

A Primer for Work-Based Learning:

How to Make a Job the Basis for a College Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the rural Navajo country of Northern Arizona, a public health technician teaching her community about health promotion creates her first PowerPoint presentation. The slide show is taken up as a model and used widely by her employer, the U.S. Indian Health Service. The technician will apply this, along with other work-based and classroom assignments, toward earning college credit.

In a community hospital in urban Medford, Oregon, a lab technician refines her skills in Internet search techniques. Her learning is part of the route to certification as a “medical informaticist”—a new type of specialist who assists nurses and other caregivers with managing patient information on computers.

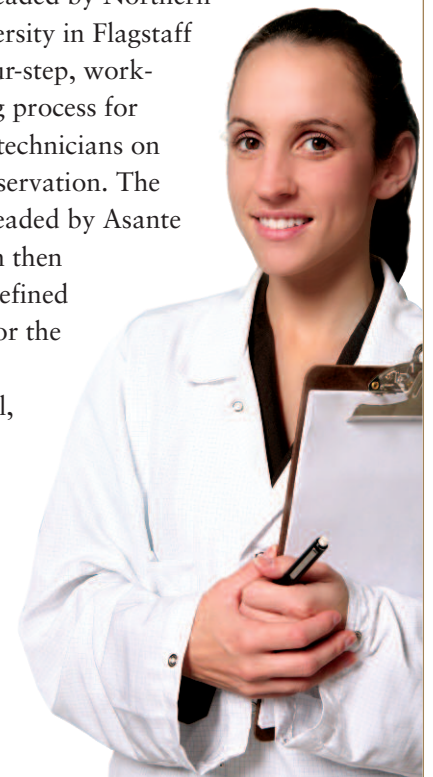
Both of these individuals are working on the front lines of delivering health care and community health services. And both are participants in *Jobs to Careers*, a five-year, \$15.8 million national initiative dedicated to improving the quality of care for patients and communities by changing the way frontline workers are trained, rewarded, and advanced in careers. This practice brief introduces work-based learning, a central and novel aspect of how workers in *Jobs to Careers* are trained and advanced, and it illustrates an approach to implementing this core concept at the initiative’s sites in Arizona and Oregon.

Work-based learning represents a novel approach to meeting labor force needs in health care as well as in other fields. It harnesses the untapped potential for instruction and skill development inherent in the job itself, using job tasks and responsibilities to teach both clinical

and academic skills. And it changes the way instruction is delivered, with the goal of making it more effective and accessible for workers and more efficient for employers.

Jobs to Careers funds 17 projects that bring work-based learning to hospitals, community health clinics, nursing homes, and behavioral health facilities. All *Jobs to Careers* grantees are developing models that build learning into the job, while providing workers with access to career paths and college credit.

The two *Jobs to Careers* partnerships highlighted in *A Primer for Work-Based Learning* are pioneers, and their experiences vividly illustrate how practitioners—at *Jobs to Careers* sites and in the health care sector in general—might apply this concept to frontline health work. The partnership headed by Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff designed a four-step, work-based learning process for public health technicians on the Navajo reservation. The partnership headed by Asante Health System then adapted and refined that process for the setting of an urban hospital, showing how the method can be successfully applied in a completely different environment.



Jobs to Careers is an experiment, seeking to test new models in an area with little direct precedent or record of experience. Accordingly, the steps taken by Northern Arizona University and Asante Health System represent two approaches to conducting work-based learning on the front lines of health, rather than the best paths for all cases. Having completed one year of implementing their projects, these and other *Jobs to Careers* participants and staff are evolving a number of approaches to work-based learning, even as they find the building blocks that are fundamental to every approach.

A Work in Progress

Jobs to Careers sites have discovered that work-based learning is not a cut-and-dried process; rather, it demands flexibility. Colleges and employers launching work-based learning programs in health care will need to factor that into their planning, along with the following lessons:

- Competencies chosen for work-based learning should apply or synthesize knowledge.
- By learning a competency, a frontline worker should be able to lighten a heavy load carried by his or her supervisor or otherwise add value to their department. Given how busy health care workers are, projects should initially tackle the competencies that frontline supervisors identify as adding the most value.
- Partnerships need flexible ways to regularly update, revisit, and add competencies. Something may arise that requires postponing learning on a particularly competency—or that lets workers jump ahead as a new learning opportunity emerges.
- Colleges and supervisors benefit from collaborating on preparing course syllabi and weekly lesson plans, using them to guide the learning and work.
- Work-based learning is best done in groups of students so that they form a learning team. Teams help students succeed.

Applying work-based learning in *Jobs to Careers* is one thing. Sustaining this approach after funding for the initiative ends is another matter. State and local leaders in the health care industry will want evidence that work-based learning can be developed and recreated in diverse environments—as will policymakers who make decisions about such critical matters as licensing regulations and funding streams. Essential to demonstrating potential for sustainability is the creation of tracking metrics that prove a solid return on investment: Does the program improve employee skills, productivity, recruitment, retention, and satisfaction?

In the next three years, the *Jobs to Careers* projects will continue. For health technicians on the reservation in Northern Arizona, and for hospital workers in Oregon's Asante Health System, work-based learning is a work in progress. And the initiative continues at 15 other sites, from Hawaii to Alaska, Mississippi to Massachusetts. Work-based learning looks different at each workplace, yet the strategies and lessons outlined in this practice brief and emerging in all *Jobs to Careers* sites will provide valuable models for any employer launching work-based learning. And if the evidence of success grows as expected, more employers, colleges, and workers will join this journey of discovery and advancement. The potential return on investment—a well-paid, stable workforce, delivering high-quality care—is too important to ignore.

Jobs to Careers

*Promoting Work-Based Learning
for Quality Care.*

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