

Social Programs That Work Review
Evidence Summary for Project QUEST—

A Workforce Development Program for Low-Income Individuals

HIGHLIGHTS:

- **PROGRAM:** A workforce development program for low-income workers, to support them in training 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.
- **KEY FINDINGS:** The program produced a 20 percent (\$5,490) increase in participants' annual earnings in the ninth year after random assignment, compared to the control group.
- **LIMITATIONS:** A study limitation is that its sample was geographically concentrated in San Antonio, Texas. Replication of these findings in a second trial, in another setting, would be desirable to confirm the initial results and establish that they generalize to other settings where the program might be implemented.

[Disclosure: Arnold Ventures provided funding for the nine-year follow-up of the QUEST RCT.¹]

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.

¹ Support for the initial six-year study came principally from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, with additional support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services through a contract with Abt Associates.

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 the study described below, the program focused on jobs in the healthcare sector. 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 \$11,500 per participant. (All dollar amounts shown in this summary are constant 2017 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 who were interested in nursing, medical records coding, or other health-related training to (i) a program 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 \$12,775 in the year prior to program entry.

For the study’s longest-term follow-up, the pre-registered primary outcome was earnings in the ninth year after random assignment, as measured with unemployment insurance (UI) wage records from the Texas Workforce Commission. The study also measured completion of college credentials over the nine years with National Student Clearinghouse data, and measured earnings and other outcomes via survey at earlier time points (two and six years after random assignment).

Key Findings:

The study found that QUEST produced sizable, sustained earnings effects over the nine years after random assignment. On the primary outcome – earnings in the final (ninth) year of follow-up – QUEST increased average earnings in that year by \$5,490 or 20% (the QUEST group’s earnings were \$33,496 compared to \$28,006 for the control group). This effect was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The study also found a positive effect on the rate of employment in year nine, but this effect did not reach statistical significance and could well be due to chance (88 percent of the QUEST group was employed at some point during the year versus 83 percent of the control group, $p = 0.15$). In addition, the study corroborated the sizable impact on earnings found in the year six survey, using UI wage records. The fact that sizable earnings impacts were found in both the survey and administrative data provides added confidence that the findings are valid.

The study further found that the QUEST group was significantly more likely to earn a college credential (i.e., certificate, diploma, associate degree, or bachelor's degree) during the nine years after random assignment. Specifically, 40 percent of the QUEST group earned a credential versus 24 percent of the control group ($p < 0.01$). The study found no significant effect on the likelihood of earning a college degree – that is, an associate degree or bachelor's degree (18 percent of the QUEST group earned a degree versus 14 percent of the control group, a difference that was not statistically significant).

Finally, 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 \$6,869 over the full nine year follow-up period.

Discussion of Study Quality:

This was a well-conducted RCT. The QUEST 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. The six-year survey also had high completion rates – approximately 84 percent for QUEST group members and 83 percent for control group members.

A study limitation is that it was conducted in a single site (San Antonio) and economic sector (healthcare). Thus, a replication trial conducted in another location and perhaps a different sector would be a valuable next step in the evaluation of this promising program.

IV. References:

Elliott, M., & Roder, A. (2017). Escalating Gains: Project QUEST's Sectoral Strategy Pays Off. New York: Economic Mobility Corporation. [Click here for the full study report.](#)

Roder, A., & Elliott, M. (2019). Nine Year Gains: Project QUEST's Continuing Impact. [Click here for the full study report.](#)

Roder, A., & Elliott, M. (2020). Nine Year Education Gains: Project QUEST's Impact on Student Success. [Click here for the full study report.](#)