Social Programs That Work Review

Evidence Summary for Per Scholas Employment/Training Program for Low-Income Workers

HIGHLIGHTS:

- **PROGRAM:** An employment and training program for low-income adults that focuses on a specific economic sector—information technology.
- **EVALUATION METHODS:** Two well-conducted randomized controlled trials (RCTs) with a combined sample of 1,143 individuals.
- **KEY FINDINGS:** The studies found that the program increased annual earnings by approximately 15% over follow-up periods of 2 years (in Study 1) and 10 years (in Study 2), compared to the control group.
- **OTHER:** While the program's sizable effects have been replicated across two well-conducted RCTs, both studies were conducted at the same program site in the Bronx. An RCT in other sites outside New York is ongoing, with the goal of establishing whether the effects generalize across different settings.

[Disclosure: Arnold Ventures funded the long-term follow-ups of Study 2, below.]

I. Evidence rating: NEAR TOP TIER

The standard for Near Top Tier is:

Programs shown to meet almost all elements of the Top Tier standard, and which only need one additional step to qualify. This category primarily includes programs that meet all elements of the Top Tier standard in a single study site, but need a replication RCT to confirm the initial findings and establish that they generalize to other sites. This is best viewed as tentative evidence that the program would produce important effects if implemented faithfully in settings and populations similar to those in the original study.

II. Description of the Program:

Per Scholas is an employment and training program for low-income workers that focuses on the information technology sector. Per Scholas originated in the Bronx (a borough of New York City) and

now has six program sites in the United States. Participants receive 15 weeks of occupational skills training in information technology, career readiness services (e.g., assistance in resume and interview preparation), and job development and placement services. The program maintains strong relationships with local employers that hire workers with information technology skills, and the employers help shape the program's training curriculum and other services. Program applicants are carefully screened to identify those most likely to be capable of completing training and to succeed in the information technology field, while not being so qualified that they could easily find a job without the program's training and services. The program's cost, which was carefully measured in the second RCT, is approximately $8,000 per participant in 2025 dollars.

Per Scholas' program services varied modestly between the two RCTs. Each RCT summary below describes the version of the program that the study evaluated.

Click here for the Per Scholas' website.

III. Evidence of Effectiveness:

This program was evaluated in two well-conducted RCTs. The following summarizes the program's effects on the main outcomes measured in each study, including any such outcomes for which no or adverse effects were found.

STUDY 1

Description of the Program as Implemented in Study 1:

Per Scholas is a nonprofit, "sectoral" employment program in the South Bronx (New York City) that provides information technology job training to unemployed, disadvantaged workers who have a high school diploma or GED and test at the 10th grade or higher in English and math. Through its role as a recycling center for old computers, Per Scholas has developed strong relationships with local employers who advise them on the program's training curriculum and participate in job fairs and mock interviews. The training lasts 15 weeks (30-35 hours per week), and its goal is for participants to earn the industry-recognized A+ certification, demonstrating competency in repairing and maintaining personal electronic equipment (i.e., computers, printers, copiers, etc.) and troubleshooting computer networks. Training participants also learn job readiness skills, such as how to interview well and manage their time. After completing training, many participants receive internships with Per Scholas refurbishing old computers for use in low-income communities. Program applicants are carefully screened to identify those most likely to benefit from training and succeed in the information technology field. Once they have completed training, Per Scholas helps them find a job.

Study Design:

The study randomly assigned 443 adults (average age 33 years), who had applied for Per Scholas' training program and met its eligibility requirements, to either (i) a treatment group that participated in job training offered by Per Scholas, or (ii) a control group that did not receive Per Scholas

services for two years, but could attend any other employment training programs in the community. 78 percent of the treatment group completed the training.

76 percent of sample members were male, 91 percent were African American or Latino, 74 percent were unemployed at the start of the study, all had a high school diploma or GED and 28 percent had some post-secondary education, 13 percent had been incarcerated, and 26 percent were foreign born. On average, they had earned $10,833 during the prior year.

Key Findings:

These are the effects on the primary outcomes that the study measured at the two-year follow-up, compared to the control group. All effects shown are statistically significant at the 0.05 level unless otherwise stated.

- 32 percent increase in average earnings during the *second year* of the follow-up ($19,343 vs. $14,680; significant at the 0.01 level). The program had no significant effects on total earnings over the full two years, but this appears to be because the Per Scholas group's earnings were lower than the control group's while they were in training, delaying the program's impact. (The program produced a non-significant 15 percent increase in earnings over the full two-year period.)
- 20 percent increase in months employed during the second year of the follow-up—8.3 months versus 6.9 months. (The program produced a 13 percent increase in months employed over the full two-year period, which was significant at the 0.10 level but not the 0.05 level.)
- 30 percent increase in the likelihood of ever working a job paying at least $11 per hour in the second year of the follow-up (60 percent versus 46 percent), and 22 percent increase in such likelihood over the full two year period—both statistically significant.

Summary of Study Quality:

- Per Scholas was evaluated as it typically operates, thus providing evidence of its effectiveness in real-world settings.
- The study had low to moderate attrition: Outcome data were obtained for 78 percent of the original sample, and follow-up rates were virtually the same for the Per Scholas and control groups.
- Per Scholas and control group members in the follow-up sample were highly similar in their observable pre-program characteristics (e.g., demographics and employment history).
- The study measured outcomes for all Per Scholas group members regardless of whether or how long they actually participated in a program (i.e., the study used an "intention-to-treat" analysis).

- Study Limitations:
  - Outcomes were measured through self-reports, obtained through researcher-administered surveys, and were not corroborated by official records (e.g., state unemployment insurance data on earnings and employment).

    The follow-up period was only two years. Longer-term follow-up is needed to determine if the sizable effects at two years persist.

STUDY 2

Description of the Program as Implemented in Study 2:

Per Scholas is a nonprofit training and employment service provider located in the Bronx, which serves low-income workers. As part of a larger demonstration project ("WorkAdvance"),[1] Per Scholas implemented an enhanced version of its usual information technology job training program that placed greater emphasis on assisting graduates with career advancement. The WorkAdvance version of the program included five key elements:

1. Screening of applicants to identify those likely to be capable of completing training and to succeed in the information technology field, while not being so qualified that they could easily find a job without the program's training and services.
2. Career readiness services, including training, individualized coaching, and support services, to assist participants in completing training and finding employment (e.g., through assistance in resume and interview preparation).
3. Fifteen weeks of occupational skills training in the field of information technology (e.g., A Plus and/or Network Plus training for jobs such as Help Desk Technician or IT Field Technician).
4. Job development and placement services through strong relationships with employers who hire individuals with the skills the program imparts.
5. Post-employment retention and career advancement services including coaching, identifying next-step job opportunities, and assistance with rapid reemployment if workers lose their jobs.

The program's cost, as implemented in the WorkAdvance demonstration, was $5,754 per participant in 2013 dollars ($8,000 in 2025 dollars).

[1] Three other sector-specific training and employment services programs were evaluated as part of the WorkAdvance demonstration: St. Nicks Alliance in Brooklyn, New York, which focused on environmental remediation and related occupations; Madison Strategies Group in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which focused on the transportation and manufacturing sectors; and Towards Employment in northeast Ohio, which focused on the health care and manufacturing sectors.

Study Design:

From June 2011 through June 2013, 700 interested applicants (average age 31 years) who were either unemployed or working in a low-wage job were randomly assigned to a treatment group that was offered Per Scholas WorkAdvance services or to a control group that was not eligible for Per Scholas services, but could receive other job training services available in the community. Eighty-seven percent of sample members were male; 44 percent were Black; 36 percent were Latino; 87 percent were unemployed at study entry; 17 percent were receiving SNAP/food stamps; virtually all had a high school diploma or GED and 63 percent had at least some postsecondary education; 6 percent had been incarcerated; and 28 percent were foreign born.[2] Within 18 months of random assignment, 78.5% of treatment group members had completed Per Scholas training.

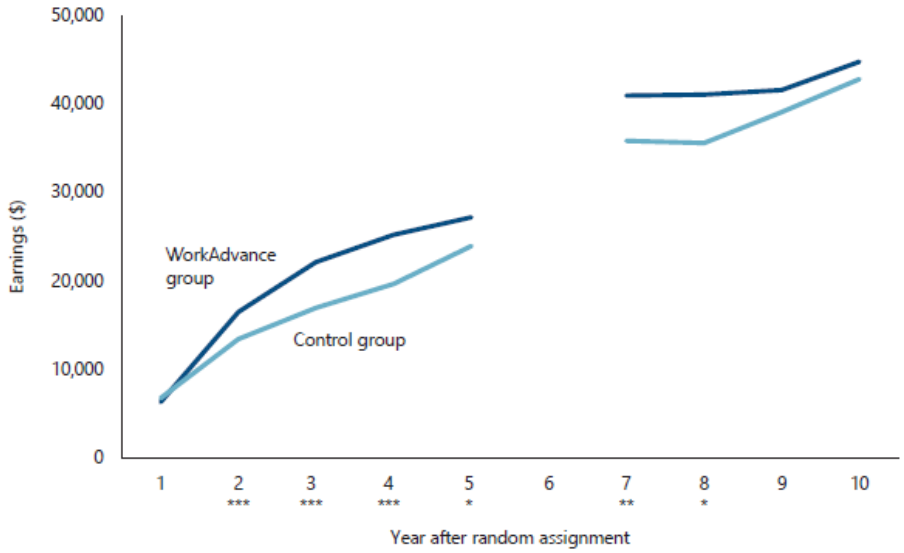
The study measured employment and earnings outcomes in years 7 through 10 after random assignment using administrative data from the federal National Directory of New Hires (NDNH). The study measured employment and earnings outcomes in years 1 through 5 using New York unemployment insurance (UI) wage records. The study also conducted a survey of sample members an average of 22 months after random assignment.

Key Findings:

Per Scholas produced sizable, statistically-significant impacts on earnings in year 2 through 8 after random assignment, as shown in the graph below. The table beneath the graph shows that (i) in years 7 and 8, treatment group earnings were 14-15%, or over $5,000 per year, higher than control group earnings; and (ii) over the full 10-year follow-up, the treatment group's cumulative earnings were approximately 16%, or $42,000, higher than those of the control group.[3] However, as the graph and table also show, in years 9 and 10 the earnings impacts diminished and were no longer statistically significant.

[2] This sample is largely similar to the sample from Study 1, with one notable exception: the Study 2 sample had obtained substantially more education (63 percent had some postsecondary education vs. 28 percent of the Study 1 sample).
[3] Earnings are reported in current dollars (e.g., any earnings from 2019 are in 2019 dollars and any earnings from 2020 are in 2020 dollars).

Appendix Figure A.6. Per Scholas Impacts on Annual Earnings, Years 1 to 10



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using New York State Department of Labor unemployment insurance (UI) wage data and National Directory of New Hires (NDNH) data.

NOTES: Statistical significance levels are indicated as follows: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

[*The above graph, photocopied from the 10-year study report, contains a small error: the earnings impact in year 8 should show two asterisks (i.e., statistical significance at the 5 percent level).*]

Per Scholas Earnings Impacts, Years 7-10 and Cumulative

Total Earnings ($)	Per Scholas	Control Group	Difference (Impact)	P-Value	Percent Increase
Year 7	$40,928	$35,806	$5,123 **	0.027	14%
Year 8	$41,039	$35,573	$5,466 **	0.030	15%
Year 9	$41,561	$39,075	$2,486	0.367	6%
Year 10	$44,765	$42,794	$1,971	0.489	5%
Cumulative (Full 10-Year)	$304,500	$262,500	$42,000	Not calculated[4]	16%

*** Statistically significant at the 5 percent level.*

We developed this table based on Table 2 in the 10-year study report.

[4] The study measured earnings using New York state UI records in years 1-5 and NDNH data in years 7-10. Earnings data were missing for two quarters in Year 6 (after the coverage period for the state UI data ended and before the coverage period for the NDNH). To estimate cumulative 10-year earnings impacts, the researchers imputed earnings data for the two missing quarters. Because the researchers did not have access to the same earnings data source for all 10 years, they did not conduct statistical significance tests for cumulative earnings.

The diminished impact in years 9 and 10 could reflect a true narrowing of yearly earnings between the treatment and control groups. But it could also simply reflect chance variation in yearly impacts caused by the study's reduced ability to precisely estimate earnings impacts as the follow-up period lengthens.[5]

The study's co-primary outcome in the long-term follow-ups – in addition to average yearly earnings – was the percent of individuals with yearly earnings of at least $45,000. The study found an impact of 6.8 percentage points on this outcome in year 7 that approached statistical significance (42.2% treatment group earned at least $45,000 versus 35.4% control group, $p<0.10$). This impact diminished by about half in years 8-10 and was no longer statistically significant.

Per Scholas increased the employment rate in years 2 and 3 after random assignment. For example, in year 3, 81% of the treatment group was employed versus 75% of the control group – a difference that was statistically significant ($p<0.05$). However, the effect on employment faded out; in years 5 through 10, it was near zero and not statistically significant.

Summary of Study Quality:

This was a well-conducted study. Members of the Per Scholas and control groups were highly similar in their demographic characteristics, as well as their pre-program education, employment, and earnings levels. All study participants were appropriately analyzed within the group to which they were originally assigned, consistent with an "intention-to-treat" analysis. Outcome data using NDNH and UI wage records were collected for 99 percent of sample members. The study also found that earnings impacts were generally similar across various data sources (NDNH, UI, IRS tax data, and surveys), providing reassurance that these impact findings are valid.

IV. References:

Study 1

Maguire, S., Freely, J., Clymer, C., Conway, M., & Schwartz, D. "Tuning into Local Labor Markets: Findings from the Sectoral Employment Impact Study." Public/Private Ventures: 2010. Linked here.

Study 2

Hendra, R., Greenberg, D.H., Hamilton, G., Oppenheim, A., Pennington, A., Schaberg, K. & Tessler, B.L. (2016) Encouraging evidence on a sector-focused advancement strategy: two-year impacts from the WorkAdvance demonstration. MDRC. Linked here.

Schaberg, K. (2017) Can sector strategies promote longer-term effects? Three-year impacts from the WorkAdvance demonstration. MDRC. Linked here.

[5] Because sample members' earnings become more dispersed (i.e., have greater "variance") over time, the confidence interval for the yearly impact estimate grows as the follow-up period lengthens. This makes it harder for the study to detect long-term impacts as statistically significant, and can lead to greater variation in yearly impact estimates at distant follow-up points.

Schaberg, K. & Greenberg, D.H. (2020) Long-term effects of a sectoral advancement strategy. Costs, benefits, and impacts from the WorkAdvance demonstration. MDRC. Linked here.

Kanengiser, H., & Schaberg, K. (2022) Employment and Earnings Effects of the WorkAdvance Demonstration After Seven Years. *MDRC.* Linked here.

Yusim, A., Schaberg, K., Tessler, B. & Ubalijoro, A. (2025) Effects of Sector-Focused Training After 10 Years: Findings from the WorkAdvance Evaluation. *MDRC.* Linked here.