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Increasing Access to Education and Skills Training for Low-Income Single Mothers: Online Learning as Training Policy

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Overview. In order to address the barriers that employed low wage workers face in attaining skills training and education, the New Jersey Department of Labor piloted an innovative workforce development program in which single working poor mothers received skills training via online learning in their homes. The results of this program have been impressive. There was a very high retention rate in the program, with 92% (117) of the 128 participants completing the program. In addition, the participants in the program experienced an average annual wage increase of 14 percent, and several of the participants enrolled in other educational programs (such as community college and college program). Perhaps most importantly, all the women emphatically reported that they would not have been able to complete a training program if it were not available at home. We believe that flexible training programs, such as those offered by using online learning, not only provide access to computers and the Internet in low-income homes, but also offers opportunities to upgrade skills to a population that is often excluded from such training.

Background. Women, especially working single mothers, are amongst the fastest growing group in poverty. The poverty rate for single working mother households is 21 percent, more than double the rate of families maintained by men with children and four times the rate of married couple families with children. (US DOL, Report 957, 2002). Of course because their mothers are poor, so are their children. Close to half of children living in female headed households live below the poverty line (IWPR, 2003). Clearly then by developing programs and policies that improve the economic status of women will help strengthen their families and raise children out of poverty.

Working full-time in today's economy does not always guarantee self sufficiency, as one can work full-time at a minimum wage job and earn less than \$15,000 a year. As such, policies must be in place that offer low-income workers opportunities to improve their economic situation. Indeed there is much consensus that access to education and skills training will lead to jobs that offer living wages and benefits. Labor market trends indicate that there will be significant growth in jobs that require competent or advanced skills, with slower growth in jobs that require basic or minimal skills throughout the early part of the 21st Century (Carnevale and Desrochers, 1999). Further, advanced skills are required in all industries, including industries that are not typically associated with high level skill demands. For example, 60 percent of sales related jobs in the service sector require skills beyond those of a high school graduate (Levenson, Reardon, and Schmidt, 1999).

So while few may doubt that education and skills training have positive effects on labor market rewards and economic self sufficiency, the real challenge is increasing access to skills training for low wage single working mothers. Indeed the current workforce system faces significant obstacles in regard to how to deliver skills training to single mothers, as they face many barriers that prevent them from attaining skills training via traditional modes of delivery.

- (1) Childcare needs place a burden on single mothers that often precludes them from attending traditional education programs. Locating affordable childcare and “off hours” childcare (such as on nights and weekends when many classes are offered) often proves to be a daunting task.
- (2) A large percentage of single working mothers are employed in jobs with irregular schedules, such as those characteristic of the service sector, making it difficult to attend classes.
- (3) Transportation is a significant barrier for many single mothers. Nationally, one-third of households earning less than \$15,000 a year do not own a car (Van Horn and Schaffner, 2003). This is especially relevant in suburban and rural areas where there are not extensive public transportation systems.
- (4) Non-college educated workers often find very little access to employer-sponsored training. Employees who are perceived as having a high turnover rate and/or possess lower levels of formal education are less likely to receive employer provided training (Lynch and Black, 1995). As such workers either forego training opportunities, or spend years attempting to complete credentials or degrees by taking one to two classes every few months.
- (5) Changes in federal programs and policies, such as those that emphasize work over education; tighter eligibility requirements; and training resources that are not available after employment have significantly reduced low-income women’s access to education.

Pilot Program in New Jersey. As a result of the many obstacles facing single mothers, it is evident that alternatives to the traditional delivery method of skills training must be explored and institutionalized in order to increase the skill levels of this population. Building on a groundbreaking New Jersey pilot program in which 128 single working poor mothers received a computer, Internet access and courses via online, we have documented an effective way to deliver skills training to an underserved and unserved population. Online learning as a training option within the United States workforce development system democratizes access to education and skills training.

Online learning has many advantages to both the women in the skills training program and their families, such as:

- (1) Online learning offers flexibility in time and place. Women can learn at their own pace- in their homes (or virtually anywhere), and attend classes when they can fit them into their schedules-taking classes at any hour or any day of the week.
- (2) Online learning is cost effective, as women save money and time in childcare and commuting when they receive their training in their homes.
- (3) Online learning offers opportunities for literacy that reach beyond course content. Women are increasing their skills using the very tool – the computer- that is markedly affecting the skills that are demanded in our labor force. Through online learning women also increase their facility with computers and the Internet; learn how to troubleshoot technology; and improve their ability to type.

- (4) Providing a computer in the home of single mother headed families provides opportunities for their children to increase their technological literacy. While access to computers and the Internet has increased over the past years, research continues to demonstrate that disparities across social class and educational level persist. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2002), households with incomes of \$75,000 or more are 20 times more likely to have access to the Internet than families with less income. Further, while 63 percent of our nation's classrooms are wired, the digital divide continues to persist. In schools where 71 percent or more of children are eligible for free or reduced lunches, only 39 percent of classrooms are wired. Alternatively, in schools where less than eleven percent of students qualify for subsidized lunch, 74 percent of classrooms are Internet ready (Van Horn and Schaffner, 2003).

In addition to these advantages skills training via online learning has proven effective in increasing the educational attainment and wages of single working poor mothers in New Jersey.

- (1) The New Jersey program had a high retention rate with only eight percent of the participants not completing the program.
- (2) The training had positive effects on the women's labor market rewards. At the conclusion of their training the average wage increase of the participants was 14 percent.
- (3) Fifteen women continued their education by enrolling in college and community college programs.
- (4) Even more important was that ALL the women felt they would have not had the opportunity to take courses and increase their technological skills without this online program.

Furthermore, an online learning program can be paid for with existing forms of funding, such as the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), Pell Grants, and Adult Education monies from the Department of Education. In addition some states have discretionary training funds from State Department of Labor budgets that One-Stop Career Centers can use to fund this program. If online learning is implemented as a means of delivering training to the working poor, states will be able to access existing funds for such training.

Building on the success of the New Jersey pilot program, the Rutgers University Center for Women and Work, with financial support from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation is working collaboratively with New Jersey to increase the scale of the project and with several other states to provide technical assistance to implement similar programs. Our goal is to expand online learning to improve opportunities for the working poor nationally. In doing so we will be able to provide training and education to groups of individuals who previously did not have access. In turn, raising single working mothers out of poverty through programs that provide a broad range of access to job training and education will strengthen their families, and help to close the digital divide.