,” said Mark Elliott, CEO of the Economic Mobility Corp., an independent organization that studied the program.

Project Quest was born from a crisis that many cities face today. In 1992, the Levi Strauss factory in San Antonio laid off 1,100 workers whose skills employers no longer needed. Two grassroots organizations, COPS, or Communities Organized for Public Service, and Metro Alliance realized there were plenty of jobs, but there was a mismatch between the unemployed and the skills in demand.

The health care industry offered the most significant potential. A year or two of community college could qualify someone for a job, and area doctors and hospitals needed registered nurses, licensed vocational nurses and medical technicians.

The groups launched Project Quest to train the poor and unemployed to fill open positions. It was not a new idea, but many before them had failed. Some economists even concluded that trying to help adults was futile.

Project Quest faced the same criticism, with city leaders demanding proof that taxpayer money spent on the program was not wasted. Project Quest agreed to allow the Economic Mobility Corp. to track participants after they graduate in a scientifically-valid trial.



*Project QUEST License Vocational Nurse student Erik Harris performs a PERRLA evaluation during a lab at St. Philip's College do lab work, Wednesday, May 31, 2017. The exam evaluates the pupil's reaction to light.
Photo: JERRY LARA, Staff / SAEN*

They took a group of 410 participants that reflected Program Quest's typical participants. Most were Hispanic, single women with an average age of 30 and at least one child. About half had attempted college but had dropped out.

After applicants completed screening and initial coaching, Elliott's team randomly selected half to receive Project Quest's follow-on services. The other half were on their own without Project Quest's help.

About 90 percent of Program Quest participants completed the training and coaching, and of those, 90 percent immediately found jobs and doubled their previous income, the study showed. Those who did not receive the additional coaching were more likely to drop out of college and earned significantly less in subsequent years.

The difference between Project Quest and other workforce development programs is a wrap-around approach to help participants overcome all potential obstacles. They receive money for tuition and books, but they also meet weekly with advisers who make sure they have remedial education, money for transportation, food, health care and childcare.

"The myth is that all we have to do is give them access to financial resources and they'll be successful," said David Zammiello, CEO of Project Quest. "Individuals in the underserved community have fragile life circumstances, whether it's family structure, home insecurities, food insecurities, so funding alone will not cure that particular issue."

Another key to Project Quest's success is picking participants who have a supportive community, are committed to improving their lives and ready for hard work. Only one in seven who undergo an arduous application process are accepted because the program only helps those willing to help themselves, Zammiello said.

"The intense, intentional intervention is a one-on-one proposition," he added. "When you graduate, we will prepare you, place you in a job, make sure you dress right, act professionally and then make sure you stay on the job for the next 18 months."

For a three-year investment of \$11,000 in tuition, books and life coaching, a parent can escape poverty and set his or her family on a path to the middle class. They'll stop needing food stamps, Medicare and other taxpayer services. Instead, they will pay taxes and contribute to the economy.

Interfaith groups across the state have taken the Project Quest model and applied it in Dallas, Austin and the Rio Grande Valley. Capital IDEA Houston also runs a similar program.

In an era where automation and income inequality are damaging our society, Project Quest offers a pretty good deal for employers and our community.

The challenge is convincing taxpayers that poverty is a treatable condition, not a moral failing.

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