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DEVELOPING A PRACTITIONER-LED RESEARCH AGENDA FOR SECTOR PROGRAMS

By Alexandra Ubalijoro and Kelsey Schaberg

The current American job market is characterized by an abundance of workers and job seekers who do not have the networks, access to resources, and training that they need to secure gainful employment. This opportunity gap—which is driven in part by historic, systemic inequalities—greatly constrains the opportunities, experiences, and outcomes available to the labor force.[1] Many workers find that despite their best efforts, they simply do not have the chance to compete for good jobs.[2]

In recent years, workforce development organizations across the country have increasingly implemented sector programs—which prepare job seekers for high-quality employment in specific industries and occupations—to try to close the opportunity gap. There is substantial and growing evidence that sector programs can work to increase individuals' earnings. However, the effectiveness of individual programs varies and even the strongest programs have room to improve.[3] Many policymakers and researchers have concluded that they need to understand what drives sector programs' effectiveness and how the programs can be strengthened and expanded so that more individuals can benefit from them and obtain the necessary skills to access good jobs with room for advancement.[4]

To get a better sense of the challenges and questions faced by staff members at sector programs, in February 2024, MDRC—as part of the Economic Mobility Lab—organized a full-day meeting with leaders from nonprofit organizations across the country that operate sector programs. (See Box 1 for more information about the Economic Mobility Lab.) The goal of the meeting was to build upon the existing research on the effectiveness of sector programs. It provided space for leaders in the workforce development field to talk about their current challenges and priorities, discuss the future of the field, and develop a practitioner-led research agenda that could be adopted by researchers in partnership with practitioners.

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Box 1. The Economic Mobility Lab

The Economic Mobility Lab—established in 2023 and supported by Ascendium Education Group, The JPB Foundation, and The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation—provides workforce development organizations with a collaborative and supportive environment to examine the current state of their training services, make program improvements, test new approaches, and expand operations to increase their programmatic capacity. The Economic Mobility Lab employs an evidence-based technical assistance approach that is grounded in human-centered design (a process for addressing problems and designing solutions that incorporates input from the intended user) to promote equitable outcomes and improve the quality of services in all organizations involved. The Economic Mobility Lab, with the support of its funders, enabled the organization of the meeting and the publication of this brief.

This brief highlights the main areas in which attendees said more evidence is needed to improve their day-to-day operations. (See Box 2 for a summary.) For each area, the brief describes the key research questions and underlying themes that emerged from discussions at the meeting. Researchers and other actors in the field should make these topics a priority when developing future studies, partnerships, and funding opportunities. Doing so will prioritize the needs of organizations that run sector programs, improve service delivery, and ensure future evidence-building efforts are relevant to the work that is currently being done.

The Meeting

Staff members from nine nonprofit organizations—A. Philip Randolph Institute, Jewish Vocational Services–Bay Area, Madison Strategies Group, Per Scholas, Project QUEST, St. Nicks Alliance, STRIVE, Towards Employment, and Year Up—came from across the country to attend the meeting. These nonprofit organizations have diverse program foci, durations, and target populations and sectors. The gathering presented an opportunity for the attendees to connect with other leaders from organizations with a similar focus, hear about their practices, and brainstorm potential partnerships or projects.

Before the meeting, attendees were sent a survey that asked about their interests and priorities. Based on their responses, researchers from MDRC chose five priority topics for the meeting and used them to craft a full day's agenda: economic mobility, scaling sector programs, using generative artificial intelligence in service delivery, employer engagement, and online and hybrid training. For each of these topics, attendees were asked to think about the challenges they encounter operating their programs; the research questions that, if answered, could inform the work being done at their organizations; and the ways they have seen each topic be operationalized and evolve in the workforce development field more broadly. In the final session of the day, attendees were asked to think about the top three areas where their organization would benefit from having more evidence to inform their operations.

Box 2. Focal Areas for Future Research and Ways to Better Support That Research

Attendees identified a range of areas where their organizations could benefit from having more evidence, as well as challenges they face making operational improvements in those areas. Both topics are discussed throughout this brief.

- **Economic mobility and services after training:** How best and when to help participants advance into higher-paying jobs over time
- **Scaling sector programs:** When and how different models can be used to serve more job seekers
- **Effects of artificial intelligence on program needs and services:** How sector programs can plan for and adapt to changes in the labor market and service delivery that are brought on by advancements in artificial intelligence
- **Employer engagement:** How best to develop and invest in effective employer relationships
- **Training and service delivery methods:** What the benefits and drawbacks of different service delivery models are (particularly for the cohort-based model)

Attendees suggested ways to improve the ability to build more evidence:

- Have a shared understanding of commonly used terms—for example, "scaling" and "economic mobility"—with any partners, to both inform sector program goals and metrics and improve service delivery.
- Gather input and perspectives from participants and front-line staff members on service delivery and participant needs and experiences.

Focal Areas for Future Research

This section summarizes the main areas that attendees said should be a focus of future research, which could improve their day-to-day operations. Some of these areas overlap with the meetings' priority topics, while others are broader, as the discussions throughout the day went in different directions and were not constrained to the originally identified topics. Each focal area is summarized and its importance to building the evidence base on sector programs is described, as are the related themes and questions that emerged.

Economic Mobility and Services After Training

The existing evidence shows that sector programs can promote economic mobility—that is, they can lead to earnings gains over time.[5] Yet sector programs do not always work—or do not work for all participants.[6] And even the most successful programs have areas where services could be strengthened. During conversations between attendees, several themes emerged that pointed to areas where the services that were offered after participants completed training were lacking and could be better informed by more evidence.

- **Participants' interest in services after training varies widely. So do their views on what it would take to achieve economic mobility. Qualitative data are needed to understand both issues better.**

There are multiple pathways that participants in sector programs can follow to achieve economic mobility. Sector programs that successfully help participants achieve economic mobility must understand their experiences, needs, and expectations, which are difficult to fully capture quantitatively. Attendees felt that economic mobility also looks different today than in the past and can vary by sector and location.

Attendees discussed the importance of collecting qualitative data on participants' goals and experiences in sector programs. They mentioned needing to determine what success means to participants. While some participants may want to get a job quickly and stay at that job, others may be interested in getting additional training so they can obtain a higher-level job. Attendees also noted that soft-skills development, such as confidence-building, is a crucial component of their programs' success and can be difficult to measure quantitatively. Program staff members and researchers can collect and use qualitative data to better track both the goals of participants and their progress toward achieving their goals.

- **Sector program staff members know how to get participants into first jobs after training completion, but they know less about how to help people advance to higher-paying jobs later.**

Attendees said that their programs were successful at helping place participants in initial jobs that increased their earnings. One main area of uncertainty was what to do after that. Attendees raised questions about how to measure longer-term success (and over what period), what role sector programs should play beyond initial job placement (and when), what constituted a "good-enough" measures of success, and what participants want and feel they need.

Attendees said that funders play an important role in the work sector programs can do after training completion, as many funders invest in services that help people get initial jobs but less funding is available to help individuals continue to advance. Attendees said that employers play a large role in what happens to participants once they are hired, and many employers (particularly managers) could benefit from learning more about how to work with people who come from unconventional backgrounds. Without funding and knowledge of how sector programs could work to better understand employer practices after participants are initially hired, it is difficult for programs to help participants retain their first job and grow beyond it.

- **Sector program staff member voices are sometime excluded from high-level conversations about operational effectiveness.**

Staff members and caseworkers who have the most direct access to participants also have the most insight into participants' needs, challenges, and expectations of programs. They are best positioned to provide insight into comprehensive questions about participants: What does economic mobility mean to them? What matters to participants beyond obtaining a first job? How do participants define success and what do they need to achieve it? Attendees said that the workforce development field needs to hear from the individuals who interact most closely with clients in order to deliver services that are devoid of assumptions and instead respond to the actual needs of participants. Sector program leaders should bring all relevant staff members to high-level meetings, empower them to say what is on their minds without fear of retaliation, and encourage an environment of open discussion.

Research Questions About Economic Mobility and Services After Training. The following questions were identified by one or more attendees as a priority for their organizations:

- What services are effective in supporting people once they have obtained a job? What services are effective in helping people take the next step in their careers?

- What role do employers play in determining the economic mobility of workers? How can employers contribute to the development of research questions and agendas more?

- How should programs define advancement, economic mobility, and success for participants beyond their initial job placement? How do program participants define economic mobility?

- At what point should providers offer advancement coaching? How can programs identify when participants are ready to think about advancing their careers?

- What are the best and earliest predictors of economic mobility?

Additional questions were raised during the meeting, including the following:

- What are the different pathways participants can take to achieve economic mobility? How can sector programs best help people advance over time?

- Should sector programs customize their services to meet the needs of each participant? Does customizing services allow programs to serve different types of people or people who would typically be screened out?

- What is a "good-enough" return after training? How should sector programs and funders set the threshold for success?

- How can sector programs work with employers to overcome racial bias in job hiring, retention, and advancement?

- How do the definitions of advancement, economic mobility, and success differ by sector, region, or participant?

Scaling Sector Programs

Given the promising evidence on sector programs, there has been a recent push by some policymakers, researchers, and funders for programs to expand to serve more job seekers—often referred to as "scaling" sector programs. Attendees discussed how little is known about how to scale sector programs, what it means for them to scale, and what barriers programs may face when trying to scale.

- **There is no single, agreed-upon definition of what it means for a sector program to scale.**

Attendees noted that productive conversations can only happen if buzzwords like "scaling"—which can mean different things to different people in the workforce development field—are not used or are clearly defined. For some people, scaling can mean that the programs serve more participants. For others, it can mean serving more participants but doing so at a lower cost or more equitably. Scaling can also mean a program offers higher-quality or longer-lasting service, works with more employers, expands into new sectors or geographic locations, or works with different types of job seekers. Without better communication about what scaling means to the various individuals in the field, it is hard for organizations that run sector programs to set and know they have reached scaling goals. Taking a more descriptive approach, rather than just using "scaling," would improve communications and help sector programs more clearly focus their efforts.

- **Funding opportunities often drive program scaling efforts.**

Attendees noted that funders often express interest in scaling, which may pressure a nonprofit organization's leaders to scale their program, even when they are not sure it is in their best interest or they do not yet know the best approach to take. Complicating this work even more, the program and funder may define scaling differently. And when a program does scale, it often means the organization needs more material and financial resources than expected and described by funding contracts. If funders set well-defined expectations for what is meant by "scaling" (including the desired time period and cost), along with ideas about how to cover additional resources, it would better set up organizations to respond to their calls to scale.

- **Scaling sector programs often comes with unintended consequences for organizations.**

When a sector program scales to serve more job seekers, the organization itself must typically expand too. Organizations may need to hire new employees (which could have implications for benefits policies), obtain more office space, and buy additional equipment and supplies (like computers). These actions come with their own set of costs that are not always covered by funding streams. Attendees also explained that scaling can lead to staff turnover or burnout: Staff members may be asked to work with more participants or take on new roles, and program leaders may need to develop new administrative policies to account for legal and resource-related changes.

Research Questions About Scaling Sector Programs. The following question was identified by one or more attendees as a priority for their organizations:

- When does it make sense for a sector program to scale? When does it not make sense?

Additional questions were raised during the meeting, including the following:

- What does it mean to scale? How do programs and funders define scaling?

- What is the right measure of success? How does one know when a program has scaled?
- How can programs ensure quality is maintained when scaling?
- Should sector programs target and provide training in more than one sector? Can programs be as effective if they target more than one sector?
- What infrastructure and abilities are needed to scale?
- Does it make sense for the organization operating the sector program to offer all program services? Can sector programs partner with other organizations to offer some services?

Effects of Artificial Intelligence on Program Needs and Services

With advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) in recent years, there have been shifts in both the job and labor markets. Additionally, generative AI—a type of AI that uses existing data to produce new content—has the potential to significantly improve program service delivery, reduce the administrative burden on staff members, and even reduce equity gaps in the distribution of services. However, it is not easy to adapt to a new job market and apply new technologies to service delivery. During the meeting, attendees discussed how AI has started influencing both their program needs and services. There are potential challenges associated with AI, and they need to train participants and staff members to adapt to jobs affected by AI and address safety and privacy concerns.

- **People in the workforce development field are uncertain about the best ways to use AI, and AI is not accessible to all populations equally.**

Attendees said it was difficult to incorporate AI into their services because of the technology's rapid growth and uncertain future. Attendees also mentioned having to consider participants' needs and ability to use AI. Participants have different levels of access to and comfort with the tool, with younger generations finding it easier to use. Program staff members also found that some participants use AI in a clumsy manner (for example, they submit AI-generated resumes to employers without knowing what is in them). It is necessary to speak with staff members (and participants, when relevant) to determine how well they understand AI, how they anticipate using it through every step of service delivery, and whether they think it will be useful.

- **AI is creating a rapidly shifting job market.**

AI is affecting the way employers hire people and the way sector programs need to train participants. Because AI is dynamic and is being implemented rapidly, the latest labor market data often do not reflect the current state of employer demand. Due to the lack of up-to-date information, sector programs are left to make changes reactively rather than proactively. Some attendees mentioned that they now need to provide additional training that is related to developments in AI because some entry-level jobs require the use of AI-based skills. Others noted that they need to adapt to the fact that employers are suddenly hiring fewer people for popular entry-level jobs that can be done with AI. Those changes have left attendees wondering, “What are we training for?” Programs may face increased operations costs. They may also need to provide social support for participants who no longer get placed in the expected positions, and they may require intermediate monetary support to sustain longer and more advanced periods of training.

Research Questions About How AI May Change Sector Program Needs and Services. The following question was identified by one or more attendees as a priority for their organizations:

- How are advancements in AI changing the broader labor market and systems in which sector programs operate? How can sector programs stay up-to-date and integrate those advancements into their operations?

Additional questions were raised during the meeting, including the following:

- How do program participants feel about the use of AI? How do sector programs overcome participants’ possible belief that AI could teach the content, skills, and tools that are taught by programs?

- How can sector programs keep up with the rapid change in jobs and work caused by AI? How can programs adapt the skills they teach participants?

- What is the cost implication for sector programs, since advances in AI may mean participants need to be trained for different jobs than before?

- What are the best practices for sector programs using AI? How can programs best use AI to help participants thrive?

- What should program staff members do with the time that is saved by using AI?

Employer Engagement

Sector programs use a “dual customer approach”—they seek to meet the needs of both job seekers and employers. One way that organizations can meet employers’ needs is by collecting their feedback on their hiring and skill needs throughout program development and implementation. However, there is limited research on the engagement approaches that are the most effective or the approaches providers use to build trusting and beneficial employer relationships. Attendees discussed how their organizations partner with employers, what they should be asking of employers, how engagement tactics differ by industry, and what evidence about employer engagement would be useful for their programs and the broader field.

- **Program staff members may want to focus on building deeper relationships with a smaller number of employers, rather than having superficial relationships with many employers.**

Attendees said they needed to invest in the quality of their relationships with employers to serve their participants better. Internal data from participating organizations show that individuals are dropping out of programs to find their own jobs and that some employer relationships do not lead to high job-placement numbers, which suggests the organizations need to improve employer relationships. Although several attendees said their organizations have many partnerships with employers, they also discussed needing to be more strategic and devoting more concentrated time to working with employers that have the potential to be true partners. In order to do so, they said they wanted to get better at identifying employer partners that will hire program participants, invest in relationships with their organizations, improve the training of their staff, and better inform the programs' technical and soft-skills training models. Additionally, attendees noted that they have seen programs successfully develop strong, deep relationships with individual employers and the impact those relationships can have on participants' outcomes. Those examples—from programs that tend to be longer in length—could serve as models for other programs.

- **It is important for programs to establish multiple pathways to employment for participants, which requires a better understanding of employer hiring practices.**

Attendees said that, depending on participants' needs and circumstances, each participant has a different path to employment. Sector programs must teach a range of skills so all participants are set up to succeed. They must also communicate with employers in different ways. For example, some programs partner directly with employers, while others partner with intermediaries or recruiters who engage with employers. Some programs teach participants job-search skills, so they are able to find jobs on their own.

Organizations also need to understand employer practices—specifically hiring practices—to match participants with the right opportunities. For example, justice-impacted participants may benefit from a "champion" who can connect them with specific employers. If sector programs had a better understanding of what types of candidates their employer partners were looking for and how they assess risk when hiring, the programs would be better equipped to provide services to participants that met the employers' needs and to create good matches between participants and employers. Additionally, some attendees said that if they had more insight into an employer's needs—and a strong relationship with that employer—they could recommend promising candidates that the employer might otherwise overlook. For example, program staff members could advise employers on skills-first hiring, an approach that prioritizes a candidate's skills over other factors, such as whether that candidate has a college degree.

Research Questions About Employer Engagement. The following question was identified by one or more attendees as a priority for their organizations:

- What are the best and most effective ways to collect feedback from employers? How do programs determine whether an approach is effective?

Additional questions were raised during the meeting, including the following:

- How do employers define a successful relationship with a sector program? How can programs measure whether their relationship is successful?

- How should sector programs position their work and the skills of their participants to employers? How can sectors programs make themselves more attractive to employers than staffing agencies?

- How can sector programs work with and understand the needs of employers?

- What are the best ways that employers can work with programs to share data, report feedback, and analyze the long-term career growth of individuals who were placed at their companies?

Training and Service Delivery Methods

Many sector programs offer career-readiness training, occupational-skills training, job-development services, and placement services. Yet there is wide variation in how organizations deliver those services. For example, some organizations provide direct, in-person training, while others offer training virtually. Each method of delivering training and other services has benefits and challenges, and there is not much evidence available on the best way to offer services. During the meeting, attendees discussed different service delivery models, their challenges, and areas where more evidence is needed to determine which models are the most beneficial.

- **Cohort-based training models can be effective, but they need to be adapted to the current needs of participants.**

Some organizations use a cohort-based model to provide services—that is, they deliver training to participants as part of a larger group (or cohort). Attendees recognized that this model could serve a large number of people but noted that it must be tailored to changing trends in the ways that participants attend training sessions and receive services. The COVID-19 pandemic required organizations to adapt to customer needs and increase remote-learning offerings. Participants no longer need to be trained at the same time or from the same location, and organizations will need to tailor their services accordingly.

- **Programs sometimes offer services online as a way to scale or to reduce costs.**

Attendees talked about how sometimes, based on input from funders, their organizations need to serve more people and reduce their costs. Some funders are heavily focused on increasing the number of participants who are served, and one way sector programs can scale is to offer their services, particularly skills training, virtually. Thus, some attendees had considered offering training and other services online. A shift to online services, however, would require programs to ensure that there are accessible job opportunities for participants who are trained virtually and might live in different locations. Attendees were also curious about offering services other than technical skills training—such as employment retention and advancement coaching or support services—virtually. But developing those services and figuring out how to offer them virtually takes time and resources that programs might not have.

Research Questions About Effective Service Delivery Methods. The following questions were identified by one or more attendees as a priority for their organizations:

- Is using a cohort-based model (where participants attend training sessions as a group) essential to increasing participants' earnings?
- Does a cohort-based model increase participants' social capital? Does it increase social capital in a way that helps participants obtain better employment opportunities?
- Who gets left behind when sector programs use a cohort-based model? How can programs support people who do not find success in the program or drop out of services?
- What are the effects of support services that are provided by sector programs? For example, what are the effects of helping expunge someone's record? Does this service matter more to a person's success in the labor market than attending training sessions?

Additional questions were raised during the meeting, including the following:

- Should sector programs customize the services they offer to meet the needs of each participant? Does customizing services allow programs to serve different types of people or people that would typically be screened out?
- What do programs lose by offering services—including skills training—virtually?
- Does online training or online service delivery work better for some people than others? Who can benefit from receiving training and services online?
- What does good-quality, posttraining coaching look like online? Are there other standardized services that could be offered virtually?

Conclusion and Next Steps

The meeting highlighted operationally focused questions and issues practitioners are confronting as they offer job seekers training and other services to improve their economic mobility. The questions they raised about their daily operations, if answered through evidence, would benefit their organizations and the field at large. This conclusion amplifies the importance of gaining evidence in the focal areas.

It is time for sector programs, researchers, and funders to come together to build new evidence pertaining to the research questions and tackle the challenges that attendees identified head-on. Program staff members and researchers who are currently engaged in studies should consider whether they can adapt their work (for example, by using data that are already being collected in a new way or to answer more questions) or build in new analyses or data collection to answer the priority research questions.

Individuals who will work on a research project should design their research questions, models or interventions, data collection plans, and analyses to align with the priorities identified here. Funders can also signal that they are making these research questions (and similar ones) a priority by providing related funding opportunities.

Many of the questions that were identified by attendees could be explored by doing randomized controlled trial designs. They could also be tackled with less expensive and short-term research methods. Questions about employer engagement strategies could be addressed with qualitative work, and questions about how to support participants beyond their initial jobs could be explored with human-centered design work and A/B tests.[7] There is also a growing role for operations-focused technical assistance in supporting sector programs, either before (or in place of) more rigorous evaluation. This technical assistance work could involve sector programs exploring, with an external partner, how to increase engagement in services or support the designing and testing of a service enhancement, among other topics.

By implementing these efforts, research organizations and funders will heed practitioner voices and implement research agendas that aim to solve sector programs' most pressing operational challenges and concerns.

Notes and References

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5 Fein and Dastrop (2022); Kanengiser and Schaberg (2022); and Roder and Elliot (2021).

6 Schaberg (2020).

7 A/B tests compare two versions of something to see which version leads to better results. People are assigned at random to receive either Version A or Version B of the thing being tested, and their outcomes are then compared. In the case of sector programs, A/B tests could focus on seeing whether, for example, offering post–job placement coaching in groups is more effective than one-on-one training.

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