

TRANSFORMING U.S. WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY CONFERENCE

Panel Summary Report #6

Building a Foundation for Transformative Change through Data and Research

by Alex Ruder, Ph.D.

This session discussed the research, evaluation, and data landscape in the workforce development field and reviewed evidence about which programs and strategies do and do not work. The session was moderated by **Demetra Nightingale**, Chief Evaluation Officer of the U.S. Department of Labor. Nightingale was joined by **Randall Eberts** of the Upjohn Institute, **Richard Hendra** of MDRC, and **Neil Ridley** of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

Workforce practitioners and policymakers across the nation are increasingly focused on using data to improve the performance, and increase the accountability, of the entire workforce development system. This focus includes efforts to use administrative data to inform customer choice and improve operations and programmatic decisions, and efforts to apply lessons learned from experimental evaluations when developing and revising strategies. In her introductory remarks, Nightingale emphasized that the U.S. Department of Labor shares this focus on data, research, and evaluation, and is committed to improving information on what works and finding better ways to disseminate that information to the field. Moreover, the U.S. Department of Labor and the entire Obama administration are working to improve interagency collaboration toward the goal of improving access to data.

With this note, Nightingale suggested broad goals for the future of data in the workforce development system. She then paused to ask about some of the current data shortcomings in the workforce system that need to be improved. Ridley pointed to a lack of transparency in the system; researchers struggle to learn how well programs are working given the difficulty tracking individuals after they receive training. Eberts seconded this point. The current data system is designed for accountability and oversight to supervisory authorities, not for evaluation and research. Eberts stressed that data collected for oversight needs to be shared with local practitioners so that they can use it for program evaluation and improvement. Hendra agreed, adding that the current system greatly increases the costs of evaluation by forcing researchers to spend considerable time and effort collecting data and conducting their own randomized control trials.

After considering the shortcomings of the current system, Nightingale asked the panelists to define elements of a new, “intelligent” workforce development system. One of the key elements discussed was personalized information for customers. By personalized information, panelists meant data systems that can predict what types of education and training options are best for a customer with a given education and employment history.

While all agreed that personalized information is a powerful tool, Nightingale asked how we can develop a system that offers that information. Eberts cited the U.S. Department of Labor's Workforce Data Quality Initiative as an important step in terms of collecting and combining data and then providing it to local agencies and practitioners. The discussion then turned to data collected from experimental evaluations. Hendra discussed what we have learned over the past several decades from experimental evaluations. Many studies find that workforce programs have only short-term effects and do not replicate when applied to a new site. In addition, skills training alone is often not enough; research shows that alignment, incentives, and other intensive strategies are often necessary.

Nightingale then fielded questions from the audience. An individual from the National Science Foundation asked the panelists to identify strategies to connect our collective knowledge gleaned from research and use that data in a collaborative effort with different workforce providers and systems (e.g., community colleges, employers, and K-12 education). The panelists suggested that university partnerships are one promising strategy to enable collaboration between research and the policy community, and that national efforts are under way to enhance collaboration across federal agencies. One panelist suggested there is a need to develop a systematic rather than piecemeal perspective; all agencies and practitioners are part of one workforce system.

Another audience member expressed tempered enthusiasm for more data collection by stating that we already know a lot but rarely apply it in practice. The comment was then posed as a question: *How do we change the system so that we are more willing to apply the lessons we have already learned?* The panelists continued to focus on data sharing and access. While discussing ways to increase access to data, the panelists discussed the importance of developing easy-to-use visual scorecards.

Another audience member suggested that the federal government needs to provide a more efficient system for collecting data from the local level; the current system involves duplicative reporting requirements spread across different agencies.

Nightingale agreed and recommended that the audience member forward the suggestion to the U.S. Department of Labor.

Nightingale then asked the panelists to discuss evidence surrounding career ladders or pathways. Some evidence suggests that success coaches are effective strategies. Hendra noted the challenges of evaluating these and other employer-based programs. Often the best mode of advancement is leaving the organization, which makes employers less likely to cooperate and employees harder to track.

The panel closed with recommendations on which efforts should be taken to incorporate data and research into workforce policy. Hendra focused on the need to incorporate what we've learned already from evaluations and to better understand why previously successful programs have often not been successful when applied in new contexts. Ridley focused on the broader theme of the panel: improved data integration across all the major workforce providers. Eberts suggested that the Workforce Data Quality Initiative is only a first step, and that the workforce system needs an initiative similar in aims to the federal government's efforts to integrate health care records systems.

About the Author

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About this Series

In October 2014, the Federal Reserve Banks of Atlanta and Kansas City and the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University hosted a national conference titled, *Transforming U.S. Workforce Development Policies for the 21st Century*. The goal of the conference was to provide a forum for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to share perspectives on transformative education and workforce development policies.

Over 250 people, including business and labor leaders, scholars, educators, policy advocates, researchers, and workforce development professionals, attended the conference. More than 60 national and international experts shared recommendations for developing policies and programs that will meet the nation's needs for talented workers.

This publication, the sixth in a series of nine reports, highlights the discussions and recommendations that were offered during the panel, "Building a Foundation for Transformative Change through Data and Research."

Previous reports in the series can be downloaded at the links below:

Reforming Workforce Development Policies for American Workers

Strategies for Helping Long-term Unemployed Job Seekers Return to Work

Aligning Employers and Workforce Development Strategies

Emerging Trends in Education and Training Programs: Credentials, Competencies, and Curriculum

Workforce Policies for Disadvantaged Populations

Conference Video

View an interview with panelist Randall Eberts

Photo Gallery



Demetra Nightingale



Randall Eberts



Neil Ridley



Richard Hendra

Building a Foundation for Transformative Change through Data and Research



Cynthia Forland of the Washington State Employment Security Department poses a question to the panel



Audience members listen to the panelists