

Project QUEST (Quality Employment through Skills Training)

Intervention Report | 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.¹ 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.² 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.³

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.⁴ 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*?⁵

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.⁶ *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 <i>Capital IDEA</i> 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>

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

Research Summary

The WWC identified five studies that investigated the effectiveness of *Project QUEST* (Figure 1):

- 2 studies meet WWC group design standards without reservations
- 1 study meets WWC group design standards with reservations
- 2 studies are ineligible for review

The WWC reviews findings on the intervention's effects on eligible outcome domains from studies that meet standards, either with or without reservations. Based on this review, the WWC generates an effectiveness rating, which summarizes how the intervention impacts, or changes, a particular outcome domain. The WWC reports additional supplemental findings, such as total college credits earned at additional time points, on the WWC website (<https://whatworks.ed.gov>).

These supplemental findings and findings from studies that either do not meet WWC standards or are ineligible for review do not contribute to the effectiveness ratings.

The three studies of *Project QUEST* that meet WWC group design standards reported findings on credit accumulation; industry-recognized credential, certificate or license completion; postsecondary degree attainment; short-term earnings; short-term employment; medium-term earnings; medium-term employment; and long-term earnings. No other findings in the studies meet WWC group design standards within any outcome domain included in the Postsecondary Career and Technical Education topic area.⁷ Citations for the three studies reviewed for this report are listed in the References section, which begins on page 15. Citations for the two studies that are ineligible for review and the reasons the WWC determined they were ineligible are also listed in the References section.

Figure 1. Effectiveness ratings for *Project QUEST*



Main Findings

Table 4 shows the findings from the three studies of *Project QUEST* that meet WWC standards. The table includes WWC calculations of the mean difference, effect size, and performance of the intervention group relative to the comparison group. Based on findings from two studies that meet WWC standards, the effectiveness rating for industry-recognized credential, certificate, or license completion is *positive effects*, indicating strong evidence of a positive effect, with no overriding contrary evidence. These findings are based on 1,301 students. Based on findings from one study that meets WWC standards, the effectiveness rating for credit accumulation is *potentially positive effects*, indicating evidence of a positive effect, with no overriding contrary evidence. These findings are based on 958 students. Based

on findings from one study that meets WWC standards, the effectiveness rating for medium-term employment, medium-term earnings, long-term earnings, and short-term earnings is *no discernible effects*, indicating no affirmative evidence of effects. These findings are based on 343 to 410 students. Based on findings from two studies that meet WWC standards, the effectiveness rating for short-term employment is *no discernible effects*, indicating no affirmative evidence of effects. These findings are based on 1,555 students. Based on findings from two studies that meet WWC standards, the effectiveness rating for postsecondary degree attainment is *potentially negative effects*, indicating evidence of a negative effect, with no overriding contrary evidence. These findings are based on 1,301 students.

Table 4. Findings by outcome domain from studies of *Project QUEST* that meet WWC standards

Measure (study)	Study sample	Sample size	Mean (standard deviation)		WWC calculations			p-value
			Intervention group	Comparison group	Mean difference	Effect size	Improvement index	
Earned a vocational certificate or license (%) (Elliott & Roder, 2017) ^a	Full sample	343	72.60	49.10	23.50	0.61	+23	.01
Receipt of a college credential (%): Any credential (Rolston et al., 2017) ^b	Full sample	958	55.44	45.00	10.44	0.25	+10	<.01
Receipt of a college credential (%): Any certificate (Rolston et al., 2017) ^b	Full sample	958	29.10	23.13	5.97	0.19	+7	.04
Receipt of a credential from (%): A college within 24 months, another education or training institution by time of survey, or a licensing/certification body by time of survey (Rolston et al., 2017) ^b	Full sample	958	64.54	60.72	3.82	0.10	+4	.22
Outcome average for industry-recognized credential, certificate, or license completion						0.40	+15	Statistically significant
Total college credits earned within 24 months of randomization	Full sample	958	34.04 (17.93)	27.49 (19.33)	6.55	0.35	+14	< .01
Outcome average for credit accumulation (Rolston et al., 2017)^b						0.35	+14	Statistically significant
Employment (Year-Round) (%), year 5 after random assignment	Full sample	343	66.60	59.20	7.40	0.19	+8	0.16
Outcome average for medium-term employment (Rolston et al., 2017)^b						0.19	+8	Not statistically significant
Earnings (\$), year 5 after random assignment	Full sample	410	24,713 (21,346)	20,792 (21,236)	3,921	0.18	+7	0.10

Measure (study)	Study sample	Sample size	Mean (standard deviation)		WWC calculations			p-value
			Intervention group	Comparison group	Mean difference	Effect size	Improvement index	
Outcome average for medium-term earnings (Elliott & Roder, 2017)^a						0.18	+7	Not statistically significant
Earnings (\$), year 7 after random assignment	Full sample	410	27,755 (24,099)	25,228 (23,347)	2,527	0.11	+4	0.28
Outcome average for long-term earnings (Elliott & Roder, 2017)^a						0.11	+4	Not statistically significant
Earnings (\$), year 3 after random assignment	Full sample	410	19,092 (18,072)	17,159 (16,513)	1,933	0.11	+4	0.26
Outcome average for short-term earnings (Elliott & Roder, 2017)^a						0.11	+4	Not statistically significant
Employment (%), 4 quarters after completion (Juniper et al., 2020) ^c	Full sample	1,212	75.32	69.00	6.32	0.14	+6	0.07
Employment (Year-Round) (%), year 3 after random assignment (Elliott & Roder, 2017) ^a	Full sample	343	48.20	55.00	-6.80	-0.17	-7	0.21
Outcome average for short-term employment						-0.01	-1	Not statistically significant
Earned a college degree (%) (Elliott & Roder, 2017) ^a	Full sample	343	18.20	26.30	-8.10	-0.29	-11	0.10
Receipt of a college credential (%): Any degree (Rolston et al., 2017) ^b	Full sample	958	29.71	25.00	4.71	0.14	+6	0.10
Outcome average for postsecondary degree attainment						-0.07	-3	Not statistically significant

Notes: For mean difference and effect size values reported in the table, a positive number favors the intervention group and a negative number favors the comparison group. The effect size is a standardized measure of the effect of an intervention on outcomes, representing the average change expected for all individuals who are given the intervention (measured in standard deviations of the outcome measure). An indicator of the effect of the intervention, the improvement index can be interpreted as the expected change in percentile rank for an average comparison group student if that student had received *Project QUEST*. A positive or negative improvement index does not necessarily mean the estimated effect is statistically significant. Some statistics may not sum as expected due to rounding.

^a Elliott & Roder (2017) did not require corrections for clustering or multiple comparisons nor difference-in-differences adjustments. The standard deviations for the earnings outcomes presented here were provided in response to an author query. The non-significant p-values presented here were calculated by the WWC, because categorical p-values were only reported in the study for statistically significant differences. This study is characterized as having a statistically significant positive effect on the industry-recognized credential, certificate, or license completion outcome domain because the estimated effect is positive and statistically significant. The study is characterized as having an indeterminate effect on the medium-term employment, medium-term earnings, long-term earnings, short-term earnings, and short-term employment outcome domains because the mean effect size is < 0.25 and not statistically significant. The study is characterized as having a potentially negative effect on postsecondary degree attainment because the mean effect size is ≤ -0.25 but not statistically significant.

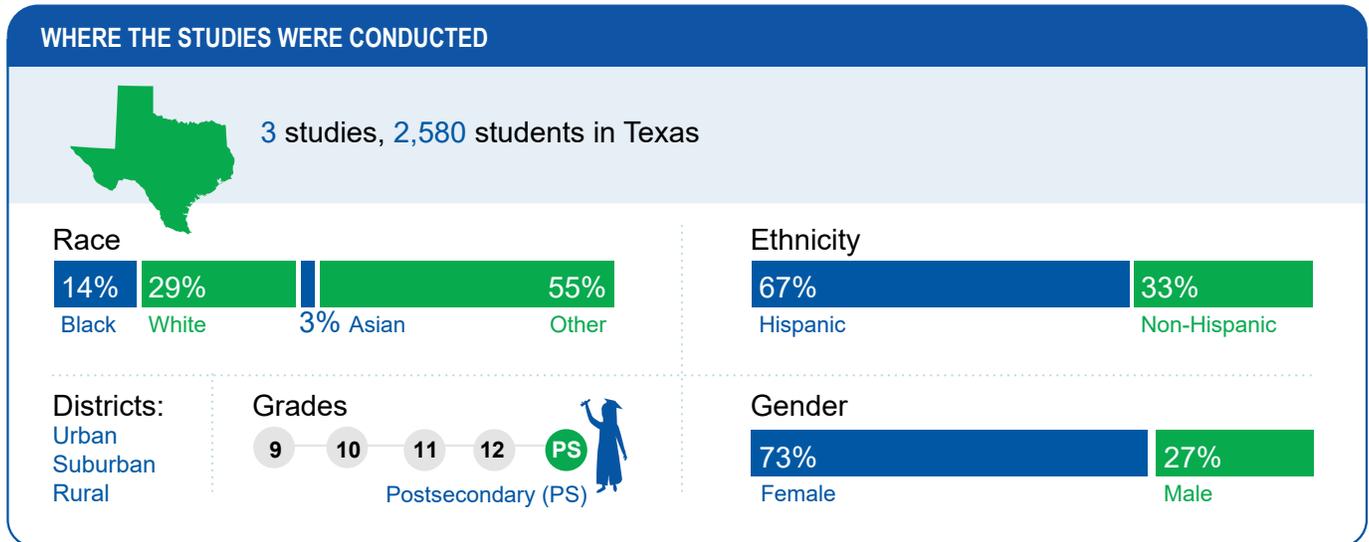
^b Rolston et al. (2017) required corrections for multiple comparisons in the industry-recognized credential, certificate, or license completion outcome domain. The unadjusted means and standard deviations presented here were provided in response to an author query. The p-values and effect sizes presented here were calculated by the WWC. This study is characterized as having a statistically significant positive effect on the industry-recognized credential, certificate, or license completion and credit accumulation outcome domains because the estimated effect is positive and statistically significant. The study is characterized as having an indeterminate effect on the postsecondary degree attainment outcome domain because the mean effect reported is not statistically significant.

^c Juniper et al. (2020) required difference-in-differences adjustments in the short-term employment outcome domain. The p-values and effect sizes presented here were calculated by the WWC. The study is characterized as having an indeterminate effect on short-term employment because the mean effect reported is not statistically significant. For more information, please refer to the WWC Procedures Handbook, version 4.0, page 22.

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.



Details of Each Study that Meets WWC Standards

This section presents details for the studies of *Project QUEST* that meet WWC standards. These details include the full study reference, findings description, findings summary, and description of study characteristics. A summary of domain findings for each study is presented below, followed by a description of the study characteristics. These study-level details include contextual information about the study setting, methods, sample, intervention group, comparison group, outcomes, and implementation details. For additional information, readers should refer to the original studies.

Research details for Elliott & Roder (2017)

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

Findings from Elliott & Roder (2017) show evidence of a statistically significant positive effect of *Project QUEST* on industry-recognized credential, certificate, or license completion (Table 5). This finding is based on an outcome analysis that includes 343 students. The findings on medium-term employment, medium-term earnings, long-term earnings, short-term earnings, short-term employment, and postsecondary degree attainment, which show evidence of indeterminate effects, are based on outcome analysis that includes 343 to 410 students. The findings and research details summarized for this study come from three related citations, including the primary study listed. See the References section, which begins on page 15, for a list of all related publications.

Table 5. Summary of findings from Elliott & Roder (2017)

Outcome domain	Sample size	Study findings		
		Average effect size	Improvement index	Statistically significant
Industry-recognized credential, certificate, or license completion	343	0.61	+23	Yes
Medium-term employment	343	0.19	+8	No
Medium-term earnings	410	0.18	+7	No
Long-term earnings	410	0.11	+4	No
Short-term earnings	410	0.11	+4	No
Short-term employment	343	-0.16	-7	No
Postsecondary degree attainment	343	-0.29	-11	No

Table 6. Description of study characteristics for Elliott & Roder (2017)

WWC evidence rating	Meets WWC Group Design Standards Without Reservations. This is a randomized controlled trial (RCT) with low attrition. For more information on how the WWC assigns study ratings, please see the WWC Procedures and Standards Handbooks (version 4.0) and WWC Standards Briefs , available on the WWC website.
Setting	The study was conducted with residents of San Antonio and Bexar County in Texas.
Methods	<p>Individuals were eligible to participate in <i>Project QUEST</i> if they (a) were 18 years of age or older; (b) had a high school diploma or GED[®], (c) tested at a minimum at an 8th grade level in reading and 6th grade level in math on the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE), (d) were interested in but not currently enrolled in college classes, and (e) were able to attend one of the healthcare career track programs full-time. <i>Project QUEST</i> targeted recruitment of individuals from lower income households—83% of study participants reported household incomes below the poverty level at enrollment. Individuals underwent a rigorous intake process which also includes completing the System for Assessment and Group Evaluation (SAGE) to assess the match between the individual’s career aptitude and interests and their goals and the ACCUPLACER[®] college placement test to identify remediation needs. Individuals who met the program requirements were randomly assigned to the intervention or comparison group.</p> <p>Of the 410 individuals who participated in the study between April 2006 and October 2008, 207 were randomly assigned to the intervention group and 203 to the comparison group. The study used administrative records to report on the short-, medium-, and long-term earnings outcomes. For all other outcome measures, the study is based on 343 participants, 175 in the intervention group and 168 in the comparison group, who completed a baseline survey at the time of enrollment and a follow-up survey six years later. Additionally, the study used data from a survey conducted two years after random assignment.</p>
Study sample	Of the 410 participants who were eligible to participate in the study and were randomly assigned to either the intervention group or comparison group, 14% were Black, 10% were White, and race was not specified for 77% of participants. The majority of participants were Hispanic (74%) and female (89%). The average age was 30 years old. The highest degree earned for the majority of participants was a GED [®] (25%) or a high school diploma (70%); 5% had earned a college degree. Almost half (45%) had previously attended college but did not earn a degree. The majority (84%) had been employed at any time during the past year. The average annual earnings in the past year was \$11,722.
Intervention group	<p><i>Project QUEST</i> is a workforce development program that serves residents of San Antonio and Bexar County, Texas. For the study, program participants were required to enroll full-time in a certificate program at an area community college or professional training institute in the field of healthcare such as nursing, medical records coding, or technician programs. <i>Project QUEST</i> provides comprehensive support services aimed at helping individuals to (1) complete occupational training programs at community colleges and professional training institutes, (2) pass certification exams, and (3) secure relevant employment. In addition to attending the occupational training program full-time, participants were required to attend weekly group meetings that focused on life skills, including time management, study skills, critical thinking, and conflict resolution. Participants received: (a) financial assistance to cover tuition, fees, books, transportation, uniforms, licensing exam fees, and tutoring; (b) basic skills instruction to improve their math and reading skills to pass college placement test; (c) counseling to address personal and academic concerns and provide motivation and emotional support; (d) referrals to other agencies for assistance with utility bills, childcare, food, and other services as needed; and (e) job placement assistance, including help with writing resumes and interviewing, and referrals to employers that were hiring.</p>
Comparison group	Participants in the comparison group could enroll in an occupational training program at an area community college or professional training institute and access job placement assistance through the college, available supports in the community, or find jobs on their own. However, they did not receive any of the benefits of the <i>Project QUEST</i> program.
Outcomes and measurement	<p>Study authors reported findings on six outcome measures that are eligible for review under the Postsecondary Career and Technical Education topic area. One eligible outcome, employment (year-round) year 3 after random assignment, was in the short-term employment domain. One eligible outcome, employment (year-round) year 5 after random assignment, was in the medium-term employment domain. One eligible outcome, earned a vocational certificate or license within 6 years after random assignment, was in the industry-recognized credential, certificate, or license completion domain. One eligible outcome, earned a college degree within 6 years after random assignment, was in the postsecondary degree attainment domain. One eligible outcome, earnings year 3 after random assignment, was in the short-term earnings domain. One eligible outcome, earnings year 5 after random assignment, was in the medium-term earnings domain. One eligible outcome, earnings year 7 after random assignment, was in the long-term earnings domain.</p> <p>The study also reported findings for employment (year-round) year 4 after random assignment; employment (year-round) year 6 after random assignment; earnings year 4 after random assignment; earnings year 6 after random assignment; and earnings year 8 after random assignment. Summaries of these findings are available on the WWC website (https://whatworks.ed.gov). The supplemental findings do not factor into the intervention’s rating of effectiveness.</p>
Additional implementation details	The operating costs of <i>Project QUEST</i> were financed by a combination of private and public funding. The primary funder was the City of San Antonio, Texas. Other funders included Bexar County, Texas and the Charles Stewart Mott, Meadows, and Annie E. Casey Foundations.

Research details for Rolston et al. (2017)

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

Findings from Rolston et al. (2017) show evidence of a statistically significant positive effect on credit accumulation and industry-recognized credential, certificate, or license completion (Table 7). These findings are based on an outcome analysis that includes 958 students. The finding on postsecondary degree attainment, which shows evidence of indeterminate effects, is based on an outcome analysis that includes 958 students.

Table 7. Summary of findings from Rolston et al. (2017)

Meets WWC Group Design Standards Without Reservations				
Outcome domain	Sample size	Study findings		
		Average effect size	Improvement index	Statistically significant
Industry-recognized credential, certificate, or license completion	958 students	0.18	+7	Yes
Credit accumulation	958 students	0.35	+14	Yes
Postsecondary degree attainment	958 students	0.14	+6	No

Table 8. Description of study characteristics for Rolston et al. (2017)

WWC evidence rating	Meets WWC Group Design Standards Without Reservations. This is a randomized controlled trial (RCT) with low attrition.
Setting	The Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA) is an adaptation of the <i>Project QUEST</i> model. The study was conducted with residents of San Antonio and four counties (Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy) in the Lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas.
Methods	Individuals were eligible to participate in VIDA if they (a) were residents of the Rio Grande Valley; (b) were 18 years of age or older; (c) had a high school diploma or GED [®] ; (d) were eligible to work in the United States; (e) tested at a minimum at a 10th grade level in reading, writing, and math; (f) were unemployed, underemployed, met federal poverty guidelines, or received public assistance; and (g) were able to attend an occupational training program at an area community college full-time. Many applicants were already enrolled in college but needed additional supports to complete their college coursework. Applicants who had not yet enrolled in college were required to take the college entrance exam. Individuals who met the program requirements were randomly assigned to the intervention or comparison group. Of the 958 individuals who participated in the study between November 2011 and June 2014, 478 were randomly assigned to the intervention group and 480 to the comparison group. Data sources include a baseline survey, a follow-up survey starting at 15 months after random assignment that occurred on average 20 months after random assignment, and administrative records from VIDA and local community colleges that almost all VIDA participants and comparison group members attended.
Study sample	Of the 958 participants who were eligible to participate in the study and were randomly assigned to either the intervention group or comparison group, 1% were Black, 3% were White, and race was not specified for 96% of participants. The majority of participants were Hispanic (96%) and female (71%). Study participants were also older than traditional college students. More than 60 percent were age 25 or older, and more than one-fifth were age 35 or older. Virtually all participants (99%) had at least a high school diploma or equivalent and more than half (57%) had completed a year or more of college. Approximately half (51%) had annual household incomes of less than \$15,000, and more than 85% had incomes less than \$30,000. Most (65%) were not working at the time of random assignment, reflecting their interest in and ability to attend school full-time.

<p>Intervention group</p>	<p>Established in 1995, <i>VIDA</i> is a non-profit, community-based organization, created through a partnership of faith-based leaders and the business community of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas to address employers' needs for skilled workers and link the area's un- and underemployed with high skilled, high wage jobs in the region. <i>VIDA</i>'s primary goal is for participants to graduate with an associate's degree or industry-recognized certificate in a high-demand occupation and find employment that pays a living wage in their area of study. <i>VIDA</i> supports full-time enrollment at local colleges through required attendance at weekly intensive counseling sessions along with direct assistance with tuition and related training expenses of \$13,750 for two and a half years on average. To start, program participants complete an initial assessment to determine their ability to commit to the program. For college-ready participants, experienced <i>VIDA</i> counselors conduct weekly mandatory group or individual case management and counseling sessions at students' colleges to provide information on how to succeed in college and employment, identify problems early, and provide social support. Program participants can receive wraparound support services for tuition, books, and other needs such as transportation to reduce the cost of obtaining a certificate or degree. For program participants who are not college-ready, <i>VIDA</i> offers a College Prep Academy, which is a 16-week, accelerated, full-time basic skills bridge program. During the 16 weeks, participants attend a daily course to prepare to pass college entrance exams. For College Prep Academy participants, <i>VIDA</i> pays for two rounds of college entrance exam testing.</p>
<p>Comparison group</p>	<p>Participants in the comparison group could not access the <i>VIDA</i> services but could access other services available in the community, such as those provided by <i>VIDA</i>'s college partners and other community resources such as occupational training programs, developmental education, and academic advising through area community colleges; career and personal counseling through area community colleges and local social service providers including American Job Centers and Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services; and financial aid to attend school through federal and local loans, grants, and scholarships.</p>
<p>Outcomes and measurement</p>	<p>Study authors reported findings on five outcome measures that are eligible for review under the Postsecondary Career and Technical Education topic area. One eligible outcome, total college credits earned within 24 months of random assignment, was in the credit accumulation domain. One eligible outcome, receipt of a college credential: any degree within 24 months of random assignment, was in the postsecondary degree attainment domain. Three eligible outcomes, 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, were in the industry-recognized credential, certificate, or license completion domain.</p> <p>The study also reported findings for total college credits earned by the end of successive periods after random assignment (by month 6, month 12, and month 18); receipt of a college credential: associate's degree 24 months after random assignment; receipt of a college credential: bachelor's degree 24 months after random assignment; receipt of a college credential: level 1 certificate 24 months after random assignment; and receipt of a college credential: level 2 certificate 24 months after random assignment. Summaries of these findings are available on the WWC website (https://whatworks.ed.gov). The supplemental findings do not factor into the intervention's rating of effectiveness.</p> <p>Study authors reported findings on 10 outcome measures that do not meet standards, and thus are not included in the intervention report. The findings include working in a job paying \$12/hour or more within 24 months of random assignment; working in a job requiring at least mid-level skills within 24 months of random assignment; receipt of a college credential: associate's degree 36 months after random assignment; receipt of a college credential: bachelor's degree 36 months after random assignment; credential earned—a licensing/certification body 24 months after random assignment; receipt of a credential from another education or training institution by time of survey; receipt of college credential: level 1 certificate 36 months after random assignment; receipt of a college credential: level 2 certificate 36 months after random assignment; receipt of a college credential: any certificate 36 months after random assignment; and receipt of a college credential: any credential 36 months after random assignment. These findings do not meet WWC group design standards because the analysis does not provide a credible measure of the effectiveness of the intervention.</p>
<p>Additional implementation details</p>	<p><i>VIDA</i> received funding from the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) evaluation for enhanced recruitment in order to double program enrollment and establish a comparison group to conduct an evaluation of the intervention.</p>

Research details for Juniper et al. (2020)

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

Findings from Juniper et al. (2020) show evidence of an indeterminate effect on short-term employment (Table 9). These findings are based on an outcome analysis that includes 1,212 students.

Table 9. Summary of findings from Juniper et al. (2020)

Outcome domain	Sample size	Meets WWC Group Design Standards With Reservations		
		Average effect size	Improvement index	Statistically significant
Short-Term Employment	1,212 students	0.14	+6	No

Table 10. Description of study characteristics for Juniper et al. (2020)

WWC evidence rating	Meets WWC Group Design Standards With Reservations. This is a study that uses a quasi-experimental design (QED) in which the analytic intervention and comparison groups satisfy the baseline equivalence requirement.
Setting	This is a study of <i>Capital IDEA</i> , which is a sectoral workforce development program implemented in Travis County, Texas, and is based on the <i>Project QUEST</i> model. Participants attend training at LifeWorks workforce development sites, including Austin Community College's (ACC) Highland Campus (95% of students) and Temple College (5% of students).
Methods	This study is a QED in which 606 program participants were matched with a comparison group of 606 individuals using propensity score matching. Potential comparison group members received services supported by Travis County. The study uses administrative data from the Unemployment Insurance program beginning with four quarters prior to the intervention and following up to nine quarters after intervention participation. The study focuses on the cohort of participants completing the program in 2016-2019.
Study sample	Eligible applicants had to be at least 18 years old, have a High School Equivalency Certification (HSEC) or high school diploma, lack an associate's or higher degree, meet reading and math skills requirements, and report a household income at or below 200% of the federal poverty threshold. Of the <i>Capital IDEA</i> participants in the study, 56% were White, 24% were Black, and 5% were Asian. Forty-one percent of the sample were Hispanic, and 70% were female. Nearly half (49%) had attended some college, and over one-quarter (27%) were receiving public benefits. The program recruited low-wage workers and encouraged them to continue working part-time throughout the program. No information was provided on the demographic characteristics of the comparison group.
Intervention group	<i>Capital IDEA</i> is a sectoral workforce development program that offers non-traditional students with the opportunity to pursue training in high-wage, high-demand occupations in health care, information technology, and other leading industries such as professional trades or applied technologies. The program coordinates and collaborates with Austin-area community colleges and employers to help prepare participants for jobs with good wages and benefits. Applicants who are unlikely to pass a college admissions assessment can enroll in <i>Capital IDEA</i> 's College Prep Academy, an intensive 6.5 hour per day, five-day a week, 12-week program designed to build math, reading, writing, and study skills. Most participants required only one semester of the College Prep Academy (10% of participants received an additional semester of support). The program assigns a career navigator to each student. Career navigators meet students at the beginning of each semester, then communicate and work with students throughout the semester. Group support sessions are also offered, with topics for these sessions driven by student needs and their ability to navigate the college experience. The career navigators also communicate over telephone, text message, email, and video conferencing to help guide students through the higher education system. The program encourages students to work part-time throughout the program. The program covers tuition, fees, books, uniforms, tools, training software, and other course-specific required items. In addition, <i>Capital IDEA</i> provides support with basic office supplies, backpacks, and eye examinations and eyeglasses, and offers emergency financial assistance for students who need help with utility bills, rent, and mortgage payments, and childcare. There is also free Cap Metro public transportation for students enrolled at ACC.

Comparison group	Comparison group members received employment assistance services available to the community through the state's WorkInTexas (WIT) program and local Workforce Investment Act-funded Workforce Solutions Career Centers. Data for the comparison group were drawn from The Workforce Information Systems of Texas (TWIST) records.
Outcomes and measurement	<p>Study authors reported findings on one outcome measure that is eligible for review under the Postsecondary Career and Technical Education topic area: employment one year after program completion, which is in the short-term employment domain.</p> <p>Study authors reported findings on three outcome measures that do not meet standards, and thus are not included in the intervention report. The findings for employment (two years after program completion) in the short-term employment domain, average quarterly earnings (one year after program completion), and average quarterly earnings (two years after program completion) in the short-term earnings domain do not meet WWC group design standards because baseline equivalence of the analytic intervention and comparison groups is necessary, but the requirement was not satisfied.</p>
Additional implementation details	No additional implementation details are provided in the study.

References

Studies that meet WWC group design standards

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

Additional sources:

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>

Roder, A., & Elliott, M. (2019). Nine year gains: Project QUEST's continuing impact. Economic Mobility Corporation. https://economicmobilitycorp.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/NineYearGains_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

Studies that meet WWC group design standards with reservations

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

Studies that do not meet WWC group design standards

None.

Studies that are ineligible for review using the Postsecondary Career and Technical Education Protocol

Elliott, M., Roder, A., King, E., & Stillman, J. (2001). Gearing up: An interim report on the Sectoral Employment Initiative. Public/Private Ventures. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED458396> The study is ineligible for review because it does not use an eligible design.

Roder, A., Clymer, C., & Wyckoff, L. (2008). Targeting industries, training workers and improving opportunities: The final report from the Sectoral Employment Initiative. Public/Private Ventures. <https://www.issuelab.org/resources/1970/1970.pdf> The study is ineligible for review because it does not use an eligible design.

Endnotes

- ¹ Carnevale, A. P., Cheah, B., Ridley, N., & Strohl, J. (2017). Good jobs that pay without a BA. Washington, DC: Georgetown University, Center on Education and the Workforce.
- ² Shapiro, D., Ryu, M., Huie, F., Liu, Q., and Zheng, Y. (2019). Completing College 2019 National Report (Signature Report 18), Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.
- ³ This report includes studies on *Project QUEST*, *VIDA*, and *Capital IDEA* because the research that meets WWC standards involves these three variants of the intervention; the details differ slightly between the three programs, and these differences are described in this report. We describe all programs as *Project QUEST* for simplicity.
- ⁴ Absence of conflict of interest: This intervention report includes a study conducted by staff from Abt Associates (Rolston et al., 2017). Because Abt Associates is a contractor that administers the WWC, this study was reviewed by staff members from a different organization.
- ⁵ The literature search reflects documents publicly available by April 2021. Reviews of the studies in this report used the standards from the WWC Procedures and Standards Handbook (version 4.0) and the Postsecondary Career and Technical Education review protocol (version 4.0). The evidence presented in this report is based on available research. Findings and conclusions could change as new research becomes available. A longer-term impacts report for the Rolston et al. (2017) study is scheduled to be published in Summer 2021, too late to be included in this intervention report.
- ⁶ Full-time enrollment is prescribed by the occupational training program. In a community college setting, full-time enrollment can be equivalent to 12+ credit hours, unless fewer credit hours are required per semester for the training program.
- ⁷ The effects of *Project QUEST* are not known for other outcome domains within the Postsecondary Career and Technical Education topic area, including technical skill proficiency and long-term employment.

Recommended Citation

What Works Clearinghouse, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. (2021, November). *Project QUEST (Quality Employment through Skills Training)*. <https://whatworks.ed.gov>.