

Project QUEST (Quality Employment through Skills Training)

Intervention Brief | Postsecondary Career and Technical Education Topic Area

WHAT WORKS
CLEARINGHOUSE™

November 2021

WWC 2022-001
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

A Publication of the National Center for Education Evaluation at IES

Rising employer demand for skilled workers has driven efforts to better align occupational training programs to industry needs. Yet, even as the demand for skilled workers increases, less than half of students who enter occupational training programs receive a credential within six years. Community-based organizations are partnering with community colleges and occupational training providers to find faster and more effective ways to train those in need of basic skills instruction in math, reading, or job skills, and provide wraparound supports to help students succeed in college or occupational training programs.

Project QUEST (Quality Employment through Skills Training) provides comprehensive support services to help participants complete occupational training programs at local community colleges and professional training institutes, pass certification exams, and obtain well-paying jobs in targeted sectors of the local economy. *Project QUEST* started in 1992 in San Antonio, Texas, and has been adapted

in other locations in Texas and Arizona under different names, including *VIDA (Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement)* in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, *Capital IDEA* in Austin, Texas and Houston, Texas, *Project ARRIBA (Advanced Retraining & Redevelopment Initiative in Border Areas)* in El Paso, Texas, and *JobPath* in Tucson, Arizona.

This What Works Clearinghouse™ (WWC) report, part of the WWC’s Postsecondary Career and Technical Education topic area, explores the effects of *Project QUEST* on education and labor market outcomes. The WWC identified five studies of *Project QUEST*. Three of these studies meet WWC standards. The evidence presented in this report is from studies of the impact of *Project QUEST* on students enrolled in occupational training programs—including Asian, Black, White, and Hispanic students—in community colleges and professional training institutes in urban, suburban, and rural settings.

What Happens When Students Participate in *Project QUEST*?

The evidence indicates that implementing *Project QUEST*:

- is likely to increase industry-recognized credential, certificate, or license completion
- may increase credit accumulation
- may result in little to no change in short-term employment, short-term earnings, medium-term employment, medium-term earnings, and long-term earnings
- may decrease postsecondary degree attainment

Findings on *Project QUEST* from three studies that meet WWC standards are shown in Table 1. The table reports an effectiveness rating, the improvement index, and the number of studies and students that contributed to the findings. The improvement index is a measure of the intervention’s effect on an outcome. It can be interpreted as the expected change in percentile rank for an average comparison group student if that student had received the intervention.

Table 1. Summary of findings on *Project QUEST* from studies that meet WWC standards

| Outcome domain | Effectiveness rating | Study findings | Evidence meeting WWC standards (version 4.0) | |
|--|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|--------------------|
| | | Improvement index (percentile points) | Number of studies | Number of students |
| Industry-recognized credential, certificate, or license completion | Positive effects | +15 | 2 | 1,301 |
| Credit accumulation | Potentially positive effects | +14 | 1 | 958 |
| Medium-term employment | No discernible effects | +8 | 1 | 343 |
| Medium-term earnings | No discernible effects | +7 | 1 | 410 |
| Long-term earnings | No discernible effects | +4 | 1 | 410 |
| Short-term earnings | No discernible effects | +4 | 1 | 410 |

| Outcome domain | Effectiveness rating | Study findings | Evidence meeting WWC standards (version 4.0) | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|--------------------|
| | | Improvement index (percentile points) | Number of studies | Number of students |
| Short-term employment | No discernible effects | -1 | 2 | 1,555 |
| Postsecondary degree attainment | Potentially negative effects | -3 | 2 | 1,301 |

Note: The improvement index can be interpreted as the expected change in percentile rank for an average comparison group student if that student had received the intervention. For example, an improvement index of +15 means that the expected percentile rank of the average comparison group student would increase by 15 points if the student received *Project QUEST*. The improvement index values are generated by averaging findings from the outcome analyses that meet WWC standards, as reported by Elliott & Roder (2017), Rolston et al. (2017), and Juniper et al. (2020). A positive or negative improvement index does not necessarily mean the estimated effect is statistically significant. The industry-recognized credential, certificate, or license completion outcomes reported in these studies include earned a vocational certificate or license within 6 years after random assignment, receipt of a college credential: any credential within 24 months of random assignment, receipt of a college credential: any certificate within 24 months of random assignment, and receipt of a credential from a college within 24 months of random assignment, another education or training institution by time of survey, or a licensing/certification body by time of survey. The credit accumulation outcomes reported in these studies include total college credits earned within 24 months of random assignment. The medium-term employment outcomes reported in these studies include employment (year-round) year 5 after random assignment. The medium-term earnings outcomes reported in these studies include earnings (average annual earnings) year 5 after random assignment. The long-term earnings outcomes reported in these studies include earnings (average annual earnings) year 7 after random assignment. The short-term earnings outcomes reported in these studies include earnings (average annual earnings) year 3 after random assignment. The short-term employment outcomes reported in these studies include employment 4 quarters after completion and employment (year-round) year 3 after random assignment. The postsecondary degree attainment outcomes reported in these studies include earned a college degree within 6 years of random assignment and receipt of a college credential: any degree within 24 months of random assignment. The effects of *Project QUEST* are not known for other outcomes within the Postsecondary Career and Technical Education topic area protocol, including technical skill proficiency and long-term employment.

BOX 1. HOW THE WWC REVIEWS AND DESCRIBES EVIDENCE

The WWC evaluates evidence based on the quality and results of reviewed studies. The criteria the WWC uses for evaluating evidence are defined in the [Procedures and Standards Handbooks](#) and the [Review Protocols](#). The studies summarized in this report were reviewed under WWC Standards (version 4.0) and the Postsecondary Career and Technical Education topic area protocol (version 4.0).

To determine the effectiveness rating, the WWC considers what methods each study used, the direction of the effects, and the number of studies that tested the intervention. The higher the effectiveness rating, the more certain the WWC is about the reported results and about what will happen if the same intervention is implemented again. The following key explains the relationship between effectiveness ratings and the statements used in this report:

| Effectiveness rating | Rating interpretation | Description of the evidence |
|--|---|--|
| Positive (or negative) effects | The intervention is <i>likely</i> to change an outcome | Strong evidence of a positive (or negative) effect, with no overriding contrary evidence |
| Potentially positive (or negative) effects | The intervention <i>may</i> change an outcome | Evidence of a positive (or negative) effect with no overriding contrary evidence |
| No discernible effects | The intervention <i>may result in little to no change</i> in an outcome | No affirmative evidence of effects |
| Mixed effects | The intervention <i>has inconsistent effects</i> on an outcome | Evidence includes studies in at least two of these categories: studies with positive effects, studies with negative effects, or more studies with indeterminate effects than with positive or negative effects |

How is *Project QUEST* Implemented?

The following section provides details of how *Project QUEST* is implemented. This information can help educators identify the requirements for implementing *Project QUEST* and determine whether implementing this intervention would be feasible at their institutions. Variations in the implementation of *Project QUEST*, *VIDA*, and *Capital IDEA* are noted below. Information presented in this section comes from the three studies that meet WWC standards (Elliott & Roder, 2017; Juniper et al., 2020; Rolston et al., 2017), the *Project QUEST*, *VIDA*, and *Capital IDEA* websites, and correspondence with the developer.

- **Goal:** *Project QUEST* aims to provide comprehensive support services to help local adult residents gain the

Comparison group: In the three studies that contribute to this intervention report, students in the comparison group could access any of the services available in their local communities such as enrolling in occupational training programs on their own or seeking out job placement assistance at the college or American Job Center.

skills, postsecondary credentials, and/or certificates needed to obtain well-paying jobs and meet the needs of employers in targeted sectors of the local economy.

- **Target population:** *Project QUEST* targets adults 18 years or older who hold a high school diploma or equivalent and demonstrate at a minimum an 8th grade level in reading and 6th grade level in math on the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE). Participants must also be available to enroll full-time in an occupational training program. *Project QUEST* recruits individuals who are interested in but are not currently enrolled in college. *VIDA* targets participants who demonstrate at a minimum a 10th grade level in reading, writing, and math, many of whom are already enrolled in college but need additional supports to complete their college coursework. All three interventions target their efforts on recruiting individuals who are unemployed, underemployed, meet federal poverty guidelines, or are on public assistance.
- **Method of delivery:** *Project QUEST* is a community-based organization that partners with colleges, professional training institutes, and employers. Participants enroll full-time in an occupational training program. They

attend weekly group meetings led by a counselor that focus on life skills, time management, study skills, test-taking techniques, critical thinking, conflict resolution, and workforce readiness skills. Participants who need to improve their basic reading and math skills can complete basic skills coursework prior to enrolling in the occupational program.

- **Frequency and duration of service:** Participants typically complete their occupational program within one to three years, depending on the length of the program.
- **Intervention components:** *Project QUEST* is comprised of several components, including a comprehensive intake process, full-time enrollment in an occupational program, basic skills instruction, intrusive advising, job placement support, financial support, and partnerships with occupational training partners and employers. Refer to Table 2 for additional details.

Table 2. Components of *Project QUEST*

| Key component | Description |
|---|--|
| Comprehensive intake process | <p><i>Project QUEST</i> conducts a comprehensive intake process to determine participant eligibility, baseline skills in reading and math, and interests. The intake process, which is similarly rigorous for <i>VIDA</i> and <i>Capital IDEA</i>, includes six steps.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Attend Orientation: Interested individuals attend an orientation that provides an overview of the program and program expectations. 2. Complete Application, Placement Tests, and Essay: Individuals complete an application detailing their education and employment history, family situation, and childcare arrangements; they take placement tests; and they write a career exploration essay. These three components are used by counselors to assess the applicant's fit for the program. 3. Complete Career Aptitude and Assessment Test, College Placement Test, and Interview: Applicants take a career aptitude and assessment test to help evaluate whether their skills and interests match their career goals. <i>Project QUEST</i> uses the System for Assessment and Group Evaluation (SAGE) and <i>VIDA</i> uses the Harrington-O'Shea Career Decision-Making System. Applicants also take the ACCUPLACER college placement test to identify any remediation needs. Finally, applicants meet with a counselor to discuss and apply for eligible funding sources. 4. Develop Academic and Financial Plans: Applicants meet with an assigned counselor to create an academic plan to map out the required courses and timeline for completion, develop a budget, and address potential barriers to program completion. 5. Submit Required Documentation: Applicants submit required documentation such as proof of income and family size to verify their eligibility for funding sources. 6. Participate in Final Interview: Applicants attend an interview with a senior staff person who reviews their academic and financial plans and determines whether the applicant is accepted into the program. |
| Full-time enrollment in an occupational training program | <p>Participants are required to enroll full-time in an occupational program. The occupational programs take one to three years to complete, depending on the program. <i>Project QUEST</i> requires participants to be enrolled in a certificate program at an area community college or professional training institute in manufacturing and trades, healthcare, or information technology. <i>VIDA</i> requires participants to be enrolled in an associate's or bachelor's degree program at an area college in nursing, allied health, technology, manufacturing, business, education and social services, or specialized trades. <i>Capital IDEA</i> requires participants to be enrolled in a degree or certificate program at an area community college in information technology, healthcare, or other leading industry such as professional trades or applied technologies.</p> |
| Basic skills instruction | <p><i>Project QUEST</i> offers basic skills instruction—or QUEST Prep classes—for participants who need to improve their basic reading and math skills prior to enrolling full-time in an occupational program. QUEST Prep classes are offered 25 hours per week at no cost to participants. Participants can complete the basic skills coursework part-time. <i>VIDA</i> and <i>Capital IDEA</i> offers a College Prep Academy for participants who are unlikely to pass the Texas State Initiative Assessment (TSIA) college entrance exam. Participants attend the College Prep Academy full-time at no cost to participants for 16 weeks (<i>VIDA</i>) or 12 weeks (<i>Capital IDEA</i>).</p> |
| Intrusive advising | <p>Counselors or career navigators hold mandatory weekly group meetings on college campuses focused on topics designed to support the achievement of academic and employment goals such as life skills, time management, study skills, test-taking techniques, critical thinking, conflict resolution, and workforce readiness skills. The weekly sessions typically last 45 minutes to an hour and allow counselors to check in with students on their academic progress. Additionally, counselors provide individual advising for academic and non-academic issues, motivation and emotional support, and referrals to other social services for assistance with utility bills, childcare, food, and other supports. <i>Project QUEST</i> counselors are available for individual advising as needed. <i>VIDA</i> requires participants to attend individual advising once a month for up to an hour. <i>Capital IDEA</i> career navigators meet individually with participants at the start of each semester.</p> |

| Key component | Description |
|------------------------------|--|
| Job placement support | <i>Project QUEST's</i> employment coordinators and Capital IDEA career navigators provide additional job placement assistance including resume and cover letter writing, job search and application assistance, and interview preparation. Employment coordinators and career navigators also inform participants about upcoming job fairs and job openings. <i>VIDA</i> does not offer extensive employment services and job placement upon program completion. Rather, counselors refer participants to career services centers on their college campus or the local American Job Center for assistance. |
| Financial support | Participants receive financial support for academic and non-academic expenses that can be barriers to learning. <i>Project QUEST</i> offers financial support to cover tuition and fees—100 percent for the first year and 50 percent for subsequent years. Proof of class attendance is required to receive tuition assistance; counselors verify class attendance weekly by auditing participant attendance sheets signed by occupational instructors. <i>Project QUEST</i> also offers financial support for books, uniforms, licensing fees, and other education-related expenses. Additionally, <i>Project QUEST</i> offers some funding for supportive services such as transportation, medical care, eye exams, utilities, and childcare. <i>VIDA</i> provides up to \$5,500 of financial support in a 12-month period to cover tuition and fees, along with financial support for books, transportation, licensing fees, uniforms, other education-related expenses including childcare related to attending school or unexpected emergencies such as car repairs. Routine assessments of financial needs are conducted at intake and at the start of each semester. <i>Capital IDEA</i> covers the cost of tuition, fees, books, uniforms, and other materials required by the occupational training program. Additionally, <i>Capital IDEA</i> covers eye exams and eyeglasses, and offers participants access to free public transportation. Emergency financial assistance is available for utility bills, mortgage, rent assistance, and childcare. Participants are encouraged to work part-time while completing the occupational training program. |
| Partnerships | <i>Project QUEST</i> and <i>Capital IDEA</i> partner with area community colleges and professional training institutes which offer associate's degrees, certificates, and licenses in occupational programs. Employment coordinators build and maintain industry connections with employers. <i>VIDA</i> does not partner with employers directly. |
| Other | <i>VIDA</i> requires participants to complete two community service activities per semester. There are no community service requirements for <i>Project QUEST</i> or <i>Capital IDEA</i> participants. |

What Does *Project QUEST* Cost?

This preliminary list of costs is not designed to be exhaustive; rather, it provides educators an overview of the major resources needed to implement *Project QUEST*. The program costs described in Table 3 are based on the information available as of May 2021.

As reported in Roder & Elliott (2018), the average cost of *Project QUEST* was \$10,501 per participant over an average of 22 months. *Project QUEST* staff accounted for 41 percent of the costs; financial support for students accounted for 23 percent; tuition accounted for 22 percent; and administrative and fundraising costs accounted for 13 percent. The operating costs of *Project QUEST* are financed by a combination of private and public funding. The primary funder is the City of San Antonio, Texas. Other funders

include Bexar County, Texas and the Charles Stewart Mott, Meadows, and Annie E. Casey Foundations.

Rolston et al. (2017) reported that the cost of *VIDA* was approximately \$13,750 per participant over an average of two and a half years. *VIDA* received funding from local economic development corporations and cities and counties in the Rio Grande Valley region of Texas. *VIDA* received funds directly from the Kresge, Laura and John Arnold, Meadows, and Hearst Foundations, and an Open Society Foundations grant to Abt Associates to double the number of participants included in the evaluation.

Juniper et al. (2020) did not break down the per participant cost of *Capital IDEA*.

Table 3. Cost ingredients for *Project QUEST*

| Cost ingredients | Description | Source of funding |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Personnel | Staff to provide direct services to students, including counselors, basic skills instructors, and other support staff such as employment coordinators for <i>Project QUEST</i> . | <i>Project QUEST</i> |
| Facilities | Facilities costs include space for administrative staff and for conducting intake, support services, and basic skills instruction. Area colleges and professional training institutes provide space for the delivery of occupational coursework and for conducting weekly group meetings. | <i>Project QUEST</i> ; colleges; professional training institutes |
| Equipment and materials | Standard information technology (IT) equipment such as computers, phones, printers, and photocopiers for staff is required. | <i>Project QUEST</i> |
| Other | Other costs include financial support for students to cover academic and non-academic expenses that can be barriers to learning, program fundraising, and administrative costs. | <i>Project QUEST</i> |

For More Information:

About *Project QUEST*

Project QUEST, Inc.
800 Quintana Road, Building 8
San Antonio, Texas 78211
Attn: Hugo Hernandez, Manager of Service and Delivery
Email: hugo@questsa.org Web: <https://questsa.org/> Phone: 210-630-4690

About the cost of the intervention

Roder, A., & Elliott, M. (2018). Escalating gains: The elements of Project QUEST's success. Economic Mobility Corporation. <https://economicmobilitycorp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Elements-of-Project-QUESTs-Success.pdf>

About the studies reviewed

Juniper, C., Rodriguez, P., & Prince, H. (2020). Evaluation of Travis County investments in workforce development: 2020 update. https://raymarshallcenter.org/files/2021/01/FINAL_FY-2019_Travis-County-Report.pdf

Elliott, M., & Roder, A. (2017). Escalating gains: Project QUEST'S sectoral strategy pays off. Economic Mobility Corporation. https://economicmobilitycorp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Escalating-Gains_WEB.pdf

Rolston, H., Copson, E., & Gardiner, K. (2017). Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement: Implementation and early impact report, OPRE Report #2017-83. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/vida_implementation_and_early_impact_report_final_b508.pdf

In What Context Was *Project QUEST* Studied?

The following section provides information on the setting of the three studies of *Project QUEST* that meet WWC standards, and a description of the participants in the research.

This information can help educators understand the context in which the studies of *Project QUEST* were conducted, and determine whether the program might be suitable for their setting.

WHERE THE STUDIES WERE CONDUCTED



3 studies, 2,580 students in Texas

Race



Ethnicity



Districts:

Urban
Suburban
Rural

Grades



Gender



LEARN MORE



Read more about the [Project QUEST](#) intervention and the studies that are summarized here in the [Intervention Report](#).