Enhancing Intake to Improve Services: Collecting Data on Barriers to Employment

Purpose of This Tip Sheet

- Explain the Barriers to Employment
- Describe the purpose for and benefits to collecting data on the Barriers to Employment
- Identify challenges states are facing in collecting the data on the Barriers to Employment
- Provide strategies to enhance the intake process to improve collection of the Barriers to Employment measures
- Provide state examples of how the Barriers to Employment measures are collected

What Are Barriers to Employment?

A primary goal of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is to help adults succeed in the labor force by connecting them with employment opportunities, education, training, and other support services. The legislation recognizes that certain groups face more barriers to entering the labor market than others and focuses funding and services on these most vulnerable populations. WIOA outlines descriptive measures of the characteristics that make it more difficult for those individuals to obtain employment and achieve other outcomes. These 11 demographic measures are referred to as Barriers to Employment: (1) Displaced homemaker; (2) English language learner, low literacy level, cultural barriers; (3) Exhausting Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) within 2 Years; (4) Ex-offender; (5) Homeless or runaway youth; (6) Long-term unemployed; (7) Low-income; (8) Migrant and seasonal farmworker; (9) Individual with disabilities; (10) Single parent; (11) Youth in foster care or who has aged out of system. (See Appendix A for full descriptions of each.) Students self-identify within these categories, and core programs and states are required to report their performance indicators disaggregated by these barriers. Identifying these subgroups of students helps programs address specific employment and educational needs of these groups. Reporting this information helps the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) to understand who is being served and how different challenges affect student achievement. Given that these populations face more challenges than other adult participants, these students may require more services and resources. OCTAE factors the number of participants served within these subgroups into state performance negotiations to incentivize service to these vulnerable populations.

Why You Should Collect Data on Barriers to Employment

States are required to collect data on Barriers to Employment because the law prioritizes service to populations that fall in those categories. A focus on the full range of challenges students face (1) provides context for how to serve students, (2) reveals whether certain barriers produce variant outcomes, and (3) acknowledges that some students face more difficulty in attaining outcomes and incentivizes serving them despite the challenges in doing so. Collecting data on Barriers to Employment allows programs and states to:

Uncover obstacles that can impede students' full participation or eligibility. All students who enter adult education programming come to develop skills, access training, improve employment prospects, and so on. But as you know, there are many factors that can contribute to these circumstances, and some that make it even more difficult for participants to achieve these goals. These additional burdens make it harder for students to participate, engage fully, and fit into traditional systems of school and work, so programs may have to be creative to meet their needs. For example, if a student self-reports that they care for a parent or child with health issues, they are homeless, or they have ex-offender status, local programs may use distance learning, modify schedules, or connect participants with employers who understand the added limitations that can result from these barriers. Programs also may determine that they need to partner with external service providers to meet the additional social service needs of these students.

Gain an increased understanding of the needs of student subgroups through analyses. Barriers to Employment are measures used to analyze the performance of subgroups of participants to understand the impact the obstacles may have on persistence and performance. By separating out students facing the challenges represented in the Barriers to Employment, you can identify whether there are differences in performance between students with and without those barriers. As noted above, this may lead you to recommend that local programs alter their program design, the resources they provide to students, or the partners with whom they collaborate.

Demonstrate that your programs are serving students with multiple challenges. This part of WIOA recognizes that there are some subgroups of populations that may require more intensive services and that some programs will serve more of these participants than others. In these cases, it is often more challenging for students to make significant gains and reach key outcomes. To make the case that you are serving students with additional barriers to labor market entry, you need to collect the data.

Common Challenges to Collecting Data on Barriers to Employment

To date, some states appear to have experienced challenges collecting and reporting data on the number of students they are serving who face Barriers to Employment, though the data is improving. There are multiple reasons programs have struggled to capture and report these data. Some of the challenges they are experiencing are found below.

- **Lack of awareness about the requirement to collect the data.** Some programs are not collecting data on Barriers to Employment because they do not understand there is a statutory requirement to collect them; it is a relatively new mandate and some programs have not adopted the practice of collecting these data yet. All programs should report that each student has at least one Barrier to Employment— "English language learner, low literacy, cultural barriers"—because that barrier is characteristic of all participants who have entered adult education programming.
- **Lack of familiarity with the category definitions.** The definitions and descriptions are complex and multifaceted. If staff are not provided with, or are not familiar with the full descriptions, they may not recognize when a student says something that reveals that they fall within one of the categories. For example, the "low-income" Barrier to Employment covers many eligibility conditions, and some could be overlooked by a staff member who is not familiar with them.

- **Ineffective questioning to solicit information from students.** Students may not understand the terminology staff are using and the information being requested. Additionally, staff may need to probe further when students are only answering “yes/no” questions, or when students seem unsure about how to respond.
- **Outdated or incomplete intake forms and paperwork.** If intake forms and procedures have not been updated for WIOA, it will impede staff’s ability to collect the needed information. While some programs may have collected this type of information before doing so was required, updates will ensure that the language is aligned with current law and responses can be entered correctly into current data systems.
- **Incompatible data systems.** Program software systems must have the capability to report separately the performance of participants facing Barriers to Employment. Some programs do not have updated data systems to collect the Barriers to Employment data, and as noted, the intake processes may not be aligned to how data need to be entered into the system. Programs may need to improve coding systems so that data entry staff know how to input information correctly.

Strategies to Collect Data on Barriers to Employment

Focus on Intake and Orientation

Well-planned orientation and intake allow programs both to pinpoint the services students need and to accomplish many data-related tasks, including identification of Barriers to Employment. They help students start programming with a foundation for success, and it’s a prime time to collect important information and data about students. Students learn about the program parameters, and staff determine how to serve their academic, career, and social service needs and track their progress and outcomes. Furthermore, obtaining complete student records at this point reduces the need to expend resources to capture missing information in the future.

Through comprehensive orientation and intake, programs can achieve the following:

- **Help students understand the purpose** of the intake and registration forms and why data are being collected. Explaining the importance of the information will encourage students to be forthcoming with the details programs need. For example, there is more value to students if the process helps teachers tailor instruction and allows staff to track their progress. It is also useful to explain to students that programs are required to collect participant information so that funders know the money is being used for the intended purposes.
- **Reassure students that their information is confidential** and is used to better serve them; their data will not be personally identifiable when submitted to funders. If students understand that their privacy will be protected, they will feel more comfortable sharing the information needed to document both their activities and progress.
- **Assess student needs** through the interview process. In these interviews, programs will discover the education, employment, and support services they need to achieve positive outcomes. These conversations provide opportunities to ask students questions about Barriers

to Employment and challenges to their participation, to collect interest and need surveys, and to conduct testing.

- **Identify short- and long-term goals**. As staff discuss the students' needs with them, they can establish what can be achieved in the short term and what will require a longer time commitment. For instance, if the student is a displaced homemaker, staff can assess how programming can best address their recent loss of income.
- **Identify barriers to participation** in education and employment. Through the interview process, staff can uncover Barriers to Employment as well as other barriers that could impede students' participation in the program. For instance, staff may learn about transportation needs, behaviors and habits that might interfere with attendance or engagement, or learning challenges, as well as Barriers to Employment such as housing insecurity, their caretaker status, or a record of arrest or conviction.
- **Identify support systems** students have in place to help them persist in the program. Staff can learn if students have family members who will support their commitments to classes and schoolwork; if they belong to community groups that will encourage them; or if their employer is willing to assist with a flexible schedule. It is helpful to learn who will facilitate their success, and where there may be gaps in support that could hinder their progress toward labor market entry.

Strategies to Improve the Intake Process

- **Develop a questioning protocol** that will elicit comprehensive answers from students. This may require adapting some language and including clarifying terminology and examples when describing the Barriers to Employment to students. Using simplified and straightforward language allows students to respond to questions more easily and accurately.
- **Develop observation skills** within the staff so that they can identify issues that students may not think to raise. For example, a student may think that only people with limited mobility have disabilities, and not recognize that their late-onset hearing loss is also a recognized disability.
- **Provide the definitions as stated in the law and provide further explanations to staff** to ensure they understand the meaning of the terms. Provide the complete language as it is written in the legislation and provide examples and interpretations, so intake staff have a broader context in which to apply the definitions when meeting with students.
- **Establish data collection procedures and pilot test them** to make sure they are easy for staff and students to understand and easy for staff to implement. Test the questions and the forms with small groups of staff and students to determine whether they are clear before they are used program-wide.
- **Design data collection forms or companion resources** that include definitions, examples, and questions to assist staff in collecting complete information. Also, update forms so that they align with the current legislation. Create reference resources for staff when there is not space within intake forms to include all these details.
- **Train staff** who conduct intake and those who do data entry. Make sure those doing intake know what questions they should ask and how to pose follow-up questions. Have them practice

and roleplay asking students questions; provide scripts initially, so that staff can get familiar with the process. Make sure data entry staff can identify the information within an intake form and know how to code it.

- **Develop and implement a quality control system** for both hard copy and electronic data. Monitor a few interviews and examples of data collection and data entry to ensure that they are in alignment.

State Examples

Each state has its own intake forms. In Appendix B you will find excerpted questions from Georgia, Massachusetts, and Indiana. The examples are annotated with text bubbles indicating how the questions relate to the Barriers to Employment. Links are included so you can access the complete forms. You can also locate sample intake forms by going to most state adult education websites.

Appendix A: Descriptions of the Barriers to Employment

Below are the classifications that describe the barriers students may face that make it harder to achieve employment outcomes.[1]

Displaced homemaker—The participant has been providing unpaid services to family members in the home and (a) has been dependent on the income of another family member but is no longer supported by that income; (b) is the dependent spouse of a member of the armed forces on active duty whose family income is significantly reduced because of (i) a deployment or a call or order to active duty pursuant to a provision of law, (ii) a permanent change of station, or (iii) the service-connected death or disability of the member; and (c) is unemployed or underemployed and is experiencing difficulty in obtaining or upgrading employment.

English language learner, low literacy level, cultural barriers—The participant has either (a) limited ability in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language; (b) an inability to compute and solve problems, or read, write, or speak English at a level necessary to function on the job in the participant's family or in society; or (c) a perception of him-or herself as possessing attitudes, beliefs, customs, or practices that influence a way of thinking, acting, or working that may serve as a hindrance to employment.

Exhausting Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) within 2 years—The participant is within 2 years of exhausting lifetime eligibility under Part A of Title IV of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 601 et seq.), regardless of whether he or she is receiving these benefits at program entry.

Ex-offender—The participant is a person who either (a) has been subject to any stage of the criminal justice process for committing a status offense or delinquent act, or(b) requires assistance in overcoming barriers to employment resulting from a record of arrest or conviction.

Homeless or runaway youth—The participant lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; has a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings; is a migratory child who in the preceding 36 months was required to move from one school district to another due to changes in the parent's or parent's spouse's seasonal employment in agriculture, dairy, or fishing work; or is under 18 years of age and absents himself or herself from home or place of legal residence without the permission of his or her family (i.e., runaway youth). However, a participant who may be sleeping in a temporary accommodation while away from home should not, as a result of that fact alone, be recorded as homeless.

Long-term unemployed—The participant has been unemployed for 27 or more consecutive weeks.

Low-income—The participant (a) receives, or in the 6 months prior to application to the program has received, or is a member of a family that is receiving in the past 6 months assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the TANF program, the Supplemental Security

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[1] Division of Adult Education and Literacy, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education. (August 2019). Technical assistance guide for performance accountability under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Retrieved from https://nrsweb.org/sites/default/files/NRS-TA-Aug2019-508.pdf

Income (SSI) program, or State or local income-based public assistance; (b) is in a family with total family income that does not exceed the higher of the poverty line or 70% of the lower living standard income level; (c) is a youth who receives, or is eligible to receive, a free or reduced-price lunch; (d) is a foster child on behalf of whom State or local government payments are made; (e) is a participant with a disability whose own income is the poverty line but who is a member of a family whose income does not meet this requirement; (f) is a homeless participant or homeless child or youth or runaway youth; or (g) is a youth living in a high-poverty area.

Migrant and seasonal farmworker—The participant is a low-income individual who for 12 consecutive months out of the 24 months prior to application for the program involved has been primarily employed in agriculture or fish farming labor that is characterized by chronic unemployment or underemployment and faces multiple barriers to economic self-sufficiency.

Individual with disabilities—The participant indicates that he or she has any disability, defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the person's major life activities, as defined under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

Single parent—The participant is a single, separated, divorced, or widowed individual who has primary responsibility for one or more dependent children under age 18 (including single pregnant women).

Youth in foster care or who has aged out of system—The participant is a person who is currently in foster care or has aged out of the foster care system.

Appendix B: State Examples

Excerpt from Georgia Intake Form

Technical College System of Georgia, Office of Adult Education
Adult Education Program Intake Assessment Form
https://tcsg.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/PP-MANUAL.pdf

This example represents questions that address Barriers to Employment.

***Labor Force Status:** *(select one)*

☐ Employed

☐ Employed, but I have received a notice of termination, facility closure, or I am a transitioning service member.

☐ Unemployed and looking for work

Barrier to Employment: Long-term unemployed

If unemployed, have you been unemployed for 27 weeks or longer? ☐ Yes ☐ No

☐ Not working and not looking for work (e.g. homemaker, retired, incarcerated, etc.)

Barrier to Employment: Low-income

***Do you receive TANF?** ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, are you within 2 years of exhausting lifetime eligibility? ☐ Yes ☐ No

***Do you or someone in your household receive SNAP benefits (Food Stamps)?** ☐ Yes ☐ No

Language spoken at home: ___________________________ **Country of Birth:** _____________________

Individual with a Disability Notice (Optional disclosure)

In the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, a disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of a person's major life activities.

***Are you an Individual with a Disability?:** ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Do not wish to disclose

Barrier to Employment: Individual with disabilities

Special Accommodations Notice (Optional disclosure)

If you have a disability and/or a condition and desire any special accommodation for instruction or testing, it is your responsibility to notify the program administrative office and provide professional documentation of your disability.

Do you wish to request any special accommodation(s)? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Confidentiality Notice Privacy

This adult education program may release your student information for only specific reasons allowed under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99), such as program evaluation purposes. If you do not wish this information to be disclosed, please check this box: ☐

***Student's Signature:** ____ ***Date:** ________________

Sign in ink

Excerpts from Massachusetts Intake Form

Adult and Community Learning Services

FY20 Adult Education Student Intake Form

http://www.doe.mass.edu/acls/laces/intake-form/

This example shows the Barriers to Employment listed using the language within the law. It provides guidance to the intake staff that at least one Barrier to Employment should be selected for each participant.

All programs should select at least one of these two Barriers to Employment

* **Barriers to Employment** (Check all that apply. Must select at least either "English Language Learner" or "Low Literacy Levels")

☐ **Cultural Barriers** – a person who perceives him/herself as possessing attitudes, beliefs, customs or practices that influence a way of thinking, acting or working that may serve as a hindrance to employment.

☐ **Disabled Individual –** a person with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the person's major life activities.

☐ **Displaced Homemaker –** a person who has been providing unpaid services to family members in the home and who has been dependent on the income of another family member but is no longer supported by that income or is the dependent spouse of a member of the Armed Forces on active duty and is unemployed or underemployed and is experiencing difficulty in obtaining or upgrading employment.

☐ **Low-income Individual –** a person who meets either of the following:

1. Who within six months has received income-based assistance, such as housing supplement or food stamps (Persons receiving public assistance or a housing supplement within last six months meet this criteria.)
2. Whose total family income is below 70 percent of the lower living standard income level.

This question represents federal and state income-based public assistance.

Public Assistance: Choose one or more if "yes":

Barrier to Employment:
Low-income

- ☐ EAEDC
- ☐ MassHealth
- ☐ Other
- ☐ SNAP (EBT/Food Stamps)
- ☐ SSI
- ☐ TAFDC (TANF)
- ☐ WIC

Excerpts from Indiana Plan for Reducing Barriers to Success

Indiana Adult Education Teachers' Handbook

Plan for Reducing Barriers to Success

https://www.in.gov/dwd/files/Teacher%20Handbook.pdf

This example provides questions that can be posed to capture information related to the Barriers to Employment as well as additional barriers to success. During the intake process, the staff member would need to probe further about these questions. For example, to report the student as having the Barrier to Employment of Displaced Homemaker, staff would need to ascertain the causes of the family care pressures and whether they are related to a reduction in income.

Plan for Reducing Barriers to Success	
Barrier	**Plan of Action**
Family ☐ Lack of childcare ☐ Lack of partner support ☐ Single parent pressures ☐ Extended family (parents, grandparents) responsibilities ☐ Domestic problems ☐ other	**Barriers to Employment:** • Displaced homemaker • Single parent
Comments/Updates:	
Health ☐ Chronic Illness ☐ Physical Disability ☐ Mental or emotional disability ☐ Family member with health problems ☐ Alcohol or drug addiction	**Barrier to Employment:** Individual with disabilities
Comments/Updates:	