

Rediscovering the American Dream of Opportunity

A Case Study of the

NVFS Training Futures – Northern Virginia Community College Partnership

February 2011

For nearly 250 years, America's promise to its citizens is that if you learn and work hard, you will succeed and have a better life. This promise of boundless American opportunity has continuously transformed people's lives and America's culture and economy. However, more recently, America's promise of opportunity has given way to a crisis of confidence – can we recover our faith in ourselves and our future after the worst recession in generations?

“Training Futures found me wondering ‘Where in the world is the American dream that one hears about?’”

The life-changing results and voices of some of Northern Virginia's more vulnerable neighbors can show the way to recovery of America's promise of opportunity. In late 2010, Northern Virginia Family Service (NVFS), with the help of a third-party evaluation partner, The Innovation Network, conducted a survey completed by 176 graduates of its Training Futures office administration job training program for low-income and unemployed workers. Also in the fall of 2010, The Aspen Institute published the results of a three-year data study of the Training Futures program, featuring its partnership with Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA). Together, the results reported by program graduates and published by one of America's top policy research institutions tell a story about the rediscovery of America as a land of opportunity for low-wage workers who envision new career skills and credentials as their path to a brighter future.

A Crisis of Confidence

Prolonged economic hardship and a crisis of confidence can create a despair that is hard to shake, for individuals and entire communities. Before entering Training Futures, as documented in the Aspen Institute study, half of program participants were unemployed. The other half was low-wage workers, typically retail cashiers, earning a median of \$16,100 per year to support their families.

“Before Training Futures, my life was upside down and I was in a dead end waitress job making poverty level income with no hope of turning my life around. I felt hopeless and powerless.”

Without the skills and credentials needed for good jobs, life in America is precarious. Before entering Training Futures, less than half of trainees (49%) had access to employer-provided health insurance. More than one in five (21%) received some form of public assistance to help them get by. The financial stress on their families resulted in depleted savings that averaged only \$2,769, and accumulated average debt of \$5,214 per trainee. But even in the darkest moments of hardship, the beacon of America's promise of opportunity can be seen, beaming from programs like Training Futures.

[Note: All quotes in this report are from respondents of the 2010 Training Futures survey of program graduates.]

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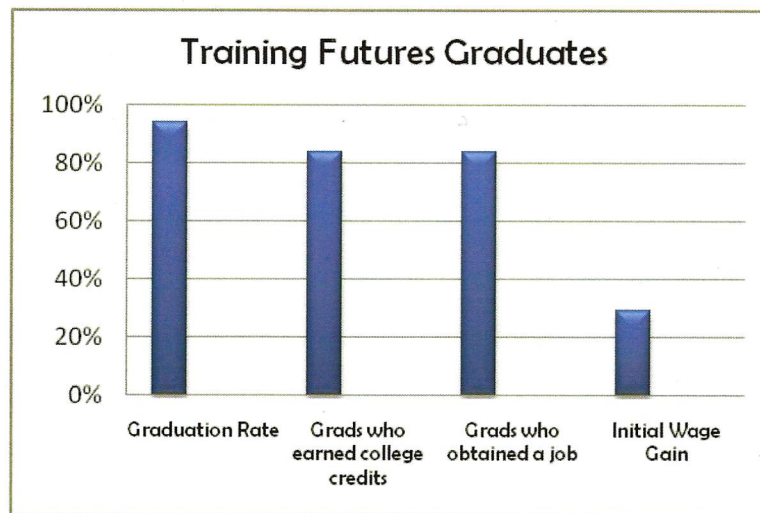
"I came to Training Futures when I was extremely depressed and lost. From the darkest point of my life I saw light and many hands that wanted to help me, without receiving anything from me."

Participants at Training Futures enter a support community of success advocates including fellow trainees, staff trainers, volunteers, and employer-partners. They learn new professional skills such as Microsoft Office software, business communication, customer service, and filing. Through the program's college credit partnership with NOVA, they can also earn up to 17 credits towards a college credential.

Transformation Through Training

"Training Futures gave me all the tools I needed to believe in myself."

Key findings from The Aspen Institute's study of 253 Training Futures participants from 2007-2010 suggest that this transformational learning experience helps them chart a new career path:



- 94% of enrolled participants successfully completed the 25-week program, one of the nation's top success rates for job training programs serving low-income workers
- 84% of participants successfully completed a median of 17 NOVA college credit hours while at Training Futures, more than a full-time semester course load
- 84% of program graduates secured new jobs following the program, a strong outcome despite the recession
- Newly-employed participants reported average initial wage gains of \$3 per hour over previous earnings in their first new job (29% increase), equivalent to a \$6,000 annualized earnings increase

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"Training Futures helped me become a better person all around, not just a better employee. By following the mantra of "getting paid to learn" instead of "just working", the mindset completely changes and it sets your attitude in a positive direction. By following this, I have been promoted multiple times."

College Advancement Special Project

In 2010, with generous support from The Aspen Institute, NOVA delivered ongoing, individualized college and career counseling help to help advance the college aspirations of 47 members of the February 2010 Training Futures graduating cohort. Compared to four previous cohorts that did not have access to these services, this cohort demonstrated remarkable progress in advancing their college aspirations. During a 10-month timeframe after completing Training Futures, participants continued their post-Training Futures college coursework at a rate that was 155% higher than previous cohorts, and increased the successful course completion rate by 31% to achieve a 94% overall college course success rate. By December 2010, a total of 10 participants from this cohort had earned a new college credential from NOVA.

Career success for participants has improved their families' lives in many other ways as well:

- Access to employer-sponsored health insurance increased by 51%
- 42% more trainees receive paid vacation days from their employers
- Home ownership increased by 80%
- Average savings increased by 84%
- Long term wage gain of 44% after initial post training job

The Ripple Effect of Trainees' Success

"Training Futures helped me to find new job where I am able to show that I can learn and move ahead and be able to spend more time with my children."

When those who live at the margins of America's economic spectrum succeed, we all benefit. Consider the 200 newly-employed program graduates in the three years documented by The Aspen Institute. The combined annual earnings increase for these graduates from their first new jobs totaled \$1.2 million. Training Futures graduates reported life changes that benefit employers, taxpayers, and merchants.

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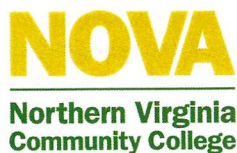
- **Employers:** Northern Virginia employers have free access to nearly 100 motivated and trained new general office and medical office workers at Training Futures each year. Not only do Training Futures participants earn promotions and above-average performance reviews, but they are loyal – one-third have been with their current employer for over four years.
- **Taxpayers:** Compared to living on the edge of poverty before the program, Training Futures graduates report a 67% lower rate of receiving public assistance. Their career success transitions most of them to community contributors through increased tax payments on increased earnings, home ownership, and sales taxes on major purchases.
- **Merchants:** Area merchants benefit when successful trainees spend their increased earnings. For example, since completing Training Futures, 38% of graduates bought home computers and 18% purchased cars.

Participants at Training Futures have rediscovered America's promise of learning and career opportunities to transform their families' lives for the better, and have contributed to creating an invigorated community of opportunity throughout Northern Virginia. Perhaps their success and their stories, echoing across the Potomac River to America's Capital City, offer a hopeful lesson for American renewal.

"Now I have a vision and a dream that I am moving towards and preparing for. I did not have this vision or the belief in myself to seek my calling or purpose in life. I believe and I will rise above soon."

For More Information

For more information about NVFS Training Futures, visit the website at <http://www.nvfs.org/trainingfutures> or call them at (703) 448-1630. For more information about Northern Virginia Community College, visit their website at www.nvcc.edu. For a detailed report on the Aspen Institute's *Courses to Employment* data study of the Training Futures – Northern Virginia Community College partnership, visit their website at <http://aspenwsi.org/NOVAOct2010.pdf>.



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