

**An Evaluation of the Ohio JOBS
Student Retention Program**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The JSRP Program

This report presents findings from an evaluation of the Ohio JOBS Student Retention Program (JSRP). The JOBS program is a component of the federal Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program and is required, in all states, for AFDC recipients who meet certain criteria. The Ohio JSRP is an activity that is pursued by some JOBS program clients in Ohio to fulfill their responsibilities in order to receive aid. The JSRP facilitates entry to and success in programs of study at two-year community or technical colleges. Approximately 17,000 individuals have participated in the Ohio JSRP program between its inception in 1990 and summer 1994. To put some perspective on that total, note that the average number of AFDC clients in Ohio *in a month* is about 245,000, and the average number of JOBS participants *in a month* is 56,000. Thus, the Ohio JSRP program serves only a small segment of welfare recipients in that state.

In many ways, Ohio's community and technical college system is a natural partner in an attempt to help welfare recipients in their transitions from public assistance to work. Historically, two-year colleges have served older and disadvantaged students, and so they have a tradition of providing the sort of individualized attention required to support successfully welfare recipients through to degree completion. Additionally, key support services are available at many two-year colleges, such as developmental education programs, financial aid access, and on-site child care.

Many JOBS and (federal) Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) programs have made use of the support services of two-year colleges by contracting the delivery of (classroom) adult basic skills training to community or technical colleges. But few local and state programs before Ohio's JOBS Student Retention Program recognized the role that two-year postsecondary programs and Associates' Degrees could play in helping clients achieve financial independence. As long as the successes achieved by welfare-to-work programs are constrained by clients' limited educational attainments, the lifetime earnings capacity of recipients is limited. The notion underlying the JSRP is that enabling a JOBS program participant to pursue a postsecondary program and earn a degree should overcome this constraint.

The intent of the JSRP is simple. It is intended to facilitate the success of JOBS clients in postsecondary settings. Some of the unique characteristics of the JSRP are as follows:

- Collaboration at the state level between the Ohio Department of Human Services and the Ohio Board of Regents
- Collaboration at the local level between County Departments of Human Services and local postsecondary institutions
- Three levels of support to the clients—initial, ongoing, and individualized
- Time limited assistance

The three levels of support for JSRP participants help clients overcome barriers to participation in higher education such as lack of self-esteem, lack of familiarity with postsecondary institutions and campus life, and lack of career direction (clients may lack direction or may have unrealistic expectations). The **initial services** of JSRP are intended to address these barriers. Either before enrollment, for new students, or concurrent with initial enrollment, for clients already enrolled, the initial services provide orientation to campuses, assessment and counseling, and life skills seminars.

Once a client has actually enrolled in classes, the **ongoing services** are intended to support the student with her/his early encounters with the system. JOBS clients have fragile support mechanisms and, early in their postsecondary educational careers, they are likely to experience academic or personal problems that are or are perceived to be of major proportions. Through group activities such as workshops, seminars, group counseling, or through individual counseling, ongoing services are geared at helping clients through these “crises.”

Finally, **individualized services** give the JSRP the flexibility to support students who need more assistance than can be provided throughout the initial or ongoing services. The three types of activities that may be funded include summer school tuition, tutoring, or payment of course-related expenses.

The JSRP administrative rules place a strict limitation on the timing and duration of services. The initial and ongoing services are limited to two semesters/three quarters of a client's attendance. This clearly signals the transitional nature of the program. Help and support are available before and during the client's adjustment period to postsecondary schooling, but the

JSRP cannot become a permanent prop or source of pressure. To complete her or his educational program, the AFDC client must become mature enough to succeed on her/his own.

The Evaluation

The programmatic philosophy of the JSRP is to facilitate, for a segment of the JOBS caseload, the transition from welfare to work through successful navigation of programs of study at two-year colleges. The main objective of the program evaluation is to determine if clients are, indeed, progressing successfully in their programs.

The evaluation that was undertaken consisted of four separate studies. The *process study* involved interviews with state officials, local County Department of Human Services (CDHS) staff members, college staff members, and clients. The purpose of the process study was to examine the “everyday” operation of the JSRP program to determine what elements of the program are working for whom under what conditions. At the same time, the process study identified relatively ineffective program features and captured stakeholders’ opinions regarding potential improvements.

The *impact evaluation* focused on client outcomes. It answered the question of what impacts participation in the JSRP had on individuals. The objective of the JSRP is to facilitate success in two-year community and technical colleges and to help JOBS clients move toward self-sufficiency. Using administrative data from the JSRP programs, from the Ohio Department of Human Services CRIS-E data system, and from the Ohio Bureau of Employment Services (OBES) wage record reporting system, the impact evaluation analyzed systematically several client outcomes.

A *follow-up study* was conducted to supplement the formative and impact evaluations. A shortcoming of the formative evaluation was that it relied on interviews with current students to gather client perspectives about the JSRP. For the most part, these students were currently receiving assistance from the JSRP program. Furthermore, the colleges selected the students. To gather the opinions of individuals who were no longer receiving JSRP assistance, the follow-up study involved a telephone survey of a random sample of clients who had participated during the period July 1991 to June 1993. In addition, the follow-up study asked participants about

educational outcomes. This information supplements the impact study because the administrative data do not contain information about education attainment and schooling.

A *cost effectiveness study* was also conducted to gauge how efficient programs were in delivering services to program participants. This study was not as central to the contracted evaluation as the other three studies, so it just provides summary cost information on a per student basis that may be compared across colleges and over time.

Findings

At the state level, the JSRP is administered by a collaboration of three agencies: the Ohio Department of Human Services (ODHS), the Ohio Board of Regents (OBOR), and Columbus State Community College (CSCC). This collaboration appears to be operating smoothly with each agency serving a different administrative function. The OBOR appears to act as the executive of the tripartite team as its staff sets the overall direction and parameters for the colleges. The ODHS acts as the fiscal arm of the administrative team. CSCC, under contract to OBOR, operates the program and is responsible for its day-to-day functioning. The philosophy of the state is to set the direction, but to allow local colleges considerable autonomy and flexibility in the services that they can offer to participants.

The biggest challenge facing the state is the uncertainty about the future of the program if federal welfare reform were to result in a block grant approach. The state administrators are trying to tailor program operations in anticipation of block grants and in anticipation of statewide emphasis on employment outcomes of clients. A major thrust in the current year (1995-96) is focusing college programs on employment and skill outcomes.

The process study suggested that local programs were providing services that were impacting the lives of JOBS clients in a positive way. The sites were operating autonomously, but many program aspects were similar across sites. Staff were structured similarly: a director, one or more student advisors, and a secretary. Some sites supplemented the program with peer tutors or work study student counselors. Almost all programs had an organized, modular set of workshops for initial services. All sites offered tutoring and counseling as part of their ongoing services, although the programs varied substantially in terms of how aggressive they were in

monitoring students. Most sites had a program newsletter, and some sites had an active advisory committee.

Students were quite satisfied with the JSRP programs and activities in which they had participated. They particularly praised the helpfulness of the staff. The programs were providing a considerable amount of information to students that was helping them with their educational and career planning. The programs were also providing clients with valuable counseling advice and help in traversing college programs of study. The programs seemed to be having success with retention, but graduation rates seemed modest.

The colleges have healthy relationships with the CDHSs that are referring clients to them. Collaboration was reported to be smooth, and problems were easily resolved at the local level. In fact, the JSRP programs facilitated significantly the case management of clients for CDHSs in addition to providing educational services to clients. The student advisors, in many instances, were much closer to clients than were the JOBS caseworkers (because of smaller caseloads and more exposure) and were able to track personal situations that may be affecting the clients' lives. In several sites, both the JSRP student advisors and the JOBS caseworkers recognized and exploited this win-win situation. The JSRP student advisors were able to help clients address problems and therefore increase their likelihood of success in the college setting. The JOBS case managers were able to devote more time and resources to other cases trusting that the JSRP program was monitoring their client and would communicate any problems that arose.

The vision and leadership skills of the director of the program at the college seemed to be key factors in successful programs. Also aggressive monitoring of student grades and progress was undertaken at more successful programs, and well-organized initial services seminars seemed to set programs apart in terms of their effectiveness.

The major challenges that local programs face are low basic skills of participants and the many barriers that JOBS clients have in undertaking college programs of study. If students need to enroll in developmental course work, then they require more time to complete their programs. But since JSRP is time limited, and Pell grants have financial limitations, students in developmental courses run considerable risks that they will not have the resources to complete their programs. It is almost certainly the case that JSRP participants are more likely than the

average student to have child care needs and transportation constraints. Furthermore, many of the participants reported that they lacked family support for their college endeavors.

Another challenge that local programs were facing was a declining number of referrals from County Departments of Human Services. Declining AFDC rolls and a tight labor market may explain the downward trend. However, it seemed to us that the State and local AFDC caseworkers could promote the program more aggressively to face this challenge.

The follow-up study confirms the positive results from the process study in many ways. The sample of former JSRP participants gave very high marks to the *process*. They found the activities that they participated in to be very useful, particularly the orientation to college and assistance with registration, financial aid, and other forms. They were highly satisfied with the counselors and counseling that they received. Over 90 percent of the ex-clients indicated that they would recommend the JSRP program to a friend or acquaintance, and half indicated that they had recommended it within the last six months. The only negatives about the programmatic processes were that about 7-10 percent of the sample felt that they had encountered poor counseling or misinformation and a large share of the sample felt that the time limitations on services to a client should be relaxed.

What did the follow-up study say about the outcomes of the program? Here the results were less sanguine. In terms of retention, about two-thirds of the respondents felt that they would not have achieved as much education without the JSRP program. However, less than 15 percent of the sample had received a degree or certificate by the time of the follow-up survey; and 40 percent indicated that they were still enrolled in college at the time of the survey. This means that almost half of the sample had discontinued their college programs prior to receiving a degree or certificate. Clients *intended* to do better in the future. About three-quarters planned to continue their education at some point in the future, but it was hard to assess the likelihood of this occurring and give it much credibility.

Also about three-fourths of the respondents indicated that they felt that their postsecondary experiences improved their chances of getting and keeping a good job. However, during the two-year period from January 1993 to December 1994, only 40 percent of the

respondents were employed for pay in any capacity—part time or full time. Furthermore, only 30 percent of the jobs held were reported to be related to the training that the clients had engaged in.

Other important outcomes for the JSRP program include welfare status and educational skill levels. On these fronts, the follow-up study showed that over 40 percent of the JOBS clients had currently closed cases, and the reading levels on JOBS assessments rose by over 50 percent.

The impact analysis examined the JSRP program using administrative data from the JSRP itself, CRIS-E, and the OBES wage-record file. The average number of credits earned per student was 33.04, and the average grade point average earned was 2.62, with 60 percent of students having earned grades in the A or B range. Defining program completion as having received services for three or more quarters, the data showed that 60 percent of participants in the most recent cohorts completed their JSRP participation.

Approximately 70 percent of program participants had some post-JSRP employment, and about 50 percent were employed in the most recent quarter of available data. For individuals who participated in the first two cohorts of JSRP, average quarterly earnings were substantial: \$3,240 and \$3,001 respectively. For individuals for whom we had earnings data both before and after JSRP participation, quarterly earnings growth ranged from \$1,000 for the first cohort to \$688 in the fourth cohort. Multivariate analyses helped to explain the factors that were correlated with post-JSRP employment and earnings for JSRP participants. Factors associated with higher earnings included having more education, being older, male, or white.

A net impact analysis contrasted JSRP participants with a comparison group. Individuals in the comparison group were more likely to be employed in the second quarter of 1995 (48 percent versus 46 percent), but JSRP participants received higher quarterly earnings. An earnings regression showed that JSRP participation boosts quarterly earnings by 8.45 percent. Participating in JSRP for three or more quarters resulted in a 12.9 percent boost to quarterly earnings, once other factors are controlled. This is a very strong finding for the program.

The cost effectiveness study showed that the average direct cost per participant was approximately \$1,120 and the total cost, defined as the direct JSRP cost plus state subsidies, averaged about \$2,770 per student. There was substantial variation across colleges in these costs, which could be explained by types of services provided, types of courses that JSRP students

pursued, institutional costs, and average number of quarters of participation. Systematically higher costs appeared for programs at four-year institutions.

Recommendations

The text of the report provides our reasoning and justification for the following programmatic recommendations:

- **State administrators should enhance the technical assistance and information about program services provided to local programs.**
- **ODHS should more effectively encourage local JOBS programs to refer clients to JSRP programs.**
- **ODHS and the Ohio Department of Education should improve the coordination of education and training services for JOBS clients.**
- **State administrators should promote a positive image to local programs and clients.**
- **All local programs should offer a modularized pre-enrollment set of workshops for initial services of at least five weeks in length that should be mandatory for all client referrals.**
- **The state should allow local programs to develop a new type of service called “pre-initial services” to accommodate students who miss the “cut-off” dates for initial services.**
- **CDHS JOBS caseworkers are critical to the success of the JSRP program. The local JSRP programs should foster collaboration with them. The ODHS should encourage their involvement with JSRP programs.**
- **The JSRP programs should evaluate their activities to determine their effectiveness in developing group cohesiveness among participants and in developing time management skills.**
- **The state administrators should provide the resources, and the local programs should provide adequate professional development opportunities for JSRP staff.**

Summary

The future of the JSRP program is not clear. Substantial changes may be expected at the federal and state levels. Nevertheless, this evaluation shows that the programs that operated between 1990 and 1995 had substantial positive effects on participants. Despite their substantial barriers to success, the JOBS clients in JSRP programs were able to make the transition into college programs and to earn good grades. Most important, the net impact analyses showed that JSRP participants earned more than individuals in a constructed comparison group. Many caveats need to be considered in interpreting the findings of this evaluation, but all in all, the evaluation suggests that the JSRP program is achieving success. It has many challenges to face, and we hope that the recommendations made herein and the findings that we have highlighted will be of use to the program as it moves forward.