

Job Training Can Change Lives. See How San Antonio Does It.

By Nelson D. Schwartz - Aug. 19, 2019



Avigail Rodriguez, a former Project Quest student, works in the emergency room at Metropolitan Methodist Hospital in San Antonio as a registered nurse. The training helped her nearly triple her wage. Credit Joanna Kulesza, NY Times

SAN ANTONIO — The economic odds facing Avigail Rodriguez a few years ago couldn't have been much worse. An undocumented immigrant and a single mother, she lived in a cramped apartment in a tough neighborhood in San Antonio and earned just \$9 an hour working as a nurse's assistant.

Today, Ms. Rodriguez, 26, owns her own home in a safer area, earns nearly three times as much as she did before and has secured legal residency. The key to her turnaround was a training program called **Project Quest**, whose own ability to beat the odds is no less striking than that of Ms. Rodriguez. Project Quest has succeeded where many similar retraining efforts have failed, taking workers lacking in skills and successfully positioning them for jobs where they can earn double or triple what they did previously.

“This really gives employers a chance to find workers they wouldn't otherwise have considered,” said Lawrence Katz, a labor economist at Harvard University. “At the same time, it provides opportunities to a rather disadvantaged group of workers, both younger and older.”

Not that Project Quest makes it look easy. It spends about \$11,000 per trainee, offering intensive coaching and financial help.

Project Quest's record is drawing attention far beyond San Antonio. In December, the program won a \$1 million grant from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. Even with Quest's insecure federal funding, a study released in April showed that compared with peers who didn't complete the program, its graduates earn far more nearly a decade later.

These developments come as the need to keep up with fast-changing technologies in the workplace becomes more urgent. Last month, Amazon [said it intended](#) to retrain about one-third of its American work force, or about 100,000 employees, by 2025. And with a tight labor market, many employers find it difficult to identify workers who have the needed skills.

However well intentioned, most training efforts show limited results, said Paul Osterman, a professor at the M.I.T. Sloan School of Management, and Project Quest is a striking exception.

"If you had a list of all the efforts that claim to be job training programs and threw a dart, whatever you hit wouldn't match the results of Project Quest," he said. "It is scalable, and there is no reason every city and town in America can't have something like it."

Data published in April are the best evidence yet of how the San Antonio program is outperforming its peers. In a nine-year trial comparing a group of people who took part in Project Quest with a group who did not, the Quest graduates ended up earning \$5,000 more annually. That was especially significant since earnings gains from training programs typically fade over time, Mr. Osterman said.

"The results were stunning," said Mark Elliott, president of the Economic Mobility Corporation, a nonprofit research group that carried out the study. "These are the largest sustained earnings impacts we've ever seen in a work-force development program."

Just as Project Quest is an outlier nationally, so is the United States among Western countries. Other nations have done a better job with training programs, said Anthony Carnevale, director of the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce.

Canada has a more robust two-year college system, Mr. Carnevale said, "and they spend a lot less than we do on postsecondary education and training and get a lot better results than we do."

In Europe, there are separate tracks for apprenticeship programs in high school, but Americans are uncomfortable with tracking students at such a young age.

"You can go to Europe, see apprenticeships are great and come back and say, eureka, I found the answer!" Mr. Carnevale said. "But 20 years later, you're still going to be banging your head against the wall."

Project Quest was born 27 years ago in a Hispanic neighborhood in San Antonio where poverty rates are above the citywide average. After the closing of a Levi Strauss factory there, community groups created Project Quest as a way of preparing workers for better-paying, more highly skilled jobs that were less vulnerable but still in demand.

Although returning to school is the main goal, Project Quest isn't aimed at recent high school graduates. The average age of participants is 30. Two-thirds are women, and more than 60 percent are Hispanic. Some hear about Project Quest through job fairs, church events, employers, the public housing authority or community colleges.

"These are not the kids coming out of school looking for a job," said David Zammiello, Project Quest's president. "These are people looking for a second chance."

Project Quest doesn't do the training itself. Instead, it places 300 to 400 students each year with local community colleges and other schools where participants can complete degrees in health care and nursing, information technology and other fields where salaries and demand is high but qualified candidates are few.

This summer, it started a pilot project to train roofers in just three weeks, guaranteeing them jobs that pay \$15 an hour and include

benefits. Still, the bulk of Project Quest's students — nearly 70 percent — are in health care.

Money is part of the equation, but not all of it. Project Quest provides half the cost of tuition and also helps with rent and utilities when necessary. Nearly half of Project Quest's enrollees have children, so there's financial assistance for child care, too.

But just as important is what staff members call the wraparound part of the program.

Participants are required to attend weekly V.I.P. (Vision, Initiative and Perseverance) sessions with Quest coaches, where they provide progress reports on classes and go over the ups and downs they experience. There are lessons in subjects like time management as well as advice on navigating coursework and college-level classes.

"It's not just about training people," Mr. Osterman of M.I.T. said. "This provides real support for the people involved."

The V.I.P. sessions also provide moments where students who are struggling can seek out support from their comrades and their coaches. Typical trainees spend 18 months in the program, and as graduation nears, they are walked through mock job interviews and learn how to prepare a résumé and pitch themselves to employers.



David Zammiello, executive director of Project Quest. "These are not the kids coming out of school looking for a job," he said. "These are people looking for a second chance." Credit Joanna Kulesza for NY Times

“It was so essential,” said Ms. Rodriguez, who was brought to the United States by her parents at the age of 4 and became a citizen in 2017. “My mom completed third grade in Mexico and she couldn’t give me pointers.”

After earning an associate degree in nursing, Ms. Rodriguez now earns \$24 an hour as an emergency room nurse. She will complete her bachelor’s degree in November.

The weekly meetings were crucial for Ms. Rodriguez, but there are other things that make Project Quest different. Career coaches coordinate tutoring in math and English, which can be a major hurdle for returning students.

Small misfortunes that would barely register for more affluent people, like a broken-down car, can easily prevent poorer students from getting to school and keeping up with classes. In this case, Quest provides transportation help like bus passes for students in need.

To live on a budget, some students are encouraged to eat at home instead of going out for meals and to spend Sundays packing lunch for the week.

The coaching continues after students finish the program and start new jobs, said Lelani Mercado, deputy director of Project Quest. “We become the surrogate parent, for lack of a better term,” Ms. Mercado said. “We will not let them fail.”

None of this comes cheap. And at \$11,000 per trainee, critics have questioned whether that kind of spending is justified, said Ron Nirenberg, the mayor of San Antonio.

“That intensity of effort for each pupil results in permanent change that breaks intractable cycles of poverty,” Mr. Nirenberg said. “Unless we have that level of commitment, cities will be throwing money at the problem and not getting results.”

Despite the evidence of Project Quest’s success, getting funding has been neither easy nor predictable, said Mr. Zammiello, the project’s president.

The program receives \$2 million to \$2.5 million annually in what Mr. Zammiello calls “foundational funding” from the city of San Antonio. Grants and donations make up the rest of Project Quest’s \$5 million annual budget, but locking them down is a never-ending process.

“Every year is a period of uncertainty,” Mr. Zammiello said. “2020 isn’t totally mapped out yet. We’re laying the tracks and running the train at the same time.”

The expiration of a Labor Department grant means that Project Quest will serve 20 percent fewer people in 2019 than it did in 2017. As far as Mr. Zammiello is concerned, a better-funded Project Quest would allow it to have a much greater impact. With double the money, he said, his group could place 700 people annually instead of 350.

“People feel like we cost so much per individual,” said Dr. Todd Thames, Project Quest’s board chairman. “That’s what makes it work — child care, mentorship, transportation, tuition, bus passes. These are the barriers that prevent people from successfully completing training programs and finding meaningful employment.”



The headquarters of Project Quest are on the campus of Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio. It was started by community groups. Credit-Joanna Kulesza NY Times