Using Assessments to Serve Disconnected Young Adults under WIOA
Lessons Learned from the Evaluation of the Linking Innovation Knowledge Employment (@LIKE) Program
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OVERVIEW
Since the passage of Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) in 2014, there has been a breadth of literature related to effective strategies in serving youth and young adults through the public workforce system. For example, in 2014 Bird, Foster and Ganzglass identified helping disadvantaged and unemployed young adults earn while they learn as a key WIOA provision. In 2015, Hossain suggested that interventions that work for adults do not always work for young adults, and what has worked for one group of young people, may not necessarily work for others. More evidence base data are needed to inform stakeholders on how best achieve the expanded WIOA youth requirements.

As with any new legislation, the public workforce system is enduring a period of transition and is working to align systems and processes with WIOA. IMPAQ’s evaluation of the Linking Innovation, Knowledge, and Employment (@LIKE) program, a Southern California based youth program funded by a US Department of Labor Workforce Innovation Fund grant, can provide the workforce system with values insight in how to meet the updated youth service provisions required. This issue brief focuses on the participant assessment strategies used by the @LIKE program. @LIKE serves young adults age 18 to 24, disconnected from school and work for at least 90 days, and face additional barriers (e.g., being an ex-offender; receiving public assistance; being low-income, gang-involved, and/or a recently separated veteran).
**WIOA ASSESSMENT REQUIREMENT**

The goal of the WIOA youth program is to assist youth and young adults in making a successful transition to employment and further education. However, the WIOA recognizes that simply providing training is not enough to enter a specific occupation. A wide range of activities and services must be available to assist youth, especially those who are disconnected and out-of-school, in making a successful transition to adulthood. The WIOA youth program is designed to provide services, employment, and training opportunities to those who can benefit from, and who are in need of such services.

There is an array of activities that must occur before enrollment into the WIOA youth program. These "pre-enrollment" activities include recruitment, intake, initial assessment including an initial determination of barriers and appropriateness for the program, referrals, and the determination of WIOA youth eligibility.

None of these activities require enrollment in the local youth program. Pre-enrollment activities are considered to be those activities leading up to the decision to register a participant for services in the local WIOA youth program.

WIOA outlines three key components of Youth program design. The components include an objective assessment (OA), an individual services strategy (ISS), case management, and follow-up services that lead toward successful outcomes for WIOA youth participants.

Both the OA and the ISS are integral to the youth program, and are intended to be on-going throughout program participation. These two activities serve as the basis for which decisions are made that lead to the receipt of the array of the 14 program elements. This brief will only focus on the OA.

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**Relevant Laws, Rules, or Policies**

- Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Public Law 113-128)
- WIOA Proposed Rules (NPRM dated 4-2-15)
- U.S. Dept. of Labor Training and Employment Guidance Letter No. 23-14 (Dated 3-26-15)
- U.S. Dept. of Labor Training and Employment Guidance Letter No. 12-14 (Dated 10-28-14)
- U.S. Dept. of Labor Training and Employment Guidance Letter No. 8-15 (Dated 11-17-15)
OBJECTIVE ASSESSMENT
Per section 129 (c)(1)(A) of the WIOA, local areas are required to provide an objective assessment of the academic levels, skill levels, and service needs of each youth participant. The purpose of the OA is to identify the appropriate services, including the identification of career pathways, for each participant. The OA shall include a review of all the following information:

- Basic skills
- Occupational skills
- Prior work experience
- Employability
- Interests
- Aptitudes (including interests and aptitudes for nontraditional jobs)
- Supportive service needs
- Developmental needs

It is important to note that WIOA does not require a new OA if the provider determines it is appropriate to use a recent assessment (within 6 months) of the participant conducted pursuant to another education or training program. This may include evaluations completed by a secondary school, Vocational Rehabilitation, Adult Basic and Literacy Education (ABLE), or other education or training providers.

@LIKE PARTICIPANT ASSESSMENTS
Under the WIF grant, all @LIKE participants’ complete academic skill and social/psychological asset assessments within the first 60 days of enrolling into the program. However, Case Managers have the discretion to have any of the assessments administered later. This flexibility is an important program feature, especially in instances when staff believe taking an assessment would drive a participant away from the program and they would become disconnected again. Young adults who have been disconnected from school have educational trauma. They do not want to be reminded of any ‘school-like’ experiences. Testing can bring on feelings of lack of self-confidence. Flexibility in when to administer assessments is a key lesson learned.

Academic skills assessments help program staff determine participants’ academic skill levels and uncover any subject areas requiring improvement. Depending on program location, @LIKE assesses participants’ academic skills using either the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) or the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE).

An innovative component of @LIKE’s service strategy is that in addition to assessing participants’ academic skills, staff also use social/psychological assessments to assess participants’ resiliency and levels of self-efficacy. These assessments provide program staff and participants with critical information for empowering participants to be active agents in shaping their future. This includes a participant’s assets—their abilities, aptitudes, and interests; and their barriers, internal drivers of behavior, levels of confidence, and self-perceptions. All @LIKE participants complete the Self-Appraisal and Perceived Barriers Assessment, the Career Development Self-Efficacy Scale—Short Form (CDSES-SF), and the CenterMark Personality Profile Assessment.

When appropriate, @LIKE participants also complete disability and/or mental health assessments through partnerships with community organizations. In these instances, program staff facilitate referrals to the partner organization and accompany the participant in instances when a participant is hesitant. These organizations provide participants with specialized assessments and services that are often critical to a participant’s success.
Assessment results are the foundation on which Case Managers and Life Coaches build relationships with each participant. All @LIKE Case Managers and Life Coaches receive training from the Project Director and an expert consultant in how to interpret and use assessment results to build their understanding of each participant and help participants learn about themselves. Each program interaction between a participant and staff member focuses on a young adult’s internal resources—their unique personality, motivations, strengths, and assets.

**EVIDENCE FROM LITERATURE**

@LIKE engages participants intensely with a major focus on building participants’ resiliency and self-efficacy. Previous research suggests that disconnected individuals achieve greatest success when in addition to developing academic and workplace competencies they develop their self-confidence, belief in their own ability to be successful (self-efficacy), and their ability to bounce back from adversity (resiliency). These internal resources support skill development and the internalization of competence.

Research suggests that there is a positive relationship between job search self-efficacy and employment outcomes, such as employment and reemployment, and number of offers received by job seekers. Self-efficacy is a promising predictor of wage and annual salary outcomes. Occupational self-efficacy seems to exert indirect positive influence on annual salary. Research also suggests that participants in intervention programs that facilitate success experiences and provide socio-emotional support will have high career self-efficacy. Witnessing the success of peers and being in a supportive environment both contribute to high career self-efficacy.

Emerging research on resilience shows that resilience correlates to performance at workplace. Hope, optimism and resilience are traits that separately and together have a significant positive correlation with worker performance. These traits also correlate positively with job satisfaction and work happiness.

**LESSONS LEARNED FROM @LIKE**

**USE ASSET BASED SOCIAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENTS**

Program staff should use social/psychological assessments to generate information to help facilitate positive changes within participants’ lives. Assessment results can help build a participant’s self-worth, and equip them with new, helpful insights about how they perceive themselves and the obstacles they face. @LIKE program staff and participants have found the assessment tools to be useful and effective. One program staff member reported, “Participants respond to the assessments—it is very empowering for them.” Participant have shared that using the assessments helps them identify their internal resources helping change the way they view themselves in terms of confidence and resiliency.

**TRAIN PROGRAM STAFF TO USE ASSESSMENT RESULTS**

@LIKE Life Coaches and Case Manager—two distinct program staff positions—receive facilitated instruction, training, and ongoing coaching on how to use assessment results and, training on when to refer participants to a qualified resource for disability and/or mental health assessments and services. Life Coaches counsel and encourage program participants on matters having to do with careers and personal challenges that inhibit them from moving forward in their lives. They use assessment results to point participants towards changes they will have to strive for in order to achieve their goals.
Case Managers also utilize assessment results. Case Managers generate resources for participants and connect participants with appropriate training opportunities based on assessment results. Case Managers provide consistent program structure by helping participants focus on the outcomes and tasks they must complete to fulfill program requirements. They help participants achieve their personal goals by setting and tracking applicable deadlines.

ASSESS ACADEMIC SKILLS

Use academic assessment results to determine participants’ skill levels and uncover any subject areas requiring improvement. @LIKE participants usually take the basic academic skills assessment within the first month of receiving services. Staff use assessment results to guide the academic support services they provide to help students gain aptitudes and increase literacy. Support may include tutoring in math or reading comprehension, or testing for a learning disability. Alternatively, program staff may engage dedicated tutors to assist participants. Participants take academic assessments again toward the end of the program to determine their progress during the program.

PROVIDE FOR MENTAL HEALTH & DISSABILITY ASSESSMENTS

It is crucial that a program serving the disconnected young adult population recognize the importance of serving participants with disabilities. The 2011 data from the Current Population Survey indicate that approximately 30 percent of disconnected youth in the United States have some type of disability that prevents them from obtaining employment, and almost all respondents who reported a disability indicated that the disability was "severe" (27.6 severe vs. 2.7 percent "non-severe"). In order to serve this population successfully, (1) plan to assess participants for disabilities and mental health needs by setting aside funds for this purpose; (2) train program staff to know when to refer participants to qualified resources; (3) create partnerships that offer services to meet these needs; and (4) provide additional support to participants through Life Coaches.

USE ASSESSMENT RESULTS TO FACILITATE CHANGE IN A PARTICIPANT

The assessments allow participants to “get a better perspective of themselves” and to recognize their strengths and weaknesses. The assessments also inform the development of the participant’s ISS, which guides the type and timing of program supports and services a participant will receive throughout the program. This specific and individualized plan of action is the first tangible result of @LIKE’s assessment process. The ISS is also a key youth program component in WIOA.

Program staff should work to ensure that participants are active agents in the assessment process and not simply passive recipients of any given assessment. Program staff and participants should work through the assessment results together in partnership. It is critical that program staff encourage participants to bring their assets to the table and that staff affirm and value participants’ assets.

USE ASSESSMENT RESULTS FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT & ACCOUNTABILITY

@LIKE relies on various data tools to keep sites apprised of their progress, provide early warnings, identify problem areas, guide the program, ensure customer satisfaction, and continuously improve the quality of the program. To accomplish this, the @LIKE Steering Committee created several scorecards to monitor key program elements (e.g., participant demographics, credentials earned, retention rates, and participant satisfaction) and send them to the sites on a weekly basis. These reports allow the Steering
Committee and project staff to track progress and work to continuous improvement the quality of the program. Through rigorous quality checks, the Project Director and Lead Coordinator ensure the accuracy of data to ensure the data staff record in participant case files matches what is in the data management system. These weekly, monthly, and quarterly scorecards also show participants’ basic academic assessment scores and scores from participants’ social/psychological assessments. If participants have completed post-tests, these reports allow program staff to analyze the changes that the participant has experienced over time. The Project Director and the Lead Grant Coordinator report their observations in the Monthly Assessment Score Reports and suggest strategies to address any outstanding issues.

CONCLUSION
Assessments that support a participant’s internal reflection and development are critical to supporting young adults on their pathways to stable and sustainable employment. When considering how to meet the WIOA requirement to provide an objective assessment, workforce practitioners should draw upon the lessons learned by @LIKE. Incorporate asset based social/psychological assessments into your workforce programs. Traditional skill- and knowledge-based assessments remain important for a young adult program participant’s objective assessment. Train staff on how to use assessment results and when to refer participants to additional services, or for additional assessments that local program staff are not trained to provide. When appropriate, provide services to address participants’ mental health and disability related needs. Use information obtained through assessments to facilitate change within participants. Workforce development professionals who utilize assessments help improve their career prospects of low-income, disconnected young adults.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
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Timothy Griffith (B.A., Political Science, Ohio State University), is an Analyst at IMPAQ International, with four years of experience and expertise in workforce development and unemployment insurance programs at the state and local level. Prior to joining IMPAQ, Mr. Griffith served as an AmeriCorps member in Washington, D.C. teaching adult literacy classes. He also worked at the National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA) providing legislative and programmatic analysis on a variety of state and federal workforce development legislation, including the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Currently, Mr. Griffith is working on a number of U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL) funded evaluations, providing qualitative and quantitative analysis of program implementation and impacts. In addition to his work at IMPAQ International, Mr. Griffith is currently pursuing a M.S. in applied economics at Johns Hopkins University.

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Dr. Sonam Gupta (Ph.D., Economics, University of Arizona) is an applied economist with expertise in Applied Econometrics, Labor Economics, and program evaluation methods. Dr. Gupta has significant
experience in conducting randomized control trials, employing diverse advanced econometric techniques for data analysis and managing large databases. She has studied policy relevant problems using both primary and secondary data. Her current research projects are based in the US and India, and are unique in part because of her focus on collecting micro level primary data. She has worked with several databases - National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), Canadian Census Public Use Microdata File, Compustat, and EPA databases such as Toxics Release Inventory (TRI), and Integrated Data for Enforcement Analysis (IDEA). In addition to her quantitative skills, Dr. Gupta has experience gathering qualitative data through key informant interviews. She has also designed and tested survey instruments.

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Zachary Miller (MPA, Nonprofit Management, George Washington University; CLSSGB) is a Research Associate at IMPAQ International with over twelve years of programmatic experience throughout the public, private, and nonprofit sectors and over five years of research and evaluation experience. He has expertise with workforce and community development, process assessment and improvement initiatives, program implementation and evaluation, youth development, and building organizational capacities. Mr. Miller specializes in providing technical assistance, working with underserved populations and facilitating short and long-term process improvement projects. He is a Certified Lean Six Sigma Green Belt (CLSSGB).

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Dr. Moore serves as the Vice President for the Labor Division. He manages a talented team of labor economists and research professionals while leading the continued growth of the Labor Division. Dr. Moore has conducted extensive research on workforce development issues, income security, and the economics of aging with emphasis on the economic status of Baby Boomers. Prior to joining IMPAQ, Dr. Moore served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for U.S. Department of Labor, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy. Dr. Moore provided advice to the Secretary of Labor, Deputy Secretary, and Departmental agencies on matters of policy development and supported the economic policy, research, and analysis agenda of the Department. Previously, Dr. Moore served as the Deputy Director and Chief Economist for the District of Columbia Department of Employment Services (DOES), as a Senior Policy Advisor with OASP, and as Deputy Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development (LWD).

Dr. Moore has held numerous federal government positions including Senior Economist for the Employee Benefits Security Administration, Office of Policy and Research, U.S. Department of Labor and as a Labor Economist with the Bureau of Labor Statistics and with the Social Security Administration. Dr. Moore earned a B.S. from Mississippi Valley State University, an M.A. from Virginia State University, and a Ph.D. in Economics from Howard University.
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Lori Strumpf (BA in Psychology and Criminal Justice; MA in Counseling Education; Specialist Degree (EDS) in Counseling Education) has over thirty years in the field of organizational development and change management in human services and workforce development organizations. She is a nationally known expert in organizational management, training and design for education, training, and human resource development systems. Prior to moving to Washington, D.C. to work on the Vice President’s Task Force for Youth Employment, Lori was the Assistant Director to a project for court diverted delinquent youth. She also worked at Florida State Prison, counseling prisoners. As a consultant to Riverside County’s Workforce Development Board, she has served as the Project Director to @LIKE since its inception.

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REFERENCES