

Escalating Gains: The Elements of Project QUEST's Success



Anne Roder and Mark Elliott
Economic Mobility Corporation

May 2018



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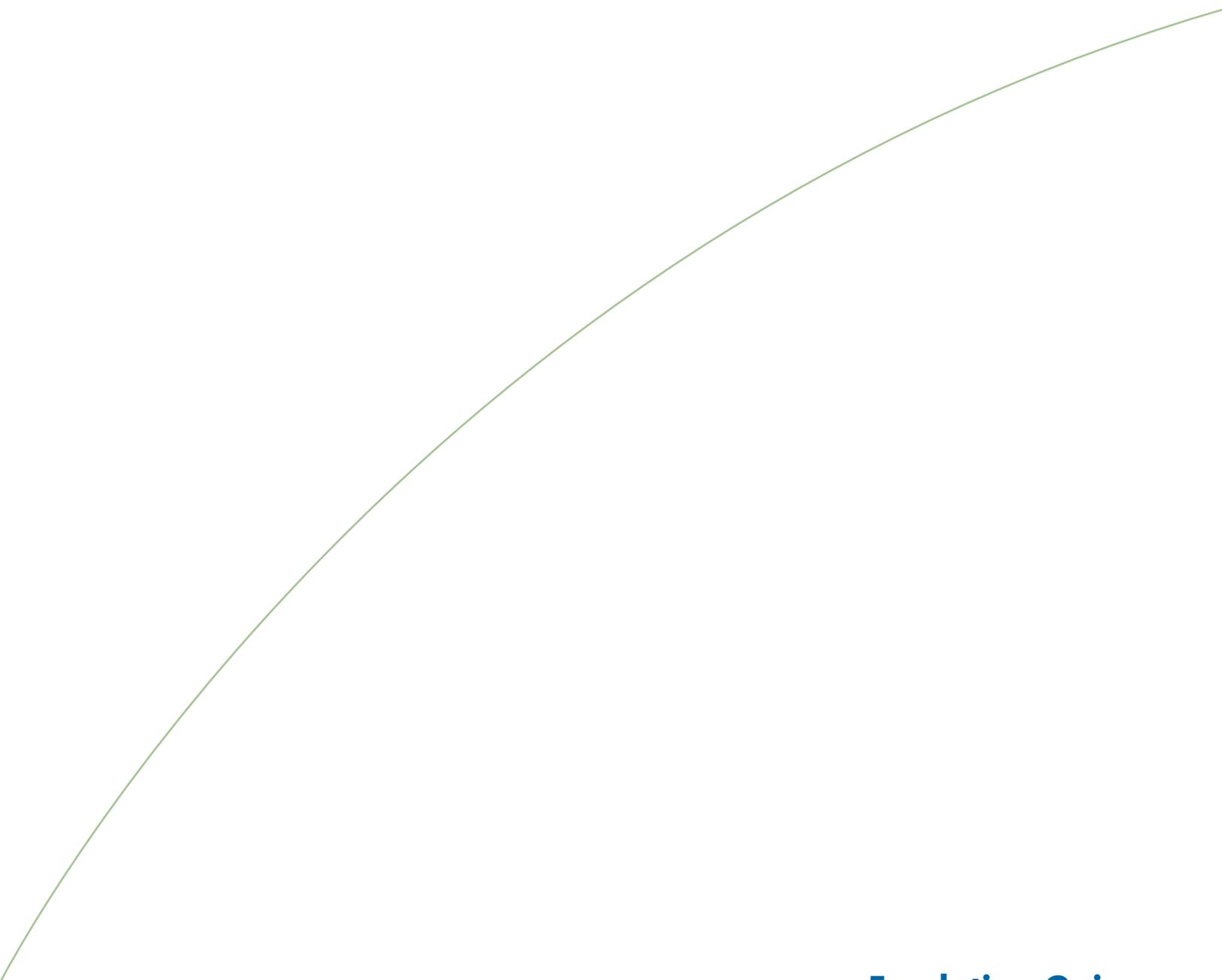
Economic Mobility Corporation, Inc.
50 Broadway, Suite 1604
New York, NY 10004

Telephone:

212.280.6975

Email:

info@economicmobilitycorp.org



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Acknowledgments

This report is dedicated to our colleague and great friend Jack Litzenberg, who believed in this project when no one else did. With his passing, in 2014, we lost a visionary in the workforce development field. We're sorry that Jack never saw the results we're sharing here—he would have been very proud.

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Table of Contents

1	Chapter 1: Introduction
7	Chapter 2: The Study Participants
13	Chapter 3: Program Impacts
26	Chapter 4: The QUEST Model and Participants' Program Experiences
43	Chapter 5: Conclusion
45	Endnotes
46	Appendix

Figures

8	Figure 1: Residential Locations of Study Participants at Program Enrollment (N=343)
9	Figure 2: The Project QUEST Intake Process
10	Figure 3: Study Participants' Characteristics at Program Entry (N=343)
11	Figure 4: Study Participants' Intended Health-Care Occupation at Program Entry (N=343)
14	Figure 5: Average Annual Earnings during the Six Years after Random Assignment among All Study Participants
14	Figure 6: Project QUEST's Impact on Average Annual Earnings during the Six Years after Random Assignment among All Study Participants (N=343)
15	Figure 7: Percent of All Study Participants Employed Year-Round during the Six Years after Random Assignment
15	Figure 8: Percent of All Study Participants Who Earned \$15 an Hour or More Six Years after Random Assignment
16	Figure 9: Job Characteristics of the Subset of Study Participants Who Were Employed Six Years after Random Assignment
17	Figure 10: Percent of All Study Participants Employed in Health-Care Occupations Six Years after Random Assignment
18	Figure 11: Percent of All Study Participants Who Earned Credentials during the Six Years after Random Assignment
18	Figure 12: Percent of All Study Participants Who Obtained Any Health-Care Certifications during the Six Years after Random Assignment
19	Figure 13: Percent of All Study Participants Who Said The Home in Which They Lived Was in Excellent Condition at the Time of the Six-Year Follow-Up
20	Figure 14: Percent of All Study Participants Who Received Each Form of Public Assistance at the Time of the Six-Year Follow-Up
21	Figure 15: Percent of All Study Participants Who Held Each Asset at the Time of the Six-Year Follow-Up
21	Figure 16: Percent of All Study Participants Who Had Each Debt at the Time of the Six-Year Follow-Up
22	Figure 17: Percent of All Study Participants Who Reported Having Each Financial Difficulty in the Six Months before the Six-Year Follow-Up

- 23 Figure 18: Percent of All Study Participants Who Reported Trouble Making Each Type of Payment in the Six Months before the Six-Year Follow-Up
- 24 Figure 19: Percent of All Study Participants Who Had Earnings of \$24,000 or More in Year Six, by Education Level at Program Entry
- 24 Figure 20: Percent of All Study Participants Who Had Earnings of \$24,000 or More in Year Six, by Age at Program Entry
- 25 Figure 21: Percent of All Study Participants Who Had Earnings of \$24,000 or More in Year Six, by Gender
- 25 Figure 22: Percent of All Study Participants Who Had Earnings of \$24,000 or More in Year Six, by Race
- 27 Figure 23: Program and Certification Requirements for QUEST's Targeted Health-Care Career Tracks
- 29 Figure 24: Percent of QUEST Participants Who Took Part in Remedial Classes, by Program Track
- 30 Figure 25: Percent of All QUEST Participants Who Received Each Form of Financial Support from Project QUEST (N=175)
- 33 Figure 26: Training Completion and Certification Rates While Participants Were Enrolled in Project QUEST, by Program Track
- 33 Figure 27: Number of Years between Enrollment and Training Completion among Those Who Completed While Enrolled in Project QUEST, by Program Track
- 34 Figure 28: Training Completion and Certification Rates While Participants Were Enrolled in Project QUEST
- 35 Figure 29: Residential Locations of QUEST Participants Who Remained in the San Antonio Area at the Time of the Six-Year Follow-Up
- 36 Figure 30: Project QUEST's Costs (Average \$10,501 Per Participant)
- 36 Figure 31: Project QUEST's Average Total Costs, by Program Track
- 48 Figure A1: Estimated Regression Coefficients for the Probability of Responding to the Six-Year Follow-Up Survey (N=410)
- 49 Figure A2: Comparison of the Baseline Characteristics of Treatment and Control Group Members in the Final Sample
- 50 Figure A3: Demographic Characteristics at Program Entry of QUEST Participants in the Final Survey and In-Depth Interview Samples

Boxes

- 6 Box 1: COPS and Metro Alliance form Project QUEST.
- 12 Box 2: QUEST participants were motivated by a desire to achieve greater financial stability, to be able to do more for their children, and to live a more fulfilling life.
- 28 Box 3: Participants' main challenges were covering basic expenses, balancing school and family, and overcoming academic difficulties.
- 31 Box 4: QUEST counselors' support was critical to participants' success.
- 37 Box 5: QUEST Participant Profile: Liana
- 40 Box 6: QUEST Participant Profile: Malena

Introduction

Background

In the post–World War II US economy, unskilled workers had a good chance to join the middle class. Well-paying jobs, particularly in manufacturing, were plentiful and offered opportunity to people with only a high school education. Today, manufacturing is a smaller sector of the economy as low-skill jobs have been moved overseas or eliminated due to automation. To earn a good living in manufacturing, workers must now possess strong technical skills.¹ Similarly, today's fastest-growing industries—health care and social assistance, educational services, and professional and business services—are more likely than others to require mid- to high-level skills for employment.² The service sector, which accounted for all net employment growth from 2001 to 2015,³ comprises such high-wage professional jobs as doctors, financial advisers, and lawyers, and such low-wage jobs as retail cashiers, food prep workers, and home health aides. In between are “middle-skills” jobs, such as health technicians and paralegals, that require more education than a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree. In order to qualify for better-paying jobs in the service sector, skills are essential.

Over the past twenty-odd years, the workforce development field has also changed in important ways. In the early 1990s, job training programs were regarded as ineffective, due in large part to the national evaluation of the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA).⁴ Although a close reading of the evaluation reveals some important positive findings, particularly for adults, at the time most policymakers viewed the study as conclusive evidence that job training did not work. A subsequent study of JTPA's longer-term outcomes found that the early positive impacts for adults faded after three years.⁵ The disappointing research findings were often cited as a basis for cutting job training funds during both conservative and liberal administrations. As support for skills training declined, a new approach that emphasized “work-first” was gaining prominence. Findings from studies of welfare-to-work strategies suggested that emphasizing immediate employment was a more effective approach to increasing participants' earnings and reducing public welfare spending than investing in skill-building activities.⁶

Despite the disappointing results from studies of job training and the promising findings from work-first approaches, it was becoming clear that, more than ever, economic success in general depended on education and skills. Sectoral employment strategies emerged in the early 1990s in response to the growing concern that workforce development strategies in general and the work-first emphasis in public policy in particular were not providing individuals the skills needed to succeed in a changing economy.⁷ Supported primarily by the Charles Stewart Mott and Ford Foundations in the early part of the decade, a small number of organizations

began pursuing approaches that emphasized intimate knowledge of a sector or industry, an in-depth understanding of employers' workforce needs in that sector, and a program that prepared workers for jobs in that industry through ongoing adaptation to changes in the sector. This report presents Mobility's findings from a randomized controlled trial (RCT) study of Project QUEST, a pioneer in the sectoral employment field that has been helping low-income San Antonio, Texas, residents prepare for well-paying careers for the past 26 years.

Project QUEST

Prompted by the rapid erosion of low-skill manufacturing jobs in the 1980s, two community-organizing groups in San Antonio led a grassroots effort to help residents gain skills to meet employers' needs in growing sectors of the local economy. The two groups, COPS (Communities Organized for Public Service) and Metro Alliance, founded Project QUEST in 1992. In its 26 years of operation, QUEST has served more than 6,000 job seekers in the San Antonio area. **Box 1** presents the story of COPS and Metro's role in QUEST's founding.

QUEST provides comprehensive support and resources to help individuals complete occupational training programs at local community colleges and professional training institutes, pass certification exams, and obtain jobs in targeted industries. QUEST's services include the following:

- financial assistance to cover tuition and fees for classes, books, transportation, uniforms, licensing exams, and tutoring
- remedial instruction in math and reading to help individuals pass college placement tests
- counseling to address personal and academic concerns and provide motivation and emotional support
- referrals to outside agencies for assistance with utility bills, childcare, food, and other services as well as direct financial assistance with other supports on an as-needed basis
- weekly meetings that focus on life skills, including time management, study skills, critical thinking, and conflict resolution
- accountability through required attendance at weekly meetings and submission of class attendance sheets signed by instructors in order to continue receiving support
- job placement assistance, including help with writing résumés and interviewing, as well as referrals to employers that are hiring

During the first three years of the study, which covered the period when all study participants enrolled and at least their first year in the program, QUEST paid 100 percent of tuition for participants. After this time, QUEST covered 50 percent of tuition for participants but continued to cover 100 percent of their fees, books, and other education-related expenses.

The Evaluation

In 2005, Project QUEST agreed to take part in an RCT study to assess its impacts on participants' earnings. Because individuals were randomly assigned either to a treatment group that could receive the QUEST services or to a control group that could not receive the QUEST services, the two groups were equivalent on measured characteristics, such as age, prior education, and work experience, and unmeasured characteristics, such as motivation, at the time of study enrollment. Therefore, any differences found in their outcomes can be attributed to the QUEST services. The evaluation focused on individuals who were pursuing training for health-care jobs, including licensed vocational nurse; registered nurse; medical records coder; and surgical, respiratory, sonography, and radiology technician. The research questions the study sought to address follow.

- The confirmatory research question the study used to assess the effectiveness of Project QUEST was the following:
 - Does Project QUEST have a positive impact on participants' annual earnings six years after study enrollment, relative to a control group?
- The study also addressed the following exploratory research questions to further understand how QUEST affects program participants:
 - What impact does QUEST have on participants' consistency of employment and hourly wages?
 - What impact does QUEST have on participants' attainment of educational credentials, including vocational certificates or licenses and college degrees?
 - What impact does QUEST have on other indicators of participants' financial well-being, including housing status, public assistance receipt, assets, debts, and ability to pay bills on time?
 - Do QUEST's impacts vary for subgroups of participants, including by gender, age, race, immigration status, education level, marital status, and whether participants had children under age 18?

Between April 2006 and October 2008, 410 individuals enrolled in the study, of whom 207 were assigned to the treatment group and 203 to the control group. The final results are based on the outcomes of 175 treatment group members and 168 control group members who completed a baseline survey at the time of enrollment and a follow-up survey six years later. The response rate on the six-year follow-up survey was 83.7 percent overall, 84.5 percent among treatment group members, and 82.8 percent among control group members. In addition to data from the baseline and six-year follow-up surveys, the report uses data from a survey conducted two years after random assignment, data from QUEST on participants' receipt of services and program costs, interviews with program staff, and in-depth interviews with a sample of 17 QUEST participants conducted between six and seven years after random assignment. Additional details regarding the study design and the final sample are provided in the appendix. In this report, we refer to all members of the treatment group as the QUEST participants or the QUEST group.

The Study's Contributions to Workforce Development and Community College Research

Rigorous RCT evaluations of a handful of sectoral training programs have found large earnings gains for participants. Project QUEST was initially part of the Sectoral Employment Impact Study, which we launched while leading Public/Private Ventures' Labor Market Department. A 2010 report from the study on the other three organizations, which trained participants for jobs in information technology, construction, manufacturing, and health care, found that participants earned about \$4,000 more than control group members in the second year after study enrollment.⁸ A 2016 study of four sectoral employment programs targeting similar industries found that all four providers increased participants' employment in the targeted sector and the more experienced providers had substantial impacts on participants' earnings two years after study enrollment.⁹ After three years, the study found varied impacts on earnings across sites and cohorts; one of the four programs demonstrated large earnings impacts that grew from the second to the third year.¹⁰

The study of Project QUEST contributes to research on workforce development programs in two primary ways. First, past studies of sectoral training programs have focused on relatively shorter-term training, ranging in length from two to 32 weeks. The training programs in the QUEST evaluation involved partnerships in which QUEST supported students so they could attend full-time occupational training programs at area community colleges. The programs were expected to take a minimum of one to three years to complete, longer for participants who first needed to improve basic math and reading skills before enrolling. Second, past studies of sectoral training programs have followed participants for only two to three years after enrollment. Questions remained about whether the large earnings impacts found in these studies would have faded over time, as past studies of job training programs had found. The evaluation of QUEST examines program impacts for six years after study enrollment.

The QUEST evaluation also contributes to research on efforts to increase community college completion rates among low-income, nontraditional students. The Project QUEST model addresses many of the barriers low-income adults face in earning college credentials, including a lack of information about how to navigate college enrollment and financial aid systems and insufficient counseling regarding program requirements and course selection once enrolled. Many low-income adults lack basic academic skills and must complete remedial education courses before enrolling in academic and career programs. Degree completion rates are low among students who take remedial classes.¹¹ Due to family demands and insufficient financial support for educational and other expenses, nontraditional students often drop out.

Recent evaluations provide evidence that comprehensive strategies to address low-income students' barriers can have a significant positive impact on graduation rates. One RCT study of a program that combined substantial financial assistance with intensive academic and personal support from a counselor found that the program increased community college graduation rates by 10 percentage points after six years.¹² A report on the early impacts from an RCT study of the Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA), which is based on the Project QUEST model, found that the program increased the number of credits students earned and their credential attainment after two years.¹³ Information is limited about whether efforts to improve community college completion rates among low-income, low-skilled adults translate into improved labor market outcomes. The evaluation of Project QUEST addresses this issue, examining changes in employment and earnings for six years after study enrollment.

While Project QUEST and VIDA offer similar services, the programs and the participants in the two studies differ in important ways. Both programs serve mostly nontraditional college students, but for this study QUEST recruited only individuals who were not already enrolled in college, 63 percent of whom needed to take part in remedial classes prior to enrolling in their occupational programs. The study of VIDA included many students who were enrolled in college when they started the program, and only 9 percent of all students needed to take part in remedial classes. VIDA required participants to attend classes full-time in order to receive assistance, including while they were taking remedial courses. QUEST participants were required to attend the core occupational portion of their programs full-time but could attend remedial and prerequisite classes part-time, making it more feasible to work during part of their coursework. QUEST also employed staff dedicated to developing relationships with employers and to helping participants identify job opportunities. Finally, the QUEST evaluation focused primarily on individuals entering certificate programs at community colleges, while VIDA focused on students in associate's degree programs.

This Report

Chapter 2 of this report describes QUEST's recruitment and intake process during the study period as well as the characteristics of the study participants. Chapter 3 examines QUEST's impacts on participants' employment, earnings, credential attainment, and financial well-being, and explores impacts on participant subgroups. Chapter 4 provides greater detail about the QUEST service model, participants' experiences and outcomes, and program costs. The final chapter offers conclusions and discusses the implications of the findings for policy and programming targeted at improving the economic success of low-skilled, low-income workers.

Box 1: COPS and Metro Alliance form Project QUEST.

“If we can educate Shamu, we can educate the people! If we can educate Shamu, we can educate the people!” chanted the several hundred San Antonio residents massed in front of city hall. SeaWorld had recently opened, bringing Shamu the killer whale along with hundreds of low-wage jobs. These residents, however, were advocating for local investment in skills training that would enable people to get better-paying jobs.

Inside city hall, Mayor Nelson Wolff was informing community leaders that he didn't have the \$2 million for Project QUEST he had promised during his campaign. “Go out and tell them that we don't have the money,” Wolff said to the group. “No,” responded one of the leaders, Pat Ozuna. “You go out there and you tell them.” So everyone marched to the front of city hall, where a big ceremonial check was awaiting the mayor's signature. “Well,” said Ms. Ozuna, “will you invest in us?” The mayor took a moment to look out at the crowd, then said yes and signed the check.¹⁴

For years COPS and Metro Alliance had focused primarily on infrastructure issues, because many streets in San Antonio's less prosperous communities were unpaved and had serious drainage problems. Hundreds of millions of dollars were invested to address those concerns as a result of their advocacy. When Levi-Strauss closed its San Antonio plant in 1990, laying off 1,100 low-skilled workers, COPS and Metro shifted their focus to jobs. At the time, San Antonio was marketing itself as a major tourist and convention destination featuring the Alamo and the city's famed River Walk. San Antonio's hotel, restaurant, and retail sectors were booming, but typically offered low-wage opportunities.

COPS and Metro held dozens of meetings with business leaders, educational institutions, and elected officials. They found that there were well-paying jobs in San Antonio, particularly in health care, that employers were having a hard time filling. In fact, many were recruiting staff from outside the metropolitan area and, in some cases, from overseas. QUEST was created to connect residents of San Antonio's low-income communities to the training that would enable them to compete for these opportunities. Employers committed to hiring San Antonio residents once they were trained, and Governor Ann Richards and Mayor Wolff agreed to provide the capital needed to support QUEST.

COPS and Metro's involvement didn't end at the check signing outside city hall, however. Their team held more than 30 meetings in the community to finalize QUEST's design. They concluded that prospective participants would need to have a high school degree and at least 20 working years ahead of them. They also decided that recruitment would take place mainly through parishes and churches. As one COPS leader explained:

We just told people at the parishes that this new job training was established and that we'd be recruiting for candidates. We were quite strict. We would bring them in; we would tell them how difficult the program was going to be but [that] it was really worth it. What kind of family support would they have? We were going to invest in them and we didn't want them to fall through the cracks. We really wanted them to be successful. Then we sent them down to the QUEST office.

In the quarter century since QUEST was launched, COPS's and Metro Alliance's roles have changed, but their leaders still have to advocate for continued funding from the city. Each year they meet with members of the city council and ensure their continued support. San Antonio's contribution is drawn from the city's general fund—QUEST has received little funding from the public workforce system—and provides the organization with a critical source of flexible resources.

The Study Participants

Target Population and Recruitment

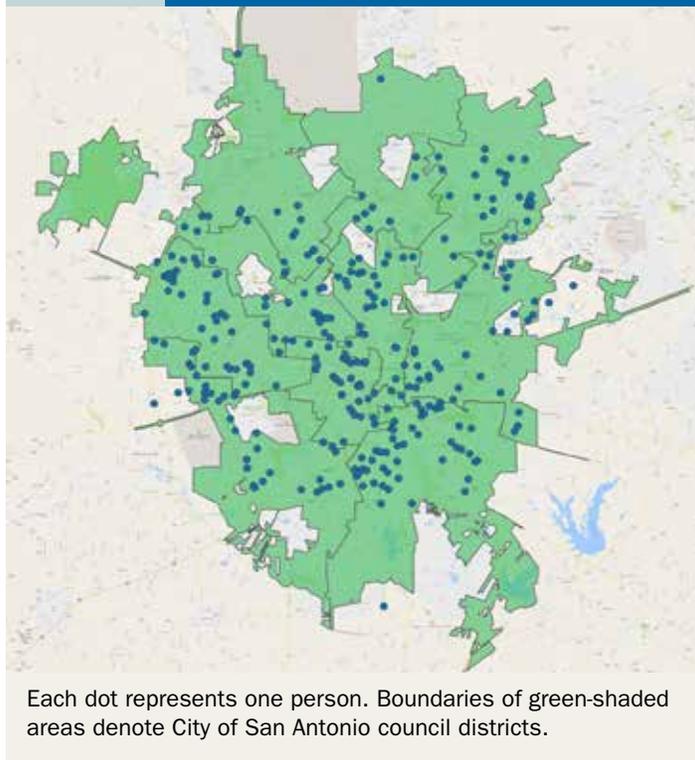
During the study enrollment period, QUEST sought to serve individuals who were interested in but not currently attending college classes. This included those who needed to improve basic reading and math skills before they could enroll in college-level classes as well as those who were ready to enroll. To qualify for QUEST, individuals were required to have at least a high school diploma or GED and to test at least at an eighth-grade level in reading and a sixth-grade level in math on the TABE (Test of Basic Adult Education). Participants also had to be willing and able to attend one of the health-care career track programs full-time after completing any necessary remedial and prerequisite classes.

QUEST used a combination of private and public funding to cover participants' educational expenses and support needs. QUEST's primary funder was the City of San Antonio. At the time of the study, other key funders included Bexar County and the Charles Stewart Mott, Meadows, and Annie E. Casey Foundations. There were some restrictions on how the funds could be used. City funds could not be used for remedial instruction, but county and foundation funds could. In order to receive funding for training from the county or funding for supportive services from the city, individuals' household income had to be at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

QUEST targeted individuals who had low household incomes, although applicants were not required to meet specific criteria to be accepted. If QUEST staff determined that an individual needed to improve their skills in order to become self-sufficient, they could accept them even if they lived with family members or a partner who earned more than 200 percent of the poverty level. However, most study participants—83 percent—reported household incomes below this level when they enrolled.

QUEST staff recruited residents of San Antonio and Bexar County through COPS, Metro Alliance, public libraries, churches, elementary and secondary schools, adult basic education centers, and other public and nonprofit social service agencies. QUEST recruiters distributed flyers and made presentations to staff at these organizations. QUEST staff also went door-to-door in San Antonio communities. As shown in [Figure 1](#), nearly all study participants were living in San Antonio at the time that they applied to the program.

Figure 1 Residential Locations of Study Participants at Program Enrollment (N=343)



The Intake Process

QUEST staff conducted a thorough screening of applicants to determine their eligibility, evaluate their aptitudes and interests, and match them to appropriate jobs and training. [Figure 2](#) illustrates the intake process, described in more detail here:

1. Interested individuals first attended an orientation at which staff members presented the history of QUEST, the program's services and expectations, and the admissions process, and described the study.
2. Individuals returned to QUEST to complete an application that staff used to assess their family situation, childcare arrangements, education, and employment history. Applicants also took the TABE math and reading tests, which QUEST used to determine whether they were likely to pass the colleges' placement tests or be able to pass after receiving remedial instruction. Applicants also wrote a career exploration essay, which counselors later used to assess their understanding of their targeted field.
3. Applicants returned for another appointment to take the SAGE (System for Assessment and Group Evaluation) test, which QUEST staff used to evaluate whether their vocational aptitudes and interests matched their career goals. At this meeting, applicants also took the colleges' placement test—the Accuplacer—to determine whether they needed remediation or were ready to

take college-level classes. A counselor also interviewed applicants to determine the funding sources for which they might be eligible and told them which documents they would need to certify their eligibility.

4. Applicants then returned for a meeting with a counselor assigned to work with students in the occupation for which they wanted to train. Counselors reviewed candidates' applications and career essays and discussed plans for addressing potential barriers to program completion. The counselors worked with the applicants to develop an academic plan, which included necessary courses and a timeline for completion. Counselors also helped them develop a budget plan to determine whether they would have enough income to cover their expenses during training, particularly given that most would need to reduce their hours or stop working altogether in order to attend the core training full-time.
5. Next, applicants returned with the documentation QUEST had requested, such as proof of income and family size, so that counselors could verify which sources of funding would cover their training and needed supports.
6. Applicants then attended a final interview with a senior staff person, at which they presented their academic and financial plans. The staff person reviewed their file and discussed potential barriers to program completion, and then decided whether or not to recommend them for enrollment.
7. Candidates recommended for enrollment were submitted for random assignment.

Figure 2	The Project QUEST Intake Process
STEP 1	Orientation
STEP 2	Application, TABE testing, career essay
STEP 3	SAGE aptitudes and interests testing, college placement testing, funding eligibility review
STEP 4	Meeting with counselor to develop academic plan and budget plan and discuss how to address barriers
STEP 5	Meeting to review documentation and verify eligibility for funding
STEP 6	Final interview with senior staff member
STEP 7	Eligible candidates referred for random assignment to treatment and control groups

QUEST staff then began working with individuals assigned to the treatment group, either inviting them to attend remedial classes held at QUEST or helping them with the college enrollment process. Staff told those assigned to the control group that they would not receive support from QUEST but that they could enroll in college or training on their own or seek other services in the community. While control group members did not receive any further support from QUEST, the intake process provided them with a de facto roadmap for completing a certificate or degree program for a specific health-care occupation at a local community college.

Participant Characteristics

A majority of study participants were female and Latina. Many were of Mexican ancestry, but fewer than 10 percent were immigrants themselves. Seventy-one percent were between the ages of 25 and 64—older than traditional college-age students. Seventy-two percent had children under the age of 18. Over half (56 per-

cent) of participants had ever been married, although only 29 percent were married at the time of study enrollment. **Figure 3** presents the characteristics of study participants in the final sample at the time they applied to QUEST. Figure A2 in the appendix compares the baseline characteristics of the QUEST group and the control group.

About 70 percent of participants had a high school diploma at enrollment, while a quarter had dropped out of high school and earned a GED. Nearly half (46 percent) of participants had attended some college but had not attained a degree. Twenty percent had earned a certificate or license in a health-care occupation. In the in-depth interviews we conducted with 17 QUEST participants, the most common reason participants cited for not obtaining a college degree was having children and needing to work. In fact, among participants who had children, 65 percent had had their first child by the time they were 21 years old.

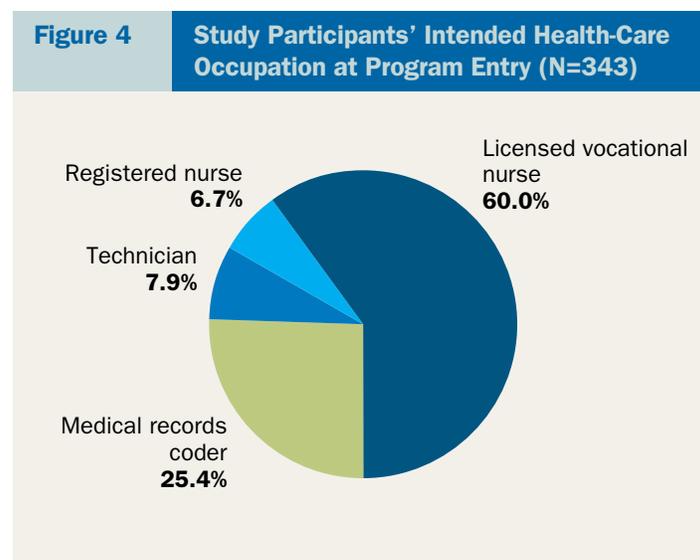
Nearly all participants (99 percent) had worked at some point prior to applying to QUEST. While 84 percent had worked in the previous year, the work had been inconsistent. Only 42 percent had worked during all 12 months of the prior year, and average earnings among all participants were only \$11,387. Most participants did not receive public assistance to help make ends meet. While almost 35 percent had received TANF at some point in their lives, only 2 percent had received it in the month prior to enrollment. Thirty-seven percent had received SNAP in the previous month, and 12 percent were living in publicly subsidized housing at the time of enrollment. Two-thirds lived with at least one other adult, such as a spouse or partner, family member, or child age 18 or older. Sixty percent reported that other household members had some form of income.

Figure 3 Study Participants' Characteristics at Program Entry (N=343)

Gender	
Female	89.5%
Male	10.5%
Race	
Latino	74.3%
African American	13.1%
White	9.6%
Immigrant (born outside of the United States)	7.3%
Age	
18 to 24	29.4%
25 to 34	44.9%
35 to 64	25.7%
Average age	30.3
Had any children under age 18	72.0%
Marital status	
Married	29.4%
Separated, divorced, widowed	26.2%
Never married	44.3%
Highest degree earned	
GED	24.8%
High school diploma	70.6%
College degree (associate's or bachelor)	4.7%
Had attended college but did not earn a degree	46.4%
Had any health-care certificates or licenses	20.1%
Recent employment	
Employed at any time during the past year	84.4%
Employed during all 12 months of the past year	41.5%
Average annual earnings during the past year (including participants with zero earnings)	\$11,387
Received SNAP in the previous month	37.3%
Had ever received TANF	34.7%
Housing status	
Owned own home	17.5%
Rented own home	34.1%
Lived with someone else and contributed to rent	26.2%
Lived rent-free	21.6%
Lived in public or subsidized housing	11.7%

The participants with whom we conducted in-depth interviews had typically worked in multiple low-wage, entry-level jobs in the past, including in customer service, retail, childcare, food service, and hospitality. The few who had obtained certifications in health care had worked as medical or nursing assistants. Nearly all reported that they were struggling financially when they decided to apply to QUEST to get help going to college. **Box 2** presents the reasons the interviewees said they had decided to pursue training and participate in QUEST.

As noted in the introduction, the evaluation of QUEST focused on individuals entering the health-care field. **Figure 4** shows the occupations for which study participants intended to obtain training at the time of enrollment. Most participants were seeking to enter non-degree certificate programs to become licensed vocational nurses (LVNs) or medical records coders. Another 15 percent sought to enroll in programs that would lead to an associate's degree, including in registered nursing and radiography, respiratory, sonography, and surgical technician programs. All of the targeted occupations required that individuals pass licensing exams after completing their coursework in order to obtain jobs.



In sum, QUEST recruited low-skilled residents of San Antonio, most of whom had recent work experience but were employed in low-wage jobs with little opportunity for advancement. This included individuals who needed to improve their basic reading and math skills before they could enroll in college-level classes. Nearly half of participants had attended college but dropped out without earning a degree. Most (71 percent) were between the ages of 25 and 64, not traditional college-age students but individuals who had been out of school for some time while they focused on working and providing for their families.

Box 2: QUEST participants were motivated by a desire to achieve greater financial stability, to be able to do more for their children, and to live a more fulfilling life.

At the time they decided to apply to QUEST, nearly all of the participants with whom we conducted in-depth interviews said they were living paycheck to paycheck, barely covering basic expenses, and were unable to save. Some said they felt they needed to make a change or they would be stuck in their present situation or worse.

My husband ... had just actually had a wreck on a dirt bike, and he had broken several bones and had a concussion and had been out of work, and I was waitressing, and I remember I worked a 22-hour shift because rent was due. And I had to make it because, obviously, we were living on such a fixed income. We didn't have short-term disability. We didn't have benefits to cover anything. That was part of the reason, too. That was a huge eye-opener. We had no cushions.

—Chloe, LVN participant

We were living paycheck to paycheck, pretty much.... It was just surviving. Just trying to get out of where we were. Our house that we lived in was right next door to [my husband's] parents' house. It was a small house. So it was good when our kids were little, but then we knew eventually we would have to move from there, and so we were over there for about 14 years. Where we thought, This is just going to be for right now, but then it was just we could never get out of it. It was that we needed to change. We needed to change and something needed to be done. If not, we were going to be stuck there and never moving forward.

—Hannah, LVN participant

Many said their children were the reason they went back to school. They wanted more stability and to provide a better life for their kids, to do fun things with them, or to move out of a relative's home and have their own place. They wanted to give their children more than what they'd had growing up.

I had to make sure that we provided for [my daughter]. She was the main reason to move forward and do something smarter and not continue to do nothing, because if I struggled, she struggled. I guess like growing up when you don't have stuff—you don't want your kids to be the same way, and you just want to give them what they should have instead of having them struggle or not having what everybody else has. I didn't want her to not look, like, presentable.

—Carla, LVN participant

Some said they wanted more for themselves—to go to school and do something more with their lives. They also wanted their children to be proud of them.

I always wanted to finish school. I always wanted to do something. I just didn't want to stay home. I think it was time for me to go back to school, because when I got married, I stopped what I was doing.

—Marcella, LVN participant

I would say meeting my husband and then having a baby—that kind of defined me and the path I was going to take. I guess I knew what I wanted for my kid and what I didn't want for him. I guess I just wanted him to be proud of his mom. Even though I did get pregnant, I guess I was just determined that even to be something.... I mean, I didn't want to be a statistic and not go to school and not do all that.... Like when he gets older and he realizes that even though I did have him at a young age, I still managed to graduate from college.

—Nicole, radiography participant

Program Impacts

Project QUEST's mission is to increase San Antonio residents' earnings by helping them access well-paying careers in strong sectors of the local economy. As we describe in this chapter, QUEST had a substantial positive impact on participants' annual earnings. We explore additional outcomes to better understand QUEST's effects on participants, including consistency of employment, hourly wages, credential attainment, and indicators of financial well-being. In sum, relative to the control group, QUEST participants worked more consistently, earned higher hourly wages, were more likely to earn a credential, and were less likely to report financial difficulties six years after study enrollment.

Employment and Earnings

QUEST had a large, sustained impact on participants' earnings.

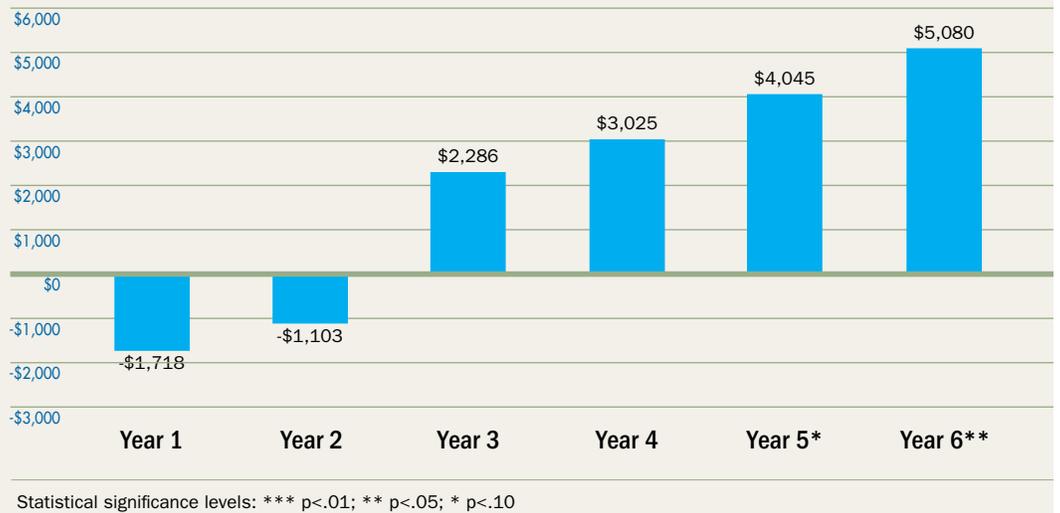
QUEST participants achieved substantially greater earnings than control group members in the third through sixth years after random assignment. As shown in Figures 5 and 6, the earnings impacts grew over time, from \$2,286 in year three to \$5,080 in year six, and were statistically significant in the fifth and sixth years after random assignment. The earnings gains correspond to when QUEST participants attended and completed training. QUEST participants' earnings were somewhat lower than those of control group members in the first two years after random assignment, when many would have either reduced their hours or stopped working to attend school full-time. Seventy-seven percent of the QUEST participants were still attending a QUEST-supported training program at the end of the first year after random assignment. Thirty-five percent were still attending QUEST-supported training at the end of the second year, and 6 percent at the end of the fourth year after random assignment.

The size of the earnings gains and the fact that they continued to grow over the six years are important findings for the workforce development field. Past studies of sector-based training programs have followed participants for only two to three years. Questions remained about whether the large earnings impacts found in these studies would fade over time due to the control group catching up to the program group, as has been found in other studies of job training programs.¹⁵ As shown in **Figure 5**, control group members' earnings nearly doubled over the six years after random assignment. The fact that the QUEST earnings impacts not only did not fade but continued to increase through the sixth year underscores the impressiveness of the findings and of QUEST's approach.

Figure 5 Average Annual Earnings during the Six Years after Random Assignment among All Study Participants

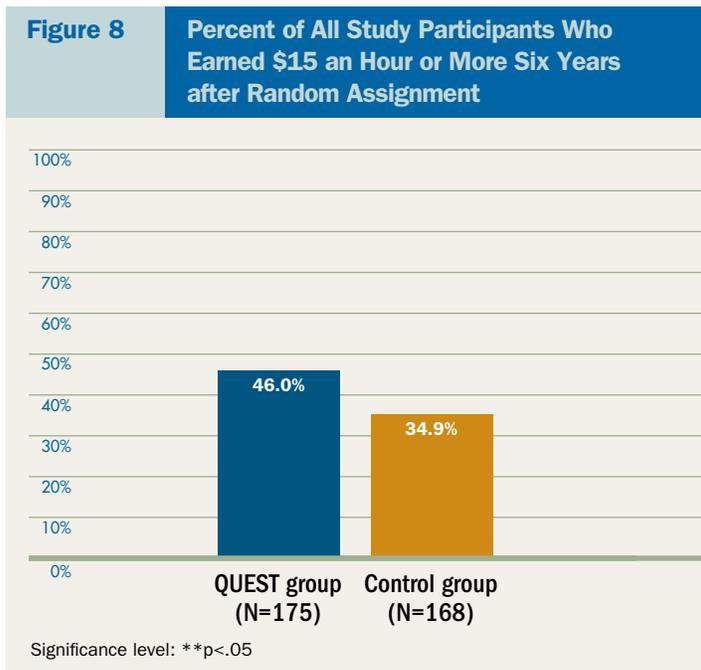
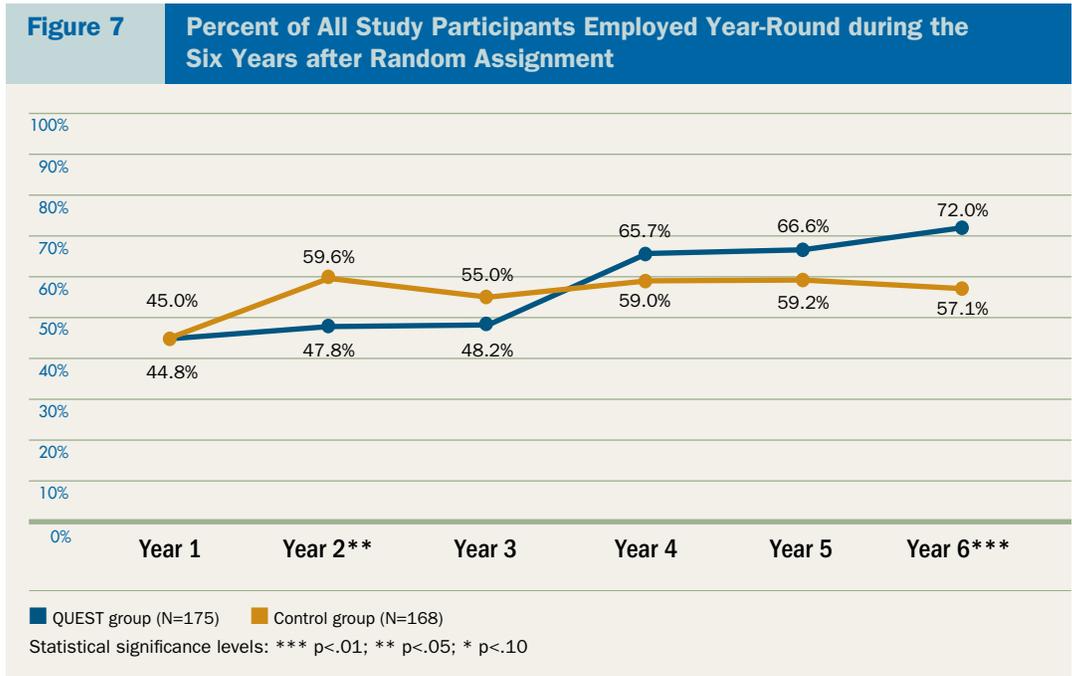


Figure 6 Project QUEST's Impact on Average Annual Earnings during the Six Years after Random Assignment among All Study Participants (N=343)



Six years after random assignment, QUEST participants were more consistently employed and earned higher hourly wages than control group members.

Similar percentages of QUEST participants and control group members were employed either full-time or part-time at any point during each year after random assignment.¹⁶ Figure 7 presents the percentages of all participants who were employed year-round—that is, during all 12 months of the year—in each year after random assignment. QUEST participants worked more consistently than control group members did in the fourth through the sixth years.



In addition to being more consistently employed, QUEST participants were significantly more likely than control group members to earn \$15 an hour or more six years after random assignment (Figure 8). Figure 9 presents the characteristics of the jobs that participants held, among those who were working at the end of the six years. QUEST participants earned nearly \$2 an hour more, on average, than control group members did. Similar percentages of QUEST participants and control group members worked in jobs that were full-time (30 or more hours per week) and that offered medical benefits, sick leave, vacation time, and/or tuition assistance.

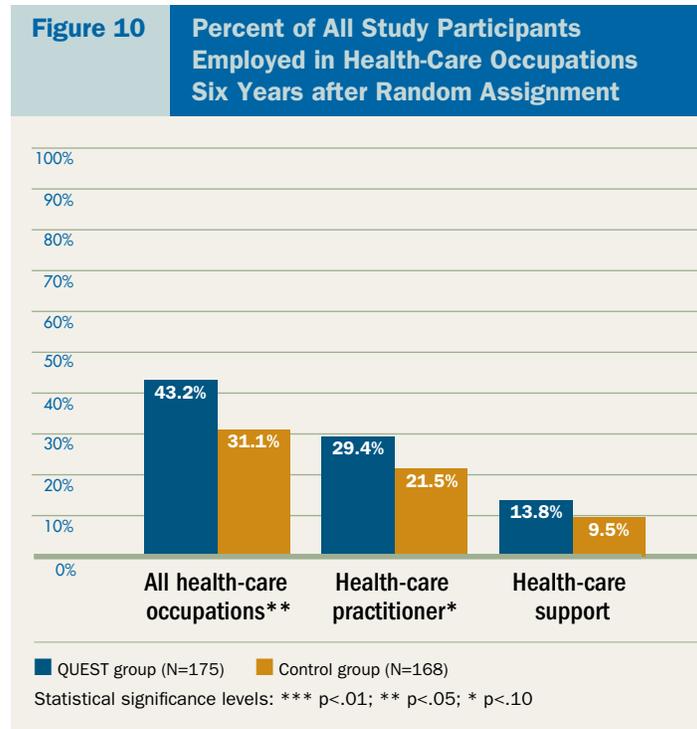
Figure 9 Job Characteristics of the Subset of Study Participants Who Were Employed Six Years after Random Assignment

	QUEST group (N=139)	Control group (N=136)	Difference
Average hourly wage	\$17.26	\$15.34	\$1.92 ***
Worked 30 or more hours per week	84.1%	85.3%	-1.2%
Medical benefits offered	80.7%	77.0%	3.7%
Medical benefits taken	54.0%	51.4%	2.6%
Paid sick leave offered	60.9%	56.9%	4.0%
Paid vacation time offered	73.6%	69.7%	3.9%
Tuition assistance offered	44.6%	42.7%	1.9%

Statistical significance levels: *** p<.01; ** p<.05; * p<.10

After six years, QUEST participants were more likely than control group members to be working in a health-care occupation.

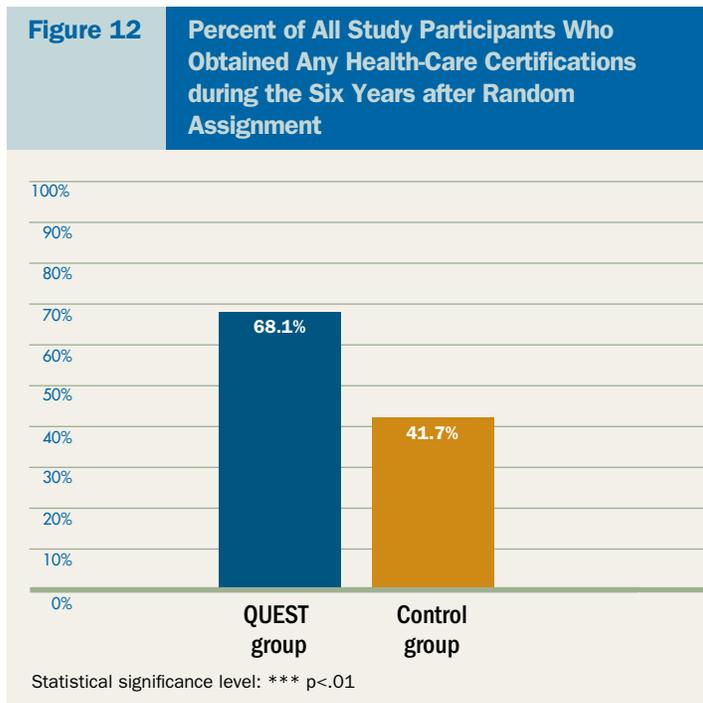
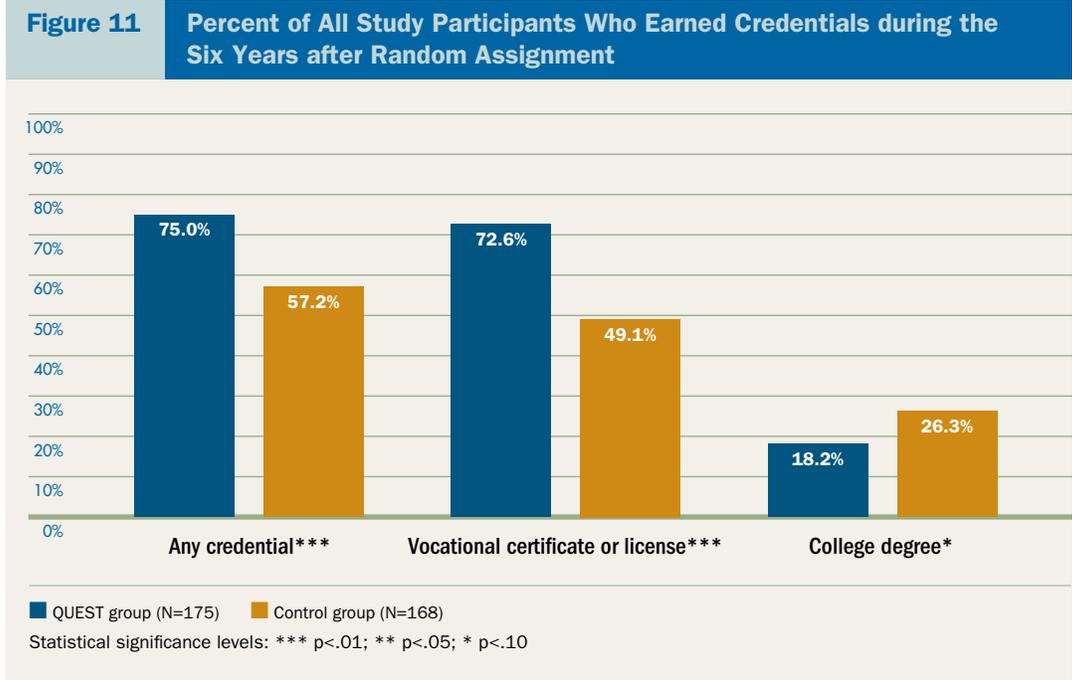
The data indicate that QUEST's success in helping people obtain employment in health-care occupations significantly contributed to its positive impacts on participants' earnings.¹⁷ QUEST participants were significantly more likely than control group members to be employed in a health-care occupation six years after random assignment, particularly in higher-skilled health-care practitioner positions, such as nurses and technicians (Figure 10). The difference in the percent employed in health-care support occupations was not statistically significant. This category includes certified nursing assistant, medical assistant, and home health aide positions that require less training. Among QUEST participants, those who were working in health-care occupations at the end of the six years earned \$20.01 per hour, on average, compared to \$13.84 per hour among those not working in health-care occupations.



Credential Attainment

During the six years after random assignment, QUEST participants were more likely than control group members to have earned a vocational certificate or license but less likely to have earned a college degree.

Slightly less than 5 percent of all study participants had a college degree at the time they applied to QUEST. While study participants sought to attend training programs at local colleges when they came to QUEST, most were not seeking degree programs. Overall, 98 percent of QUEST participants and 77 percent of control group members reported attending any college classes or training programs during the six years after random assignment. QUEST participants were significantly more likely than control group members to earn any credentials during the six years after random assignment (Figure 11). This was driven by the fact that QUEST participants were more likely than control group members to obtain vocational certificates or licenses. On the other hand, control group members were somewhat more likely to obtain a two-year or four-year college degree. Most study participants who obtained college degrees obtained associate's degrees (97 percent of the QUEST participants and 89 percent of the control group members who obtained college degrees). As shown in Figure 12, QUEST participants were substantially more likely than control group members to obtain any health-care certifications or licenses during the six years after random assignment.



As noted in chapter 2, during the intake process, QUEST staff worked with all applicants to develop an academic plan and a budget plan to determine if they would be able to support themselves during the duration of their training, particularly when they would be required to attend classes full-time. This assistance might have improved the likelihood that both treatment and control group members earned credentials, diminishing the estimate of QUEST's impact on this measure.

Similar percentages of QUEST participants (18 percent) and control group members (17 percent) were attending college or training programs at the time of the six-year follow-up survey. Most participants in both groups (86 percent of QUEST participants and 83 percent of control group members) said they planned to pursue more education or training in the next three years.

Financial Well-Being

At the time of the six-year follow-up survey, QUEST participants reported greater financial stability than control group members.

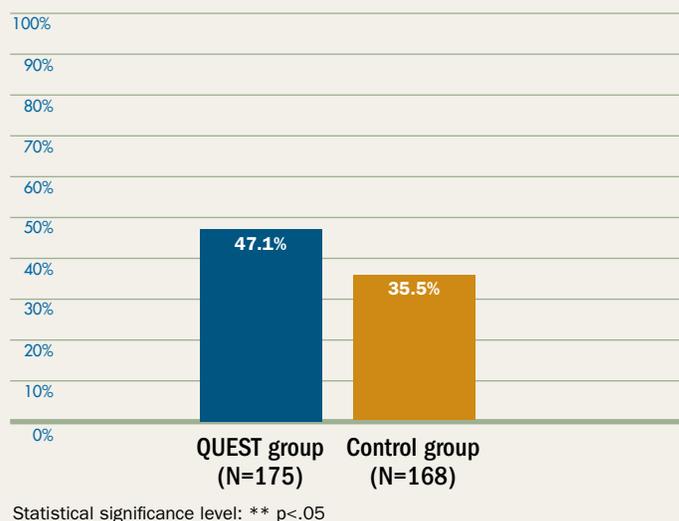
Family and Household

Similar percentages of QUEST participants and control group members were married at the time of the six-year follow-up (38 percent and 41 percent, respectively). While similar percentages of QUEST participants and control group members got married during the six years, QUEST participants were more likely than control group members to become separated or divorced (12 percent versus 7 percent, respectively), but this difference is not statistically significant. About 77 percent of participants in both groups had children under age 18 at the time of the follow-up survey.

Similar percentages of QUEST participants and control group members moved at least once during the six years after enrolling in the study (65 percent and 63 percent, respectively). At the time of the six-year follow-up, similar percentages of QUEST participants and control group members owned or rented their own homes rather than living with others and contributing to the rent or living rent-free (70 percent and 65 percent, respectively).

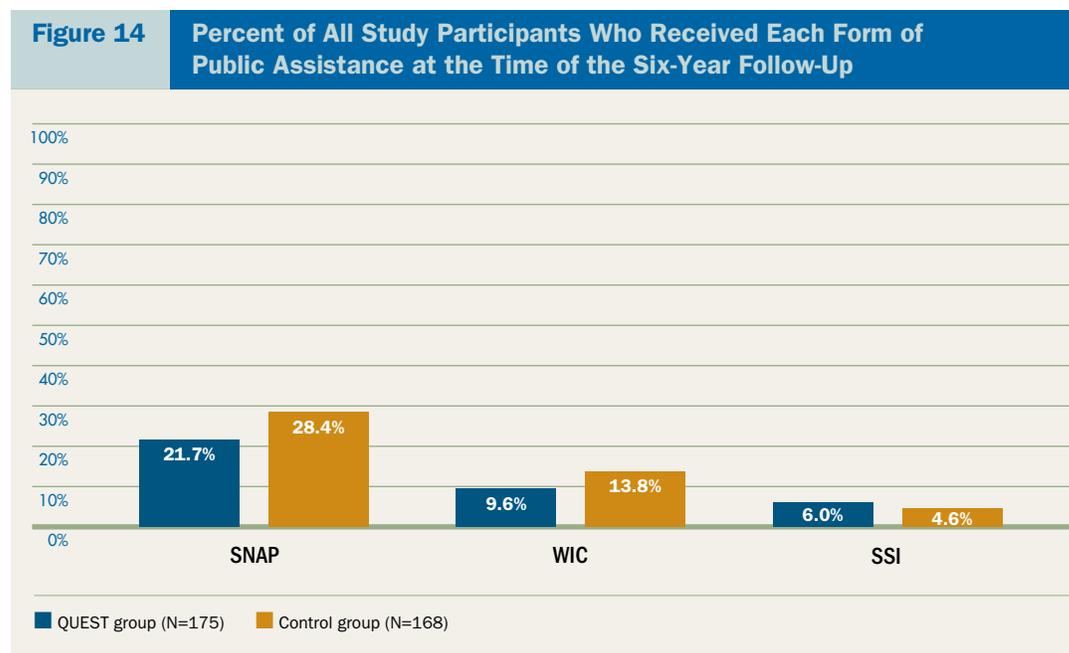
About 9 percent of both QUEST participants and control group members lived in publicly subsidized housing. QUEST participants were significantly more likely than control group members to say the home in which they lived was in excellent condition (**Figure 13**).

Figure 13 Percent of All Study Participants Who Said The Home in Which They Lived Was in Excellent Condition at the Time of the Six-Year Follow-Up



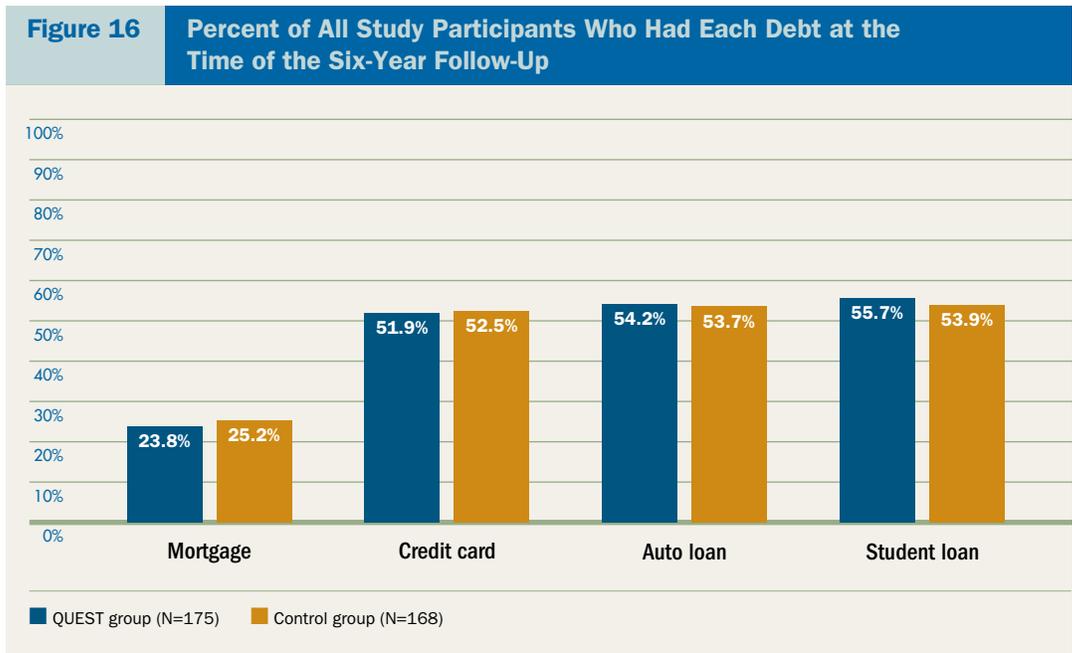
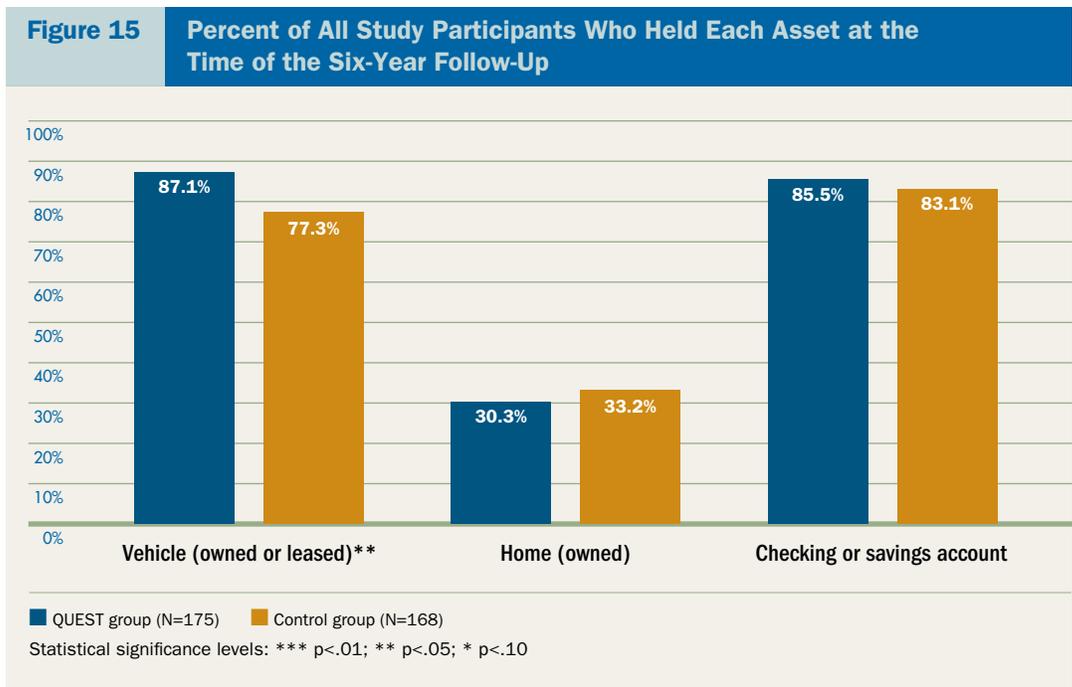
Receipt of Public Assistance

Six years after random assignment, there were no statistically significant differences between QUEST participants' and control group members' receipt of public assistance. Fewer than 3 percent of participants in either the QUEST or control groups received TANF, childcare subsidies, or unemployment insurance at the time of the six-year follow-up survey. **Figure 14** presents the most common forms of public assistance that study participants received.



Assets and Debts

At the end of the six-year follow-up period, QUEST participants were significantly more likely than control group members to own or lease an automobile (**Figure 15**). Similar percentages of QUEST participants and control group members owned a home or had a checking or savings account. As shown in **Figure 16**, similar percentages of QUEST participants and control group members reported having debts, such as a mortgage, credit card debt, auto loan, or student loan. We do not know if the student loans reported in the six-year follow-up survey were taken out before or after study enrollment. As noted earlier, about half of all study participants had attended college classes prior to applying to QUEST, but most did not earn a degree. Also, three years into the study, QUEST's tuition support decreased from 100 percent to 50 percent, resulting in some participants taking out loans to help cover tuition costs. Some participants we interviewed said they also took out student loans to help cover basic living expenses while they were attending training full-time.



Financial Difficulties

QUEST participants were less likely than control group members to report having various financial difficulties during the six months prior to the six-year follow-up survey. **Figure 17** presents the percentages of all participants who reported difficulty with making housing payments, overdue utility bills, and/or concern that their food would run out before they would have money to buy more. QUEST participants were significantly less likely than control group members to have trouble with rent or mortgage payments or utility bills.

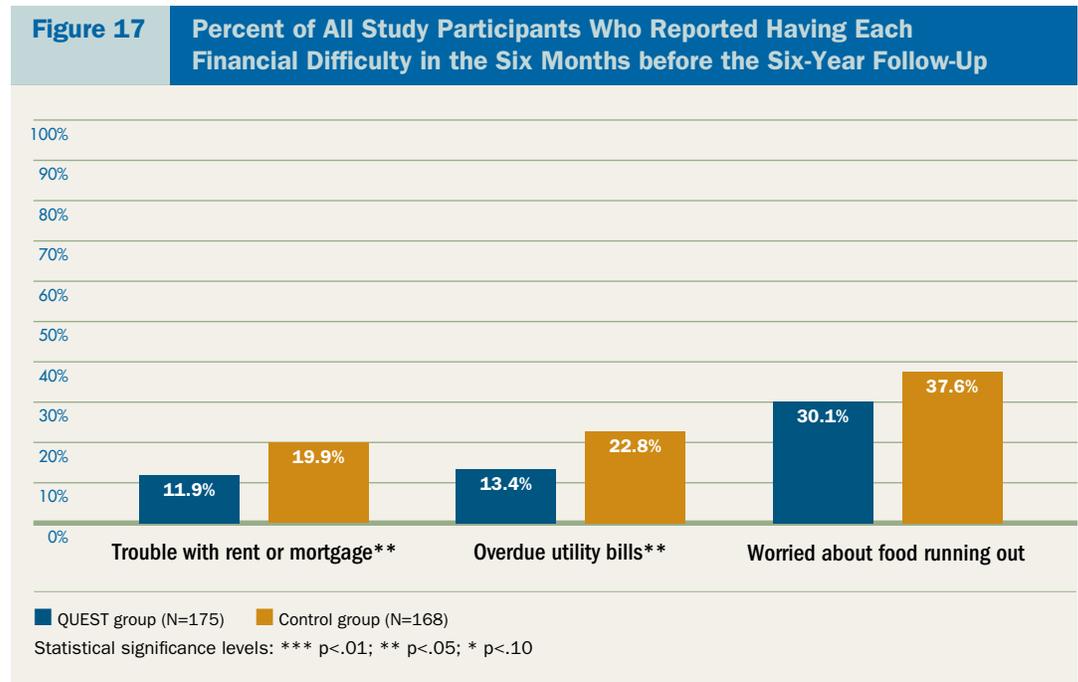
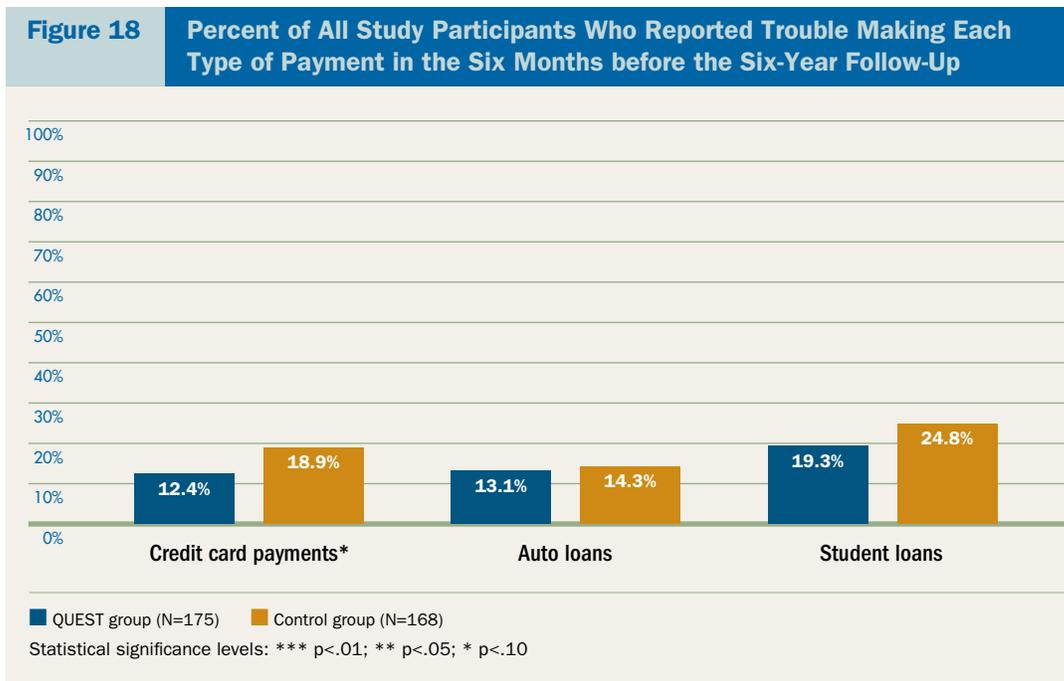


Figure 18 presents the percentages of all participants who reported having difficulties with payments on credit cards, auto loans, and student loans during the six months prior to the follow-up survey. QUEST participants were significantly less likely than control group members to report having trouble with credit card payments. Differences in the percent who had trouble with auto loan or student loan payments were not statistically significant.

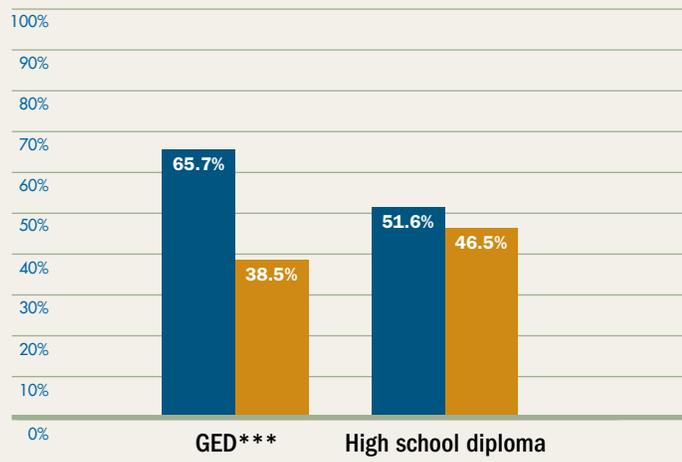


Earnings Impacts for Subgroups of Participants

QUEST had the greatest impact on the earnings of nontraditional college students and those who had struggled with completing education in the past.

We examined whether QUEST's impact on participants' earnings six years after random assignment varied across demographic subgroups, including by gender, age, race, immigration status, education level, marital status, and whether participants lived with children under age 18 at the time they applied to the program.¹⁸ QUEST's impacts on the percent who earned the median amount of \$24,000 or more in year six were greatest for people who had dropped out of high school and earned a GED and for individuals ages 25 to 64. As shown in [Figure 19](#), QUEST's impact on the percent of GED holders who earned \$24,000 or more in year six was 27 percentage points—significantly greater than its impact on the percent of those with a high school diploma who earned this amount. As shown in [Figure 20](#), QUEST's impact on the percent of individuals ages 25 to 64 who earned \$24,000 or more in year six was 17 percentage points—significantly greater than its impact on the percent of those ages 18 to 24 who earned this amount.

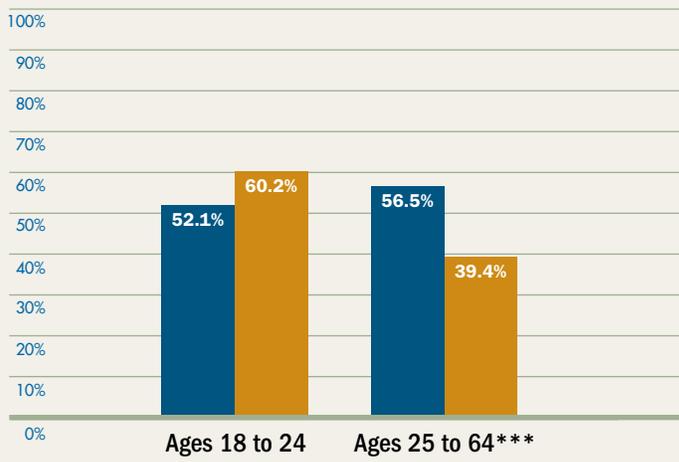
Figure 19 Percent of All Study Participants Who Had Earnings of \$24,000 or More in Year Six, by Education Level at Program Entry



■ QUEST group ■ Control group

Within group statistical significance level: *** p<.01
Between group statistical significance level: * p<.10

Figure 20 Percent of All Study Participants Who Had Earnings of \$24,000 or More in Year Six, by Age at Program Entry



■ QUEST group ■ Control group

Within group statistical significance level: *** p<.01
Between group statistical significance level: ** p<.05

QUEST had significant positive impacts on earning a vocational certificate or license among participants in both age groups and among those who had either a high school diploma or GED at program entry. However, control group members who had a high school diploma and those who were ages 18 to 24 were more likely than their counterparts in the QUEST group to earn a college degree, which likely contributed to the differential impacts in earnings across age groups and education levels. Beyond the differences between QUEST participants and control group members, Figure 19 shows that QUEST participants who had a GED had better earnings outcomes in year six than those who had a high school diploma. This difference was driven by the fact that QUEST participants with a GED were more likely than those with a high school diploma to work at all during the sixth year after random assignment (98 percent versus 88 percent, respectively). Among those who worked, there was no difference in the percent of participants who earned \$24,000 or more. We cannot determine from the data why QUEST participants with a high school diploma were less likely than those with a GED to work at all in the sixth year. Similar percentages of QUEST participants who had a high school diploma and a GED were attending college or training at the time of the six-year follow-up.

Earnings impacts were greater among female participants than male participants (Figure 21). However, the number of males in the sample was small (11 percent) and the difference in impacts for females and males is not statistically significant. Earnings impacts were greater among Latino and African American participants than among white participants, although, given the small number of non-Latino participants, differences across these groups were not statistically significant (Figure 22). Earnings impacts did not differ significantly across the other subgroups examined.

Figure 21 Percent of All Study Participants Who Had Earnings of \$24,000 or More in Year Six, by Gender

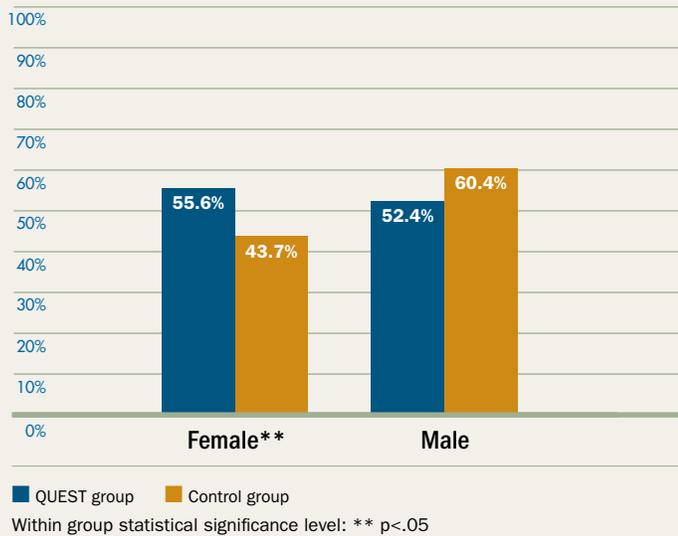
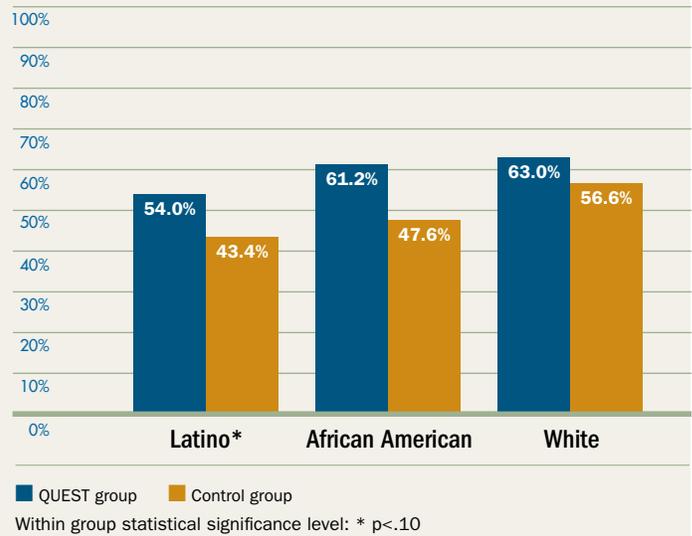


Figure 22 Percent of All Study Participants Who Had Earnings of \$24,000 or More in Year Six, by Race



In sum, QUEST had a large impact on participants' annual earnings—an impact that grew over the six-year follow-up period. Control group members were highly motivated: 77 percent attended college or training and their earnings nearly doubled over the six years. This set a high bar for QUEST to demonstrate its effectiveness. QUEST increased participants' attainment of vocational certificates or licenses, particularly in the health-care field. QUEST participants worked more consistently and in higher-wage jobs than control group members did. QUEST participants also reported fewer financial difficulties at the end of the follow-up period. QUEST's impacts were greatest for participants ages 25 to 64, who had been out of school longer than younger participants and likely faced greater barriers to enrolling in and completing college-level programs.

Chapter 4

The QUEST Model and Participants' Program Experiences

They bring you up when you're feeling down. When you're about to give up, they kind of remind you why you started. —QUEST participant

The QUEST Model

Partners and Targeted Health-Care Career Tracks

The QUEST model combines comprehensive support for participants and partnerships with area colleges, training providers, and employers to help low-income individuals obtain the necessary credentials for well-paying careers in strong sectors of the local economy. During the study period, QUEST's primary community college partners were St. Philip's College and San Antonio College, both part of the Alamo Colleges District, which offer associate's degrees, certificates, and licensures in occupational programs as well as arts and sciences courses whose credits can transfer to four-year colleges. Much of QUEST's groundwork with employers in the health-care industry was completed prior to the start of this study, but it is important to understanding the model. QUEST employed staff dedicated to developing relationships with businesses, understanding what skill sets they required for employees, and working with the colleges to develop programs to teach those skills.

Figure 23 provides information about the course requirements for completing each of the health-care career tracks QUEST targeted during the study, as well as the certification exams graduates were required to pass for each occupation. As noted earlier, once students completed remedial and prerequisite classes and entered the career track programs, they were required to attend these classes full-time. When students completed their coursework and clinical rotations, they were required to pass a national certification exam, and in some cases a state exam as well, to work in their chosen profession. Participants in the in-depth interview sample noted a number of challenges to completing the programs, as presented in **Box 3**.

Figure 23 Program and Certification Requirements for QUEST's Targeted Health-Care Career Tracks

Track	Program requirements	Leads to AAS*	National certification required
Licensed vocational nurse (LVN)	1-year program with 3 prerequisite classes	No	National Council Licensure Examination for Practical Nurses
Registered nurse (RN)	2-year program with 7 prerequisite classes	Yes	National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses
Medical records coder	7-month program with 1 prerequisite class	No	American Academy of Professional Coders Certified Professional Coder Exam
Radiography technician	2-year program with 3 prerequisite classes	Yes	American Registry of Radiologic Technologists Exam
Respiratory therapy technician	2-year program with 3 prerequisite classes	Yes	National Board for Respiratory Care Therapist Multiple Choice Exam
Sonography technician	2-year program with 3 prerequisite classes	Yes	American Registry of Radiologic Technologists Exam
Surgical technician	1-year program with 6 prerequisite classes	Yes	Certified Surgical Technologist Exam

*AAS is an associate of applied science degree

Remediation

During the study period, QUEST sought to extend its services to individuals with lower basic reading and math skills than those it had served in the past, and to provide them with remedial instruction to prepare them to enroll in college-level classes. As described below, in order to meet the study's enrollment goals, QUEST also opened enrollment in the study to one of the populations it had traditionally served: individuals who were not currently attending college but who were academically ready to enroll in college-level classes. As shown in [Figure 24](#), a large portion of QUEST participants in the final study sample—63.4 percent—took part in remedial classes. The need for remediation was greatest among those entering the technician programs, followed by those entering the two nursing programs.

When the study began, in 2006, QUEST and the Alamo Colleges District implemented a model in which a cohort of students took contextualized math and reading classes with the expectation that they would transition together into prerequisite and core program classes. The class schedule for the cohorts would not be dependent on the college's regular semesters, so that students could move from one phase to the next without gaps. Participants were also expected to benefit from having a peer group that would provide support and motivation.

The cohort model proved difficult to implement, however, particularly in the context of a randomized controlled trial study. QUEST had difficulty recruiting enough students to fill a cohort as well as the study's control group, as groups of students who were interested in the same career track had to have academic skills at about the same level. Additionally, while students took remedial classes and

Box 3: Participants' main challenges were covering basic expenses, balancing school and family, and overcoming academic difficulties.

According to the participants we conducted in-depth interviews with, the primary challenges they faced during the program were managing finances, balancing school and family, and overcoming academic difficulties. They all noted that QUEST pointed them to resources to help cover their expenses but that they still had difficulty making rent or mortgage payments, car payments, and paying for other incidentals. Some used student loans to cover their living expenses while others relied on family members or public assistance.

For a while I was working, so it would be like, I probably wouldn't get to work till probably like five and work five to close and then come home and do it all over again. I did that for about half the program and then I kind of got burned-out because it was just school all day and then work and then a kid. So I stopped working. Then I applied—that's when I got into trouble and I applied for loans and stuff. Really, like the student loans were paying for our living situation, our living expenses, because I wasn't working.

—Nicole, radiography technician participant

Many participants said their biggest challenge was finding time to both study and spend time with their children. They struggled with feeling as if they were not putting their families first. Some had supportive partners, but for others their school attendance led to fights over not spending enough time with their partners or their children.

It was hard. You have your family and you have kids. My daughter is in high school. It was just adjusting to having to go back to school and homework and stuff like that. ... It was just knowing the timing of when to study, because you want to make sure that your kids were OK. You have to help them with their work and then with your husband and you have to make sure that everything is OK with him and then you have time for yourself.

—Marcela, LVN participant

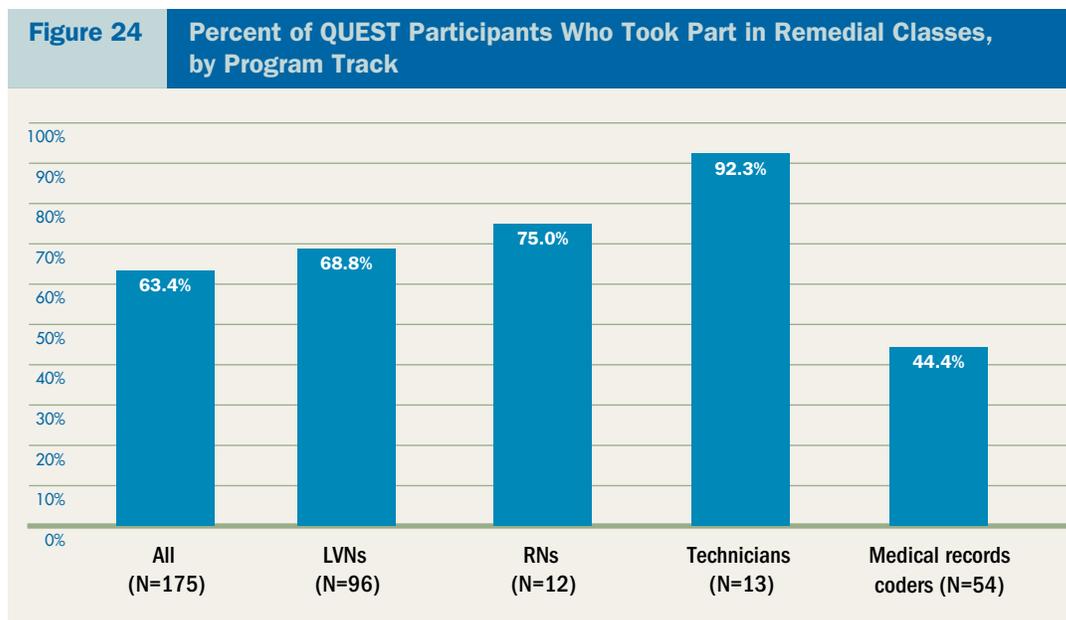
Most participants said they faced academic challenges. Some had difficulty with particular math or science classes. Others mentioned it was hard to relearn how to study and take tests after being out of school for a long time. Participants whose primary language was Spanish noted the difficulty of taking timed exams in English.

I didn't finish it in a year because you had to then actually get into college. You had to take all of the tests that you need to get in to figure out where you fit in to the college, and your scores had to be at a certain place. So when I took those tests, then I was struggling with math. I passed everything but my math. Project QUEST offered me the help. So from there we just worked at it and I did what I had to do.

—Hannah, LVN participant

Just the whole program itself was a big challenge. Just having to study for the whole course was very intense. Our teacher was very strict. I learned a lot from her, but just having to adjust again to having to study and having to take tests and the whole thing was very challenging.

—Gabriela, sonography technician participant

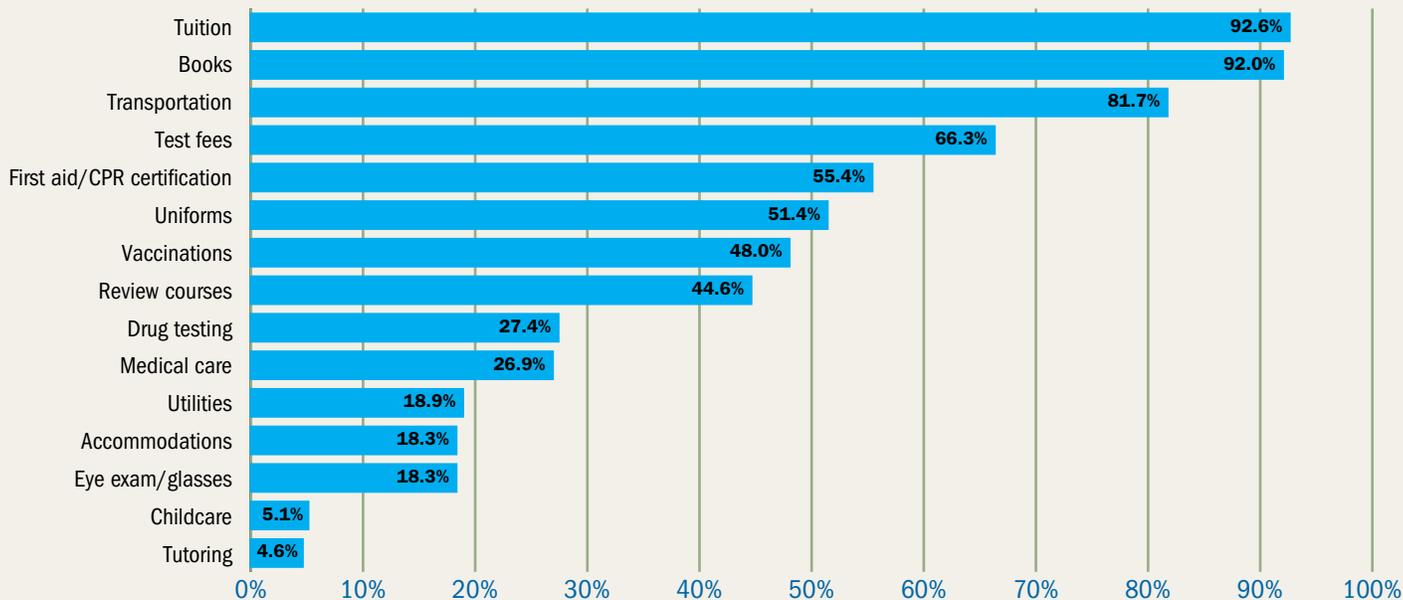


prerequisites together, some did not pass all of the prerequisite courses and had to restart with another cohort. Therefore, the seamless transition into the career track courses and the supportive peer relationships the QUEST staff had hoped for were not sustained.

Given the difficulties in implementing the cohort model, QUEST changed strategies in March 2007, about a year after study enrollment began. At that time, QUEST brought an adult basic education instructor from the San Antonio Independent School District on site to help students improve their math and reading skills so that they could pass the colleges' placement tests and avoid taking remedial classes. These "QUEST Prep" classes were available 25 hours per week and were tailored to students' needs. QUEST continued to offer these classes throughout the study period. Simultaneously, QUEST began enrolling its traditional population in the study—individuals who were academically ready to enroll in college-level classes.

Financial Assistance

When study enrollment began, QUEST paid 100 percent of participants' college tuition and fees as well as the costs of books, uniforms, required vaccinations and drug testing, tutoring and review courses, and licensing exam fees. QUEST also provided some funds for supportive services, such as transportation, medical care, eye exams, utilities, and childcare. Overall, 95 percent of QUEST participants received any tuition or other financial support from QUEST. **Figure 25** presents the percentages of participants who received each type of financial support directly from QUEST. In the 2009–2010 school year, due to reductions in funding, QUEST started paying 50 percent of tuition for participants, and the participants had to pay the other half through grants, loans, and/or other sources. This change affected 42 percent of QUEST participants in the study. QUEST continued to pay

Figure 25 Percent of All QUEST Participants Who Received Each Form of Financial Support from Project QUEST (N=175)

the full costs of participants' other college fees, books, tutoring, review courses, and licensing exam fees, and increased the amount of financial assistance for supportive services to offset some of participants' tuition costs during the transition. Those who were still attending classes after QUEST implemented this change were more likely than those who had completed or left training prior to the change to have student loans at the time of the six-year follow up (63 percent versus 50 percent, respectively). However, graduation rates and earnings six years after random assignment did not differ significantly by whether or not participants were still enrolled in QUEST after this change was made.

Comprehensive Support from a Counselor

Project QUEST career counselors worked with participants from the time they were accepted into the program until they obtained a job. QUEST held weekly group meetings—called Vision, Initiative, and Perseverance (or VIP) sessions—led by counselors and held on the college campuses. These sessions focused on life skills, such as time management, study skills, test-taking techniques, critical thinking, and conflict resolution. During the study period, the sessions shifted to focus more on workforce readiness skills, including writing résumés and cover letters and completing applications. Participants were required to attend the VIP sessions weekly while they were taking classes and to hand in class attendance sheets signed by their instructors in order to continue receiving tuition assistance from QUEST. The VIP sessions allowed counselors to monitor students' progress in class and check in on how they were doing.

Box 4: QUEST counselors' support was critical to participants' success.

All participants in the in-depth interview sample reported that QUEST's financial support was critical to their success in the program. Many participants mentioned that in addition to tuition and books, QUEST provided gas cards, gift cards for food or toys for the holidays, and referrals to food pantries and programs to help them with utility bills and childcare. All participants also mentioned the importance of knowing that their QUEST counselor was there to talk to at any time if they had a problem. They said the staff showed they really cared, were always willing to help, and kept them motivated.

Hugo [the counselor] would give me books or—"Here, go to the bookstore and get this one"—and so every time I would be like, "I got it, I got it." So, he never gave up on me. He was always: "OK, did you go test?" So, it was voucher after voucher for paying for these tests. I think I took the test six times—the math test. He was like, "But you passed everything the first time but your math." So he said that the fact that you have gotten this other stuff, don't even worry about it. He was very supportive. There was a time where I told him, "I can't do this. This math is too hard." I would get there and I would forget everything. I would think, I got this, I got this, and then I would still fail it. Failing it by one or two a few times—I could deal with being a ways from it, but then to be one or two questions away. That's what would get me. He stuck with me through this whole thing. It really, really helped.

[Later in the program] I am trying to think, How am I going to do this? Because there was just points where I need to work to get some of these bills paid. [Hugo] was like, "No, you don't need to work. They have these programs. Let's call these programs..." I am thinking, How is this going to get paid? My lights are going to get cut off and I am in school, and it was kind of like, That is selfish of me to not be working and getting this paid.... It was to the point where I have to work because there is no way I can do it and his [my husband's] check can't do it by himself anymore. Hugo was like, "No, no, no. Let's try to get this. Let's call this place."

—Hannah, LVN participant

Maria [the counselor] helped me with everything. Anything that I needed. She always kept me motivated and she said that she had an open-door office if I ever needed to discuss anything, and if I was getting stressed-out at work or at school and if I needed anything that I could always come to her or call her with anything. And it didn't particularly have to be about school. She was there for me. She tells me even about food assistance, too. If our pantry was running low, she would tell me, "Hey, at this site they are going to be giving food." She would always tell me and I would go to the pantries.

—Gabriela, sonography technician participant

You have a counselor there that you can talk to, and even if you're just frustrated, I mean, they were there. And they were there for a lot of the girls and I saw it. And they would also have resources and people, like when I did move out on my own, even with school, they helped me with just getting all the resources I needed to be successful.... She was just very personable. I mean, she knew our children's names. She knew us because we were her children. She knew everything about us.

—Rose, RN participant

Counselors were also available to meet one-on-one with participants to help them solve problems and to refer them to needed supports, such as assistance with utility bills, childcare, food, or tutoring. Box 4 presents the perspectives of some of the participants who completed in-depth interviews on the assistance they received from QUEST.

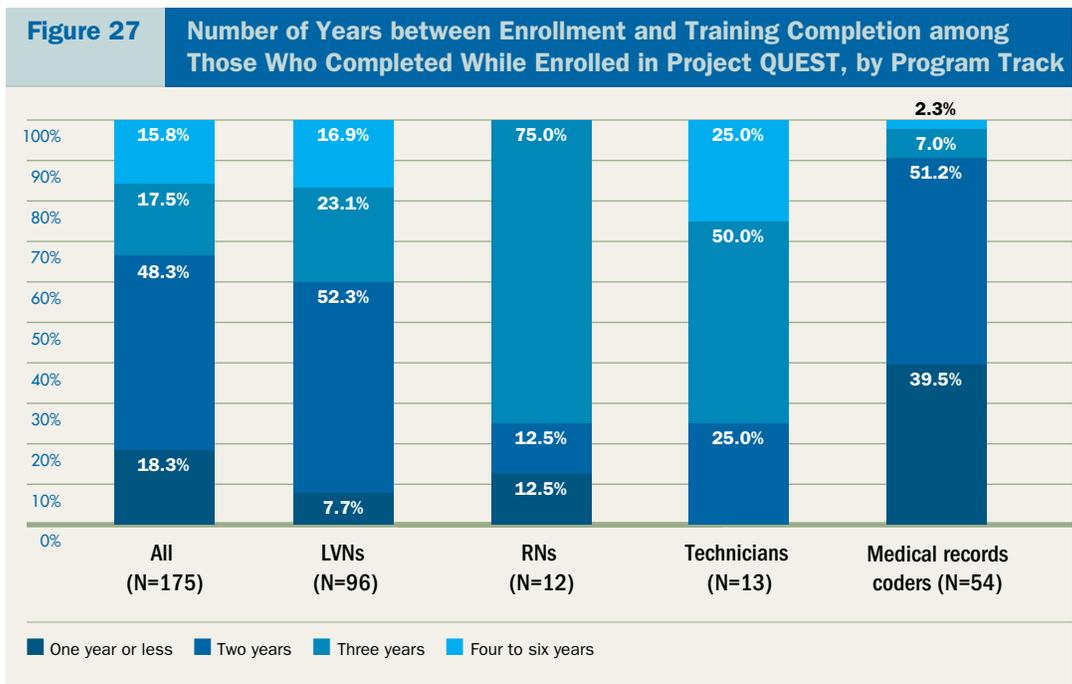
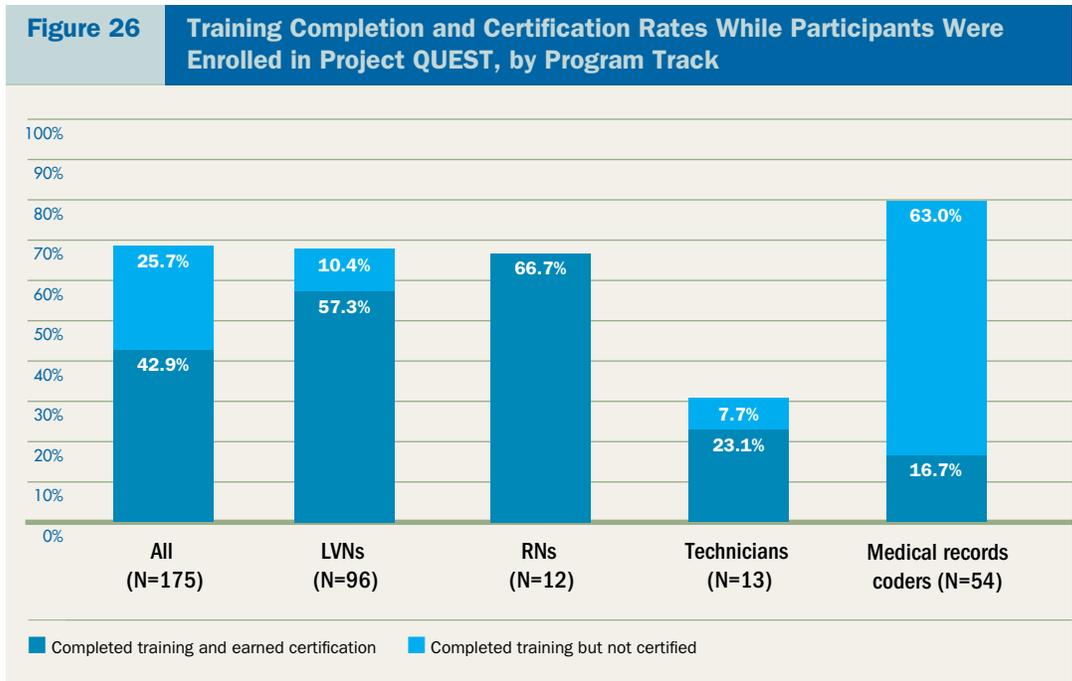
Job Placement

QUEST employed occupational development staff whose role was to maintain relationships with employers to understand the skill sets they required, and to work with the community colleges to modify existing training programs or develop new ones to meet employers' needs. At the time of the study, QUEST had been working as an intermediary in the health-care sector in San Antonio for several years, and many local employers were already familiar with its services and graduates. QUEST's employment coordinator helped participants write résumés and cover letters and practice for interviews. Both the career counselors and the employment coordinator provided participants with information about upcoming job fairs and identified employers that were hiring.

QUEST Participants' Outcomes

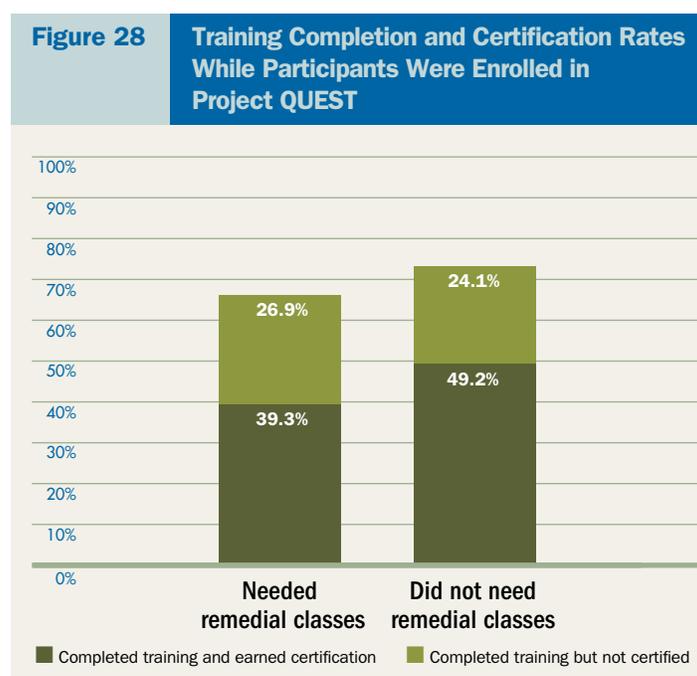
Overall, 69 percent of QUEST participants completed training and 43 percent earned the targeted health-care certification while receiving support from QUEST. As shown in [Figure 26](#), participants in the LVN and RN programs were substantially more likely than participants in the medical records coding and technician programs to earn the targeted certification. At the time of the study, QUEST's relationship with the medical records coding program was new and unproven. While most participants completed the program, a majority were unable to pass the coding certification exam. The small number of participants enrolled in the technician programs makes it difficult to identify reasons for the low completion rates. Staff believed participants dropped out due to personal reasons or because they decided the targeted job was not a good fit.

Participants who completed training while receiving support from QUEST took 23 months to do so, on average. As shown in [Figure 27](#), the time to completion varied substantially across the program tracks. Most participants in the RN and technician programs needed three to six years for completion, reflecting both the longer length of these programs and the fact that most of these participants needed to take remedial courses prior to starting their programs. Sixty percent of those completing the LVN program did so within two years, as did 91 percent of those completing the medical records coding program.



QUEST participants who needed to take remedial classes had strong program completion and earnings outcomes.

As shown in [Figure 28](#), after accounting for differences in outcomes across program tracks, 66 percent of the QUEST participants who took part in remedial math or reading classes completed training and 39 percent earned the targeted health-care certification while receiving support from QUEST. These figures are not significantly different from those for participants who did not need remedial classes, of whom 73 percent completed training and 49 percent earned the targeted certification. In the sixth year after random assignment, the average annual earnings of QUEST participants who needed remediation were \$26,961, compared to \$30,890 among participants who did not need remediation. The positive findings for participants who had not been academically ready for college-level classes are important, given the low college completion rates typically found among this population.¹⁹

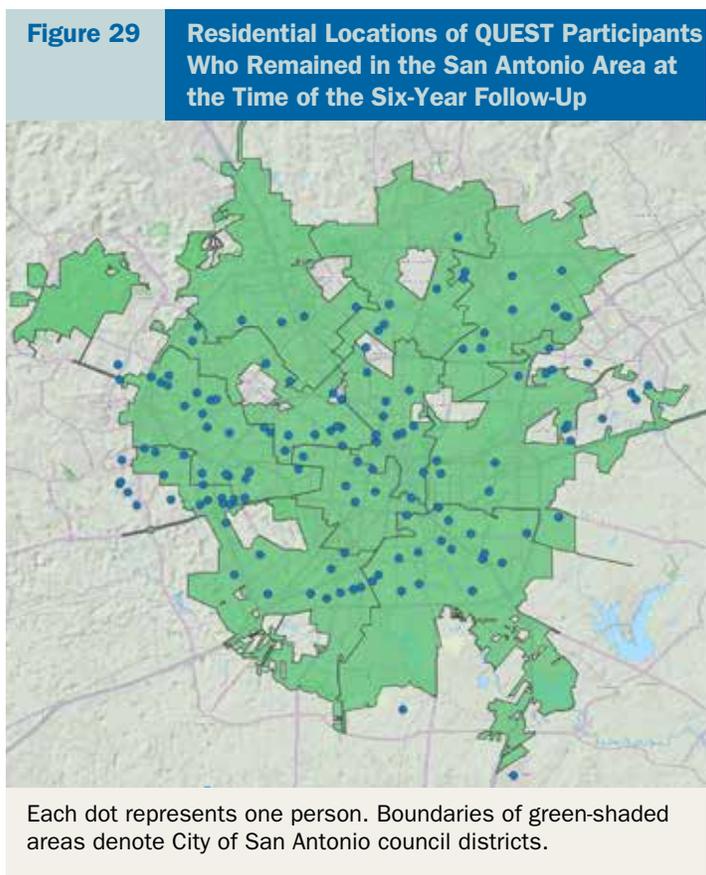


QUEST program completers were highly likely to remain in health-care occupations after six years and had average annual earnings of \$38,000.

Two-thirds of participants who completed training reported in the six-year follow-up survey that they had received assistance with finding a job from QUEST. Most participants in the in-depth interview sample said they were aware of QUEST's job placement assistance, although some did not use it because they had already been offered jobs before they completed their programs. Eighty-nine percent of participants who earned a certification while receiving support from QUEST (the QUEST completers) had worked in a health-care occupation at some point during the six years after random assignment. In the sixth year after random assignment, nearly 80 percent were working in a health-care occupation, and their average annual earnings were just over \$38,000.

Six years after study enrollment, nearly all QUEST participants remained in Texas and 85 percent were still living in San Antonio.

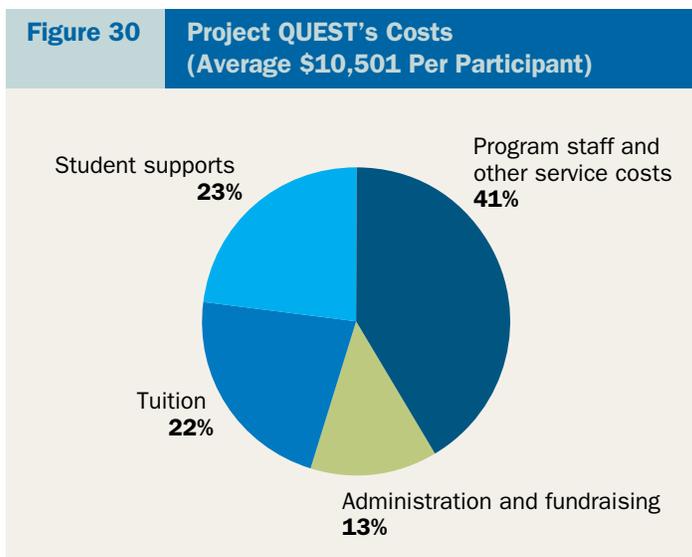
Nearly all study participants were living in San Antonio at the time they applied to the program. After six years, 96 percent of QUEST participants were still living in Texas, 85 percent in San Antonio. **Figure 29** shows where the QUEST participants who remained in the San Antonio area lived at the time of the six-year follow-up.



Program Costs

QUEST made a substantial investment in participants.

Study participants received support from Project QUEST for an average of 22 months, and the average cost per participant was \$10,501. **Figure 30** presents the breakdown of these costs. Tuition costs—that is, the portion of participants' community college tuition that QUEST paid—accounted for 22 percent of the overall costs. The additional supports that QUEST provided made up another 23 percent of costs, the most common of which were books, transportation, certification exam fees, review courses, uniforms, and vaccinations required to enter the health-care field. Salaries and benefits for program staff, including the career counselors who supported participants from college enrollment through job placement, and other direct program costs accounted for 41 percent of the overall costs.



As shown in **Figure 31**, average program costs varied by career track. On the higher end were participants pursuing RN degrees, who received support from QUEST for an average of 36 months with an average cost per participant of nearly \$20,000. At the lower end were participants in the medical records coding track, who received support from QUEST for an average of 15 months with an average cost per participant of just over \$6,000.

Figure 31 Project QUEST's Average Total Costs, by Program Track

	N	Average cost per participant	Average number of months in QUEST
RNs	15	\$19,678	36
LVNs	122	\$11,292	24
Technicians	19	\$9,708	21
Medical records coders	51	\$6,204	15
All	207	\$10,501	22

In sum, the QUEST model offered comprehensive academic, financial, and personal supports to help individuals complete college programs and drew on its strong partnerships with colleges and employers to ensure that graduates were prepared to access well-paying careers in the health-care sector. Helping individuals complete the targeted health-care programs required a substantial investment, with an average time to completion of 23 months. Nearly all of the QUEST completers obtained work in health-care occupations, and most continued to work in health care at the end of the six-year follow-up period. Boxes 5 and 6 profile the experiences of two QUEST participants who completed the RN and LVN programs.

Box 5: QUEST Participant Profile: Liana

Liana was born in Mexico and grew up with both her parents and her three sisters along the US-Mexico border. Her parents had only a primary-level education. Her father worked on a ranch and her mother cared for the children. Her family immigrated to the United States to live with her aunt and cousins when Liana was 14 years old. She attended high school in Texas. She had taken English classes while in Mexico but struggled with speaking English at school. When she graduated from high school, she moved to San Antonio to live with her sister and niece. Liana had planned to go to college and enrolled a year after high school, but her plans didn't work out.

When I graduated, I decided to move to San Antonio. Supposedly, I was going to go to college. After high school, I wanted to be a nurse. So I came over. I found me a job. So I put college to the side for a while. Save my money, buy me a little used car. And from there, I did go to college for about a year, but it wasn't working out... I started helping my sister with her bills, because obviously, I was living in her house. But I put school to the side because I wanted to make the money and save money, sometimes send it to my mom. But I never really saved. I would send it to her, but I would spend whatever I had left.

Liana worked for a couple years and moved in with her boyfriend and, at that point, realized she should have continued with college.

I felt proud of [my job] because I was getting paid more than the minimum wage. It wasn't a lot more, but it was still getting paid, bringing a check in. That's when you spend the money and start buying yourself clothes. I moved in with my boyfriend, so now I was on my own, so I had to provide to the apartment. I changed cars and got me a brand-new truck at the time. So I would feel very proud getting the money in and using it on me. But I never thought about the future. You don't appreciate until later on when you get a little bit older and you realize, I'm just living for today. I'm not living for the future or for kids.

After four years Liana got married and had her first child. She then got pregnant with twins, but her husband had not wanted any more children. After the twins were born, she left her husband and moved back in with her sister. Her sister saw a flyer about Project QUEST at the elementary school where she worked and told Liana about it. At the age of 31, Liana decided to take part in QUEST because it offered to help her pursue the nursing career she had been looking for.

That's something that I now was determined to do, because now I was on my own with three kids, and one was almost five, and the twins were barely a year old. So now it was like: If I can get all this help and if I will finish what I started to provide for my kids and survive, because we had to survive. Especially with three kids and living with somebody else.

Now I'm back into no house, having to ask for food stamps. I'm just staying home and kind of feeling sorry for myself, yet taking care of two babies, taking one to preschool, and I wasn't happy. And you start reflecting and thinking, This is not what I want for them. I'm not going to repeat my mom's story. I have the opportunity, and I will change. And that's what I did.

Liana applied for the LVN program at St. Philip's College. The first challenge she faced was passing the college's placement exams. She took the remedial math and reading classes QUEST offered until she passed.

I started taking classes to pass the, like, your placement. So first I went for about three months; we used to meet, I think, every Monday and Wednesday for the algebra, the reading, and stuff like that. Before you go and take the test, they help you, Project QUEST, so you can, you know, because it's been a couple years [since] the last time I went to college. I took it, like, three times to pass it, but I ended up passing it, and then I started college just to get some of the basics they were asking for.

Once in the program, Liana's family helped her get by financially. Her main challenges were academics and balancing school and family.

I struggled through school, all the way. I guess my language barrier... I mean, I could read [English], and I could write it, and I could actually speak it. With the science, you had to apply a lot of the stuff. You had to apply your knowledge, and with me not having any previous nursing experience, it was very hard to put it on a scenario and know what to do next....The problem at the time was that they time you for your test. And in my case, I needed time to read it and understand it, and if I didn't understand it, I will always translate it in my own mind into Spanish so I could understand what they were asking, and then look at the answers. And so sometimes when you are answering the questions, you answer right, but then you see the time and it's almost finished, and you're barely halfway there.

And it was not putting my family first. You know, because you hate when you're leaving and they're crying. Well, because now you are a single parent. You have three kids. They're little. They need your attention. They're not used to being in somebody else's house.... It was heart-breaking knowing that they wanted to be with me, but I couldn't. I needed to study.

When asked what was particularly helpful about QUEST's support, Liana talked about both the emotional support and the access to resources.

It was helpful that they bring you up when you're feeling down. When you're about to give up, they kind of remind you why you started. "Think about where you were before," or "You're six months away from graduating." So they encouraged you a lot. "If you walk away, where are you going to go?" "Remember why you started this." So they kind of bring you up and kind of push you. "You can do it." "How many people have graduated? You can do it."

When you go to the meetings, they ask you, "What are you struggling with?" Could be paying the bills, the gas. They offered that, and they had a lot of ways to help you: "Go here and they will help." Once it was Christmastime, and the lady called me to the office and she's like, "I put your kids under Make-A-Wish or... Toys for Tots," and she gave me a whole bag full of toys for my kids, and I was like, Wow, because, you know, kids, when they're little, they just want a toy to open. They don't care about brand-name. So that was really good for her to do. Because you are in need of everything, and I wanted at least to give them a little toy. When she gave me a whole box of toys for my kids, I wanted to just hug her.

Liana completed the LVN program two and a half years after enrolling in QUEST. She used an online tutoring program that QUEST paid for to study for and pass the LVN licensing exam. A QUEST counselor told her about employers who were hiring and helped her prepare for job interviews. She accepted a job offer two weeks after passing the licensing exam.

Liana first worked at a nursing home and then at a rehab center. During this time, she reunited with her ex-husband. After working as an LVN for three years, she decided to return to school to become an RN and was attending the program at the time of the interview.

Well, after I got out of Project QUEST, obviously, I was making good money. I wasn't rich, but I was able to provide enough, and then at the time, my husband took a little course to become a truck driver, and he passed the test. And he worked a couple of years to save a little bit of money, because ... ever since I became an LVN, I wanted to come back to school. I didn't know when, because it feels like it's always been the kids. But I knew I wanted to do it. I knew Project QUEST was not going to pay for it, because I was now financially stable.

But you dream about it. So for a couple of years, that was my life, taking them to school, going to work, enjoying the weekends. But then—I don't know if it's just my nature or whatever—I didn't want to just be there. I wanted to go higher. LVN and RN is a big pay difference; they respect you more and you do basically the same job. I knew it was going to be hard. It is very hard, but I said to my husband, "I'm going to try it until they close all the doors on me. And if I make it, I make it." If I make it, I'll show them, my kids, that you can come from a little ranch with no electricity and still become successful, you know, at least live comfortable.

Regarding what her experience with QUEST has meant for her and her family, Liana remarked:

Thanks to them I had the opportunity to have kind of a degree or some kind of a job that I can choose to either work days, nights, weekends, a few hours, longer hours. No other places, or other jobs, would give you some kind of a degree or certificate that you can have that choice. So I can do that. For a while, I worked only weekends so I can take my kids to school. For a while, I worked nights because it was better for my kids.

[On getting off of food stamps] Because you need it, but you also feel, when you're paying with food stamps, people looking at you like, Oh, she's Mexican, or, All they do is just live like that and get bigger, or, They just keep on having kids and kids and kids, stuff like that. But I feel free. Free to know that I struggled, but I made it, and I'm able to provide for them. They may not have everything, but they live comfortable until I can provide for them a little more.

[What going back to school means for her kids] I'm very proud I've come this far, and I'm proud that my kids get to see it and they get to appreciate that Mommy's going to school, like we are, and my oldest one gets to see even the way I struggle sometimes when I stay [up] late studying while they go to sleep. So I think he kind of appreciates that. So I want to [imprint] that on him. Nothing is impossible if you really want it. You have your heart into it. It's taken me a while to show my oldest one that's the way it is. It's not going to be given to you, but if you want it, you will make it happen.

[On her relationship with her husband] I was able to speak up. I didn't keep it to myself. I knew that now I had a choice and I could provide for them with or without him. I had that. I mean, you go from making \$6 to starting pay \$19. It's a big difference. So maybe back then, I feel, like, inferior and not able to be on my own because I had three kids, and now it's like I'm more open to it. OK, if it doesn't work out, I know I can go anywhere and find me a job and provide for them. It may not be easy. It's going to affect them, but I know I have the choice.

Box 6: QUEST Participant Profile: Malena

Malena grew up in a small farm town in Texas with her mother, stepfather, and two siblings. Her grandparents immigrated to the United States from Mexico when her biological father was a child. Her mother was of European ancestry. Her mother and stepfather had college degrees and worked in municipal and state jobs. She disliked school but wanted to get out of the small town and did not want to start a family at a young age. But she got pregnant at 17, while still in high school. She got married only because her stepfather and boyfriend wanted her to, then dropped out of high school and earned a GED.

Malena was unhappy in her marriage and left her husband after a year. She moved back in with her parents but left shortly thereafter and moved to San Antonio to live with her grandmother. In San Antonio, Malena worked and had a second child. She attended vocational school and earned a dental assistant certificate. She worked as a dental assistant for five years but decided she did not like the work. She then worked in retail and telemarketing jobs. She remarried and had a third child. She worked in a call center taking prescription refills over the phone, but she found the work mundane.

Malena learned about Project QUEST through her mother-in-law, who had received help from the program to finish nursing school. At the age of 28, she decided to take part in QUEST to improve her family's financial situation and to do something for herself.

We lived in a small apartment. I was married at that time. We had three kids and we were living paycheck to paycheck with two incomes.... Sometimes [I was] worrying about if I could afford new shoes for one of the boys. Pay was a big factor at that time because I wanted more for my kids. I wanted to be able to financially support them and give them things that they needed as well as things that they wanted.... They always had shoes but it might not have been something that they wanted. When I grew up, it wasn't like that. I always got what I wanted. I kind of wanted that for them. There was still food on the table, but [not] new clothes or new shoes or stuff like that, something that they wanted, like a video game. It was heartbreaking sometimes because you want your kids to have what they don't have. It was kind of sad.

I was just unsatisfied and I knew that I needed to be doing something more than what I was doing. I just had this feeling one morning that this can't just be my life and I was a mom of three. I did everything for them but I needed to do something for myself.

I also wanted them to be proud of who I was and what I did. Because one time I went to school with my son and he was in elementary school and they did, like, drawings about their moms and stuff like that. He drew a picture of me sweeping the house. So I was like, Wow, that's what they think of me.

With QUEST's support, Malena enrolled in the RN program at San Antonio College. Her primary challenges while in school were finances and balancing work and family.

We basically lived off of student loans. Even though my [former] husband was working, he wasn't making anywhere near what we needed to make to survive.

The classes weren't as hard as I thought they were going to be. So that wasn't a big challenge. I guess it was home life. It was—my ex-husband didn't like that I was making all of these new

friends and he didn't like me being away from the family as much as I was. And then when I got home, he helped out a lot with the kids, with watching them and cooking and stuff whenever I couldn't, but he was kind of a jealous person. So that kind of interfered a lot. We would argue and then I wouldn't be able to finish [my] homework and I would have to catch up the day that it was due. The stress levels of arguing at home and then going to school and being OK and away from him and knowing that, Oh, crap, I have to go do that all over again tonight... I don't think he realized how much it would take away from family time—not really family time, but his time—because my focus was school and my kids and not really him.

When asked what was helpful about the assistance QUEST provided, Malena talked about the emotional support from her career counselor as well as the resources she helped her access.

She was very personable. She was very relatable. I didn't see her as a counselor. I saw her as maybe somebody that I could be friends with outside of Project QUEST. She would ask you about your grades and how you were doing in school. She would ask about your family and if you needed help in that area, or if you needed additional assistance. And how are you coping with everything? Is everything living up to your expectations? What can they do to make it better? It was almost like counseling. I guess going through school and being a mom and a wife and everything, I guess we all kind of needed that.

I was a different person back then. Like I said, I was pretty bitter. I was so upset about how my life was and where I was at that time. I just thought that everything was unfair. I think if I would have gotten somebody else besides Maria [her counselor], I probably would have dropped out. Like I said, her positive attitude was really catchy. I would always see a glass half-empty and she would say, "No, no, no, it is half-full." So I kind of figured, What would it hurt to start thinking the way she thought? And it did a lot of stuff for me. It changed a lot of things.

They paid for school. They paid for my books. They paid for our scrubs. We used to get gas vouchers. Even though I didn't have my own personal car, she still gave me the gas vouchers in case my ex-husband would take me to school. If we didn't put [the money] into a gas card, she would give it to us for groceries and stuff like that.

After four years, Malena completed the RN program and passed the certification exam. She noted that QUEST paid for the exam and the fingerprinting required to work in the field. QUEST's employment coordinator helped her prepare for her job search.

He prepared you for your job interviews. It was kind of like a mock job interview when you would go in with him. He also helped you with your résumé. They did provide clothes for you and they would provide you with one pair of scrubs for work. They gave you your stethoscope. They wouldn't hook us up with people. They would tell us that these are the places that are hiring. They would work with you until you got a job.

Malena accepted a job offer from a hospital before taking the certification exam. At her job, she completed a 22-week training for ICU nurses. After a year, she moved into emergency nursing and had been in this role for three years at the time of the interview. She loved her work.

I see people at their worst. Because you go into the emergency room and see a truly sick patient—you are there; I am their savior. If they are going in for a heart attack, sometimes people don't even know it. It just shows up as numbness in their arm or jaw pain or something like that, and you kind of catch it and send them to a cath lab and have them do blocks on arteries and they will be fine. I had a guy come in and he was in respiratory distress and we had to intubate him. He had a panicked look. He came back and he brought me flowers and said thank you and all kinds of stuff. It is those moments.

At the time of the interview, Malena was divorced and raising her three sons, ages 20, 16, and 11, on her own. She described her decision to divorce after completing the program.

Before going to school and before QUEST and me being a nurse, I was always at home, because we didn't have enough money for me to do anything, and, I don't know, I think he was very jealous and I couldn't handle that. I didn't want that kind of negativity and I didn't want fighting around my kids. So yeah, shortly after [QUEST] I realized I can support them on my own. He wasn't really helping me support them anyway. We were living off of my student loans.

Malena's oldest son had graduated from high school and was enrolling in barber school. Her second oldest son had done well on the PSAT and planned to attend college after graduating from high school. He wanted to be a cardiothoracic surgeon. She described what her experience with QUEST meant for her and her family.

I wouldn't be sitting here. I am not living luxurious but I am comfortable and my children are comfortable and they are taken care of. I think that QUEST provided everything of where I am now.... It definitely helped with my kids because they saw me going to school and they saw this program helping me and helping them.

I think that my kids are very proud of what I do. It is long hours. It is 12 hours, and sometimes I work four days a week and sometimes I work three. I see them less now that I work day shift. I went to day shift to try and get a normal-type schedule and to spend more time with them, but I think I saw them more when I worked nights. I used to work nights because my little one, I would be here for him when he got home from school.

I am not living paycheck to paycheck, but it is pretty tight now because I am paying for my classes, but it is not like back then. We do a lot more stuff. They have a lot more things. I can provide more stuff for them than I was able to.... My [first] two, with the whole going-to-school process, didn't really ask for anything. Because they knew we couldn't afford that, and having a 10-year old say, "Oh, I don't want it. We can't afford it"—it was really bad. [Now] my 11-year old—that is not even in his vocabulary.

I am very busy, but it is a different kind of busy. I am working and I have extracurricular activities with my kids. I am also back in school because back then they only had their associate's degree program. So now a lot of our hospitals are requiring a bachelor's. So I am doing that. I am very pleased with my life right now.

Conclusion

QUEST has demonstrated that investing in low-income individuals' skills and attainment of postsecondary credentials can have a meaningful and lasting impact on their lives. Participants were typically poor when they enrolled in QUEST but, six years later, were earning an average of \$28,000 per year. Program graduates who obtained a certification in one of QUEST's targeted fields were doing considerably better than this, making more than \$38,000 per year. (San Antonio is less costly than many US cities. Salaries to achieve the equivalent standard of living would be approximately \$51,000 in Chicago, \$61,000 in Los Angeles, and \$64,000 in Washington, DC.²⁰) Steady employment and good wages meant less financial stress for QUEST participants, as they were much more likely to be able to pay their rent, utilities, and other bills on time. Three key observations regarding QUEST's impacts follow.

- QUEST not only increased its participants' earnings; it enabled graduates to reach the middle class. Few workforce development programs have had as powerful an impact.
- QUEST served students who were not currently attending college and had the most impact on individuals ages 25 to 64—that is, not traditional college-age students—and on those who entered the program with a GED rather than a high school diploma. This indicates that QUEST was particularly successful in reaching into the community to engage people who were unlikely to navigate their way through postsecondary training to a good job on their own.
- QUEST's program serves as an excellent local economic development model. The vast majority of participants who benefitted from the program have remained in the San Antonio area working for local employers.

The QUEST findings strengthen the evidence base on the effectiveness of sector-based training programs, demonstrating that earnings impacts can be sustained and even grow after six years. The findings also show the effectiveness of comprehensive strategies to support low-income adults' attainment of postsecondary credentials at community colleges. The findings are made more striking by the fact that QUEST recruited individuals for the study who were not currently attending college, 63 percent of whom needed to take remedial courses to improve basic math and reading skills before enrolling in college-level programs.

While the RCT design does not enable us to separate the effects of the various program components, participants' experiences indicate that several factors were crucial. QUEST provided students with substantial financial assistance to cover tuition and other education-related expenses as well as comprehensive support from a counselor. QUEST participants indicated that both were essential to helping them

complete their programs. The financial support made it feasible for them to attend college, and the counselors were critical to helping them persist when they faced academic, family, and financial difficulties. Another important aspect of the QUEST model is that it targets well-paying occupations in strong sectors of the local economy and employs staff dedicated to developing relationships with employers and to providing participants with assistance in obtaining a job.

Because QUEST partners with local community colleges and professional training institutes, its approach can easily be adapted to different sectors of the local economy as employer demand changes. QUEST has supported students in manufacturing and diesel mechanics programs and is currently helping students who are preparing for jobs in technology. QUEST has continued to keep pace with the evolving needs of the health-care industry. For example, as most local hospitals now require nurses to have two- or four-year degrees, many current QUEST participants are pursuing degrees rather than certificates.

Project QUEST's strategies can be replicated in other communities. In fact, affiliated organizing groups have created similar organizations across the Southwest, and other workforce development organizations have replicated the model in additional locations.²¹ Nonprofit organizations can serve as intermediaries connecting residents, community colleges, and employers in growing sectors of the local economy. The key to such programs' success, of course, is considerable, reliable financial support that can be used flexibly to meet students' needs—something rarely available through the nation's workforce system. Governors, mayors, corporations, and local foundations will need to look to their own resources to create local entities like Project QUEST.

Endnotes

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12. Gupta, Himani, *The Power of Fully Supporting Community College Students: The Effects of CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate's Programs after Six Years*, New York: MDRC, October 2017.
13. Rolston, Howard, Elizabeth Copson, and Karen Gardiner, *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, US Department of Health and Human Services, October 2017.
14. As reported by Sister Pearl Ceasar (P Ceasar, personal interview, January 27, 2015). Sister Pearl was COPS's lead organizer at the time and was in the meeting with Mayor Wolff. Nelson Wolff remembers the meeting a little differently. He says he told the COPS leaders that the city didn't have all of the money he had promised. When they walked outside city hall and faced the protesters, Pat Ozuna leaned in and whispered to Wolff, "You better have the right answer." Wolff, who says he is a longtime supporter of COPS and Metro, claims he knew what his answer was going to be before they got there. "You can always find the money if the political pressure is good enough. They got what they asked for," he recalled, laughing at the memory (N. Wolff, personal interview, January 26, 2015).
15. An evaluation of the Job Training Partnership Act found that the significant earnings impacts for adult men and women in the second and third years after random assignment disappeared by the fifth year. (See: US General Accounting Office, *Job Training Partnership Act: Long-Term Earnings and Employment Outcomes*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1996.)
16. The percentages of QUEST participants and control group members employed at any time during each year was, respectively, 73 percent versus 78 percent in year one; 82 percent versus 87 percent in year two; 85 percent versus 87 percent in year three; 86 percent versus 86 percent in year four; 87 percent versus 83 percent in year five; and 90 percent versus 87 percent in year six. None of these differences are statistically significant.
17. Analysis shows that QUEST's effect on year-six earnings was significantly mediated by its effect on the percent of participants who were employed in health-care occupations six years after random assignment.
18. The study was not designed to ensure sufficient sample sizes for examining subgroup impacts. Therefore, this analysis was exploratory. Given the small sample sizes and the large variation in annual earnings, the study did not have sufficient power to examine subgroup differences in average annual earnings. Therefore, we examined the percent of participants who earned \$24,000 or more in year six, the median annual earnings for the full study sample.
19. See: Attewell, P, D. Lavin, T. Domina, and T. Levey, "New evidence on college remediation," *Journal of Higher Education* 77(5), 886–924, 2006.
20. Cost of living comparison data obtained from www.bankrate.com/calculators/savings/moving-cost-of-living-calculator.aspx.
21. QUEST's sister organizations include Capital IDEA in Austin, TX; Project ARRIBA in El Paso, TX; VIDA in the Rio Grande Valley, TX; and JobPath in Tucson, AZ.

Appendix

Study Design and Final Sample

The evaluation of Project QUEST uses a randomized controlled trial design to assess its impacts on individuals' educational attainment, employment, earnings, and other indicators of financial well-being. The evaluation focused on individuals pursuing training for health-care occupations. At the time of study enrollment, 60 percent of participants intended to enroll in licensed vocational nursing programs, 7 percent in registered nursing, 25 percent in medical records coding, and 8 percent in various technician programs (i.e., surgical, respiratory, sonography, and radiology). To assess program impacts, the study relies on data from a baseline survey conducted at the time of study enrollment and follow-up surveys conducted two years and six years after study enrollment. We used data from the baseline survey to examine the characteristics of treatment and control group members in the final sample and to control for any differences in characteristics between the groups in the analysis of program impacts. The six-year follow-up period allowed sufficient time for program participants to complete remedial, prerequisite, and core program classes, pass the necessary certification exams, and obtain employment prior to measuring program impacts on annual earnings. We also analyzed data from QUEST on participants' receipt of services and financial supports, interviewed program staff, and completed in-depth interviews with a sample of 17 QUEST participants to gain a richer understanding of the individuals and families QUEST serves and how the program helps them achieve their educational, career, and financial goals.

Intake, Baseline Survey, and Random Assignment

QUEST staff completed the program's intake and screening process to identify eligible candidates and obtained their written consent to take part in the study. Staff then sent their contact information to a survey firm, the Institute for Survey Research (ISR) at Temple University, which completed the baseline survey and conducted random assignment. Individuals were blocked according to their intended program track (i.e., registered nursing, licensed vocational nursing, medical records coding, and the various technician tracks), and the survey firm randomly assigned 50 percent of study participants to the treatment group and 50 percent to the control group within these blocks. Between April 2006 and October 2008, 410 individuals enrolled in the study, of whom 207 were randomly assigned to the treatment group and 203 to the control group. QUEST staff invited those assigned to the treatment group to participate in the program. Those assigned to the control group were told that they would not receive support from QUEST but that they could enroll in college or training on their own or seek other services.

Follow-Up Surveys

The impact data come from two follow-up surveys. ISR conducted a two-year follow-up survey that gathered information about study participants' employment since the time of the baseline survey. Mobility contracted with the RAND Survey Research Group to locate and interview study participants for the six-year follow-up survey. This survey gathered information about study participants' employment since the date of their last survey, their education and training experiences since the time of the baseline survey, their family and housing status, and other indicators of financial well-being. All interviews were conducted by telephone using computer-assisted interviewing software.

To capture the data upon which the earnings impact estimates are based, each survey asked respondents to list all full-time or part-time regular jobs, odd jobs, temporary jobs, or any other jobs at which they had worked at least 10 hours during any single month during the period in question. For each job listed, interviewers asked which months during the period respondents had worked in the job, marking each month on a calendar. Based on these responses, the computer displayed a list of the months in which the respondents had no jobs listed. For each of these months, interviewers asked what the respondents were doing. If the respondents had in fact been working, the interviewer corrected the information. For each job, the survey asked what the respondents' pre-tax pay was when they started the job, pre-tax pay either when they left the job or currently (if still employed in the job), the unit of pay, the number of hours and days worked in a typical week, and the number of weeks worked in a typical month. The survey asked how long respondents had worked in each job in order to identify jobs held for less than a month.

We used the data collected to calculate monthly earnings for each job the respondents held. When the starting and ending pay differed, we calculated monthly starting earnings, average earnings, and ending earnings. We assigned monthly earnings to each calendar month in which the respondent held each job. For those whose pay changed over time, we assigned starting, average, and ending earnings based on the amount of time individuals held the job. We summed the earnings for all jobs held each month to calculate total earnings for each month. We then converted the calendar months to months before and after the random assignment month, and we summed the monthly earnings to calculate total earnings for each year. We followed a similar process to calculate the total hours

worked per month. We reviewed each respondent's data on total monthly earnings and hours worked to identify and clean outliers in the data (e.g., for months in which individuals left one job and started another job, we used the average of the earnings in the month before and after the job change).

Sample Attrition

The final response rate on the six-year follow-up survey was 83.7 percent overall, 84.5 percent among treatment group members, and 82.8 percent among control group members, for an overall attrition rate of 16.3 percent and a differential attrition rate of 1.7 percent. We used regression analysis to examine whether there were systematic differences between those who responded to the six-year follow-up survey and those who did not, in terms of baseline characteristics likely to affect earnings outcomes. **Figure A1** presents the regression coefficients estimating the effect of each variable on the probability of completing the survey and the p-value indicating the level of statistical significance of this relationship. The results show that only one characteristic—whether or not the participant had any health-care certifications prior to enrollment—was statistically significant at the $p < .10$ level. Overall, the regression results showed that differences in characteristics between survey respondents and nonrespondents were not statistically significant. The findings imply that the survey results are not biased.

Figure A1 Estimated Regression Coefficients for the Probability of Responding to the Six-Year Follow-Up Survey (N=410)

Variable	Coef.	p-value
Treatment group	0.166	0.562
Female	0.573	0.180
Age 25 to 34	0.186	0.586
Age 35 to 44	0.802	0.132
Age 45 to 64	0.832	0.278
Latino	0.191	0.631
Other	0.596	0.305
Immigrant (born outside of the United States)	-0.436	0.405
Earned high school diploma	0.338	0.324
Earned college degree (associate's or bachelor)	0.280	0.713
Had any health-care certificates or licenses	-0.554	0.098
Average annual earnings in the year prior to enrollment (including zeros)	0.000	0.654
Rented own home	0.000	1.000
Owned own home	0.093	0.870
Homeless	-0.911	0.509
Lived in public or subsidized housing	-0.428	0.321
Had a valid driver's license	0.476	0.259
Rating of own health: good	0.299	0.575
Rating of own health: excellent	0.255	0.623
Formerly married	-0.124	0.742
Currently married	0.578	0.179
Had any children under 18 in household	0.331	0.346
Wald statistic	26.63	0.272
Pseudo R-square (.0729)		

Equivalency of the Groups on Baseline Characteristics

Figure A2 presents the baseline characteristics of the QUEST participants and control group members in the final sample. Differences in key characteristics—including gender, age, highest degree earned, annual earnings, housing status, marital status, and whether participants had children under age 18—were small and not statistically significant. There were a few statistically significant differences between the groups in terms of race/ethnicity, whether they lived in subsidized housing, whether they had a valid driver's license, and their rating of their own health.

Figure A2 Comparison of the Baseline Characteristics of Treatment and Control Group Members in the Final Sample

	Treatment group (N=175)	Control group (N=168)	
Female	90.9%	88.1%	
Age			
18 to 24	27.4%	31.6%	
25 to 34	45.7%	44.1%	
35 to 44	17.1%	18.5%	
45 to 64	9.7%	6.0%	
Race			*
Latino	69.1%	79.8%	
African American	16.6%	9.5%	
White	12.0%	7.1%	
Other	2.3%	3.6%	
Immigrant (born outside of the United States)	9.7%	4.8%	
Highest degree earned			
GED	24.0%	25.6%	
High school diploma	70.3%	70.8%	
College degree (associate's or bachelor)	5.7%	3.6%	
Had any health-care certificates or licenses	22.9%	17.3%	
Average annual earnings in the year prior to enrollment (including zeros)	\$11,670	\$11,092	
Housing status			
Owned own home	20.0%	14.9%	
Rented own home or lived with someone else and contributed to the rent	62.9%	57.7%	
Lived rent-free	17.1%	27.4%	
Lived in public or subsidized housing	16.0%	7.1%	**
Had a valid driver's license	94.9%	85.7%	***
Rating of own health			*
Excellent	47.4%	57.7%	
Good	46.3%	34.5%	
Fair or poor	6.3%	7.7%	
Marital status			
Currently married	30.9%	28.0%	
Separate, divorced, widowed	25.1%	27.4%	
Never married	44.0%	44.6%	
Had any children under 18 in household	70.3%	70.2%	

Significance levels of differences between groups: ***p<.01, **p<.05, p<.10

Analysis

To assess Project QUEST's impacts on participants' employment, educational attainment, and financial well-being, we used multivariate regression analysis and we report regression-adjusted results. The regression models included the baseline explanatory variables in the tables above to control for any differences between the treatment and control group members in the final survey sample. The models also included the baseline value of the outcome of interest and a binary variable for being a treatment group member.

In-Depth Interviews

We conducted in-depth interviews with 17 former QUEST participants, including 12 who had completed their health-care training program and obtained the targeted certification, two who had completed their program but never obtained the certification, and three who had dropped out prior to completion. All participants in this sample had completed the six-year follow-up survey. [Figure A3](#) compares the demographic characteristics of all QUEST participants in the final

Figure A3 Demographic Characteristics at Program Entry of QUEST Participants in the Final Survey and In-Depth Interview Samples

	Final survey sample (N=175)	In-depth interview sample (N=17)
Gender		
Female	90.9%	82.4%
Male	9.1%	17.6%
Race		
Latino	69.1%	70.6%
African American	16.6%	17.7%
White	12.0%	11.8%
Immigrant (born outside of the United States)	9.7%	17.7%
Age		
18 to 24	27.4%	17.6%
25 to 34	45.7%	58.8%
35 to 64	26.8%	23.5%
Highest degree earned		
GED	24.0%	29.4%
High school diploma	70.3%	64.7%
College degree (associate's or bachelor)	5.7%	5.9%
Employed at any time during the past year		
Employed at any time during the past year	86.3%	94.1%
Employed during all 12 months of the past year	45.1%	52.9%
Received SNAP in the month prior to program entry	36.6%	35.3%
Had ever received TANF	34.3%	29.4%
Had any children under age 18 at program entry	71.4%	94.1%
Marital status		
Married	30.9%	41.2%
Separated, divorced, widowed	25.1%	23.5%
Never married	44.0%	35.3%
Housing status		
Owned own home	20.0%	23.5%
Rented own home or lived with someone else and contributed to the rent	62.9%	64.7%
Lived rent-free	17.1%	11.8%

study sample to the characteristics of those in the in-depth interview sample. The demographics of those in the interview sample generally reflected those of the full sample of QUEST participants. The primary difference was that for the in-depth interviews we targeted participants who had children under the age of 18 at the time they enrolled in QUEST. Therefore, the percentage with children under 18 is higher among those in the interview sample.



M O B I L I T Y

Economic Mobility Corporation, Inc.
50 Broadway, Suite 1604
New York, NY 10004
212.280.6975

www.economicmobilitycorp.org