

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report presents the findings of a process study of Job Corps operations. The study was conducted as part of the National Job Corps Study, whose purpose is to measure the effects of Job Corps participation on students' post-program earnings and related outcomes. In support of this broad goal, the process study describes and documents program services and operations. Data for the process study were collected during calendar year 1996 through a telephone survey of Job Corps outreach and admissions (OA) counselors, a mail survey of all Job Corps centers, and visits to 23 centers for interviews with staff, observations of activities, and focus group discussions with students and staff.

We conclude from the process analysis that Job Corps uses a well-developed program model and that the program is well implemented. If the net impact study finds positive net impacts or net impact for some groups of students but not others, the process study information summarized here will help us to understand how this occurs. If the net impact study finds no positive impacts, the findings of the process study allow us to rule out failure in implementing the planned model as a reason. Job Corps students are receiving substantial, meaningful education and training services. Whether the program has positive impacts on students outcomes relative to all the other education and training opportunities available to the youth who apply remains an open question that the forthcoming impact study will answer.

Below we highlight some key findings of the process study.

### **OVERVIEW**

Job Corps is an intensive and comprehensive program whose goal is to help disadvantaged youth between the ages of 16 and 24 become more responsible, employable, and productive citizens. The program's major service components include academic education, vocational training, residential living, health care and health education, counseling, and job placement assistance. At the time of the study, these comprehensive services were delivered at 110 Job Corps centers nationwide, through a program structure that unites federal agencies, private contractors, and national unions and businesses. Thirty centers were operated by agencies of the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and of the Interior under interagency agreements with the U.S. Department of Labor; the other 80 were operated by private contractors under contract with Job Corps regional offices. Currently, 116 centers provide Job Corps training. Most Job Corps students reside at the Job Corps center while training, although about 12 percent are nonresidential students who reside at home. A variety of public and private entities conduct outreach and screening of new students and help graduating students to find jobs or further education. Federal staff in the Job Corps National Office provide programmatic and policy guidance; federal staff in the Job Corps regional offices contract for and directly oversee provision of services.

Developed and refined over a 30-year period, Job Corps has a number of distinctive characteristics: a high degree of uniformity in program form and content; a high degree of federal

direction; continuity, especially in center operations (where in many cases the same contractor has been operating the center for decades); and career paths for Job Corps staff that have attracted a large number of committed, long-term staff. Job Corps is performance driven; heavy emphasis is placed on a contractor's report card in awarding competitive contracts. The program's performance measurement system has successfully focused managers and staff on achieving specific student outcomes.

The three program areas--outreach and admissions, center operations, and placement--are integral to the Job Corps model, but center operations are the heart of the program. Next, we highlight key study findings on operations in each area.

## **OUTREACH AND ADMISSIONS**

As of July 1996, 86 OA contractors operated throughout the United States in more than 500 offices, employing approximately 900 to 1,000 OA counselors. OA services are provided by three main types of contractors: (1) State Employment Security Agencies (SESAs) and other state and local agencies, (2) private organizations affiliated with a Job Corps center, and (3) private organizations not affiliated with centers.

OA activities encompass outreach, eligibility screening, and admissions counseling. OA counselors are predominantly females who are salaried, full-time employees. Average tenure of OA counselors is short, and few have prior Job Corps experience.

OA counselors devote considerable time to outreach activities. Some of this involves contacts with youths and parents through home visits, public events, or contacts initiated by the public. To reach a wider audience of potentially eligible youth and parents, OA counselors develop and maintain relationships with other agencies and community organizations that serve youth. Although OA counselors undertake considerable outreach, they view word of mouth and advertising as the most effective methods of making youths aware of Job Corps.

To be eligible for Job Corps, youth must satisfy criteria related to age, selective service registration, residency, family income, need for additional training/education, environment, health history, behavior adjustment history, child care, parental consent, and capability and aspirations to participate. Eligibility assessment and determination primarily screens into the program youth who meet the "traditional," easily documentable eligibility criteria related to age, U.S. citizenship, income, and so forth. While OA staff confer with applicants whose qualifications on the harder-to-document criteria of aspirations and capacity to benefit appear questionable, very few youth who otherwise are eligible and persist in their intention to enroll are found ineligible.

OA counselors have limited firsthand knowledge of the centers for which they recruit. They have recently visited only a few of the centers their applicants will attend, and most indicate that they have not received up-to-date information from the centers. Center staff complain that many students arrive on center without a good idea of what to expect and what the specific center offers.

## **CENTER OPERATIONS**

### **Vocational Training**

The vocational training program provides job-specific skills in a trade that will allow each student to secure a job or qualify for advanced training upon completion. From its inception, Job Corps has followed a distinctive open-entry, open-exit educational philosophy in its vocational and academic programs. Instruction is individualized and self-paced; students enter with differing levels of preparation, progress at their own pace, and leave when they have achieved an appropriate level of mastery. The Job Corps vocational program emphasizes competency-based instruction that uses curricula developed with input from business and labor organizations.

In addition to classroom-based instruction, Job Corps provides students with workplace learning experiences through Vocational Skills Training (VST) projects and Work Experience Programs (WEPs). Job Corps' VST projects provide students with the opportunity to learn occupational competencies while performing the types of activities they are expected to perform on a job. VST projects involve students in occupationally relevant activities that improve centers' facilities--such as building a new structure, renovating existing structures, or painting buildings--or that assist community-based organizations in similar activities. WEPs are the culmination of students' vocational training in many areas where they do not have an opportunity to participate in a VST project. A WEP places a student in an unpaid position with a local employer for six weeks; during this time, the student performs duties related to his or her area of training in a workplace setting.

Job Corps offers training programs in more than 75 vocational areas; however, the largest 10 trades--clerical occupations, health occupations, carpentry, masonry, building and apartment maintenance, food service, auto/truck mechanic, welding, painter, and electrician--account for 80 percent of all training slots. To broaden the range of programs offered on centers, many centers in urban areas contract with local training providers to allow Job Corps students to participate in outside programs.

Job Corps attaches importance to ensuring that students are trained in jobs for which demand for workers exists. Projected annual openings are expected to be very high in the two largest vocational areas: clerical occupations (nearly 300,000 openings per year), and health occupations (about 120,000 openings per year). Furthermore, Job Corps has the capacity to train only a small fraction of these annual totals. Together these trades account for about one-third of training offered. In contrast, the number of annual openings in welding, carpentry, and masonry will be in the range of 10,000 to 30,000, and Job Corps' current capacity will provide large fractions of the new workers in these areas.

Job Corps adjusts its trade offerings to shifts in employers' demands for workers very slowly. Centers monitor placement rates and other indicators that training is meeting employer needs. They also consult with local employers to anticipate demand. Training capacity in current Job Corps trades that are not performing well can be reduced or eliminated fairly easily. Capacity in trades that perform well can be expanded. However, adjustments in the form of opening new trades that have not previously been offered are very gradual. Centers proposing to start offering new trades must demonstrate that a labor market for workers exists and that training can be provided cost-effectively.

Regional office and National Office staff must approve all adjustments in capacity, especially starting a new trade, and recent experience of the centers we visited indicates that changes are made very gradually.

## **Academic Education**

Students typically enter Jobs Corps with substantial deficits in their literacy and numeracy skills. Only 20 percent have a high school diploma or GED at entry, and only 40 percent (including the graduates) read at a level that qualifies them for enrollment in a GED preparation course. The Job Corps academic program is designed to alleviate these deficits.

Job Corps' Computer Managed Instruction (CMI) system provides uniform curriculum and program delivery of the major academic courses--reading, math, and writing/thinking skills--across centers. CMI is integral to instruction and student assessment. While instructors have flexibility in instructional approaches, the Job Corps curriculum and CMI dictate the content of instruction almost entirely. Supplemental courses or approaches are implemented at some centers, based on available resources and assessment of student needs, skills, and requirements.

## **Residential Living and Health Services**

Residential living is one of the most distinctive programmatic components of Job Corps. Since most students reside at the center, the program design has many features that seek to make the residential living experience pleasant, productive, and supportive of the vocational training and academic education. Consequently, residential living encompasses a wide range of program elements, including new student orientation, residential support services, counseling, social skills development, evaluation of student progress, intergroup relations, recreation, student government and leadership, and behavior management. A closely related component is provision of health services.

Residential advisors (RAs) and counselors are the key residential support staff. RAs, who oversee dormitory life, have more one-on-one contact than any other staff because they interact with students where they live. They serve as mentors and surrogate parents for youth, many of whom are living away from home among strangers for the first time. Their job duties also include providing social skills training and often helping students conduct other formal group activities. Counselors serve as advocates for students, helping them to resolve scheduling conflicts, problems with their classes, and personal difficulties. Counselors' caseloads range from 60 to 80 students.

Nonresidential students have a very different Job Corps program experience than students who live on center. Approximately 12 percent of Job Corps students are nonresidential students. They attend vocational training and academic education classes and are encouraged to participate in other parts of center life. However, the participation of many nonresidential students in activities outside of classes is limited, often because of family responsibilities. Most residential support services (except dormitory life) are available to nonresidential students. Special nonresidential counselors

help these students resolve child care, transportation, and income support problems in addition to the full range of issues that counselors address with residential students.

The social skills training (SST) program seeks to improve life skills (accepting criticism, getting along with peers and supervisors) necessary to successful employment. While SST is widely acknowledged as very beneficial to students, many staff we spoke to cited a need for improving the curriculum and improving the training of the RAs who conduct most SST sessions. (Since our site visits, the curriculum has been revised extensively.)

Progress and Performance Evaluation Panels (P/PEPs) are the cornerstone of Job Corps' student evaluation process. The panels are made up of a counselor, a vocational instructor, an academic instructor, and an RA, preferably but not necessarily the staff who work with the individual student. A P/PEP meets with each student periodically to assess progress in each program area and to guide the student in an ongoing process of self-assessment and goal-setting. As part of the assessment process, each student meets with each instructor in preparation for the meeting. Staff and students embrace the P/PEP concept but faulted the amount of time that goes into preparing for and holding the meetings. A few centers have received permission to use Progress and Performance Evaluation Counseling (P/PEC), in which a meeting with the counselor substitutes for the panel meeting but other elements remain unchanged.

While the review process is widely regarded as constructive, the performance bonus system, which grants pay bonuses on the basis of students' P/PEP or P/PEC ratings is viewed as subjective and inequitable. The primary problem is that RAs' ratings of achievement lack consistency across staff members, with the result that students with similar achievement can obtain very different ratings.

Center recreation programs play an important part in occupying students' time outside the training day. Student government associations provide valuable leadership experiences for students and opportunities to get involved in the center community, but student government seems to have very little influence on center policies or operations.

The behavior management system--a system of privileges earned for good performance and sanctions for poor performance--provides an effective means to encourage positive behaviors among students. All centers must have written rules and sanctions, but many have implemented sophisticated systems in which students can earn privileges (off-center trips, choice dorm rooms). Centers in which all staff were involved in implementing and reinforcing the center's behavior management system were more effective at encouraging positive behaviors and reported fewer problems. The national expanded zero tolerance (ZT) policy for drugs and violence instituted in April 1995 appears to have had a profound positive effect on the behavior management system and on the general climate on center.

Centers provide required health services for students through a combination of center staff and outside contractors. Program regulations require centers to provide physical, dental, and mental health services to all students. Centers employ registered and licensed nurses to staff the center's health facilities and contract with local physicians, dentists, and mental health consultants to provide

student physicals, medical care, dental care, and mental health care that goes beyond counseling duties.

## **PLACEMENT**

Placement agencies are responsible for helping former Job Corps students get jobs that will allow them to be self-sufficient or to pursue additional training. They are required to provide placement assistance for a period of six months to all terminating Job Corps students regardless of how long they were enrolled (except fraudulent enrollments and those terminated for ZT infractions). These agencies hold competitively awarded cost-reimbursement contracts administered by the regional offices. Placement contracts are currently held by Job Corps centers, other private for-profit organizations, and SESAs or other state agencies. Most also hold contracts to conduct OA activities.

Placement agency services are limited in scope and substance. Most staff effort is devoted to locating students and to maintaining some minimal level of contact with them over the six-month placement horizon. Placement staff rarely meet with former students in person, and most contact is by telephone, which limits the possibility of providing comprehensive placement services. Many managers suggested that more intensive services could be provided to students who complete the program if placement contractors were relieved of the requirement to serve all students regardless of whether they had had significant exposure to Job Corps.