The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA): Summary of Stakeholder Input on Research Priorities

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November 2021

Introduction

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Research Portfolio project aims to generate a wide range of short- and long-term research options for the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) to consider as it seeks to strategically build rigorous evidence to support the continuous improvement of Employment and Training Administration (ETA) programs and services. This DOL-funded project supports ETA in fulfilling requirements under WIOA Section 169 related to conducting evaluations of WIOA activities and supporting stakeholder discussions on ETA's five-year research and evaluation strategic plan.

The WIOA Research Portfolio project will identify research topics and develop research options that are high priority for DOL and key stakeholders, are likely to fill key knowledge gaps, and are able to generate actionable evidence that is widely applicable across areas and programs. To this end, Mathematica, Social Policy Research Associates, and the National Association of Workforce Boards (NAWB) engaged a broad set of stakeholders and an expert panel to identify priority research topics. These stakeholders and experts included representatives from federal agencies; state and local workforce system agencies; advocacy organizations; and the fields of organized labor, business and industry, and postsecondary education.

This brief summarizes the input on research priorities gathered from stakeholders and experts by the WIOA Research Portfolio project team between November 2020 and April 2021. The timing of these discussions provides important context for the findings. Many discussions were held during a surge in cases of COVID-19, when social distancing measures were widespread. Other discussions were held after the vaccines were becoming widely available and restrictions were being lifted. The conversations also spanned two different presidential administrations. As a result, the policy and economic context was changing rapidly during these discussions about workforce strategies and labor market trends.

Composition of Stakeholders Group and Expert Panel

Collecting input from a wide and diverse range of stakeholders in the public workforce system is critical to building a relevant and comprehensive research portfolio on WIOA. This section describes the stakeholders and experts we identified, in consultation with DOL, and with whom we held discussions.

We used a two-stage process to identify stakeholders. First, we worked with DOL to identify seven distinct categories of priority stakeholders:

- State workforce system
- Local workforce system
- Business and industry
- Workforce advocacy
- Organized labor
- Postsecondary education
- Federal agencies[1]

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[1] While the project focused primarily on engaging stakeholders outside of the federal government in small group and one-on-one discussions, we also held two meetings with federal agency staff to provide background on the project and obtain their input.

We then identified specific organizations to engage from each of these stakeholder categories. Working closely with DOL, NAWB, and the National Governors Association, we identified people for seven group discussions with external stakeholder groups of 5 to 8 participants each. In addition, we scheduled individual or small-group conversations with 1 to 3 participants each.

Overall, from November 2020 to March 15, 2021, we met with 53 organizations across all seven stakeholder categories, speaking with 105 people in total (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of stakeholder organizations, by category

State workforce system	Local workforce system	Business and industry	Workforce advocacy group	Organized labor	Post-secondary education	Federal agencies	Total
10	15	10	9	4	3	2	53

DOL selected experts identified by the project team to serve on a panel (Table 2). The selected experts were drawn from the same categories of stakeholder discussed above. The experts shared their perspectives and knowledge but were not expected to reach consensus or make formal recommendations. A meeting with the expert panel took place on April 29, 2021.

Table 2. Expert panel members

Name	Affiliation
Amanda Bergson-Shilcock	Senior fellow, National Skills Coalition
Kisha Bird	(Former) Director of youth policy, Center for Law and Social Policy
Peter Callstrom	President and chief employment officer, San Diego Workforce Partnership
Yvette Chocolaad	Director, workforce policy and research, National Association of State Workforce Agencies
Maureen Conway	Executive director, Economic Opportunities Program, The Aspen Institute
Brent Orrell	Resident fellow, American Enterprise Institute
Kent Phillipe	Associate vice president, Research and Student Success, American Association of Community Colleges
William Spriggs	Chief economist, AFL-CIO
Deniece Thomas	Deputy commissioner of workforce learning and development, Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development
James Vander Hulst	President and chief disruptive officer, ERN-USA
Carl Van Horn	Director, Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, Rutgers University

Approach to Obtaining and Synthesizing Stakeholder and Expert Input

We used human-centered design techniques and interactive meeting tools to structure and guide virtual meetings and then organized and synthesized the key discussion points by topic area. The stakeholder

consultations focused on understanding (1) what stakeholders most needed to know to help them do their jobs better, and (2) what additional evidence on workforce development they would find useful. Broad questions were designed to elicit free-flowing discussion and participants were not expected to address each question. In addition, our synthesis of these conversations do not allow for generalizations about the priorities and concerns of other stakeholders with whom we did not meet.

We organized discussions with stakeholders around two broad categories: workforce service strategies and the changing world of work. Figure 1 shows the five topics that stakeholders identified as being of greatest priority within each of these broad categories. [2]

Figure 1. Stakeholders' top five priority topics related to workforce service strategies and the changing world of work

Workforce service strategies: Top five topics

#1 Work-based learning and apprenticeship

#2 Career pathways, advancement, stackable credentials

#3 Integrated service/ co-enrollment

#4 Employer service/employer engagement

#5 Career planning/career navigation

Changing world of work: Top five topics

#1 Job changes related to COVID-19

#2 Changes in value of credentials

#3 Remote services

#4 Data infrastructure

#5 Remote work

For each topic listed above, experts were asked to provide input in two areas: (1) evidence gaps and research needs and (2) strategies that could be tested. Finally, we developed two framing documents and distributed them to the experts before the meeting: a research evidence scan on key workforce strategies related to WIOA, and a scan of labor market and policy trends the workforce system faces.

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[2] We asked stakeholders to assign a set of points to topics based on level of priority and then aggregated their responses to determine the top five in each category.

Summary of Stakeholder and Expert Panel Input

We present the key points stakeholders and experts (collectively referred to hereafter as "stakeholders") shared on each topic below.[3] Some topics summarized here have been the subject of significant and rigorous research, whereas the evidence base for other topics is limited. This brief does not discuss the existing evidence on the topics raised during stakeholder conversations.

Work-based learning and apprenticeships

Interest in work-based learning and apprenticeship emphasized the need for more information in five areas: (1) motivating employers to participate in work-based learning; (2) increasing equity and inclusion; (3) work-based learning programs for youth, the supports needed to make such programs effective, and particular youth models such as pre-apprenticeship and summer employment; (4) generating and using data to understand outcomes and costs; and (5) generating evidence on the impacts of different work-based learning and training approaches.

Career pathways, advancement, and the role of credentials

Stakeholders expressed a need for better understanding of (1) whether and how job seekers and workers use career pathways and stackable credentials; (2) how much career pathway programs benefit workers and employers in the short and long term; and (3) which credentials employers value in career pathways. They raised questions about how the system should measure worker outcomes—including accounting for factors other than earnings that affect the quality of the job (such as schedules) and for benefits accrued to workers who advance but do not complete the originally conceived pathway. Other areas of interest included the way benefits from such programs accrue differently to different groups, such as youth, older workers, or rural residents.

Integrated services and co-enrollment

Service integration was a key goal of the WIOA legislation. Stakeholders highlighted the need to learn and disseminate best practices from states that have had the most success in integrating services and to understand the common barriers that others face. They also discussed the need to think about integrated services using a broader model that goes beyond co-enrollment, and the need to develop a framework that includes outcomes and indicators of service integration. They noted that although some evidence indicates increased co-enrollment as a result of WIOA, particularly in Title I and Title II programs, it is less clear if WIOA led to increases in co-enrollment in other programs. Finally, stakeholders sought more evidence on whether the benefits of service integration are greater than the substantial cost it takes to implement.

Employer services and engagement

The stakeholders discussed a need for the workforce system to move toward a framework in which employers are viewed as partners, rather than just customers, and a need to know how these partnerships could be developed to improve training, career advancement, and racial equity for workers. They also noted the general gap in knowledge about why some employers engage with the workforce system and others do not. Stakeholders cited a need to explore what accountability systems are currently in place for

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[3] Some topics were slighty combined, modified, or recategorized as discussions with stakeholders, the expert panel, and DOL evolved.

employers that use public funds, and whether increasing that accountability could help workers receive rigorous training.

Career planning and navigation

There are key challenges and evidence gaps related to how the workforce system provides labor market information and assists job seekers with career planning and navigation of the labor market. Stakeholders also discussed the need for career planning earlier in workers' lives and how the workforce system could partner with K–12 education agencies to accomplish this. Stakeholders noted the system needs to understand the relative effectiveness of various aptitude, interest, and skill-assessment tools. Finally, they discussed evidence gaps related to how career planning professionals are trained and the models of support they provide.

Remote services

Stakeholders discussed how pandemic conditions required local workforce boards and their service providers to experiment quickly with remote services, including services accessed through American Job Centers and other WIOA programs. There was general agreement that at least some remote services are likely to continue post-pandemic and that key questions about the effectiveness of various types of remote services have not yet been answered. Stakeholders discussed the benefits and trade-offs of remote services, especially given the unequal distribution of high-speed Internet, varied comfort levels with technology, and the associated knowledge gaps. They also cited the need for evidence on which types of services are best provided in person versus remotely, and which are best delivered interactively in real time versus those that people can do at their convenience.

Job changes related to COVID-19

Stakeholders discussed the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor market and various occupations and industries. They had questions both about the extent of such effects and whether pandemic-related changes would persist as the economy reopens. Stakeholders also highlighted a need for evidence on the best strategies to help the most affected workers. Some discussions on this topic occurred as early as November 2020, when the pandemic was surging, many restrictions were in place, and vaccines were not yet available. Other discussions occurred as late as April 2021, when vaccines were becoming more widely available and the economy was beginning to reopen.

Changes in the value of credentials

The rapid growth in the number and variety of credentials being offered, and the relationship between that growth and labor market dynamics, was a key point of discussion. Stakeholders stressed the importance to the workforce system of developing a clear understanding of the value of credentials in general, identifying high quality credentials and helping workers pursue them, and understanding how the value of some credentials is evolving in a rapidly changing labor market. They raised questions about the increasing prominence of competency-based credentials, as opposed to traditional credentials based on course time completion. Similarly, stakeholders cited the need for evidence on the differential impacts of industry-based versus educational credentials.

Data infrastructure

Stakeholders identified several gaps in the evidence on how to improve national and state data infrastructure, including best practices for funding, procuring, and developing new data systems, and

training staff to use them effectively. Stakeholders asked how states and federal agencies could promote data sharing and discussed the need for examples of effective data-sharing agreements between partner institutions that allow workforce staff to track people across programs.

Remote work

Noting the massive increase in people working from home as a result of the pandemic, stakeholders raised questions about the implications of this phenomenon, such as its impact on the distribution of jobs across urban and rural locations and the demand for certain skills. Key questions included which employers, occupations, and industries were most and least likely to allow their employees to work remotely during the pandemic and the likelihood of this trend continuing post-pandemic. Stakeholders also raised the question of whether and how the public workforce system should help workers prepare for remote jobs, such as training in the use of technology platforms or addressing skills that are more critical in remote settings.

Cross-cutting themes

Two themes permeated many stakeholder discussions on nearly every topic. Those themes are the need to consider (1) diversity, equity, and inclusion as it relates to all aspects of the workforce system and its customers and (2) trade-offs between short- and long-term research needs.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion

Stakeholders offered several observations and questions related to developing diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplaces and how the public workforce system can reduce or eliminate structural inequities. Stakeholders suggested using data the workforce system maintains to investigate (1) whether certain groups are less likely to receive individual training accounts or other services and (2) whether career pathways and licensing requirements in the workforce support or restrict equitable access to good careers.

Short- and long-term research needs

An important challenge for DOL in building a research portfolio is to balance (1) the need to rigorously answer key questions with long-term impact studies that collect new data and could take several years against (2) the need to provide answers to other questions with short-term but potentially less rigorous analyses of existing data. The need for short-term analysis of existing data is especially pronounced because the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated filling a number of short-term evidence gaps, such as the differential effects of the pandemic on various populations and industries, and the relative strengths and weaknesses of different remote services platforms.