

Job Corps: A Successful Workforce Program for International Consideration

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Abstract

This article provides information about the United States Department of Labor's Job Corps program and the success it is having with at-risk youth. Information gathered so far demonstrates the positive economic impact this education and training program is having in the US. In addition, this article describes the operation of the Job Corps program and suggests ways in which the program can be adapted to specific workforce needs of a donor agency or international partner, striving to address a countries undereducated and unskilled "youth bulge" that is, a large cohort of young people reaching a working age in their country.

Keywords: Job Corps, workforce program, economy, at-risk youth

Introduction

Over the past few years, many Americans began to realize the nation's economy crisis. This predicament has been driven in part by an education system that has not kept pace with the increased demands of tomorrow's jobs. This dilemma is also troubling developing countries, which are experiencing a youth bulge and other economic issues (Ghose, Majid, & Ernst, 2008). Many economists and labor market experts believe that job growth would be much stronger if employers were able to find the skilled labor they so desperately need. This lack of skilled workers hampers the ability of businesses to take advantage of market conditions that would otherwise lend themselves to expansion. In the end, the shortage of skilled laborers has a negative impact on economic growth (Isidore, 2007). The students, who are typically left behind, lost, or on the verge of involvement in illegal activities, however, can play a key role in addressing a nation's economic needs.

Facing this crisis, America and other countries around the world need to continue to strengthen not only the education system, but invest in and ex-

pand on proven programs, such as Job Corps (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2009). This program is America's premier workforce training and dropout recovery program, working with over 60,000 at-risk students each year. Job Corps is not only the most successful program with the at-risk student population, but it also is very cost effective; studies have proven it has had a minimum positive \$2 return for every \$1 spent (McConnell & Glazeman, 2001).

Now, more than ever, Job Corps is playing a key role in delivering educated and skilled workers to meet the needs of high demand occupations. Due to multiple factors, America is facing a crisis-level deficiency in skilled workers. As the population in the rest of the world grows larger, younger, and more educated, technological change and global competition are demanding more of America's workers; and high school dropout rates are alarmingly high that is, 50 percent in some major cities (Balfanz, 2007). Further, America's population growth has slowed; the population and workforce are aging; and the education system has not kept pace with the increased demands of tomorrow's jobs. The US economy is growing increasingly dependent on the dropouts, minorities, and disadvantaged students as well as traditional education and social systems.

The economic success of the US, its companies, and workforce is extremely dependent, at this time, on the ability to significantly increase the education and training levels of every student in the school systems. The Job Corps program model, as described in this report, can and should be adapted to help meet the needs of developing countries that are experiencing economic development issues as well as problems with youth who are under-educated, under-trained, and under-utilized.

Future Demand for Workers

Today's US economy – driven by the pace of technological change, the expansion of international trade and the globalization of capital markets – requires a more highly skilled workforce (Aspen Institute Domestic Strategy Group, 2010). Those entering the workforce for the next four plus decades are not necessarily going to be as educated as those they replace. To a great degree, those in the pipeline to take the place of aging “baby boomers” (Baby Boomer Headquarters, 2010) are minority populations that for a number of reasons have had a lower level of academic success than the national average (Baby Boomer Headquarters, 2010). These demographic trends are putting the nation at an academic crossroads. Incoming minorities have large hurdles to overcome in achieving the skill level obtained by exiting baby boomers.

African Americans and Hispanics comprise the largest portion of the at-risk student population (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). For the 2005-2006

school year, it was reported that 24% of white students failed to graduate from high school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). While this number is high, 45% and 49% of Black and Hispanic students respectively failed to graduate (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Against this backdrop, the labor market is demanding more highly-skilled workers than ever before – people who can analyze computer networks, provide financial expertise and give medical care to such groups as the growing population of senior citizens. Job Corps, which provides training in industry-recognized certificated programs, is playing a key role in delivering educated and skilled workers to meet the needs of high demand occupations.

Increased Premium on Education and Training

There are over 3.1 billion individuals working across the globe and 73 % of those are in developing countries (Ghose, Majid, & Ernst, 2008). There is also a growing youth bulge as teenagers unsuccessfully seek entry to formal employment. An ever-increasing expansion of the 15-24 year old group in terms of the total workforce population has not provided the fuel for reducing a global skills shortage. As the global demand for skilled workers has strengthened, the capacity of national economies to meet that demand has declined. This is particularly true given these important facts (Moses, 2009):

- An extra *one billion* people will become of working age within the next decade,
- The 15 to 25 year age group in developing countries represents 85% of the world's population, and
- Conservatively, 89 million more secondary training places are needed by 2015.

With most jobs requiring education beyond secondary education, dropouts face a life of challenges and economic disadvantage. Without education and training, dropouts have the potential to become a huge burden on economies.

While overall educational attainment went up in the US for all ethnic and racial groups, the educational gap between whites and most minority groups also went up. In 1980, the disparity between whites and African Americans was 11 % (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2005). Two decades later, it was 15 %. In 1980, the disparity between whites and Hispanics was 12 % (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2005). Two decades later, it was 19 % (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2005). If these kinds of gaps stay in place, the increase in the number of workers with a post-secondary education will no longer remain the same. Instead, between 2000 and 2020 it is expected to be 4 percent (Aspen Institute Domestic Strategy Group, 2010). In short, the least educated

segment of the population is growing the fastest. And if current trends continue, those coming into the labor market will lower the education level of the American workforce.

Job Corps is one major US program addressing this foreseeable problem. This undereducated, fast-growing and diverse group of young people so desperately needed by our economy is exactly the group that Job Corps is training. A redesigned Job Corps type program could play a crucial role in helping countries experiencing a youth bulge where at-risk, lost or orphaned youth are predominantly undereducated with little or no work skills.

US Workforce Dynamics

The myriad numbers pertaining to age, race, ethnicity, and educational attainment do not bode well for meeting the needs of a 21st century workforce. Nor do they bode well for maintaining the nation's economic edge in an increasingly global marketplace. Instead they point to three troublesome trends:

1. Job growth is outpacing population growth;
2. The jobs themselves will require increasingly complex tasks; and
3. Gains in educational attainment are on the wane.

Gone are the days when manufacturing jobs allowed people without a high school diploma to excel in the workforce and provide a comfortable living for their families. As the number of those jobs has dwindled, they have been eclipsed by jobs that require, at the very least, a high school diploma. More than likely, however, they require some postsecondary education.

The value of education is an important message imparted to Job Corps students by a dedicated staff that tutors, teaches, coaches, and encourages students to excel. The message is very similar to one published in a Department of Labor (2007) report entitled, *America's Dynamic Workforce*. "Today, and increasingly in the future, a solid education foundation, including completion of post-secondary courses or degrees is needed to compete successfully in the job market," the report said (US Department of Labor, 2007, p. 41). A solid educational foundation is also needed if the United States wants to remain competitive in a global marketplace where technology and outsourcing allow the educated populations of India, Mexico, Brazil, and a number of other countries to compete – in essence – for American jobs.

If educational disparities stay in place, experts predict there will be a damaging ripple effect in the U.S. economy. They will "depress personal income levels for Americans, in turn create a corresponding decrease in the nation's tax base," said the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (US Department of Labor, 2005, p. 1). Such disparities will also lead to more outsourcing, according to the US Department of Labor (2005).

The group's report predicted that between 2000 and 2020, there will be a loss of personal income totaling \$395 billion. If the gap is closed, future gains should be over \$421 billion and may be as high as \$805 billion, depending on a variety of factors (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2005). Closing that gap requires educating those youth who have traditionally been left behind. Dealing with those left behind is a Job Corps program focus. With the help of the Job Corps education, training, and transitional programs in 2009 nearly 21,751 students obtained employment (Job Corps Data Center, 2010).

How the Job Corps Program Operates in the US

Job Corps is a concentrated, comprehensive program whose goal is to help disadvantaged youth between the ages of 16 and 24 become more responsible, employable, and productive citizens. Most of the 123 Job Corps Centers across America provide residential services; only about 12% are nonresidential with students living at home (Management and Training Corporation (MTC) Institute, 2009). The Federal Job Corps National Office provides all funding, programmatic, and policy guidance; regional offices directly oversee the provision of contract services. The program encompasses a demand driven approach utilizing both an Industry Advisory Council and Community Relations Council to improve the ability of centers to meet the needs of business and the community.

Job Corps serves these fast-growing segments of the population. It has over four decades of experience working with minority students, as well as dropouts of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Of those who enter Job Corps, 76.5 % are high school dropouts; without Job Corps, they would be much more likely to depend on taxpayer dollars via the welfare system, the criminal justice system and other government-run programs (US Department of Labor, 2009).

The average length of stay for student graduates is almost a year. However, students can stay in the program for up to two or three years, if they choose to go to college. Most Job Corps participants enter the program with many needs. By the time they leave the program, most have obtained a high school diploma or a GED and an industry-recognized certificate in one of nearly 100 career technical training programs. Of the 59,353 youth who separated from the Job Corps programs in 2009, nearly half, or 29,415, earned a vocational certificate; 10,711, earned a GED; and 8,855, earned a high school diploma (Note: 16,934 entered the program with a GED or High School Diploma) (Job Corps Resource Library, 2009). Most (78 %) of the graduates complete their high school diploma or GED and/or an industry-recognized certificate leading to careers in skilled trades, the military or entered college (Job Corps Resource Library, 2009).

Outreach and Admissions

A variety of public and private entities under contract with the Federal National Office of Job Corps, conducts outreach, admissions, and screening of new students as well as help graduating students find jobs or further education.

Career Preparation Development

Job Corps students enter with varying levels of academic abilities and progress at their own pace. Many centers offer English Language Learner (ELL) classes. In addition to providing participants with basic courses in literacy and numeracy, workforce skills, life skills (including conflict resolution), and tools for civic engagement, the Job Corps program helps build the skills and attitudes that promote personal and career growth, offering opportunities to learn the value of community service through civic engagement with a variety of charities and other social functions. Job Corps encourages a team-building approach to assist in establishing alternative group affiliations for participants, which helps with retention.

Trainees, in collaboration with program staff, develop group process rules and procedures to maintain discipline. Self-regulation and democratic processes are critical factors in the success of Jobs Corps and help participants become engaged in the center culture, leadership and gain a better understanding of themselves and how they can make a positive contribution to society.

Career Transition

Job Corps centers help in many ways to prepare the student who is near completion of a program to be ready for the transition to a new place to live, finding a job or entering the military. In addition, working closely with the center are public and private entities, under contract to the Federal Job Corps National Office, who are focused on helping graduating students find jobs or go on to college.

Considering the Job Corps Model for International Adaption

The Job Corps program is very beneficial for the US, recovering a number of students who would otherwise continue through life as undereducated and lacking skills that would help them become self-sustaining. The US Job Corps program is expansive, thus the cost of replicating such a program would most likely be prohibitive. The programming elements however, could readily be modified and adapted to fit the needs of youth for training in support of workforce demands in emerging countries. Much of the structure in the existing program supports an accountability framework of a very competitive

program, which has a number of contractors. This structure would also not be something that would need to be transferred to another country.

Management and Training Corporation (MTC) has over 30 years of experience providing education and training of young adults under the Job Corps model and over 20 years of experience teaching academics, developing personal and workforce skills with offenders in correctional facilities. It is this experience that provided a foundation for successfully adapting the model for use in other countries over the last six years, piloting initiatives designed to test processes and explore what works in relation to Job Corps type program elements. In most of the initiatives, MTC has brought in outside expertise to partner with local business leaders and training experts.

The MTC protocol typically includes a gap analysis to determine the potential for growth in specific occupational areas, integrating the available training providers (e.g., employers, TVET schools, person to person) so as to be able to meet a training need. Any analysis would also take into account gender, cultural, and religious considerations in the development of the pilot program.

A pilot program, which has some of the aspects of the US Job Corps program, will need to limit the costs by starting with a small initiative, focusing on entry level training with possibly only one or two trades. It may be possible, depending on the structures that are available, to have a residential training facility. While it would be less expensive in an emerging country to renovate, staff, and operate a residential facility, it may be necessary to operate the pilot program as a non-residential program. One of the barriers with a non-residential program is transportation, which will need to be taken into account during any feasibility study. Preferably, the location of training facilities would be near the location of various business partners who would not only participate in helping guide the center's training, but hire graduates. The pilot initiative would necessarily need strong partnerships with local experts and businesses/industries to create a sustainable TVET program.

Many countries, especially developing countries, do not have the dedicated funding streams to meet the needs of an ever-expanding group of under-educated, under-trained and under-utilized youth. One of the key elements to a good workforce training program is ensuring that training will be delivered to take into account the employers' skill demands and makes sense for the country (Berryman, Natsios, Elkins, & Marquardt, 2008). Any interest in adapting the Job Corps model to another country should start by talking with various donor agencies to determine more specifically what they want to do in various countries and if possible, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) experts knowledgeable of the countries that have a need and interest.

Following the discussion with the stakeholders and donor agencies, one should conduct an analysis, utilizing experts in TVET, with a focus on creating a demand driven program with extensive business and industry partnerships.

The Job Corps TVET model can be segmented and overlaid with the wants and needs of an identified country. These may include:

- Residential and non-residential,
- Academics and technical vocational education,
- Life skills and other soft skills training,
- Tracking the performance after setting clear outcomes,
- Partnerships with business leaders and industry, colleges, universities, and
- Entrepreneurial training for students who would return home to open a small business.

Another advancement, which could be included in the design of a program, is the use of information and communications technology (ICT). ICT is a growing practice in a number of countries, recognizing the adaptability and access granted through the variety of mediums available, including social networking forums. Using E-Learning can greatly increase participation, reduce space needs and allow large numbers to access education, as well as address the limited academic resources in many developing countries (Moseki & Pence, 2009).

Conclusion

As noted earlier, the Job Corps program is a comprehensive program model that can be readily adapted or replicated to meet the demands of countries around the world. Research demonstrates that both skills training and comprehensive workforce development programs have improved labor market outcomes for youth in developing countries (Betcherman, Godfrey, Puerto, Rother, & Stavreska, 2007).

Opportunities exist for foreign countries to identify experts who operate Job Corps centers in the US who will consult or help with implementing and building a program or providing knowledge transfer. Finding an organization that has experience with demand driven workforce programs can assist government in exploring the development of conceptually similar programs. A partnership of this nature could assist countries in their efforts to address economic issues and the burdens of an undereducated, untrained youth bulge, either through their own resources or through the support of a donor agency. Many elements of the US Job Corps program can be implemented in other countries to assist with the problems associated with unskilled youth and businesses which are limited as a result of too few qualified employees.

The economy continues to struggle in the US and many other countries, which are facing the demand for skilled workers. Job Corps is a successful workforce program for at-risk youth and is one of the best examples of how the US Department of Labor is working to address the pressing issue of undereducated and unskilled youth.

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