

Long-term (nine year) earnings impacts in the Project QUEST randomized trial – a workforce development program for low-income individuals

Grantee: Economic Mobility Corporation (Mobility). Mobility’s full study report is [linked here](#).

Description of the Intervention: This is a randomized controlled trial (RCT) of Project QUEST in San Antonio, Texas. QUEST provides comprehensive support and resources to help low-income individuals enroll full-time in occupational training programs at local community colleges, complete the training, pass certification exams, and enter well-paying careers in high-growth sectors of the local economy (hence, the program is sometimes described as a “sectoral” training program). In this study, the program focused on jobs in the healthcare sector. Major components of the program are: required full-time enrollment in a college occupational training program that QUEST is partnered with, required weekly group or individual counseling sessions, financial assistance for tuition and other school-related expenses, and remedial instruction for those requiring it. The program costs approximately \$11,700 per participant. (All dollar amounts shown in this summary are constant 2017 dollars.)

Study Design: Between 2006 and 2008, the researchers randomly assigned 410 low-income individuals who were interested in nursing, medical records coding, or other health-related training to (i) a program group that received QUEST services focused on healthcare occupations, or (ii) a control group that did not receive these services. Sample members were largely female (88%), Latino (74%), and unmarried (72%), and most had only a high school diploma or GED (95%). They averaged 30 years of age, and earned an average of \$12,775 in the year prior to program entry. An earlier study follow-up, published in 2017, found that QUEST increased average annual earnings in the sixth year after random assignment by \$5,365, compared to the control group, based on sample members’ self-reports.¹

With Arnold Ventures funding, the researchers conducted a longer-term follow-up, measuring annual earnings in the ninth year after random assignment using Texas unemployment insurance records (earnings in year nine was the study’s primary [pre-specified](#) outcome for this follow-up). The purpose was to determine whether the program’s earning effects endure over time and constitute a sustained improvement in participants’ economic well-being.²

Impact on the Primary Outcome: The study found that QUEST’s earnings effects were sustained. Specifically, QUEST increased average annual earnings in the ninth year after random assignment by \$5,490 or 20% (the QUEST group’s earnings were \$33,496 compared to \$28,006 for the control group). This effect was statistically significant ($p=0.02$). In addition, the study corroborated the sizable effects on self-reported earnings in prior years using Texas unemployment insurance records.

Study Quality: Based on careful review, we believe this was a well-conducted RCT that produced valid findings.³

¹ Support for the initial six-year study came principally from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, with additional support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services through a contract with Abt Associates.

² As part of the project, the researchers will also measure exploratory long-term outcomes, including educational attainment and receipt of public assistance, and will conduct a cost-benefit analysis (these findings are expected in February 2020).

³ For example, the study had successful random assignment (as evidenced by highly similar treatment and control groups), no sample attrition, and valid analyses.