

# Using “Measurable Skill Gains” to Best Serve Low-Income, Lower-Skilled Individuals

DECEMBER 2014 | ANNA CIELINSKI

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) is very pleased that Congress, in passing the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), included an interim measure of progress as one of the six “primary indicators of performance.” The legislative description of this indicator reads as follows:

*The percentage of program participants who, during a program year, are in an education or training program that leads to a recognized postsecondary credential or employment and who are achieving measureable skill gains toward such a credential or employment. (WIOA, Section 116(b)(2)(A)(V)).*

This common measure offers an opportunity to ensure WIOA funds are used to provide services for participants with initially low basic skills, including English language learners. Recognizing that these individuals will require additional services and a longer timeframe to succeed in postsecondary education and the labor market, this measure helps programs demonstrate success through interim outcomes achieved by this population.

The “skill gains” measure can also promote unified planning and shared accountability, as well as support longer-term and more integrated interventions, such as career pathway approaches, which are encouraged in WIOA. Career pathway approaches connect progressive levels of education, training, support services, and credentials for specific occupations in a way that optimizes the progress and success of individuals with varying levels of abilities and needs.<sup>i</sup>

In developing regulations and guidance for implementing the skill gains performance indicator, CLASP invites the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor to consider the recommendations below.

## One common menu of options for skill gains

CLASP recommends that the Departments of Labor and Education work together to create one common menu of options for determining how skill gains would be measured that is based on each individual participant’s starting point, not their funding source. Although creating separate “skill gains” definitions for each program may seem expedient and be supported among some stakeholders, we are concerned that it would discourage innovative and evidence-based co-enrollment and contextualized learning program designs, and it would inhibit a sense of shared accountability throughout the system. It will also move providers away from one of the law’s intent—to integrate and align service delivery— and reinforce siloed programming and accountability. This common measure would become common in name only.

Under our recommended approach, each option on the menu would correspond to individuals’ status (e.g., being basic skill deficient, lacking work experience, having a disability or other barrier to employment). Each of the options on the common menu could be used in any of the core WIOA programs. Each participant’s starting point would determine which option from the menu would represent skill gains for that individual.

The use of the interim measure of progress can best support services to low-skilled and English language learners if the common menu of options recognizes the diverse paths one can take to earn a postsecondary credential or gain employment and the milestones along those paths. A few examples follow, but this list is not intended to be comprehensive:

<b>Concept of a Menu of Options</b>	
<b>Individual's starting point</b>	Examples of possible skill gains milestones
<b>Adult or youth who is basic skills deficient</b>	Learning gains on standardized reading and math assessments Completing some designated portion of a high school equivalency course Earning high school equivalency
<b>English language learner</b>	Learning gains on standardized ELL assessments Passing a final test for a contextualized education and training program
<b>Individual with a high school diploma or equivalent, but not ready for college-level work</b>	Completing one developmental education course Completing the required developmental education sequence to enter credit-bearing work. Passing a credit-bearing gateway course
<b>Individual in need of occupational training to improve employability</b>	Completing some given number of credits Demonstration of competencies associated with training milestones in a quality competency-based course Demonstration of competencies associated with training milestones in work-based training

In addition, a common menu of options, rather than separate definitions, would encourage co-enrollment across the core programs for youth and adults, as well as contextualized learning. For example, a common menu could support increased use of contextualized education and training, blending WIOA Title I funds for occupational training and WIOA Title II funds for contextualized basic skills education bridge programs.<sup>ii</sup> If separate definitions were used for these two funding streams, each student in such a program would have to demonstrate measurable skill gains in two different ways, *creating* barriers to working across programs rather than *breaking* them down.

## Data definitions for the skill gains indicator

The legislative description of the skill gains indicator has two components: 1) the number of individuals who “are achieving measureable skill gains” toward a recognized postsecondary credential or employment; and 2) the total number of individuals who “are in an education or training program” that leads toward such credential or employment. Presumably, the former would be the numerator of the indicator and the latter would be the denominator.

### Minimum program duration threshold

States will need guidance on how to determine which education and training programs qualify as leading to a recognized postsecondary credential or employment. Rather than including everyone receiving WIOA education and training services in the denominator for this measure, CLASP recommends creating definitional parameters to describe which subset of training programs count as programs that lead to credentials or employment.

If the Departments take this approach, CLASP recommends that one of the definitional parameters be a minimum program duration threshold. An interim measure from a stand-alone, short-term training program (i.e., 2-4 weeks in duration and not part of an explicit career pathway) would provide little meaningful information. For a skill gain to be meaningful, individuals should be in a program that is part of a longer-term strategy and intervention to get lower-skilled individuals credentialed or employed. In other words, all those who enroll in the subset of programs that meet the duration threshold should be included in the denominator. Determining the precise number of weeks (or hours) will require research and thoughtful consideration.

## Verifiable skill gains

In defining whether to count a participant in the numerator as having achieved a skill gain for the year, CLASP recommends that the Departments require that the achievement of skill gains be externally verifiable. If skill gains need not be verifiable, programs could overuse the measure and count nearly all participants as making gains, leading to a less meaningful indicator. However, if the verification bar is set too high, important progress toward credentials might not be counted, creating disincentives to serve low-income, lower-skilled individuals. To be counted, skill gains should be verifiable based on approved assessments, educational credit accumulation, valid and reliable course tests given by eligible training providers, competencies demonstrated in high-quality competency-based education, or other externally verifiable means as appropriate. Measuring skill gains should not always require an exam. It may also be impractical to count work-based training toward the measurable skill gains indicator because those gains would have to be reported by employers; this could pose recordkeeping and other challenges.

## Conclusion

As the Departments consider how to define the indicator of measurable skill gains toward a credential or employment, CLASP recommends a single, common menu of options, rather than separate definitions for each program, to promote shared accountability and encourage co-enrollment and contextualized learning. Each option could be determined by the needs of the individual coming into the program, not the funding source.

Conceptualizing measurable skill gains this way is aligned to the law's intent as reflected in the Managers' Statement by legislative sponsors when WIOA passed in Congress: "For those participants who have low levels of literacy skills, or who are English language learners, the acquisition of basic English literacy and numeracy skills are critical steps to obtaining employment and success in postsecondary education and training." CLASP's proposed design of the measurable skill gains indicator also aligns with the WIOA provision that underscores the workforce system's priority of serving individuals who are basic skills deficient.

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### ENDNOTES:

<sup>i</sup> *Shared Vision, Strong Systems: The Alliance for Quality Career Pathways, Framework Version 1.0*, CLASP, 2014, <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/files/aqcp-framework-version-1-0/AQCP-Framework.pdf>.

<sup>ii</sup> Julie Strawn, *Farther, Faster: Six Promising Programs Show How Career Pathway Bridges Help Basic Skills Students Earn Credentials That Matter*, CLASP, 2011, <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/files/Farther-Faster.pdf>.