UNLOCKING ECONOMIC PROSPERITY: CAREER NAVIGATION IN A TIME OF RAPID CHANGE

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Adult education in the United States differs in each state, region, and local area. How we define our services, the funds received, and the demographics of our participants vary. Our commonality lies in our mission and belief in helping individuals who are under-represented, disengaged in the workforce, or trying to reengage. With the COVID pandemic, we have seen a shift in needs of our participants as well as employers. How can we help our participants become successful? The article, *Unlocking Economic Prosperity: Career Navigation in a Time of Rapid Change,* defines the need for implementation for career navigation with the integration into programs. In addition, practitioners need to advocate for systems and policies to help drive success for effective and equitable career opportunities for participants.

The Need
Over the past decade, 53 million individuals in the United States were employed in low-wage jobs, with median annual earnings of $24,000. While wages have increased with the need of a skilled workforce, there remains a threshold of a gap in pay that has not changed. Women are overrepresented in this category as well as 32% Black workers and 41% Latinx workers. Those that fall into that category have less than a college degree (Martha Ross and Nicole Bateman, Meet the Low-Wage Workforce).

In addition, the trend of automation is creating a chasm that continues to grow. This automation has removed entry-level positions and the technology displaces many employees who are not digitally literate or who do not have the proper training to shift into a new role.

Hence with the data and support for pathways to high-paying jobs for our participants, it is imperative that we understand business needs and opportunities for career exploration, information, and education. This can be accomplished through career navigation.

The Career Navigation Components
Career navigation is not necessarily new to the field of adult education, however, how we define it and utilize staff varies. We use terms such as *Career Path Navigators, Career Counselors,* and *Career Coaches* and we rely on our instructors to integrate components into

their curriculum. Training for our staff is limited and defined by the programs, funding, and partnerships. Career navigation is personal and is different for each individual who enters our program. It is a continuous process from career exploration, self-assessments, education, and training to job placement.

According to the article, the basic components of career navigation falls into the following categories:

1. *Acquiring knowledge* This includes self-assessments, career exploration, and understanding how to gather and use information for an informed decision based on their goals, skills, interests, and values.

2. *Making informed career plans* Pathway Mapping, SMART goals, Golden Circle, or Goal Pyramids are useful tools to help chart a course.

3. *Integrating and Negotiating education, training and work actions* How do we help our participants attain a credential and place them into a job that leads to career advancement?

While we acknowledge the components, having career navigation support defines success. This includes coaching, mentoring, networking, assessment tools, career exposure, and innovative programs that include targeted programs, job shadowing, pre-apprenticeship programs, and integrating wrap-around services to help participants succeed.

The Future of Adult Education

In reviewing the article, adult education programs must provide an effective and equitable career navigation system. We must be able to define career navigation and create national standards that are non-negotiable.

Aligning with the principles of effective and equitable career navigations we need to ensure that programs

1. Provide staff that are trained in trauma-informed care. Focus on empathy, designed to be culturally relevant and tailored to the needs of participants and meet them where they are.

2. Integrate career exploration and invest in this initiative and provide tools needed for staff.

3. Incorporate digital literacy and technology and provide access to resources in local, state, and federal programs.

4. Be savvy in understanding employers' needs and trends. Partner with the American Job Centers for data, training, and employment opportunities and other community partnerships.

5. Provide wrap-around services that incorporate case management, referral to partners for additional support, financial literacy and work-readiness skills.

6. Collect data, and continuously evaluate programs to ensure effectiveness.

This paper helps to define the barriers and emphasizes the need and tools of career navigation as a necessary platform within adult education. Adult education participants who enter programs every day request assistance in employment and arrive with the lack of skills that make it difficult to enter or move in the workforce system. ⌘