Social Programs That Work Review

Evidence Summary for Project QUEST:
Training Low-Income Individuals for Well-paying Healthcare Jobs

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HIGHLIGHTS:

- **PROGRAM:** A workforce development program for low-income individuals, training them for well-paying careers in high-growth sectors of the local economy. The program version that has been rigorously evaluated focuses on training for healthcare sector employment.

- **EVALUATION METHODS:** A well-conducted randomized controlled trial (RCT) with a sample of 410 low-income adults in San Antonio, Texas.

- **KEY FINDINGS:** The program produced a sustained increase in annual earnings over the study's 14 year follow-up period. The longest-term findings – for years 9-14 after random assignment – show annual earnings gains of 15-20%, or about $6,000 per year. These effects were statistically significant or near-significant in years 9-12 but not years 13-14.

- **LIMITATIONS:** A limitation of these findings is that the study was conducted in a single site (San Antonio) with a modest-sized sample, and the effects did not always reach statistical significance. A replication RCT, conducted in another setting, would be valuable to hopefully confirm these results and establish that they generalize to other communities where the program might be implemented.

[Disclosure: Arnold Ventures provided funding for the 9- and 11-year follow-ups of the QUEST RCT.]

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:

Project QUEST provides comprehensive support and resources to help low-income individuals enroll full-time in occupational training programs at local community colleges, complete the training, pass certification exams, and enter well-paying careers in high-growth sectors of the local economy (hence, the program is sometimes described as a "sectoral" training program). In support of these goals, QUEST forges relationships with employers to understand what skill sets they require for employees, and works with local colleges to develop or modify programs to teach those skills.

In the study described below, the program focused specifically on healthcare sector training and on recruitment of individuals who were not currently attending college. The program supported these individuals in pursuing higher-skilled nursing and other allied health programs that prepared them to enter well-paying healthcare jobs upon program completion.

Major components of the program are: required full-time enrollment in a college occupational training program that QUEST is partnered with, required weekly group or individual counseling sessions, financial assistance for tuition and other school-related expenses, and remedial instruction for those requiring it. Program services are provided for 23 months on average, and the program costs approximately $14,400 per participant. (All dollar amounts shown in this summary are constant 2022 dollars.)

Project QUEST's website is linked here.

III. Evidence of Effectiveness:

Overview of the Study Design:

Between 2006 and 2008, the researchers randomly assigned 410 low-income individuals in San Antonio, Texas who were interested in nursing, medical records coding, or other health-related training to (i) a treatment group that received QUEST services focused on healthcare occupations, or (ii) a control group that did not receive these services. Sample members were largely female (88%), Latino (74%), and unmarried (72%), and most had only a high school diploma or GED (95%). They averaged 30 years of age, and earned an average of $15,298 in the year prior to program entry.

For the study's long-term follow-ups, the preregistered primary outcome is annual earnings as measured with unemployment insurance (UI) wage records from the Texas Workforce Commission.[1] The study also measured completion of college credentials with National Student Clearinghouse data.

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[1] The study's 2018 and 2020 preregistrations, posted prior to the 9 and 11 year follow-ups respectively, specified earnings in the 9th and 11th years after random assignment as the primary outcomes. The study did not post a new preregistration for the longest (14-year) follow-up.

Key Findings:

The study found that QUEST produced sizable, sustained gains in annual earnings (the primary outcome) over the 14 years following random assignment. The graph below, taken from the study report, depicts the earnings effects over time. The longest-term findings – for years 9-14 – show earnings gains of 15-20%, or approximately $6,000 per year, over the control group's average earnings of about $35,000 per year during these years. These effects were statistically significant or near-significant in years 9-12 but not years 13-14 – possibly because sample members' earnings grow more dispersed over time (i.e., have greater "variance"), making it harder to detect an effect as significant.


Figure 1 — Project QUEST's Impact on Average Annual Earnings during Each of the 14 Years after Study Enrollment (N=410)

Note: Earnings impacts are reported in constant 2022 dollars and represent differences in average annual earnings between the QUEST treatment group and the control group in each year. Statistical significance levels: *** p<.01; ** p<.05; * p<.10

The study also found positive effects on the rate of employment (a secondary outcome) in years 10-14, but not earlier, as shown in the graph below. In years 10-14, the treatment group's employment rate was 5 to 10 percentage points higher than that of the control group – a difference that was statistically significant in three of these years.

Figure 4 — Percent of All Study Participants Who Were Employed at Any Time during Each Year after Study Enrollment

QUEST group (N=207) • Control group (N=203)
Statistical significance level: ** p<.05
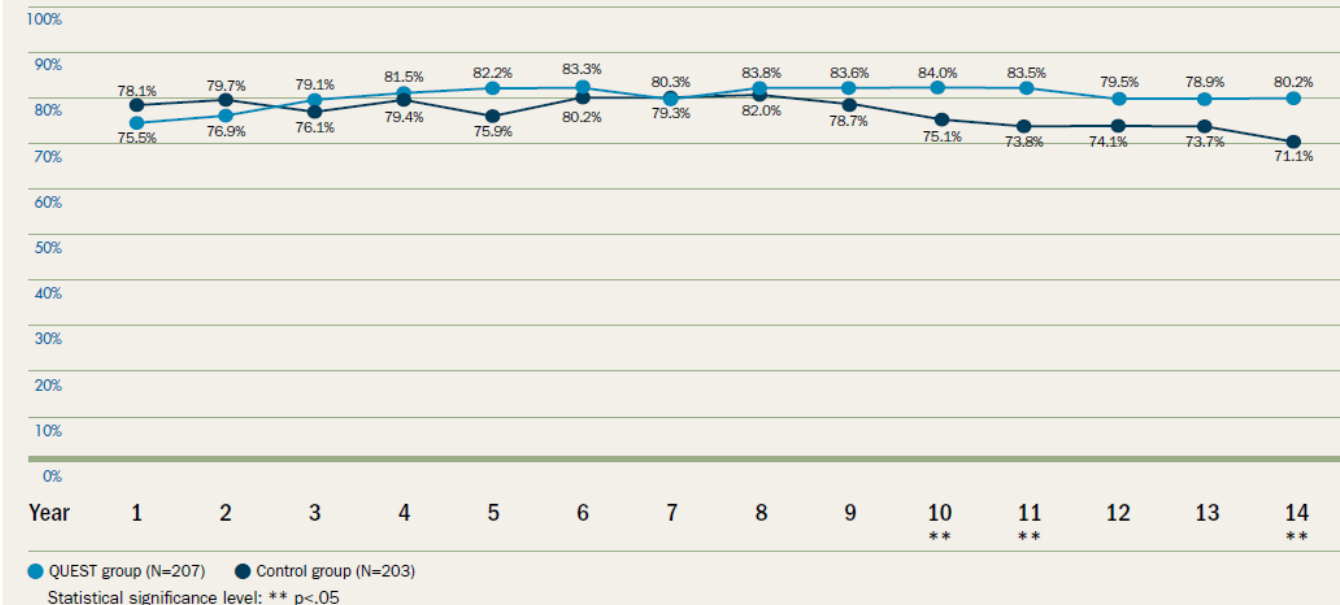
The study further found that the treatment group was much more likely to earn a college credential (a secondary outcome) during the 14-year follow-up. Specifically, 44% of the treatment group earned a credential – i.e., certificate, diploma, associate degree, or bachelor's degree – versus 30% of the control group, a difference that was statistically significant. The study found no significant effect on the likelihood of earning a college degree – that is, an associate's or bachelor's degree (22% of both groups earned a degree).

Finally, the study found that QUEST's effects on earnings far exceeded the program's cost. Specifically, the study estimated that the average earnings gain to QUEST participants exceeded the average cost of QUEST program services plus the average cost of participants' additional college enrollment by $38,036 over the 14-year follow-up period.

Discussion of Study Quality:

This was a well-conducted RCT. The treatment and control groups were generally similar in their pre-program characteristics, including earnings. The study appropriately measured and analyzed outcomes for all treatment group members regardless of whether or how long they participated in QUEST (i.e., the study used an "intent-to-treat" analysis). The study obtained outcome data using UI wage records for all sample members, without attrition.

Limitations of the findings include the fact the study was conducted in a single site (San Antonio) with a modest-sized sample, and the long-term earnings effects did not always reach statistical significance. Thus, a replication trial conducted in another location would be a valuable next step in the evaluation of this promising program, with the goal of hopefully confirming these study results and establishing that they generalize to other communities where QUEST might be implemented.

IV. References:

Roder, A., & Elliott, M. (2024). Fourteen Year Gains: Project QUEST's Remarkable Impact. New York: Economic Mobility Corporation. See full report.

Roder, A., & Elliott, M. (2021). Eleven Year Gains: Project QUEST's Investment Continues to Pay Dividends. New York: Economic Mobility Corporation. See full report.

Roder, A., & Elliott, M. (2020). Nine Year Education Gains: Project QUEST's Impact on Student Success. New York: Economic Mobility Corporation. See full report.

Roder, A., & Elliott, M. (2019). Nine Year Gains: Project QUEST's Continuing Impact. New York: Economic Mobility Corporation. See full report.

Elliott, M., & Roder, A. (2017). Escalating Gains: Project QUEST's Sectoral Strategy Pays Off. New York: Economic Mobility Corporation. See full report.